Most of poetry is not what is said but how it’s said.

Consider this: most great poetry, when it comes down to it, is pretty cliché. It says things about love and death that have already been covered.

Great poetry figures out how to say universal things like “I love you” in interesting and memorable ways—so it’s not really what it says but how it says it. A poem that’s paraphrased loses power.

Great poetry chooses and arranges words in interesting, unexpected, and memorable ways. It moves people and is memorable.

Great poetry depends on great craftsmanship.

I like stuff that comes from the heart, but that’s really not poetry. Everyone has a heart. Poetry is an art.
Wordsworth famously said that poetry is “overflow of spontaneous emotion,” but he added that it is “emotion recollected in tranquility”—meaning, emotion is the source of poetry but that feelings need to be worked out patiently to become poetry.

Some people dislike analyzing poetry because they think it ruins its beauty. As Wordsworth also said, “we murder to dissect.”

Even so, for those who want to understand how poetry works, it helps to take poems apart and to study what makes them effective—what gives them their power upon their audience.
What follows is one approach. When I study a poem, I approach it like other complex things: I break it into small parts. After that, I look for patterns and try to make connections so as to arrive at some overall sense of the poem’s significance.

These are some key things to consider in a sonnet:

- Structure (quatrains & the couplet; the volta in Italian sonnets).
- Rhyme and meter.
- Rhythm, sound (alliteration, assonance, consonance), & punctuation.
- Diction (interesting or unclear word choice), key verb choices.
- Literary devices (like similes, metaphors, personification, irony, euphemism, hyperbole, sarcasm, puns, symbols, imagery, allusion).
Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,  
That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain,  
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,  
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,  
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,  
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow  
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburned brain.

But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay;  
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows,  
And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.  
Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,  
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write."

Note: There are 3 quatrains and a couplet. Quatrains tend to be contained but build on each other.
The couplet wants to sum it all up neatly.
Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain,
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know, 
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,
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Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write."

The basic structure (quatrain, & couplet) and the key verbs interest me first.
The speaker loves and seeks to paint; he studies and reads but then bites and beats.
Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain,
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
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Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write."
So far, this much is evident:
The sonnet is divided into three clear quatrains and key verbs highlight what’s happening (conflict). Verbs signal the main action.

1. The speaker loves in pain and wants his beloved’s pity. He’s a thinker. He thinks too much. He schemes “if then” plots.
2. He seeks to paint his emotions; he studies and reads; he tries hard.
3. But he can’t produce anything good or original.

The couplet brings closure (resolution) with the lesson he’s learned after beating himself up: forget about study; listen to the heart.

The meter normally would be iambic pentameter, but this poem is iambic hexameter, with some irregularities. For example, the poem begins with a trochee (Loving) rather than an iamb. (See A60-62 on Meter and Rhythm in The Norton Anthology). All this suggests the work of an anxious lover who tries too hard.

The rhyme scheme is remarkable for its redundancy (and slant rhymes). If the speaker has a trouble being creative, the rhymes convey it.
Quatrain 1: The section where the lover schemes about how one thing might lead to another is choppy (punctuated in bits with commas) but excited, enhancing appreciation for the lover’s anxiety and excitement.

Quatrain 2: Every line in the poem has end-stop punctuation (punctuation at the end of the line), except line seven. This makes line seven noteworthy and interesting. Lines seven and eight are an example of enjambment. (Again see A61).

If the speaker has writer’s block, lines seven and eight exemplify his goal:

Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburned brain.

The “flow” the lover-poet craves is exemplified not only by enjambment but by the remarkable alliteration.
A contrast in flow and sound is remarkable at the third quatrain.

Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburned brain.

But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay;

Unlike the fluid “s” sounds and soft “f” sounds in the alliterative line, the new quatrain introduces a shift: a series of hard, clunky, consonant sounds, most noted in the repetition of hard “t” sounds.

The speaker wishes his words flow, but they are clunky. The speaker’s poetic efforts come in fits and starts (“halting forth”), and the sound of the line helps to convey that feeling. It gives it power.
Loving in truth, and fain [desirous] in verse my love to show,
That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain,
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburned brain.

But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay [support];
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows,
And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.
Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes.

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write."

Tip: underline interesting word choices & look up unfamiliar words
Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain,
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
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"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write."

**Pun** (double meaning): Fain plays on the word feign—to fake.

**Hyperbole** (extreme exaggeration): blackest

**Imagery**: Leaves, fruit, showers, and sun are images of natural growth.

The speakers craves words that sprout like leaves, but reading the pages (leaves) of others makes him a frustrated imitator w/ an over-enlightened "sunburned" brain.
Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain,
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,
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Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write."

Juxtaposition (placing side by side): putting truth right next to fain (feign) is suspicious. It hints at fake artistry—putting on a show.

Irony: read literally, it's unexpected that someone sweet is sadistic. Read as a Petrarchan allusion, it's totally expected.

Diction/Word Play: others' feet and leaves refer to others' poetry—lines of meter divided by "feet" and leaves are pages.
Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain,
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,
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Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write."

**Imagery:** to halt, flee, and strike a blow are military images.

**Great with child** and helpless in *throes* (spasms) are pregnant images.

**Personification:**
Nature’s child, Invention, fled from Study, the step-mother of Invention, meaning study doesn’t give birth to creativity (invention), nature does.
Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That the dear She might take some pleasure of my pain,
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburned brain.

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And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.
Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write."

Diction/(personification): why truant pen? A truant is someone who doesn’t work.

Irony: The poem is powerful because it’s great art, not because it’s from the heart. This truth undercuts the false modesty behind the couplet.

To think for a moment that his pen doesn’t work, that he’s a fool, that he has a muse, or that he consults his heart rather than art is to be duped by false “truth.”
The poem’s powerful because it’s great art, not because it’s from the heart. (The poem’s various poetic strategies help prove this).

This truth undercuts the false modesty throughout the poem.

The poem echoes the idea about “recklessness” in *The Courtier*: the ideal courtier is not supposed to appear to try to hard; he’s supposed to make everything look natural, even though it isn’t.

Sidney makes his speaker — his persona (“avatar”) — kind of dorky. The speaker seems like someone who tries too hard. He studies too hard, imitates too much, loves too much, and therefore doesn’t appear natural or in control.

However, all that is a ruse. Sidney puts on a show. Far from being an uninventive fool, he’s a creative genius, though his abilities are indebted to — not impeded by — the artists he’s studied.