Sonnet 7: How soon hath Time, the subtle thief

POEM TEXT

How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,
Stol'n on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!
My hasting days fly on with full career,
But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth
That I to manhood am arriv'd so near;
And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.
Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
It shall be still in strictest measure ev'n
To that same lot, however mean or high,
Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heav'n:
All is, if I have grace to use it so
As ever in my great Task-Master's eye.

SUMMARY

The speaker laments how quickly time, which he compares to a thief that robs people of their youth, has stolen his 23rd year. His days pass swiftly in a rush, yet he hasn't produced anything substantial. He doesn't physically look like the man he is close to becoming, and though he has potential, he doesn't seem as impressive or promising as those who have accomplished more in their time. But whether it be small or large, and whether it happens sooner or later, whatever he does will be nothing more or less than his fate, however mundane or exalted, and which only time and God determine. If he has the grace to follow God's will, everything will be exactly as God designed it.

THEMES

WORK, AMBITION, AND AGING

"How soon hath time" is, in part, a poem about the fear of failing to accomplish something meaningful in life. In the first 8 lines, the speaker complains that he has reached the ripe old age of 23 without doing much of note. In making this complaint, the speaker suggests that the value of his life depends on his actions and, more specifically, his accomplishments; though he will complicate this assertion by the end of the poem, he initially argues that his merit as a man depends on the work he produces during his dwindling time on earth.

The poem begins with the speaker announcing his astonishment about how quickly his life has gone by. Describing time as a "thief" in the poem's first line, the speaker characterizes his experience of aging as one of loss, even robbery: something vital has been taken from him. As the poem continues, it becomes clear that what he has lost—or is losing—is possibility itself: the possibility of accomplishing something grand and ambitious.

The speaker notably describes himself as on the verge of being fully a man. Yet though his youth is behind him, he has yet to produce a "bud" or "blossom." Here the speaker plays with some of the tropes of Renaissance poetry, in which youth is often compared to spring. The speaker is somehow out of joint with time: though his spring is almost over, he has yet to bear any flowers.

In its density of symbolic language, the poem raises some implicit questions for its reader. One might wonder, for instance, what these "buds" or "blossoms" represent—that is, what the speaker hopes to accomplish in his life and hasn't yet. In this regard, the speaker is circumspect, refusing to specifically unfold his ambitions for his readers. But he does make some tantalizing hints. For instance, he uses the word "career" in line 3. He employs it primarily in an old-fashioned sense, meaning something like "rushing recklessly" or "running out of control." But the modern sense of the word is present too: the speaker wants to do something meaningful and consequential with his life, and he wants to do it in a way that other people will recognize. In line 7, he then notes that he has "inward ripeness"—that is, that he is full of inner beauty and potential. Yet that inner beauty doesn't register like the "buds" and "blossoms" he desires in line 4. No one else can see it or celebrate it.

The first 8 lines thus present an ambitious yet anxious speaker: someone who is eager to make his mark on the world yet who feels his life slipping by—and who feels like his life *will* be meaningless unless he manages to accomplish some grand, public project that other people can witness and appreciate. The poem thus implicitly asks readers to consider an important set of questions about life itself. Working through the speaker's anxiety, the reader begins to wonder what makes life meaningful. The speaker suggests an answer to that question: work makes life meaningful, and the things one accomplishes are what matter.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

FAITH, GRACE, AND SELF-SURRENDER

The first 8 lines of the poem present an ambitious, anxious speaker, eager to make his mark on the world. In the final 6 lines, following the sonnet's *volta* or *turn*, the speaker contemplates an alternate source of meaning for his life—not work, but *faith*. Instead of striving actively toward some grand accomplishment, the speaker argues that God will guide him to the right path and the right task. The poem thus implicitly takes a side in the religious debates that fractured England in the 17th century. Instead of advocating for salvation through works (a position broadly aligned with Catholicism), Milton—who was a devout and militant Protestant—appears to take a Puritan standpoint: faith alone, the poem suggests, guarantees salvation.

In the poem's final 6 lines, the speaker offers himself a kind of correction to the position he'd established in the prior lines. No matter how hard he struggles to accomplish something grand, he'll do it when and only when God wants him to. Indeed, he suggests that God has already determined his "lot": that is, God has a plan for him, and the speaker will do nothing more and nothing less than what God intends.

One might wonder, then, whether the speaker has free will. Though the first 8 lines of the poem posit that it's up to the speaker himself to make something of his life, when "will" enters the poem in line 12, it's the will of "Heav'n" that matters—not the speaker's. Ultimately, however, the poem is less interested in free will than it is in the idea of grace; a crucial complication to the speaker's deference to God's will is that he may accomplish God's plan only if he has "grace."

"Grace" is a charged word in Puritan theology: it separates the elect, who will go to Heaven, from those who won't. Further, in many protestant sects, grace manifested in worldly success: to prosper in business or politics, or to have many children, were both considered signs that God had bestowed grace upon someone.

The speaker's anxiety in the first 8 lines thus may have less to do with the scale of his accomplishments and more to do with whether he has grace. The fact that he has yet to accomplish much might be a sign that God hasn't given him grace, *or* it might be a sign the God's plan for the speaker is humble and quiet; the speaker can't be sure yet which is true.

Since grace comes from God as a gift, it cannot be acquired—no matter how hard one works or prays. This marks an important difference between Protestant sects like the Puritans and the Catholic Church, which does believe that one can influence their fate through piety or charitable acts. At stake in the poem, then, is not just whether the speaker will accomplish something important. The speaker is also locating himself in his era's most pressing questions of religious doctrine. In the first 8 lines, he flirts with a Catholic position: suggesting that the value of his life comes from his works. In the final 6 lines, he returns to a Puritan position: the value of his life is granted by God, and thus his task is to surrender himself to God's plan and accomplish it as best he can. In making this correction, the speaker suggests that the value of his life depends on God—not on himself.

The poem thus initially appears to be self-involved: a young person thinking through the meaning of his own life. But its religious argument suggests that its ambitions are broader. If the reader feels similar anxieties about their life and career, the poem supplies a model—in Milton's mind, a theologically sound one—for how to handle those anxieties: by surrendering to God's plan, trusting in His grace, and accomplishing only what He intends.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,
Stol'n on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!

The first 2 lines of "How soon hath Time" establish the poem's initial concerns as the poem's speaker, a young man of 23, reflects on his life. Far from being satisfied with what he's accomplished, he feels that his life is flying by. The speaker feels a sense of loss, as though time has deprived him of something vital and precious. In this way, he suggests that he measures his own life in response to an external standard: he feels that he should have done something important with his youth, but time has robbed him of the opportunity to do so.

In the speaker's estimation, time is a malicious and active force that makes decisions and has intentions. What's more, these intentions are dark: time is described in strikingly negative terms as someone who steals from the speaker. Time is further described as a figure with wings. Though the speaker resists directly identifying time with any particular tradition, time behaves in the poem like a demi-god: a creature with magical powers capable of shaping the world. In this respect, time is perhaps most closely aligned with figures from Greek mythology like Hermes, a winged trickster god who often interferes in human affairs.

The presence of this demi-god raises theological questions for the poem. As the poem unfolds, it becomes clear that its speaker is a committed Christian. One might wonder about the relationship between time and God himself, asking, for instance, whether time is independent of God, or an expression of His will.

The first 2 lines of form a single grammatical unit, with an enjambment at the end of line one and an end-stop at the end

of line 2. This establishes a pattern that will hold through the first 8 lines of the poem of, alternating enjambed and end-stopped lines. The lines are similarly in strong iambic pentameter, which suggests an underlying temporal regularity. Finally, the poem—which is a Petrarchan sonnet—introduces here the two rhyme sounds that will recur throughout its first eight lines, *-uth* and *-ear*. The regular return of these rhymes at precisely the expected intervals provides another form of reinforcement to the poem's rhythm—and thus to its underlying sense of organized time.

LINES 3-4

My hasting days fly on with full career,
But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.

In lines 3 and 4, the speaker clarifies his complaint with time. He begins by noting once again that his life is "fly[ing]" by; that his days seem to be in haste, moving rapidly, in a panic. He describes their motion using an antiquated expression—"in full career." For Milton's speaker, the word career means two things at once. The word holds its familiar modern meaning: the professional path one takes in life. But it also carries a more important, antiquated meaning: a "career" is a technical term from jousting, referring to the galloping charge that knights make toward each other during a match. It thus describes a frenzied, violent moment, almost out of control. This is the primary way in which Milton uses the word, but its modern sense echoes in the line—and gives listeners an initial sense of why the speaker is so upset with time. He has a sense of what he wants to do during this career, but he hasn't accomplished it yet.

Switching metaphors, line 4 expands this suggestion. Instead of describing his life in terms of a knight's charge during a joust, Milton's speaker characterizes his life through the seasons of the year: his youth is like the spring and, by implication, adulthood is like summer and old age like autumn. Here the speaker plays on a traditional trope of Renaissance poetry—particularly Renaissance love poetry. It is a striking choice for a Christian poem: Milton does not work in opposition to secular, even erotic, traditions; rather he adopts and revises those traditions for his own purpose.

Invoking the spring as a model for youth also heightens a suggestion which has so far remained implicit in the poem. The speaker is upset not only because his youth is over, but because he has failed to accomplish what he should have in his youth. Just as plants put out buds and blossoms in the spring, so too he should have begun some important work. The speaker has fallen behind. He thus believes there is a timeline which he must observe and which gives his life value. To fail to adhere to that schedule is to fail in a significant way to make his own life worthwhile.

LINES 5-8

Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth
That I to manhood am arriv'd so near;
And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.

In lines 5-8, the speaker of the poem expands on the anxieties he announced in the poem's first 4 lines. Instead of being concerned with his own accomplishments, he worries about the way he appears to other people. He begins by discussing his physical appearance—his "semblance." He hopes that he might deceive other people: because he still looks young, maybe they won't realize that he's so close to being a man. And maybe, as a result, they won't judge him for his lack of accomplishment.

In lines 6-7, the speaker returns to the central metaphor of line 4: perhaps he has not managed to produce any outward buds or blossoms, but he is, he argues, inwardly ripe. This inward ripeness doesn't count for much, though, since no one can see it—and there are other people ("timely-happy spirits") who *do* manage to complete significant projects during their youth.

This is a crucial moment for the poem: the speaker is suggesting that the value of his life depends on the work that he produces, rather than his plans, his personality, or even his piety. This position might be understood to be sympathetic to the doctrines of the Catholic Church, which stresses that salvation can be achieved through certain acts, often called "works" (things like the sacraments or acts of charity). Though the poem has so far largely progressed without explicit reference to religion, the priorities of the speaker seem subtly aligned with a prestigious—and, during Milton's lifetime, highly controversial—theological position.

As the speaker's concerns evolve and expand in lines 5-8, the formal pattern of the previous 4 lines continues, unaltered, underneath them. Like the first 4 lines of the poem, these lines are strongly iambic. They rhyme in the same pattern as the first 4 lines, and they use the same rhyme sounds. This formal continuity feels obsessive, repetitive, even claustrophobic; this creates the sense that the speaker is trapped in his anxiety, watching it expand even as he remains stuck in the condition that provoked that anxiety in the first place. Through its first 8 lines, the poem thus presents a recognizable, even universal, set of circumstances: almost everyone looks back over their life with regret and anxiety about what they've managed to accomplish.

LINES 9-12

Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
It shall be still in strictest measure ev'n
To that same lot, however mean or high,
Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heav'n:

Lines 9-12 begin with the word "Yet"—which signals to the reader that the speaker is about to reverse or object to his own

conclusions from the first 8 lines. Indeed, having laid out his anxieties and values in stark, affecting terms, the speaker moves in the poem's final 6 lines to provide a solution to his woes.

The speaker begins by interrogating the underlying premise of his anxiety. In the poem's opening lines, the speaker complains that he failed to accomplish anything meaningful in his youth—and, as a result, he is out of joint with the standard schedule of human life. Spring is supposed to bring forth buds and blossoms, but his spring has no such buds or blossoms. In lines 9-12, the speaker gently corrects himself: there is no standard schedule for human life, he argues. He will accomplish exactly what God wants him to, and he will do so on a schedule that God himself sets—it doesn't matter whether it happens "soon" or "slow," or whether what he does is "less" or "more."

As Milton's speaker refutes the premise that underlies his anxiety, the form of his poem also shifts. Where the first 8 lines of the poem were tightly organized and rhythmically repetitive, lines 9-12 are more complicated. The rhyme pattern shifts, and the tight, strict iambs of the previous 8 lines begin to loosen. All of this comes as something of a surprise. Milton's speaker insists here that the "will of Heav'n" maintains strict control over his own life and tightly regulates its schedule. Yet the poem itself becomes less strict at precisely the moment he introduces this idea.

This tension between form and content is part of Milton's point. In contrast to the expected, regular rhythms of the poem's first 8 lines, the rhythm and rhyme of lines 9-12 are less easy to anticipate. That doesn't mean it is any less organized or controlled, however. In the same way, God's plan for the speaker is not necessarily easy to discern, but it is just as powerful as any schedule he has imagined for himself.

The poem thus encounters some theological complications. One might wonder, if God has so much control over the speaker's life, whether the speaker has free will and the capacity to decide for himself how and whether to act. Free will is a major topic in Milton's poetry from early lyrics like this one to his epic *Paradise Lost*, where God is fully aware that Adam and Eve will eat the apple long before they do. In order to understand Milton's position on the issue, one has to revise their understanding of freedom itself. For Milton, freedom is not the capacity to act on one's own behalf, according to one's whims. Rather, freedom consists in bringing oneself into alignment with God's will and accepting His grace.

LINES 13-14

All is, if I have grace to use it so
As ever in my great Task-Master's eye.

In lines 9-12, Milton's speaker begins to assuage the anxieties he lays out in lines 1-8. Instead of obsessing over what he hasn't accomplished in his young life, he accepts that God has a plan for him. The question then becomes how to reconcile himself to this plan. In the final two lines of the poem, the speaker addresses this implicit question. His answer is that he must possess "grace"—the "grace" to live with God's plan. If he does so, he will be rewarded with certainty: he will trade anxiety and self-obsession for calm and self-surrender. Everything will be as it is, has been, and will be in God's "eye."

The word "grace" is a significant and highly charged word in the context of the poem's theological engagements. If the first 8 lines of the poem lay out a Catholic theological position—in which a person achieves salvation through works (such as piety and charitable acts)—the final 6 lines lay out a Puritan position in which one is saved by grace.

Like many other Protestant sects, the Puritans reject the notion that one can achieve salvation through works and believed, instead, that salvation must be conferred by God. For the Puritans, only a handful of human beings—the elect—were granted such grace; the rest were doomed from the start. The task of the faithful is to accept God's grace. In the final 6 lines of the poem, as the speaker insists that he cannot do anything that God has not ordained ahead of time, the speaker brings the poem back in line with Puritan theology, and subtly rejects Catholic doctrine. The poem thus participates in and takes a side on one of the major doctrinal conflicts of the 17th century. And while it has often been read autobiographically, as a meditation on Milton's own life, it takes up broader themes. In the poem, Milton is concerned to show his readers how to handle their anxiety about how to best live their lives—and to show them how to be, in his mind, properly Christian.

SYMBOLS

SPRING

In line 4 (and again in line 7), the speaker compares himself to the spring, and the things it produces: buds, blossoms, ripe fruit. In doing so, he plays on a standard trope of Renaissance poetic tradition. Renaissance poets often compared the course of human life to the course of the year, and Renaissance readers would have been aware of the general context that such symbolic language usually appears in: mostly, that is, in love poetry. Milton, then, is taking a resource from the secular—often sexual—rhetoric of his culture and redeploying it in a religious context.

In "How soon hath Time" the symbol of spring thus serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it shows that Milton's speaker has failed to accomplish what he thinks he's supposed to have accomplished by this point in his life—his spring is "late." The "bud or blossom" to which the speaker refers is not specified, but is implied to be in reference to some sort of work. The speaker has potential but has yet to create anything of merit, like a spring flower that has yet to bloom—and is running

out of time to do so before winter (symbolic of death) comes.

On the other hand, "spring" as a symbol also shows that Milton *himself* is out of joint with his own culture: he understands its resources but he refuses to use them the way that other poets do. Instead of participating in the erotic conventions of Renaissance poetry, he reclaims those conventions for his own purpose.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "spring," "bud," "blossom"
- **Line 7:** "ripeness"

WINGS AND FLIGHT

In line 2, Milton describes Time as a creature with "wings" and again in line 3 evokes imagery of flight. Most basically, this is meant to symbolize the fleeting nature of time, which appears to the speaker to flitter past, uncontrollable and uncatchable like a bird that soars out of humankind's reach.

More broadly, "wings" themselves are a rich symbol that suggests Christianity's deep connection to and authority over the past. A number of significant and interesting creatures have wings—angels, Greek gods like Hermes, birds. Milton does not specify what kind of wings Time has, nor, for that matter, what kind of winged creature Time is. Time's activities, though, give some hints: it's hard to imagine a devout Christian poet like Milton describing angels as thieves, and Milton's consistent personification of Time makes it seem more human than a bird.

For that reason, Milton is most likely thinking of time on the model of a god like Hermes—a Greek god known as a winged trickster. The presence of this Greek divinity—however subtle—in this poem is puzzling. Why would a Christian poet invoke a pagan god in the midst of a poem about the power and authority of his own God?

Part of the answer lies in Milton's deep learning—he was a scholarly poet who consistently drew upon the resources of past poetic accomplishments in shaping his own. In doing so, he makes an argument about the relationship between his own Christian faith and those past cultures. Christianity, in Milton's treatment, does not simply render the classical past obsolete. It also *includes* that past, bringing it under its own influence.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "wing"
- **Line 3:** "fly"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"How soon hath Time" makes frequent use of alliteration. For example, in the poem's first 5 lines, Milton establishes a strong chain of repeated *s* sound (which is more specifically an example of sibilance), which appears in "soon," "subtle," and "stol'n." He also creates a repeated *f*, *b*, and *T* sounds throughout. The alliteration at times suggests an underlying connection between rather disparate concepts throughout the poem, such as time, theft, flight, youth, and spring.

In the second half of the poem, one is struck by the more direct and immediate connections between alliterating words: for example, "grace" and "great" in lines 13-14. Here, it is God's grace that makes Him great: it is natural and even elegant that these two conceptually linked words should also be related sonically. This conceptual and sonic connection is also evident in words like "still," "strictest," "soon," and "slow," which all generally relate to the idea of motion and control.

The poem thus embodies its argument in sound. When the speaker is struggling with anxiety and confusion, the alliteration becomes confused, full of questions; it's unclear how . When he finds his way toward certainty, the alliteration becomes smooth, elegant, and appropriate.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "soon," "subtle"
- **Line 2:** "Stol'n"
- **Line 3:** "fly," "full"
- **Line 4:** "But," "bud," "blossom"
- **Line 6:** "am arriv'd"
- **Line 9:** "soon or slow"
- **Line 10:** "still in strictest"
- **Line 11:** "however," "high"
- **Line 12:** "Toward," "Time"
- **Line 13:** "grace"
- **Line 14:** "great"

METAPHOR

"How soon hath Time" contains a number of metaphors that subtly shape its argument. For example, in the first line, Milton compares time to a "thief." Before one learns anything about the speaker's particular anxieties, there is already a strong sense of how the speaker feels about time itself: it has wronged—and robbed—him. Another metaphor occurs in line 3; days do not literally "fly" by, but using this language connects their swift passage to the winged Time.

Similarly, the speaker compares his youth to the spring in line 4. Once again, the metaphor creates a sense of how the speaker feels about his own life: he thinks it should follow a regular

pattern, with major events happening on a certain schedule. Any deviation from this schedule will be experienced as painful, even perverse. In a poem which is so rhetorical, so concerned with making an argument, each element of the poem—even its images and analogies—contribute to framing and sustaining the argument.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Time, the subtle thief of youth"
- **Line 3:** "My hasting days fly"
- **Line 4:** "my late spring"

ASSONANCE

Alongside its use of alliteration, "How soon hath Time" makes marked use of assonance. For example, in lines 3 and 4, Milton repeatedly returns to a long *a* sound:

> My hasting days fly on with full career,
> But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.

Here the poem exhibits a strong correlation between sound and sense: the *a* sound underlines the relationship between "hasting" and "days," the way that days seem to fly past. Further, the repeated sounds tend to speed up the line, giving it a fast-paced, rhythmic quality: one reads the line at just the panicked speed that the speaker describes.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "soon," "youth"
- **Line 3:** "hasting days"
- **Line 4:** "late"
- **Line 9:** "or more"
- **Line 14:** "my," "eye"

CAESURA

Milton uses caesura several times in "How soon hath Time"—usually to introduce a qualification or complication into a statement. For instance, in the poem's first line, he begins to complain about time—but pauses first to describe time, calling it "the subtle thief of youth." Here the caesura serves as an elegant rhetorical flourish—but it doesn't particularly affect the poem's argument.

Later in the poem, however, Milton uses caesura to complicate his argument. Line 12, for example, works much like line 1: Milton makes a claim about time and then qualifies it:

> Toward which Time leads me, and the will of
> Heav'n

However, the qualification that appears after the caesura operates differently in line 12 than the qualification in line 1. In line 1, the phrase "the subtle thief of youth" tells readers more about time itself. In line 12, the phrase "and the will of Heav'n" has, at best, an ambiguous relationship to time. The reader might wonder whether time and "the will of Heav'n" are one force—or whether the speaker imagines that there are *two* divine forces governing his life. The caesura thus poses a key interpretative question for the poem—at a moment when the speaker claims to have resolved that question. Because of the caesura, one remains unsure of the relationship between God and time at the end of line 12.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ",""
- **Line 9:** ",""
- **Line 11:** ",""
- **Line 12:** ",""
- **Line 13:** ",""

ENJAMBMENT

In the first 8 lines of the poem, Milton follows a regular pattern of alternating enjambed and end-stopped lines. One can see this pattern in the poem's opening lines, wherein line 1 is enjambed and line 2 is end-stopped:

> How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,
> Stol'n on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!

Milton begins a sentence in line 1, but he doesn't complete it. Though there is a comma after line 1, the actual *thought* of the line remains conceptually and grammatically incomplete until the end of line 2. The pattern repeats through the octave, giving the poem's grammar a sense of rhythm and control.

One point of contention arises in line 3, where the enjambment is less pronounced. In fact, one could argue that line 3 is actually end-stopped given that it is *technically* a complete sentence:

> My hasting days fly on with full career,

Yet the speaker's actual *point* cannot be fully grasped without *also* reading line 4. Because the main conceptual idea of these lines spills over from one to the next, this can still be considered a form of soft enjambment that upholds the speaker's pattern.

Of course, this organization disappears in lines 9-12. Instead of alternating and end-stopped lines, lines 9-12 constitute one extended sentence, which rushes down the page before finally reaching an end-stop at line 12. After the regularity of the poem's 8 opening lines, the reader likely experiences this sudden intensity of enjambment as disruptive, if not disorienting.

It is surprising to encounter this disorientation at this particular

point in the poem. After all, the first 8 lines of the poem are where the speaker expresses his doubts and anxieties; in the final 6, he finds reconciliation with God despite his anxieties. One would expect those final 6 lines therefore to be much smoother, more controlled, and more regular in the grammar and syntax.

However, the enjambments in this part of the poem subtly reinforce the speaker's argument. He finds solace in God's grace even though he no longer has a firm sense of control—and even though his poem is no longer moving in regular pulses of enjambment and end-stop.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "youth,"
- **Line 3:** "career,"
- **Line 5:** "truth"
- **Line 7:** "appear,"
- **Line 9:** "slow,"
- **Line 10:** "ev'n"
- **Line 11:** "high,"
- **Line 13:** "so"

END-STOPPED LINE

"How soon hath Time" contains a number of end-stopped lines. In the first 8 lines, these end-stops are organized in a regular pattern: they fall every other line (alternating with instances of enjambment). In this way, they serve as a kind of time-keeping device within the poem itself. Like the ringing of a church bell to mark the passing of the hours, the end-stops measure out the reader's temporal experience of the poem, dividing it into a series of regular units.

In the final 6 lines of the poem, however, this temporal regularity dissolves: though one might expect an end-stop in line 10, the line ends with a prominent enjambment, and the long sentence that starts in line 9 doesn't come to rest until the end of line 12.

The reader may experience this break from the poem's pattern as a loss of certainty—or, perhaps, a confusion of time itself. Instead of having regular, expected pauses, the poem's pauses become unexpected. In this sense, the structure of the poem's end-stops mirrors its argument more broadly. Just as Milton's speaker must give up his expectations about when he will accomplish something and surrender to God's (somewhat inscrutable) schedule, so too must the reader of the poem give up the reassurance provided by the first 8 lines' rhythmic regularity and trust the poem's capacity to unfold according to its own idiosyncratic logic.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** " year!"
- **Line 4:** "shew'th."
- **Line 6:** "near;"
- **Line 8:** "endu'th."
- **Line 12:** "Heav'n:"
- **Line 14:** "eye."

PERSONIFICATION

In the first line of "How soon hath Time," the speaker compares Time, which he deems a proper noun, to a thief. This personification gives Time human characteristics—namely, agency and desire. Building on this initial comparison, Milton continues to grant Time agency throughout the poem: he steals things in line 2 and he leads the speaker in line 12. By the end of the poem, Time seems like a character in its own right, with its own ideas and priorities.

This is potentially an interpretative problem for a Christian poem about God's capacity to control and regulate the speaker's own life. The reader might wonder whether Time is an expression of God's will, operating under His control—or if Time has independence, and as such must be a separate semi-divine force with which God collaborates.

At key points in the poem, often because of Milton's use of personification, Time *does* seem to be independent, or even God's equal. Needless to say, this is a potentially heretical claim: in a Christian world, God is the only divinity. As is often the case in Milton's writing, his stated religious positions come into conflict with the way he discusses religious issues. As a result of moments like this, William Blake famously claimed that Milton was "of the devil's party without knowing it."

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Time, the subtle thief of youth, / Stol'n on his wing"
- **Line 12:** "Time leads me"

SYNECDOCHE

In the final line of "How soon hath Time," Milton uses a strange phrase: "my great Task-Master's eye." He is referring to God Himself in saying the "great Task-Master," but he does so by referencing only part of God's body: his eye.

This is a suggestive and sophisticated choice. The eye, as opposed to the other senses, is associated in the Western tradition with observation and with judgment. Milton's God thus emerges as a creature who both observes and judges—indeed, these are his primary functions. In using synecdoche to refer to God, Milton thus makes an argument about who God is and what he does. He is not only a "Task-Master" who lays out duties and obligations. He is also a careful observer, who tracks and judges his creations.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "my great Task-Master's eye"

CONSONANCE

Milton employs many moments of consonance, particularly in the beginning of the poem. He creates repeated *t* and *th* sounds, which appear, for example, in "time," "thief," "three-and-twentieth," and "truth." As with the poem's instances of alliteration, assonance, and sibilance, such moments of sonic repetition create a sense of connection between disparate ideas. Time is intimately linked to the concept of thievery, youth in general, and the speaker's specific age.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hath," "Time," "subtle," "thief," "youth"
- **Line 2:** "Stol'n," "three," "twentieth"
- **Line 5:** "truth"
- **Line 6:** "That"

SIBILANCE

The poem is brimming with moments of sibilance throughout. As with the instances of alliteration, assonance, and consonance, this sibilance reinforces an underlying connection between disconnected concepts. For example, the speaker's "spring" is sonically linked to Time's "subtle" and hasty thievery.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "soon," "subtle"
- **Line 2:** "Stol'n," "his"
- **Line 3:** "hasting days"
- **Line 4:** "spring," "blossom," "shew'th"
- **Line 5:** "Perhaps," "semblance," "deceive"
- **Line 6:** "so"
- **Line 7:** "ripeness," "less"
- **Line 8:** "some," "spirits"
- **Line 9:** "less," "soon," "slow"
- **Line 10:** "shall," "still," "strictest," "measure"
- **Line 11:** "same"
- **Line 13:** "is," "grace," "use," "so"
- **Line 14:** "As," "Task-Master's"

VOCABULARY

Subtle (Line 1) - Something being "subtle" usually means that it's smart, sophisticated, and slightly restrained: one has to pay close attention to catch it. Milton uses the word in a related, but slightly different sense. For Milton, the word means something like "crafty" or "treacherous." One has the sense that Time is not only a thief, but a particularly effective one—so effective one might not even notice him at work.

Hasting (Line 3) - Hasting means to be in a hurry, or to move quickly. Along with "fly" and "career," the word is part of an ensemble of terms that convey speed and chaos: time moves here with anarchic energy that the speaker cannot convey.

Career (Line 3) - In contemporary English, the word "career" usually refers to one's professional path in life—one's job or vocation. Milton uses the word in an archaic sense here, derived from jousting. In jousting, to "career" is to charge or gallop at the other knight. In its extended senses, then, the word refers to swift and violent motion, often with a sense that things are out of control.

Shew'th (Line 4) - The word is a contraction of "sheweth," which means "to show" or "to display." Milton cuts the second vowel from the word to make it better fit the meter: instead of ending the line on an awkward unstressed syllable, the contraction allows it to end with a forceful, stressed syllable.

Semblance (Line 5) - "Semblance" means the appearance of a person or thing: how it (or they) look. In this instance, there's an interesting question about whether the speaker uses the word metaphorically: he might be asking one to look at his face for whiskers to see if he's reached manhood. Or he might be asking one to think more generally, surveying the whole course of his life and evaluating it.

Arriv'd (Line 6) - The word is a contraction of "arrived"—the past tense of the verb "arrive." Here it means something like "to reach" or "to attain." With its connotations of travel and distance, the word continues and contributes to the metaphors of line 3, which compare Time to something that physically moves across space at great velocity.

Timely-Happy (Line 8) - "Timely-happy" is not a real word—Milton has invented it for the poem. That said, we can arrive at a reasonable sense of what it might mean by thinking of the two words in isolation. "Timely" refers to something that happens on schedule—or, more broadly, something apt or appropriate. "Happy" can refer to a sense of satisfaction and pleasure—or, more broadly, it might refer to something lucky. (The root of the word, "hap" means "luck"). To be timely-happy is thus to arrive at happiness or at luck on schedule, when you're supposed to. Someone who is "timely-happy" is doing all the right things, at exactly the right time.

Endu'th (Line 8) - A contraction of the verb "endue." Usually the word means "to bring in, or to introduce," though it can also take on a figurative sense and mean "to take in, or inwardly digest." The word is close in sense and sound to the word "endow." Milton suggests here that the "timely-happy spirits"—of whom he is seriously jealous—have been given some kind of gift, that allows them to remain on track and to produce the right things at the right time. It's an important moment in the poem: as talented or as lucky as those "spirits" are, Milton suggests, their talent and luck don't belong to them,

but come from some place else.

Measure (Line 10) - As a verb, the word refers to the act of determining the magnitude or quantity of something: how long, how big, how much. But Milton uses the word here as a noun. As Milton uses the word, it has less to do with the act of measuring and more to do with the thing *being measured*. Here the word means "a quantity" or "a portion." It may refer to musical measures (and by extension to the meter of a poem). Milton imagines that his life will unfold according to a strict metrical scheme, orchestrated and carefully controlled by God. In this sense, he aligns himself with God: God, too, is a poet.

Mean (Line 11) - Though the word has a number of meanings, the key one here is a little archaic. Rather than referring to something average—or, for that matter, something nasty or unpleasant—Milton uses the word "mean" as the opposite of "high": to be "mean" is to be low, lesser, or even disappointing.

Grace (Line 13) - A complicated and fraught word, which involves serious theological issues. In its simplest uses, "grace" references God's benevolence toward humanity, his willingness to forgive, indulge, and love his creation. This manifests in two key ways: God gives gifts to human beings, and he also grants them salvation.In Puritan theology, only a small subset of humanity, the elect, possess grace: it is evident not only in their piety but also in their material success. The key question, theologically, is what one can do to receive God's grace. For the Puritans—and for many other Protestant sects—one can't do anything; grace is something *given* by God, and you simply have to accept what God gives you.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"How soon hath Time" is a Petrarchan sonnet. As such, it can be divided in 2 parts. The first 8 lines of the poem, the octave, stand as a unit (and they have a distinctive rhyme scheme). The final 6 lines of the poem, the sestet, work as a second, separate unit with its own rhyme scheme—and often its own ideas. The pivot between these two parts, in line 9, is called the "turn" or the "volta."

Petrarchan poets use the two halves of the poem rhetorically: advancing an idea or an argument in the first 8 lines which they often reverse, complicate, or contradict in the poem's final 6 lines. Indeed, reading this poem, one has a sense that something *is* turning, changing, after its first 8 lines.

Milton thus relies on the typical sonnet structure heavily here: introducing doubts and anxieties in the poem's octet which he resolves—in part, by contradicting the assumptions that underlie those anxieties—in the poem's sestet.

METER

Like almost all English sonnets, "How soon hath Time" is written in iambic pentameter. Line 1 is a perfect example of this:

> How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,

To avoid becoming repetitive, poets may introduce metrical substitutions: these vary and syncopate the rhythm of their lines without disrupting its fundamental pulse. Yet "How soon hath Time" is notable for how infrequently it turns to metrical substitutions like these, though it does occasionally employ then. For example, line 2 begins with a trochee before returning to regular iambs:

> Stol'n on his wing

This is a relatively unobtrusive metrical substitution; poets often start iambic lines with trochees. The only significant and disruptive metrical substitutions come in line 12:

> Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heav'n:

The line contains a couple of intriguing complications. The third foot, "leads me" is metrically ambiguous. "Lead" and "me" are more or less equal in terms of the stress they bear. While the strong iambic rhythm that surrounds them might guide the reader to put the stress on "me" instead of "lead," the foot is, arguably, most naturally read with both "time" and "leads" being stressed, creating a trochee (leads me) where one expects another iamb (leads me).

This is a potentially significant equivalence. The speaker seems momentarily unable to decide which is more important: himself ("me") or the fact that he is being led ("leads). Given the poem's complicated relationship to free will, this is potentially another moment where the individual and his will loses its preeminence, submerged in Time and God's will.

In the next foot, "and the will," there is a further complication: instead of the iamb one expects, there is an anapest. Milton preserves the number of stresses in the line—like all regular iambic line, this one has five stressed syllables. But he introduces an extra syllable, and he does so at an unusual spot: anapests are most often found in the first and fifth feet of iambic lines. Here the caesura is important: the pause between "leads me," and "and the will of Heav'n" acts, rhythmically, like the start of a line: a place where the poet might experiment with and alter the rhythm of the poem.

More broadly, though, one might think of this moment of metrical disturbance as related to the poem's theological argument. Even as Milton's line experiences some turbulence, it remains within the frame of an iambic line, with its five stressed syllables. That iambic line acts as a guide—a strict

measure—which shows readers what to stress.

The metrical form of "How soon hath Time" thus reflects its content. In the poem, the speaker argues that the course of his life will precisely follow God's plan. He uses a musical metaphor to describe that plan and its unfolding: it is, he writes in line 10, the "strictest measure." Among other things, the word "measure" might refer here to a musical measure: the units that divide up a musical score, so that it's rhythm becomes legible to its performers. Extending the metaphor slightly, one might see this as a metrical metaphor. The feet of a metrical poem are like the measures of a score of music: they organize and regulate the poem's rhythm and sound. In this sense, the poem's meter is not simply a convenience that Milton observes: it's related to the poems deepest theological questions. As Milton asks whether God has a plan for his life, the meter provides a quiet, implicit answer.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "How soon hath Time," as with all Petrarchan sonnets, can be divided into two parts. The poem's first eight lines uses just two rhyme sounds, repeated in the pattern:

ABBAABBA

The limited rhyme pattern—which doubles back on itself, returning to the same sounds over and over again—gives the poem an anxious, obsessive energy, as though the speaker can't shake an intrusive thought. Working through a limited set of rhyme sounds, Milton's speaker binds together a disparate set of concerns into one consuming anxiety: that he has failed to accomplish what he was designed to do.

In the second half of a Petrarchan sonnet, the rhyme scheme loosens and changes. Unlike the first half, there is no set formula for the rhymes. Poets use a variety of rhyme schemes, including *cdecde*, *cdcdcd*, and *cddcdd*. Milton uses a particularly unusual rhyme scheme in the final six lines of his poem:

CDEDCE

The sestet starts off looking fairly normal. One expects it to follow a standard Petrarchan formula: *cde* followed by *cde*. Reversing the *c* and *d* rhymes, Milton disrupts readers' expectations: the *d* rhyme comes too soon and the *c* rhyme too late.

One may experience this as awkwardness or strangeness in an otherwise smooth and highly polished poem. Yet in introducing this awkwardness, Milton makes a subtle theological point. Though the poem doesn't rhyme where one expects it to, it *does* eventually rhyme. So, too, might God's plan upset one's expectations—but that doesn't mean that God has no plan. Just as Milton's sonnet asks readers to recalibrate their expectations about rhyme, Milton's God sometimes asks people to recalibrate their expectations about His plan for their lives.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "How soon hath Time" is an ambitious young man, reflecting anxiously on what he's accomplished life—and finding solace for his anxieties in his religious faith. Critics traditionally treat the poem as autobiographical, and there is strong support for this autobiographical reading. For one thing, the poem expresses religious views that Milton passionately defends elsewhere. Further, like the poem's speaker, Milton was 23 years old when he wrote it, living at home with his parents and pursuing a leisurely course of theological study.

However, the poem is also clearly intended to instruct its readers and to help them manage their own anxieties. In this sense, whether the poem is autobiographical or not doesn't really matter. The poem is both specific and universal: it expresses Milton's personal circumstances and, in doing so, expresses universal human worries.

SETTING

The setting for "How soon hath Time" is England in the 1630s, most likely in the rural countryside, where Milton was living with his parents at the time he wrote the sonnet. However, the poem contains few references to its specific setting—with the exception of the "buds" and "blossoms" in line 4, the poem does not reference the external world. Instead, its true landscape is internal: the psyche of the speaker, where he wrestles with doubt, anxiety, and faith. This contributes to the sense that the poem's message is universal. Instead of attaching itself to a particular time and place, it locates itself in the fears and anxieties everyone shares.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Milton wrote "How soon hath Time" in the early 1630s. By that time, poets had been writing sonnets in English for nearly 100 years. The form had gone through an early period of experimentation—where poets like Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard tried different methods for bringing the form (originally Italian) into English. And it had experienced a period of intense popularity during the 1590s, before falling out of fashion in the early 17th century. When Milton sat down to write his sonnet, then, he was working with a form that had a distinguished history—and that was somewhat unfashionable, even exhausted.

One of the challenges facing Milton as a poet was to find new possibility and energy for the form. Joining contemporaneous experiments by poets like John Donne and George Herbert, he tried to revive the sonnet by transforming its content. Where

the sonnet was traditionally used for love poetry—working through the agonies and ecstasies of erotic love, with all its anxieties and pleasures—Milton transformed it into a poem about the agonies and ecstasies of religious devotion.

In doing so, Milton preserves some of the key tropes of the sonnet tradition. For example, Shakespeare similarly refers to youth as springtime. In Sonnet 3, he reminds his lover: "Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee / Calls back the lovely April of her prime" (9-10). One might imagine that a religious poet like Milton would be eager to suppress the secular sources of his sonnet; instead, he both transforms and preserves them, so they remain in his poem, as if trapped in amber.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"How soon hath Time" was written at a fraught moment in English history. In 1625, Charles I had become King of England—and under his reign, religious and political discontent within the country began to boil over. By 1642, 10 years after Milton wrote the poem, the country had descended into civil war; in 1649, Charles was executed.

Milton strongly supported the revolution and even defended the execution of the King. He did so because of his religious faith. Milton was a committed Puritan—he refused to enter the Church of England after graduating from Cambridge because he could not accept the Church's doctrine on a number of key issues. For example, the Anglican Church continued to offer communion, which the Puritans considered idolatry. The Civil War began, in part, in response to these doctrinal conflicts between the conservative Church of England and the radical Puritans.

One may thus locate the poem in the center of doctrinal conflicts within England in the 17th century. More broadly, it is situated in the broad debates about the Christian faith that consumed Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries following the Protestant Reformation. Where Protestant sects (like the Puritans) rejected the notion that salvation could be achieved through works, the Catholic Church insisted that good deeds, piety, and following the sacraments—in short, works—*could* affect one's fate in the afterlife. The Church of England's practices were uncomfortably close to Catholicism for Puritans like Milton: they sought to purify their religious practice of any lingering hints of Catholic practice.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Resources from the British Library on Milton — The British Library's page on John Milton, with information about his biography, faith, politics, and works. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-milton)
- John Milton and the Cultures of Print — From Rutgers University Library, this online exhibit provides background on Milton's relationship to his own culture—particularly the developing technology of print. (https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/exhibits/milton/)
- Guide to the Sonnet — The Academy of American Poets' guide to several sonnet forms, including the Petrarchan sonnet. (https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/sonnet-poetic-form)
- John Milton Reading Room — Dartmouth College's Milton reading room, which features Milton's complete poetry, selected prose and research guides to his work. (https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/contents/text.shtml)
- "How soon hath Time" Read by Peter Hedditch — Peter Hedditch reads Milton's sonnet. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68Va2w7fvNg)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN MILTON POEMS

- Sonnet 19: When I consider how my light is spent (On his blindness)

HOW TO CITE

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