Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me

POEM TEXT

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

SUMMARY

When you look at me you must see that time of year when yellow leaves, or no leaves, or just a few leaves, hang on tree branches that shiver in the cold. In me you see deserted church choirs, which used to hold singing birds but are now bare. You see twilight in me—the part of the day when the sun has set in the west, and the darkness of night slowly takes over. Night is a shadowy version of death, because death will one day permanently close the eyes that are now temporarily closed in sleep. In me you can see the glow of a dying fire that rests on its own ashes like a deathbed, since the fire will eventually burn out upon the remains of the wood that once fueled it. You see all this, and seeing it makes your love stronger. You love me more knowing that I will die soon.

THEMES

LOVE AND OLD AGE

Sonnet 73 uses autumn, twilight, and a dying fire as extended metaphors for growing older. The poem makes it clear that aging and death are inevitable, but it also affirms that the person the speaker is addressing still loves the speaker just the same—in fact, this person loves the speaker even *more* knowing that their time together is limited. Rather than rage against the march of time, the poem ultimately offers that genuine love doesn't care about age and need not diminish as a loved one nears death.

The metaphors of the poem hardly make the speaker seem traditionally attractive or appealing, in that they all suggest decay. For instance, the poem begins by comparing the aging speaker to late autumn, a "time of year" when the trees' vibrant green leaves have changed to "yellow" and then begin to fall. The speaker is compared to a nearly bare tree branch shivering in the cold.

The second metaphor then compares the speaker's current time of life to "twilight," or the time when the day's last light is still present in the sky, but dark night is imminent. This suggests that the speaker's "light"—his vitality, attractiveness, wit, or any number of other qualities—has peaked, has already come and gone; everything is only going to get darker—to go downhill, basically—from here.

Finally, the third metaphor compares the aged speaker to a dying fire. Once again, the connection between old age and death is made explicit: the fire is on its "death-bed" and "must expire," suggesting that the speaker, too, is edging ever closure to his own expiration date.

None of these images are romantic, and they all suggest deterioration rather than vibrancy. Love is also often associated with the potential for new life (i.e., procreation), but that's clearly not something the speaker is capable of. Even in a more platonic sense, the metaphors the speaker uses reveal that he is well past his prime, with less to offer his beloved than perhaps he once had.

Yet the poem's final couplet suggests that the poem's addressee cherishes the speaker not *in spite of* these visible signs of old age but *because* of them. The addressee sees that the speaker is aging and knows that the process cannot be reversed. Since death is inevitable, the addressee must eventually "leave" the speaker—a line that also implies that this addressee is significantly younger than the speaker and, it follows, has more life left. However, accepting the speaker's approaching death makes the addressee's love for the speaker "more strong." In other words, none of these signs of aging matter when genuine love is involved. And that love is made all the more precious by its inevitable loss.

This final touches on a theme broader theme about the nature of life and mortality more generally, which we'll discuss next.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

MORTALITY, NATURE, AND MEANING

Much of "Sonnet 73" is devoted to extended descriptions of natural processes unfolding in time. The three metaphors compare the speaker's dwindling time on earth to three instances of natural decline—autumn, twilight, and a dying fire. Importantly, no attention is given to the fact that the chosen examples are *cyclical*—the speaker presents them as completely linear and irreversible. Similarly, the couplet's reference to the speaker's limited lifespan goes against the Christian idea that joy will come in the afterlife. Instead, the poem argues that joy actually comes from the *brevity* of life (i.e., how short life really is). Through its natural imagery, the poem shows that people are subject to the unrelenting march of time toward death, but it also suggests that limited time on earth actually makes life more meaningful.

By choosing natural images to represent the speaker's aging process, the poem suggests that human life is bound by the laws of nature. The first description, of late autumn, demonstrates time's power to destroy that which was once whole and beautiful. Trees are described through their autumnal "yellow leaves" that fall to the ground, and through their "bare" and "ruin'd" boughs.

The second description, of twilight, focuses on how the coming night is a metaphor for the speaker's approaching death. Night is called "death's second self," as sleep temporarily "seals" the eyes that death will one day close forever. The third description, of a dying fire, shows that no person or element can sustain itself indefinitely. Like the fire that will soon burn out on its own ashes, the speaker will soon lie on his own "death-bed." Since each process of natural decay over time is metaphorically located "in" the speaker, the poem suggests that each metaphor reflects the inevitable decline of the speaker—and, by extension, of all human beings.

Yet though the natural processes in the poem are in fact cyclical—meaning that "life" will return—the speaker focuses on *decline* rather than *renewal*. In describing late autumn, twilight, and a dying fire, the speaker fails to mention that springtime follows winter, that day follows night, or that fires might be re-kindled. Just as the metaphors fail to mention nature's cycles, the final couplet's reference to the speaker's limited lifespan fails to reference the Christian belief in a blissful afterlife in heaven (note that Christianity was very widely accepted in the England of Shakespeare's day). The poem thus refuses traditional forms of consolation, instead focusing on the inevitability of decay.

The final two lines, however, suggest that the harsh reality of life's linear progression toward death also offers unexpected comfort. In the couplet, the speaker suggests that the addressee sees time's effects on and "in" him, and thus knows the speaker must die. Knowing this, however, causes the addressee's love for the speaker to become "more strong." Loving and leaving become linked, making limited time a condition for this relationship's ultimate strength. The brevity of peoples' natural life, then, becomes the very thing that makes love possible.

Though the poem focuses on the uncompromising movement of time toward death, this natural process is not presented as a negative thing. Instead, the poem ultimately shows that moving toward a definite ending can create the kind of intense feeling that gives life meaning.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

AGING

The poem clearly explores the nature of love in the face of mortality, but it takes a look at what it actually *feels* like to get older on a more immediate level—to actually live with death just over the horizon. Note how each of the metaphors that describe the speaker's stage in life also gesture toward a youthful past, showing how the speaker's youth remains a vivid memory even as it seems to fade. Part of getting older, it seems, entails harboring a fond, poignant longing for the excitement of years gone by. At the same time, aging is associated with a sense of peace and calm as the ruckus of life slowly begins to fade.

The poem first compares the speaker to a tree in late autumn, which on one level reveals the speaker's advancing age. At the same time, however—though this tree is clearly showing signs of decay with its yellow, falling leaves and shivering "against the cold"—this tree is not *yet* dormant for the winter. The speaker, too, may be getting old, but is still very much alive right now; his outward appearance is just less showy, with fewer brightly colored leaves.

The subsequent comparison to a church choir also subtly recalls the trees' springtime youthfulness, when "birds sang" on its leafy branches. The speaker mourns the birds' departure and the deadened appearance of the tree's boughs, and in doing so, the speaker implicitly mourns the loss of his own youthful appearance—a time when perhaps the addressee would have loved the speaker more. Yet the absence of birds also connotes the emergence of a kind of peace and quiet.

This notion continues when the speaker moves on to a consideration of twilight. Twilight is a time when the brilliant finale of the setting sun is over, implying within the context of this metaphor that the speaker is now past his prime. Yet twilight is still often considered a peaceful, reflective time of day before the dark of night sets in. And that "night," for that matter, is explicitly connected to "rest." Death isn't necessarily something frightening, then, but rather a continuation of the calm and quiet that seems to characterize old age.

The speaker's final metaphorical fire smolders weakly upon the "ashes of his youth," or the decomposing remnants of the logs that once fueled vibrant flames. The image implies that aspects of the speaker's younger self remain within the speaker, even as he grows old. The speaker's self will eventually be extinguished through the passage of time that allowed that growth to occur, yet for the moment, the speaker still lives on.

This suggests that the addressee can still love the speaker so strongly because, aging outward appearance aside, the speaker's inner self remains the same; the volume has just been turned down, the colors muted, and the brightness dimmed. Aging in the poem is like a slow fade out, a time marked by quiet reflection and consideration of the life one is gearing up to leave behind.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

That time of year thou mayst in me behold

The first line of "Sonnet 73" introduces many of its central thematic and formal qualities. Essentially, the speaker is talking to some unknown addressee and saying, "When you look at me you see a certain time of year." What specific time of year (a.k.a. season) isn't revealed until the next line, but it's clear that this poem will be dealing with the nature and passage of time in some way. Already, the poem is highlighting its metaphorical landscape: this is not a poem *about* nature, but one that uses nature to speak about human beings.

This first line also hints at the human relationship that grounds the poem. Through the phrase "in me," which will be repeated as an anaphora in each quatrain, the speaker establishes the poem's first-person perspective. But the use of "thou" shows that the poem is framed as an apostrophe to a specific listener. Despite how old-fashioned it might sound, "thou" is actually the *informal* form of the second person singular (that is, of "you"), which suggests that the speaker and the addressee have an intimate relationship.

Finally, the line establishes the poem's use of iambic pentameter, the classic da DUM rhythm one would expect in a Shakespearean sonnet. The first line follows the even rise and fall of its chosen metrical pattern flawlessly (which, in hindsight, may reflect the aging speaker's skill having been accumulated over time). The line is divided into five feet (the basic unit of poetic measurement), each one consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable:

That **time** | of **year** | thou **mayst** | in **me** | be**hold**

For the most part, the rest of the poem will follow this steady rhythm. The line is also enjambed, a formal quality that helps create a coherent extended metaphor within each quatrain as the lines overflow from one to the next.

LINES 2-4

When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

In lines 2 through 4, it becomes clear that the "time of year" being described is late autumn. The extended metaphor stretches across all four lines of the first quatrain, with enjambment linking lines 2 and 3 just as it linked lines 1 and 2. The series of smaller metaphors contained within the larger one suggests that the speaker is no longer in the spring of youth, nor in the summer-like prime of young adulthood. Instead, this speaker is likely middle-aged or older, and the winter of his old age and eventual death quickly approaches.

To further emphasize the connection between this season and the speaker's own life, the speaker personifies the changing trees. The speaker suggests that trees shiver in the cold like a human would, and implies that they feel nostalgia for the warmer seasons when birds sang on their branches. These pathetic qualities work to elicit pity from the addressee.

Line 4 has proved particularly interesting to literary critics, who often discuss its presentation of the tree's branches as "choirs." This word refers to the stalls where the choir sits in a church. As a metaphor for the tree's branches, it works on several levels. First, the stalls are made of wood, just as the branches are. In this sense, it is a metaphor that moves close to equivalence. Metaphors usually compare two *unlike* things, while this one is almost a metonym in the way it refers to one thing by using a word directly related to it.

Choirs, however, also evoke connotations unrelated to wooden tree branches. Directly before and during Shakespeare's lifetime, religious upheaval led to the ruination of many beautiful Catholic monasteries and churches. The choirs, like the tree branches they stand in for here, were thus "ruin'd" and emptied of the singers who once filled them.

The line's formal qualities also underscore this mournful emptiness. It is composed almost entirely of simple, monosyllabic words, and it begins and ends with spondees (a foot consisting of two stressed syllables): "**bare ru**-" and "**birds sang**." The line does not move up and down (da DUM) as a regular iambic pentameter line would, creating a kind of rhythmic deadness.

There is also alliteration and consonance present in these lines, particularly of /k/, /b/, and /s/ sounds. The repeated /k/ of "sha**k**e against the **c**old," for example, almost creates a sense of teeth chattering. Also note the /w/ and /s/ and assonant long /a/ sounds of "**w**here late the **s**weet birds **s**ang," which together

create a lovely sensation bordering on euphony. This beautiful language reflects the beautiful music of the birds.

LINES 5-6

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,

The beginning of the second quatrain mirrors the beginning of the first in a number of significant ways. Most obviously, these lines introduce another extended metaphor. Having already been compared to autumn—the season when trees lose their leaves and shiver in the cold air as winter approaches—the speaker now gets compared to twilight, that time at the end of the day when the sun is setting but it's not yet totally dark. Twilight, like late autumn, becomes a metaphor for the speaker's advancing age.

Implicitly, the speaker has offered two instances of natural decline that also contain the promise of rebirth: spring will come again after the deadness of winter, and a new day will dawn after the darkness of night. Importantly, however, neither quatrain explores the cyclical nature of these processes. In failing to do so, the poem sets aside the comforting notion that renewal follows decay. This creates a sense of finality surrounding death.

As in the first quatrain, the second quatrain's first two lines are enjambed. Because the lines are not end-stopped, the extended metaphor continues fluidly from one line to the next. Enjambment thus helps sustain a single larger metaphor across the entire quatrain.

The second quatrain also parallels the first one through the repeated phrase "in me." The phrase becomes an anaphora within the poem. By repeating these words, the speaker invites the addressee to focus on the process of decline occurring within the speaker. Though most of the poem consists of natural imagery, the anaphora keeps the addressee's focus on how this imagery relates to the *speaker himself*.

LINES 7-8

Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

It is fitting that the poem's moment of greatest alliterative intensity occurs in line 8, when the speaker explicitly uses the word "death"—which, so far, has only been alluded to through metaphors.

> Which by and by black night doth take away,
> Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

These two lines explode with alliteration and consonance of /b/, /d/, /l/, and /th/ sounds. There's also plenty of sibilance here, which, together with the soft /th/, /l/, and /f/ sounds make line 8 feel intensely hushed and muffled—as if this line itself were "sealed up in rest."

The use of sibilance may further subtly allude to death's association with Satan, who in the Bible appears to Eve as a snake. The hissing serpent tempts Eve to disobey God's command not to eat the forbidden fruit. When Eve gives into the temptation and disobeys God, death is brought into the world. This story is foundational within Christianity, which was the dominant religion in Elizabethan England.

The poem has been hinting at the inevitability of death all along, and finally names it in this moment. Even here, however, death is referenced *within* a metaphor: night is presented as "death's second self," because darkness and sleep are like the shadows of eternal rest.

Each of the extended metaphors in the poem describes natural processes of decay that mirror the speaker's advancing age. The reason those processes *matter* for the speaker's relationship, however, is that they foreshadow the speaker's eventual death and physical *separation* from the addressee. Though this may seem like an unsurprising line of argument, it differs from many other love sonnets. Commonly, Renaissance love sonnets explore problems that keep the speaker's beloved at a distance in the present. This sonnet, however, suggests that the speaker and the addressee are very much *together* in the present. Of course, this poem nonetheless reflects on the coming division between them because of the speaker's inevitable death.

LINES 9-10

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,

In the third quatrain, the speaker finally includes an extended metaphor that involves, well, *finality*. While the poem ignored the possibility that seasons and days are cyclical, those metaphors' connotations of eventual renewal were unavoidable (in other words, it's hard to ignore that winter will eventually give way to spring, just as night will lead to a new day).

As the quatrains' metaphors diminish from a season to a day to a fire's brief duration, however, the poem moves toward a deeper acknowledgment of the brevity of human life. The speaker personifies the dying fire by describing how it lies upon "the "ashes of his youth." The pronoun "his," here, begins to break down any division between the speaker and the fire. It is not entirely clear whether the "his" refers to the personified *fire* used in the metaphor, or to the *speaker* himself. In any case, neither the speaker nor the fire can regain their youth. Their brief lives cannot be repeated, and cannot be renewed in this world. Though other fires may be lit, the particular logs that fueled this fire will only decompose further.

Though the dying fire's connotations differ slightly from the poem's first two extended metaphors, the poem continues to draw formal parallels between the three quatrains. Like the

poem's first two quatrains, the third quatrain's two enjambed lines create fluidity and coherence within the extended metaphor. The quatrain also again makes use of anaphora through the phrase "in me," which is present for the third time in the poem.

LINES 11-12

As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.

The second half of the third quatrain continues to make use of personification. The speaker describes the fire as dying upon its own ashes like a "death-bed." In using this very human image, the speaker continues to help the addressee visualize the aging process taking place within the speaker, and its eventual conclusion in death. The speaker also implicitly seeks emotional *responses* from the addressee—namely, pity and strengthened love. (Using pity to evoke love has a long history in literature. Dante and Petrarch often present themselves as melting in tears before their beloveds, while the English sonneteer Sir Philip Sidney opens *Astrophil and Stella* with the idea that Stella's "pity" might help Astrophil obtain her "grace.")

Line 12 also contains a powerful paradox. The speaker describes how the fire's life will be snuffed out, explaining that it will be "consum'd" by the very thing that once "nourish'd" it. The food-centered language used here plays upon the seemingly contradictory nature of a substance that once *fed* another being eventually *being fed* by it. What it means, however, is that the ashes of the wood that once fueled the fire will eventually *suffocate* that same fire. As will become clear in lines 13 and 14, this paradox sets up the equally paradoxical nature of the couplet's argument.

LINES 13-14

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

The couplet gathers all the content of the previous lines' into the single, accented word "this," and finally suggests that the addressee's perception of the speaker's inevitable death will result in strengthened love. All three quatrains, then, have been leading up to this climactic moment. It is a striking and paradoxical argument, as it means that the speaker's *decline* causes the addressee's love for him to *grow*.

To set the couplet apart from the quatrains, the speaker reserves a variety of stylistic changes for these final two lines. The couplet makes heavy use of the fricative consonants /v/ and /th/, sounds that are produced when the breath creates friction as it moves through a narrow space in the mouth. These fricatives are included through both alliteration and consonance ("this," "thou," "perceiv'st," "thy," "love," "leave," etc.) Alliteration also emphasizes the connection between love and separation, as "love" and "leave" are included in the final lines. Finally, subtle /o/ sound assonance underscores the couplet's insistence that decline must result in renewed love, as the phrase "more strong" is placed prominently at the end of the penultimate line.

Line 13 arguably opens with a trochee and closes with a spondee (again, a foot of two stressed syllables in a row). This adds emphasis to the initial "this," underscoring that it is in reference to *everything* that has come thus far in the poem, while the double stress of "more strong" reflects the strength of the phrase itself:

> This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,

The poem's final line is in perfect iambic pentameter, and uses only monosyllabic words. Even meter and simple language create a sense of clarity and calmness in the end. Taken together, these qualities suggest that a loving response from the addressee is just as certain as the speaker's eventual death. Readers should remember, however, that this poem is one of many Shakespearean sonnets that discuss anxieties about time and death. Perhaps the speaker is not as confident in the addressee's loving response as the couplet would suggest.

SYMBOLS

SEASONS AND DAYS

In "Sonnet 73," autumn and twilight are located within the larger constructs of seasons and days. These natural cycles become symbols of the human lifespan.

In order to describe his age precisely, the speaker must place himself within the broader sequence of birth, youth, middle age, old age, and death. Focusing on particular moments in the year allows him to do just that. Even as the tree shakes in the cold, a memory remains of the birds that once sang amidst its branches. Even as the sun sets, the fading light is a reminder of its midday radiance. Through these metaphors, the speaker implies that he is no longer in his youth nor even in early middle age. At least in his own perception, the speaker is old enough to be seriously approaching death.

In addition to describing twilight, the second quatrain explores the symbolic association between night and death. This symbolic resonance is an ancient one, and Shakespeare makes use of it in several other sonnets. "Sonnet 30," for example, describes friends who have been lost to "death's dateless night." In "Sonnet 73," night is presented as a shadow of death. All eyes close in rest during the nightly darkness, mimicking the way death closes one's eyes for the last time.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "time of year "
- **Lines 2-4:** "yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang / Upon those boughs which shake against the cold, / Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang"
- **Lines 5-8:** "the twilight of such day / As after sunset fadeth in the west, / Which by and by black night doth take away, / Death's second self, that seals up all in rest"

FIRE

The poem uses a dying fire as a metaphor for the speaker's advancing age and limited lifespan. In doing so, it plays on several of fire's many time-honored, symbolic resonances.

Fire's association with life itself has remained constant since ancient times. In Greek mythology, for example, the titan Prometheus famously gave humans the gift of fire. This gift was the spark of life and of warmth, giving humanity a great deal of power. Shakespeare explicitly associates fire with life in *Macbeth*, where the title character exclaims, "Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow . . ." In "Sonnet 73," the dying flame is, metaphorically, the speaker's own life. Fire's power to devour all it touches also features in the poem, which offers a paradoxical presentation of how fire both consumes and is consumed.

Finally, the poem may also hint at fire's association with love and passion. The romantic relationship between the speaker and the addressee is, in a sense, the situation that generates the poem's argument.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire / That on the ashes of his youth doth lie, / As the death-bed whereon it must expire, / Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Sonnet 73 includes many instances of alliteration. One of the strongest and most evocative moments comes in lines 7 and 8, with the intense repetition of /b/, /d/, and /s/ sounds. This is also the first time that the point has actually mentioned death directly, and as such it seems like a fitting moment for the speaker to amp up the poetic intensity! The extensive /s/ sounds in these lines also create clear sibilance, adding to line 8's hushed quality; the /s/ sounds combined with other soft consonance of /th/ and /l/—in "death," "second," "self," "seals" "all," etc.—create the sensation that this line itself is hushed, sealed up by death.

The one sound that *does* echo throughout the poem is the /th/ sound, often because it is attached to the word "thou." "Thou" is repeated five times throughout the poem, in lines 1, 5, 9, 13, and 14, and in four of those instances "thou" is placed beside another word beginning with /the/. This insistent repetition emphasizes the speaker's laser-like focus on the addressee, even as the poem's content largely focuses on the speaker's condition. It also speaks to the unrepeatable nature of this particular person, and encourages the lover to think of the speaker in the same way.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "m," "m"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "b," "b," "b," "d"
- **Line 8:** "D," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 9:** "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 13:** "Th," "th," "th," "l"
- **Line 14:** "l," "th," "w," "w," "th," "l," "l"

ANAPHORA

Some critics have suggested that the poem's quatrains each repeat the same idea: that everything must decay and die, including the speaker. This viewpoint is reinforced by the repeated phrase at the beginning of each quatrain: "in me." Together, these repeated phrases at or near the beginning of each quatrain constitute an anaphora. Each time the speaker repeats the phrase, he invites the addressee to see the process of decline occurring within him.

What this argument for continuity in content misses, however, are the subtle changes achieved alongside the sonic repetition. The repeated phrase in some sense actually masks why the quatrains' images progressively diminish, or get smaller in scope—moving from an entire season, to a single day, to a short-lived fire. This subtly suggests the speaker is edging closer and closer to death.

While the first two quatrains compare the speaker's aging to processes of decline that are cyclical in the world outside the poem (again, winter leads to spring and night leads to morning), the third and final quatrain embraces a clearer sense of finality; once the fire is out and the logs that fed turned to ash, they cannot be *remade* into logs. Perhaps this shift reflects the speaker himself coming to terms with the devastating process of decay he describes, and what it means for the future of his relationship. Either way, by focusing each image "in" and through himself, the speaker makes the quatrains' extended metaphors seem a bit more similar than they truly are.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "in me"
- **Line 5:** "In me"
- **Line 9:** "In me"

APOSTROPHE

The entirety of "Sonnet 73" is an apostrophe, as the speaker addresses a lover. The interplay between the repeated words "me" and "thou" keeps the reader's focus on the close relationship between these two figures. Perhaps to further emphasize the closeness between them, the speaker uses the *informal* form of the second person singular, "thou," rather than the formal "you."

For context, this is a departure from something like Petrarch's *Rime Sparse*, in which the addressee, Laura, is always addressed using the formal second person pronoun "lei." The formality helps show that, in Petrarch's world, the loved one is unattainable. In the world of Shakespeare's sonnets, this is not so.

It is also significant that "Sonnet 73" fails to include the addressee's name. Many other love sonnets from the period include the name of the beloved being addressed. Petrarch included Laura's name throughout his sequence, for example, and the English sonneteer Philip Sidney had often referred to his beloved Stella. In "Sonnet 73," the name's absence contributes to the universality of the poem. Its message can easily extend outward to any reader, and need not even be restricted to those in romantic relationships. All readers are mortals, and all love another person who might die before they do.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

ASSONANCE

The use of assonance in "Sonnet 73" helps mark a subtle division between the poem's three quatrains and its final couplet. Throughout the three quatrains, the dominant repeated vowel sounds are short and long /e/ and short /a/. Just before the couplet begins, however, the soundscape shifts toward the short /i/ sound through the words such as "which," "it," and "nourish'd." This shift is then maintained across the divide between quatrains and couplet through the words "this," "which," and a hint of the elided vowel in "perceiv'st."

Of course, when used as adjectives, "which" and "this" are not stressed within sentences. In such cases, readers might not even notice or attribute meaning to the way they create consonance. As a demonstrative pronoun, however, "this" sums up and refers to everything contained in the previous lines. It also stressed at the start of line 13. As such, it is an extremely important word within the poem, and the repetitive soundscape reinforces its presence.

Assonance also parallels the poem's ultimate message: that advancing age and eventual separation should make long "more strong" in the present. The demands of the iambic pentameter line aside, the speaker might have used the word "stronger" and achieved the same meaning. In choosing "more strong," the speaker gives more space and greater sonic emphasis to the idea.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "e," "e"
- **Line 2:** "e," "e," "ea," "a"
- **Line 3:** "o," "a," "o"
- **Line 4:** "a," "e," "a," "ee," "a"
- **Line 5:** "e," "ee," "a"
- **Line 6:** "A," "a," "e," "a," "e," "e"
- **Line 7:** "y," "y," "i," "a," "a"
- **Line 8:** "e," "e," "e," "ea," "e"
- **Line 9:** "e," "ee"
- **Line 10:** "a," "a"
- **Line 11:** "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 13:** "i," "i," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 14:** "o," "i," "u," "o"

CONSONANCE

Consonance can be heard in almost every line of the poem. For example, /l/ and /n/ sounds dominate in line 2 ("when," "yellow," "leaves," "none"). In several lines, consonance works together with alliteration to emphasize one particular sound. Overall, varying the repeated consonants across lines creates a pleasant soundscape.

In line 4 for example, the /w/ and /s/ sounds make the phrase "where late the sweet birds sang" feel cohesive and lovely, a reflection of the beautiful music being described. As mentioned in our discussion of alliteration, lines 7 and 8 are particularly filled with repeating sounds, namely /b/, /d/, and /s/. The fact that this poem is addressed to someone creates frequent consonance of the soft /th/ sound, given that the speaker repeatedly addresses his listener as "thou."

Together, all these harmonious sounds also soften the blow of what the quatrains describe: decline and eventual death. Content and stylistics, then, are somewhat at odds.

The couplet is equally harmonious in sound, using the fricative consonant /v/ in both lines ("perceiv'st," "love," "leave"). Through alliteration, these lines also emphasize the fricative /th/ sound ("this," "thou," "thy," etc.). These lines offer a somewhat comforting thought—that the inevitability of death leads to stronger love in the present. The softly voiced consonants perhaps reflect that sense of gentle calm.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "m," "m," "m"
- **Line 2:** "n," "ll," "l," "n," "n"
- **Line 3:** "k," "c"
- **Line 4:** "r," "r," "r," "w," "r," "sw," "r," "s," "s"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s," "s," "w"
- **Line 7:** "b," "d," "b," "b," "d," "th"
- **Line 8:** "D," "th," "s," "s," "d," "s," "th," "s," "l," "s," "ll," "s"
- **Line 9:** "th," "th"
- **Line 10:** "th," "th"
- **Line 11:** "th," "d," "th," "d"
- **Line 12:** "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 13:** "Th," "th," "v," "th," "v"
- **Line 14:** "l," "v," "th," "w," "w," "th," "l," "v," "l"

ENJAMBMENT

In "Sonnet 73," the use of enjambment helps create continuity within the four lines of each quatrain. The quatrains describe three different instances of natural decline, with multiple ideas gathered into a coherent, extended metaphor. The enjambed lines in each quatrain set up those three images of decay, while the non-enjambed lines elaborate on the image and show why it describes the speaker.

For example, lines 1 through 4 compare the speaker's advancing age to late autumn. Lines 1 and 2 are both clearly enjambed, unbroken by punctuation and with their images spilling over on the following line. Line 3 is more accurately end-stopped, and *elaborates* on the image presented in lines 1 and 2. This line adds a metaphor on top of a metaphor by comparing the tree's branches to "ruin'd choirs." The quatrain then very clearly ends with the full stop of line 4.

Lines 5 through 8 then compare the speaker to twilight, with the first two lines of the quatrain again being clearly enjambed as they present an image, and the third line again building upon the metaphor already presented (here comparing night to death's shadow). Again, the quatrain ends with a full stop. The final quatrain is slightly different in that only its first line (line 9) is clearly enjambed, but again the end-stopped lines serve to elaborate upon the image presented in that enjambed line.

In each case, the lack of punctuation between lines helps connect the ideas within them. And to further unify each quatrain and create divisions between them, the speaker uses periods only at the end of each one. Each quatrain, then, might be uttered in one breath. Taken together with the poem's use of end-stopped punctuation, then, enjambment helps the reader notice how a single idea unifies each quatrain.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "behold"
- **Line 2:** "When," "hang"
- **Line 3:** "Upon"
- **Line 5:** "day"
- **Line 6:** "As"
- **Line 9:** "fire"
- **Line 10:** "That"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"Sonnet 73" uses one extended metaphor per quatrain to describe the speaker's aging condition. The overarching metaphors compare the speaker to late autumn, twilight, and a dying fire. Within each larger metaphor, a number of smaller, interrelated metaphors contribute to the idea as a whole.

In comparing his situation to twilight, for example, the speaker compares being past the prime of life to the time of day *past* sunset. The speaker suggests that the way night gradually takes away the sky's remaining light parallels how advancing time gradually steals human youth and beauty. Approaching night is then made into a smaller metaphor within the larger metaphor: it is "death's second self" in that sleep is a shadow of final rest.

Taken together, these lines offer a vibrant metaphorical scene that could not be achieved through a series of disconnected ideas. Through them, the speaker describes different aspects of and complexities in the aging process. In particular, the first two extended metaphors suggest but refuse the possibility of cyclicality and renewal (winter leads to spring, night leads to day), while the final example embraces finality (the fire can't be relit after turning its fuel to ash). Through the progression, readers see the speaker coming to terms with (or perhaps helping the addressee come to terms with) the processes being described (in other words, accepting his mortality and the finality of death).

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12

IMAGERY

Throughout "Sonnet 73," the speaker invites the addressee to look at him and see the aging process taking place within him through imagery. The preposition "in" implies that this is an interior change. This contains a hint of irony, as the aging process is usually very visible on the human body. While it might seem difficult to perceive an internal process through the senses, the poem consistently uses sensory language to describe it nevertheless. The dominant sensory appeal is to the eyes—the speaker first invites the addressee to "behold" the images being described and insists twice more that he "see'st" them. The speaker paints a vibrant picture encompassing seasons, skies, and glowing fires. The sense of hearing appears

in the poem as well, when the speaker mourns the loss of birdsong in line 4.

In the penultimate line, however, the speaker makes a subtle shift from "seeing" to "perceiving." This shift is important, because perception involves noticing something not only through the senses, but through the *mind*. Perhaps the speaker seeks to engage his beloved's entire being in "perceiving" their relationship, rather than seeing it through external senses alone.

Despite the couplet's confidence in the strength of their relationship, perhaps the speaker also worries that his aging body will not capture the beloved's attention as it used to do. Ultimately, the speaker's use of imagistic language encourages an emotional reaction in the addressee—one that will bind them more closely together. Because death will one day make it impossible for the lovers to be physically together, they must gaze at one another while they still can.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13

PARADOX

"Sonnet 73" contains one striking paradox that gestures toward the quatrains' argument as a whole. In the third quatrain, the speaker describes a fire sputtering out on its own ashes. The fire is "consum'd" by that which once "nourish'd" it, since the dead ash now suffocates the fire rather than fueling it. It seems contradictory for the very thing that fed a fire to ultimately be fed *by* it. In fact, however, the fire has turned the wood into a very different substance. The fire's blistering heat has caused the wood to decompose into ash, which consists of un-burnable minerals.

The poem suggests that human life operates in a similar way. The body functions because its organ systems do. These systems slowly decline over time, and one day a problem within them could result in natural death. Alternately, we might say that time allows people to grow and change from babyhood to adulthood. As time marches onward, however, death comes ever closer. The speaker suggests that, one day soon, his time will run out—he will have no more logs to burn and the ashes left behind (that is, his aged body) will be his death bed.

The paradox forms part of the speaker's recognition that his death approaches, and sets up the couplet's argument for a renewed and strengthened relationship between himself and the addressee. The speaker knows that it might seem paradoxical for love to increase while one's body declines. The paradox in line 12 foreshadows that final argument, and helps makes it seem more reasonable.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by."

PERSONIFICATION

In each of the extended metaphors that form the quatrains, the speaker personifies the natural world. In describing late autumn, the speaker suggests that boughs "shake against the cold." This implies that the tree shivers and braces itself against the weather, rather than simply being acted upon by the wind. In describing twilight, the speaker makes an explicit comparison between night and death. Though death is certainly not applicable only to humans, mentioning it here connects cycles of light and darkness to human life. In addition, death is described as having personhood, since it has a "self." In describing a fire, the speaker calls its ashes a "death-bed." This is, perhaps, the most humanlike of all the poems' nature-centered descriptions. Humans fashion beds from once-living wood to make themselves more comfortable in sleep and in sickness, and gather around them to mourn dying family members and friends.

In each case, the personified natural objects lend pathos to the speaker's cause. The speaker implies that, if even nonhuman trees mourn the passing of summer, the addressee must have human compassion for his declining lover. In other words, the speaker seeks to elicit an emotional reaction from the addressee. He encourages the addressee to cherish him even as he ages, just as the natural world acknowledges its own decay.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** " those boughs which shake against the cold"
- **Line 8:** "Death's second self, that seals up all in rest"
- **Lines 10-12:** "on the ashes of his youth doth lie, / As the death-bed whereon it must expire, / Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by"

VOCABULARY

Thou/Thy (Line 1, Line 5, Line 9, Line 13, Line 14) - Informal versions of "you/your." They sound old fashioned to modern ears but wouldn't have in Shakespeare's day.

Mayst (Line 1) - And old fashioned way of saying "you may."

Boughs (Line 3) - The main branches of a tree.

Choirs (Line 4) - The wooden stalls in a church where the choir sings. Here, the word is used as a metaphor for the tree's branches.

Late (Line 4) - Recently, or "of late."

Twilight (Line 5) - The time of day shortly after the sun has gone down and there's still some light left in the sky. "Twilight"

can also refer figuratively to a general state of decline and suggests the sense that something is waning, or fading, away.

Death's second self (Line 8) - Most likely a poetic way of referring to death's "shadow." The speaker is calling the night a mere echo of actual death.

Doth (Line 10) - An archaic form of "do."

Expire (Line 11) - To breathe one's last breath, or to die.

Nourish'd (Line 12) - Fed or fueled. Here, the word refers to how the raw material of the wood fuels the fire.

Perceiv'st (Line 13) - An archaic way of saying "you perceive," or notice through one of the senses.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 73" is a Shakespearean sonnet—the name given to the English sonnet form first used by Sir Thomas Wyatt but popularized by Shakespeare. The Shakespearean sonnet is divided into three consecutive four-line quatrains followed by one two-line couplet. The "problem" of the poem is often described in all three quatrains, leaving only those final two lines for a resolution. In this way, the Shakespearean sonnet departs from the older Italian sonnet form, in which the 14 lines are divided into an octave of eight lines (which contains two quatrains of four lines each) and a sestet of six lines (which contains two tercets of three lines each). There, a problem is often set up in the octave, while a "volta" or turn in the sestet moves toward a resolution.

While some of Shakespeare's sonnets depart from these conventions at certain points, "Sonnet 73" follows them closely. Structurally, the poem's content follows its form. Each quatrain describes a different example of natural decline that reflects the speaker's advancing age. Shakespeare's control over the quatrain is on display here—each one is a carefully crafted unit offering a distinct and coherent image (autumn, twilight, a dying fire).

Because the Shakespearean sonnet leaves significantly more space than the Italian sonnet for setting up a problem, the paradoxical nature of the couplet's resolution also appears in a sudden and strong burst. The final two lines transform the way readers have been encouraged to see decay (that is, as a negative force that lays waste to that which was once young and beautiful). The quatrains' relentless descriptions of decay are undercut when the couplet suggests that the speaker's decline actually causes the addressee's love for him to *grow*.

METER

Like most sonnets in English, "Sonnet 73" is written in iambic pentameter. The poem's metrical variation is minimal—most lines contain 10 beats per line divided into 5 "feet" (the basic unit of poetic measurement) that each consist of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. Note, for example, the regular meter used in the first line:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold

This lack of variation may at first seem surprising, given that the poem is about changes over time. It is important to remember, however, that the poem presents change as a natural and inevitable process. Aging and death are presented as unchangeable facts of life, and the poem's extremely regular meter might be said to mirror the relentless march of time.

Where the poem *does* contain metrical variation, the irregularities are tied to the lines' content. For example, the use of spondees (stressed-stressed) in line 4 underscores the lack of visual contrast and variation in the late autumn landscape: the trees, stripped of green leaves and no longer home to singing birds, are a sea of bare brown branches.

Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

The strongly stressed first syllable of line 13, "this," emphasizes how all of the poem's previous content is gathered into a single word. Placing the stress on "this" and leaving the following word "thou" unstressed creates a trochee and therefore a trochaic inversion at the beginning of the line:

This thou

This is one of the most common forms of metrical inversion in an iambic pentameter poem. As the poem's "volta" or turn occurs here, in the final couplet, the trochee draws attention to it.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "Sonnet 73" follows the expected pattern for a Shakespearean sonnet:

ABABCDCDEFEFGG.

As with its regular meter and adherence to the usual Shakespearean sonnet form, the poem's regular rhyme scheme plays into the poem's stance toward old age and death. The rhyme scheme is exactly what we would expect to see in a Shakespearean sonnet, paralleling the speaker's recognition that the aging process always advances as time progresses and always ends in death.

This rhyme scheme allows for sonic continuity within each quatrain and couplet, and sonic shifts between each unit. Since the three quatrains describe three instances of natural decline, the shifts in rhyme sounds between them further emphasize the distinct and coherent nature of the images contained therein. The couplet's break from the quatrain's alternating rhymes, on the other hand, parallels the poem's surprising

suggestion that two people might grow closer because they know that death will divide them. The closeness of the couple described in the final two lines is emphasized through the perfect end rhymes, which form a "couplet." In Italian, that couplet would be described as a "rima baciata"—a kissing rhyme.

SPEAKER

Literary critics puzzle over how to characterize the speaker of Sonnet 73. Because Shakespeare's sonnets were published as a sequence and contain thematic links, some argue that there is a *single* speaker throughout. Some associate that speaker with Shakespeare himself. "Sonnet 73" also falls within the sequence's first 126 sonnets, which together seem to be written from the perspective of an aging male poet to an attractive male youth. Furthermore, many have perceived a narrative arc linking sonnets 72 through 74. In each one, an aging speaker explores how his closeness to death affects his relationship to a younger lover. The speaker of "Sonnet 73" is clearly getting up there in years, and his addressee's reaction suggests that this person is younger than the speaker (such a reaction would probably not be necessary if both were the same age and equally likely to die of old age).

Without the context provided by the other sonnets, however, the reader can't say for certain that the speaker is male, that the lover is male, or perhaps even that the lover is younger than the speaker. The defining characteristic of the poem's speaker is advancing age. In the quatrains, the speaker seeks to evoke empathy by comparing the aging process to three natural instances of decline. The descriptive language used is pathetic—the trees "shake" in the cold, night "[takes] away" day and is akin to "death," and that which "nourish'd" the fire becomes its demise. In the couplet, the speaker suggests that the lover's affection grows upon recognizing these natural signs of aging. It is not entirely clear whether the speaker beholds this reaction in the lover and is simply describing it, or whether the speaker instead *wishes* the lover will react this way. This ambivalence contributes to the poem's universality, since the language used could apply to a couple of very different situations.

SETTING

On the most *basic* level, the poem's setting is the natural world in which the speaker and the beloved exist. Although "Sonnet 73" describes three different scenes from nature, those descriptions do not constitute the setting. Each of those scenes are located "in" the speaker, making the speaker himself the clearest reference point for the poem's location. This means that the setting of "Sonnet 73," like many of Shakespeare's sonnets, is nonspecific. This lack of specificity contributes to the poem's perceived universality and continued popularity in a variety of contexts.

By placing the poem in context, one might also interpret its setting to be Elizabethan England. The first 126 of Shakespeare's sonnets largely explore a relationship between an aging poet and an attractive young man. If we follow the argument that the aging-poet-speaker might be closely identified with Shakespeare himself, we might then place the poem in the 1590s in England, when and where the poem was written. Furthermore, the poem's form, meter, and rhyme scheme identify it as an English sonnet. Implicitly, then, it is in conversation with the many other love sonnets written in England in the 1590s. In that particular time and place, love sonnets were hugely popular.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

In a broad sense, "Sonnet 73" is in conversation with the Renaissance sonnet tradition as a whole. Petrarch's 14th-century *Rime Sparse*, a series of 366 poems largely exploring the relationship between the speaker and his beloved but unreachable Laura, had enormous influence on the English literary tradition. Most of its 317 sonnets contain an octave and a sestet rhymed ABBA ABBA CDE CDE (or CDCDCD). Shakespeare follows Sir Thomas Wyatt's revised rhyme scheme (ABAB CDCD EFEF GG), which took hold in 16th-century England. Shakespeare was also directly influenced by Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), a love sonnet sequence that initiated a sonnet craze in England.

"Sonnet 73" is part of a larger sequence of 154 poems published under Shakespeare's name in 1609. Unlike those of his precursors, Shakespeare's sonnets do not focus on heterosexual love between a man and a virtuous, golden-haired woman. The last thirty or so poems, for example, center on a "dark lady," and it is clear that the speaker is in a sexual relationship with the unnamed woman he describes and sometimes insults."Sonnet 73," on the other hand, forms part of the first 126 poems, which involve an aging male poet and a fair (but not always virtuous) young man. By exploring these relationships, Shakespeare works within a conventional literary form to challenge literary and cultural values.

Though the sonnets were published less than a decade before Shakespeare's death in 1616, the poems were likely written in the early 1590s. This would place the poems' composition early in Shakespeare's literary career. By the late 1590s, Shakespeare had written over a dozen plays, but had yet to write *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or *The Winter's Tale*. In the sonnets, he was already exploring the themes of time, mortality, love, and infidelity that would become important in these later plays.

Although the sonnet vogue faded shortly after Shakespeare's poems were published, the poems themselves remained hugely influential. Critics have often been drawn to a biographical interpretation of the poems, leading some 18th and 19th century editors to downplay the same-sex desire implied in the early sonnets. Even so, the poems continued to be printed, and many poets have used "Sonnet 73" as a source. John Keats, who famously kept a bust of Shakespeare and a copy of the sonnets nearby while he wrote, used "Sonnet 73" as inspiration for his "Ode to a Nightingale." One notable recent homage to "Sonnet 73" is the English poet Jo Shapcott's "2014/2015," in which each of the 14 lines is a kind of meditation on Shakespeare's words.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although some scholars believe the sonnets were written as early as the 1580s or as late as the 1600s, most date the poems to the 1590s. We know that some sonnets were circulating in manuscript during this time, and at least five of them appeared in a volume called *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599. Historically, this would place this poem's composition during an unusually peaceful period of English history. Even so, the English people had one major concern about Queen Elizabeth: she was aging, and she was both unmarried and childless. Less than one hundred years earlier, England had been torn apart by decades-long wars over succession to the throne. Shakespeare's contemporaries were not keen to undergo a similar crisis, and this anxiety appears in much literature in the period. Shakespeare himself devoted many history plays to the Wars of the Roses, and 17 sonnets to the idea that a fair youth ought to father children and produce copies of himself.

Against this political background, "Sonnet 73"'s focus on aging and death would have struck a chord. Significantly, this poem (unlike others in the sequence) refuses to discuss what might come *after* death. It does not explore the dominant religious belief that heaven or hell await the departed, nor potential connections between the dead and the living (a huge topic within religious debates at the time). Instead, it encourages readers to channel their knowledge of death's power to divide into a strengthened focus on the *present*. Perhaps this message might have encouraged Shakespeare's contemporaries to cherish their aging queen during her lifetime, rather than worrying about the uncertain future.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Sonnet 73" Read Aloud — In this YouTube video by Socratica, hear Jamie Muffett read Sonnet 73 aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpVEqXZzK18)
- British Library: Introduction to the Sonnets — This higher-level introduction to Shakespeare's sonnets explores the poems' importance to British literary history and their continued relevance today. It also includes a number of images relating to sonnet history. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/an-introduction-to-shakespeares-sonnets)
- LitCharts Shakescleare Translations — Here at LitCharts we've "translated" all of Shakespeare's sonnets into modern English to help you understand them. (https://www.litcharts.com/shakescleare/shakespeare-translations/sonnets)
- CrashCourse: Introduction to Shakespeare's Sonnets — This YouTube video, part of a CrashCourse series on literature, offers a twelve-minute introduction to Shakespeare's sonnets led by young adult author John Green. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDpW1sHrBaU)
- Facsimile of "Sonnet 73" from Quarto 1 (1609) — Here you can see a facsimile—a reproduction of a printed text—of the first edition of Shakespeare's sonnets. (https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/facsimile/book/UC_Q1_Son/31/?work=&zoom=500)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE POEMS

- Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds
- Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun
- Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth
- Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
- Sonnet 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
- Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought

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