Sonnet 60: Like as the waves make towards the

POEM TEXT

Like as the waves make towards the pebbl'd shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

SUMMARY

Just as waves move towards the pebbly shore, the moments of our lives rush towards death. Each new moment swaps places with the previous one, moving forward in a constant struggle. Babies, after being thrust into the light of life, start crawling towards adulthood. And once they reach maturity, the darkness of old age starts to set in. Time takes back the gift he gave, piercing the glow of youthfulness and carving wrinkles into people's foreheads. Time feeds on all the wonders and beauties of nature, and nothing can avoid time's swinging scythe. That said, I hope my poems will survive to praise you, despite time's cruelty.

THEMES

TIME, ART, AND IMMORTALITY

"Sonnet 60" is about the relentless forward march of time. Life is short and even cruel in this poem: youth and beauty never last, and the brief candle of life is doomed to be snuffed out before too long. Just one thing *might* survive the destructive forces of time, says the speaker, and in doing so grant its subject immortality: this poem itself.

"[O]ur minutes," the speaker says, are like waves rolling onto the shore; just as a new wave rolls forward as soon as the previous wave disappears, a new moment "toil[s]" forward as soon as the previous moment is over. Through this comparison, the speaker presents time's passage as inevitable and unstoppable, with the "minutes" of human life pulled ceaselessly toward "their end." As soon as people are born, it follows, they start "crawling" towards adulthood, old age, and death. In other words, life goes by in a few blinks of the eye; people are born, they wear the "crown[]" of "maturity" and then everything's over.

With time's forward march comes pain and decay, the speaker says, presenting time is like a mean trickster who gives people the joys of life in one instant only to take them back in the next. Time grants people youthful beauty, yet later sculpts lines ("parallels") into their brows. Time is the grim reaper who feeds on the "rarities" of life—everything good and joyful about being alive—and "mows" people down with his "scythe."

The only thing that *might* "stand" up to time, states the speaker, is this poem itself. Written as part of a sonnet sequence praising a young man known as the "Fair Youth," the poem ends with Shakespeare's common rebuttal to the fact of time's power: poetry has the power to preserve people's "worth" in verse, even when people *themselves* die by time's "cruel hand." Poetry, then, presents a kind of immortality. At least the speaker's "hope[s]" that's the case—only *time will tell*.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Like as the waves make towards the pebbl'd shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;

The poem opens with a simile comparing the passage of time to waves as they "make towards" the shore. The speaker is talking about the way that waves keep moving towards the shoreline (pulled by an unstoppable force which, not too long after this poem was written, was identified as gravity). Likewise, "our minutes"—our time as individuals on earth—quickly flow toward their end.

The first line captures this sense of unrelenting motion through its sound. This poem, like most sonnets, uses iambic pentameter: a meter with five iambs, feet with a da-DUM (unstressed-stressed) pattern, per line. But this pattern gets disrupted immediately with a trochee (stressed-unstressed) in the poem's first foot:

> Like as | the waves | make towards | the peb- | bl'd
> shore,

A metrical stress can be used to suggest force, and that's exactly what's going on here. The emphasis on "Like" lends the line extra strength, as does the extra stress on "make." All these stressed beats thrust the line forward.

Assonance adds to this feeling of forward momentum, the long shared vowels sounds of "Waves make" and "towards [...] shore" again pulling the reader through the line just as the waves are pulled towards the sand. Also note how the first two lines use sibilance to conjure the sounds of the sea, words like "towards," "shore," "So," and "minutes hasten" evoking the hiss and spray of the waves as they roll onto the beach.

LINES 3-4

> *Each changing place with that which goes before,*
> *In sequent toil all forwards do contend.*

Lines 3 and 4 expand on the simile begun in the opening two lines. As soon as one lands upon the shore, another rolls forward to do the same. Each wave essentially changes places with the wave that came before it, just as each present moment gets quickly and replaced by the next.

This mention of change also evokes the way that the force of the waves may gradually reshape or erode a shoreline. If the movement of the waves represents the passage of time, then human beings are perhaps like the shoreline in this analogy—subject to changes due to the relentless force of time.

Line 4 then makes the analogy more abstract, as the speaker says that minutes go on and on in a kind of struggle (they "toil"), one after the other (in *sequence*). "Toil" and "contend" suggest difficulty and conflict, which hints at the way people struggle against time (or, perhaps, struggle with the fact that their time in life inevitably leads to death).

Both of these lines are pure iambic pentameter, which once again gives them a sense of unstoppable momentum:

> Each chang- | ing place | with that | which goes |
> before,
> In se- | quent toil | all for- | wards do | contend.

Also note how the final words in these lines rhyme with those in lines 1 and 2, creating an ABAB pattern.

LINES 5-8

> *Nativity, once in the main of light,*
> *Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,*
> *Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,*
> *And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.*

The sonnet's second quatrain—which runs from line 5 to 8—tells the story of a human life in miniature. Line 5 starts with birth ("Nativity"), then the slow "crawl[]" to adulthood—and, then in the blink of an eye, the march towards death. All people are carried along helplessly by the passage of time, the speaker says, unable to escape the inevitable arc from existence to non-existence. As Shakespeare famously put it in *Macbeth*, life is just a "brief candle."

This passage uses a mixture of personification, metaphor, and metonymy:

- The speaker first treats "Nativity" (which refers to birth) as an actual baby thrust into the "light" of life. This "light" is in a sense literal, given that newborn babies have to adjust to the sudden brightness of life outside the womb. Light also is a common symbol for life, knowledge, and understanding.
- That baby then "crawls to maturity," crawling suggesting both a baby's literal movements and the way that time seems almost endless in youth.
- "Maturity" here represents the peak of life, when "nativity" wears the "crown" of adulthood. For a moment, people feel strong and even invincible.
- In the blink of an eye, though, maturity's "glory" is locked in a battle with the time. "Crooked eclipses"—a phrase that personifies the rise and fall of the sun—undermine any brief sense of security and power that comes with being in the peak of life. That "light" of youth gives way to the darkness of old age and death.

The sharp alliteration of "crown'd" and "crooked eclipses" makes it feel as though the crown is being snatched from this hypothetical person's head. The spiky /c/ is then picked up on by the consonance in "eclipses," again suggesting struggle and strife.

Any struggle against time is, of course, futile. The speaker personifies "Time" here and treats "him" like a god who both gives and takes away. In other words, time gives the gift of life, only to bring it to ruin ("confound"). "Confound" can also mean *confuse*, and might gesture towards humanity's effort to puzzle through what this whole life thing is about—given that it's over pretty soon after it gets going!

LINES 9-12

> *Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth*
> *And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,*
> *Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,*
> *And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:*

Lines 9 and 10 are all about appearances and fading beauty. Personified time doesn't just march people to their inevitable death, but also "transfix[es]" the beautiful glow ("flourish") of youth. "Transfix" means "pierce" here; if time *pierces* youthful looks, it kills them!

Similarly, time "delves" (or *digs)* "parallels" into people's "brow." In other words, it gives people wrinkles. Furrowed brows suggest worry, which ties in with line 8's suggestion that getting older is "confound[ing]"—confusing and strange. The sounds of the poem itself suggest this process, those consonant /l/ sounds burrowing deep into the line:

> And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,

The showy alliteration in "beauty's brow," meanwhile, is meant to sound obviously *poetic* as a way of suggesting aesthetic beauty.

Time doesn't just etch wrinkles into people's skin, but also "feeds on the rarities of nature's truth." Time is like a monster that *consumes* even the most wondrous, beautiful, and precious things in nature. In fact, things only "stand," or exist, for "his scythe to mow." A scythe is a sharp tool for cutting crops; time is like the Grim Reaper mercilessly cutting down human beings, who are like crops in that they're raised by time, and, soon enough, devoured by time too.

Literally *nothing* can stand the test of time, it seems—for now at least! The next two lines tell a different story.

LINES 13-14

> *And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,*
> *Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.*

As this is a Shakespearean sonnet, the turn—the poem's classic twist—comes in its closing couplet. Here, the speaker offers the poem itself as something that *might* stand the test of time. And, so far, the speaker has been right! This sonnet is part of Shakespeare's famous Fair Youth sequence, which features many poems addressed to an unknown young man. The speaker alludes to other sonnets in that sequence here, specifically those "praising" the "worth" of the Fair Youth, and suggests that they will live on even after time "mow[s]" down their subject.

The speaker can only "hope" that this is the case, however, and seems rather resigned to the "cruel hand" of time eventually wrecking everything. The caesura in the middle line 14 (that pause after "worth") makes the poem end on a doubtful, hesitant note, slowing the poem's pace as if in an attempt to hold back the tide of time. And the final rhyme of "stand" and "hand" continues the poem's habit of building things up only to let them fall. That is, the poem ends not with the *standing* of the speaker's verse, but with the "hand" of time. Here, then, it's time that has the final word, even if the word is written/spoken by the speaker.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Sonnet 60" uses alliteration to bring its images and ideas to life. The clearest alliteration comes in the poem's second quatrain, where the speaker tells the story of a human life in miniature—showing how quickly the prime of life starts to fade. Youth, the speaker says:

> Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,
> Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
> And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.

Note the repetition of /cr/ sounds above, which link the stages of life: the "crawl" of youth, the "crown" of maturity, and the "crooked eclipses" of old age. The alliteration creates the sense of life moving ceaselessly forward, each phase "changing place with that which goes before"—just as "waves" and "minutes" do in the poem's first quatrain.

The sharp /c/ sound then gets echoed by "eclipses" (which counts alliterative because the shared sound falls at the start of a stressed beat, "eclipses") and "confound." All this alliteration makes the story sound all the more powerful and inescapable, much like the passage of time itself.

The other alliterative sound in these lines pits those aforementioned "crooked eclipses" (again, the passage of time and dawning of old age) "'gainst" the brief "glory" of youth. These hard /g/ sounds feel aggressive, suggesting a futile struggle against the mighty force of time. The alliteration of "gift" and "gave" in the very next line has the same effect.

Finally, the alliteration in line 10 is deliberately show-offy: "beauty's brow." The poem makes the point that beauty is short-lived and soon taken away by time. The sonic play in the phrase "beauty's brow" seems like a vain attempt by the poem itself to hang onto the beauty being described.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "with," "which"
- **Line 6:** "Crawls," "crown'd"
- **Line 7:** "Crooked," "eclipses," "gainst," "glory"
- **Line 8:** "gave," "gift," "confound"
- **Line 10:** "beauty's brow"
- **Line 12:** "stands," "scythe"
- **Line 13:** "to times"

ASSONANCE

"Sonnet 60" uses assonance much like alliteration, drawing attention to certain words and bringing the poem's images to life. Take the first line, for example:

> Like as the waves make towards the pebbl'd shore,

The repeated sounds suggest the insistent movement of the waves. The line heaves this way and that, first towards the long /ay/ sound and then towards /or/. This movement subtly reflects the motion of the waves, with the length of the vowels suggesting strength. Those same sounds weave in and out of the following lines:

> So do our minutes hasten to their end;
> Each changing place with that which goes before,
> In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

The return to these sounds again creates a sensation of insistence or relentlessness. This, in turn, evokes the unceasing passage of time, which just keeps "toil[ing] forwards."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "waves make," "towards," "shore"
- **Line 2:** "hasten"
- **Line 3:** "changing place"
- **Line 4:** "toil," "forwards"
- **Line 10:** "delves," "parallels"

CAESURA

The poem doesn't contain much caesura, its lines instead feeling relatively smooth. This makes sense considering that the poem is about the relentless march of time; caesura would stop readers in their tracks, cutting into the illusion of ceaseless forward motion.

That said, caesura does pop up a few times in the poem. In the second quatrain, for example, the pause after "Nativity" briefly slows the poem to a "crawl" and evokes the way life seems endless in youth.

The poem also uses caesura in its final line. The comma after "worth" appears in both the modernized and the Quarto versions of the poem, and can be interpreted in a couple ways:

1. On the one hand, the caesura slows the poem down, perhaps in an attempt to portray the speaker as bold and brave in the attempt to create poetry that will stand the test of time (and do justice to the Fair Youth to whom the poem is addressed).
2. On the other hand, maybe the comma is a moment of hesitation, the speaker knowing that any attempt at immortality is doomed to fail—thus closing the poem on an image of time's, rather than the speaker's, power.

Note that readers can't always rely on punctuation to show where caesura (or other devices like end-stops and enjambment) appear, because this is a modernized version of the text (check out the Resources section to see the original Quarto format—even that wasn't authoritative at the time!).

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Nativity, once"
- **Line 6:** "maturity, wherewith"
- **Line 14:** "worth, despite"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration and assonance, consonance helps make the poem's images all the more striking for readers. In the first stanza, for example, the poem uses /s/ sounds (sibilance) to recreate the atmosphere of a shoreline, evoking the spray of the waves with words like "So," "minutes," and "hasten."

The sounds of the poem's first three lines are relatively smooth (lots of /z/, /s/, and /w/ sounds), which makes the sharpness of line 4 all the more striking. Here, spiky /t/ and /c/ sounds make for difficult reading:

> In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

The line feels cumbersome, and that's exactly the point the poem is driving at: humanity *struggles* with time as each moment changes places with the next. Similar spiky sounds appear in lines 6-8 as the speaker describes a fight between time and humanity:

> Nativity, once in the main of light,
> Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,
> Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
> And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.

This is a fight that the latter can never win, so it makes sense that the speaker turns once more to harsh, cumbersome consonance.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "waves," "towards"
- **Line 2:** "So," "minutes hasten"
- **Line 3:** "Each changing," "with," "which"
- **Line 4:** "sequent toil," "forwards," "contend"
- **Line 5:** "Nativity," "once in," "main," "light"
- **Line 6:** "Crawls," "maturity"
- **Line 7:** "Crooked eclipses," "'gainst," "glory," "fight"
- **Line 8:** "Time that," "gave," "gift confound"
- **Line 9:** "transfix," "flourish"
- **Lines 10-10:** "d / elves"
- **Line 10:** "parallels," "beauty's brow"
- **Line 11:** "rarities," "nature's truth"
- **Line 12:** "stands," "scythe"
- **Line 13:** "to times," "verse," "stand"

- **Line 14:** "worth"

METAPHOR

Most of "Sonnet 60" deals in metaphor, and even the first line, which is technically a simile, is part of the poem's overall metaphorical discussion. Ultimately, time is an abstract concept, so it's hard *not* to use metaphor when talking about it! Here, the speaker uses all this figurative language to make the point that life is short, and that everything is bound on a one-way course towards death and annihilation.

In lines 2 and 3, for example, the speaker says that "minute"s are capable of "hasten[ing]" (or hurrying) to their end. "End" here is a euphemism for death. And, of course, minutes can't actively hurry anywhere! People might feel like minutes are rushing by them, but this feeling entirely dependent on *human perception*. The same is true of the idea that each minute changes place with the next (line 3). Minutes don't really take up space; they aren't literally lined up or able to swap places. But this reference to forward motion *captures* that sense that time is heading directly in one direction beyond human control.

In the poem's second quatrain (lines 5-8), the speaker characterizes life as a gift given to humanity by time (one that time subsequently snatches back). This metaphor simply suggests that life is precious and, to most people at least, *feels* like it has value. Presenting life as a gift allows the poem to show life as something that can be given and, more importantly, taken away.

(Note that much of the figurative language here is more specifically analogy and personification, both of which overlap with metaphor but are discussed separately in this guide.)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-14

PERSONIFICATION

The poem personifies "Time" as a male figure capable of both giving and taking away the gift of life. In fact, time is more *deified*—turned into a God—than personified! In any case, the speaker treats capital-T "Time" as a being with agency, and in doing so creates a clear enemy in the poem—a figure that the speaker can rail against.

This personified, deified Time is not a kind character. Time "transfix[es]" (pierces) youth's beauty, and digs lines of worry and old age into people's brows. Time is "cruel" and all-powerful, and nothing is capable of surviving his destructive appetite. He "feeds" on the "rarities of nature's truth," the speaker says, bringing to mind the image of a ravenous monster. And in line 12, the speaker presents "Time" as a kind of grim reaper who cuts people down with his "scythe."

Personifying "Time" as this powerful entity makes the speaker's seeming victory (in the sense of granting the poem's addressee immortality through "verse") feel more powerful and righteous. The speaker hasn't just defeated some anonymous natural force, but an actively cruel enemy.

Human life itself is also subtly personified. In line 5, the speaker uses the word "Nativity" to refer to birth and/or an actual baby. This is both personification and metonymy, because birth is something associated with human life. Nativity is granted agency; like a baby, it "crawls" to adulthood. Soon enough, adulthood becomes a slow march towards death, and personified life fights against the god-like "Time."

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12
- Line 14

ANALOGY

The poem opens with an analogy comparing the passage of time to the way that "waves make towards the pebbl'd shore." This establishes two important features of the poem's attitude towards time:

1. First, it portrays time as an unstoppable force. Humanity can't push back the waves, nor can it hold back the tide of time. Time governs *us*, not the other way round.
2. Second, the analogy shows that time is an *unending* motion. As long as there is a moon above and water below, the waves will keep coming and going. This limitlessness suggests passages of time that are beyond the human lifespan, and even beyond human comprehension.

But there's another aspect to the analogy that gets picked up on by lines 3 and 4. A "pebbl'd shore," like life, is in a state of constant flux and change. There is a kind of paradox at work, then: time is a *constant*, unchangeable force, but the *consequence* of that force is constant change (as described by lines 5 to 10).

Where Analogy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Like as the waves make towards the pebbl'd shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end; / Each changing place with that which goes before, / In sequent

toil all forwards do contend."

VOCABULARY

Hasten (Line 2) - Hurry towards.

Sequent (Line 4) - Consecutive and continuous.

Toil (Line 4) - Struggle/battle/labor.

Contend (Line 4) - Fight with one another.

Nativity (Line 5) - Birth/a newborn.

Main (Line 5) - Refers to the open expanse of the sea, shifted here to apply to "light."

Maturity (Line 6) - Adulthood/a fully-grown adult.

Wherewith (Line 6) - By means of which.

Eclipses (Line 7) - The rotations of the earth and moon, and/or the rising and setting of the sun. The speaker is referring to the general passage of time and darkness of old age.

'Gainst (Line 7) - Abbreviation of "against," shortened to fit the poem's meter.

Doth (Line 8, Line 9) - Archaic form of "does."

Confound (Line 8) - To overthrow through conflict and/or to confuse.

Transfix (Line 9) - Pierce.

Flourish (Line 9) - Healthy glow.

Set On (Line 9) - Granted to.

Delves (Line 10) - Digs in.

Parallels (Line 10) - Lines (wrinkles).

Scythe (Line 12) - A long blade used for gleaning crops.

Mow (Line 12) - Chop down.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 60" is a Shakespearean sonnet, meaning that its 14 lines divide neatly into three quatrains and a closing couplet.

Each quatrain deals with a different aspect of time—how it flows, how affects human life, and how it inevitably takes away the "gift" of beauty and youth. The first three quatrains, then, all expand on the same theme.

As is traditional for a Shakespearean, the couplet then offers a twist on everything that has come before. If the quatrains make the struggle against time seem hopeless and futile, the couplet reveals the speaker's hope that this "verse shall stand" the test of time—that this very poem will immortalize the "worth" of the person to whom the poem addressed ("Sonnet 60" is part of a sequence addressed to a young man known as the "Fair Youth"—check out the Context section for more).

The couplet thus adds another dimension to the poem, making it an example of meta-poetry in addition to a meditation on time. In other words, the poem comments on poetry itself, hoping that it is through verse that humanity can score a victory over time's destructive power.

It's also worth taking note of this poem's placement within the overall sonnet sequence. Placing it in the 60th position is a gesture towards measurements of time (e.g., 60 minutes in an hour).

METER

"Sonnet 60" is written in iambic pentameter, meaning there are five iambs (feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern) per line. Take line 8 for a perfect example of this meter at work:

> And Time | that gave | doth now | his gift | confound.

The steady march throughout the poem evokes the steady but unstoppable flow of time.

That said, there are plenty of variations on this overarching meter throughout the poem. Lines 6, 7, 9, 11 and 14, for example, all open with a trochee (stressed-unstressed) rather than an iamb:

> Crawls to [...]
> Crooked [...]
> Time doth [...]
> Feeds on [...]
> Praising [...]

These opening stresses portray time as a powerful force and convey a sense of struggle and difficulty. Take lines 6 and 7, where trochees appropriately slow things down on the word "Crawls" and twist the poem's rhythm on the word "Crooked." In line 11, the stress on "Feeds" adds force to the description of time's insatiable appetite for destruction, whereas line 14's "Praising" represents the equivalent of the poem puffing out its chest, willing to do battle with time.

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet 60" follows the typical rhyme scheme for a Shakespearean sonnet:

> ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

All the quatrains have the same alternating rhyme pattern, and fittingly all focus on the same theme: time's destructive power. The poem then shifts the rhyme scheme in that closing couplet as the speaker responds to everything that has come before.

Some of the actual rhyme *words* themselves also subtly dramatize the conflict between humanity and time. The poem

presents time as a kind of destructive god, against whom nothing can "stand," and this battle plays out in rhyming pairs:

1. The pairing of "end" and "contend" (lines 2 and 4) suggests that all moments quickly disappear ("end") and that the push forward toward death is a kind of draining struggle.
2. The "light[ness]" (line 5) of innocent childhood is soon locked in a "fight" (line 7) with time.
3. Once "Crown'd" (line 6) with the confidence of maturity, people are "confound[ed]" (line 8) by Time—that is, time confuses and battles against them.
4. The speaker hopes that this poem will "stand" (line 13) up against time's "cruel hand" (line 14).

The rhymes themselves, like humanity and time, are at war!

SPEAKER

For the most part, the speaker stays out of the poem. This makes most of the poem feel objective, as though the speaker is a detached observer simply relaying the truth about time.

But this all shifts in the closing couplet, when the speaker suddenly enters the poem directly. The speaker references "my verse" (meaning this very poem itself) and reveals that they have a stake in this terrible fight against time: the speaker has addressed this poem to another person, whom the speaker hopes to immortalize within this sonnet.

The speaker is usually equated with Shakespeare himself, and the addressee with someone scholars call the "Fair Youth," a young man to whom the majority of Shakespeare's sonnets were written. Shakespeare isn't just railing against time for the sake of it, then, but rather showing this young man how much he means to him (and, of course, praising his own poetic skill in the process).

SETTING

The poem aims to be as universal as possible, discussing general truths about humanity and time rather than anything particularly specific to the speaker's own situation. As such, the poem doesn't have a concrete setting, instead taking place in the realm of metaphor. It opens with the image of a shoreline, which is both constant and ever-changing—like the force of time itself. The poem also performs an incredible feat of compression, squeezing an entire (hypothetical) lifetime in to the space of lines 5-8. This supports the poem's argument that life is short, and that time comes to destroy everything before too long.

More broadly, the poem takes place while the speaker and the poem's addressee are still alive—that is, before time "mow[s] them down with "his scythe." The fact that we're still reading the poem today shows that the speaker's goal of immortalizing the address in "verse" has worked out well so far!

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

This poem first appeared in the 1609 Quarto edition of Shakespeare's poetry, which contained 154 sonnets. The bulk of these (1-126) are known as the "Fair Youth" sequence, and are addressed to a young, aristocratic man with whom the speaker (generally taken to be Shakespeare himself) had an intimate relationship.

These sonnets don't have titles and are identified by their first lines and position in the sequence. That's why this poem is called "Sonnet 60": it's the 60th sonnet in the sequence (and the fact that there are 60 minutes in an hour probably isn't a coincidence!).

"Sonnet 60" comes as a pair with "Sonnet 59," which focuses more on the past (rather than the unending destructive power of time). But time, and art's relationship to time, is a constant theme throughout Shakespeare's poetry—and Renaissance poetry in general. Sonnet 18, for example, famously features a concluding couplet that's very similar to this one:

> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

For further comparison, readers might want to check out sonnets 19, 55, 81, 107, and 123 (to name only a few). Edmund Spenser's "Sonnet 75" also sees a speaker attempting to immortalize his beloved through poetry.

The sonnet form is arguably poetry's most enduring, and is still popular today. The 14th-century Italian poet Petrarch established the now common link between the sonnet and love, and also began the long tradition of poetic skill being read as evidence of powerful romantic feeling.

The sonnet was later popularized in the English language by writers like Sir Thomas Wyatt (who translated/interpreted a number of Petrarch's sonnets) and Sir Philip Sidney (whose sequence, *Astrophel and Stella*, was a major influence on Shakespeare's own). So-called Shakespearean (or English) sonnets differ from Petrarchan sonnets through their rhyme scheme and structure, with the latter focusing more on a shift (or "volta") between the eight and ninth lines. By contrast, Shakespearean sonnets end with a couplet that often summarizes or concludes what came before (though sometimes it also introduces a last-minute surprise or twist, as it does here).

As with a number of Shakespeare's sonnets, this one has its roots in classical literature. It closely follows a template set out by the Roman poet Ovid in the 15th book of the *Metamorphoses*, which also compares the passage of time to waves and discusses time's all-devouring appetite for destruction.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shakespeare's sonnets were composed in the 1590s and early 1600s, though only first published in 1609. This means the sonnets were mostly written in the Elizabethan period, but published in the Jacobean, when King James succeeded Queen Elizabeth.

The Elizabethan era is known as an age of adventure and discovery, with British ships exploring the globe and the age of colonialism on the horizon. It was a culturally rich time, too: Shakespeare was one of London's many celebrated poets and playwrights, making a name for himself through exciting linguistic innovation and psychologically complicated characters.

This poem makes a concerted effort to look beyond its historical time period, allowing no culturally specific objects into its world. Instead, images based on the waves and, later, agricultural rhythms, speak to the poem's universal truth: that time changes—and *destroys*—everyone and everything.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Shakespeare's Sonnets — Find all the sonnets, plus some analysis, in one useful place! (http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com)
- The Identity of the Fair Youth — Read about the debated identity of the sonnet's mysterious addressee. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeare-sexuality-and-the-sonnets)
- The Poem Out Loud — "Sonnet 60" read by the legendary Patrick Stewart. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6wlhQtnfV4)
- The First Edition of the Sonnets — See the poem in its original context: the 1609 Quarto edition. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-shakespeares-sonnets-1609)
- Time in Shakespeare's Sonnets — Learn more about how Shakespeare treats one of his favorite themes throughout his poetry. (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316727094_THE_CONCEPTION_OF_TIME_IN_SHAKESPEAR

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE POEMS

- Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds
- Sonnet 129: Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
- Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun
- Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth
- Sonnet 147: My love is as a fever, longing still
- Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
- Sonnet 19: Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws
- Sonnet 20: A woman's face with nature's own hand painted
- Sonnet 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
- Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
- Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments
- Sonnet 71: No longer mourn for me when I am dead
- Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold

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