

Mr. Robel's Example Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnet 73

William Shakespeare's sonnet 73 dramatizes the conflict between love and the passing of time. Through **apostrophe** and a series of **three central metaphors**, the speaker not only portrays his own swiftly advancing age, but also emphasizes the fact that his beloved loves him in spite of—or perhaps because of—the fact that the speaker's time is running out.

In the first quatrain, the speaker uses **apostrophe** to directly address his beloved, stating that he knows his beloved can perceive his advanced age. The poem's first **metaphor** compares the speaker's life to a year and uses the imagery of winter, describing how his beloved "mayst . . . behold" or see in him "That time of year . . . / When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang / Upon those boughs which shake against the cold" (1-2). The **image** of a tree in winter—specifically, a tree with the leaves, the "sweet" songbirds, and the birds' beautiful music all gone—creates a **tone** of mournfulness, especially given the speaker's **additional metaphor** describing the birdless branches as "bare ruined choirs" (4). This **image** emphasizes both the speaker's loss of youth and his knowledge that his beloved can see that his youth is completely gone. In this way, the speaker sees himself as an elderly man in the winter of his life, a man who feels sadness both about his departed youth and about his beloved's awareness of his state.

The sonnet's second quatrain repeats the use of **apostrophe** and **metaphor**, but it dramatizes the speaker's state with a different metaphor. Beginning with the **apostrophe** "In me thou see'st" (5) to again emphasize what his beloved perceives in him, the speaker declares that his beloved notices in him "the twilight of such day / As after sunset fadeth in the west" (5-6), a **metaphor** comparing his entire life to a single day. A day is far briefer than a year, and for the speaker to shift from viewing his life as a year in the first quatrain to viewing it as only one day in this quatrain, the implication is that time is speeding up for him. Metaphorically, the speaker thinks that the sun has already set on his life, a fact that his beloved also knows. The speaker also describes how "black night doth take away" (7) the day that is his life, and he calls night "Death's second self, that seals up all in rest" (8). This **additional metaphor** suggests that the sleep we humans literally experience at the end of each day is like a preview of death itself—a "second self" of the final "rest" that all humans must take when they die. While this quatrain repeats the pattern of the opening quatrain, its speeding up of time and its introduction of the haunting presence of death adds a **tone** of growing urgency to the speaker's words.

In the final quatrain, the same rhetorical pattern continues, but this time the speaker uses the **metaphor** of a fire to capture his nearness to death. Again he **apostrophizes** his beloved, declaring, "In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire, / That on the ashes of his youth doth lie" (9-10). Now instead of perceiving his life as an entire year or a single day, the speaker perceives his life as a fire, an entity that is even more evanescent. The fire of his life may still be glowing, but no more fuel is left to sustain it; the speaker's "youth" and vitality have been almost completely consumed, and "ashes" are all that remains. This third metaphor gives the speaker's **tone** even more urgency; knowing how quickly a flame can flicker out when its fuel has been exhausted, the speaker looks at himself and sees almost no time left. All that is left of his life-force is glowing coals. The end of life seems to be coming far too quickly for him, with no solution in sight.

Given the speaker's **tone** of sadness and increasing urgency about his imminent mortality, is there any cause for hope, or any saving thought to counter his growing despair? In the sonnet's couplet, he declares to his beloved, "This thou perceiv'st" (13), for the fourth time in the poem repeating the fact that the beloved clearly perceives the speaker's proximity to death. Why does he keep repeating this idea? The couplet includes the poem's **volta** or turning point, where a new element enters the poem: the fact that the beloved's awareness of the speaker's mortality "makes [the beloved's] love more strong, / To love that well which [the beloved] must leave ere long" (13-14). What does the speaker find comforting or view as a cause for gratitude? As he confronts his imminent mortality, the person he loves *continues* to love him in return, despite knowing that the speaker will be gone soon. Though time may always be running out, nevertheless, love does not run away. Love stays till the very end, and love does not look away.