

In this sonnet, Shakespeare envisions beauty as a fleeting and fragile entity, while he portrays time as a rapacious and relentless destroyer of all things. The poem's diction, imagery, metaphor, personification, and choice of details all help us perceive time as an inexorable conqueror of all that is beautiful.

Shakespeare begins the first quatrain portraying time as the most powerful force in the world—a force whose power is both sad and raging. At first Shakespeare lists what seem to be the strongest, most durable elements in the world—brass, stone, earth, and boundless sea—but then he declares that none of these elements can stand up to “Sad mortality [which] o’ersways their power.” The poem’s first thought poses a **rhetorical question**: If none of these enduring and powerful elements can withstand time, then how can beauty hope to survive, when its “action is no stronger than a flower”? By presenting beauty through the **image** of a flower, Shakespeare emphasizes its vulnerability; it is a fragile and delicate entity that is incapable of withstanding such an omnipotent foe as time. There is an interesting nuance of **diction** in this quatrain, when Shakespeare names time’s advance not only as “sad mortality”—a rather conventional response to the eventual death time brings to all things—but also as “this rage,” endowing time with a frenzy or wrath that makes it deaf to reasonable arguments or pleas for mercy. Time is presented as a merciless conqueror in a war against all things, and beauty has no chance of reasoning or bargaining with it.

The second quatrain asks another **rhetorical question**, essentially restating the idea voiced in the first quatrain. Shakespeare provides another conception of beauty’s transitory nature in the image of “summer’s honey breath”—an entity warm, sweet, and destined to be swept away by the advance of fall and winter. A **metaphor** for time’s advance upon summer and beauty is “the wrackful siege of battering days,” portraying the coming days as an army at the gates of a city, intent on gaining violent and destructive access to what hides behind the protection of the city walls. Time’s weapon of entry consists of “battering days,” against which nothing can stand—not even “rocks impregnable” or “gates of steel.” In asking the question of the second quatrain, Shakespeare creates a **tone** of fear, helplessness, and pleading—as if the speaker is frantically searching for a solution to a problem that seems unsolvable and an invasion that seems unstoppable.

The third quatrain begins with what seems to be an **apostrophe**—“O fearful meditation”—yet the speaker seems to be addressing his own thoughts, as if aware that his questions seem to have no comforting answer; his “meditation” increases anxiety rather than assuaging it. His own struggle to find a possible way to defeat the relentless advance of time’s conquering army leads only to greater fear and a deeper sense of inescapable doom. The **metaphor** describing beauty as “Time’s best jewel” is puzzling—implying that beauty itself belongs to time or is a treasure made valuable in some way by time’s desire. In this quatrain the speaker asks **two questions** instead of one, wondering if there is any way to hide beauty from time’s ravenous desire, or any hand strong enough to forbid time’s spoil of beauty. The two questions within one quatrain increase the tension of poem and emphasize the frantic nature of the speaker’s search for a solution. In these questions “Time” is now capitalized and **personified**—no longer merely as an insensible “rage” or a “wrackful siege”—as a human invader who loots other people’s treasure for his “chest” and who wantonly destroys all else with his “swift foot.” By the end of the third quatrain, there seems to be no hope of defeating time’s offensive.

However, the poem’s **volta** occurs in the concluding couplet, where Shakespeare offers the possibility for hope in the form of a “miracle”: that his own “black ink” may have the power or “might” to preserve his love for beauty despite time’s passage. Shakespeare expresses no certainty that beauty will outlast time—saying that “none” can likely prevent time’s conquest of beauty—but through the **synecdoche** of calling this poem “black ink,” he suggests that his own poetry might be able to preserve his “love” for all the beauty that time will inevitably destroy. He is hoping for a miracle; if that miracle does occur, it will be a miracle of Shakespeare’s own creation—through a poetry that preserves forever in human language what cannot survive on its own.