

That Time of Year (Sonnet 73)

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is generally acknowledged as the greatest literary genius of the English language. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, he was the son of a prosperous businessman, and probably attended grammar schools in his native town. In 1582, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior, and who bore him three children. The legacy of his writing includes 36 plays, 154 sonnets, and 5 long poems.

The English or Shakespearean sonnet is composed of three quatrains of four lines each and a concluding couplet of two lines, rhyming abab cdcd efef gg. There is usually a correspondence between the units marked off by the rhymes and the development of the thought. The three quatrains, for instance, may represent three different images or three questions from which a conclusion is drawn in the final couplet. As a result, the sonnet is one of the most tightly organized poetic forms used.

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 ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
5 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,
10 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

● The Facts

1. What image does the poet focus on in the first quatrain? What relationship does this image have to the speaker?
2. The speaker shifts to another image in the second quatrain. What is it, and what relationship does it bear to him?
3. Yet another image is introduced in the third quatrain. What is the image, and how does it relate to the speaker? What rather complex philosophical paradox is involved?
4. The final couplet states the poet's thesis (or theme). What is that thesis? State it in your own words.

The Strategies

1. The entire poem is organized around three analogies. State them in three succinct sentences.
2. The three images in the poem are presented in a particular order. Do you see any reason for this order?
3. In lines 3 and 4, what effect do the words “cold,/Bare ruined choirs” have on the rhythm and meter?
4. In line 2, what would be the result of substituting “hang” for “do hang”?
5. What is the antecedent of “this” in line 13?

The Issues

1. What can you deduce from this poem about the speaker and his frame of mind?
2. Someone once said, “Youth is wasted on the young.” How might that witticism be applied to this poem?
3. Why should a student whose major is, say, business and who has no interest whatsoever in literature be forced to take classes in which poems such as this one are studied?
4. Shakespeare has been called surprisingly modern in his outlook. What about this poem would seem to justify that observation?

Suggestions for Writing

1. In two or three well-developed paragraphs, challenge or defend the claim that too much money is spent on extending the lives of old people.
2. Write an essay about a memorable older person.

● CHAPTER WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write a well-organized essay in which you describe your conflicting attitudes about some aspect of society that puzzles you or to which you have no clear answer.
2. Write a well-organized chronological autobiography.
3. Write an essay detailing the steps you follow when you have to complete a writing assignment.
4. Detail in a tightly organized essay any particular procedure or process (e.g., how to send digital photographs via email) with which you are intimately familiar.

● WRITING ASSIGNMENTS FOR A SPECIFIC AUDIENCE

1. Write an essay of appreciation directed at your favorite teacher—from any grade—telling how he or she affected your life.
2. Write an essay, after doing the necessary research, telling an audience of high-school dropouts the opportunities available to them for continuing their education.