Sonnet 12: When I do count the clock that tells

POEM TEXT

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white;
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,
Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
And die as fast as they see others grow;
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

SUMMARY

Whenever I count the hours on the clock and see time passing,
And when I see the beautiful day turn into the ugly night;
When I see the violet after it's started to wilt,
And when I see black curly hair turn white;
When I see tall trees without the leaves
That used to shelter animals from heat,
And when I see the green crops of summer bound up in bundles
Carried on a funeral bier with an old and bristly beard,
That's when I start to speculate about your own beauty
And the fact that you will also age and die someday,
Since all sweet and beautiful things lose their sweetness and beauty
And die just as quickly as other sweet and beautiful things grow.
Nothing can defend against the power of Time's blade
Except for having children, which allows you to defy Time when he takes you away.

THEMES

TIME, MORTALITY, AND THE CYCLE OF LIFE

"Sonnet 12" is one of Shakespeare's "procreation sonnets," a group of poems urging their handsome young addressee to marry and have children. In this particular poem, the speaker makes his case by illustrating time's unstoppable power, evoking images of day disappearing into night, summer fading into fall and winter, flowers withering, hair graying, and trees losing their leaves. Nothing escapes the passage of time, the speaker reasons, including the young man himself—who will grow old, die, and decay like everything else. The only way to cheat time and mortality, the speaker concludes, is to "breed": to leave behind children who will keep the young man's precious beauty alive after he dies.

The speaker begins the poem with an image of a ticking or chiming clock, calling attention to the relentless passage of time. Nothing in nature lasts forever, the speaker says, going on to show how all of nature's beauties are subject to that clock: day sinks into "hideous night," violets wilt and wither "past prime," lustrous black hair becomes "silvered o'er with white," and the vibrant green of summer gives way to frost.

Time, here, comes across as a malignant, destructive force. It not only takes away nature's beauties, the speaker says, but is armed with a "scythe" that ruthlessly cuts life down. Nothing lasts forever, in other words, and the young man the speaker addresses is no exception: like all things in nature, the young man's beauty (and the young man himself!) will someday disappear.

At the same time, the poem suggests that even if all of the beauties mentioned must fade, they do so just as "others grow." The implication is that beauty is never truly gone, since new beautiful things emerge just as older ones pass away. After the poem's build-up of despair about time's passage, then, the speaker offers a last-minute loophole by arguing that the young man can preserve his beauty by fathering children. Only in this way will the young man be able to "brave" time and die without regrets, knowing that all of his good qualities will live on in his offspring.

In the end, then, the poem isn't just about a confrontational struggle between time and all of the world's beauties. Instead, the speaker ultimately offers a cyclical view of time in which death and decay lead to new life. Indeed, readers may realize looking back that most of the poem's images are implicitly cyclical. Though every day gives way to night, a new day always breaks at dawn; similarly, and summer ends with the coming of autumn and winter only to return the following year. Though individual beauties must fade, including the young man's, the poem suggests that in having children there is a natural way for the young man's beauty to be reborn.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;

Lines 1-2 together introduce the speaker's anxiety about the unavoidable passage of time. The ticking of a clock reminds the speaker that time is constantly passing, as does seeing beautiful daytime turn into "hideous," or ugly, night. The mention of day and night also introduces the more specific idea that, just as time inevitably passes, beauty inevitably fades.

Lines 1-2 establish the poem's meter of iambic pentameter, meaning that each line has five iambs (poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern):

When I do count the clock that tells the time,

This steady meter will hold throughout the poem. The first line, in particular, is noteworthy for being astonishingly regular, with no variations in its meter, and for using only single-syllable words. The line's regular rhythm helps to suggest the relentless ticking of the clock that it describes. The strong alliteration and consonance ("count the clock" and "tells the time") only reinforce this impression, suggesting the constant, unavoidable passage of time which is the source of the speaker's distress.

This regularity and use of single-syllable words also make the next line all the more startling. The word "hideous" after a string of monosyllables helps to emphasize the idea of nighttime as something truly terrifying and horrible—which is appropriate, as it is also the poem's first image of decay.

Line 2 also sets up the rest of the poem's use of juxtaposition to emphasize both the disappearance of beauty and the ugliness it gives way to. Here, "brave," a word that suggests brightness and beauty, contrasts with the "hideous" quality of night.

LINES 3-4

When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white;

Lines 3-4 provide more examples of natural decay. The first of these is of a violet (flower) withering ("past prime") in line 3. The violet is a conventional symbol of beauty, and line 3 thus neatly captures the idea of beauty being overcome by time. (It also introduces the imagery of the seasons to be developed in lines 5-8.)

It is significant that this conventional image of beauty fading is also paired with the image of black hair turning white in old age. Line 4 foreshadows the fact that, behind the poem's natural imagery, the speaker's primary concern is with the loss of *human* beauty (and specifically that of the young man to whom the poem is addressed).

Line 4 also uses more juxtaposition, describing "sable" (meaning "black") hair being covered over with "white," to emphasize the dramatic difference between youthful beauty and what is ultimately left after time has its way.

The sounds of these lines add to their meaning. Note how the strong alliteration of "past prime" adds punchy emphasis to the phrase, for example. In the next line, sibilance mixes with liquid /l/ sounds to evoke the slow but unstoppable flow of time:

And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white;

LINES 5-8

When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,

After the relatively shorter clauses of the previous lines, lines 5-8 offer the poem's most elaborate image of natural decay. This quatrain also features the poem's most concentrated use of juxtaposition to showcase the destruction of beauty over time.

The speaker first contrasts the splendor of beautiful summertime with the decay of autumn that follows:

- Seeing trees "barren of leaves," or bare, is all the more poignant when one remembers that their "lofty" foliage was once abundant enough to serve as a shelter for grazing flocks—to shield "the herd" from "heat."
- Worth noting, too, is the unusual use of the word "barren," which usually means "infertile." The point may be to hint at the dangers of infertility, given that the thrust of the whole poem is to urge a young man to have children and preserve his beauty while he still can.

The speaker then contrasts the beautiful greenery of summer's crops with the harvested crops bundled up in the fall ("all girded up in sheaves"):

- The speaker describes the wagon or cart in which these bundles are transported as a "bier," a word usually reserved for a frame on which a corpse is carried to its burial place. In this way, the speaker reimagines the harvest season as a kind of funeral procession. This word thus highlights the fact that time's passage also entails death's approach, and it also presenting the disappearance of natural beauty as an event worthy of intense mourning and grief.

- At the same time, the fact that these bundles have a "white and bristly beard" associates the disappearance of all these beauties with the fading of *human* beauty (which has already been referred to in line 4, and which the rest of the poem is going to be about).

Finally, alliteration and assonance work to reinforce the poem's despair about time and its incessant forward march. The steady, sharp alliteration of "green" and "girded," "borne," "bier," "bristly," and "beard" may, for example, recall the rhythm of the ticking clock from line 1. The insistent assonance of words like "trees," "leaves," "heat," "green," "sheaves," and "bier," with their long, drawn-out vowel sounds, may also further suggest the speaker's despairing tone.

LINES 9-12

Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
And die as fast as they see others grow;

The poem finally arrives at its main point: if decay is so widespread and nothing is exempt from time's power, then the beauty of the young man to whom the poem is addressed must also someday disappear. The whole poem has been building up to this "Then" statement. Having already demonstrated in the previous lines that "sweets and beauties" in general must all eventually give up their sweetness and beauty, the speaker is confident in saying that the young man's beauty must fade away and disappear (he will one day go "among the wastes of time").

Line 12, however, suggests a hint of hope in that, though beauties fade, they do so even as others are growing. The juxtaposition here is again sharp, as the speaker places death and growth on either side of the line:

> And die as fast as they see others grow;

This hints at the cyclical nature of life, and in doing so foreshadows the solution of the closing couplet—which suggests that there are ways to perpetuate one's beauty by leaving behind children.

LINES 13-14

And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

After piling on examples of time, decay, and mortality, the closing couplet finally offers some light: there is only one way for the young man to cheat time, the speaker argues, and that is to quickly marry and have children. Although everything within the natural order obeys the laws of time, there is *within* that order, a way for beauty to be born again nevertheless: that is, parenthood.

Line 13 personifies "Time" as a ruthless and powerful figure to whom all things are equally subject. The fact that "Time's" weapon of choice is "scythe," moreover, associates him with death. A scythe is a sharp blade used for harvesting grain, and its mention associates Time specifically with the legendary Grim Reaper, a figure that comes to harvest a person's soul at the moment of their death.

At the same time, imagining Time as a kind of "reaper" or a harvester recalls the image of autumn and the harvest season as a kind of death in lines 5-8 and especially the funeral "bier" in line 8. By making this association, the poem possibly means to represent all death, even human death, as something as natural as the coming of the fall. Since it's natural and inevitable, all people can do is expect it and prepare for it (for example, by having children).

Sonnets traditionally have what's called a *volta* (from the Italian word for "turn") near the end. The volta is a shift or reversal where the speaker changes their attitude or introduces a new perspective or unexpected idea. As is typical in a Shakespearean sonnet, that turn comes in the poem's final couplet (and, more specifically, in line 14). The reversal that it achieves is twofold:

- First, just when it seemed that the speaker was only summarizing his overall argument about the all-encompassing nature of time's power in line 13, line 14 surprises the reader by extending the statement and adding an exception. In the very last line, the poem presents the young man with a last-minute hope: all he has to do is become a parent. And the effect is especially persuasive after the rhetorical build-up of the rest of the sonnet.
- Second, the fact that the speaker suggests a way for the young man to have his beauty be reborn by fathering a child implies that time is really cyclical, rather than just a process of decay. Though beauties fade, beauty can be reborn again. Similarly, although summer may give way to fall, a new summer nonetheless comes every year.

Interestingly, having children will allow the handsome youth to "brave" Time at the moment of his death, a word that echoes the "brave day" of line 2. The end of the sonnet mirrors echoes its beginning, reflecting this circularity of time itself.

SYMBOLS

NATURE

On the surface, the poem draws on examples from nature to build an argument that all things eventually

must lose their beauty and disappear, including the young man. Although these are supposedly just the examples that come to the speaker's mind as reminders of time passing, each can also individually be considered as symbolic of the young man himself.

The "brave day" coming to an end and "violet past prime" in line 3 both represent the fading beauty and old age of the poem's addressee. Similarly, in line 5, the "lofty trees" becoming "barren" add urgency to the plea that he should hurry and have children while he can. Finally, the bundles of harvested crops being personified as being carried on a "bier" and having a "white and bristly beard" makes it clear that they are meant to suggest the young man's own old age and eventual death.

Because all these examples also suggest a cyclical view of time, however, they also hint at the hopeful resolution offered in the final couplet. Though it may disappear, these images hint that the young man's beauty can be born again in the same way, like the coming of a new dawn or the return of summer in the new year.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "And see the brave day sunk in hideous night; / When I behold the violet past prime, "
- **Lines 5-8:** "When lofty trees I see barren of leaves / Which erst from heat did canopy the herd, / And summer's green all girded up in sheaves / Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard, "

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem is full of alliteration that helps to evoke specific sounds or images, to emphasize the speaker's mournful tone, and to reinforce connections between certain words.

In line 1, for example, the sharp, crisp alliteration of "count the clock" and "tells the time" helps evoke the repeating, regular ticks of a clock, and thus sonically suggests the incessant and unstoppable march of time.

Other moments of alliteration simply add emphasis to certain phrases, as is the case when the speaker says that the "violent" in line 3 is "past prime." The alliteration makes the speaker's assertion that this flower's beauty has faded all the more forceful. The strong alliteration in "Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard" works similarly, with those repeated, heavy /b/ sounds also evoking the steady thump of a funeral march.

More subtly, the poem uses alliteration to strengthen connections between important words in the poem and to suggest transitions from states of youthful beauty to states of aging and decay. For example, line 4 suggests the shift of hair from "sable" (black) to "silver'd." And in line 7, the "green" of summer becomes "girded up" in bundles. The repeated /g/ sound calls attention to the dramatic change that the plants of summer have gone through—how their state has shifted from one of vibrant and flourishing life to one of being manipulated and tied up by human hands.

But arguably the poem's most significant use of this device is "breed" and "brave" in line 14. The /br/ sound shared between these words helps reinforce their logical connection in the poem. By relating these two words, the poem emphasizes that it is the act of "breeding," or having children, that will directly allow the handsome young man to "brave" (challenge) time when he eventually dies.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "count," "clock," "tells," "time"
- **Line 3:** "past prime"
- **Line 4:** "sable," "silver'd," "with," "white"
- **Line 6:** "heat," "herd"
- **Line 7:** "green," "girded"
- **Line 8:** "Borne," "bier," "bristly," "beard"
- **Line 9:** "Then," "thy"
- **Line 10:** "That," "thou"
- **Line 11:** "Since," "sweets," "forsake"
- **Line 12:** "fast"
- **Line 14:** "breed," "brave"

ASSONANCE

In general, assonance performs some of the same functions as alliteration in the poem, giving dramatic weight to images of beauty and decay and accentuating the speaker's sad tone.

Assonance is most concentrated where the speaker describes beauty disappearing. For example, the shared long /ay/ sound in the words "brave day" helps to highlight the beauty and splendor of daytime before it is overtaken by "hideous night." The long vowel sound, prolonging the pronunciation of the line, also suggests the speaker's desire for it to last and unwillingness to see it go.

Similarly, long /ee/ sounds in the words "heat," "green," "sheaves," and "bier" intensify the sorrowful tone of lines 5-8 about summer giving way to fall. Meanwhile, the much shorter /i/ sounds in the words "girded" and "beard" (pronounced more like "bird" in Shakespeare's English) possibly evoke the now shrunken and compressed condition of once living, free, and flourishing plants.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "brave," "day"
- **Line 5:** "trees," "leaves"
- **Line 6:** "heat"
- **Line 7:** "green," "girded," "sheaves"

- **Line 8:** "bier," "beard"
- **Line 14:** "breed," "thee"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem contains two important examples of personification.

The first appears in line 8, which describes the harvest crops being carried away on a "bier," a word that usually describes a frame where human corpses are taken to be buried. This associates the image of autumn with death and helps identify it as a metaphor standing in for the handsome young man's own passing. The fact that the poem personifies the crops as having a "white and bristly beard" makes it even clearer that autumn is supposed to represent human death and decay.

The second example appears in the final couplet, which personifies time as an imposing and destructive figure that deals death equally to all things. Importantly, "Time" wielding a "scythe" recalls the legendary figure of the Grim Reaper, traditionally a personification of death that comes to harvest the souls of the dying. By associating time with the Grim Reaper, line 13 effectively summarizes the poem's argument that time leads all things eventually to their end. Just as important is the fact that personification explicitly casts "Time" as an antagonist, setting up the last-minute solution that will allow the young man to "brave" or challenge him in the next line.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard"
- **Lines 13-14:** "And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence / Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence."

CAESURA

The poem contains only one marked caesura, in line 14: "Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence."

It's significant that the speaker introduces a caesura at just this moment. The pause at the beginning of the line notably helps to add dramatic weight to the last-minute reversal (that is the hopeful possibility of defying personified "Time" despite its great power). But just as important as the caesura itself is the noticeable *lack* of caesurae in the lines leading up to it.

The smooth, flowing lines that fill the rest of the poem seemed to be building a unified argument about the inevitability of death and decay. As such, the sudden pause in line 14 makes the line especially stand out rhythmically (especially when reading the poem out loud). It flags the line as a dramatic reversal, registering the element of surprise in offering this unexpected resolution.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** ","

ANAPHORA

The poem uses anaphora (as well as broader grammatical parallelism) throughout its first five lines. The speaker creates a list of several things in the world that serve as a reminder of the inevitability of death and decay—from daytime giving way to night, to the change of seasons—and parallelism makes the speaker's argument (that no beauty in nature is safe from the power of time) seem all the more powerful and emphatic. Note how the receptive structure of this list creates a feeling of building intensity:

> When I do count the clock that tells the time,
> And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
> When I behold the violet past prime,
> And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white;
> When lofty trees I see barren of leaves

This repetition adds to the impression of overwhelming evidence for time's destructive power. And with so many reminders of time's power over nature, the speaker increases the sense of despair and adds urgency to the plea that the handsome youth not waste time and father children already.

It's also worth noting that each of the parallel clauses here involves the speaker in some way:

> When I do count the clock that tells the time,
> [...]
> When I behold the violet past prime,
> [...]
> When lofty trees I see barren of leaves

The hideousness of nighttime, the horror of graying hair, the decay of summer into autumn are all things the speaker *personally* has witnessed—evidence from the speaker's own eyes and experience that nothing, truly nothing, can resist the power of time, much as the speaker may want to deny it.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When I do count"
- **Line 3:** "When I behold"
- **Line 5:** "When lofty trees I see"

JUXTAPOSITION

In general, the speaker uses juxtaposition as a rhetorical tool to emphasize the inevitability of decay and the power of time over all things.

To that end, the speaker often sets things at the height of their beauty side by side with those very same things fallen into a

condition of undesirable decay. For example, line 2 juxtaposes the "brave day" with the "hideous night" that overtakes it. Line 4 is similar, setting "sable curls" (the black hair of a young person) with the word "white" (representing the gray hair of an old person) to illustrate the dramatic effect that time can have on the human body. These juxtapositions help to drive home to the addressee that, young and good-looking as he may be, his beauty, too, will similarly disappear.

This type of juxtaposition continues throughout the poem's first eight lines. For instance, the speaker in lines 4 and 5 goes on to contrast the trees "barren of leaves" with the image of their former glory, when their leaves used to be abundant enough to "canopy," or shade, flocks of animals. In lines 7 and 8, the speaker contrasts for the same reason the "green" of summer's plants with the "white and bristly beard" of the harvest crops in the autumn.

Another, more subtle kind of juxtaposition can be found in line 12:

> And die as fast as they see others grow;

The line juxtaposes the death of old "sweets and beauties" with the growth of new ones. Here, the point is less to illustrate the inevitability of decay, so much as to hint at the hopeful resolution that the poem is building to. In a sense, the juxtaposition of this line gives the addressee a model to imitate. When the young man's beauty and he himself must disappear, that is, he can die content in seeing that beauty "grow" anew in "others"—that is, in his children.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "the brave day sunk in hideous night"
- **Line 4:** "sable curls all silver'd o'er with white"
- **Lines 5-6:** "When lofty trees I see barren of leaves / Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "And summer's green all girded up in sheaves / Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,"
- **Line 12:** "And die as fast as they see others grow;"

VOCABULARY

Brave (Line 2, Line 14) - Brave as used in line 2 means something like "glorious," "splendid," or "beautiful." The word highlights the intense beauty of day before night comes. Shakespeare perhaps also means to suggest a secondary meaning of "valiant" or "bold," suggesting that even despite its the day's best efforts it cannot resist the coming of night. The word appears throughout Shakespeare's sonnets to describe courage in the face of with overwhelming forces. The word reappears in line 14, this time as a verb meaning "defy" or "challenge." Its reappearance of the word possibly suggests that, unlike the "brave day" which failed to win out against night, the young man *does* have a way of successfully "braving" his doom.

Prime (Line 3) - The word "prime" as used in line 3 generally refers to the very best condition or time of life of something. Here, the word describes a violet after its time of greatest beauty, after it's started to wither.

Sable (Line 4) - "Sable" refers to the color black. In line 4 of this poem, it describes the curly hair of a young person.

O'er (Line 4) - "O'er" is a contraction of the word "over," often used in poetry for the purposes of meter.

Erst (Line 6) - "Erst" in line 6 means "long ago," "at first," or "at one time." Here, it describes the bare fall trees that, in the summer, used to shelter animals with their many leaves. Shakespeare likely chose the word to highlight the passage of time and the difference between what remains and what used to be.

Bier (Line 8) - The word "bier" can generally refer to a framework for transporting something, like a wagon, a stretcher or a wheelbarrow. It more usually refers to a movable stand on which coffins or corpses are placed before burial. Shakespeare aptly uses this word to liken the harvested crops to dead bodies, after their vibrant vitality in the summer.

Thy/thou/thee (Line 9, Line 10, Line 14) - "Thy/thou/thee" are forms of an archaic second-person pronoun, synonymous with the word "you." "Thou" is used when the word is the subject of a sentence and "thee" when it is the object. "Thy" means "your."

Sweets (Line 11) - The word "sweet" used as a noun, as in line 11, means "a sweet thing." It can also refer to a dear or beloved person. Some critics have also interpreted the word in this context as meaning "virtues" or "good qualities."

Scythe (Line 13) - A farming implement with a long, curved blade, used to cut down crops during the harvest. The word associates time with the concept of death, since a scythe is traditionally wielded by the Grim Reaper, a legendary personification of death that, instead of crops, comes to harvest people's lives at the moment of their death.

Hence (Line 14) - The word means "from here." In context, it means "from this life."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 12" is a Shakespearian sonnet, meaning that it consists of 14 lines of iambic pentameter and follows a specific rhyme scheme (more on that later in this guide). Shakespearian sonnets are traditionally divided into three quatrains, or four-line stanzas, followed by a concluding couplet.

Here, the first quatrain introduces the theme of passing time

with a cluster of images, giving a single line to each: a clock, nightfall overtaking the beautiful day, a violet withering, and greying hair. The second quatrain gives a more concentrated example of decay in the shift from summer into autumn. The third quatrain turns to focus on the addressee's own beauty, which must also naturally fade, while the final couplet offers a last-minute solution.

The structure of "Sonnet 12" can also be compared to that of a Petrarchan sonnet, usually divided into an octet (eight-line unit) and a sextet (six-line unit). The first eight lines illustrate time's power over nature in general, while the remaining six lines turn to focus on the addressee in particular.

Both Petrarchan and Shakespearian sonnets also traditionally include a *volta* or reversal near the end. The volta usually introduces a solution or a dramatically new perspective on the poem's predicament. In Petrarchan sonnets, the volta tends to fall around line 9, whereas Shakespeare typically saves it for the final couplet. The volta in "Sonnet 12" volta is especially late even by the standards of Shakespearian sonnets, as it only appears in the poem's very last line, increasing its dramatic impact.

METER

"Sonnet 12" is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that each line 10 ten syllables, grouped into five iambs—poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM).

This is the meter Shakespeare uses most often throughout his poetry and drama (and historically the most popular meter in all of English poetry). Some explain its popularity by suggesting that it is the meter closest to the way people actually speak.

The rhythm of iambic pentameter can sometimes be very noticeable and rigid, as in the very first line of this sonnet:

> When I do count the clock that tells the time,

The words follow one another in a very steady unstressed-stressed pattern. The use of only single-syllable words and the alliteration throughout this line ("count"/"clock" and "tells"/"time") make the rhythm even stronger. This strong rhythm, in turn, evokes the ticking of a clock and the regular, steady march of time.

After this remarkably regular first line, there are several noteworthy variations in the meter that draw attention to important images in the poem or give these images an extra dramatic flair. Line 8, for instance, contains an inversion of the meter:

> Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,

Instead of an iamb, the line begins with a trochee, a poetic foot with a stressed-unstressed syllable pattern (DUM-da). This is one of the common variations of meter in English poetry. Here, it helps to slow the rhythm and draw attention to the speaker's mournful image of summer's plants being carried away in carts as if in a funeral procession. Another interesting variation occurs in line 2:

> And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;

This line has six stressed beats instead of the usual five, because of the extra stress on the word "day." Here, the two stresses in a row of "brave day" helps to suggest a climax of beauty, before sinking into "hideous night."

Finally, another significant variation in the meter occurs in line 5:

> When lofty trees I see barren of leaves

The line is unusual enough that some may even consider it to be "unmetrical." Although there are still five stresses and ten syllables in the line, the normal stress pattern is disrupted with two stressed syllables in a row followed by two unstressed syllables in a row. Arguably, this scattered rhythm reflects the speaker's increasing distress about the evidence of time's decay all around. After the word "see," just where readers would normally expect an unstressed syllable, the word "barren" is especially striking, possibly to call attention to the speaker's horror at the idea of loss and infertility.

RHYME SCHEME

As a Shakespearian sonnet, "Sonnet 12" follows a traditional rhyme scheme of:

> ABABCDCDEFEFGG

Notice how, in the sonnet's first 12 lines, the rhymes alternate; line 1 rhyme with line 3, line 2 with rhyme 4, and so on. This interweaving pattern continues until the final couplet, where the rhyme scheme shifts. This sets the final couplet off from the rest of the poem and reflects how it brings closure to the problem, puzzle, or predicament set up by the previous lines.

All of the sonnet's rhymes are perfectly regular here, perhaps evoking the regular march of time. (Note: the word "beard" in line 8 is pronounced like "bird" in Elizabethan English and therefore rhymes with "herd.")

Worth noting, too, are the actual words that "Sonnet 12" links together through rhyme. Rhyme is often used to suggest connections between seemingly unrelated concepts or to reinforce meaningful relationships among them. The rhyme of "night" with "white," for example, which refers to the black night and white hair, invites readers to think about the conceptual relationship between two seemingly very different examples of natural decay: the day-night cycle and the old age of an individual.

SPEAKER

As with Shakespeare's other Fair Youth sonnets, the speaker here is an eager admirer of a handsome young man. And as with the other procreation sonnets within the Fair Youth sequence (sonnets 1-17), the speaker is a (very possibly romantic) friend, likely an older man, who is concerned that the young man is wasting his good looks by refusing to marry and have children.

The speaker's being an older man is suggested by the fact that the speaker in a position to give advice to the addressee. Throughout the sonnet, the speaker also demonstrates an intense awareness of the passage of time, suggesting that he has considerable life experience.

Those who believe that the sonnets are autobiographical identify the poem's speaker with Shakespeare himself, addressing a younger friend or lover who has been reluctant to settle down. The Fair Youth is a key figure in the majority of Shakespeare's sonnets, though his identity and the precise nature of his relationship to Shakespeare remain unknown.

SETTING

The poem features many times and places, each of which plays an important role in building up the poem's picture of natural decay.

The physical setting in line 1 is unclear; the speaker could be counting the strokes of a clock either in the privacy of a home or a public place in the city. Regardless, the fact this poem about time and mortality begins with a clock, a commonplace object that could be encountered anywhere, helps to suggest that reminders of time passing can spring up anywhere, even in the day-to-day.

The physical setting for the rest of the poem's ideas is, broadly, the world of nature. In line 2, to illustrate the point that all beauty is ephemeral, the speaker contrasts the settings of daytime and nighttime, one being "brave" (glorious and beautiful) and the other, which replaces it, "hideous." In lines 5-8, the poem goes on to describe the cycle of the seasons, specifically shift from the beautiful setting of summer into fall. The speaker specifically describes the harvest season, as crops are described being driven away on a wagon (a "bier"). After showing that time is always passing, contrasting the settings of day/night and summer/autumn becomes a way for the speaker to illustrate more specifically that all things, even beautiful things, must end with death.

The poem also shifts between the present, in which the speaker is encouraging the addressee to have children, and the distant future. In the poem's final line, the speaker urges the addressee to "breed" *now* so as to be able to "brave" or defy Time on the day of his death, knowing that he is leaving behind a version of his own beauty in his children. By reminding the addressee of a present that is always slipping away, and then projecting forward to the future time of the young man's eventual death, the speaker reinforces the message that time is of the essence: he should hurry and "breed" while there's still time.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Although it was not published until 1609 along with the rest of Shakespeare's sonnets, "Sonnet 12" was probably written sometime during the late 1590s.

The sonnet was originally an Italian form, and the word *sonnet* itself comes from the Italian for "little song." It was introduced into English poetry by Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey's translations of Francesco Petrarch's sonnets in the early sixteenth century. These brief yet highly elaborate "little songs" took off, especially after Sir Philip Sidney's sequence of love sonnets titled *Astrophel and Stella* in 1591. From then on, the sonnet soon became the standard form for expressing feelings of intense admiration or romantic love. Sonnet sequences by well-known poets like Shakespeare, Michael Drayton, and Edmund Spenser quickly followed.

Although today Shakespeare's sonnets are by far the most famous poems of their kind in the English language, they are highly unusual for their era. Sonnets at the time were usually addressed to a beautiful woman. A highly original poet, Shakespeare allowed himself the freedom to stray from these conventions, addressing 124 of his sonnets to a handsome young man known only as the Fair Youth.

Scholars usually refer to Shakespeare's first 17 sonnets as the "procreation sonnets" because they urge this attractive young bachelor to preserve his own beauty by settling down and have children. "Sonnet 2," for example, ends with the couplet: "This were to be new made when thou art old, / And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold." The unavoidability of aging and death are persistent themes throughout the sequence, of which "Sonnet 12" is one of the most well-known. It is also highly characteristic of these poems, building an argument about time and natural decay that culminates with a kind of loophole related to preserving beauty after death.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Most scholars believe that Shakespeare's sonnets were written sometime in the 1590s. Some speculate that most were composed in the *early* '90s in particular, when a plague in London caused theaters to be shut down and Shakespeare was forced to take a break from his career as a playwright.

In any case, these poems were written at a time of general peace and prosperity for England. Queen Elizabeth had warded off a Spanish attempt to invade England in 1588, after years of

conflict abroad. During the period of relative calm that followed, poets often turned to deeply personal subjects like love and marriage and indulged in philosophical themes like time, beauty, and mortality.

Although they did achieve a limited readership, Shakespeare's sonnets were not popular in their own day. Edmund Malone's 1780 edition of the sonnets helped revive interest in them by considering the poems as autobiographical documents containing insights into Shakespeare's life, about which little is known. There is a continuing debate about whether the sonnets are, in fact, autobiographical. Regardless, many figures have been proposed for the real-life identity of the Fair Youth, including Shakespeare's nephew William Hart, Henry Wriothesley, and William Herbert.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Watch Shakespearean actor Sir Patrick Stewart read "Sonnet 12" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t65ind8zJiw)
- The Fair Youth — Learn more about the mysterious young man to whom many of Shakespeare's poems are add (https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/blogs/mysterious-identity-fair-youth/)
- The Poem Out Loud—Again! — For another interpretation, listen to actor Scottish actor David Tennant read "Sonnet 12" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5gLvAZzz5A&ab_channel=JustTennant)

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 33: Full many a glorious morning have I seen
- Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments
- Sonnet 60: Like as the waves make towards the pebbl'd shore
- Sonnet 71: No longer mourn for me when I am dead
- Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Alaoui, Al Mahdi. "*Sonnet 12: When I do count the clock that tells the time.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Mar 2021. Web. 30 Apr 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Alaoui, Al Mahdi. "*Sonnet 12: When I do count the clock that tells the time.*" LitCharts LLC, March 28, 2021. Retrieved April 30, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-shakespeare/sonnet-12-when-i-do-count-the-clock-that-tells-the-time.