Sonnet 65 ("Since brass, nor stone, nor earth,

POEM TEXT

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

SUMMARY

Given that sad death is more powerful than even brass, stone, the earth, and the limitless ocean, how could beauty possibly stand a chance against time's rage, when beauty is as fragile as a flower? How can the sweet air of summer withstand the onslaught of the days leading to winter, which keep coming like a destructive army? How can beauty possibly survive, when time breaks down even solid rocks and strong steel gates? Oh, it's scary to think about this! Sigh, where will the thing that time prizes most of all hide? What has the strength to hold back time's quick forward march? Who can stop time from ruining beauty? Oh, no one and nothing can overcome time, unless the miracle of poetry is real—meaning that my love can survive in this poem itself, and continue to shine brightly in the black ink of these words.

THEMES

THE IMMORTALIZING POWER OF POETRY

The speaker of "Sonnet 65" laments the fact that time changes all things. As time continues its merciless march forward, everything in the world dies, decays, or is lost. In the face of time's power, the speaker wonders how phenomena as delicate as beauty and love possibly might endure. The only thing that can hold back time, the speaker concludes, is poetry itself: even though the speaker will die one day, the words of the speaker's poetry, and the love those words express, will live on in "black ink."

The speaker acknowledges that even the strongest substances in the world are subject to the passage of time. Everything from "brass," to "stone," to "earth," to the "sea" is eventually overcome by "sad mortality." In other words, everything breaks down sooner or later. Brass can get tarnished, stone becomes gravel or sand, dirt gets eroded, and the "boundless sea," which appears limitless, has an end. Neither impenetrable rocks nor strong steel gates seem all that tough in the fight against time, which breaks through their defenses and "decays" them like everything else.

If time can destroy even "steel" and "stone," the speaker reasons, then it follows that intangible things like love and beauty don't have a chance of sticking around for long. Such things, in this speaker's mind, are as delicate and fleeting as "summer's honey breath" or a spring "flower"—and thus even more vulnerable to time's cruel hand.

Yet the speaker *also* suggests that something *can* survive the passage of time: "this miracle"—the poem itself. If a poem has "might," or lasting power, then it can travel into the future to be read by generations of readers. And if that's true, perhaps love can *also* survive, since poetry can *express* and *contain* love. In other words, poetry is essentially immortal, and the love and beauty that such poetry contains will still "shine bright" in the "black ink" of the poem for years to come.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,

The speaker begins by listing out strong, seemingly everlasting substances: "brass," "stone," the "sea," and the "earth" itself. The speaker then laments the fact that even these materials are, in the end, temporary: "sad mortality," the speaker says, will overcome—"o'ersway[]"—their "power."

By calling mortality "sad," the speaker communicates a sense of loss: time alters everything, these opening lines suggest, and even the most basic of materials—metal, rock, water, dirt—are subject to change and decay. Think about it: over time brass becomes tarnished, stone breaks down into sand, sea levels rise

and fall, and earth is eroded by water and wind. All of these substances, in the speaker's estimation, are thus "mortal"—they are temporary.

The speaker uses polysyndeton (that repeated "nor") to add intensity and emphasis to this idea that nothing can escape "sad mortality"—not this nor that, nor that, nor that. The hissing sibilance here also makes the lines feel hushed and solemn, all those /s/ sounds bringing the speaker's voice down to a (perhaps sinister) whisper:

> Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
> But sad mortality o'ersways their power,

By connecting the words to one another through sound, this sibilance also subtly reinforces the fact that *all* of these things are subject to change.

This is a sonnet and, like most English-language sonnets, it uses the meter iambic pentameter—lines of five iambs, or feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern. Line 1 features perfect iambic pentameter, evoking the relentless march of time, but notice how things get funky in line 2:

> Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
> But sad mortality o'ersways their power,

While "power" *technically* has two syllables, it's likely that Shakespearean readers would have scanned it as having just one: "pow'r." A more obvious substitution pops up in the middle of the line, where there are two stressed beats in a row thanks to the word "o'ersways." Such disruption of the steady meter evokes time's destabilizing power.

LINES 3-4

> *How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea*
> *Whose action is no stronger than a flower?*

These lines wrap up the first of the poem's rhetorical questions: given that time is more powerful than things like "brass" and "stone," the speaker wonders how something as delicate as "beauty" could possibly escape time's grasp.

Time's forward movement becomes a "rage" here—a violent, forceful anger—while the speaker metaphorically compares beauty's "action," or strength, to that of a flower. Unlike the materials mentioned in line 1, a flower is very fragile; think about how easy it is to pluck a flower's petals. Beauty, it seems, stands no chance, can't "hold a plea," against time. The fact that beauty's strength is compared to a living thing here also foreshadows the speaker's real concern: the fading beauty of the speaker's beloved.

These lines signal the end of the sonnet's first quatrain, or cluster of four lines. In doing so, they also establish the poem's ABAB rhyme scheme, as "sea" rhymes with "plea," and "power" rhymes with "flower." The meter follows the same pattern as lines 1 and 2 as well, the steady march of iambic pentameter evoking the steady march of time.

LINES 5-6

> *O how shall summer's honey breath hold out*
> *Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,*

The speaker asks how the warm, sun-filled summer air could possibly withstand the passage of time—given that time leads to winter.

The speaker again juxtaposes, or contrasts, beauty's fragility with time's might. Summer's metaphorical "breath" may be sweet as "honey," but "breath" is, by its very nature, ephemeral and delicate. It's even *more* delicate than the "flower" from line 4, in fact, and certainly isn't something that can withstand a "siege" of "batt'ring days."

This is a metaphorical description of time as a kind of military onslaught. This siege is "wrackful," or destructive, in the sense that each passing day batters itself against summer, bringing winter ever closer. Again, then, time seems both violent and all-powerful, and the speaker questions how anything can withstand its inevitable forward march.

Note how the sounds of these lines reflect that idea. The soft, hushed alliterative /h/ sounds in "honey" and "hold," for example, convey summer's gentle warmth even as the speaker wonders whether that warmth can "hold" out, or last. By contrast, the sharp /k/ sound and assonant /ah/ of "wrackful" and "batt'ring" reinforce the sense of time as a kind of rough, destructive force.

LINES 7-8

> *When rocks impregnable are not so stout,*
> *Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?*

The speaker wonders how "summer's honey breath" could possibly withstand the "siege" of time given that time can break down even the strongest rocks and gates made out of "steel." Again, the speaker uses juxtaposition to emphasize time's power, contrasting the gentle image of summer air with that of "rocks" that are "impregnable" (i.e., invulnerable) and protective "gates of steel." It doesn't matter how strong or fragile something is; time can break through all defenses, and everything is subject to "decay."

The sounds of these lines reflect their meaning. Note the parallelism and alliteration/consonance in the phrases "so stout" and "so strong," for example, which underscores the idea that *both* rocks and steel gates are *the same* before "Time"; *both* are subject to deterioration and change. The word "decays" in line 8 also rhymes with "days" from line 6, reinforcing the idea that the passage of "days"—of time itself—brings death.

More broadly, the mixture of hissing /s/ and sharp, biting /t/ and /k/ sounds in these lines makes it almost seem as though the

speaker is spitting the words out in anger or disgust:

> When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
> Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?

LINES 9-12

> *O fearful meditation! where, alack,*
> *Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?*
> *Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?*
> *Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?*

The speaker says that it's frightening to reflect on all of this. If time can break through rocks and steel gates, where, the speaker then asks, can beauty or love hope to hide in order to evade time's power?

The metaphor the speaker turns to here presents time as a kind of personified cask or jewelry box, whose favorite "jewel" is beauty/love. In other words, these are what "Time" prizes above all else—Time's favorite things to take away. The speaker wants to know how beauty/love, this metaphorical "jewel," can remain hidden from "Time's chest"—that is, how beauty/love can evade capture by time.

Having wondered where beauty/love can "hide" from time, the speaker wonders how to forestall time itself. Now personifying time more directly, the speaker wonders how to stop time's "swift foot" in its tracks. In asking who can stop time's forward momentum, it follows, the speaker is also asking who can stop time from causing death and decay—who can "forbid" time from spoiling beauty.

The poem feels even more urgent in its third quatrain. Whereas the first two quatrains each extended a single question over four lines, now the speaker lets out three swift questions in a row. This dramatically speeds up the poem and conveys a sense of fear and despair. The anaphora in these lines (the repetition of "Or") adds to the sense of desperation.

Also notice how the speaker introduces a human presence into the poem for the first time here with the mention of someone's "strong hand" and the "who" in line 12. This foreshadows the argument that the speaker will make in the poem's closing two lines: that the speaker's own hand, in writing poetry, can fight against time.

LINES 13-14

> *O none, unless this miracle have might,*
> *That in black ink my love may still shine bright.*

Most sonnets feature something called a *volta*, or turn, when the speaker responds in some way to the problem or dilemma posed by the poem's previous lines. In Shakespearean sonnets like this one, the *volta* usually pops up until the final couplet—and it does so here, right on cue, swooping in at the last moment to save the day and fight off time.

First, though, the speaker seems to suggest that *nothing* can escape time. "O, none," the speaker says in response to the previous lines' questions—nothing has the power to stop time and, with it, death and mortality.

But there's an "unless" right after this seeming defeat: nothing can defeat time "unless" some "miracle" happens. And, of course, the speaker goes on to explain what this miracle is: the speaker's love will continue to "shine bright" in the "black ink" of the poem itself.

In other words, the speaker's poetry has the miraculous power to defeat time by preserving the speaker's love in language. If the speaker's poetry is read by future generations, then the speaker's love will survive, continuing to "shine" through the poem's words long after the poet has died. Poetry, then, creates a kind of immortality, allowing the speaker's love to defeat time.

Note how the alliterative /m/ sounds in "**m**iracle" and "**m**ight" reinforce the sense that a poem is a "miracle"—a form of beauty that has its own distinct "might." The sharp consonance of "bla**ck** in**k**," meanwhile, reinforces the strength of this ink and its presence on the page. Finally, the assonant long /i/ sounds in "sh**i**ne" and "br**i**ght" draw out the poem's ending, subtly conveying the way that poetry can "hold [time's] swift foot back."

SYMBOLS

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

The speaker envisions this poem itself, and the love that it expresses, "shin[ing] bright," into the future. This idea of the poem as a source of light builds on some common symbolism: while darkness usually symbolizes death and despair, light symbolizes life and hope. The fact that this poem can "shine bright," then, suggests that poetry, and the immortality it brings, is a source of hope and consolation in the face of death and loss.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "in black ink my love may still shine bright"

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses personification to emphasize the destructive power of time. The speaker refers to time's "swift foot," for example, to illustrating time's inevitable forward movement. Time, the speaker adds, claims every "jewel" or precious thing for his "chest," or his own jewelry box. Time also "spoil[s]"—destroys—beauty.

Time here is thus a figure with a will and agency of his own, and

personification makes it easier for the reader to see this capital-T "Time" as a distinct enemy. The reader might envision a violent, selfish person who destroys everything in their path. In this sense, time seems almost like a tyrant, who rules over everything and everyone.

The poem also personifies beauty, which can't "hold a plea" against time's "rage." Beauty is like a "flower," a delicate creature that can't hope to reason with time. Summer, too, gets personified, as the speaker deems its warm air "honey breath." This sweet, golden "breath" is meant to evoke beauty and pleasure. This personification helps to emphasize how delicate and fragile beauty is compared to time. Where beauty, personified, has gentle, "honey breath," time marches forward ruthlessly, each day "batt'ring" against the next.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?"
- **Lines 5-6:** "O how shall summer's honey breath hold out / Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,"
- **Line 8:** "Time decays"
- **Line 10:** "Time's best jewel," "Time's chest"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back? / Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?"

POLYSYNDETON

The poem uses polysyndeton in the opening line via the repetition of "nor." This repetition shows how time has the power to change even the strongest of substances. Polysyndeton also adds intensity, rhythm, and emphasis to the poem's beginning. When the speaker says that neither "brass, **nor** stone, **nor** earth, **nor** boundless sea" can withstand "sad mortality," that repeated "nor" creates a piling up effect. It feels as though the list could go on and on, and, in this way, polysyndeton illustrates the immensity of time's might.

Polysyndeton also appears later in the poem, when the speaker repeats the word "Or" while questioning who or what could possibly stop time. This repetition of "Or" is also an example of anaphora, given that these words fall at the starts of consecutive lines:

> **Or** what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
> **Or** who his spoil of beauty can forbid?

Here, polysyndeton again conveys time's apparently all-powerful nature. The repetition of "Or" reflects the notion that the speaker is searching desperately for something, anything, that can win in the fight against time.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "nor," "nor," "nor"
- **Line 11:** "Or"
- **Line 12:** "Or"

ANAPHORA

In the last lines before the closing couplet, the poem uses anaphora to suggest that maybe nothing and no one *can* outlast time. The speaker repeats the word "Or" at the start of two consecutive questions, asking:

> **Or** what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
> **Or** who his spoil of beauty can forbid?

This anaphora—combined with the poem's increasingly short questions—conveys a sense of increased urgency, almost despair. Here, the speaker seems to suggest that given everything the poem has just described, maybe nothing *can* outlast time or stop time from "spoil[ing]" beauty.

Note that these questions also begin with a parallel structure; "Or what," the speaker asks, and then "Or who," emphasizing that he is searching for anything or anyone capable of "hold[ing …] back" time or protecting beauty from death and decay.

This anaphora also powerfully builds up to the closing couplet, where the speaker at first seems to reply to these questions that "none" can stop time, before suggesting that *poetry* can *survive* and *outlast* time, an achievement that is, in and of itself, miraculous.

More subtly, the speaker repeats the word "O" at the starts of lines 5, 9, and 13. The word "O" is an archaic expression, conveying strong feeling. This anaphora, then, helps to convey the speaker's despair and longing.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "O"
- **Line 9:** "O"
- **Line 11:** "Or"
- **Line 12:** "Or"
- **Line 13:** "O"

METAPHOR

The poem uses several metaphors that convey the precious and delicate nature of beauty—and, by contrast, the ruthless strength of time.

First, the speaker says that beauty is "no stronger than a flower." By comparing beauty's strength/will, or "action," to that of a flower, the speaker implies that beauty is delicate, fragile, and mortal. Flowers can't live forever, so this metaphor also reinforces the sense that beauty does not stand a chance against all-powerful time.

The speaker then compares time to a "wrackful," or destructive, military "siege," or attack. The passage of days is like a battering ram; readers might envision those days hammering against summer's door. With this metaphor, the poem depicts time as being relentless in its march, like a destructive army that forcefully batters down everything in its path.

Later in the poem, the speaker asks where “time’s best jewel” can hide from "Time's chest." This jewel can be read as a metaphor for both beauty and love: the most valuable and rare things in life, in the speaker's mind. Time does not literally have a kind of jewelry box that holds these “jewels,” of course. Instead, the speaker is using metaphorical language to describe how time snatches away beauty and love away from the world.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “no stronger than a flower”
- **Line 6:** “the wrackful siege of batt'ring days”
- **Line 10:** “Time’s best jewel,” “Time’s chest”
- **Line 14:** “my love may still shine bright”

APORIA

Aporia is important to the poem, which is structured as a series of questions (that readers may or may not interpret as being purely rhetorical). This sense of doubt draws readers into the poem, inviting them to share in the speaker’s search for something that can outlast time.

The first two questions both extend over four lines. And in each of these first two questions, the speaker asks how beauty can possibly withstand the passage of time given that even strong materials like stone and steel are subject to decay. These first two questions feel rhetorical in the sense that there *seems* to be only one possible answer to them: beauty cannot beat back time, and will quickly fade like everything else.

Yet the speaker *continues* to ask whether *anything* can hold back time, and the poem’s questions feel increasingly urgent. In the poem’s third quatrain, the questions grow shorter, speeding the poem up. Here, one question extends over just two lines, and then lines 11 and 12 are each a single question:

> Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
> Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?

With these increasingly urgent questions, the reader can sense the speaker’s despair: perhaps “none” really can be stronger than time.

This sense of urgency, then, sets the poem up for its turn in the closing couplet, when the speaker says that perhaps one thing *can* last: poetry. The questions up to this point make this turn feel even more powerful, and the idea of something surviving truly “miraculous.”

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-12

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker uses juxtaposition to emphasize time's strength. In the poem's first four lines, for example, the speaker juxtaposes strong, solid, or seemingly limitless entities like metal, rock, earth, and even the ocean with the fragility "flower." The materials mentioned in line 1 are all much stronger and longer-lasting than a flower, and that contrast hammers home the speaker's point: that time has power over *all* things. And if this is the case, then delicate beauty itself has no chance of surviving.

Similarly, the speaker juxtaposes “summer’s honey breath” with impenetrable rocks and "gates of steel." The contrast between these things once again underscores time's power: time breaks through all of these things with ease. Those "gates" might as well be intangible air for all the good they do in keeping time at bay. And the warm air of summer, however sweet and pleasant, cannot possibly hold back that "wrackful siege of batt'ring days," a description that turns time into a destructive, unstoppable army.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses alliteration to create music, add emphasis to certain ideas, and convey the poem’s meaning. In line 5, for example, note how the repeated /h/ sounds seem to fill the speaker's question with more urgency:

> O **h**ow shall summer’s **h**oney breath **h**old out

That /h/ sound is also airy, infusing the line with a sense of the “honey breath” that the speaker is describing here.

Later, the shared /s/ and /st/ sounds of lines 7-8 call readers' attention to the "stoutness" and "strength" of the rocks and gates at hand. The strong, emphatic alliteration here underscores just how sturdy these materials are—and thus how powerful time must be if it can so readily break through:

> When rocks impregnable are not **s**o **st**out,
> Nor gates of **st**eel **s**o **st**rong, but Time decays?

The shared /m/ sounds of "**m**iracle" and "**m**ight" in line 13 works similarly, emphasizing the potential power ("might") of poetry

(the "miracle at hand).

Note that much of the alliteration in the poem is more specifically sibilance, which fills the opening lines in particular (with /s/ sounds at both the beginning and in the middle of words):

> Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
> But sad mortality o'ersways their power,

The /s/ sounds here add a sinister hiss to the poem's opening, perhaps evoking the merciless sway of time.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Since," "brass," "stone," "boundless," "sea"
- **Line 2:** "But," "sad," "o'ersways"
- **Line 5:** "how," "honey," "hold"
- **Line 7:** "so stout"
- **Line 8:** "steel so strong"
- **Line 11:** "strong," "hand," "hold his," "swift," "back"
- **Line 12:** "spoil," "beauty"
- **Line 13:** "miracle," "might"
- **Line 14:** "black," "bright"

CONSONANCE

Consonance works just like alliteration in the poem, filling the lines with music and drawing attention to certain images and ideas. Again, much of this is more specifically sibilance, as in the opening line's "Since," "brass," "boundless," and "sea."

That hissing /s/ sound links up with sharp /k/, biting /t/, and growling /r/ sounds later in the poem as the speaker continues to describes time's power:

> Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,
> When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
> Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?

Time here is like a cruel army hammering through any and all defenses, and the cacophony of sounds (added to by the hard /g/ and /p/ consonants above) is appropriately like an onslaught on the reader's ear.

Consonance works similarly throughout the poem, making certain images and ideas stand out all the more clearly for the reader.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Since brass," "stone," "boundless sea"
- **Line 2:** "But sad mortality o'ersways"
- **Line 5:** "how," "honey," "hold"
- **Line 6:** "Against," "wrackful," "siege," "batt'ring"
- **Line 7:** "rocks impregnable," "so stout"
- **Line 8:** "gates," "steel so strong," "Time," "decays"
- **Line 11:** "strong," "hand," "hold his," "swift foot," "back"
- **Line 12:** "who his spoil," "beauty," "forbid"
- **Line 13:** "unless this miracle," "might"
- **Line 14:** "black ink," "love," "still," "bright"

ASSONANCE

In addition to alliteration and consonance, the poem also includes several moments of assonance to create music and emphasis. For example, long /ay/ sounds link "o'ersways" and "rage," emphasizing the idea that time is a kind of destructive, powerful "rage" that can "o'ersway" or overpower everything else.

Later, short /uh/ sounds assonantly link "summer's" and "honey," while /ah/ sounds connect "wrackful" and "batt'ring." These two moments of assonance call attention to the contrast between the delicate, beautiful air of summer (which is sweet-smelling, like honey), and the "wrackful" forces of time, which moves forward like a battering ram.

Finally, at the poem's ending, long /i/ sounds emphasize the phrase "shine bright." These long vowel sounds seem to stretch forward and elongate the poem's last line. In doing so, these sounds enact the speaker's belief that the poem itself will live on.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sea"
- **Line 2:** "sad mortality," "o'ersways"
- **Line 3:** "rage"
- **Line 5:** "summer's honey"
- **Line 6:** "wrackful," "batt'ring"
- **Line 10:** "Time's," "best," "Time's," "chest," "lie"
- **Line 11:** "his swift"
- **Line 13:** "might"
- **Line 14:** "my," "shine bright"

VOCABULARY

O'ersways (Line 2) - An abbreviation of the word "oversway," which means to overcome or overpower.

Rage (Line 3) - Anger; intense energy or power.

Wrackful (Line 6) - Destructive.

Siege (Line 6) - A "siege" is a persistent attack, as in a military attack.

Batt'ring (Line 6) - "Batt'ring" is an abbreviation of "battering," an adjective that means violent, damaging, destructive, and relentless.

Impregnable (Line 7) - Invulnerable.

Stout (Line 7) - "Stout" means strong and robust.

Meditation (Line 9) - Reflection or train of thought.

Alack (Line 9) - "Alack" is an archaic expression used to convey regret or sadness.

Chest (Line 10) - Within the poem, the word "chest" refers to a container or box, like a jewelry box.

Swift (Line 11) - "Swift" means quick-moving.

Spoil (Line 12) - To "spoil" something means to ruin it or cause it to go bad. As a noun, the word "spoil" can also refer to something someone has stolen, as in the "spoils of war."

Forbid (Line 12) - To "forbid" something means to not permit it to happen.

Might (Line 13) - "Might" means power or strength.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 65 is," as the name indicates, a sonnet. More specifically, it's a Shakespearean sonnet. This means that the poem has 14 lines broken up into three rhyming quatrains (four-line stanzas) and a closing couplet.

Traditionally, sonnets deal with some kind of problem or internal argument. In a typical Shakespearean sonnet, the speaker presents the problem or question of the poem in the quatrains, and then uses the closing couplet (the last two lines) to respond in some way to everything that came before. This moment is called the poem's *volta*, or turn.

That's essentially what happens here: the speaker spends the quatrains wondering if anything can stand up to time's power, and then declares in the couplet that nothing can—save poetry.

What's interesting about "Sonnet 65" is that it *also* has a slight turn in line 9, right as the third quatrain starts. This is actually where the *volta* appears in a different kind of sonnet, the Petrarchan, and it neatly divides the poem into an opening octave (eight-line stanza) followed by a sestet (six-line stanza):

- In the opening eight lines of "Sonnet 65," the speaker questions how beauty could possibly withstand time's power given that much stronger substances fall prey to decay.
- And at the beginning of the sestet, just as in a Petrarchan sonnet, there's a shift: the speaker's questions become increasingly shorter and more urgent, taking up just one line apiece as the speaker introduces a human presence into the poem: who, the speaker wonders, could ever hold back time and death?

Importantly, however, the poem doesn't *truly* answer this question until the closing couplet. Time thus seems all-powerful for most of the poem. It's only at the last minute that the speaker suggests something *could* survive: the poem itself.

METER

"Sonnet 65" is written in iambic pentameter, the type of meter used in traditional sonnets. In this meter, each line of the poem has five metrical feet; each of those feet is an iamb, meaning it begins with an unstressed syllable and ends on a stressed syllable. For example, the first two lines of the poem read:

> Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
> But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,

The two stressed beats of "o'ersways" break with the meter and draw attention to the destabilizing power of time, but overall the metrical variations here are minor. (Also note that, in Shakespeare's time, the words "power" and "flower" would likely have been pronounced as "pow'r" and "flow'r," meaning each word counts as only one stressed syllable.)

Throughout the sonnet, then, the meter creates a regular, back and forth movement, almost like the tick-tock sound of a clock. This steady meter conveys part of the poem's meaning, as it illustrates the regular, inevitable movement of time. The meter, then, *seems* to reinforce the idea that time is all-powerful and that nothing can escape it.

Yet the poem shifts *out* of this meter at the very end, right when the speaker implies that something *can* outlast time: poetry, and with it, the love that the poetry contains. The last line of the poem reads:

> That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Both "black ink" and "shine bright" can be read as spondees, metrical feet made out of two stressed syllables. This shift and these clusters of stresses emphasize the "black ink" of the poem, and its ability to "shine" into the future. Just as the speaker suggests that poetry can escape the deteriorating effects of time, then, the poem escapes its own meter, conveying the power and "shining" quality of the poem itself.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a regular ABAB rhyme scheme throughout its first 12 lines and ends with a rhyming couplet. As a whole, then, the rhyme scheme follows this pattern, which is standard for Shakespearean sonnets:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

The rhyme scheme throughout the poem's three quatrains—when the speaker questions whether *anything* can outlast time—reinforces the sense that time's forward momentum is inevitable. Just as each quatrain rhymes in a predictable way, the poem suggests that time predictably

moves forward.

The regularity of the rhyme scheme throughout the first 12 lines *also* calls attention to the closing couplet, which follows a GG pattern. The shift in rhyme scheme here reflects the poem's sudden shift in attitude: the speaker suggests that something *can* outlast time—poetry, and the love that it conveys.

SPEAKER

While the speaker of "Sonnet 65 "remains anonymous throughout the poem, many readers take the speaker to be a representation of the poet, William Shakespeare. For one thing, it's implied that the speaker is a poet—that the speaker has written "love" into "black ink." The ending of the poem, then, strongly suggests that the speaker is a representation of Shakespeare himself.

Of course, this is not the only way to interpret the speaker. In a certain sense, the speaker could be *any* writer or artist who hopes that their art might last into the future and, in doing so, preserve some facet of their life. Even more broadly, the poem can be read as expressing a universal human wish to attain immortality or to avoid the losses that time inevitably entails.

SETTING

"Sonnet 65" doesn't have a specific setting. The speaker mourns how everything in the world—"brass," "stone," the "sea," etc.—is subject to change and decay. The speaker highlights natural things like flowers and summer air while also calling attention to human-made objects like "gates of steel." *All* of these things, the speaker argues, change, decay, or disappear over time. Keeping the setting so broad allows the poem's message to be universal; it's not tied to anyone one time or place, but rather is speaking to a fact of existence itself (i.e., that everything is subject to the passage of time).

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 65" was first published in 1609 as part of a collection of Shakespeare's sonnets. "Sonnet 65" belongs more specifically to a sequence known as the "Fair Youth" sonnets, a series of poems addressed to an unidentified young man for whom the speaker of the poems expresses love and attraction.

The "Fair Youth" has never been definitively identified, but scholars have proposed Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton, as well as William Herbert, the 3rd Earl of Pembroke, as possibilities. Both Wriothesley and Herbert were patrons of Shakespeare, and Shakespeare dedicated the sonnets as a whole to a "Mr. W. H."

Although the speaker doesn't *specifically* describe the "Fair Youth" in this poem, the speaker's reference to "love" in the final line implicitly references him. "Sonnet 65" is also one of several Shakespeare poems in which the speaker questions how love can outlast time and then proposes that poetry itself can grant its subjects a kind of immortality. (The topic was in fact quite common among Renaissance poets, who were likely concerned with their own legacies.)

Interestingly, the sonnets were published without Shakespeare's authorization: a local publisher, Thomas Thorpe, effectively pirated the sonnets from their author. This has led some readers to speculate that they were intended as private missives, not public poems—they were meant, in other words, for the "Fair Youth" himself.

As a sonnet, the poem draws on a poetic form that dates back to 13th-century Italy and the poet Petrarch. Shakespeare helped to reinvent the form in the English language, switching up its rhyme scheme and moving the poem's *volta*, or turn, to its closing couplet.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Sonnet 65" meditates on the power of time to erode, change, and deteriorate all things. Importantly, too, although the poem doesn't name death directly, such words as "decay" and "mortality" clearly evoke the speaker's sense of death as tangible and omnipresent.

When reading the poem, it can be helpful to remember that in Shakespeare's lifetime, death *was*, in a sense, omnipresent. Shakespeare lived through multiple iterations of the plague, and, in the absence of modern medicine, death was generally much more a part of everyday life in Renaissance England than it is today. In fact, an early Quarto version of the poem includes an illustration: a print of death as a kind of reaper, cutting down everything and everyone in its path.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of William Shakespeare — Read more about Shakespeare's life and work. (https://poets.org/poet/william-shakespeare)
- The 1609 Quarto Version — View the original 1609 Quarto version of the poem, which includes a creepy illustration of death/time. (http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com/sonnet/65)
- Folger Shakespeare Library — Find a range of resources on Shakespeare's life and work at the website of the Folger Shakespeare Library. (https://www.folger.edu/publishing-shakespeare)
- The Poem Out Loud — Watch actress Annette Badland

recite the poem. (https://vimeo.com/44723859)

- The Fair Youth Sonnets — Learn more about Shakespeare's Fair Youth sonnets, including different possible identities proposed for the Fair Youth. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeare-sexuality-and-the-sonnets)

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 12: When I do count the clock that tells the time
- 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

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