



Series 1, Number 3

# WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE 1564-1616

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## SONNET # 12...

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.

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## CHRONOLOGY

**1564:** William Shakespeare is born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England.

**1582:** Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway, who is 26.

**1585-1592:** The so-called "Lost Years" - little is known about Shakespeare's activities during this period.

**1592:** Shakespeare is first mentioned as a playwright in London.

**1593-1594:** Theaters in London are closed due to plague. During this time, Shakespeare likely begins writing his sonnets and narrative poems.

**1594:** Shakespeare becomes a founding member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men acting company.

**1596-1599:** Shakespeare is believed to have written most of his sonnets during this period.

**1599:** The Globe Theatre is built; Shakespeare is a part-owner.

**1609:** Shakespeare's Sonnets are published by Thomas Thorpe. It's not known whether Shakespeare consented to this publication. The dedication to "Mr. W.H." sparks debates about the identity of the "Fair Youth" addressed in many sonnets.

**1611-1613:** Shakespeare likely retires to Stratford-upon-Avon.

**1616:** Shakespeare dies on April 23, at the age of 52.

**1623:** The First Folio of Shakespeare's plays is published posthumously.

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## PODCAST (<https://influential lyrics, etc.>)

### *Topics*

- English (a.k.a. Shakespearean) Sonnet
- Quatrain, Couplet
- Meter

### *Lines to remember...*

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

## ***Podcast Script***

### **Shakespeare, Sonnet 12**

In 1609, a volume of 154 of Shakespeare's sonnets was published in London by the printer Thomas Thorpe. The publication raises several literary-historical questions, many of which still unresolved. We don't know, for instance, whether Shakespeare himself was involved in or even approved of the publication. We don't know who arranged the sonnets in the order they appear in the volume. The volume is dedicated to someone referred as "W. H."—but we don't know who WH is or even if the dedication to WH is from Shakespeare or from Thorpe. Etc. What we do know is that most of the first 120-some sonnets appear to be addressed to a handsome young man (WH?) while the last 30 or so are about a person who has come to be known as the "Dark Ladie." And we know that the first 17 sonnets—often called the "Procreation Sonnets"—are each rhetorical addresses to the younger man, encouraging him to have children and thus to pass along his youthful beauty to the next generation.

I have selected one of these Procreation Sonnets as the subject of the present podcast, but I don't mean to suggest that this one poem is somehow better than the others. Rather, Sonnet #12 gives us an excellent example of the kinds of imagery and the formal ingenuity that are characteristic of most of the poems in the collection. By considering this one poem, in other words, we can better understand why Shakespeare's sonnets have been held in such high esteem among readers and so massively influential on later poets.

So here is Shakespeare's Sonnet #12:

[poem]

Beautiful little poem! As usual here on *Influential Lyrics*, we'll begin with an explication, then we'll look at some of the more inventive formal techniques that are characteristic of Shakespeare's work.

The poem's opening quatrain offers a series of images, all presented within two "When..." clauses:

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;

The opening line refers to the speaker watching a clock and noting the passage of time; the second line offers a somewhat more ominous register of time passing—from “brave day” to “hideous night.” Already, the central “problem” of the sonnet is clear: time is passing and with that passage things get worse. The next two lines offer more tangible images of impending mortality—the violet was once a beautiful little flower, but now it’s “past prime”; the “sable curls”—black hair, in other words—have now gone white, presumably with age. There is, incidentally, a hint of social status in Shakespeare’s use of the word “sable.” Sable was the highly prized fur of a sable marten that was used in elegant, even royal garments and that appears in heraldic coats of arms. Hence, the image in the poem suggests not just hair going white with age but also the loss of wealth and status.

The second quatrain of the sonnet offers a further development of this theme of time passing, this time using images from a bucolic, rural (and almost stereotypically English) countryside.

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,

The first image here is of a grove of “lofty trees” that, during the summer provided shade for a herd of cattle, but that now is “barren of leaves.” Summer is descending into winter. The second image is perhaps more complex. Consider the seasonal evolution of a field of wheat. During the summer, wheat fields are a uniform green, but when harvest time approaches, the wheat turns a golden yellow. At this point, the wheat is cut (in Shakespeare’s day, this would have been the job of a reaper with a scythe) and then bundled into sheaves to be carried from the field. This explains the “summer’s green all girded up in sheaves,” but the next line offers a frightening twist. Instead of hauling the sheaves from the field in an ordinary farm cart, they are “Borne on the bier”—a “bier” [that’s B I E R] is a cart traditionally used to carry a casket to the cemetery. What is more, the bristly heads of the wheat stalks are described in anthropomorphic terms as a “white and bristly beard” echoing the white hair of the previous quatrain. Thus, the image of the wheat harvest is mingled inseparably with diction describing a human funeral.

Thus far in the sonnet, Shakespeare has presented a series of images all having to do with the passage of time and the inevitable process of aging and death. In the next quatrain, the speaker turns his attention directly to the addressee of the poem who is, apparently, a beautiful young person just now in the prime of life. In essence, the speaker says that when he considers all these images of mortality...

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 meaning here seems quite straightforward: having seen that such beautiful things as the “brave day,” the “violet,” the “sable curls,” and the “lofty trees” all have but a brief existence, then the beauty of the addressee is likewise temporary and must inevitably succumb to the “wastes of time.”

It all sounds like a sad prospect. So, is there any hope? Must the addressee’s present “beauty”—like all mortal things—come to an end? Well, the final couplet offers some advice:

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

To paraphrase: there is no defense against the ravages of time except for children— “breed”— who will presumably inherit your beauty even as death “takes thee hence.” Thus we conclude the line-by-line explication of Shakespeare’s sonnet. The basic “content” of the poem is quite simple: all things in nature (including people like the addressee) are subject to the passage of time and the inevitable decline. And, while the individual person is eventually going to fall to “Time’s scythe,” the vibrancy and beauty of youth can be passed along to the next generation. Not the most pleasant thought, perhaps, but it’s not difficult to understand!

The very simplicity of the meaning, however, raises another question. After all, though it may be a little uncomfortable to think about it, who doesn’t already know that we are all going to get old, we are all going to lose the vitality and beauty of youth, and eventually we are all going to die. We really don’t need Shakespeare to tell us this. So if there is nothing especially original or profound about the paraphraseable message, then why would a poem like this be so significant, so influential on later writers?

I’m not sure I have a completely convincing answer to this question, but I would like to note a few aspects of Shakespeare’s composition that, for me, make this such a brilliant poem. First, consider

a sort of micro-level reading focusing on individual word choices such as those noted in the explication. Take the words “sable” and “silver’d” in the fourth line—“And sable curls all silver’d o’er with white.” Compare that expression to a paraphrase like “And dark brown hair that now is turning white.” “Dark brown hair” just sounds so bland when compared to “sable”—it lacks all the richness and allusion; likewise, “turning white” is lifeless when compared to “silver’d o’er with white.” Or, for another example, consider that mingling of harvest imagery with the human mortality in the second quatrain—what seems like a pleasant rural landscape suddenly morphs into a funeral scene. And note too the alliteration on B and R in the line “And borne on the bier with white and bristly beard.” This is sonic quality is hinted at elsewhere in the poem with words like “brave” at the beginning and end of the poem; and “breed” – “save breed to brave him.”

And, while I’m on the subject of sound (prosody), consider the penultimate line – “And nothing ‘gainst Time’s scythe can make defence.” For one thing, the scythe image picks up on the harvest scene from the middle quatrain—it’s a reaper with a scythe that cuts the wheat and binds the sheaves. Now, however, this is explicitly *human* mortality—the grim reaper, so to speak. To add to this ominous quality of the image, consider the impossible collection of consonants in the phrase “‘gainst Time’s scythe.” The poem consists mostly of lines in a comfortable, regular iambic pentameter:

ta **Dum** ta **Dum** ta **Dum** ta **Dum** ta **Dum**.

when I do Count the Clock that Tells the Time.

ta **Dum** ta **Dum** ta **Dum** ta **Dum** ta **Dum**.

that Thou a**M**ong the **W**astes of **T**ime must **G**o

But this line trips in the middle—right on the image of the reaper. Just try to say “‘gainst Time’s scythe” in anything like a comfortable rhythm!

And nothing ‘gainst Time’s scythe can make defence

You get the idea...the steady “heartbeat” of the poem’s regular meter is suddenly cut short highlighting the presence of “Time’s Scythe” right in the midst of the addressee’s fleeting youth.

So much for the micro-level analysis of the poem...The poem also demonstrates some of Shakespeare’s genius at the macro level. To explain, let me first provide a short reminder about the typical structure of a Shakespearean sonnet. In most cases, these sonnets consist of three quatrains

(that is, three four-line blocks all linked together by an alternating rhyme words); these three quatrains are then followed by a couplet (that is, two rhyming lines that provide a resolution to the poem). You may remember the rhyme pattern from a high-school English class—ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Now, in one sense, this may all seem merely formulaic, like a sort of mold into which the poet pours his words and then out pops a sonnet. That’s partly true here—strictly in terms of the rhyme scheme, this poem fits that mold perfectly.

But now look at the *logical* structure. You can see this perhaps most clearly by looking at the first words of each line rather than the last (as one does with rhyme). The first four lines are When... And... When... And...; the next four stretches this When/And structure over two lines each: When... [line] And... [line]. Put this together and we get this phrasing of the argument:

When And When And When --- And...Then

It’s as though these passage-of-time images get increasingly intense until we get to the “Then” section that brings the mortality imagery to bear specifically on the addressee of the poem. All of this sets up the “punchline” quality of the final couplet. Put this all together and we get this structure:

When And When And When...And...Then..... And nothing gainst Time’ scythe

What I’m hoping to suggest here is that there is a kind of logical counterpoint going on that elevates this language into a *musically* self-contained phrase. So, while the literal, paraphrasable content of the poem, as I noted earlier, is not exactly original or surprising, the rhythmic phrasing of the language and the logic of the argument combine to make this a fascinating and influential lyric.

That’s certainly enough from me about this little poem! Many thanks for listening, and, if you’ve found the discussion illuminating, I hope you’ll consider liking the podcast. As always, I’ll append another reading of the poem after the closing music in case you’d like to hear it once again now that you’ve heard the explication and commentary.

Thanks again, and I hope to see you for the next episode of *Influential Lyrics!*

[poem]

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## FURTHER READING

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Shakespeare, William. *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS. Neuer before Imprinted*. Internet Shakespeare Editions [Facsimile of the original publication by Thomas Thorpe], [https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/facsimile/overview/book/Q1\\_Son.html](https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/facsimile/overview/book/Q1_Son.html).

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## ETC....

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