

Literary text • *Sonnets to the Young Man*

from Sonnet 60, by William Shakespeare

Sometimes Shakespeare's reflections on mortality and the transience of life expand beyond the young man to whom the sonnets are addressed. The power of these sonnets lies in their attempt to address the **human condition** in general and to become a universal expression of it.

In this poem, the atmosphere is much darker than in 'Sonnet 18'. The poet is in a melancholy mood but his melancholy inspires him to reflect on how the progress of human life resembles the **futile movement of the waves**. Just as each wave dies as soon as it reaches the shore, only to be replaced by the next, the minutes of our lives pass quickly away. Minutes, like the waves, are small units and they help to convey the inexorable forward movement of time. But, again like the waves breaking on the shore, they also suggest how much time is simply wasted.

In the second stanza the poet evokes the 'ages of man', a familiar subject in literature of the period, tracing the short path from birth to adulthood and then old age. In the beginning time is seen as benevolent, the giver of life, but as we grow older, it becomes a trap. The positive value of the gift of life is cancelled by the fact that it is also the gift of death.

After a middle period, in which the appearance of youth appears to be fixed – 'time doth transfix the flourish set on youth' – comes old age and physical decay. Time is portrayed as the conqueror: everything to which he has given life must also die.

Finally comes the turning point of the sonnet, in which Shakespeare speaks again of the immortality of poetry and the fact that it is the only thing which can survive the effects of time. Here, however, it appears only at the very end, in the final couplet, and seems much weaker and less confident in its expression. Poetry may survive the effects of time but here it seems to offer limited consolation.

- 1 Like as the waves make towards¹ the pebbled² shore,
So do our minutes hasten³ to their end,
Each changing place with that which goes before;
In sequent toil⁴ all forwards do contend.⁵
- 5 Nativity, once in the main⁶ of light,
Crawls⁷ to maturity, wherewith⁸ being crowned⁹
Crookèd¹⁰ eclipses 'gainst¹¹ his glory fight,
And time that gave doth¹² now his gift confound.¹³
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,¹⁴
- 10 And delves¹⁵ the parallels in beauty's brow;¹⁶
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe¹⁷ to mow.¹⁸
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth¹⁹ despite his cruel hand.

1 make towards: move in the direction of.

2 pebbled: covered in small stones.

3 hasten: hurry.

4 toil: work, effort.

5 contend: compete, pursue an object.

6 main: fullness.

7 Crawls: moves on all fours.

8 wherewith: at which point.

9 crowned: made king (the idea is that maturity is the highest point a person can

reach and is thus like being a king, but from this point on we are menaced by every kind of 'enemy', from disease and decrepitude to younger rivals).

10 Crookèd: sinister, unnatural.

11 'gainst: against.

12 doth: does.

13 confound: (here) defeat.

14 flourish set on youth: the healthy colouring of youth.

15 delves: digs.

16 brow: forehead.

17 scythe: long handled tool for cutting hay or grass (associated with the figure of death).

18 mow: cut down.

19 worth: value.

COMPREHENSION

1 Here are short descriptions of each section. Match each to the appropriate section.

- 1st quatrain **a** The stages of man's life from birth to adulthood are evoked together with the passage of time from a positive force to a negative force.
- 2nd quatrain **b** The indestructible nature of poetry is reaffirmed and with it the hope that the young man will be immortalised.
- 3rd quatrain **c** The time of life is compared in its forward movement to that of the waves moving towards the shore.
- Final couplet **d** The poem speaks about the destructive effects of time in later life and its eventual triumph over all living things.

2 Find the lines which refer to the following:

- a** the manner in which the waves and time move forward
- b** the appearance of wrinkles on the forehead
- c** time cutting down everything it has permitted to grow
- d** the way childhood progresses directly to adulthood
- e** the misfortunes of adulthood

ANALYSIS

- 3** Listen to the poem again and note down its rhyme scheme.
- 4** Now focus on the rhythm of the first quatrain. How can we describe it? Fill in the following text with the appropriate words.

regular • minutes • passing • waves

The poem begins with a rhythmically complicated line,

describing the movement of the **1**, but then immediately becomes more **2** as this movement is compared to the movement of time. As the essentially repetitive, forward movement of both **3** and waves is established, so too by the fourth line, the poem's metre resolves into a straightforward iambic pentameter pattern. Something that initially appears to be complex and irregular, once we look at it closely, becomes ordered and regular. The chaotic appearance of both life and the waves is reduced to the essential fact of their **4**

- 5** The second quatrain contains some caesurae. Where do they appear? What effect do they have?
- 6** Find an example of enjambment. What is it used to convey? Choose the idea you find most convincing:
- a** the fact that as soon as we grow up we immediately start to get old
- b** the fact that when we reach maturity time starts to move faster
- c** the fact that when we reach maturity time starts to slow down
- 7** Where is the main turning point of the sonnet? What idea does it introduce?
- 8** Reflect on the tone of the poem. Is it entirely optimistic about the power of poetry and art? How would you describe it? Choose from the following:

dark • melancholic • serene • uplifting • frustrated • resigned • despairing • restless • angry • calm

DISCUSSION

- 9** Compare Shakespeare's sonnet to Spenser's. What do they have in common? Can you see any differences? Make a list and then discuss your ideas with other students.