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**COMPLETE TEXT IN THIS GUIDE*

THE REMARKABLE THING
ABOUT SHAKESPEARE IS
THAT HE REALLY IS VERY GOOD,
IN SPITE OF ALL THE PEOPLE
WHO SAY HE IS VERY GOOD.
—Robert Graves

Unit 2—Lesson 4

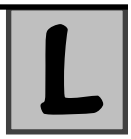
Sonnet 73 and Sonnet 97

Sonnet 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold,
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou seest the twilight of such day,
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self that seals up all in rest.
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

Sonnet 97

How like a winter hath my absence been
From thee, the pleasure of the fleeing year!
What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!
What old December's bareness every where!
And yet this time removed was summer's time
The teeming autumn big with rich increase,
Bearing the wanton burthen of the prime,
Like widowed wombs after their Lords' decease:
Yet this abundant issue seem'd to me,
But hope of orphans, and unfathered fruit,
For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
And thou away, the very birds are mute.
Or if they sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer,
That leaves look pale, dreading the winter's near.



Literary Lesson

Content

Sonnet 73 is mostly about the speaker's age. He provides three metaphors for his old age (discussed below) and ends by saying that the fact that he is old makes the reader's love stronger, because they must be parted soon (". . . which makes thy love more strong, / To love that well, which thou must leave ere long"). In Sonnet 97, the speaker expresses his unhappiness at being separated from the reader, essentially saying that even though it's summer ("And yet this time removed was summer's time"), this separation makes it winter for him ("How like a winter hath my absence been / From thee").

The Language of Sonnet 73

All three quatrains of Sonnet 73 are metaphors for old age. The first is a seasonal metaphor, comparing old age to winter, even though winter is never specifically named. It is apparent though from the few or no leaves, the cold, and the absence of bird song. The second quatrain uses a temporal metaphor: "In me thou seest the twilight of such day, / As after sunset fadeth in the west." We have moved from seasons to the time of day. The third quatrain employs an elemental metaphor, in which old age is compared to a dying fire. In contrast to these three metaphors, all expressing the same idea, the couplet is direct and literal.

In spite of the differing metaphors in the three quatrains, they all contain images which interlink them. Although the first metaphor is seasonal, it contains the idea of time (but time on a much larger scale) and also contains the word *time* in a prominent, stressed position. This helps link it to the second quatrain. The image of the sunset in the second quatrain links it to the third quatrain and its image of a fire because the sun and fire share visual and tactile properties. Another tactile link is between the *cold* of the first quatrain and the implied feeling of a dying heat in the third. The word *yellow* in the first quatrain, describing the leaves, links it visually to the other two quatrains (because of the sun and the fire). (It links it again to the second quatrain which contains the color black.) More subtly, the sound of dry leaves, which lurks behind the image of them even though it is not directly expressed here, is very similar to the sound of a fire. Thus Shakespeare provides connections through the three metaphors on the level of sight, touch, and sound.

There is a gradual change throughout the poem in how the speaker addresses the sonnet's reader. In the first quatrain he says, ". . . thou mayest in me behold." This tentativeness ("Maybe you've noticed, or maybe not" or "It's possible to see in me") changes to a more definitive statement in the second and third quatrain (and this statement is repeated exactly at the beginning of each quatrain): "In me thou seest." Finally, in the couplet, the speaker is not only sure that the reader sees his old age ("This thou perceiv'st"), but also is certain that the reader has taken the extra step of integrating that knowledge into their relationship. In other words, "You know I'm old, and it's affected your feelings for me in this way." This is indicated, not only by the fact that the speaker details how it affects the relationship ("which makes thy love more strong"), but also by the fact that he has switched from *seest* to

perceiv'st. To *see* may carry no more connotation than simply to physically observe something. But to *perceive* carries a connotation of understanding (for example, we say someone is perceptive because they can see truths that are not readily apparent).

This change gives the sense of shifting emotions in the speaker. At first, he is uneasy approaching the subject of his age (presumably because the poem's reader is much younger). Next, he is able to state that he knows the reader is fully aware of his age. Finally, he comes to the conclusion that this is actually a positive thing for the relationship. But, is his conclusion accurate or is he fooling himself? I see two arguments that he is accurate. First, the poem moves from hesitancy to acceptance of the speaker's age and the reader's recognition of it. This might indicate that the couplet continues to move in that realistic direction. Also, the couplet is literal rather than metaphorical, and in it the speaker admits that the relationship will not last much longer.

The argument that the speaker is fooling himself uses these same facts, but looks at them in a different light. Although the first three quatrains move from hedging to definitiveness, the standard sonnet form is to have a turn at the couplet; so perhaps the speaker's shift is not just from the metaphorical to the literal, but also from facing facts to wishful thinking. Even though there is a tendency toward recognition in the quatrains, they are all in metaphor, indicating a resistance to directly stating "I am old." Finally, although the couplet is literal, the speaker does not say "I will die soon"; instead he says "which thou must leave ere long" as if it is the reader who will leave. This further indicates that the speaker is not quite able to face the truth.

Alliteration and assonance play their roles here as well. In the first quatrain, *yellow leaves* are linked by the ***l*** sound. *Boughs, bare,* and *birds*—which are partnered in one image—are also drawn together by the initial ***b*** sound, even though they are separated by many intervening words. *Sweet* and *sang* also alliterate, and the initial ***s*** helps connect the first and second quatrains with *seest* and *sunset* in the first two lines of quatrain two. *Twilight* and *night* are connected in meaning and in their long-***i*** sounds. *Day, fadeth,* and *take away*—all connected by the theme of the quatrain—are bound more closely across the intervening words by their common long-***a*** sound. *Second, self,* and *seals* are linked by the initial ***s***. Finally, *love* (which appears twice), *leave,* and *long* in the couplet are linked by alliteration.

The Language of Sonnet 97

I stated in the introduction that I used original punctuation for the sonnets, and that is true except for the exclamation marks in this one. Originally, question marks ended these three lines, but nearly every modern printing of this sonnet replaces them with exclamation marks. The reason is explained by Booth: "[The use of question marks] was dictated by the Renaissance practice of sometimes retaining interrogatory punctuation in sentences which, like these, are exclamations structured like questions" (p. 314). I decided in this instance to follow suit because I believe the exclamation points provide the modern reader with a more accurate sense of the emotion of the opening quatrain.

The first quatrain of Sonnet 97 is metaphorical. This is a seasonal metaphor in which the speaker compares his absence from the reader to winter. The second quatrain takes a turn, however, towards the literal. Here the seasons, summer and autumn, are literally summer and autumn and define the period of separation. The speaker does use a simile in the last line, but the comparison is not about his thoughts or feelings like the first quatrain is. Rather, he simply says that autumn's harvest, which bears the growth which began in spring, is like a womb (holding a child) after the father has died. (In other words, spring is compared to a father, and now that the father has died, autumn as the mother bears the harvest.) The speaker returns to his feelings in the third quatrain, and this passage is neither strictly literal nor metaphorical, but more fanciful. The harvest is empty, summer is personified, and the birds don't sing because the reader is not there. Nature itself has changed for the speaker because he is alone.

The significant turn in this sonnet is the second quatrain. The first is wholly metaphorical, while the rest of the poem, though it contains figurative elements, is largely literal. The couplet expands on the last line of the third quatrain, but there is no further shift here. The couplet does take the poem to a circular closure, in a way, with its final mention of winter.

In the first quatrain the long-***e*** sound is prominent with *thee, fleeting, freezings,* and *seen.* This links this quatrain to the second, in which we soon find *teeming.* This sound is echoed again in the third quatrain with s*eem'd, me,* and *thee,* and finally in the couplet with *leaves,* and of course, the couplet's rhyme, *cheer* and *near* (though the final ***r*** alters the sound here just the tiniest). *Dark, days,* and *December* are linked, as is *bareness everywhere.* In the second quatrain, *bearing* and *burthen* connect, as do *widowed wombs.* Assonance, as well as definition, link *big, rich,* and *increase.*

Contrasting Sonnet 73 and Sonnet 97

These sonnets are similar in that they both use seasonal metaphors, sometimes even using the same images and language: bareness, pale or yellowed leaves, cold, darkness, and a lack of birdsong. Both address a separation of the speaker and the reader; though in the first it is a future separation which will be permanent, while in the second it is a current separation which is presumably temporary (the speaker gives no indication that it is not).

The tones of the sonnets are somewhat different, however, and in a surprising way. The first, which speaks of a future but permanent separation (through the death of the speaker no less) actually ends on a fairly upbeat note. The second retains a consistently sad tone throughout, except for the second quatrain, but even this mention of summer and autumn is then used by the speaker as a sharper contrast for his feelings. ("I feel this bad and it's a beautiful summer day—imagine what state I'll be in if you're still gone when it's winter!") This difference in tone reflects how people commonly react to foreseen future sadness as opposed to present sadness. Even though we know that we, and loved ones, must die someday, we are able to brush aside the thought. But present separation, though temporary, cannot be ignored.

Writing Exercises

(Starred exercises are repeated in multiple lessons, but should only be done once in this course.)

*1. Rewrite these sonnets in prose form. Then write a paper explaining the differences between the poetry and prose versions. What is lost by transforming them into prose? What is gained?

*2. Write an English sonnet of your own on any subject. (See pages 29–30 for instructions on the proper form of an English sonnet.)

3. Write a paper, either poetry or prose, in which you use the seasons as a metaphor for something. You could use them as a metaphor for time or for an emotional state as Shakespeare does here (these are common metaphorical uses for the seasons), but your poem or paper must be on a different topic (i.e., you cannot write about being old or about being separated from someone).

4. Respond to the emotional content of either sonnet in one of these two exercises:

   a. Write a paper (either an opinion essay or in letter form) responding to Sonnet 73. (Is the speaker reasonable to be worried about getting old? Is he reasonable in his metaphors for old age? What do you think of his attitude? What is your opinion of his conclusion in the couplet? What do you imagine the reaction of the loved one would be to reading this?)

   b. Write a paper (either an opinion essay or in letter form) responding to Sonnet 97. (Is the speaker over-reacting to the separation? Have you ever been separated from someone you loved for a period of time (at least a few months); and if so, how did your feelings compare? If you think the speaker's feelings are reasonable, what do you think of the way they are expressed? What do you imagine the reaction of the loved one would be to reading this?)

*5. Shakespeare was influenced by other poets. Write a research paper on any of these poets: Ovid, Petrarch, or Spenser.

6. The following sonnet is anonymous, but was printed in 1602. Write a paper comparing and contrasting this sonnet with either Sonnet 73 or Sonnet 97:

Were I as base as is the lowly plain,
And you (my love) as high as heaven above,
Yet should the thoughts of me your humble swain
Ascend to heaven, in honour of my love.
Were I as high as heaven above the plain,
And you (my love) as humble and as low
As are the deepest bottoms of the main,
Whereso'er you were with you my love should go.
Were you the earth (dear love) and I the skies,
My love should shine on you like to the sun,
And look upon you with ten thousand eyes,
Till heaven waxed blind, and till the world were dun.
Whereso'er I am, below or else above you,
Whereso'er you are, my heart shall truly love you.

Elizabeth I and James I

Elizabeth I and James I were the two monarchs who ruled England during Shakespeare's life. Elizabeth I was queen when Shakespeare was born and ruled until she died in 1603. At her death, James I became king and was king of England when Shakespeare died. Elizabeth would have been alive for performances of *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*, while *Macbeth* and *King Lear* were probably written during James's rule.

Elizabeth I was the daughter of Henry VIII. Henry had been a ruthless, charismatic, and strong king, and Elizabeth was much like her father. Perhaps their primary difference was that while Henry had several wives, Elizabeth never married and was known as the "virgin queen" (the U.S. state Virginia is named after her). Her decision to never marry may have been inspired by the fates of five of her father's wives: Henry divorced two, executed two (including Elizabeth's mother), and one died in childbirth. The sixth managed to outlive him.

Elizabeth's mother was Henry's second wife, Anne Boleyn. Henry had so desperately wanted to marry Anne, that he broke with the Catholic Church and established the protestant Church of England in order to obtain a divorce from his first wife, Catherine. Elizabeth would later carry on that protestant tradition.

Elizabeth did not become queen on Henry's death. First, her half-brother Edward reigned, then her half-sister Mary. In 1558, Elizabeth assumed the throne. While Mary was on the throne, she had tried to return the country to Catholicism, partly by persecuting Protestants. When the protestant Elizabeth became queen on Mary's death, she in turn persecuted Catholics (including executing her Catholic cousin Mary, Queen of Scots).

England flourished under Queen Elizabeth. Although vain and ruthless, she was highly intelligent, witty, and active. She patronized the arts, encouraged exploration of America, reformed the currency, and increased trade with other countries. During her reign, England defeated the Spanish Armada, a tremendous victory.

James was not much like Elizabeth. He was not the naturally strong leader that she was, so he tried to bolster his authority by emphasizing the "divine right of kings"—the idea that a king was placed in his position by God and was answerable only to God, not to the people or the law.

James fancied himself a scholar and was particularly interested in witchcraft (in the sense of discovering and executing witches, not in the sense of practicing it). He even wrote books on the subject. He was a Protestant, but not a Puritan, and the animosity between Catholics, moderate Protestants, and Puritans grew during his reign. Certainly the most famous manifestation of this was when a group of Catholics was discovered plotting to blow up the king and Parliament. The conspirators were executed. One of the conspirators was Guy Fawkes, and the incident is celebrated every year in England with Guy Fawkes Day. James combined his literary and religious aspirations when he ordered a new translation of the Bible into English. The *King James Bible* was not the first English Bible, but it quickly became the most popular and famous.

One thing James did have over Elizabeth, and all the kings and queens that preceded him, was the ability to call himself King of Great Britain rather than King of England. James had been the king of Scotland when Elizabeth died, and he now ruled England, Scotland, and Ireland—the first regent to do so.

Shakespeare had to be careful with his plays not to offend whichever regent was in power. This probably affected the content of the histories more than any of the other plays, because the histories dealt with regents, issues of power, and in some cases, Elizabeth's ancestors. It would not do to write a play that glorified rebellion, for example, or cast Elizabeth's ancestors in a bad light.

Both Elizabeth and James patronized the theater and Shakespeare. In fact, Shakespeare's company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men, became the King's Men when James assumed the throne. An old, possibly true, story claims that Shakespeare wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor* specifically at Elizabeth's request. It's more probable that *Macbeth* was written specifically for James.