

## A Writer's Model

### Metaphor and Theme in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73"

There's an old saying: "You don't miss the water, 'til the well runs dry." We often do not appreciate what we have until it is gone. However, what happens when we foresee an approaching loss? In "Sonnet 73" Shakespeare considers this question by discussing aging and dying. He develops a solemn metaphor for old age, leading up to a final statement of the poem's hope-filled theme: Love grows strong in the face of approaching death.

First, in the opening quatrain, the speaker compares himself to a tree in winter, a tree whose "yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang / Upon those boughs which shake against the cold" (lines 2–3). Beginning this poem on a somber note, this complex metaphor goes beyond the traditional association between winter and old age to create the image of an elderly person whose thin arms and legs (boughs, or limbs) shake in the cold. The metaphor suggests that death is natural.

Next, in the second quatrain, the speaker compares himself to the twilight of the day, that time of day just before dark, "after sunset fadeth in the west" (6). This metaphor suggests that the speaker is very near the end of his life because "by and by black night" (7) will take away all remaining light. Shakespeare enriches the metaphor by personifying death and night, "Death's second self" (8). Again, Shakespeare takes advantage of traditional associations between the cycle of the day and the cycle of life to emphasize that death is an inevitable and natural part of life.

Then, in the third quatrain, Shakespeare develops a complex metaphor of fire to suggest the progression through life to death. The speaker compares himself to the ember stage of a fire. The fire, the "deathbed whereon [the speaker] must expire" (11), is now a bed of ashes. The ashes represent all the years the speaker has lived up to this point. Ultimately, then, the speaker will be consumed by what once nourished him, the wood—now ash—that will finally suffocate the last glowing embers of life. The association of the life cycle with the natural phenomenon of fire paints death as merely the last step in a natural process. This metaphor has a degree of ambiguity, as well. Shakespeare uses the word *consumed* (12), which has many meanings. Readers should assume the primary definition, which is that the speaker's youth has been destroyed by fire. However, to appreciate the richness of the metaphor, readers should also consider the other definitions: Perhaps the speaker's youth has been spent wastefully or

(continued)

#### INTRODUCTION

Engaging opener  
Title and author  
Thesis statement

#### BODY

First key point  
Evidence: quotation  
Complexity

#### Elaboration

Second key point  
Chronological order  
Evidence: quotations

#### Elaboration

#### Third key point

Evidence: quotation  
Elaboration  
Evidence: paraphrase

#### Elaboration

Ambiguity  
Elaboration

*(continued)*

the speaker is engrossed or obsessed with thoughts of his youth. With any of these definitions, the image and tone remain somber.

Finally, in the concluding couplet, the speaker shifts from metaphors about aging to his theme. The speaker addresses his friend, saying that the friend clearly sees that the speaker's death is fast approaching, but that the effect of this knowledge is to make "thy love more strong, / To love that well which thou must leave ere long" (13–14). The speaker seems to say that his friend's love grows stronger as he or she realizes that death will soon separate them. His tone, then, shifts from the somber tone of the first three quatrains to a happier, more hopeful tone in the closing couplet.

Shakespeare's metaphors lead the reader to a universal truth of human existence: As death nears, the bonds of friendship are strengthened and intensified. Perhaps the intensity of emotion we feel for someone we love at the approach of the inevitable and natural end of life is nature's way of telling us to cherish the people we love while we can.

**Fourth key point**

**Evidence: paraphrase**

**Evidence: quotation**

**Elaboration**

**Nuance**

**CONCLUSION**

**Thesis restated**

**Closing thought**