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# Metaphors of Time

– Mortality and Transience  
in Shakespeare's Sonnets

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## **Abstract**

This essay is about metaphors of time, mortality and transience in William Shakespeare's sonnets. Exploring these metaphors, I examine sonnets nr. 60, 64 and 65 more closely, since I think they are particularly representative as regards the metaphors of time. Unlike the rest of the sonnets, these three deal with the subject throughout the sonnets, focusing on the inevitable degeneration of material things. The image of time in the sonnets is depicted in a varied way constructed by several metaphors that add to the depth and paint images influenced by the beliefs and knowledge of Shakespeare's time. I put these images in relation to the English Renaissance and its concepts of time using sources from, for example, John Spencer Hill, Katherine Duncan-Jones and Dymphna Callaghan, who all have made their own analyses of Shakespeare's sonnets. In my close reading of the sonnets I analyse the various metaphors Shakespeare uses to make us experience the passage of time as in, for example, sonnet number 60, where the ongoing passage of time is described in a cyclical way by the use of the metaphor of the waves rolling in and out of a pebbled shore. In a repetitive way the waves are in constant motion. We can recognise ourselves as being the pebbles, affected by the constant motion in our lives, slowly turning into sand by time's cruel hand.

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## Introduction

*Le temps ne s'en va pas mais nous nous en allons.*

French proverb

William Shakespeare is one of the world's most famous writers. Among many well-known plays he also wrote 154 sonnets during his lifetime, 1564–1616. One of the most striking themes of Shakespeare's sonnets is time. Personally in reading the sonnets, I have experienced a strong feeling of presence here and now and sensed the urge to suck the marrow out of life. In contemplating our own mortality we can learn to appreciate life more and enjoy the present moment at the fullest. Mortality and transience of all living things are expressed in these lines from *King Lear*: "Thou'lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never!" (Shakespeare 923).

Sometimes we can feel as if time stands still. Other times time rushes, especially when we have a lot to do. What has been interesting in reading the sonnets is the discovery that time itself is not moving. It is the material world that changes, not time. In times when we feel as if we are the same as before, that we have not changed a bit, we can suddenly become aware of our slowly, but inevitably, whitening hair and see our children slowly growing into adults. At such moments we do not really understand how it is possible that so many years have gone by without us noticing. We only notice it in the changes in the outside world as well as in our inner, emotional life.

In *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time* (1982), David Scott Kastan claims that the nature of time can only be known by what happens in time, not independently (10). Kastan discusses Augustine, who asked himself: "What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled" (Kastan 9). Kastan suggests that what baffles Augustine is the difficulty of conceiving time in "spatial paradigms". This stems from time's lack of "empirical content" (10). Augustine is aware of the fact that time is an actual thing, but at the same time he is aware of the difficulty of knowing time in a physical way. For him, the passage of time is: "a concept realized by mental action" (Kastan 10).

Augustine suggests that our awareness of time is dependent on our awareness of the present time's evanescence. He writes:

It is absolutely clear . . . that neither the future nor the past exist, and therefore it is not strictly correct to say that there are three times, past, present, and future. It might be correct to say that there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things, and a present of future things. Some such different times do exist in the mind but nowhere else that I can see. (Augustine qtd. by Kastan 10)

We as human beings have our limited life span, and so does every other creature on earth. We share the same life conditions as the animals, with one significant difference: the awareness of our limited life. Everything has its own time of existence in this world. Kastan argues that if we ignore the demands of time we “ignore a (perhaps ‘the’) central truth about ourselves” (23).

In the sonnets, time is described in various metaphors influenced by the ideas and knowledge of the time Shakespeare lived in. He lived in the period in history that we call the Renaissance. This period was strongly influenced by classical ideals, and there was a great interest in the study of Latin classics. This feature was called new learning—or humanism—a term derived from the Latin word *humanitas*—and it focused on the achievements and interests of human beings as well as on their capabilities. Renaissance humanists were interested in the understanding of human nature, much influenced by Christianity (Mc Kay et al. 420). One of the most important writers from the classical world was Ovid, and his work *Metamorphoses* was a great source of inspiration for Shakespeare in his writing of time's passage.

In the middle of this search in society for a higher conscience, with the help of classical ideas and thinking, this was also a period with many outbreaks of the plague. Death and decease were always present in people's daily lives. Katherine Duncan-Jones writes in her essay, “Playing Fields or Killing Fields”, that people reading *Shakespeare's Sonnets* “could for a while forget their own painful ‘ignorance’ of the proximity of death” (128). Duncan-Jones claims that, in 1609, when *Shakespeare's Sonnets* was published, there was one outbreak of the plague. There had also been severe outbreaks in 1593-94 (128). Shakespeare expresses the closeness to death in his sonnets by pointing at the passage of time and to life's transience.

In this essay, I explore the presence of mortality and transience in the sonnets and look closer at the metaphors Shakespeare uses to describe the passage of time. As my primary source I use the sonnets in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, originally published 1996, the Wordsworth Editions. In my essay I will try to find the answers to these questions: What were the Renaissance concepts of time? How is time depicted in the sonnets? What are the metaphors Shakespeare uses to describe the passage of time? What do these metaphors express, and what feelings do they evoke?

We can find the time theme in many of the sonnets, as well as in Shakespeare's many plays. I will focus mainly on three of the sonnets with only a few references to the plays due to the limited span of the essay. I will try to answer the questions mentioned above by looking closer at Renaissance ideas, at their influence on the literature of the time, and at Shakespeare's writing. I will go on to examine the Renaissance concepts of time mainly using John Spencer Hill's *Infinity, Faith, and Time: Christian Humanism and Renaissance Literature*, which is one of my main sources. I continue by writing about some different views on the time theme in Shakespeare's work, with focus on the sonnets, mainly using John Spencer Hill's *Infinity, Faith, and Time*. In my description of different views on time I also use, for example, *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time*, by David Scott Kastan. At the end, I do a close reading of three of the sonnets; number 60, 64, and 65, where I have found the time theme being especially significant because of its focus on the subject throughout the sonnets. I explore and analyse the metaphors Shakespeare uses when he writes about time, mortality and transience. In my close reading of the sonnets I draw on Dymphna Callaghan's *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Katherine Duncan-Jones' *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, and Robert Matz' s *The World of Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

# English Renaissance

## Influence on literature

Every writer is a product of the time he lives in, and he gets many of his ideas, and his inspiration to write, from the society he lives in. To better understand where Shakespeare came from, and from where he got his inspiration, I will shortly describe the society of the time:

The Renaissance period in English literature stretched from 1550 to 1660. This was the reign of queen Elizabeth I, and the Stuart king James VI of Scotland, also titled James I of England. These periods came to be known as the Elizabethan and the Jacobean periods. During this particular period in history England assimilated the European Renaissance, and its renewed interest in classical learning influenced English literature enormously. At the beginning of this period, blank verse, unrhymed iambic pentameter, was introduced for the first time by Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, with his translation of the Latin work, *Aeneid*. Blank verse, a verse that does not rhyme but nevertheless has strict metrical requirements, was a very common technique among English poets during the Renaissance (Booth, Hunter, and Mays 778-79). Among many other influences classical learning provided an essential foundation for Shakespeare who came to be one of the greatest writers and poets of the time.

The Renaissance was a turbulent time in history with many changes in society: England's population doubled, wages were record low, prices were high, new industrial inventions began to flourish, and old beliefs were dissolving. There were two sides in society: one of new possibilities and the other of new doubts, and this gave intensity to literature. The old medieval world order was replaced with new science, new religion, and a new humanism. Astronomers redrew cosmos in a profoundly disturbing way. Technological inventions changed the perception of life for people in general. The Tudor church was an institution for social and political control, but at the same time, it was losing its position as the only authority. People started to think more rationally, and, exploring their own beliefs, they were more unwilling to follow doctrines and forms. There was an urge to catch up with the Continental developments, both in arts and in philosophy. There was also a need for a more educated class and a new, systematic schooling was introduced to create a social elite with knowledge of the Latin authors as well as the Greek. It was this schooling Shakespeare received, with great influences from the classical world.

## Renaissance concepts of time

John Spencer Hill writes about the perception of time in Shakespeare's lifetime and argues that it was based on both Greek and Hebrew ideas. According to Hill, the Greek perception of time in the long view is cyclical; Plato describes time "as the number or measure of change, the condition of all coming-to-be and passing-away" (70). Aristotle explores Plato's ideas and suggests that "[t]ime . . . 'is just this – the number of motion in respect of 'before' and 'after'" (70). The Greek philosophy of time was quantitative, "*chronos*, a quantitative and pseudo-spatial correlate of physical motion that, in its action, is cyclical, stripped of a meaningful future, and essentially destructive" (77).

Such constant motion is depicted in the first two lines of sonnet number 60: "Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end" (Shakespeare 1232). Hill argues that if there is no motion there is no time: motion and time are either the same thing or each other's attributes. He argues that time in itself is a destructive force as it moves forward, like a river bringing everything in its way towards an inevitable death. As the river only moves in one direction it is doomed to finally come to an end, and as the river constantly flows it is not possible to step down into the same river twice (71). This is a constant ongoing process, and we are only a small part of life's greater cycles. People have lived before us and are going to live after us, in the future. In language there are three different tenses; past, present and future tense. I think these tenses exist because of our reality. This is how life is constructed: We can look back and get nostalgic, we can feel and experience something right now and we can hope for better times to come. Augustine described it this way: "The present of things past is memory; the present of present things is direct perception; and the present of future things is expectation" (qtd. by Muldoon 32).

In contrast to the Greek perception of time as cyclical, the Hebrews had a more linear view of time. Hill describes the Hebrew perception of time as "an historical continuum", where God is time and eternity's Lord and where time is historically predestined (72). Time for the Hebrews was qualitative, "*kairos* – the recognition that, in the providential world of God's holy-making, there is a season and a proper time for everything under heaven" (75). Shakespeare, as a man of his time, wanted to belong to the avant-garde of humanists that believed in man's ability to fight against time's devastating force with the resources of human intellect and ingenuity (Hill 104). According to Hill, Shakespeare's work was strongly inspired by Christian beliefs as well as by secular ideas of the Renaissance period (105).

## The time theme

Hill states that nearly half of Shakespeare's sonnets deal with time (Hill 104). He also argues that Shakespeare's understanding of time was not as our modern understanding since he was educated and influenced mostly by the Bible, Augustine, Petrarch and Seneca. Shakespeare was strongly influenced by the Christian morals and values of his time. Hill states that in the sonnets there are in fact many allusions to the Bible, one example being the very first line in sonnet number 116: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds" (Shakespeare 1239), which is similar to a passage in the Corinthians 13:4-8 (Hill 105).

During the Renaissance Ovid grew in popularity and to every educated man, knowledge of his works was taken for granted. Shakespeare was also very much influenced by Ovid and Ovidian aphorisms such as: "time is the devourer of all things" (Ovid qtd. by Hill 106). Hill claims that also in Shakespeare's sonnets time and death are deeply connected (Hill 106). Time's passage is also described as seasonal decay, as in sonnet number 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 ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang." (Shakespeare 1234). Here, the changing of the seasons symbolises the aging of a man.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* we can also find this comparison of the seasons to that of a man's life:

Then again, do you not see the year assuming four aspects, in imitation of our own lifetime? For in early spring it is tender and full of fresh life, just like a little child; at that time the herbage is young, swelling with life, but as yet without strength and solidity, and fills the farmers with joyful expectation. Then all things are in bloom and the fertile fields run riot with their bright-coloured flowers; but as yet there is no strength in the green foliage. After spring has passed, the year, grown more sturdy, passes into summer and becomes like a strong man. For there is no hardier time than this, none more abounding in rich, warm life. Then autumn comes, with its first flush of youth gone, but ripe and mellow, midway in time between youth and age, with sprinkled grey showing on the temples. And then comes aged winter, with faltering step and shivering, its locks all gone or hoary. (Ovid 379)

In Shakespeare's plays we find countless examples of the time theme, as for example, in *Pericles*, when Pericles considers his own fortune and fate: "Time's the king of men, / For he's their parent, and he is their grave, / And gives them what he will, not what they crave." (Shakespeare 1043). According to Hill, Shakespeare's attitude to time in his plays differs

from Greek drama in the sense that for him time's inevitable passing is not merely humanity's fate and necessity but more of an object of man's free will and of his values. Even if men are subject to time and death they can choose not to become "[t]ime's fools" (Shakespeare qtd. by Hill 108), a line from sonnet number 116 where time's fool means something that is mocked by time and that time has power over (Duncan-Jones 342). In contrast to the Greek drama, "where the past is determinative and the future either closed or without significance" (Hill 108), Shakespeare leaves the future in his plays open. Man is free to do not completely what he wants but he can influence his future and by his own actions make life meaningful. The plays explore, all in different ways, "what it means for human beings to live in time, to be self-conscious creatures inhabiting a world of passage and decay" (Hill 108). In Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, the condition of our existence is described like this: "'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine, / And after one hour more 'twill be eleven; / And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe, / And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot" (Shakespeare 621). According to Hill, Greenblatt describes how Shakespeare makes us love the theatre: "On stage, Shakespeare realized, we can see our desires fulfilled, safely cordoned from reality. Only in the theatre can 'playing dead' equal 'being dead'; only here can we see the dead resurrected" (Greenblatt qtd. by Hill 123). Hill goes on to describe Douglas Peterson's views on time in Shakespeare's plays, and he argues that Peterson interprets time as duration:

Durative time is cyclical, bringing life out of death as inevitably as spring emerges out of winter. It is no longer Augustine's Destroyer, but the measure of the process which sustains genera and species. Individual life is utterly dependent upon process, but in the continuum of time in which the living emerge out of and replace the dying, genera and species subsist eternally. (Peterson qtd. By Hill 121)

Peterson means that duration is the condition of experience where "all temporal things actively participate in the eternal" and in which man "must discover his role in process itself . . . must discover in transience what is permanent, sifting out the real from the illusory" (Peterson qtd. by Hill 121).

Hill argues that we can see a development in Shakespeare's view on time; in his early plays as well as in the sonnets, and narrative poems, time is primarily a destroyer, but in the later works time is more of a revealer. In Shakespeare's work, however, no categories are absolute: "time appears as both a destroyer and a revealer throughout—but there is a shift of emphasis from the early works to the later ones that . . . implies both a deepening and a sophistication of Shakespeare's understanding of time" (Hill 109).

Writing about the beauty theme in the sonnets, Dymphna Callaghan suggests that beauty is dependant on time as well as on death. Without life there is no beauty and “great art is *living art*” (36). She goes on to describe the “Ovidian theme of the inevitability of change” (41). This theme is the main theme in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* that Shakespeare was very inspired by (Callaghan 41-42). According to Callaghan, Shakespeare expresses the idea that we are indebted to time and that the debt continually increases (Callaghan 92). There is a ““continual haste”” (95) in the sonnets that resembles the Latin hexameters in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. This sense of time’s haste is what Horace called “*vitae summa brevis*, the short span of human life” (Callaghan 95). As opposed to Horace, Shakespeare does not accept the inevitable progression of time but believes it has to be fought against with the weapons of biological reproduction and everlasting poetry to preserve youth and beauty (Callaghan 95). This belief that his poetry shall live on forever has clear influences from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* where Ovid states that: “through all the ages shall I live in fame” (Ovid 427).

## The sonnets

In poetry, figurative language is being used to a great extent and, in order to get started with the close reading of the sonnets, I here briefly describe some of the most central terms in the analysis of poetry as described in *The Norton Introduction to Literature* by Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, and Kelly J. Mays. Let us begin with the term figures of speech that we use when making comparisons where we try to imagine something pictured in the shape of something else that is familiar to us. In that way we have to think of a thing as if it were some other thing. We take this for granted in our daily life as in for example: “God is said to be the father; Italy is said to be shaped like a boot; life is compared to a forest, a journey, or a sea” (703). When a thing is directly compared to something it is called a simile. There is a slight difference between a simile and a metaphor, but traditionally they have been seen as related to each other as expressed by Gunnar Backman: “The simile is said to be a statement of likeness; it does not say that a thing is something which it is not” (20).

On the contrary, when something is described as being something else it is called a metaphor. It is metaphors that are most commonly used in the sonnets, as we shall see. Metaphors can clarify things and at the same time they make us think about what feelings they evoke. These feelings are the more important part of the experience of a poem. Through metaphors we come to an understanding of the poem and we can appreciate and share the sense of it (Booth, Hunter, and Mays 707). Aristotle once stated: “To metaphorize well . . . implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars” (Aristotle qtd. by Riquier 6). Shakespeare was a master in describing things through metaphors and the language used in the sonnets is a great example of this. The Elizabethan metaphor derives from the usage of the metaphor in the Middle Ages where its purpose was to express the experience of God’s presence (Backman 26). In Gunnar Backman’s *Meaning by Metaphor*, a metaphor is described like this by Terence Hawkes: “Metaphor . . . is not fanciful ‘embroidery’ of the facts. It is a way of *experiencing* the facts” (Hawkes qtd. by Backman 11).

The sonnet, one of the most persistent verse forms, originated in Italy and France during the Middle Ages. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries it was the dominating verse form in England. Almost without exception, the sonnet has consisted of fourteen lines. It has usually been written in iambic pentameter (Booth, Hunter, and Mays 781), that is: “unstressed and stressed syllables alternating regularly” (780), each line consisting of five beats (780). Instead of being divided into stanzas a sonnet is printed as a

single stanza. It has several formal divisions representing the rhyme schemes and breaks of the sonnet. There are two main principles of division that most sonnets are structured by: One is divided “into three units of four lines each and a final unit of two lines” (781), and the other one is divided in two with an octave of eight lines and then a sestet containing six lines. The sonnet divided 4-4-4-2 is often called the English or the Shakespearean sonnet, while the 8-6 sonnet is usually called the Italian or the Petrarchan sonnet, due to the famous Italian poet Petrarcha (781).

In Elizabethan England sonneteering had reached its peak with Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*, and had by the end of 1590 spent its force. By the accession of James in 1603 sonneteering became popular for a second time (Duncan-Jones 29). *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* were first published in the *Quarto* in 1609. They were first meant for his private friends but somehow they became public and the first notice found about them dates from 1598 by Francis Mere:

As the soule of *Euphorbus* was thought to live in *Pythagoras*:  
so the sweete wittie soule of *Ouid* liues in mellifluous &  
honey-tongued *Shakespeare*, witness his *Venus* and *Adonis*, his  
*Lucrece*, his sugred Sonnets among his private friends, &c. (Francis Mere qtd.  
by Duncan-Jones 1)

According to Duncan-Jones, for the Jacobean readers, the sonnets: “could be received as a part of this small but vigorous movement to provide the new court culture with its own refashioned sonnet sequences and lyrical collections” (29). Duncan-Jones claims that the sonnets of the time were not any longer idealistically Petrarchan or Sidneian, but were characterized by: “sportiveness, satirical and epigrammatic touches, and abrupt reversals of mood” (29). During the centuries there have been many attempts to organize and classify the sonnets. One of the main structural divisions of the sonnets have been made by Brent Stirling in 1964:

Number 1-126: to the friend/fair youth

Number 127-52: to the dark lady

Number 153-54: Cupid’s fire

Naturally we do not know anything about Shakespeare’s view on this classification, or others, but we are all free to make our own interpretations and analyses built on the evidence that are there. In analysing poetry we can also add our own thoughts and feelings, based on our own experience, as that is the essence of poetry—to evoke feelings.

## Close readings

I here present the original sonnets one by one as presented in Wordsworth Editions' *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Directly after each of the sonnets I do a close reading where I make an interpretation focusing on the various metaphors of time.

### Sonnet number 60

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end;  
Each changing place with that which goes before,  
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.  
Nativity, once in the main of light,  
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,  
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,  
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.  
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth  
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow;  
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,  
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:  
And yet, to times in hope my verse shall stand,  
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand. (Shakespeare 1232)

Katherine Duncan-Jones claims that in this sonnet, time is described as cyclical, perpetual movement by the use of the metaphor of the waves moving in and out towards the shore. She argues that it expresses a sense of loss and makes a reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* book number 15:

But looke,  
As every wave drives other foorth, and that that commes behind  
Both thrusteth and is thrust itself: even so the tymes by kind  
Doo fly and follow bothe at once, and evermore renew  
For that that was before is left, and streyght there doth ensew  
Anoother that was never erst. (Ovid 230)

We can clearly see the similarity of this poem to sonnet number 60, and as we know, Shakespeare was very much inspired by Ovid. As Duncan Jones claims, the image of the never ending rolling of the waves towards the shore evokes a sense of eternity. The pebbles are hard, made of stone, but they roll with the movement of the waves in a constant process. They are inevitably going to turn into sand but then new pebbles are going to appear to make the process continue. Robert Matz argues that this sonnet contains various figures of speech

such as for example, a simile comparing the passage of time to the constant movement of the waves, and “the personification of time mowing down what nature creates” (35). As Matz argues, we can see the constant movement of the waves as a simile for the passage of time, but, considering the fact that a simile and a metaphor are closely related, I am more bound to agree with Duncan-Jones and see the movement of the waves as a metaphor for time’s cyclical and perpetual movement. When we continue to read the sonnet, we get the feeling that what is actually being expressed is the human life span. As mentioned before: when something is described as being something else, it is called a metaphor.

The number of this sonnet corresponds to the number of minutes in an hour (Duncan-Jones 230). Dymphna Callaghan writes that in Shakespeare’s time a minute was the smallest unit of time (122). Numbering this sonnet number 60 connects to line two where the comparison to the minutes that haste to their end gives us a sensation of being in a hurry. We know that our minutes will finally come to an end some day and in that sense we as persons will not live forever. But life itself will go on without us, with new waves rolling in and out of the pebbled shore. The motion of the waves is described as hard work. Every wave is changing place with the one before, and the waves are competing in order to win something. This image gives a sense of the struggle through life that every man has to go through. It becomes a metaphor for the ever-changing life where we fight to succeed and struggle to survive. We are progressing only to be replaced by someone else in the end.

The description of a man’s life with nativity, maturity and crooked eclipses, symbolising old age, makes us realise that these are the conditions of life for human beings. This is a more linear view of time than that of the waves and we can clearly see that in this sonnet, the cyclical and the linear time perspectives are co-existing.

According to Matz, there is a repetition of like words, called *trawductio* –a very common technique at the time and among many writing techniques described by Puttenham in *Arte of English Poesie*. We can see this in the word-pairs: gave–gift, time–times and stand–stands where the sounds of the repeated words give an effect of time that both gives and takes. The couplet—the last two lines—draw on a figure of speech called *antepagoge* in which you amend a negative idea with a positive one (Matz 35). Despite the cruel hand of time this poetry will live on. We can find this idea; that the poetry shall live forever, in the couplet of sonnet number 65 as well, as we shall see. This hopeful thought has clear influences from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as mentioned in the previous chapter: “The time theme” in this essay.

## Sonnet number 64

When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced  
The rich proud cost of outworn buried age;  
When sometime lofty towers I see down-razed,  
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;  
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain  
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,  
And the firm soil win of the watery main,  
Increasing store with loss, and loss with store;  
When I have seen such interchange of state,  
Or state itself confounded to decay;  
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare,—  
That Time will come and take my love away.  
This thought is as a death, which cannot choose  
But weep to have that which it fears to lose. (Shakespeare 1233)

This sonnet is about the destructive force of time that affects everything. Time's progress is not considered in the terms of *summa brevis*—the brief span of life “but rather the passage of time from age to age in terms of human history, and the progress of time as it is marked on nature, changing the shape of land and sea” (Callaghan 123).

In the opening line: Time's fell hand, represents the typical Renaissance image of time with his scythe ready to strike. Fell hand is also a symbol of the hand on a clock's dial (Callaghan 96). Time's fell hand becomes a metaphor for death and destruction.

Duncan-Jones suggests that the lofty towers down-razed could refer to the demolishing of churches, castles and monasteries made by Henry VIII, in his aim for a more secular society (238). Nothing lasts forever, even big buildings will decay and so will brass, shore and soil. Brass, with its supposed lastingness but at the same time its vulnerability, could refer to Horace' *Odes*, where he had constructed a monument ““more lasting than brass”” (Duncan-Jones 238).

The key-line in this sonnet I consider to be interchange of state, which points at the transience of all things. It also resembles the rolling of the waves in sonnet number 60, only that in sonnet number 64 we have more focus on material, manmade things, such as buildings and states. The resemblance to sonnet number 60 is also obvious in the description of the ocean gaining advantage of the shore. The constant interchange of state reminds us of time as cyclical and everlasting at a large scale, at the same time as we have the linear, limited life span of a human being. According to Duncan-Jones, interchange of state could also refer

to the end of Elizabeth's reign and to the beginning of the reign of James, as there is also the word kingdom in line six (238).

The decay of the material world makes us think about our own mortality. In nature we can see things come into bloom and eventually rotten, as a part of the seasons of the year. We are also a part of nature and we all share the same destiny. The seasons will continue to change every year even when we are no longer here. All material things will come to an end. The only things that will continue are life itself or time itself. This makes us consider the fact that we are all going to die, and we will all suffer and mourn the losses of the ones we love.

Our mortality and the anguish we can feel when we are reminded of it, is expressed when the speaker of the sonnet is facing the inevitable: the loss of his loved one, with the only thing left—to weep.

## Sonnet number 65

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 battering 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. (Shakespeare 1233)

According to Callaghan, this sonnet is built on four questions which all express how to prevent time from ruining everything (124). I believe there are actually five questions in this sonnet, as we soon shall discover.

The first two lines suggest that mortality has more power than brass, stone, earth and sea and the question that follows is how beauty, compared to a flower, can survive this. The flower cannot take action or hold a plea—a legal metaphor, because it is not potent enough (Duncan-Jones 240). The flower is a metaphor for both beauty and vulnerability. Time even affects brass, traditionally also used as a metaphor for poetry. As we saw in the analysis of the previous sonnet, Horace compared his poetic monument with brass, both lasting and vulnerable, giving us a hint that our hope to fight against time with everlasting poetry may be worthless (Duncan-Jones 240). We can feel the sadness of this sonnet that expresses the weakness of the flower also symbolising us as human beings.

The second question is how summer's honey breath shall hold out. A metaphor for our lives in full bloom, summer even breathes! In contrast to the delicate flower stand the battles symbolising the hard and ruthless effects of time that even crush rocks and steel. How will it not crush a tiny flower, then? There is an ongoing struggle between the hard and the soft, the strong and the weak, in this sonnet. The material world is transient and the only immortal is love.

The third question is about where we can we hide a jewel that will last forever. The answer seems to be that we can hide it in the poem itself, if it lives on to future generations, as it has done. According to Callaghan, the answer is that the miracle of the poem

will preserve love forever (124). The jewel then becomes a metaphor for ever-lasting love. It is the best jewel and it lies hidden in time's chest. We naturally associate something good coming from our chest with love, and it becomes obvious for us that the hidden jewel symbolizes love. This love will live on forever, through the survival of the sonnet.

The fourth question is about where to find a hand that has the strength to withstand the devastating force of time. The underlying answer is that there is no hand strong enough to hold time's swift foot back: "Time is here personified as a speedy runner" (Duncan-Jones 240).

Finally, the fifth question asks: who is there to forbid time's spoil of beauty? The given answer is, as expected, that no one can decide over time or life. The only option left for us is to try to find the treasures in life and make the best out of our existence, or, believe in the miracle that the black ink of the sonnet shall live forever as a witness of the love Shakespeare feels and expresses so wonderfully.

## Conclusion

The time theme is a vast field and the sonnets an inexhaustible source to examine. I have only covered a small part of this subject in my essay. I have tried to find answers to the questions I first asked in the introduction: What were the Renaissance concepts of time? How is time depicted in the sonnets? What are the metaphors Shakespeare uses to describe the passage of time? What do these metaphors express, and what feelings do they evoke?

I have explored the English Renaissance main characteristics and its different concepts of time. I have examined the time theme, and finally, I have done a close reading of the sonnets number 60, 64 and 65, trying to analyse the metaphors of time Shakespeare uses, interpreting what they express, and what they make us feel.

Time in the sonnets is depicted as the destroyer of all things, a force that inevitably and constantly mows down all material things, nature and human beings. The haste of our existence and the changes out of our control such as decay, transience and mortality are the main issues in Shakespeare's dealing with time in the sonnets. Time is described as a threat to life itself and it has to be fought against with biological reproduction and everlasting poetry.

The influence Renaissance ideas and thinking had on Shakespeare's writing is obvious. We have the view of time as cyclical from the Greek, with Plato and Aristotle's ideas of time as motion. Then, there is the linear view of time from the Hebrews, where time has a history with a beginning, a middle and an end, and where God is the lord of time and eternity. Renaissance society influenced Shakespeare a great deal with its schooling in Latin classics, the new learning—or humanism, where the focus was on personal achievements and interests of human beings as well as on their capabilities. This urge for wanting to understand human nature is what we can read about in Shakespeare's sonnets where he tries to find out what we shall do to make something that lasts after our lives.

The most outstanding metaphor Shakespeare uses in the sonnets to describe time's passage in a cyclical way, is when describing the waves' constant movement in and out of the shore in sonnet number 60. The resemblance of this passage to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* book number 15 is clear, but in Shakespeare's sonnets there is also a linear view of time that we do not see to the same extent in Ovid's text. There is more hope in the constant change Ovid writes about than in Shakespeare's sonnets, where one can feel a more devastating effect of time's passage.

Though the Renaissance was a period with great prosperity for society and with many new discoveries and inventions, there were, at the same time, several outbreaks of the plague. The dark picture of life, sometimes painted in the sonnets, reflects the harsh life conditions of the time, with the plague threatening around the corner and with the miserable economic situation of the people. Death and disease had a natural part in people's daily lives. The drastic and dark picture of time's passage in the sonnets must have had its origin in this closeness to misery, sickness and death.

In analysing the three sonnets I have come to the conclusion that the main issues in these particular ones are transience and mortality. The metaphors of time are all about how time's fell hand will eventually destroy everything. We can observe this destruction in the material world that surrounds us, in its constant change and decay. We can also see it in the seasonal changes of nature, where life and death constantly go round and round, as in a cyclical dance. We human beings are also ever changing, as part of nature.

I remember when I as a child first learned from my father about the life of the Dragonfly and, true or false, that it had only one day to get born on, reproduce and finally, when the night came, die. This was the whole meaning of its life. This insight was very painful and still is even if I at the same time find it very beautiful. In this image we can summon up life. We have to hurry to live. There is not much time left and this life will never come back again.

What the sonnets express is that in facing these facts as human beings, submitting to life's conditions, we have to fight against time's passage with the means of biological reproduction and least but not last—everlasting poetry. Though the outcome may seem hopeless and without meaning, the awareness of life's transience and the reminding of our mortality, can make us appreciate life more and make us want to live every moment at the fullest, as long as we have it. I believe this awareness is exactly what Shakespeare wants to communicate to us through the centuries, by his everlasting poetry.

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