

*From fairest creatures we desire increase,
 That thereby beauty's Rose might never die,
 But as the ripper should by time decease,
 His tender heir might bear his memory:
 But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
 Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
 Making a famine where abundance lies,
 Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel:
 Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament,
 And only herald to the gaudy spring,
 Within thine own bud buriest thy content,
 And tender churl makes waste in niggarding.
 Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
 To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.*

In almost every line this sonnet lays down a thread of thought which will be traceable in the rest of the sequence. Some of these are obvious, some more subtle. All may be dropped from time to time only to be taken up again later. Some are introduced briefly, disappearing when their work is done, like minor characters in the plays. In the first line of Sonnet 1, for example, the word *increase* (emphasized by its position at the end of the first line) introduces the idea of procreation, a dominant thread in the first seventeen sonnets but dropped thereafter. Other threads run through the whole fabric: beauty (and its symbol, the rose), immortality, time, and death—all of which appear in the first quatrain.

However, the most crucial element in the sonnets is the character of the speaker, the only voice Shakespeare allows us to hear. It is his tragedy that slowly unfolds, each sonnet a scene in the drama. The speaker engages right away in an argument, his favorite form of discourse, and the first line is a typical axiom-like beginning from which the rest of the sonnet develops. Because everyone wishes to preserve beauty, he argues, we wish for the "fairest creatures" to produce heirs that will make them live in memory even though they must die in the course of time. Like a wise uncle, the speaker leads the youth he addresses through a train of logic, chastising him for not wanting to marry and have offspring to preserve his beauty. How successful the speaker will be in persuading the

young man is the key question that draws the reader on.

An agon—a dramatic struggle—develops between the speaker and the youth. This subtle contest of wills goes on so long that the reader realizes how difficult it is for the youth to be convinced, despite the rhetorical skills of the speaker. In Sonnet 1 the youth may well be antagonized by the speaker's accusations of narcissism, but he may also be indifferent. Since he says nothing in the whole sequence, he must be understood by inference. The very fact that the speaker feels he must hammer at the same theme for seventeen sonnets indicates that the youth is resisting. By this technique Shakespeare achieves dramatic interest like that of a mystery with few clues.

The agon begins with the second quatrain, when the speaker addresses the youth directly for the first time with a reprimand. Instead of being contracted to another (a hint at marriage) the youth as obsessed with himself as Narcissus was. He is contracted to his own "bright eyes" (l. 5), which will become a major thread—a symbol of appearance as opposed to reality. The speaker warns him that he is using up his own reserves of energy to feed his life's flame. Where he had an abundance of procreative power he is creating a famine. The octave ends with the speaker's most serious criticism: "Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel." This line enunciates the overarching theme of the sonnets: betrayal, especially self-betrayal. The speaker sees in the youth a betrayal that he will finally realize in himself. He will also be cruel to himself, sometimes without knowing it.

Next, in the sestet, the speaker argues that the youth has a role to play as "the world's fresh ornament" (l.9). He becomes a force of nature when described as a "herald to the gaudy spring." (l. 10) In these hyperbolic metaphors the speaker shows his susceptibility to the youth's charms, and, in his role as mentor, he repeats his warning against a narcissistic approach to life. He clinches his

argument with a paradox (a device he uses lavishly): the youth is wasting his beauty by being miserly ("niggarding," l. 12). He is a churl, a worthless fellow, by sinning in this fashion--but a tender one. (This is a reverse parallel to his being cruel to his own sweet self in line 8.)

The speaker ends by admonishing the youth that he has a duty to the world, which would suffer from his failure to reproduce. That would be a form of gluttony (one of the Seven Deadly Sins) because he would overindulge himself, denying his beauty to others. If he went to his grave without offspring he would betray both himself and the world.

By this, the speaker introduces another force in this sonnet which we shall call "the world." This thread appears in both lines of the couplet (and in l. 9), and it refers to the collective will of society, especially those in positions of power and influence. This takes us back to line one, where the word *we* subtly introduces the power of society (including the speaker) to control individual behavior. Shakespeare well knew the tyranny of public opinion.