

*To me, fair friend, you never can be old,  
 For as you were when first your eye I eyed,  
 Such seems your beauty still: Three winters cold  
 Have from the forests shook three summers' pride;  
 Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turned  
 In process of the seasons have I seen,  
 Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned,  
 Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green.  
 Ah yet doth beauty like a dial hand  
 Steal from his figure, and no pace perceived;  
 So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand,  
 Hath motion, and mine eye may be deceived:  
     For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred,  
     Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead.*

**N**ow the speaker holds the mirror up to his friend in one of the most eloquent eulogies imaginable. If beauty is in the eye of beholder, this sonnet is the great confirmation of the subjectivity of the speaker's admiration for his "fair friend." In a return to his earlier waves of enthusiasm, the speaker insists on the perdurance of his friend's beauty, though the word *seems* (l. 3) may give the reader pause. But the strength of the previous line with its clever phrase "when first your eye I eyed" overwhelms all doubt of love at first sight. As a whole, the sonnet confirms the speaker's belief in everlasting Platonic beauty.

By contrast, the seasonal imagery depicts the mutability of natural beauty. The number three used to delimit the pair's friendship is not necessarily literal. Some critics have thought so, but more likely it is the magic number arbitrarily used by poets. When the speaker arrives at the telling phrase "three hot Junes burned" (l. 7), there is a sad climax in the weather's betrayal. All the seasons, however lovely, are shown in their decay. But the preceding vivid descriptions also show the richness of the natural cycle, and though there are warning signs, the speaker recalls to his friend the time when "first I saw you fresh, which yet are green" (l. 8).

The sestet takes a turn to the future—and for the worse. The elaborate conceit of beauty likened

to a clock's hand stresses the slow but inevitable passage of time. The hand moves so slowly that it seems to steal from number to number with no noticeable progress ("no pace perceived," l. 10). The friend's "sweet hue" (handsome appearance) may look fixed but the speaker's eyes may be deceived.

The couplet takes another turn: this time the speaker addresses the era to come, announcing to it that before those living in the future were born, summer's beauty (the friend) was dead. This startling concept shows the acuity of the speaker. He has found a new way to aver that his friend's death, though inevitable, has left his beauty intact and unlikely ever to be matched. And thus the speaker has returned to almost pure admiration of his friend. What's more, his muse has been revived.