

*Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth,  
 . . . . . these rebel pow'rs that thee array.  
 Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,  
 Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?  
 Why so large cost having so short a lease,  
 Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?  
 Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,  
 Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?  
 Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,  
 And let that pine to aggravate thy store;  
 Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross,  
 Within be fed, without be rich no more:  
     So shalt thou feed on death, that feeds on men,  
     And death once dead, there's no more dying then.*

**T**his famous sonnet sits, like an island of introspection, among the poems of love and hate, cruelty and mercy, comfort and despair. No lover – neither friend nor mistress – is addressed or even mentioned, only the “poor soul,” which suddenly replaces the heart at the center of his “sinful earth.” He chastises it as if it were his prodigal son fallen into dissolute spendthrift ways. The basic conflict is that between the spiritual and the material, quite unlike that of Sonnet 144, though both concern the soul.

First, the speaker rebukes his soul for spending so much on its “outward walls.” (l. 4) It has fallen from grace because of pride, arrayed as it is by “rebel pow'rs” (l. 2), suggesting satanic forces. The speaker, who, after all, should own his own soul, asks it why it spends so much on its fading exterior (the “mansion” that is his body). At death, only worms will inherit the costly excesses.

The speaker concludes his argument by instructing the soul to use the body as a servant. Let the body's wealth dwindle, he says, and thereby increase your own “store.” (l. 10) Buy time in heaven by selling wasteful “hours of dross” (l. 11), and give up external splendor so that you can be fed instead of suffering dearth (l. 3).

It is evident by this time that the speaker is aware of his self-betrayal. The abrupt (and dramatic) shift

away from the sonnets concerning the mistress  
underlines his internal struggle. He has been false to  
his own notions of morality. Such a recognition  
scene is a traditional feature in tragedies from  
*Oedipus Rex* through *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

Note: The gap at the beginning of line two indicates  
that the Quarto mistakenly repeated "my sinful  
earth" here. The right words are unknown.