

*When I consider everything that grows
 Holds in perfection but a little moment,
 That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows
 Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;
 When I perceive that men as plants increase,
 Cheered and checked even by the self-same sky,
 Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
 And wear their brave state out of memory;
 Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
 Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,
 Where wasteful time debateth with decay
 To change your day of youth to sullied night,
 And all in war with time for love of you
 As he takes from you, I engraft you new.*

Here the marriage campaign falters. Briefly, in this sonnet, the speaker turns to his pride as a poet. Instead of urging the youth to find immortality through progeny, the speaker turns to the old idea of gaining eternal life through poetry. The agon shifts from that of the speaker versus the youth to that of the youth (assisted by the speaker) versus time. Even if the speaker does not defeat time, he can at least make it a draw: the final line is, "As he [time] takes from you [the youth], I will engraft you new."

Combined with this contest is the battle between growth and decay. The sonnet has opened with the speaker meditating on transiency, specifically the transiency of growing things. This now is blended with two other powerful images: the metaphor of this earthly life as a huge stage, which is also used in *As You Like It* and *King Lear*, and the influence of the stars, a thread from the previous sonnet.

The idea of growth is developed in the analogy between men and plants (ll. 5-8) that are "cheered and checked even by the same sky." In youth they boast of their "youthful sap" (l. 7), but at their height they begin to diminish, finally wearing out their prime until they are forgotten. This progression parallels the seasonal cycles in Sonnets 5 and 7, thus making the image itself cyclical. The speaker's meditation concludes with a vision of the "most rich" youth on the stage of life (l. 10), then switches to the debate between time and decay over the date when the youth's bright vigor must yield to

“sullied night.” (l. 12) By the clever manipulation of complicated threads and images of battle, the speaker creates a moving panorama of all life, warring against time for the preservation of the youth in poetry. The force and scope of his imagination is, indirectly, a play for the youth’s respect and affection.