

*Those hours that with gentle work did frame
 The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell
 Will play the tyrants to the very same,
 And that unfair which fairly doth excel:
 For never resting time leads summer on
 To hideous winter and confounds him there,
 Sap checked with frost and lustry leaves quite gone,
 Beauty o'ersnowed and bareness everywhere.
 Then were not summer's distillation left
 A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,
 Beauty's effect with beauty were bereft,
 Nor it nor no remembrance what it was.
 But flowers distil'd, though they with winter meet,
 Lose but their show; their substance still lives sweet.*

Though this sonnet seems not to be addressed to anyone, the opening of Sonnet 6 makes it clear that the youth is still intended as the recipient. However, taken as a separate poem, as a number of the sonnets can be, it takes on a meditative quality and the harsh words of Sonnet 4 are absent. The tone is more relaxed; the insistent queries and the driving force of argument are abandoned for a while. The focus is on time and beauty as embodied in the summer and flowers. Ultimately the subject is that of human decay, which parallels that of the seasons.

The first two lines of this poem talk about procreation, the "gentle work" that leads eventually to the "lovely gaze" of a beautiful child. The owner of this gaze becomes, in turn, a cynosure, gazed on by "the world." But immediately the hours that were used for creation become the destroyers ("tyrants," l. 3) of that same human being. Time will remove ("unfair," l. 4) that beauty which excels all others.

The second quatrain brings in the seasons. In an even quicker progression, time turns summer into "hideous winter" (l. 6) and then destroys him. By contrast two whole lines are allotted to the static winter landscape, which is barren; its "lusty leaves" are gone and its beauty "o'ersnowed" (ll. 7-8). If it were not for "summer's distillation" (l. 9)--a glass vial of perfume made from flowers--both beauty and its

“effect” (l. 11) —that is, what is made from it—
nothing would remain, not even the memory.

However, even though distilled flowers are subject to winter, they lose only their appearance; their “substance” (reality) still smells sweet. The flower (like beauty’s rose of Sonnet 1) stands for the youth, and the perfume (in its protective vial) stands for the child, the essence created from his father’s beauty. Thus the meditation becomes a symbolic message (not an open argument) which implies that if the youth does marry and beget a child, his beauty can be preserved like the flowers’ scent that survives the winter, which stands for the youth’s inevitable death. He, too, will be slain by time.