

*What is your substance, whereof are you made,  
 That millions of strange shadows on you tend?  
 Since everyone hath, every one, one shade,  
 And you, but one, can every shadow lend:  
 Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit  
 Is poorly imitated after you;  
 On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,  
 And you in Grecian tires are painted new:  
 Speak of the spring and foison of the year,  
 The one doth shadow of your beauty show,  
 The other as your bounty doth appear,  
 And you in every blessed shape we know.  
     In all external grace you have some part,  
     But you like none; none you, for constant heart.*

**I**n his typically dramatic fashion, Shakespeare piques the reader's interest by asking a question that begets others and is not fully answered until the end of the following sonnet. The initial mystery is the nature of the youth's "substance," the pure and permanent ideal that is so crucial to Renaissance Platonism. In the sonnets, as elsewhere in the literature of the period, "shadow" is opposed to substance, and Shakespeare toys with various meanings of the words as he toys with his readers and the youth he addresses. Who are the millions of shadows that accompany the youth? In the Platonic tradition all beings—indeed, all worldly things—are transient and therefore shadows. Only the abstract ideal—a blend of beauty, truth and goodness—is real and therefore permanent. Throughout the sonnets, the youth's beauty is ideal, but as the speaker continually reminds him, he himself is transient. The "strange shadows" (l. 2) are teasingly ambiguous. At first, they seem to be other human beings that follow the youth, aspiring to be like him or simply admiring him. But later (l. 3), the "shade" of every one appears to be the shadow cast by all individuals. And then (l. 4), the reader is faced with the notion that the youth and only the youth can provide an earthly image (a shadow) to emulate. Paradoxically, though but one person, the youth fuses beauty, truth and goodness and so

embodies and disseminates all the various earthly virtues.

The sliding series of notions about shadows becomes clearer in the second quatrain when specific images are cited. First the speaker asserts that if anyone tried to describe Adonis (a mythical mortal and therefore a kind of shadow as well as an ideal of male beauty), he would fail: the image would be “counterfeit” (l. 5). Why? The speaker cleverly shifts ground by contending that anyone attempting to portray Adonis would fail because he would inevitably turn to the youth as a model.

The speaker advances his argument by imagining someone trying to enhance Helen of Troy’s beauty by cosmetic artifice. To do this, the person would paint the youth in Grecian garments. Hence the youth would be confirmed as the reflection of the ideal on earth. Not only human forms but the most beautiful seasons—spring and fall—become shadows of the ideal. From these, the speaker moves upwards to the transcendent whole where “we” (the millions of earthly shadows) perceive the youth “in every blessed shape we know.” (l. 12)

In the couplet the first quatrain’s cloudiness begins to clear. The shadows the youth can lend to all others are reflections of his grace: “In all external grace you have some part,” says the speaker. As if this praise weren’t lofty enough, the speaker caps it with the compliment supreme: In this world of ever-shifting shadows, the youth is alone; no one is like him in “constant heart.” So ends the hyperbole. Other discoveries are to come.