Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o’ersways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O how shall summer’s honey breath hold out
Against the wrackful siege of batt’ring days
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong but time decays?
O fearful meditation: where, alack,
Shall time’s best jewel from time’s chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil or beauty can forbid?
O none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

It should be no great surprise now
that in Sonnet 65 the paradox of
black ink making love shine bright
returns, wave-like, as a re-
incarnation of the black lines of
Sonnet 63, which preserve the
lover’s perpetual green. The famous
opening, “Since brass, nor stone, nor
earth, nor boundless sea” carries
over three images from Sonnet 64
and combines them with stone
to give exceptional strength to the
stressed syllables. The “mortal rage”
of Sonnet 64 is echoed in the rage of
“sad mortality” in lines two and
three of Sonnet 65. As a dramatic
contrast, Shakespeare introduces the
flower as the last word in the first
quatrain. Note that the word flower
puts a weak syllable at the end of
the line; “a rose” would not have
the same touch of pathos. It also
gives a strong contrast to the
rhyming word power.

In the second quatrain, “summer’s
honey breath” (an allusion to Sonnet
18) is at war with “batt’ring days,” a
parallel to the war between land
and sea in Sonnet 64. The phrase
“rocks impregnable” is given
weight by the trisyllabic word and
occurs in the same position as “sad
mortality” in line two, thus creating
another subtle parallel to the
imagery of warfare. “Wrackful
siege” and “batt’ring days” are
resisted by “gates of steel,” but there
is no contest. The quatrain closes
with the triumph of mortality:
“Time decays” everything. (l. 8) All
four phrases have the same syllabic
rhythm: stressed, unstressed,
stressed—a kind of counterpoint to the iambic meter.

The sestet begins with the speaker’s fear: his friend (“time’s best jewel”) is under threat from time, the athletic thief of life, whose spoil is beauty. This time nothing can save the friend from death, unless there is a miracle. Once more the ink is black, but now it may preserve the light of love. The threat, though the same as that in Sonnet 64, seems stronger. However, the reward of the miracle is love’s untarnished and imperishable glory. After the five questions in the body of the poem comes something resembling hope.