

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
 Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
 In me thou seest the twilight of such day
 As after sunset fadeth in the west,
 Which by and by black night doth take away,
 Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
 In me thou seest the glowing of such fire
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
 As the death bed whereon it must expire,
 Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
 This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.*

Sonnet 73 is one of those few in the sequence that have been given an independent life by publishers and the general reading public. Its prominence is due to the character of our own "world," one still dominated by romanticism when it comes to love. Textbooks of literature omit this poem only at their peril, and teachers delight to teach it. Readers who have heard of Shakespeare as a writer of fine "love poems" pluck small attractive volumes from bookstore shelves, despite the lack of notes or explanatory essays. Students are often smitten by this particular poem out of context because of its vivid nature images, its intense emotions, and its faith in love despite the threat of separation in death.

Scholars and poets have been delighted to discover that the poem is also beautifully constructed, chiefly in the use of quatrains that deal with increasingly briefer periods of time: autumn, as a time of year, is followed by twilight, a time of day, and the glowing of a fire shortly to disappear. The ashes of the speaker's youth are likened to a deathbed where the fire of life which nourished him will also consume him.

Putting this sonnet, which is usually read as a single poem,

into the context of the whole, we perceive that it comes close to the center, just after a group of very gloomy musings. Though the topic of impending death continues, the tone changes drastically, ending on a positive note. As we have often seen – and heard, the speaker becomes more forceful in the final couplet: here, the friend is addressed in a series of thick-clustered consonants, and three of the first four syllables are emphatically stressed. The key word *strong* anchors the rest of the line. The bond between speaker and addressee that had been seriously weakened just prior to this is now reaffirmed.

One more surprise occurs in the last line. The speaker does not talk about his own leaving, but switches to his friend's departure. This has at least two different effects: it suggests a sweet self-effacement of the speaker in thinking primarily of his friend's faithfulness. But it also raises a question: for what will his friend leave? The reader may well ask – and be encouraged to do so by the author – is this poem aimed at binding the friend to the speaker in the face of loosening ties? And how well is that well which he asserts? Is it perhaps a fantasy in the stream of the preceding sonnets?

In short, what has been taken as a clearcut affirmation of love in the couplet turns out to be, in light of the friend's previous unfaithfulness, a last effort to hold on to a doubtful lover.