

*How like a winter hath my absence been
 From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year?
 What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen?
 What old December's bareness everywhere?
 And yet this time removed was summer's time,
 The teeming autumn big with rich increase,
 Bearing the wanton burthen of the prime,
 Like widowed wombs after their lords' decease.
 Yet this abundant issue seemed to me
 But hope of orphans and unfathered fruit;
 For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
 And thou away, the very birds are mute;
 Or if they sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer,
 That leaves look pale, dreading the winter's near.*

Abruptly, the time and the tone have changed. By condensing and blending two time schemes, one actual and the other mental, Shakespeare makes a static situation more dramatic. After the bitter antagonism of the preceding poems, the distancing of the two men is quietly, but sadly, contemplated by the speaker. The actual time of their separation was summer (l. 5), but it has seemed like winter. The friend is addressed as "the pleasure of the fleeting year" (l. 2), but has the separation lasted twelve months? As in the plays, the time scheme is sometime hard to determine, but the fluidity of the seasons adds to the richness of the imagery. When "summer's time" has "dark days" and "freezings" like December's, the emotion is noticeably heightened. (l. 3)

Autumn was "teeming," carrying the "wanton burden" of spring's sexual activity. (l. 7) But this abundance reminded the speaker of the state of "widowed wombs after their lords' decease" (l. 8), and the reader is reminded of the speaker's urging the youth's marriage and procreation in the early sonnets. Now the vision of autumnal plenty has become the miserable "hope of orphans and unfathered fruit" (l. 10). Summer's pleasures will not return until the men are reunited.

With the couplet the mental cycle of the winter begun in line one comes near its conclusion. And yet even this is mixed when the mute birds of line twelve are allowed a song of dull cheer. The merging of the seasons creates a disorder that parallels the disorder in the men's relationship.