Sonnet 19: Devouring Time, blunt thou the

POEM TEXT

Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws,
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;
Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
And burn the long-liv'd Phoenix in her blood;
Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleets,
And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
To the wide world and all her fading sweets;
But I forbid thee one more heinous crime:
O, carve not with the hours my love's fair brow,
Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen!
Him in thy course untainted do allow
For beauty's pattern to succeeding men.
Yet do thy worst, old Time! Despite thy wrong
My love shall in my verse ever live young.

SUMMARY

All-consuming Time, dull the lion's claws and force the earth to ravenously eat up her own sweet children. Remove the sharp teeth from the powerful tiger's mouth, and burn the immortal Phoenix in her own blood. Turn happiness into sadness as you quickly slip away, and do whatever you will, quick-moving Time, to the whole world and all its fleeting pleasures. But I refuse to let you commit one truly unspeakable crime: don't etch wrinkles into my love's young and beautiful forehead. Don't use your old pen to draw any lines on his face! Leave him alone so that his beauty can serve as a model for future generations of men. That said, you might as well do your worst, old Time! Because even if you wrong my love, he will remain forever young in my poetry.

THEMES

TIME AND DECAY

"Sonnet 19" focuses on the idea that everyone and everything is at the mercy of time, a force that the poem argues leads to inevitable deterioration and decline. Even the fiercest lions and tigers aren't exempt from the personified "Time's" mighty power, the speaker says, which eventually makes all things fade. Nothing lasts forever, the poem implies, and the speaker is particularly troubled by the fact that "[d]evouring Time" will lay waste to the youth and beauty of the speaker's lover.

The speaker notes that even the strongest, most respected creatures on earth are vulnerable to the passage of time, which can "blunt" a lion's claws or "pluck" the sharp teeth from a tiger's mouth. Given that these animals are so strong and powerful, their physical deterioration highlights that the cruelty of time makes no exceptions—no matter what, all living things are fated to decline.

Time, in other words, has its way with everything in the end, an idea the speaker further accentuates by mentioning the "long-liv'd Phoenix." The Phoenix is a mythical creature that, upon burning to death, rises from its own ashes and begins life anew. Although this bird usually represents the idea of immortality, this poem highlights something else about the Phoenix—namely, that this mythical creature is susceptible to the passage of time just like everything else is. After all, its many life cycles demonstrate that even things that live forever are still subject to destruction.

If even the immortal Phoenix is influenced by time's unrelenting march, it's clear that humans are even *more* vulnerable to decay and change. This is why the speaker implores time to spare the lover, asking it to not etch wrinkles into his face. This, however, is not a reasonable request, since it's obviously impossible to protect somebody from the effects of age and time. In the end, the speaker knows, time will do its "worst" to the lover, and this spotlights the inarguable fact that nothing can withstand the pull of time. Simply put, everything in life—including youth and beauty—is fleeting.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

ART AND IMMORTALITY

Despite arguing that time is an all-consuming, destructive force, the speaker spends much of the poem trying to fight back—imploring the personified "Time" to spare the youth and beauty of the speaker's beloved. In the end, however, the speaker seemingly rejects the rules the poem has established altogether, declaring that if Time won't spare the lover, then the speaker will simply preserve this person through "verse." Although it's impossible for people to avoid the ravages of time, then, the speaker argues that it *is* possible to use art—and, more specifically, poetry—to immortalize certain aspects of human life.

The speaker accepts that there is no avoiding the passage of time and the destruction it brings. To make this easier to bear,

the speaker takes comfort in the idea that the poem itself will preserve the lover. Time may "carve" wrinkles and "draw" lines onto his face, but the speaker is confident that the lover will remain youthful and attractive in poetry, saying, "My love shall in my verse ever live young."

The word "live" in this phrase is especially important, since it suggests that poetry isn't just a record of the past, but rather something capable of housing the ongoing spirit of the lover's youth—something the poem implies will continue to live long after time has had its way with the lover. In this sense, part of the lover's youth will survive old age and even death.

Poetry, then, is more than a simple historical document—it's something that gives lasting life to otherwise short-lived, ephemeral things like youth and beauty. In the face of so much impermanence, the speaker suggests, creating art is a meaningful way to immortalize a person's most fleeting qualities.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 13-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws,
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;

The sonnet begins with both apostrophe and personification, as the speaker directly addresses time itself. By using the word "devouring," the speaker invites readers to see time as an all-consuming, destructive force that ravages everything in its path.

To further demonstrate time's might, the speaker goes on to say, "blunt thou the lion's paws." Lions are very powerful and strong animals, and the fact that time is capable of dulling their sharp claws implies that even the fiercest, most fearsome creatures on earth are no match for time, which gradually weakens everything in its path. In other words, age inevitably brings on decay, as everything that was once glorious and strong eventually loses its edge.

This, it seems, is simply the way the world works—an idea the speaker highlights by personifying the earth, saying, "And make the earth devour her own sweet brood." This phrase repeats the word "devour," emphasizing the idea that time lays waste to everything and that experiencing this kind of ruin is simply part of being alive.

The metaphorical idea of time forcing the earth to eat "her own sweet brood" also implies that the earth itself is bound to time in unavoidable ways—that life on earth is defined by the passage of time.

These opening lines also establish the poem's use of iambic pentameter, a meter in which lines contain five iambs (metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: da-DUM). However, the first two lines contain two metrical substitutions:

> De**vou**- | ring **Time**, || **blunt thou** | the **li**- | on's **paws**,
> And **make** | the **earth** | de**vour** | her **own** | **sweet** **brood**

For the most part, there is a strong iambic rhythm in these lines, as phrases like "And **make** the **earth** de**vour**" feature the da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM thump created by a string of iambs. And yet, these lines also include two spondees, which are metrical feet consisting of two stressed syllables. For instance, the words "**blunt thou**" in the first line create a spondee, as do the words "**sweet brood**" in the second line.

This subtly disrupts the iambic rhythm, but it doesn't totally upend the overall feel of the poem. Instead, these spondees indicate that the poem won't perfectly follow its own meter, effectively leading to a slightly off-kilter feel that perhaps reflects the speaker's discomfort with the fact that time lays waste to all.

LINES 3-4

Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
And burn the long-liv'd Phoenix in her blood;

The speaker continues to use apostrophe to address a personified version of time, telling it to remove the sharp teeth from a tiger's mouth. This echoes the previous idea of time dulling a lion's claws, again illustrating that the passage of time weakens even the most powerful creatures on earth.

Going on, the speaker says, "And burn the long-liv'd Phoenix in her blood." According to ancient mythology, the Phoenix is a bird that lives for hundreds of years before burning to death and then rising from its own ashes to begin a new life. As such, the bird usually functions as a symbol of immortality.

In this context, though, the burning Phoenix serves as a reminder that all things in life—even mythological birds—are bound by the limitations of time. After all, the Phoenix doesn't simply live forever, but rather lives for a long time before dying and then rising again to begin a new life. In some ways, then, this process actually *emphasizes* the influence of time, since the cyclical nature of the Phoenix's life ends up highlighting the passage of time.

These lines are fairly consonant. For instance, the beginning of line 3 features the /k/ sound in the words "pluck" and "keen," creating a harsh, abrasive effect. Going on, line 4 features the consonant /l/ sound several times:

> And burn the long-liv'd Phoenix in her blood

This repetition of the consonant /l/ gives the line a slight feeling of solidity while also making the phrase "long-liv'd" roll off the tongue. The speaker uses the assonant /ee/ throughout lines 3 and 4 as well:

> Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
> And burn the long-liv'd Phoenix in her blood

The /ee/ sound in these lines goes nicely with the consonance, creating a melodious effect that draws readers through the poem and generally heightens the language. In this way, the speaker's use of both assonance and consonance intensifies the poem's overall sound while also coaxing readers through the musicality of the lines.

LINES 5-7

> *Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleets,*
> *And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,*
> *To the wide world and all her fading sweets;*

Still using apostrophe, the speaker addresses time, personifying it and giving it permission to move through the seasons in a "fleet[ing]" way that turns happiness to sadness. "Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleets," the speaker says, acknowledging that the passage of time often brings on feelings of regret, since periods of happiness gradually slip away as the seasons turn. With this in mind, the speaker tells time to do whatever it wants to the world, which is full of "fading sweets."

At this point in the poem, the speaker seems to have accepted that there's no way to avoid the unrelenting march of time. Life on earth is defined, the speaker implies, by the fact that everything fades at some point, so there's nothing to do but simply allow time to take its toll.

Line 5 is fairly sibilant, as the /s/ and /z/ sounds repeat several times:

> Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleets

This makes the speaker's delivery sound fluid and smooth, especially since the line includes other soft sounds like /th/ and /f/ (both of which are often considered sibilant as well). In fact, these sounds reappear alongside the /s/ sound in lines 6 and 7:

> And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
> To the wide world and all her fading sweets

These sibilant sounds are pleasant and soothing—an appropriate effect, considering that these lines are about the various pleasures of life. This soothing effect is bolstered by the alliteration here on the /w/ sound. At the same time, the section is *really* about how these pleasures fade away, so the soft and wishy-washy sound created by the /s/, /f/, /w/, and /th/ sounds also reflects a feeling of impermanence, hinting at the fact that everything will eventually wash away.

Lines 5 through 7 are also all end-stopped, giving them a controlled, measured sound. This, in turn, aligns with the use of meter in lines 5 and 6, as the speaker employs nearly perfect iambic pentameter (a meter in which each line contains five iambs, or metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable):

> Make glad | and sor- | ry sea- | sons as | thou fleets,
> And do | whate'er | thou wilt, || swift-foot- | ed Time

The fourth foot of line 6 deviates from the iambic pulse of the rest of the poem, since "swift-foot" is a spondee, meaning that it contains two stressed syllables in a row. This places extra emphasis on the word "swift," emphasizing the fact that time moves quickly. Similarly, line 7 features a spondee that accentuates the words "wide world":

> To the | wide world | and all | her fad- | ing sweets

By stressing the word "wide," the speaker subtly implies that, no matter how large and mighty the world might seem, it is still at the mercy of time. Once again, then, the poem illustrates the extent to which time brings itself to bear on all things.

LINES 8-10

> *But I forbid thee one more heinous crime:*
> *O, carve not with the hours my love's fair brow,*
> *Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen!*

Until this point, the poem focuses exclusively on time's ability to lay waste to everything in the world. However, a slight tonal shift occurs in this section, as the speaker implores the personified time to leave the speaker's lover alone.

To do this, the speaker uses a metaphor that frames time as an artist that "carve[s]" wrinkles and "draw[s]" lines on people's faces—something the speaker hopes won't happen to the lover, whose face is presumably young and "fair."

The fact that the speaker can't bear the idea of the lover getting older illustrates just how hard it can be to fully accept the relentless passage of time. Although the speaker seemingly knows that time lays waste to everything in the world, the speaker still wants to protect the lover from this unfortunate fate. Given that the rest of the poem emphasizes the inevitable decay that comes with the passage of time, though, it's clear that it will be impossible for the speaker to shield the lover in this way.

The alliteration of hard /c/ sounds in "crime" and "carve" here makes the speaker's language sound assertive and stern—an appropriate effect, given that the speaker wants to fend off time so it won't destroy the lover's youthful beauty.

The speaker also uses a caesura in line 9: "O, || carve not with

the hours my love's fair brow." This pause makes the speaker sound somewhat overwhelmed, giving the moment a plaintive, mournful sound. To that end, it's as if the speaker is desperate to strike a deal with time. This effect is further accentuated by the fact that line 10 is end-stopped with an exclamation point: "Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen!" It's very clear that the speaker wants nothing more than to make sure time doesn't harm the lover.

LINES 11-12

Him in thy course untainted do allow
For beauty's pattern to succeeding men.

Imploring the personified time to leave the lover alone, the speaker asks that the lover be allowed to remain youthful and attractive. More specifically, the speaker hopes that time will let the lover be a model of beauty for future generations of men. This is noteworthy because it suggests that the lover is a man, thereby supporting the common belief that the sonnets in Shakespeare's "Fair Youth" sequence are about an older poet's romantic relationship with a younger man.

To that end, "Sonnet 19" is about time and all its destructive power, but it is also a love poem. This becomes clear in these lines, since the speaker's admiration of the lover's beauty is on full display. After all, the speaker doesn't just want to protect the lover from the ravages of time, but also wants to preserve the lover's beauty *forever*, wishing that the lover's looks could become the template upon which all men are based. This is a very grand gesture, to say the least, effectively turning this otherwise pessimistic poem into something a bit more romantic.

The meter in this section further underscores that "Sonnet 19" isn't just about time's mercilessness. Line 11 features a metrical substitution at the very beginning of the line, as the speaker uses a trochee (stressed-unstressed) instead of an iamb (unstressed-stressed):

Him in | thy course | untain- | ted do | allow

By beginning this line with a trochee, the speaker emphasizes the word "him." This, in turn, ensures that readers focus on the lover, as it becomes increasingly clear that the poem isn't just about time, but about this beautiful young man whose beauty the speaker treasures so dearly.

LINES 13-14

Yet do thy worst, old Time! Despite thy wrong
My love shall in my verse ever live young.

The final couplet features a shift, as the speaker gives up trying to convince time to spare the lover. "Yet do thy worst, old Time!" the speaker says, going on to say that it doesn't matter *what* happens to the lover, since his youthfulness will live on in the speaker's poetry. This moment therefore functions as the sonnet's "turn," when the speaker pivots and offers a solution to the problem outlined by the rest of the poem.

In this case, the problem is that time lays waste to everything, even the strongest and fiercest creatures on earth. Although the speaker pleads with time in the third quatrain by asking it not to ruin the lover's youthful beauty, it now becomes clear that the speaker knows this attempt to protect the lover is futile. For this reason, the speaker shifts tactics altogether, deciding to take comfort in the fact that art—and specifically poetry—is one of the few things that can withstand the passage of time. Poetry is impervious to the decay that time forces on people, the speaker implies, meaning that this very poem has the power to encapsulate everything about the lover that the speaker wishes could last forever in real life.

One interesting thing about this notion is that it parallels the metaphor the speaker uses in lines 9 and 10 to depict time as an artist that "draw[s]" lines on people's faces. Whereas time is presented as an artist that creates decline and decay, though, the speaker emerges as an artist capable of preserving that which cannot otherwise be preserved. In turn, poetry becomes a force of conservation and, in some ways, immortality, since the lover will be able to "live" forever within the speaker's verse. Or, to put it more simply, the speaker realizes that poetry is the only thing that will endure the test of time, meaning that writing about the lover is the only way to protect him from decay.

The final line is particularly musical, partially because the speaker leans heavily on the consonant /v/ sound:

My love shall in my verse ever live young.

This creates a soft buzzing sound that pairs well with the assonant /e/ sound that appears in the words "verse" and "ever." To add to this, the /l/ sound in the words "love," "shall" and "live" roll nicely off the tongue, making the entire line sound pleasant and harmonious. As a result, the language of the poem matches the speaker's newly optimistic attitude, as the speaker celebrates the comforting idea that poetry will be able to preserve the lover's youth and beauty forever.

SYMBOLS

THE LION, TIGER, AND PHOENIX

The speaker mentions a lion, a tiger, and a Phoenix in "Sonnet 19," all of which normally represent strength and vitality in literature. However, the speaker doesn't use these animals just to symbolize power, but also to demonstrate that not even the fiercest, most resilient creatures are capable of withstanding the cruel passage of time.

According to the speaker, time will "blunt" the lion's claws and

"pluck" the sharp teeth from a tiger's mouth. What's more, time burns the Phoenix—a mythological bird that usually represents immortality—in its own blood (or perhaps in the tiger's blood, depending on how readers interpret the speaker's words).

Of course, one might think that the Phoenix has found a way to triumph over time, since it rises from its own ashes to begin a new life each time it burns to death. However, this cyclical process actually *highlights* time's inevitable influence, since the Phoenix is just as bound to the revolutions of time as anything else. In turn, all the animals in "Sonnet 19" are symbols of time's mercilessness, illustrating that even the most powerful creatures can't escape time-related decay.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "blunt thou the lion's paws"
- **Line 3:** "Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws"
- **Line 4:** "And burn the long-liv'd Phoenix in her blood"

POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

The first half of the poem is defined by the speaker's use of parallelism, with lines 2, 4, and 6 all beginning the same way:

> And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;
> [...]
> And burn the long-liv'd Phoenix in her blood;
> [...]
> And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time

In each of these lines, the speaker addresses time and tells it to do something specific, urging it to force the earth to "devour her own sweet brood," then telling it to burn the "long-liv'd Phoenix," and finally telling it to generally do whatever it wants. This firmly establishes the poem's overall structure, which is based upon the speaker's attempt to talk directly to time.

This parallelism also adds a certain rhythm to the poem, making it feel repetitive and predictable. This, in turn, makes it all the more noticeable when the speaker breaks from this pattern in line 8 by saying, "But I forbid thee one more heinous crime."

Until this point, all of the even-numbered lines begin with the word "And." This one, however, begins with the word "But," signaling a change in the speaker's attitude. Indeed, the speaker suddenly tries to "forbid" time from doing whatever it wants, and this shift is accentuated by the fact that the poem transitions away from the parallelism that defines the feeling, rhythm, and structure of the first six lines.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And make"
- **Line 4:** "And burn"
- **Line 6:** "And do"

ASSONANCE

Assonance pops up throughout the poem, adding musicality and moments of emphasis to the poem. Take the very first line, for example, which features both the /ow/ sound and the long /i/ sound:

> Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws

These assonant sounds make the opening line sound cohesive and harmonious, adding strength and confidence to the speaker's request of time. This effect is even more apparent in lines 2 through 5, which include prominent /ee/ sounds:

> And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;
> Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
> And burn the long-liv'd Phoenix in her blood;
> Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleets

Phrases like "keen teeth" jump out because they include two instances of the assonant /ee/ sound, grabbing readers' attention and encouraging them to more vividly picture a tiger's sharp fangs. Elsewhere, lines like "Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleets" sound deeply melodic, as the /ee/ sound pops up three times without much interruption.

The end of the poem also includes assonance, here weaving long i/ sounds throughout the final couplet:

> Yet do thy worst, old Time! Despite thy wrong
> My love shall in my verse ever live young.

This makes the poem's ending sound lofty and controlled, again adding strength and confidence to the speaker's words.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Devouring," "Time," "thou," "lion's"
- **Line 2:** "earth," "her," "sweet"
- **Line 3:** "keen," "teeth," "fierce"
- **Line 4:** "liv'd," "Phoenix"
- **Line 5:** "sorry," "seasons," "fleets"
- **Line 6:** "wilt," "swift," "Time"
- **Line 7:** "wide," "sweets"
- **Line 9:** "hours," "brow"
- **Line 11:** "Him," "in"
- **Line 13:** "thy," "Time," "thy"
- **Line 14:** "My," "my"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears throughout "Sonnet 19." Consider, for example, the sharp /k/ sound that appears when the speaker tells time to "pluck the keen teeth" from a tiger's mouth. This /k/ sound is abrasive, cutting through the rest of the poem in the same way that a tiger's teeth might pierce its prey.

Other moments of consonance in the poem create musicality. Take lines 6 and 7, when the speaker uses /s/, /w/, /t/, and /f/ sounds:

> And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
> To the wide world and all her fading sweets

The thick, gentle consonance here creates a pleasing soundscape, which makes sense given that the speaker is talking about the pleasures of earthly life. At the same time, though, the hissing /s/ and /f/ sounds make the words sound fluid and fleeting, thereby giving the poem the same feeling of impermanence that time forces upon the "fading sweets" of life on earth.

In general, consonance simply heightens the language of "Sonnet 19," often making the speaker's words sound a bit more formal and stylized. Take, for example, the way the /l/, /v/, and /r/ sounds are woven throughout the last line:

> My love shall in my verse ever live young.

All three of these forms of consonance are strong and noticeable, which is partly why the last line sounds so memorable. By using consonance to create texture, then, the speaker lends a musicality to the poem that gives the language a unique and impassioned effect.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Time, blunt," "lion's"
- **Line 2:** "devour," "sweet brood"
- **Line 3:** "Pluck," "keen teeth from," "fierce tiger's"
- **Line 4:** "burn," "long-liv'd Phoenix," "blood"
- **Line 5:** "glad and sorry seasons," "fleets"
- **Line 6:** "whate'er," "wilt, swift-footed Time"
- **Line 7:** "To," "wide world," "fading sweets"
- **Line 8:** "one more heinous crime"
- **Line 9:** "carve"
- **Line 10:** "no lines ," "there," "thine antique pen"
- **Line 13:** "do," "worst, old Time! Despite"
- **Line 14:** "love shall," "verse ever live"

ALLITERATION

The speaker occasionally uses alliteration to make certain words and phrases stand out from the rest of the poem. For example, the /w/ sounds in lines 6 and 7 are particularly noticeable:

> And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time,
> To the wide world and all her fading sweets

In particular, the alliteration of the /w/ sound in the phrase "wide world" emphasizes the idea that the world is quite large, even if it's still at the mercy of "swift-footed Time," which will do "whate'er" it "wilt" to the earth.

Similarly, the alliteration of the sibilant /s/ in the phrase "sorry seasons" calls attention to the unfortunate fact that the passage of time often brings on sadness and regret, as the seasons go by quickly and turn happy times into nothing more than a memory.

In other moments, the speaker's sparing use of alliteration simply makes the language feel measured and carefully considered. This is the case in the final line, when the speaker alliterates the /l/ sound, saying, "My love shall in my verse ever live young." Along with this line's various consonant sounds (including the /v/ and /r/ sounds), this alliterative /l/ gives the language a distinct, memorable sound that ultimately makes the final line sound especially, well, final.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "thou," "the"
- **Line 3:** "teeth," "from," "fierce," "tiger's"
- **Line 4:** "burn," "long," "liv'd," "Phoenix," "blood"
- **Line 5:** "sorry," "seasons," "fleets"
- **Line 6:** "whate'er," "wilt," "swift," "footed," "Time"
- **Line 7:** "To," "wide," "world," "fading"
- **Line 8:** "forbid," "crime"
- **Line 9:** "carve," "fair"
- **Line 10:** "there," "thine"
- **Line 11:** "thy"
- **Line 13:** "do," "worst," "Despite," "wrong"
- **Line 14:** "love," "live"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is a major part of "Sonnet 19" because the entire poem is addressed to time itself, with the speaker treating time as though it has agency and the ability to listen to the speaker's words. In the first half of the poem, the speaker simply gives time permission to do what it already does—namely, to lay waste to everything in the entire world, including the fiercest creatures in existence.

However, the speaker later implores time to leave the speaker's beloved alone. In this sense, personifying time allows the speaker to push back against its merciless influence by pleading with it, making it seem for a moment as if it's actually possible to reason with one of the inarguable facts of life (that is, that all things fade away).

By the end of the poem, though, the speaker taunts time by telling it to do its "worst." This is because the speaker has seemingly grasped that trying to keep time at bay is a futile thing to do, since nothing the speaker could ever say or do would protect the lover from succumbing to the inevitable decay and decline that comes along with aging. In turn, the poem frames time as an ominous but unavoidable force, using personification to demonstrate that it's impossible to reason one's way out of the passage of time, which is uncompromising and inescapable.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

METAPHOR

The speaker uses a metaphor in lines 9 and 10 to present time as an artist. More specifically, the speaker depicts time as an artist who "carve[s]" wrinkles and "draw[s]" lines on otherwise young, pristine faces.

On the whole, this metaphor casts time as a person who deliberately defaces youthful beauty—something that stands in stark contrast to the role the speaker plays as a writer who uses poetry to *preserve* such things. Whereas the speaker writes poems like this one so that the lover can "ever live young" within the lines themselves, time is presented as a morbid, destructive artist that actively ruins the kind of beauty and vitality the speaker is so interested in celebrating.

In this sense, the speaker has to work against time in order to capture and even immortalize things that will, in real life, someday fade away because of time's relentless march. By comparing time's influence on humans to a form of vandalism, then, the speaker not only vividly illustrates the toll aging takes on people, but also vilifies time itself as a menacing force.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "O, carve not with the hours my love's fair brow, / Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen!"

CAESURA

The few caesuras in "Sonnet 19" slow down the pace of the poem while also giving readers a moment to reflect upon what has just been said. For instance, after the speaker addresses time in the first line, there is a brief caesura in which readers have the chance to consider the implications of what the speaker has said:

> Devouring Time, || blunt thou the lion's paws

This caesura pushes readers to pause and think about the fact that the speaker has used the phrase "Devouring Time"—a phrase that sets the tone for the rest of the poem by characterizing time as a destructive, all-consuming force. Pausing after addressing time also subtly implies that the speaker has some control over time, or at least wants to try to exert some control.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses caesura as a simple way to disrupt certain lines. This is the case in line 9, when the speaker says, "O, || carve not with the hours my love's fair brow." It's also the case in line 13, in which there are two caesuras:

> Yet do thy worst, || old Time! || Despite thy wrong

These caesuras segment the rhythm of this line, isolating the third foot ("old Time"). Furthermore, the caesura after the exclamation point is especially strong, creating a brief moment of suspension before the speaker goes on to deliver the rest of the final couplet. In turn, the caesura helps prepare readers for the poem's conclusion, inserting an empty beat that creates a certain feeling of anticipation and momentum as the speaker prepares to utter the last, and arguably most important, words of the sonnet.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Time, blunt"
- **Line 6:** "wilt, swift"
- **Line 9:** "O, carve"
- **Line 13:** "worst, old," "Time! Despite"

ALLUSION

The poem's opening words—"Devouring Time"—allude to a quote by the ancient Roman poet Ovid: "*Tempus edax rerum*," or, "Time, devourer of all things."

This line appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an epic poem that details, through the telling of various myths, the history of worldly existence from the creation of the earth up until the fall of Julius Caesar in Rome. *Metamorphoses* had a profound influence on Shakespeare, who often alluded to its various ideas and themes. In particular, the epic poem touches upon the idea of time-related decay and change, as well as the pursuit and creation of the arts.

In this way, it's appropriate that "Sonnet 19" opens with an allusion to *Metamorphoses*, since the two works are thematically aligned with each other. After all, "Sonnet 19" is about the mercilessness of time and, more importantly, the ability of art to preserve and immortalize certain aspects of human life. As such, opening with the phrase "Devouring Time" alerts readers who are familiar with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to the similarities between the two poems, therefore acting as a subtle way to outline the themes of the sonnet in the very first words of the opening line.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “Devouring Time”

END-STOPPED LINE

"Sonnet 19" is made up almost entirely of end-stopped lines, making the poem feel tightly controlled. In the first two lines, for example, the poem comes to a full stop at the end of each line before transitioning to the next:

> Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws,
> And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;

After the speaker tells time to "blunt" the "lion's paws," there is a transitional beat that takes place before the next line continues. The second line then begins with the word "And," meaning that the speaker has begun a new clause that, though connected to the first line, ultimately takes the poem in a new direction. This formula repeats throughout the first half of the poem, making the lines seem self-contained and deliberately separated from each other.

Of course, it's worth noting that some readers might read lines 11 and 13 as enjambed, since in both cases it's a little ambiguous whether the lines are end-stopped. In particular, one might argue that line 13 is enjambed with line 14 because the phrase "Despite thy wrong" doesn't necessarily sound like it's clearly separated from "My love shall in my verse ever live young." This is a valid argument, and the matter simply depends on how readers hear the poem. For the most part, though, since the rest of the lines in "Sonnet 19" are so obviously end-stopped, it seems reasonable to pause after line 13. All in all, then, the poem maintains a measured and plodding pace as the speaker moves carefully from one line to the next.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “paws,”
- **Line 2:** “brood;”
- **Line 3:** “jaws,”
- **Line 4:** “blood;”
- **Line 5:** “fleets,”
- **Line 6:** “Time,”
- **Line 7:** “sweets;”
- **Line 8:** “crime:”
- **Line 9:** “brow,”
- **Line 10:** “pen!”
- **Line 12:** “men.”
- **Line 13:** “wrong”
- **Line 14:** “young.”

APOSTROPHE

The speaker uses apostrophe throughout the poem, since "Sonnet 19" directly addresses a personified version of time. This becomes clear in the very first line, when the speaker says, "Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws." By saying "Devouring Time," the speaker announces the fact that the following words that make up the poem are intended to be heard by time itself.

This continues throughout the ensuing lines, as the speaker never shifts away from talking directly to time. This is because the speaker hopes to convince time to leave the lover alone, saying, "O, carve not with the hours my love's fair brow." This, it seems, is why the poem is addressed to time: so that the speaker can dissuade it from laying waste to the lover's beauty. Of course, this is an impossible task, since time passes and works its destruction regardless of how people feel about it.

For this reason, the speaker finally tells time to go ahead and do its "worst," abandoning all attempts to reason with such a cruel and unrelenting force. By saying this, then, the speaker changes the tone of the poem, no longer addressing time with respect but instead brazenly tempting it to do whatever it wants—a sentiment the speaker is only able to stomach because of the idea that the lover will live forever in the speaker's own poetry.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

VOCABULARY

Devour (Line 1, Line 2) - To "devour" something is to eat it ravenously or, alternatively, to completely destroy it.

Blunt (Line 1) - To "blunt" something is to make it dull.

Thou/Thy/Thine (Line 1, Line 5, Line 6, Line 10, Line 11, Line 13) - "Thou" is an old-fashioned version of "you," and both "thy" and "thine" are old-fashioned versions of "your."

Brood (Line 2) - An animal's young family.

Pluck (Line 3) - Pull.

Keen (Line 3) - Sharp.

Long-liv'd Phoenix (Line 4) - The phrase "long-liv'd Phoenix" refers to the immortal Phoenix, a mythological bird that is said to live for hundred of years before burning to death and then rising from its own ashes to begin a new life.

Fleets (Line 5) - To "fleet" is to recede or retreat quickly.

Whate'er (Line 6) - Whatever.

wilt (Line 6) - Archaic version of the word "will."

Swift-footed (Line 6) - To describe something as "swift-footed" is to indicate that it moves quickly.

Heinous (Line 8) - Wicked and terrible.

Fair (Line 9) - Beautiful.

Antique (Line 10) - Ancient, very old.

Untainted (Line 11) - Unharmed or uninfluenced.

Succeeding (Line 12) - For something "succeed" something else means that it comes after it. In this context, the speaker wants the lover's beauty to serve as a model for future generations of men.

Ever (Line 14) - Forever.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This is a Shakespearean sonnet, a 14-line poem broken into three quatrains followed by a final couplet:

- Quatrain
- Quatrain
- Quatrain
- Couplet

The first two quatrains establish the idea that time lays waste to everything in the world—even the most powerful and seemingly untouchable creatures. Then, in the third quatrain, the speaker tries to convince time itself to leave the lover alone—a plea that the speaker eventually abandons in the poem's "turn," which appears in the first line of the couplet. In this moment, the speaker gives up trying to protect the lover from time's influence and instead tells time to do its "worst." This shift then allows the speaker to set forth a new idea, which is that the poem itself will preserve the lover's youthful beauty even after time takes its toll. In this way, the structure of the sonnet clearly outlines the speaker's developing thought process.

METER

"Sonnet 19" is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that the majority of its lines contain five iambs—metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Consider, for example, the first two lines:

> De**vou-** | ring **Time**, || **blunt thou** | the **li-** | on's **paws**,
> And **make** | the **earth** | de**vour** | her **own** | **sweet brood**

These lines have a definite iambic feel, but it's worth noting that not *all* the metrical feet create an iambic bounce. For instance, the first line's third foot isn't an iamb, but a spondee (a metrical foot made up of two consecutive stressed syllables: "blunt thou"). Similarly, the last foot of line 2 as a spondee: "sweet brood." These opening lines still maintain the general da-DUM da-DUM rhythm of iambic pentameter, but the spondees make them sound a little less predictable, keeping the poem interesting and fresh.

Similar variations appear elsewhere in the poem, such as when the speaker tells time in line 9 to leave the lover alone:

> O, || **carve** | **not** with | the **hours** | my **love's** | fair **brow**

The caesura after "O" in the first foot sets the word apart and makes it sound stressed. As a result, "O, carve" is yet another spondee. The line's second foot is then a trochee (stressed-unstressed): "not with." As such, the first three syllables of the line are all stressed, giving this moment a particularly forceful, assertive sound that reflects the speaker's determination to sternly "forbid" time from ruining the lover's beauty. It's also worth pointing out that the final foot *could* be read as a spondee, too, placing emphasis on the word "fair" and thus accentuating the idea that it would be a "heinous crime" for time to deface the lover's good looks.

On the whole, then, the speaker's use of meter not only makes sure the poem's rhythm avoids monotony, but also spotlights certain important words or phrases that align with the theme at hand.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows the standard rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet, which looks like this:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

Each quatrain features alternating end rhymes, giving the lines a feeling of musicality and cohesion. The dependability of this rhyme scheme also creates a sense of predictability that aligns with the poem's overall message—namely, that time marches on no matter what and that there's no stopping the effect this has on people.

Although it might seem to contemporary readers that lines 2 and 4 don't actually rhyme, the words "brood" and "blood" most likely *did* rhyme in Shakespeare's pronunciation. The same may be true for lines 13 and 14. Overall, the rhyme scheme holds together quite well throughout the poem, creating a sense of regularity and consistency that reflects the steady forward match of time.

SPEAKER

There isn't much identifying information about the poem's speaker. However, readers can conclude that the speaker is in love with a young, attractive man (as evidenced by the personal pronoun "him") and that the speaker finds the thought of time destroying this man's beauty unbearable. In some ways, this thought process implies that the speaker is older than the lover and knows all too well that time inevitably destroys all the positive things associated with youth.

This reading aligns with the widely held belief that the speaker

in all 126 of Shakespeare's "Fair Youth" sonnets is the same person: an older male poet involved in a romantic affair with a beautiful younger man. Even on its own, though, "Sonnet 19" presents the speaker as someone determined to cherish the lover's youthful qualities in any way possible, even if this is only achievable through poetry.

SETTING

The setting of the poem is ambiguous because neither the physical surroundings nor the time period factor very heavily into the sonnet's subject. After all, the poem meditates on love, the passage of time, and art's ability to immortalize otherwise fleeting aspects of human existence. These ideas are relatively universal, and by not placing the poem in a specific place or time, the speaker in a way plucks the beloved himself out of time's grasp.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 19" belongs to Shakespeare's "Fair Youth" sequence, which consists of 126 sonnets that typically revolve around themes of love, art, and the passage of time. Most readers believe that the speaker of these sonnets is an aging male poet who's in a romantic relationship with a younger man. Throughout this sequence, the speaker laments the "swift" nature of time and worries about how it will ruin the lover and, in turn, their romantic bond.

The "Fair Youth" sequence often turns to art as a way to preserve and immortalize the love between the speaker and the young man—something "Sonnet 19" does very clearly when the speaker suggests that, despite the ravages of time, the lover will "ever live young" in the speaker's own poetry.

In general, these ideas draw upon concerns that are very common in Renaissance poetry. Indeed, most sonnets during this period dealt with the various sorrows and joys associated with romantic affection—a tradition that began in the 1300s, when the Italian poet Francesco Petrarch seized upon such themes in his sonnets, the majority of which centered around love and desire. These sonnets were so popular that the form Petrarch used (though did not invent) became a template that many poets copied—a template now known as the Petrarchan sonnet.

"Sonnet 19," of course, isn't a Petrarchan sonnet, but rather a Shakespearean sonnet. This means that it features a different rhyme scheme and a slightly different structure; whereas Petrarchan sonnets consist of an octave followed by a sestet, Shakespearean sonnets consist of three quatrains followed by a final couplet. Nonetheless, there's no denying that Shakespeare's thematic interests in "Sonnet 19" take cues from Petrarch's work. The difference in structure and presentation, then, simply highlights the ways in which the sonnet evolved as a form between the 1300s and the late 1500s, taking on new iterations as it spread through medieval Europe.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Most scholars believe that "Sonnet 19" was written in the 1590s, which was a remarkably peaceful and prosperous time in England. In 1588, Spain sent a fleet of 130 ships to invade England with the purpose of overthrowing Queen Elizabeth and destroying one of the prominent footholds of Protestantism in Europe. However, the fleet, known as the Spanish Armada, lost miserably to England, and the ensuing years were relatively calm in Britain as a result.

This, therefore, meant that Englanders had time to focus on and patronize the arts, which is possibly why the 1590s were among the most prolific years of Shakespeare's writing career (at least in terms of creative output). During this time, he not only composed plays like *Henry IV* (parts I through III), *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, but also penned his sonnets. And although there were certainly some very dark moments (including the outbreak of Bubonic plague in 1592 that shut down London's theaters and killed 15,000 people), this time period is generally seen as a fruitful, productive era in England, especially for writers like Shakespeare.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Patrick Stewart Reads the Poem — Listen to the actor Sir Patrick Stewart give a dramatic reading of "Sonnet 19." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yebKiCLfIBI)
- Long Live the Phoenix — To better understand the poem's reference to the "long-liv'd Phoenix," explore the information about the mythological creature. (https://www.britannica.com/topic/phoenix-mythological-bird)
- More About the Bard — To learn more about Shakespeare, take a look at this overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-shakespeare)
- 1609 Facsimile — Check out this facsimile of the 1609 publication of "Sonnet 19" to get a sense of what it would have been like to read Shakespeare during his lifetime. (https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/facsimile/book/UC_Q1_Son/8/?work=&zoom=500)
- Shakescleare Translation — Gain some extra clarity with our concise and understandable modern

English translation of "Sonnet 19." (https://www.litcharts.com/shakescleare/shakespeare-translations/sonnets/sonnet-19)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE POEMS

- Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds
- Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun
- Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth
- Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
- Sonnet 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
- Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
- Sonnet 71: No longer mourn for me when I am dead
- Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold

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