

A clockwork shakespeare: analysis of time in sonnet 12



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

William Shakespeare's take on the passage of time seems consistently concentrated on its most destructive effects on the body. He obsesses over this ineluctable force across several of his sonnets, couching the passage of time with almost exclusively negative terminology. He resonates the same ideal in "Sonnet 12: When I do count the clock that tells the time," utilizing a sequence of ironic personifications and metonymic symbols to illustrate the inevitability of time and ultimately his only conceivable hindrance of this in bearing children. The personifications in this sonnet function primarily to emphasize elements of death. Shakespeare breathes life into them only to figuratively kill them off soon afterward. He effectively demonstrates the ravages of the inescapable passage of time, as seen in this juxtaposition: "When I do count the clock that tells the time / and see the brave day sunk into hideous night" (1-2). Here the clock almost tauntingly "tells" the time, in a sense mocking the "brave" day that inevitably must acquiesce to the flow of time thereby falling "into hideous night." This also draws a sense of irony, in that sunsets are typically depicted beautifully, whereas this one is repugnant. Subsequent personifications employ a similar technique, taking something typically viewed in a positive manner and depicting it as growing listless and unfavorable with the passage of time. The speaker portrays the otherwise pleasant "summer's green" (7) as inevitably "all girded up in sheaves / borne on the bier with white and bristly beard" (7-8), granting the season of summer the ability to physically die over time by representing it as an old, dying man through the bier and beard. This serves a second example of irony, where an otherwise productive and celebratory time of harvesting grain becomes juxtaposed with the unattractive facets of aging, further portraying the graveness of time. It also provides a contrast in color, as the <https://assignbuster.com/a-clockwork-shakespeare-analysis-of-time-in-sonnet-12/>

lively “ green” of summer clashes with the achromatic and abrasive “ white and bristly beard,” further substantiating the ill-desired effects produced by passing time. The series of ironic personifications observed in the first two quatrains of the sonnet are consistently presented in this positive light only to succumb to death soon after, like the “ lofty trees” (5) becoming “ barren of leaves, which erst from heat did canopy the herd” (5-6). The speaker clearly makes his point in demonstrating the devastation of time, and until the concluding couplet of the sonnet offers little solace in staving it off. In the sonnet’s final bit of personification, The narrator elects that “ nothing ‘ gainst Time’s scythe can make defense / save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence” (13-14), suggesting that the only way to remain alive despite time is through bearing children to live on in one’s place. The sonnet also employs the literary trope of metonymy to effectively accentuate aspects of death due to the passing of time. The aforementioned “ bier” and “ white and bristly beard” (7-8) serve as appropriate metonymic symbols in their equation to much larger themes of death and aging, transcending the more evident irony and personification to function on a third rhetoric level. The speaker’s implementation of this sort of symbol serves additional support in his emphasis on the inexorable damage done by time’s passing, underlining the effects of old age and death and explicitly stating “ that thou among the wastes of time must go” (10). Hair color proves emblematic of old age a second time in the sonnet also, when earlier the speaker “ behold[s] the violet past prime and sable curls o’ersilvered are with white” (3-4). The narrator establishes a corollary here, exemplifying the idea of time draining life by showing how it drains color in the transformation made from the “ violet” and “ sable curls” to “ white,” again demonstrating the inversely

<https://assignbuster.com/a-clockwork-shakespeare-analysis-of-time-in-sonnet-12/>

correlated relationship between time and beauty. The synecdoche of the white hair to old age furthers Shakespeare's attempt to portray the ravages wrought by the flow of time, knowing full well that "sweets and beauties do themselves forsake" (11). This leads him to his only means of retaliation against time- since all beautiful creatures "die as fast as they see others grow," (12) Shakespeare proposes that the beautiful creatures must procreate to save the world from becoming dreary, dull, and dead. In this way, the incessant ebb time tolls on one's "beauty" (9) is also sufficiently redeemed by the likeness of that beauty one's offspring perpetuates in their place. Works Cited Shakespeare, William. Sonnets. Baltimore: Penguin, 1961.