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# **Endings and Beginnings: Shakespeare's Sonnet 73**

*Jane Andrew*

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**William Shakespeare**  
**Sonnet 73**

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 see'st 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 see'st the glowing of such fire,  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the deathbed 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.

## Endings and Beginnings

To a young person, William Shakespeare's sonnet 73 may only be an example of finely crafted verse, but for someone elderly, it is as real as his own thoughts. An aging person is acutely conscious of two things this sonnet addresses: a fact—the finality of death, and a question—how does one respond to that fact? To express the fact and answer the question, Shakespeare makes three familiar “endings” into devastating visual images, then arranges them so that the speaker and his audience progress from ordinary “seeing” to a deeper perception of the finality of death. But at the same time, these images retain a strong sense of beginnings, or at least of something before the end, so that the speaker and the audience acknowledge life as well as death, and in that find strength.

In this sonnet we see an old man musing aloud to a listener (or maybe to no one in particular, as old people sometimes do), “In me thou see'st. . . .” Perhaps they go out walking, and the elderly speaker begins to compare himself to the day. The sense of imminent death is conveyed by the dying leaves which “hang” limply on branches that, like the speaker's limbs, shake with infirmity. Perhaps they pass a once-beautiful chapel whose choir walls are now ruined, as the speaker's body is (a temple, too, according to the Bible). Here, the image of crumbling stone and rotting leaves physically, visibly parallels the condition of his body. However, amidst the decay, we are reminded of what went before: the “sweet birds” of youth sang in the “choir” of his body not long ago. This first quatrain implies the possibility of renewal: after autumn and winter, spring will come again.

As the miserable autumn day declines into evening, the speaker finds an image of himself in the twilight. Life is gradually draining out of him like the color out of a sunset. The last light gives way to “black night,” which is “Death's second self that seals up all in rest.” Night seals the living in restful sleep—from which they awake. The dead, who appear to be sleeping, are sealed in tombs. “By and by,” Death is sealing in the speaker. This image seems more finite and conclusive, but, as with the memory of “sweet birds,” reminders of the previous condition linger: to have a twilight, one must have had a day. Also, the second image, like the first, implies a cycle: dawn will come again.

Or will it? The last word of the quatrain is pivotal: “rest.” It can mean either a pause, which makes continued activity possible, or a complete halt. That is, it may be temporary (as in sleep), or permanent (as in death). The word is pivotal because the first two images were of

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cyclical things, a season and a day, for which endings are temporary,  
but the third image is of final, destructive fire.

Deep night has fallen on the dreary day, and the speaker sits before a fire which has burned low. Of all the images, he identifies himself most closely with the fire by personifying it. "The ashes of his (the fire's) youth" become a "deathbed" on which the fire will "expire." The word deathbed continues the metaphor of night, sleep and death begun in the previous quatrain. His body, which once "nourished" the fire of passion, has decayed to ashes. Disease "consumes" the passion, and death will extinguish it, as ashes finally quench embers.

Thus far, the speaker has spoken to some immediate audience, but in the couplet he seems to include himself in the statement, "This thou perceiv'st." This perceiving involves more than the sense of sight. Shakespeare signals this in the very first line by using the word "behold" in an otherwise very literal image: according to the Oxford English Dictionary, at that time "behold" could mean "to regard (with the mind), consider." Thus, both the speaker and his listener have perceived—beheld, recognized—two things. Death is inescapable: based on the previous images, the speaker must "leave ere long." Yet, even in old age the memory of youth and the capacity for love are still alive: if the speaker felt only despair at the decay of his body, there would be no reason to make "thy love more strong," nor any "that" to love well.

However, these perceptions are not limited to the speaker or to the listener (present or imagined) who walks beside him. The sonnet also works if "thou" is taken throughout to be a real person—the reader. By progressing from images of the ever-renewing seasons and days to destructive and consuming fire, and by making these images into increasingly complex metaphors for death, Shakespeare forces us to recognize the speaker's mortality, and in his, our own. We all must "leave ere long." Yet, by using endings he reminds us of beginnings, and says that our response to death should be to savor our memories and the life that remains.

**Jane Andrew** - is from Marseilles, Illinois. Jane earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Physics in the spring of 1986 and is currently living in Champaign Illinois, where she is doing technical work for Searle Laboratories.