

Shakespeare's Sonnet 73

— An Empsonian Approach —

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In this paper I will examine Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 by means of verbal analysis in an attempt to arrive at a fuller comprehension, and hence appreciation, of the poem. For the following analysis I am indebted to two analytical conceptions propounded by W.G. Ingram and William Empson: namely, the "movement" inside the sonnet form and "ambiguity".

W.G. Ingram, who edited *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London, 1964) with T. Redpath, discusses the "Shakespearean quality" of the Sonnets as follows:

In studies of the Sonnets we naturally find attention directed to their imagery; but the interest has been largely thematic. Its effect on structure and on what I will call "movement" inside the sonnet form — on the nature of the thought progression that modifies content-pattern — has received but limited notice. Yet this is one of the features that markedly distinguish the "Shakespearean" feel of the Sonnets from the general run of contemporary sonneteering.⁽¹⁾

This characteristic "movement of the sonnet" is indeed conspicuous in many of Shakespeare's sonnets, and Sonnet 73, a masterpiece of Shakespeare's poetic technique, in particular, seems to embody such well-executed "movements". I will try to show that one ought to pay due attention to such "movements" in the three quatrains in order to appreciate fully the lavish and beautiful poetic complexities of Sonnet 73.

As for Empson, it is no difficult job to do the nitpicking in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.⁽²⁾ No doubt many readers of the book would concur with J. Haffenden, editor of the posthumous collection of Empson's essays *Argufying*, when he says "[Empson]

paid too little attention to questions of authorial aim and literary and historical relevance."⁽³⁾ The adverse criticisms against *Ambiguity* may be summarized by the following quotation from Empson's own remarks:

The argument which seems to me strongest, in these literary critics who say that Empson is absurd, is that they say the overall effect of a piece of writing, the general intention of the author, is what decides what you make of a particular line. The critic mustn't pick on one line and get astonishingly irrelevant meanings out of it, because that isn't what anybody does if he is reading properly.⁽⁴⁾

This sort of criticism, I agree, might well be pertinent to some of Empson's analyses in his *Ambiguity*. In my analysis of Sonnet 73, however, I will attempt to demonstrate how an *Empsonian* verbal analysis and his concept of ambiguity can be of great use and importance in reading Shakespearean verse. Though the overall poetic feeling in Sonnet 73 is unmistakable, this sonnet contains quite a few cruxes that puzzle the reader's mind. In order to unravel these enigmas and explain the nature of the delightful poetic reverberations in this poem, I have found the *Empsonian* approach indispensable.

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For the text and commentary of Shakespeare's Sonnets, I have looked into the original 1609 Quarto text⁽⁵⁾ as well as four other editions by the modern scholars: i.e. W.G. Ingram and T. Redpath⁽⁶⁾, J. Dover Wilson⁽⁷⁾, Stephen Booth⁽⁸⁾, and John Kerrigan⁽⁹⁾. Let me

reproduce the 1609 Quarto version first:

Sonnet 73

1. That time of yeeare thou maist in me behold,
2. When yellow leaues, or none, or few doe hange
3. Vpon those boughes which shake against the
could,
4. Bare m'wd quiers, where late the sweet birds
sang.
5. In me thou seest the twi-light of such day,
6. As after Sun-set fadeth in the West,
7. Which by and by blacke night doth take away,
8. Deaths second selfe that seals vp all in rest.
9. In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,
10. That on the ashes of his youth doth lye,
11. As the death bed, whereon it must expire,
12. Consum'd with that which it was nurrisht by.
13. This thou perceu'st, which makes thy loue more
strong,
14. To loue that well, which thou must leaue ere
long.

In the course of my analysis, I will occasionally refer to this 1609 Quarto text for its original spellings and punctuations. As the main reading text, however, I will choose the most recent edition of Kerrigan:

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

long.

As a rule, I will not repeat what has already been discussed by the above-mentioned modern commentators unless the point in question is relevant to what I propose to discuss. (And when I do make a repetition, I will always indicate the source.) My analysis will focus on the three quatrains. I will omit the last couplet from my discussion because I can make no contribution of my own to the previous scholarship.

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Stephen Booth had presented an analysis of Sonnet 73 in his earlier, searching study *Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven, 1969)⁽¹⁰⁾. First of all, let me summarize some of the points in Booth's analysis that are relevant to my discussion. Booth observes that the formal identity of the three quatrains is reinforced substantially and syntactically. The three quatrains compare the speaker to a tree, twilight, and fire, respectively; each quatrain is a single sentence, and the first lines of the second quatrain ("*In me thou seest the twilight...*") and the third quatrain ("*In me thou seest the glowing...*") echo line 1. He also observes several progressions which coexist in the quatrains. Time is measured in progressively smaller units: first a season of a year, then a part of a day, and finally the last moments of the hour or so that a fire burns.⁽¹¹⁾ These observations are all important. In other words, the three quatrains consist of three sentences that are parallel both syntactically and thematically, and each seems to present an image — i.e. "few yellow leaves", "fading twilight", and "glowing of dying fire" — to symbolize things just about to pass away.

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The first quatrain compares the age of the poet to the season when few leaves are left on the boughs of a tree. The visual imagery of the "few yellow leaves hanging on the boughs which shake against the cold wind" offers to the reader's mind a picture of winter's arrival as well as one of autumn's end. The imagery of

“winter” operates here as a force of Nature that brings death to things, and to the leaves on a tree in particular. It is rather important to recall that, in Shakespeare’s Sonnets, “winter” is mentioned repeatedly to symbolize the last years of human life and is closely associated with the image of death. To quote a few other examples:

For never-resting Time leads summer on
To hideous winter and confounds him there

(Son. 5/5-6)

Against the stormy gusts of winter’s day
And barren rage of death’s eternal cold?

(Son. 13/11-12)

The imagery of “winter” in the Sonnets at large evidently helps to highlight the designed pathos in the reader’s mind.

The last line of the first quatrain “Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang” was adduced by Empson in his discussion of the first type of “ambiguity” in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. (No other part of Sonnet 73 was cited or examined in *Ambiguity*.) The purpose of this paper is not to repeat what Empson has already done, but to show how his concept of ambiguity can provide the keys to unlock other parts of this sonnet. It seems tedious to quote him at this point, but just to be reminded of what Empson had to say on the line, I will sum up his argument and make some quotations.

Empson provides a general definition of the term “ambiguity”, at the onset of *Ambiguity*, as “any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language” (*Ambiguity*, p. 1). The first type of ambiguity is then broadly defined as “a word or a grammatical structure effective in several ways at once” (*Ibid.*, p. 2). As an archetype of this first ambiguity, Empson takes up the “comparison of two things which does not say in virtue of what they are to be compared.” (*Ibid.*, p. 21). Line 4 of Sonnet 73 is quoted as the first example of this type of ambiguity:

To take a famous example, there is no pun, double

syntax, or dubiety of feeling, in

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds
sang,

but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter, because the cold and Narcissistic charm suggested by choir-boys suits well with Shakespeare’s feeling for the object of the Sonnets...; these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind. (*Ibid.*, pp. 2-3)

I think Empson is right when he makes a further comment that “the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry” (*Ibid.*, p. 3). Although the validity of the entire above-quoted list of reasons for linking Shakespeare’s “boughs” with ruined monasteries is questionable⁽²⁾, the important facts are that “bare ruined choirs” hangs syntactically in apposition with “boughs” in the previous line, and that “choirs” functions as a metaphor for “boughs”. Here, we must stop to consider whether the relative clause “where late the sweet birds sang” goes with “choirs” in line 4 or with “boughs” in line 3, or with both. The 1609 Quarto Text reads:

4. Bare m’wd quiers, where late the sweet birds
sang.

The line thus originally had a comma before the relative clause. When we delete the comma, as Ingram & Redpath and Kerrigan did⁽³⁾, the relative clause is more directly connected with the preceding word “choirs”;

when we leave it in, the connection becomes less direct and, instead, it becomes easier to link the clause with "boughs" in the previous line. The word "choir" (spelled "quiere" in those days) signifies "that part of a church appropriated to the singers" (*O.E.D.*, s.v., 2). Therefore, when the clause "where late the sweet birds sang" takes "choirs" as the antecedent, the phrase "sweet birds" metaphorically conjures up a vision of choristers singing in chorus in a church. On the other hand, when the same clause takes "boughs" as its antecedent, the clause invokes the imagery of birds warbling in the tree in summer. I think it quite senseless to try to decide here on one reading to the exclusion of the other. The ambiguity in the syntactical connection of the relative clause is deliberate, so that it makes the reader, in pondering over the alternative readings, bear in mind all the meanings it puts forward. We will observe the same ambiguities in the next two quatrains.

Though not touched upon by the commentators, a *contrast* in sound imagery is clearly at work in the first quatrain. The "sensitiveness of Shakespeare's ear" or the poet's "daintiness of ear" is well attested to in Spurgeon's work.⁽⁴⁾ According to Spurgeon, when Shakespeare's "imagination is heightened...he tends naturally to fall into the analogy of music," (*Imagery*, p. 75) and that the "song of birds" seemed "specially to interest or affect Shakespeare." (*Ibid.*, p. 73). To quote a couple of other examples from the Sonnets:

Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
(Son. 29/10-12)

Yet nor the lays of birds, nor the sweet smell
Of different flowers in odour and in hue,
Could make me any summer's story tell,
(Son. 98/5-7)

Hence, in the first quatrain, we are able to perceive the arrival of winter not only visually, through the imagery of a "few yellow leaves hanging on the bare boughs", but also audibly, through the conspicuous silence left by the absence of the singing of birds, as well as through

the bleak rustling sounds of the "boughs shaking against the cold wind."

Kerrigan draws our attention to a possible pun on the word "quiens" (the original Quarto spelling of "choirs"). *O.E.D.* registers "quier" for the 16th century spelling of "quire", which could signify "a small pamphlet or book, consisting of a single quire; a short poem, treatise, etc., which is or might be contained in a quire" (*O.E.D.*, s.v. *quire*, 2). Kerrigan refers to Sonnet 17/9 ("So should my papers, yellowed with their age,") and argues that "quiens" in the Quarto Text "usually alerts the reader, already (with hindsight) sensitized by *yellow leaves*, to a pun on 'quires'." (Kerrigan, p. 265). Thus, "the poet finds his writings, once tuneful, old and barren." (*Ibid.*, p. 265). Kerrigan proposes this imagery rather cautiously, describing this metaphoric connection as "less immediate". Did Shakespeare really intend this pun? Should this seemingly far-fetched imagery of "quires" be admitted? Though we cannot have a definite answer to this question, I think it quite possible that this subdued pun on "quiens" should have evoked, albeit momentarily, an image of old, tattered "quires" of poems in the minds of the Elizabethan readers. To be sure, this image cannot be a dominant one in the quatrain. It could, however, indirectly throw in the figure of the poet himself in his late years—through the medium of the image of his once-tuneful, old and tattered collection of poems—amidst the seasonal imagery of winter made up by "leaves", "boughs", "choirs", and "birds". To the old poet's mind the bygone days when his verses were delightful in tune may well seem, psychologically speaking, to be *but now*. Hence, the adverb "late" in "quiens where late the sweet birds sang" is not incongruous with the line but functional: it could only help to increase the intended pathos in the clause.

Ambiguity occasioned by a pun was extensively discussed by Empson as his third type of ambiguity (see *Ambiguity*, pp. 102-132), and the line we have been discussing might well be considered as an example of ambiguity through a pun which "may make a single statement and imply various situations to which it is relevant." (*Ibid.*, pp. 111f.).

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In the second quatrain, we are presented with the image of nightfall. As we tend to admire the beauty of the sunset and the evening glow, here Spurgeon's analysis of Shakespeare's imagery is also helpful. She observes that while the spectacle of the rising sun seems ever peculiarly to inspire and delight Shakespeare,

The sight of the setting sun, on the other hand, depresses him: he sees in it, not the glory of its colour, or rest and quiet, or the promise of another day, but the end of things, old age, storms to come, sorrow, dangers and approaching night.

(*Imagery*, p. 63)

The contrast in color between twilight (glowing red) and night (black), or the change in the fading color of twilight, is employed to heighten the poetic sentiment.

Line 8 is, in a way, a poser. This I had always found somewhat puzzling until I read Empson.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The difficulty is twofold. One is the exact meanings of the two phrases, namely, "Death's second self" and "seals up". The other is the syntactical connection of the relative clause "that seals up all in rest". The two problems are closely intertwined.

Ingram & Redpath pass over the phrase "Death's second self" in silence. Booth glosses it simply as "a stock Renaissance epithet for sleep, here applied to *night*" (Boothe, *Sonnets*, p. 259). This comment is repeated almost verbatim and endorsed by Kerrigan.⁽⁴⁶⁾ There is, I believe, a need to elaborate on the signification and function of the phrase. Let me begin by drawing attention to the neat syntactical parallelism among the three quatrains:

3. ... boughs ...
4. Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.
7. ... night ...
8. Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
10. ... ashes ...

11. As the deathbed whereon it must expire,

(Note that the Quarto Text had a comma before the relative clauses in lines 4 and 11. Conversely, it did not have a comma in line 8.)

Lines 4 and 8 seem to hang syntactically in apposition with "boughs" and "night", respectively. We have already discussed the syntactical ambiguity in the relative clause "where late the sweet birds sang" in line 4. This same ambiguity continues to function in lines 8 and 11. In the second quatrain, the relative clause "that seals up all in rest" can take either "night" or "Death's second self" as its antecedent. Likewise, the clause "whereon it must expire" can be linked either with "ashes" or with "deathbed". Indeed, the reversal placement and omission of commas preceding the relative clauses in lines 4, 8, and 11 between the 1609 Quarto Text and Kerrigan's text seem to substantiate the very ambiguity in the syntactical connections of the three relative clauses in question. This sort of "ambiguity of syntax" belongs to Empson's second type of ambiguity (*Ambiguity*, pp. 48-101). I should think it even strange that Empson did not adduce these lines to support his argument. For these are perfect examples, as we will further see in the following analysis, to demonstrate that Shakespeare was able to create, using "several different metaphors at once"⁽⁴⁷⁾ through the ambiguity of syntax, an enriched multiple imagery in a single sentence.

Now, we proceed to tackle the phrase "Death's second self". The first question must be: Is this an epithet or a metaphor for "black night"? As we have seen, both Booth and Kerrigan seem to think that it is an epithet applied to "night". That is possible. It is certainly one way of reading the quatrain without any further ado. On the other hand, when we consider the facts that "Death's second self" is a standard epithet for *sleep* (and *not* for *night*); that a neat parallelism runs through three pairs of lines, i.e. lines 3-4, 7-8, and 10-11; and finally, that the word "deathbed" in line 11 functions metaphorically for "ashes" in the previous line — whether the preposition "as" in the adverbial phrase "As the deathbed" signifies "in the function of"

or “like” that introduces a simile — , it seems to me somewhat absurd to insist that “Death’s second self” can *not* be interpreted as a metaphor for “black night”. Facing this enigmatic phrase, the reader’s mind inevitably swings back and forth between the two alternatives. When one reading cannot be chosen to the exclusion of the other, again as before, it would be more natural, I think, to assume that Shakespeare is deliberately playing on ambiguity.

If we take the expression “Death’s second self” as a metaphor, in the three pairs of lines extracted above, the words in the first lines of each group, i.e. “boughs”, “night”, and “ashes”, all conjure up metaphorical images in the following lines. In the chart below, I have mapped out the way in which the three different sets of images operate in each quatrain:

Quatrains (I, II, III)

(A) Things just about to pass away

(B) Things left behind

(C) Things compared to (B)

I. (A) yellow leaves

(B) boughs

(C) (bare ruined) choirs

II. (A) twilight

(B) night

(C) “Death’s second self”

III. (A) glowing of (dying) fire

(B) ashes

(C) deathbed

Thus, each of the three parallel quatrains strings the three images (A), (B), (C) in succession with neat, parallel relationships among one another.

When we take this elegant parallelism — a nice example of Ingram’s “movement” inside the sonnet — seriously, we can further observe that the two metaphoric expressions “Bare ruined choirs” and “Death’s second self” may both be preceded by “As” in perfect accordance with the succeeding phrase “As the deathbed”.

Then, when we consider the phrase “Death’s second self” as a metaphor for “black night”, the

primary denotation of the phrase can simply be “sleep”. In this case “black night ..., Death’s second self, that seals up all in rest” would mean: “Just as sleep seals up all eyes into restful sleep, so does black night ‘seel up’⁽¹⁸⁾ all eyes”, or “..., so does black night seal up everything into darkness in which all will be asleep.” But, of course, the phrase “Death’s second self” is not exactly identical with “sleep” itself. For one thing, the word “Death” at the outset of line 8 certainly leaves a strong impression on the mind of any reader of Sonnet 73. What is more, we ought to recall the fact that, in Shakespeare’s works, sleep was closely associated with death. “Most constantly of all,” Spurgeon observes, “he sees it (i.e. death) as a sleep.” (Spurgeon, *Imagery*, p. 184) To cite a few of the best-known examples:

Hamlet:

“To die — to sleep, / No more; ...”

(*Hamlet*, III.1.60–61)

Prospero:

“We are such stuff / As dreams are made on;

and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.”

(*The Tempest*, IV.1.156–8)

In fact, as we know, the association between death and sleep goes all the way back to the Bible. For instance:

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.
(I Thess. 4:14–15)⁽¹⁹⁾

Hence, I contend that the two images of *sleep* and *death* overlap in the single expression “Death’s second self”. This overlapping of sleep and death, we should not fail to observe, is beautifully echoed in the succeeding word “rest”. “Rest” signifies not only “sleep” but also “the repose of death or of the grave” (*O.E.D.* “rest” 6). Then lines 7 and 8 could mean “Just as death seals up all eyes into eternal rest,” or “Just as death seals up everybody into a repose of death in a coffin, so does black night, like a coffin, seal up everything into deadly darkness.”⁽²⁰⁾

The last imagery compares, as it were, the darkening sky at nightfall to the lid of a coffin, which is just about to be sealed up, leaving the whole world in the darkness of death. Even when we take the phrase "Death's second self" as an epithet for "black night", or when we read the line as "As (i.e. in the quality or function of) Death's second self", the connection "black night, that seals up all in rest" could only mean one of the above-mentioned interpretations of the clause. Consequently, the two alternative interpretations of "Death's second self" — i.e. one reading the phrase as a metaphor for "black night" and the other as its epithet — are not in the least incompatible, but, instead, the more strained reading of the former could only help to enrich the imagery of "black night" as an emblem of death, which is what the latter, more straightforward reading suggests.

To conclude a rather lengthy discussion on the ambiguities in the significations of "Death's second self" and "seals up" and those in the syntactical connection of "that seals up all in rest", I would repeat my contention that, when we are faced with those puzzling ambiguities, it is unwise as well as impossible to decide on a single reading of the text to the exclusion of the others. Shakespeare's unsettling syntax and use of expressions force our mind to react to the ambiguities, which must be deliberate and serve to create richer poetic complexities. I believe the following comment of Empson's may well be applied to our discussion here:

All meanings to be extracted from these are the immediate meaning insisted upon by the words, and yet the whole charm of the poem is its extravagant, its unreasonable simplicity. (*Ambiguity*, p. 49)

Now, if, as we have just analyzed, "black night" is draped with the imagery of death, the grammatical object of "take away" could also imply something other than the mere "fading evening glow". To say that "night takes away twilight" is certainly poetic, but, at the same time, this sounds slightly odd in ordinary diction. Any reader would no doubt feel this delicate oddity in the

second quatrain. Then, if we changed the word order of line 5 to a more usual one, reading "Thou seest the twilight of such day in me..., Which by and by black night doth take away," it would become easier to realize that it is not inconceivable to take the antecedent of "Which" in line 7 to be "me" of line 5 in the Elizabethan poetic diction.⁽²⁾ Were this reading to be granted, the lines could mean: "You see the last spark of life in my old self, which Death will soon take away from this world." This might seem a bit too far-fetched, yet it is a possibility. In any case, as "black night" stands for an emblem of death in this quatrain, lines 5-7 may well mean: "You see in me the fading vigor, the last spark of my life, which will presently be taken away by the approaching death just as the black night takes away the twilight." Hence, when this subdued meaning of the second quatrain is made clear, the degree of personification in the quatrain becomes dramatically heightened to prepare the reader's mind for the more directly personified third quatrain.

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In the third quatrain we find no riddle to perplex our mind. We ought to note that the degree of personification from the first through the third quatrain has progressively increased. In the first quatrain, the personification was, at best, indirect and momentary. There the reader was allowed to catch only a glimpse of the old poet, depending on a subdued pun of "quieters". In the second quatrain, as we have just discussed, the degree of personification is much heightened with a string of images. In the final third quatrain, the degree of personification climaxes with a series of words that evidently pertain to human beings: namely, "ashes", "youth", "lie", "deathbed", "expire", and "nourished". ("Ashes" could mean "That which remains of a human body after cremation" [*O.E.D.*, s.v. 4]). Here, the imagery of the "last spark of life" in the poet, which was not yet self-evident at the first reading in the second quatrain, is unmistakably projected onto the picture of the "glowing of dying fire".

Furthermore, the last line of the third quatrain:

12. Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

whose syntactical subject is "fire" in line 9 as well as "it" in line 11, does manifest, I think, a strong degree of personification. To be sure, the primary sense of the line is "(dying fire) choked by and along with the ashes of firewood which it had previously eaten up in order to burn." However, the idea that Time "nourishes" human life and then "consumes" and destroys it later is recurrent in the Sonnets. To quote two examples:

Those hours that with gentle work did frame
The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell
Will play the tyrants to the very same
And that unfair which fairly doth excel;
For never-resting Time leads summer on
To hideous winter and confounds him there,
(Sonnet 5/1-6)

Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.
(Sonnet 60/5-8)

Therefore, I would argue that Shakespeare is drawing a parallel relationship between fire vs. firewood and human life vs. Time in line 12. As we read on through lines 9 to 12, the imagery of the poet's last spark of life increasingly catches up with that of dying fire.

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Before concluding this analysis of Sonnet 73, I ought to add some remarks on what Ingram calls "movement inside the sonnet form." We have already discussed two such "movements" in this sonnet. The first one was the neat parallelism that runs through the three quatrains, which reinforces the metaphorical function of the phrase "Death's second self". The second was the gradually increasing degree in the personification of "things just about to pass away" through the three quatrains. There are two other examples of "movement" or what Ingram paraphrases

as "thought progression that modifies content-pattern"⁽²²⁾ in the quatrains.

1) In the first two quatrains the reader's attention is naturally alerted to the contrast in sound and in color. As we have already discussed, the contrast in the two sound images in the first quatrain was between the image of the bleak rustling sound of "boughs which shake against the cold" and that of a past memory of "the sweet birds" singing. In the second quatrain, the contrast in color between the "twilight" and "black night" was clear-cut. Now, in the third, the above two contrasts in sound and color both seem to be effectively working as if two previous movements of the preceding quatrains had converged into one in the last. The contrast in color between the "glowing fire" and "ashes" (or darkness after the extinction of fire) is obvious. In addition to this visual contrast, when the reader visualizes a fireplace with firewood in flames, though not overtly mentioned in the third quatrain, the crackling sound of burning firewood, so warming and cheering to the soul on a cold winter night, is sure to be heard in his imagination. In the third quatrain, this crackling or sputtering sound is heard no more. Probably only a dying fall of the music is heard, and we know that after the fire "expires", a total hush will envelope the scene. Thus, we cannot choose but notice the contrast in sound between the warm crackling of burning firewood called forth to our imagination and the hush after it "expires".

2) In the first quatrain, we see the imagery of autumn's end and the arrival of winter through "yellow leaves" and "boughs which shake against the cold." In the second, we observe another temporal transition: namely, one from evening to night. Hence, since our mind, as we read on, follows this sequential movement in time — that is, "from autumn to winter" and "from evening to night", in the last quatrain, where no temporal reference is made, the natural flow of the poem *allows* us to assume the time to be the result of two temporal sequences converged into one, i.e. winter night. What is important here is that the last quatrain, if read by itself, would give us no clue as to its temporal background; while, as it is in the sonnet, the time reference "winter night" can easily be imagined in the

reader's mind to further enhance the poetic sentiment. The very first image invoked in Sonnet 73, that of yellow leaves hanging against a wintry sky, which, though certainly cheerless, was not altogether so disheartening, seems thus to culminate in the final quatrain, in the multiple threads of imagery of "night", "winter" and "dying fire", all of which are intimately associated with the idea of death. If we were to add the image of the poet in the last moments of his life, which is the theme of the sonnet as well as the image that the personified dying fire calls forth in the third quatrain, the cumulative poetic effect of the images would indeed be overwhelmingly filled with pathos.

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Through an analysis of Sonnet 73, we have noted how Shakespeare fits a whole bunch of imagery into the sonnet form so aptly that, through the "movements" inside the quatrains, the poetic sentiment of pathos progressively heightens as one reads on. A peculiar characteristic of Sonnet 73 is that, although it consists of three syntactically and thematically parallel sentences, if we were to pick up the final quatrain by itself, it would immediately lose the cumulative poetic momentum that it has. Nor can we alter the sequence of the three quatrains without losing the culmination of poetic feelings in the third quatrain.

We have also examined in some detail how masterfully Shakespeare wields ambiguities to create deeper poetic effects. I hope I have been successful in showing that Empson was in the right when he remarked on the criticisms against his *Ambiguity*:

I know I made mistakes, but you can't laugh the whole method off; it can still stand up even when the fashion changes.⁽²³⁾

Notes

- (1) W. G. Ingram, "The Shakespearean Quality," in *New Essays on Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Ed. Hilton Landry. (New York, 1976). p. 42.
- (2) The first edition: 1930, London. In this paper, I quote from the revised third edition (1953, London). Hereafter cited as *Ambiguity*.
- (3) William Empson, *Argufying* (U. of Iowa Press, 1987), p. 10.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 10. From his BBC broadcast on Oct. 20, 1954.
- (5) *The Reproduction of the 1609 Quarto Text*. (New York: Payson & Clarke, 1927).
- (6) *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, (ed. W.G. Ingram & T. Redpath. London, 1964).
- (7) *The Sonnets* (The New Cambridge Shakespeare), (ed. John Dover Wilson. Cambridge, 1966).
- (8) *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, (ed. Stephen Booth. New Haven, 1977). Hereafter cited as "Booth, *Sonnets*".
- (9) *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, (ed. John Kerrigan. Penguin, 1986). Hereafter cited as Kerrigan.
- (10) Hereafter cited as "Booth, *Essay*".
- (11) Booth, *Essay*, pp. 125-126.
- (12) I will not go into this controversy regarding "the degree of correspondence imagined or imaginable" between *boughs* and *choirs*. For this, see Kerrigan's commentary, pp. 265-6.
- (13) Wilson and Booth retained the comma in their modernized editions.
- (14) Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery*. (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1935). Hereafter cited as *Imagery*.
- (15) As I mentioned before, by the way, Empson did *not* discuss Sonnet 73, except for line 4.
- (16) Kerrigan, p. 266: "A standard description of sleep, here applied to *night*."
- (17) Empson, *Ambiguity*, p. 49.
- (18) cf. *Macbeth* III.2.46-47, "Come, seeling Night,/ Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Day". See Booth's *Sonnets*, p. 259, and Kerrigan, p. 266. (I quote Shakespeare's plays from the Arden editions.)
- (19) The quotation is from the Authorized Version. See also I Cor. 15:51-52.
- (20) A coffin image was suggested by Ingram &

Redpath, and repeated by both Booth and Kerrigan.

- (21) See Abbott's *A Shakespearian Grammar*, p. 165.
- (22) See Ingram's statement quoted at the beginning of this paper.
- (23) *Argufying*, p. 11.