Sonnet 15

Shakespeare's Sonnet 15 echoes the idea of *tempus fugit* prominent in Renaissance writing, observing in its first two quatrains the inexorable loss of man's youth to the passage of time. However, the poet recognises that it is precisely the ephemerality of the Fair Youth's present beauty that renders it more vibrant and intense in his eyes, before introducing the immortalising potential of his verse — the creative enterprise of art can equally serve the natural function of procreation and triumph in the war against time.

In the opening quatrain, the poet establishes not only the fleeting nature of youth but also man's lack of control and agency, with one's life a mere performance and fate dictated by the stars. The poet begins by contemplating how "everything that grows / Holds in perfection but a little moment," with the evanescence of youthful prime and "perfection" reinforced by the almost tautological "little moment" and extra fading syllable of the feminine ending ("moment"). This impermanence is a natural, fundamental fact of life, underscored not only by the use of the absolute ("everything") but also the allusion to the Aristotelian conception of the vegetative soul, which is universally possessed by "everything that grows." Not only is man's youth subject to the incessant flight of time, he is also devoid of agency over his own life — it is but a performance "present[ed]" on the "huge stage" of the world. This metaphor is most prominently expressed in Shakespeare's own *As You Like It* ("All the world's a stage"), but it originates from classical writers like Juvenal ("All of Greece is a stage, and every Greek's an actor") and Petronius ("because almost the whole world are actors") from whom Renaissance writing commonly draws inspiration. The poet goes on to further undermine man's power — not only is human life merely a series of performative appearances, the script is written by "stars in secret influence," reflecting the widespread astrological beliefs of the era that the stars above us govern our conditions. In fact, it is the stars that appear to be the true *stars* of the world's "stage" since it "presenteth naught but shows… [their] influence," highlighting man's lack of significance. Hence, the poet bleakly establishes the nature of human youth and existence — fugacious and astrologically determined.

Subsequently, the poet (extending his description of the vegetative soul) compares men to "plants," elucidating the intertwined nature of growth and decline and the inevitable erosion of youth with time. The poet establishes the constancy of the "self-same sky," the sky's unchanging quality not only evinced by the emphatic "self-same," but also echoed in its sound with persistent sibilant alliteration and constant metrical stress in the molossus. This invariable

sky stands in sharp contrast to the plants that are both “cheered and checked” by it, with the alliterative association of the antithetical verbs highlighting the inextricable link between growth (“cheered”) and decline (“checked”) — so fleeting is the growth of plants that the same weather that allowed them to flourish can catalyse their decline. In a similar fashion, the “youthful sap” of men “at height decrease,” with the poet’s perfect rhyming of the antonyms “increase” and “decrease” in the quatrain reinforcing the inevitable collapse of youth and beauty following its peak. Despite this imminent loss of their vigour and vitality (“sap”), youth continue to “vaunt”, with the emphatic trochaic foot “Vaunt in” lending a sense of self-importance to their flaunting. This leads them to “wear their brave state out of memory,” with “wear” cleverly bearing a dual meaning — not only do men flaunt their youthful beauty to such a superlative extent that they don (“wear”) it as if it were clothing, it is also precisely this ostentatious display that erodes (“wear”) their splendid youth away until the world cannot remember how they were in their prime. In this light, the poet underscores the vanity of showing off one’s youth — just like how plants will grow and wilt, man’s youthful beauty will be lost to time.

However, the poet — opening with a transitory “then” — reveals that it is precisely the transient nature of the Fair Youth’s beauty that augments and intensifies it in the moment, even if it cannot endure the ravages of time. In this quatrain, Shakespeare shifts away from the third person to directly address the Fair Youth (“you”) to whom the bulk of his sonnets are addressed, proclaiming that the “inconstant stay / Sets you most rich in youth,” the sustained use of sibilance throughout both lines almost audibly enacting the slipping away of youth. Yet the oxymoronic “inconstant stay” encapsulates the central paradox of the quatrain — it is ironically the recognition of the transitory nature of youth that makes the Fair Youth “most rich” in it, with the spondee and the superlative “most” emphasising his unparalleled vigour and vitality. Hence, the knowledge of the imminent disappearance of his youth and the unpredictability of life has enhanced the poet’s appreciation and cherishing of the Fair Youth’s beauty. Nonetheless, his beauty, however intense in the “little moment,” cannot stand the test of time: “Time debateth with Decay” over how to take his youth away. Not only does the personification of “Time” and “Decay” lend both forces a sense of power, the harsh dental alliteration reinforces their potency and destructive potential. The poet then describes their plot to “change your day of youth to sullied night”: so powerful are time and decay that they can turn “day” — a common Renaissance motif of youthful beauty with its bright connotations of vitality and energy — into its polar opposite “night.” Hence, while the fugacity of the Fair Youth’s young beauty renders it all the more vibrant and intense for the poet, it is ultimately still unable to overcome the destructive force of time.

It is in the concluding couplet that the poet offers a way out of the ostensibly inescapable ephemerality of youth: the Fair Youth can be immortalised through the poet's own verse. The poet declares that love for the Fair Youth has driven "all [to be] in war with Time": the love he receives is not only universal (underscored by the absolute "all"), but also so intense that it has sparked the highest degree of hostility ("war") between the world and time. To preserve the Fair Youth's beauty from the assaults of time, the poet seeks to "engraft [him] new": "engraft" not only denotes the horticultural practice of affixing new shoots onto old roots to create a new plant, it also alludes to the poet's own act of writing. Hence, the poet's own verse — hinted at by "conceit" in line 9 — can accomplish the same eternalising function of agricultural grafting: life and youth can continue through artistic creation just as it can through natural procreation. Ultimately, Sonnet 15 concludes with an idea that will become typical of the Renaissance: that one's love shall in one's verse live ever young.