



## Aesthetic Multiplicity in Shakespeare's Sonnets

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### Abstract

This article illustrates the aesthetic multiplicity of Shakespeare's Sonnets by way of interpreting how the images in the Sonnets produce multi-layered meanings. The image, whose essence consists not only in a fusion of affection with scenes, but more in creating "image beyond image", "ideas beyond speech", is the soul of poetry. They are adopted to display the poet's subjective feelings and thoughts and to transform the abstract and intangible ideas into concrete and graphic pictures for rich implications and strong artistic appeal. This article argues that the beauty of the image comes from its fuzziness and indeterminacies, which leave enough space for readers to imagine. In the Sonnets, Shakespeare applies numerous images to enrich the poems' connotation which could arouse reader's wild imagination, ponderings and even arguments. The magic of the miraculous sonnets lies in these aesthetic factors and the consequent aesthetic effects, and lies in the never-ending illustration and the hidden charms.

**Key words:** Aesthetic multiplicity; Image; The Sonnets; Shakespeare

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### INTRODUCTION

Aesthetic multiplicity refers to artistic multi-layered meanings by means of choosing different images to constitute different artistic conception. For the art of poetry, imagery is particularly important, as image itself is a picture which is showed by words, and a poem itself is perhaps an image which is composed of many kinds of images. The term "image" itself has been much broadened from the "imago" of Renaissance rhetoricians and now it is often used to include figurative language of almost any kind, description which appeals to the physical senses, and even abstract ideas which are strikingly expressed. To be an "image", it seems enough that a phrase should impart to the reader a mental picture of some kind. The subject has been handled in a variety of ways (Hankins, 1953, p.1).

Being the soul of poetry, image, through its terse diction, ushers readers into a vast imaginary space. Its essence consists not simply in a fusion of affection with scenes, but more in creating "image beyond image", "ideas beyond speech". They are adopted to display poet's subjective feelings and thoughts and to transform the abstract and intangible ideas into concrete and graphic pictures for rich implications and strong artistic appeal. Different readers may have different interpretations and concretizations with regard to the same image. Readers from different cultural background may exhibit still wider differences in their interpretations and concretizations of the indeterminacies of the same image. It is believed in this article that the beauty of the image comes from its fuzziness and indeterminacies, which leave enough space for readers to imagine. The use of imagery is only one of several factors in poetic art, but it is a highly important aesthetic factor and our especial concern in this article.

## AESTHETIC MULTIPLICITY IN THE SONNETS

Shakespeare's works are abundant in vivid images and can evoke pictorial imagination. John Keats in one of his letters says that, "One of the three Books I have with me is Shakespeare's Poems: I never found so many beauties in the sonnets —they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally — in the intensity of working out conceits" (Herrnstein, 1965, p.5). The main body of Shakespeare's images falls practically into two groups, those from nature and those from indoor life and customs (Spurgeon, 1939, p.44).<sup>1</sup> Nature contains the life of the English countryside, the weather and its changes, the seasons, the sky, sunrise and dawn, the clouds, rain and wind, sunshine and shadow; the garden, flowers, trees, growth and decay, pruning and grafting, manuring and weeding; the sea and ships, the river and its banks, weeds and grasses, pools and water, animals, birds and insects, sport and games, especially snaring birds, hunting and hawking; these are the things which chiefly occupy Shakespeare and remain in his mind. In his sonnets contain many kinds of images, but the nature imagery is dominant.

As Mr. Edward Hubler said,

he [Shakespeare] saw nature precisely and was always able to find the right words for her loveliness .... It is to the exercise of this talent that the absence sonnets of widest fame owe their renown. Two of them ("How Like a winter" and "From you I have been absent") are remembered for passages of unobtrusive melody and lines of easy grace. (Hubler, 1952, p.30)

In Sonnets 7, 29 and 33, early morning's loveliness and plenitude are demonstrated well. The first two lines in Sonnet 7, "Lo, in the orient when the gracious light, / Lifts up his burning head," lines 11 and 12 in Sonnet 29, "Like to the lark at break of day arising, / From sullen earth," and the first quatrain in Sonnet 33, "Full many a glorious morning have I seen, / Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye, / Kissing with golden face the meadows green, / Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy".<sup>2</sup> It is indeed clear that the spectacle of the rising sun seems ever peculiarly to inspire and delight Shakespeare. He connects it with youth and vigour, with strength, splendour, good cheer and renewal of life. While 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, and the approaching night. In Sonnet 7, Shakespeare pictures men adoring the sun when he "lifts up his burning

head" and climbs the sky. The sun, he says, resembles strong youth in his middle age, but when "like feeble age, he reeled from the day", the watchers avert their eyes from the level rays which in setting he throws athwart them. Finally, the witty couplet, with its quick bolthole pun (son), offers a last-minute escape from the doom of solar analogy (by which a childless man would set, like the sun, and be found by onlookers to be of no social consequence). So the poet says to his friend, "So you too, fair youth, will be nothing as you age, unless you become the rising sun by having a son."

The seasons, to be sure, receive full attention. The image of seasons (spring, summer, autumn and winter) connects with the theme of time closely, the poet resorts to four seasons' different characteristics to praise his beloved friend's beautiful appearance and to express his complicated feelings. The Sonnets are set within contexts of diurnal and seasonal change. We see the Sun in glory of his rise and splendid in mid-career, but also reeling to his end so tragically that eyes are averted (7). Seasonal change is continual before us. We are not allowed to forget how "never-resting Time leads summer on / To hideous winter, and confounds him there" (5). We watch "summer's green all girded up in sheaves," borne on the bier "with white and bristly beard" (12). The future promises "winter" storms, and the "barren rage of death's eternal cold" (13). Such is our setting.

Summer is wholly desirable, but winter is "full of care" (56). The loved youth is like "the spring and foison of the year" (53), sweet and perfect as "a summer's day" (18). But, in his absence, "teeming autumn," with all its "increase," is a mockery, "For summer and his pleasures wait on thee, / And, thou away, the very birds are mute" (97). Either that, or their songs forebode "winter." Indeed, his absence makes it all a period of "freezings" and "December's bareness" (97). The thought is elaborated immediately: even "proud-pied April," who injects youth into all nature, is now no better than winter (98). Thinking of their three years' acquaintance, the poet writes in Sonnet 104, "Three winters cold / Have from the forests shook three summers' pride, / Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turn'd / In process of the seasons have I seen, / Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burn'd, / Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green. / Ah, yet doth beauty, like a dial-hand, / Steal from his figure and no pace perceiv'd...." There is a contrast between "fresh" and "green." The beginning of this sonnet states "To me, fair friend, you never can be old," but the doubt can be clearly sensed. However, miraculous his youth, the boy is part of nature and subjects to her laws.

"Spring" appears 6 times (in Sonnets 53, 75, 97, 98, 102 and 104); "autumn" 3 times (in Sonnets 53, 97 and 104), Sonnet 73 does not mention "autumn", but the whole poem talks about it; "summer" 20 times (in Sonnets 1, 6, 12, 54, 65, 68, and 96); "winter" 10 times (in Sonnets 2, 5, 13, 56 and 97). "Spring" is the symbol of freshness,

<sup>1</sup> In *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*, Miss Caroline Spurgeon analyzes in a detailed way the Shakespeare's imagery, and she classifies them into two groups: Nature imagery and indoor life and customs' imagery. However, little analysis covers Shakespeare's Sonnets.

<sup>2</sup> All the citations of Shakespeare's Sonnets in this article are from *The Norton Shakespeare based on the Oxford edition*.

energy and hope. The joyousness of the opening of the Sonnet 75, "So are you to my thoughts as food to life, / Or as sweet seasoned showers are to the ground," the poet praises his friend and says that he is for his thoughts, as food is necessary to life, as spring showers are to the ground. Here the poet uses a simile and then forms a vivid picture to declare how important his friend for him is. Springtime and love were proverbial companions. Let's see the song in *As You Like It*, "It was a lover and his lass, / With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino, / That o'er the green corn-field did pass / In the spring time, the only pretty ring time, / When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding: / Sweet lovers love the spring" (V.iii.14-19). In Sonnet 102 line 5, "our love was new and then but in the spring", it is not implied that the poet first became acquainted with the youth in the springtime, but their love is tender, fresh and comfortable, like the springtime. In Sonnet 53, the poet claims that "Speak of the spring and foison of the year: / The one doth shadow of your beauty show, / The other as your bounty doth appear; / And you in every blessed shape we know." In this sonnet, "spring" symbolizes freshness and energy, "foison" signifies bumper and opulence, "foison of the year" refers to harvest season, so it symbolizes fruitful "autumn". The beautiful spring is the image of appearance, while the abundant autumn represents inner beauty. The poet's beloved possesses both of the characteristics of spring and autumn, he not only owns freshness of spring, but also the richness of autumn. By means of the two images, the poet expresses his deep feelings towards his friend. Spring and autumn period takes turn, the turn of the four seasons represents time passing. The poet likens his beloved to beautiful "spring" and rich "autumn", this kind of analogy does not simply one side illuminate the other one, but the two sides explain each other. Therefore, the poem becomes more refined, contains more connotations and contains richer multi-level contents in the limited words. Therefore, we cannot understand the significance in the sole word and expression, but we could feel the reflections of poetry in the whole and the commensal effect of the meanings, we can further appreciate the exquisite subtle meanings, then the poetry is led to multiple understanding. In Sonnet 98, the poet depicts the beautiful scenery of spring, "when proud-pied April, dressed in all his trim, / Hath put a spirit of youth in everything, / that heavy Saturn laughed and leapt with him." However, without accompany of his friend, it was seemed that he was in winter. Everything else is enjoying springtime and rebirth, but he alone is locked in hideous winter. All the occurrences of "spring" remind him of the youth, for the beauties of the seasons are based on the youth's beauty and derive from him. Sonnet 97 expresses the similar idea, a strong contrast runs throughout between presence and absence, summer and winter, pleasure and pain.

The image of "summer" appears in several sonnets, "summer's green all girded up in sheaves" (Sonnet 12), "when summer's breath their masked buds discloses" (Sonnet 54), "making no summer of another's green" (Sonnet 68) etc.. In England, summer is the best season, but not for the poet, as the most beautiful summer cannot compare with his friend's beauty. The most famous comparison is in Sonnet 18, the speaker opens the poem with a question addressed to the beloved, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Various interpretations of this poem prove what Evans says that "great riches of implication are packed into the interrogatory first line" (Evans, 1996, p.9). The next eleven lines are devoted to such a comparison. In line 2, the speaker stipulates what mainly differentiates the young man from the summer's day: he is "more lovely and more temperate". Summer's days tend toward extremes: they are shaken by "rough winds"; in them, the sun ("the eye of heaven") often shines "too hot", or too dim. The poet compares his friend to "a summer's day", on one hand, the poet expresses his tender passions towards the youth, as "a summer's day is itself full of meanings both lovely and ominous, it represents the season of growth, fertility, flowers, juvenescence, love" (Evans, 1996, p.9), on the other hand, the fact itself reminds us of a single day's brevity, no matter how long it lasts by count of daylight hours. Summer is fleeting: its date is too short, and it leads to the withering of autumn, as "every fair from fair sometime declines". The final quatrain of the sonnet tells how the beloved differs from the summer in that respect: his beauty will last forever ("Thy eternal summer shall not fade...") and never die. In the couplet, the speaker explains how the beloved's beauty will accomplish this feat, and not perish because it is preserved in the poem, which will last forever; it will live "as long as men can breathe or eyes can see". It is worthy to note that almost every line in this sonnet ends with some punctuation which affects a pause, like the short lease summer. So, Shakespeare uses the image of summer not only pictures the young man's incomparable beauty, but tells readers that only his art could defy the destroyable time and make his young man's beauty long live, and he uses language skill to let readers do believe that it is necessary to retain his friend's beauty by using of poetry.

In the couplet of Sonnet 56, the poet says that "Or call it winter, which, being full of care, / Makes summer's welcome, thrice more wished, more rare" (13-14), the poet metaphorizes separation as winter and reunion as summer. Here "Makes summer's welcome", the welcome is given to the advent of summer (the height of the year compared to the height of love renewed) (Evans, 1996, p.164). In this sonnet, the poet meditates that it is not so with hunger, which renews itself with each passing day. "Why cannot love be the same", he reasons. He urges himself and the beloved friend also, to keep alive the spirit

of love. Let them consider this time of separation as an interlude which divides lovers on different shores, making their reunion even more joyful. Or let it be as the starving winter which is alleviated at last by summer's return, a return which is all the more desired and precious because of the hardships of winter which have been endured. Winter and summer, pleasure and care are often linked together as opposites, "the full[ness] of care in winter makes one long even more for eyes fill[ed] with fullness of seeing. The eye as a vessel that can be filled till it winks with fullness, brimming with tears of joy, may have suggested the waters of the separating ocean (line 9). The gluttony of physical appetite has been chastened, by the end, into a legitimized happiness at the re-fruitation of the earth at a seasonable time after the deprivation—care—of winter" (Vendler, 1977, p.272). The sharp contrast of the "summer" and "winter" image depicts well for the speaker how important the young man is, how deep their affections are!

The image of "winter" in the sonnets has different significances and changes from time to time. In Sonnet 2, winter is the chief criminal to deface the youth's beauty. The poet looks ahead to the time when the youth will have aged, and uses this as an argument to urge him to waste no time, and to have a child who will replicate his father and preserve his beauty. The imagery of ageing used is that of siege warfare, forty winters being the besieging army, which digs trenches in the fields before the threatened city, "forty, an infinite number frequently used to suggest what the Elizabethans thought of as the dangerously wrong side of middle age" (Evans, 1996, p.117). The trenches correspond to the furrows and lines which will mark the young man's forehead as he ages. He is urged not to throw away all his beauty by devoting himself to self-pleasure, but to have children, thus satisfying the world, and Nature, which will keep an account of what he does with his life. In Sonnet 5, winter is the symbol of old ages, the poet laments the progress of the years, which will play havoc with the young man's beauty. Human life is like the seasons, spring, summer, autumn's maturity and fruition, followed by hideous winter. Nothing is left of summer's beauty except for that which the careful housewife preserves, the essence of roses and other flowers distilled for their perfume. Other than that there is no remembrance of things beautiful. But once distilled, the substance of beauty is always preserved. Therefore the youth should consider how his beauty might be best distilled. Lines 5-6, "For never-resting time leads summer on / To hideous winter, and confounds him there," here "winter" is the image of a tyrant, he could destroy all the beautiful things and take away them ruthlessly. The theme of the previous sonnet, that summer's beauty must be distilled and preserved, is here continued. Lines 1 and 2, "Then let not winter's ragged hand deface / In thee thy summer ere thou be distilled", winter was often depicted as wearing rags.

Also, being destructive, it would make things it touched look ragged. Here "summer" refers to the youth at his best. This sonnet begins by completing the analogy between natural summer and a human summer, evoking the prospect of the de-facing of the lovely gaze by the hand of winter. The youth is encouraged to defeat the threatened ravages of winter by having children. Ten children would increase his happiness tenfold, since there would be ten faces to mirror him. Death therefore would be defeated, since he would live forever through his posterity, even if he should himself die. He is much too beautiful to be merely food for worms, and must be encouraged not to be selfish, but to outwit death and death's conquering hand. In Sonnet 97, adopting the image of "winter" reappears pictorially the poet's sad mood, the poet departs with his friend in summer ("this time removed was summer's time"), so the poetical summer scenery looks desolate. The poet's world is dark and cold, the desolation of winter is everywhere. Wherever the youth is, it is summer or fruitful autumn, wherever he is not, it is freezing winter. The rich imagery of the natural world somehow endows the youth with a supernatural beauty, and one begins to understand why he exercises such a fascination over all those who know him. To a certain extent therefore the poem is positive and serene, because, despite the negative imagery of winter, it holds out the hope of being part of summer's pleasure. In this poem the poet compares that absence to the desolation of winter. In the first quatrain, the speaker simply exclaims the comparison, painting a picture of the winter: "How like a winter hath my absence been / From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year! / What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen! / What old December's bareness everywhere!" In the third quatrain, he dismisses the "wanton burthen of the prime" —that is, the bounty of the summer—as unreal, as the "hope of orphans". It could not have been fathered by summer, because "summer and his pleasures" wait on the beloved, and when he is gone, even the birds are silent. In the couplet, the speaker says that the birds may sing when the beloved is gone, but it is with "so dull a cheer" that the leaves, listening, become fearful that winter is upon them. The seasons, so often invoked as a metaphor for the passage of time in the sonnets, and function as a kind of delusional indication of how deeply the speaker misses the company of the beloved. As the second quatrain reveals, the speaker spends some time apart from the beloved in "summer's time", in late summer, when the natural world is heavy with the fruits of the summer. But without the young man's presence, the world of abundance and plenty instead resembles "old December's bareness", not the pleasures of summer attendant upon the young man's presence. The linguistic richness of this poem is the cause of its prominence and popularity among the sonnets. With an economy of imagery, the speaker manages to evoke the "freezings" and "dark days" of winter, the warmth and

luxury of the “teeming autumn, big with rich increase”, it is natural for readers to feel the uneasy coexistence of the two and their struggle in the speaker’s mind. The poem makes use of its strong alliteration (“fleeting” and “freezings”, “dark days” and “December”, “time” and “teeming”, “widowed wombs”, “orphans” and “unfathered fruit”) to give it linguistic weight and pacing, and its lines seem stuffed full with of evocative words. The beloved friend brought him pleasure and warmth like the sun, but when he left the poet, the poet’s life became meaningless, therefore, sunshine is taken place by haze and floweriness of summer became bleakness of winter. The seasons of the year are applied to serve as an analogy with reference to what the speaker’s feeling is like. It is a picture of harsh winter, unbearable in terms of its biting cold. The strong comparison between summer and winter reflects the poet’s inner feelings, he cannot bear this separation and falls into deep suffering. The friend is an emblem of the beautiful things in man’s short life, the bitterness felt by the speaker reflects what any other person feels. Shakespeare treats the separation as a form of winter. Similarly, in Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, Sonnets 87-98 (and possibly also Sonnet 99) relate to a period of physical separation, Sidney treats absence of Stella, who is like a bright star, as a form of “night” (Duncan-Jones, 1997, p.304). This implies that Renaissance poets seek comfort from the seasons whose changes are often reflections of their innermost feelings and serves as a medium to celebrate the pleasurable or to moan the miserable.

Autumn is also received attention in the sonnets. Best known one is the following opening lines from 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” ( L1- 4). In this poem, the speaker invokes a series of images to characterize the nature of what he perceives to be his old age. The first quatrain, which employs the image of the autumn day, emphasizes the harshness and emptiness of old age, with its boughs shaking against the cold and its “bare ruined choirs” bereft of birdsong. In the second quatrain, the image shifts to that of twilight, and emphasizes not the chill of old age, but rather the gradual fading of the light of youth, as “black night” takes away the light “by and by”. But in each of these quatrains, with each of these images, the speaker fails to confront the full scope of his problem: Both the image of autumn and the image of twilight imply cycles, and impose cyclical motions upon the objects of their images, whereas old age is final. In human life, however, the fading of warmth and light is not cyclical; youth will not come again for the speaker. In the third quatrain, he must resign himself to this fact. The image of the fire consumed by the ashes of its youth is significant both for its brilliant disposition of the past—the ashes of which eventually snuff out the fire, “consumed by that which it was nourished by” —and for

the fact that when the fire is extinguished, it can never be lit again. In this sense, Sonnet 73 is more complex than it is often supposed by critics and scholars. It is often argued that 73 and sonnets like it are simply exercises in image—that they propose a number of different images for the same thing, and the images essentially mean the same thing. Sonnet 73 is not simply a procession of interchangeable images; it is the story of the speaker slowly coming to grips with the real finality of his age and his impermanence in time. The couplet of this sonnet renews the speaker’s plea for the young man’s love, urging him to “love well” that which he must soon leave. It is important to note that the couplet could not have been spoken after the first two quatrains alone. No one loves twilight because it will soon be night; instead they look forward to the morning. But after the third quatrain, in which the speaker makes clear the nature of his “leav[ing] ere long”, the couplet is possible, and can be treated as a poignant and reasonable exhortation to the beloved. The second line, by its pauses, almost re-creates the blowing away of the last resistant fading leaves by the autumn wind. The poet depicts the scene of autumn, which reflects on the onset of age, even though the word “autumn” does not appear. Nevertheless it is slightly surprising that the statements are so definite and uncompromising. This is how he is now, it is not some prognostication of decay, or a brief glimpse forwards to some imaginary time. The picture is more like that of age on his death-bed, of the autumn tree, of the onset of night, of the actuality of dying.

The poem’s only unusual and therefore freshest lines, “When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang / Upon those boughs” (Lines 2-3), offer a key to the sonnet’s impact. The juxtaposition of the leaves makes the lines unusual. Sequential logic would dictate them to read, “When yellow leaves, or few, or none do hang / Upon those boughs”. This would hardly have escaped Shakespeare’s notice; why then did he reverse the order? In fact he did not; he simply used a different yardstick. Sequential logic would, first of all, invalidate the image of hanging leaves; if the branches are bare, no leaves “do hang” there--the defoliation is a fait accompli. Nothing can be done for the bare branch, whereas a few leaves evoke both our sympathy and a wish to nurse and cherish what little is left. In short, Shakespeare used the logic of pathos, building our empathy from ruefulness for the yellow leaves, through resignation, to tender sympathy.

That same logic of pathos governs the structure of the entire sonnet. We might expect, using sequential logic, that the poem would proceed from the hour (or the amount of time it may take a log to burn in the hearth) to the day, and finally to the imposing duration of the year. Falling back on the logic of pathos, however, Shakespeare chose to reverse that order. In a triangle with an inverted apex, we drop from year, to day, to the brief duration of a fire. With time getting shorter and shorter as we move down

the narrowing triangle toward the tip—land's end, as it were—our sense of fleeting mortality becomes ever more acute; so does our sympathy for the speaker.

The logic of pathos also governs the ordering of the images: the year is a planetary phenomenon, the day a global one; but the wood-burning fire is personal—it reminds us that aging and death are as close as the hearth in our living quarters.

Think now of the sonnet's three quatrains as a rectangular grid with one row for each of the governing images, and with four vertical columns:

Spring	summer	fall	winter
morning	noon	evening	night
tree	log	ember	ashes

These divisions of the images seem perfectly congruous, but they are not. In the year the cold of winter takes up one quarter of the row; in the day, night takes up one half of the row; in the final row, however, death begins the moment the tree is chopped down into logs.

The further we read the grimmer the picture becomes: in winter, a benevolent sun never really departs but merely withdraws its heat from us by retreating farther south. It disappears completely at night to submerge us in darkness. In a complete reversal, the third image plucks a fragment of the sun, the fire in our hearth, whose proximity makes it all the more intense. Unlike the sun, it is a malignant force that destroys us. The images, moving according to the logic of pathos, take us from discomfort, to disorientation, to agonizing pain and death. And if we step back for a moment and look at these three stages—cold, dark, and decomposition—we find the sequence of death itself, the body's expiration, burial, and return to ashes. But "autumn" is not always a season of sadness, it can be "teeming autumn big with rich increase" (in Sonnet 97), and "autumn" is the "foison of the year" (in Sonnet 53).

Brightness of spring, colourfulness of summer, generosity of autumn and bareness of winter all these are endowed with different symbolizing meanings, by means of imagery, the poet expressed his different feelings, such as, praise, love, loyalty, sadness, loneliness and so on. In the sonnets, Shakespeare resorts seasons' different features to eulogize the youth's nice appearance, voices his inner complicated feelings, and at the same time shows definitely his exquisite poetic art. Just like John Erskine Hankins interprets that,

The poet's art is shown in what he does with the words: Stripping away nonessential verbiage, placing the words in fresh contexts, fitting them into a rhythmic pattern, clarifying and sharpening their emotional connotations. Like a convex lens, he gathers to himself diffused streams of light and centers them into one burning phrase. This gift for arriving at the essential phrase reflects the clarity and depth of the poet's own mind and marks the highest reaches of the poetic art. (Hankins, 1953, p.281)

Human life is closely related with the rhythm of the universe, and the progression of human life corresponds

to the succession of the four seasons of a year. Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* narrates a "Speech of Pythagoras," which vividly describes the four stages of human life in keeping with the four seasons of the year, "What? seest thou not how that the yeere as representing playne / The age of man, departs itself in quarters fowre? First bayne / And tender in the spring it is, even like a sucking babe..... / The yeere from springtyde passing foorth too sommer, wexeth strong, / Becommeth lyke a lusty youth. For in our lyfe through out / There is no tyme more plentifull, more lusty whote and stout. / Then followeth Harvest when the heate of youth grows sumwhat cold, / Rype, meld, disposed meane betwixt a yoongman and an old, / And sumwhat spent with grayish heare. Then ugly winter last / Like age steals on with trembling steppes, all bald, or overcast / With shirle thinne heare as whyght as snowe ( 221-235) (Ovid, 1986, p.358). The fact that all the seasons appear in the sonnets is by no means accidental. It discloses the fierce nature of time: all-devouring and all-destroying with its inexorable scythe.

Time destroys all, devours all, with wings on his back, flying about maliciously to annihilate all the beautiful things without mercy, whatever nature's or human beings'. As for the destructiveness of time, Ovid says, "the great time, you swallow all; You and the envy become second nature the old age, you have destroyed all, you use the tooth to chew slowly, are consuming all, causes them to die slowly" (Ovid, 1986, p.363). In Shakespeare's sonnets, the poet describes time as "devouring" (Sonnet 19), "bloody tyrant" (Sonnet 16), "slutish" (Sonnet 55), "age's cruel knife" (Sonnet 66), "time's injurious hand" (Sonnet 63), "thy scythe" (Sonnet 123) and "time's fickle glass" (Sonnet 126), all these images reveal time's cruelty, among them "scythe" or "sickle" is more important image and appears 6 times in the sonnets. The image of "scythe" comes from the Greek mythology, scythe is the weapon of Time God Kronos, Kronos conspires with his mother to castrate his father — Great Uranus, and this is done with a huge scythe, and he begins to govern the whole universe. People take the sickle as the symbol of Kronos not because of this, but because he corresponds to Saturn in Roman mythology. Saturn is the god of agriculture, with the sickle as his agricultural implement or his instrument of castration. As agriculture is the oldest occupation human beings ever undertake, Time as represented by Kronos is also very often depicted as an Old Man, hence called Old Time, or Father Time.

Up to the Renaissance period, time is generally depicted as almost nude and with wings. Apart from the sickle or scythe, a sandglass is occasionally added, or a dragon biting its tail, or a circle of the zodiac, and sometimes a crutch symbolic of old age. In Shakespeare's sonnets, the destructive force of time is brought out through the images of the scythe (or sometimes sickle) and glass of time. Time generously endows human beings

with life, but he demolishes them himself. A glass reflects the boundless universe, scythe of time destroys all. The images of time skillfully states that the mercilessness of scythe of time, variability of river of time and loss of the friend's youth. So the speaker in the sonnets persuades his friend to defy time and to achieve immortality through marriage, this can continue his marvelous appearance in begetting children, and he can bravely speak to Time, "I will be true despite thy scythe and thee".

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## CONCLUSION

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In Shakespeare's Sonnets there are abundant images of seasons and of time. The various interpretations of abundant images produce the sonnets' rich connotations. John Erskine Hankins gives us a satisfying answer why Shakespeare, like other poets, prefers to apply "image" in the poems to express his idea, "when a poet seeks to convey ideas to his readers, the ideas themselves are seldom original. His usual function is not to originate but to intensify, to realize more intensely the essence of an idea, to perceive its emotional significance, to bring it into sharper focus, to startle the reader from indifference into acceptance" (Hankins, 1953, p.281). So, it is no exaggeration to say that, because of the using of images, each of Shakespeare's lines instantly reveals multiple layers of meaning. The magic of the miraculous sonnets lies in these aesthetic factors and the consequent aesthetic effects, and lies in the never-ending illustration and the hidden charms. Each of the imagery in the Sonnets denotes special stress, since there is little space within three quatrains and a couplet to waste syllables on terms that do not intensify or support the poem. In order to

recover the full sense of the sonnets, it is important to recognize the imagery as one of the formal elements in the writing, for to dismiss it as accidental or artless is to neglect an instrument Shakespeare uses to create excellence.

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