Sonnet 104 by William Shakespeare

Read Shakespeare’s Sonnet 104, ‘To me, fair friend, you never can be old,’ with a summary and complete analysis of the poem.

‘*To me, fair friend, you never can be* old’, also known as [sonnet](https://poemanalysis.com/poetic-form/sonnet/) 104, is one of the [154 sonnets written by Shakespeare](https://poemanalysis.com/william-shakespeare/154-sonnets/) during his lifetime. It is part of the Fair Youth sequence of [sonnets](https://poemanalysis.com/poetic-form/sonnet/) that are dedicated to a beautiful young man. This particular poem speaks on themes of age, beauty, and the future.

0 seconds of 0 secondsVolume 0%

**Sonnet 104**

*William Shakespeare*

To me, fair friend, you never can be old,

For as you were when first your eye

I ey'd,Such seems your beauty still. Three winters cold,

Have from the forests shook three summers' pride,

Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turned,

In process of the seasons have I seen,

Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned,

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 perceived;

So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand,

Hath motion, and mine eye may be deceived:

For fear of which, hear this thou age unbred:

Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead.

Explore Sonnet 104

* [1 Summary](https://poemanalysis.com/william-shakespeare/sonnet-104/#Summary)
* [2 Structure](https://poemanalysis.com/william-shakespeare/sonnet-104/#Structure)
* [3 Poetic Techniques](https://poemanalysis.com/william-shakespeare/sonnet-104/#Poetic_Techniques)
* [4 Detailed Analysis](https://poemanalysis.com/william-shakespeare/sonnet-104/#Detailed_Analysis)

Summary

[Sonnet](https://poemanalysis.com/poetic-form/sonnet/) 104, ‘*To me, fair friend, you never can be old,*’ by [William Shakespeare](https://poemanalysis.com/william-shakespeare/biography/) addresses the facts of aging and the possibility that the Fair Youth is effected just as much as anyone else is.

The poem is addressed to the Fair Youth, who is throughout the text complimented on his beauty. He seems not to have aged the whole time the [speaker](https://poemanalysis.com/diction/speaker-in-poetry/) has known him. Over the last three years, he has remained just as fresh and green as when they first met. But, the speaker acknowledges towards the end, he knows this can’t be the case. All people age and time moves so slowly that he just can’t see it.

The final two lines are addressed to future generations. He tells them that when they are alive, the most beautiful person to have ever lived will have already died. 

Structure

*‘To me, fair friend, you never can be old’* by William Shakespeare is a fourteen-line sonnet. The poem is structured in the form which has come to be synonymous with the poet’s name. It is made up of three [quatrains](https://poemanalysis.com/poetic-form/quatrain/), or sets of four lines, and one concluding [couplet](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/couplet/), or set of two [rhyming](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/rhyme/) lines. The poem follows a consistent [rhyme scheme](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/rhyme-scheme/) that conforms to the pattern of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG and it is written in [iambic pentameter](https://poemanalysis.com/poetic-meter/iambic-pentameter/). This means that each line contains five sets of two beats, known as metrical feet. The first is unstressed and the second stressed. It sounds something like da-DUM, da-DUM.

As is common in [Shakespeare’s poems](https://poemanalysis.com/william-shakespeare/), the last two lines are a rhyming pair, known as a couplet. They often bring with them a turn or [volta](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/volta/) in the poem. They’re sometimes used to answer a question posed in the previous twelve lines, shift the [perspective](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/perspective/), or even change speakers. 

Poetic Techniques

In *‘To me, fair friend, you never can be old’*Shakespeare makes use of several poetic techniques. These include but are not limited to [simile](https://poemanalysis.com/figurative-language/simile/), [alliteration](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/alliteration/), and [enjambment](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/enjambment/). A simile is a [comparison](https://poemanalysis.com/figurative-language/simile/) between two unlike things that uses the words “like” or “as”. A poet uses this kind of [figurative language](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/figurative-language/) to say that one thing is similar to another, not like [metaphor](https://poemanalysis.com/figurative-language/metaphor/), that it “is” another. In the third [quatrain](https://poemanalysis.com/poetic-form/quatrain/), the poet uses a simile that compares the process of aging to the progression of an hour hand on a clock. It moves so slowly that if one is watching they can’t see it. But, it does ultimately move.

Another important technique commonly used in poetry is enjambment. It occurs when a line is cut off before its natural stopping point. [Enjambment](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/enjambment/) forces a reader down to the next line, and the next, quickly. One has to move forward in order to comfortably resolve a phrase or sentence. For example, the [transition](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/transition/) between lines three and four.

[Alliteration](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/alliteration/) occurs when words are used in succession, or at least appear close together, and begin with the same sound. For instance, “fair friend,” “For,” and “first” in lines one and two. 

Detailed Analysis

Lines 1-4

To me, fair friend, you never can be old,

For as you were when first your eye I eyed,

Such seems your beauty still. Three winters cold

Have from the forests shook three summers’ pride,

In the first lines of *‘‘To me, fair friend, you never can be old’* the speaker addresses the Fair Youth to whom this poem and many others are dedicated. He tells this young man that despite the time that might’ve passed since they met that he looks no older. He cannot, in the speaker’s eyes, ever age. The Fair Youth is just as beautiful as he was when they first knew one another. He is thinking specifically about the young man’s eyes.

Since the first time they met, three “cold” winters have passed and three prideful summers. 

Lines 5-8

Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turned

In process of the seasons have I seen,

Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned,

Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green.

The next quatrain adds that their time together has also seen “Three beauteous springs” that became “yellow autumn[s]”. They have been together through three Aprils, which smelled of blooming flowers, and “three hot Junes” that burned under the summer sun. The first time he saw this young man he was “fresh” and he still appears that way. The word “green” in this line refers to youth as if a fruit has not quite ripened.

Lines 9-12

Ah, yet doth beauty, like a dial-hand,

Steal from his figure, and no pace perceived;

So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand,

Hath motion, and mine eye may be deceived:

In the last quatrain of ‘*To me, fair friend, you never can be* old’ the speaker changes tactics slightly and acknowledges that although the young man may seem not to have aged, the speaker knows that he has. Time moves slowly, so much so that people cannot see it. It is “like a dial-hand” of a clock. This simile speaks to the power time has and how “no [pace](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/pacing/)” can be perceived.

He knows that the young man’s beauty is also changing. His “sweet hue” which appears to stand still is actually moving. It “Hath motion” and the speaker’s eye is deceived.

**Couplet**

For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred:

Ere you were born was beauty’s summer dead.

In the couplet, which comes after the turn in the poem, he thinks about the possibility that his eyes have been deceived. He addresses “thou age unbred,” or the future generations. The speaker tells them that no matter what they see around them, the most beautiful person to have lived is now dead.