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Analysis of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 15

In Sonnet 15, Shakespeare periodically departs from the overall iambic pentameter structure to create tension between growth and decay and emphasize the pauses and shifts in life’s cycle. Shakespeare also uses caesuras toward a similar purpose. The first metrical departure occurs in the second line: there is an extra weak beat at the end of “moment” (l. 2). This metrical departure structurally produces an out-of-step pause that echoes the diction’s suggestion of a pause between growth and decline. The word “holds” suggests a pause, or a cessation of movement (l. 2). The word “but” suggests that this pause—and thus, the perfection this pauses brings—will be short (l. 2). “Little moment” further suggests that idea of a temporary break from movement. There is an alternative metrical interpretation of this line. Instead of “holds” containing a weak beat, it could be seen as containing a strong beat. This still produces a beat that is out of meter: two strong beats come at the beginning of the line instead of a weak beat and a strong beat (and there is still an extra weak beat at the end). With this alternative metrical interpretation, both the denotation of the word “holds” and the metrical emphasis on it suggest a pause in movement. The double strong beat of “grows” and “holds” creates the need for a pause between the words (l. 1-2). Because of the meter, “grows” can no longer flow directly into “holds.” This pause creates an emphasis on the shift between the movement of “grows” and the stillness of “holds,” and also creates a sense of unnaturalness: at this point, the poem does not conform to its established movement. This structural elements, in conjunction with the diction, back up the poem’s opinion that there exists only brief, temporary relief from the natural, continual movement from growth to death.

The second metrical departure occurs toward the end of the fourth line. The word “influence” consists of a strong beat and two weak beats; if this word was in line with the iambic pentameter of the rest of the poem, the metrical pattern would have been strong-weak-strong (l. 4). The three beats of “influence” create an emphasis. This influence refers to “the stars,” not man or the speaker of the sonnet: nature, rather than man, has control over man’s destiny (l. 4). The beats of “influence” break the controlled pattern of the rest of the sonnet, structurally emphasizing this lack of control (l. 4). In addition, this line has 12 beats instead of the 10 beats of iambic pentameter: the extra two beats, once again, suggest a lack of control. Line 4 ends in a weak beat; in iambic pentameter, lines typically end with strong beats. Shakespeare rhymes “comment” with “moment” (the B’s of the ABAB section of the sonnet) and also matches their beats, which are out of line with the rest of the sonnet 9 (l. 4, 2). The beats of “moment” create a tension between the stillness of a pause and the movement of the rest of the poem (and the cycle of time itself). Likewise, the beats of “comment” create a tension between the life of man and man’s lack of control over life: because of man’s lack of control, he is unable to hold the pause—he must continue the cycle and the movement.

The third metrical departure occurs at the beginning of the sixth line. Instead of a weak beat and then a strong beat to start the line, there is only a strong beat (“cheered”). This comes right after “increase” (the last word of the previous line). The denotations of both “increase” and “cheered,” the words on which the two strong beats fall, suggest growth. These two strong beats fall on the last two descriptions of growth in this section—after “cheered,” the sonnet transitions to descriptions of decay (“at height decrease,” “wear their brave state out of memory”). The fact that this emphasis of diction comes at the point where the meter is out of step suggests that life is at its strongest when it is about to decline. The metrical break creates both an emphasis and a pause, and then returns to normal iambic pentameter, switching from diction of growth to diction of decline.

The first caesura in the poem occurs in line 7. Here, a comma separates two clauses: “Vaunt in their youthful sap” and “at height decrease” (l. 7). The pause created by the caesura echoes the “little moment” that, according to Shakespeare, occurs between growth and decline (l. 2). A similar pause takes place in the last line of the poem: it contains a caesura in the form of a comma between the two clauses of the line. “As he takes from you” is the first clause; “I engraft you new” is the second clause (l. 14). The word “as” at the beginning of the first clause suggests that the actions (“takes,” “engrafts”) of the two clauses occur simultaneously. However, the clauses are in opposition with each other: the first suggests decay (Time takes life from the person), and the second suggests growth (“engraft you new”). The word “engraft” suggests two separate things becoming one, which echoes the suggestion of “as”: two separate clauses operating simultaneously (l. 14). “Engraft you new” suggests that “new” consists of both decay and growth: because “takes” is happening at the same time, it seems that the process of “engrafting” is made up of both “new” and the “taking” process (l. 14). The caesura structurally produces tension between the clauses, echoing the tension created by diction. However, the caesura also creates two parallel expressions, suggesting a sort of continuity. This dual purpose suggests the dual nature of the cycle of time: in a seemingly contradictory way, time creates both death and life.