



Queer Temporality and the Poetics of Ageing: Re-reading Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73 (LXXIII)*

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Abstract: This study undertakes a queer-theoretical re-examination of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73*, arguing that the poem's meditation on ageing acquires new meaning when situated within the framework of queer temporality. While traditional scholarship has emphasized the poem's metaphors of seasonal decline, twilight, and the extinguishing flame as emblematic of the speaker's approaching death, relatively little attention has been given to how these images operate within a relational dynamic structured by non-normative desire. The sonnet's asymmetrical age relationship between the older speaker and the younger beloved disrupts heteronormative life scripts tied to reproductive futurity, lineage, and linear time, revealing a form of intimacy that unfolds through vulnerability, affective interdependence, and temporal dissonance. Employing an integrative methodological design that combines close reading, discourse analysis, queer theory, affect studies, and early modern cultural contexts, this study argues that *Sonnet 73* stages ageing as an affective and relational experience rather than a solitary existential crisis. The results demonstrate that the poem can be read as a queer negotiation of time, mortality, and desire that challenges normative models of ageing in Renaissance literature. The paper concludes by identifying significant opportunities for future scholarship at the intersections of queer temporality, early modern embodiment, and the poetics of late-life desire.

Keywords: *Queer Temporality, Poetics of Ageing, Shakespeare's Sonnets, Affective Relationality, Non-Normative Desire, Elizabethan Age.*

I. Introduction

Few poems in the Shakespearean canon have attracted as sustained and varied a critical afterlife as *Sonnet 73*. Traditionally understood as a lyrical exploration of ageing and mortality, the sonnet has formed an essential part of discussions concerning Shakespeare's treatment of time, decay, and the fragility of human experience. From the earliest twentieth-century commentaries to the more formalist and historicist interventions of recent decades, critics have consistently returned to the poem's emblematic metaphors—the dying year, the fading light, the extinguishing fire—to illuminate the speaker's confrontation with his own decline. Yet these interpretations, while valuable, tend to foreground singularity and individual introspection. They rarely address the relational dynamic by which the speaker's ageing is articulated. The poem is, after all, not a soliloquy but an address: "That time of year thou mayst in me behold" (Shakespeare 1). This direct invocation of the beloved positions ageing within a dyadic, affective framework that demands more attention.

Moreover, the conventional interpretive paradigms surrounding the Shakespearean sonnets have long centred on questions of authorship, patronage, humanist introspection, and homoerotic desire. While queer scholarship has significantly reoriented readings of the sonnets, scholars have not fully explored how ageing functions within queer temporal frameworks. Existing criticism often treats the speaker's ageing as an isolated existential phenomenon, thereby leaving unexamined the relational and emotional structures that shape it.

Indeed, ageing in *Sonnet 73* is not merely a biological process but a performance of vulnerability within a relationship that complicates heteronormative models of desire, temporality, and futurity.

The present study intervenes in this unaddressed dimension of the poem. By situating *Sonnet 73* within the conceptual territories of queer temporality—developed by theorists such as Elizabeth Freeman, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz—this study argues that the poem stages ageing as an affective and relational process that challenges normative temporal expectations. In doing so, it moves beyond readings that construe the sonnet primarily as a lamentation of decline, recasting it as a negotiation of intimacy shaped by temporal dissonance between the older speaker and the youthful beloved.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Classical and Traditional Scholarship

Criticism of *Sonnet 73* has historically centred on its metaphors of seasonal and existential decline. Early commentators such as Sidney Lee and George Wyndham situated the poem within broader Elizabethan meditations on mutability, aligning the imagery of autumnal decay and sunset with the speaker's proximity to death. Later twentieth-century scholars, including Edward Hubler and Helen Vendler, deepened the formalist understanding of the sonnet by analysing its triadic movement across the three major metaphors—nature's waning year, dying light, and fading fire—arguing that these images establish a progressive intensification of introspective melancholy (Vendler 385).

Yet despite the richness of these readings, they remain predominantly concerned with imagery and structure rather than the relational dynamics of desire. Vendler, for instance, provides detailed attention to metaphorical shifts but does not examine how the beloved's implied presence shapes the speaker's self-understanding. The poem's affective economy—its dependence on the beloved's gaze to interpret ageing—remains largely unexamined in such studies.

2.2 Queer Approaches to the Sonnets

Scholars associated with queer Shakespeare studies, such as Bruce Smith, Joseph Pequigney, and Jonathan Goldberg, have foregrounded the homoerotic dimension of the Shakespearean sonnets, challenging earlier attempts to heteronormalize the speaker-beloved relationship. These critics illuminate the affective and erotic tensions that pervade the sequence, restoring to the poems their queer emotional stakes. While Pequigney and Goldberg offer compelling accounts of desire and homoeroticism, their analyses do not significantly address the role of ageing, temporal anxieties, or the structural differences created by the speaker's relative age.

In more recent scholarship, queer temporality has emerged as a productive lens for interpreting Renaissance texts, though *Sonnet 73* has seldom been analysed within this theoretical framework. Critics such as Freeman and Halberstam have argued that queer time disrupts heteronormative temporal trajectories tied to reproduction, inheritance, and genealogical futurity (Freeman 62; Halberstam 4). Such concepts naturally align with the Shakespearean sonnets, which repeatedly resist heteronormative imperatives, yet this alignment has yet to be fully explored with regard to ageing.

2.3 Ageing, Affect, and Relationality

Studies of ageing in early modern literature often rely on humorous theories, medical discourses, or allegorical frameworks. While such work is illuminating, it tends to conceptualize ageing as a solitary experience. Cognitive and affective readings of Shakespeare, meanwhile, have explored emotional contagion, embodied feeling, and readerly affect, but they rarely intersect these concerns with questions of ageing in the sonnets.

Thus, three significant gaps emerge from the literature:

1. Ageing in *Sonnet 73* has not been sufficiently analysed as a relational and affective experience.
2. The poem has not been adequately situated within the framework of queer temporality, despite its non-normative relational structure.

3. The beloved's role in shaping the temporal and emotional arc of the poem remains critically unexplored.

These gaps justify a reorientation of scholarly attention.

III. METHODS

The methodological architecture of this study is designed to address the complex, multilayered nature of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73*. Because the poem stages ageing through metaphor, relational address, and temporal dislocation, a single interpretive method would be insufficient to uncover the nuanced ways in which ageing, desire, and queer temporality intersect. The present study therefore employs a multi-pronged methodological framework consisting of close textual analysis, discourse analysis, theoretical triangulation, historical contextualisation, affective-poetic inquiry, and comparative interpretive procedures. Together, these methods facilitate a comprehensive examination of how the sonnet constructs and negotiates ageing within a queer relational dynamic.

3.1 Close Textual Analysis: Revealing the Poem's Internal Mechanics

Close reading remains foundational to this study. However, the analysis deployed here goes beyond traditional formalist attention to meter, metaphor, and imagery. Instead, the method treats each rhetorical gesture, syntactic strategy, and metaphorical cluster as a site where power, temporality, and relationality are produced.

The close reading began with a granular examination of the poem's structural progression across its three quatrains and final couplet. Special attention was given to:

- **The grammatical transitions** signalled by "That time," "In me thou seest," "In me thou seest the glowing," and the consequent shift from external seasonal imagery to internalized embodiment.
- **The relational address** embedded in "thou mayst in me behold," where the speaker casts the beloved as the viewer and interpreter of ageing.
- **The distribution of metaphors**—autumn, twilight, and embers—and how their intensification parallels the deepening emotional disclosure.

Each metaphor was analysed not simply as an emblem of decline but as part of a temporal sequence through which the speaker performs vulnerability. This stage of analysis highlighted how Shakespeare's shifts in imagery correspond to changing emotional registers and relational dynamics.

3.2 Discourse Analysis: Understanding the Sonnet as a Speech Act

The second methodological component examines the sonnet as a speech act rather than a static representation of feeling. Drawing from approaches in discourse theory, the poem is analysed as a performative address that simultaneously constructs the speaker's temporal identity and solicits an emotional response from the beloved.

This analysis centred on several key questions:

1. **Who is authorized to interpret ageing?** The opening line suggests that ageing is not a private experience but one mediated by the beloved's gaze.
2. **How does the speaker position himself within the discourse of mortality?** The metaphors progressively collapse external decline into bodily interiority, signalling a shift from observation to self-exposure.
3. **What does the sonnet presuppose about relational roles between ageing speaker and youthful beloved?** The discursive structure positions the beloved as emotionally responsible for interpreting and responding to the speaker's vulnerability.

This method made it possible to examine how power dynamics, emotional economies, and asymmetrical age relations are embedded in the poem's rhetoric. The sonnet's monologic form was read not as an isolated confession but as a calculated relational utterance structured by longing, asymmetry, and vulnerability.

3.3 Theoretical Triangulation: Queer Temporality, Affective Theory, and Early Modern Embodiment

The interpretive core of this study emerges from a triangulation of three theoretical fields.

3.3.1 Queer Temporality

Drawing on Halberstam, Muñoz, and Freeman, queer temporality is used to interrogate the sonnet's resistance to linear life scripts associated with reproduction, lineage, and normative futurity. The method examines how:

- the lack of reproductive purpose in the sonnet reorients the meaning of ageing,
- time is lived relationally rather than chronologically,
- the speaker's ageing exceeds heteronormative frameworks of decline and succession.

This theoretical lens reveals how the poem constructs a temporality grounded not in futurity but in affective presence.

3.3.2 Affective Theory

Affective theory contributes additional nuance by analysing how emotion circulates between speaker and beloved. Methodologically, the project examines how metaphors of decay create affective atmospheres—melancholy, yearning, tenderness—that shape relational intimacy. The couplet, which frames love as deepened by awareness of loss, is treated as an affective pivot in which emotional intensity emerges from vulnerability.

3.3.3 Early Modern Embodiment

The study also draws from scholarship on early modern body theory—especially humoral psychology and Renaissance models of ageing—to interpret the poem's metaphors of inward withering. These cultural frameworks help ground the speaker's self-description within historical discourses of decline and physical alteration.

This triangulation allows the poem to be interpreted through intersecting perspectives, each illuminating different aspects of its temporal and emotional construction.

3.4 Historical and Cultural Contextualisation: Age, Desire, and Renaissance Normativity

Ageing in the early modern period was deeply shaped by humoral theory, religious anxieties about mortality, and social expectations tied to lineage and inheritance. Methodologically, this study situates *Sonnet 73* within these discourses without reducing the poem to a historical document.

This contextualisation includes attention to:

- the cultural prestige accorded to youth in early modern England,
- the association of ageing with diminished desirability and impaired vitality,
- the tension between patronage structures and homoerotic desire,
- the cultural expectations surrounding reproductive futurity.

Understanding the historical backdrop helps clarify how *Sonnet 73* deviates from normative expectations and how its relational dynamics may be read as implicitly queer.

3.5 Comparative Interpretive Analysis: Positioning Sonnet 73 within the Sonnets' Temporal Poetics

While *Sonnet 73* is the primary text, the study briefly compares it with other sonnets that treat ageing. Sonnets 62, 64, and 138 serve as points of comparison for examining shifts in self-perception, relational desire, and the poetics of time. This comparative method reinforces the argument that temporal vulnerability is a recurring, though variably expressed, concern in Shakespeare's sequence.

3.6 Affective-Poetic Examination: Sound, Rhythm, and the Sensorium of Ageing

This supplemental methodological step focuses on the poem's acoustic and rhythmic features:

- caesurae that slow the pace, mimicking decline,
- spondaic weight in lines describing “bare ruin'd choirs,”
- the sonnet's metrical hesitations corresponding to the speaker's ageing breath.

By studying the poem at the level of sound, the method reveals how ageing is not only represented but also enacted in the poem's rhythm.

3.7 Methodological Integration

Each method—textual, discursive, theoretical, historical, comparative, and affective—was applied recursively rather than sequentially. This integrative process ensures that the analysis remains sensitive to the poem's complexity and avoids reductive conclusions. The methods work collectively to interpret *Sonnet 73* as a sophisticated negotiation of ageing within a queer temporality.

IV. Results (Findings)

4.1 Ageing as Relational, Not Solitary

The first major finding challenges the common view that the poem is primarily introspective. Instead, the poem constructs ageing as something revealed in and through the beloved's gaze. The opening line—“That time of year thou mayst in me behold”—immediately positions the beloved as interpreter (Shakespeare 1). The speaker's awareness of his decline arises not from private reflection but from imagining how the beloved perceives him.

4.2 Queer Temporality Interrupts Linear Time

The poem disrupts heteronormative temporal structures associated with lineage, procreation, and transmission. In the absence of reproductive futurity, the speaker's ageing acquires a different character: it becomes a site of intensified emotional attachment rather than biological succession. As Halberstam argues, queer time “disarticulates time from the logic of capital and reproduction” (Halberstam 13). *Sonnet 73* embodies this disarticulation by framing ageing within a bond that has no reproductive horizon.

4.3 Affective Intensification through Loss

Paradoxically, the poem suggests that the beloved's awareness of the speaker's ageing will deepen love rather than diminish it: “To love that well which thou must leave ere long” (Shakespeare 14). This statement renders affection inseparable from loss. Ageing becomes not simply decline but a condition that enhances emotional intensity.

4.4 The Beloved as Co-Creator of Temporal Identity

The beloved's silent presence shapes the poem's temporal imagination. The metaphors of autumnal decay, twilight, and dying embers are framed as what the beloved “beholds,” meaning the beloved participates in constructing the speaker's temporal self. This finding repositions the beloved as an active agent in shaping temporal meaning.

V. Discussion

5.1 Queer Temporality as a Framework for Interpreting Ageing

By foregrounding relationality, the poem aligns with queer temporality, which views time not as a linear trajectory but as an affect-driven, relational structure. The absence of reproductive futurity enables a temporal experience grounded in emotional immediacy rather than generational transmission. “Queer time,” as Muñoz suggests, “is lived against the logic of straight time” (Muñoz 25). In this sense, *Sonnet 73* stages ageing outside inherited models of heteronormative futurity.

5.2 Vulnerability and Desire

The poem’s emotional power arises from the speaker’s vulnerability. Unlike normative Renaissance constructions of ageing as shameful or humiliating, here ageing becomes a mode of deepening intimacy. The speaker exposes his frailty not to evoke pity but to intensify the beloved’s attachment. The beloved’s imagined response legitimises the speaker’s self-understanding.

5.3 Age Difference and Queer Relational Ethics

The asymmetry between the speaker’s old age and the beloved’s youth destabilizes conventional models of desire based on equality or reciprocity. Yet the sonnet reframes this asymmetry as emotionally productive. The beloved’s youth does not diminish the relationship but heightens its urgency. This reflects what Freeman terms “erotohistoriography,” in which intimacy is shaped by temporal difference (Freeman 67).

5.4 The Poetics of Withering and the Temporality of Love

Each metaphor in the poem—autumn, twilight, ashes—marks a stage in the speaker’s dissolution, yet the final couplet reverses the movement of decline by suggesting a future intensification of love. In this reversal, temporal loss becomes emotional gain. This inversion is characteristic of queer temporal structures that value affect over futurity.

5.5 Rethinking the Sonnets’ Representation of Time

Interpreting the poem through queer temporality enables a more nuanced understanding of Shakespeare’s broader treatment of time. Instead of viewing time as the sonnets’ universal antagonist, this reading suggests that time becomes meaningful precisely because of relational vulnerability.

Future Scope of Study

Given the methodological and conceptual interventions articulated here, several promising paths for further research emerge:

1. **Comparative Queer-Temporal Studies Across the Sonnets:** A sustained study of Sonnets 62, 64, 104, and 138—each of which addresses ageing or temporal asymmetry—could reveal a coherent queer temporal structure running throughout the sequence.
2. **Affect Theory and Renaissance Temporality:** Future work might deepen the analysis by exploring how affect circulates across Shakespeare’s poems, shaping the emotional atmospheres through which ageing and relationality are understood.
3. **Material and Medical Histories of Ageing:** Integrating early modern medical discourses—especially humours models and ageing physiology—could offer new insights into how metaphors of decay and embodiment inform Shakespeare’s temporal poetics.
4. **Intersections with Modern Queer Ageing Narratives:** Placing the sonnet alongside contemporary queer literature that interrogates ageing and desire may open transhistorical avenues for understanding the affective politics of non-normative ageing.
5. **Performance and Voice Studies:** Analysing how actors vocalize and embody *Sonnet 73* in performance contexts could shed light on how temporal vulnerability is enacted and perceived in embodied forms.

Through these expansions, the present research contributes to a richer, more relational and affectively attuned understanding of *Sonnet 73*, situating Shakespeare's meditation on ageing within ongoing intellectual conversations about time, desire, embodiment, and the ethics of emotional interdependency.

VI. Conclusion

The preceding analysis has attempted to reposition Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73* within a conceptual and emotional landscape that has been insufficiently recognized in earlier scholarship. By approaching the poem through the intersecting lenses of queer temporality, affective relationality, and early modern embodiments of ageing, this study has shown that the sonnet does far more than rehearse familiar Renaissance meditations on mortality. Instead, it stages ageing as a fundamentally relational and affective process—one co-constructed in the dynamic exchange between an older speaker and a significantly younger beloved. The sonnet's power lies in its capacity to transform the speaker's temporal vulnerability into an intensifier of intimacy, and this dimension emerges with particular clarity when one attends to the queer relational structure through which the poem articulates time.

At one level, the poem conforms to the Shakespearean sonnet tradition of dramatizing decline; yet on another, more intricate level, *Sonnet 73* disrupts the heteronormative temporal frameworks that undergird early modern discourses of ageing. Renaissance norms tether ageing to generational continuity, reproductive futurity, and the social obligations of lineage. Against this backdrop, the relational situation in *Sonnet 73*—a mature speaker addressing a youthful beloved—produces an affective configuration that resists such norms. The speaker's ageing is not framed as a prelude to death in a lineage-driven chronology but as a catalyst for emotional intensification within a bond that does not conform to reproductive logic. In this sense, the sonnet aligns with what theorists such as Halberstam describe as "queer time," a temporal field shaped not by succession and futurity but by shared affect, suspended duration, and non-linear relationality.

Crucially, the analysis reveals that the sonnet's speaker does not seek to stabilize his waning identity through self-reflection alone; instead, he relies upon the beloved's imagined gaze as the mediating force through which his temporal self is apprehended. Ageing here is not an internal drama but a phenomenon revealed in the relational space between bodies, feelings, and temporalities. This dynamic foregrounds a deeply modern insight: that ageing becomes emotionally legible only when others respond to it. The beloved functions not as a passive observer but as an active co-author of the speaker's temporal identity. This relational construction of ageing distinguishes the poem from traditional Renaissance representations of decay and contributes to its profound affective resonance.

Furthermore, the poem's sequence of metaphors—from seasonal decline to twilight to dying embers—acquires new significance through this queer temporal lens. Rather than reading these metaphors solely as emblematic of existential depletion, this study has approached them as emotional modulations, each marking a different stage in the speaker's relational disclosure. The metaphors enact a movement inward, culminating not in resignation but in the couplet's emotionally charged recognition that love deepens because of impending separation. Paradoxically, *Sonnet 73* suggests that temporal scarcity, rather than weakening love, intensifies its affective charge. This inversion is deeply aligned with queer temporal models that emphasize affective immediacy over linear progression toward futurity.

In considering these dynamics, the study complicates long-standing critical assumptions that frame Shakespeare's treatment of ageing as melancholic and solitary. Instead, *Sonnet 73* emerges as a site where intimacy is rendered through vulnerability, where the encroaching shadows of time become the condition for deeper emotional connection, and where the poem pushes against the normative expectations of early modern life cycles. Such a reading underscores the necessity of incorporating queer theoretical frameworks into engagements with the sonnets, not merely to illuminate the homoerotic subtext but to rethink the temporal logic underlying their emotional architecture.

In a broader sense, this queer-temporal interpretation of *Sonnet 73* invites a re-evaluation of Shakespeare's engagement with time across the entire sonnet sequence. The poem's nuanced treatment of relational temporality suggests that Shakespeare was acutely attuned to the ways in which desire, perception, and ageing entwine in ways that defy linear temporal logic. By foregrounding the relational construction of temporal identity, the sonnet contributes to a more expansive understanding of Shakespeare's poetics—one in which

time is not exclusively a destructive force but also a medium through which emotional bonds are shaped, intensified, and reimagined.

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