Sonnet 7
John Milton (1632)

How soon hath Time the suttle theef of youth,
Stoln on his wing my three and twentieth yeer!
My hasting dayes flie on with full career,
But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth, [ 5 ]
That I to manhood am arriv'd so near,
And inward ripenes doth much less appear,
That som more timely-happy spirits indu'th.
Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
It shall be still in strictest measure eev'n [ 10 ]
To that same lot, however mean, or high,
Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heav'n;
All is, if I have grace to use it so,
As ever in my great task Masters eye.

Notes

Introduction. Unlike the Petrarchan themes that dominate the Italian sonnets, this one takes a distinctly inward turn. The speaker sounds deliberately ambivalent about being a late-bloomer. On one hand he feels his youth has been stolen away before he has developed the "inward ripeness" he expects of himself. On the other hand, he professes strong confidence in "the will of Heav'n" to bring his life to proper fruition in God's own time. The strict measure of line 10 underscores this theme and the speaker's conviction. Though there has been some controversy in dating this poem, Barbara Lewalski settles fairly confidently on a time "on or shortly after his twenty-fourth birthday," arguing that "Milton's usual way of referring to his age when dating his poems makes 1632 probable" (The Life of John Milton 60).

Line 2. The 1673 edition has "Soln".

three and twentieth yeer. Milton turned 23 years old on December 9, 1631.

semblance. Appearance. See OED2.

indu'th. Endows. See OED2.

Line 11. The 1673 edition has no comma here.

great Taskmasters. This alludes to the parable of the talens in Matthew 20: 1-16.