

A Short Analysis of Henry Howard's 'The Soote Season'

A reading of one of the first English sonnets

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1516/17-1547) [was the poet who invented the Shakespearean sonnet](#), sometimes known as [the English sonnet](#). It was the Earl of Surrey who made the innovation of ending the sonnet with a rhyming couplet, and in 'The Soote Season' he uses this to brilliant effect. This is one of the first sonnets written in English, but it's not as well known as it perhaps should be. We think 'The Soote Season' is also one of the [finest English poems written about summer](#), though it also takes in the spring season too. It was first published in English poetry's first ever verse anthology, [Tottel's Miscellany: Songs and Sonnets of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Others \(Penguin Classics\)](#), in 1557, where it appeared with the title 'Description of Spring, wherein each thing renews, save only the lover'. Below is the poem, to which we append a few words of analysis. The poem is given in its original spelling.

The soote season, that bud and blome furth bringes,
With grene hath clad the hill and eke the vale:
The nightingale with fethers new she singes:
The turtle to her make hath tolde her tale:
Somer is come, for euery spray nowe springes,
The hart hath hong his olde hed on the pale:
The buck in brake his winter cote he flinges:
The fishes flote with newe repaired scale:
The adder all her sloughe awaye she slinges:
The swift swallow pursueth the flyes smale:
The busy bee her honye now she minges:
Winter is worne that was the flowers bale:
And thus I see among these pleasant thinges
Eche care decays, and yet my sorow springes.

Henry Howard's summery sonnet, in summary, is about the coming of summer and the various ways in which a world previously in a sort of stasis or hibernation is now springing into life. ('Soote' in 'Soote Season' means 'sweet'.) However, despite this, the poet's sorrow also springs into new life at this time. We usually associate autumn and winter with sorrow, but not the summer. The Earl of Surrey makes his sorrow all

the more piquant precisely because it is surrounded by reminders of joy, life,



activity, and vibrancy. Isn't our own sorrow sometimes all the more keenly felt when everything else around us is joyful, and we know we should be happy too? But as Diana Wynne Jones once remarked, 'Happiness isn't a thing. You can't go out and get it like a cup of tea. It's the way you feel about things.' Sometimes there is no rhyme or reason – or season – to unhappiness.

'The soote season' takes up the literary legacy of Middle English poetry and, specifically, alliterative verse. These move between the soft sibilance that strike an appropriately summery note ('soote season', 'spray nowe springes') and harsher sounds conveying the vivid activity going on in the natural world ('tolde her tale', 'buck in brake'). In a sense, the final phrase in the poem, 'sorow springes', combines this soft sibilance and the harsher plosives in two words, just as, earlier in the poem, 'bringes' and 'singes' had merged into 'springes'.

That last word, 'springes', is especially poignant, given the seasonal focus of the poem: spring and summer should not give rise to sorrow. And it is all the more arresting given that it comes hot on the heels of many previous 'inge' rhymes: brings, sings, flinges, slinges, things, and – indeed – springes: 'Somer is come, for euey spray nowe springes'.

'The soote season' is not only one of the first English sonnets written in English; it was written by the very man who invented the sonnet form that [Shakespeare](#) would later put his indelible stamp on. But Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey is not as celebrated as the Bard. Even a preliminary analysis of 'The soote season' shows, however, that he didn't simply prepare the way for Shakespeare: he wrote a powerfully affecting and technically accomplished sonnet in his own right.