

Sonnet 18

Shall I Compare Thee to A Summer Day

By William Shakespear

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?	a
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:	b
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,	a
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;	b
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,	c
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;	d
And every fair from fair sometime declines,	c
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;	d
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,	e
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;	f
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,	e
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:	f
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,	g
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.	g

Thee:	you
Thou:	you
Art:	are
Temperate:	mild; not extreme
Bud:	small growth on a plant that develops into a flower
Lease:	a certain time
Hath:	have
Ow'st:	owe / own
Brag:	boast / be proud
Grow'st:	grow
Wand'rest:	wander; roam

FORM

The poem is written in the form of a sonnet. It has fourteen lines, which are divided into three quatrains and a couplet. The first eight lines—the octave—discuss the same thought i.e., the comparison of the speaker's beloved with summer. The last six lines—the sestet—bring in a new thought. These lines describe how the speaker's beloved is unlike the summer.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of the sonnet is ababdcdefeg.

Summary

The poem opens with the speaker putting forward a simple question: can he compare his lover to a summer's day? Historically, the theme of summertime has always been used to evoke a certain amount of beauty, particularly in poetry. Summer has always been seen as the respite from the long, bitter winter, a growing period where the earth flourishes itself with flowers and with animals once more. Thus, to compare his lover to a summer's day, the speaker considers their beloved to be tantamount to a rebirth and even better than summer itself.

As summer is occasionally short, too hot, and rough, summer is, in fact, not the height of beauty for this particular speaker. Instead, he attributes that quality to his beloved, whose beauty will never fade, even when 'death brag thou wander'st in his shade', as he will immortalize his lover's beauty in his verse.

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

The immortality of love and beauty through poetry provides the speaker with his beloved's eternal summer. Though they might die and be lost to time, the poem will survive, will be spoken of, and will live on when they do not. Thus, through the words, his beloved's beauty will also live on.

In terms of imagery, there is not much that one can say about it. William Shakespeare's sonnets thrive on simplicity of imagery, the polar opposite of his plays, whose imagery can sometimes be packed with meaning. Here, in this particular sonnet, the feeling of summer is evoked through references to the 'darling buds' of May and through the description of the sun as golden-complexioned.

It is almost ironic that we are not given a description of the lover in particular. In fact, scholars have argued that, as a love poem, the vagueness of the beloved's description leads them to believe that it is not a love poem written to a person but a love poem about itself, a love poem about love poetry, which shall live on with the excuse of being a love poem.

The final two lines seem to corroborate this view as they move away from the description of the lover to point out the longevity of his own poem. As long as men can read and breathe, his poem shall live on, and his lover, too, will live on because he is the subject of this poem.

However, opinions are divided on this topic.

Shakespeare's sonnets are all written in iambic pentameter – an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, with five of these in each line – with a rhyming couplet at the end.

Analysis

Sonnet 18 is essentially a love poem, though the object of its affection is not as straightforward as it may first seem. The speaker initially tries to find an appropriate metaphor to describe his beloved, suggesting that the beloved might be compared to a summer's day, the sun, or "the darling buds of May." Yet as the speaker searches for a metaphor that will adequately reflect his beloved's beauty, he realizes that none will work because all imply inevitable decline and death. Where the first eight lines of the poem document the failure of poetry's traditional resources to capture the beloved's beauty, the final six lines argue that the beloved's eternal beauty is best compared to the poem itself. In a strikingly circular motion, it is this very sonnet that both reflects and preserves the beloved's beauty. Sonnet 18 can thus be read as honouring not simply to the speaker's beloved but also to the power of poetry itself, which, the speaker argues, is a means to eternal life.

The poem begins with the speaker suggesting a series of similes to describe the beloved. In each case, he quickly lists reasons why the simile is inappropriate. For instance, if he compares the beloved to a "summer's day," he has to admit that the metaphor fails to capture the beloved's full beauty: the beloved is more "lovely" and more "temperate." As the poem proceeds, though, the speaker's objections begin to shift. Instead of arguing that the beloved's beauty exceeds whatever compared to, the speaker notes a dark underside to his own similes: they suggest impermanence and decay. To compare the beloved to the summer implies that fall is coming.

However, as the speaker notes in line 9, "thy eternal summer shall not fade." The beloved's beauty is not subject to decay or change. Clichéd, natural metaphors fail to capture the permanence, the inalterability, of the beloved's beauty. To praise him, the poet needs to compare him to something that is itself eternal. For the speaker, that something is art. Like the beloved's "eternal summer," the speaker's lines (i.e., the lines of his poem) are similarly "eternal." Unlike the summer or the sun, they will not change as time progresses. The speaker's lines are thus similar to the beloved in a key respect: the poem itself manages to capture the everlasting quality of his beauty, something that the poem's previous similes had failed to express.

If the speaker begins by suggesting that the poem is a good metaphor for the beloved's beauty, he quickly moves to a more ambitious assertion: the poem itself will give eternal life to the beloved: "So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." Here the poem's argument becomes circular: the beloved isn't like a summer's day or the sun because his beauty is eternal. But his eternal beauty is itself a property of the poem that praises him: his body is as fallible and mortal as anyone else's. He attains a kind of permanence and immortality only because the poem praises him.

The speaker thus thinks that poems are eternal objects—that they do not change or alter as they encounter new readers or new historical contexts. He also thinks that poetry possesses a set of special, almost magical powers. It not only describes, it preserves. The poem is thus not simply a way of cataloguing the beloved's beauty, it propagates it for future generations.

The poem, then, ultimately asks its audience to reflect on the powers of poetry itself: the ways that it does and does not protect the beloved against death, and the ways in which it preserves and creates beauty unmatched by the rest of the mortal world.

LITERARY DEVICES

- **Assonance:** Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same line. For example, the sound of /ou/ in “Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st”.
- **Alliteration:** Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in the initials of two successive words. For example, the sound of /l/ in “So long lives this” and /t/ sound in “to Time thou grow’st.”
- **Consonance:** Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in the same line. For example, as the sound of /r/ in “Nor shall death brag thou wand’rest in his shade” and the sound of /s/ in “So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”
- **Imagery:** Imagery is used to make readers perceive things involving their five senses. For example, “Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May” and “But thy eternal summer shall not fade.”
- **Personification:** Personification is to give human qualities to inanimate objects. For example, “Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May.”
- **Metaphor:** It is a figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between the objects that are different in nature. For example, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” though it is somewhat interrogative.
- **Rhetorical Question:** Rhetorical question is a question that is not asked to receive an answer; it is just posed to make the point clear. Shakespeare states rhetorical questions in the first line of the poem to put emphasis on his point. For example, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”

Themes

- **The Immortality of Poetry:** One of the central themes of Sonnet 18 is the idea that poetry has the power to make the beloved immortal. The poem itself becomes a vehicle for preserving the beauty and memory of the beloved, transcending the limitations of time and mortality.
- **The Permanence of Beauty:** The sonnet explores the concept of enduring beauty. While natural beauty, like that of a summer’s day, fades and changes, the beauty of the beloved is presented as something that will never diminish.
- **Love and Devotion:** The poem is a declaration of love and devotion from the speaker to the beloved. It portrays the beloved as someone of exceptional beauty and worth, deserving of such praise and attention.
- **The Impermanence of Nature:** The sonnet contrasts the fleeting and unpredictable nature of the seasons with the enduring nature of the beloved’s beauty. This contrast highlights the superiority of human art and emotion over the natural world.