

SONNET 18

SHALL I COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER'S DAY?

In the opening line of this sonnet, Shakespeare asks if he should compare his loved one to a summer's day. The obvious answer would seem to be that he should, but in fact he does not. He goes on to say that his beloved is more lovely and more temperate (less extreme/milder) than such a beautiful day. This sets the tone for the first two quatrains (four lines) in which the poet explains why summer does not match up to his beloved. Note that the poet is speaking directly to his beloved in the sonnet. This adds a sense of intimacy to the poem.

The poet tells us that even in May, the buds can be shaken by 'rough winds'. He also points out that summer does not last long. It has 'all too short a date'. Sometimes the sun burns too brightly and it is too hot, and at other times the 'gold complexion' of the sun is 'dim'd' or hidden by clouds. Everything that is fair or beautiful can fade, either by accident 'chance' or the changing seasons: 'nature's changing course'. The beauty of summer fades into autumn each year. The phrase 'nature's changing course' has been used as an oxymoron, which means the unchanging change of nature, and the only thing that does not change is 'change'. For this reason, the poet does not want to compare his loved one to something so transient and imperfect as a summer's day. This is an interesting reversal of the normal expectations which might be raised by the question the poet asks in the first line. We could reasonably expect the poet, having asked such a question, to justify why he might say that his beloved is every bit as lovely as a summer's day. But this is not the case. Instead, he holds the summer's day up to the harsh light of criticism, and finds it wanting – compared to the object of his affections. This shows us the strength of feeling Shakespeare has for his beloved. Normally, when a poet uses metaphors, similes or analogies, the purpose is to show how the subject of the poem matches up to the object to which they are compared. Here, it is the other way around. Such a reversal makes us sit up and take notice in a way we might not in a more clichéd praise of an adored object.

In the third quatrain, Shakespeare addresses his beloved again. He has told us why the summer cannot compare to his loved one, and now he explains why his beloved's beauty is more long-lasting. The use of the word 'But' signals this change in the poem. The poet says that the loved one's beauty will not fade or be forgotten because it will be immortalized in this poem. Even when his loved one dies, Death will not be able to boast that he has control now. Shakespeare's beloved will live on in the lines he has written and will not fade in death but will continue to grow because of his sonnet. The lines will be 'eternal' and in them the loveliness which Shakespeare treasures will be preserved for all time. There is a metaphor of grafting in the phrase 'thou grow'st'. Grafting is a technique used to join parts from two plants with cords so that they grow as one. The beloved becomes immortal, grafted to time with the poet's eternal lines.

The sonnet ends with a couplet (two lines) in which Shakespeare makes the claim that as long as there are people on earth, his loved one's beauty will live. He says that the poem will live as long as there are people to read it, and because of that, his beloved will live on too and will be given eternal life by the sonnet. The repetition of the words 'So long' and 'this' in both lines emphasize the theme of the poem as well as giving a pleasing end to the sonnet.

This sonnet is the first in which the poet has mentioned the longevity of youth's beauty as eternal. Another important theme here is the power of the speaker's poem to defy time – the immortality of art.