

SONNET 18

(SHALL I COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER'S DAY?)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

And summer's lease hath all too short a date.

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

And often is his gold complexion dimmed;

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,

Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,

When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

William Shakespeare 1564-1616



William Shakespeare

Notes

temperate (2): i.e., evenly-tempered; not overcome by passion.

lease (4): i.e. here it means the borrowed time of summer

the eye of heaven (5): i.e., the sun.

every fair from fair sometime declines (7): i.e., the beauty (fair) of everything beautiful (fair) will fade (declines).

nature's changing course (8): i.e., the natural changes age brings.

that fair thou ow'st (10): i.e., that beauty you possess.

in eternal lines...growest (12): The poet is using a grafting metaphor in this line. Grafting is a technique used to join parts from two plants with cords so that they grow as one. Thus the beloved becomes immortal, grafted to time with the poet's cords (his "eternal lines").

BACKGROUND

This is a sonnet of 14 lines, one of over 150 sonnets which Shakespeare wrote.

Sonnet 18 is one of the greatest and best loved love poems and it was probably written to a young man.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE POEM?

In the first 4 lines (quatrain) the poet praises his beloved who is more lovely than a summer's day. Even early summer is marked by strong winds which can ruin the buds.

In the next quatrain, the poet says the summer can be too hot or cloudy and says that beauty will fade as nature changes (people grow old).

In the third quatrain the poet says his lover will not change but actually become an eternal summer after being earlier compared to changeable summer. The lover will not lose 'his' beauty and will not die.

In the final rhyming couplet the poet says that as long as people live, his poetry will live on and ensure the immortality and life of his lover

WHAT ARE THE MAIN IDEAS AND THEMES?

- The stability or immortality of love and beauty
- The perfection of the beloved
- How poetry can immortalise beauty

WHAT ARE THE ASPECTS OF STYLE WHICH ARE EFFECTIVE?

- The emphasis and stress in the first line should not be on 'shall' because the poem is with confidence going to compare his lover to a summer's day and to the lover's superior credit.
- The metaphor of a summer's day has a range of contrasts: it can be stormy, brief lived, hot, cloudy and is subject to the changes of nature. By comparing (and contrasting) his beloved to a summer's day he can set up his lover as being eternal in beauty and unchanging.
- There are references to Time (personified) and death but the lover is set apart from these.
- The effect of the final rhyming couplet is certain and definite in its rhyme and in the balance between the two parts of each line. A caesura is a break in a line, (see the commas) and gives further weight to the poet's thoughts and love.
- The phrase 'The darling buds of May' has become well-known (so much of Shakespeare's language has) as it gave rise to the title for an H.E Bates novel (1958) and then a television comedy series.

