Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's

POEM TEXT

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 dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st 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.

SUMMARY

Should I compare you to a summer's day?
You are lovelier and more mild.
In May rough winds shake the delicate flower buds,
And the duration of summer is always too short.
Sometimes the Sun, the eye of heaven, is too hot,
And his golden face is often dimmed;
And beauty falls away from beautiful people,
Stripped by chance or nature's changing course.
But your eternal summer will not fade,
Nor will you lose possession of the beauty you own,
Nor will death be able to boast that you wander in his shade,
When you live in eternal lines, set apart from time.
As long as men breathe or have eyes to see,
As long as this sonnet lives, it will give life to you.

THEMES

ART AND IMMORTALITY

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 (traditionally believed to be a young man)—suggesting that he 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 young man's beauty, the final six lines argue that the young man'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 young man's beauty. Sonnet 18 can thus be read as honoring 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 young man. In each case, he quickly lists reasons why the simile is inappropriate. For instance, if he compares the young man to a "summer's day," he has to admit that the metaphor fails to capture the young man's full beauty: he's more "lovely" and more "temperate." As the poem proceeds, though, the speaker's objections begin to shift. Instead of arguing that the young man's beauty exceeds whatever he's compared to, the speaker notes a dark underside to his own similes: they suggest impermanence and decay. To compare the young man to the summer implies that fall is coming. To compare him to the sun implies that night will arrive—and soon.

However, as the speaker notes in line 9, "thy eternal summer shall not fade." The young man's beauty is not subject to decay or change. Clichéd, natural metaphors fail to capture the permanence, the inalterability, of the young man'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 young man'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 young man 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 young man's beauty, he quickly moves to a more ambitious assertion: the poem itself will give eternal life to the young man: "So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." Here the poem's argument becomes circular: the young man 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 young man'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 young man against death, and the ways in which it preserves and creates beauty unmatched by the rest of the mortal world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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;

The first four lines of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" establish the broad concern of the poem and some of its stylistic features. The first line of the poem poses a rhetorical question: the speaker asks whether he should compare his beloved (addressed directly as "thee") to a summer's day. (Based on contextual clues in the surrounding poems, most scholars assume that the person addressed in this sonnet is a young man, possibly of higher social standing than the poet. Despite extensive analysis, there is no consensus about who this young man was). In posing this question, the speaker is playing on a Renaissance proverb: "as good as one shall see in a summer's day"—which means something like "as good as the best there is." The speaker is asking, in other words, whether it would be appropriate to compare the young man to something widely regarded as the best and most beautiful thing possible.

In the following three lines, the speaker offers a series of reasons why the comparison is inappropriate. His reasons are surprising—the young man is *more* beautiful than a summer's day. His beauty exceeds a proverbially perfect thing. The speaker offers a series of reasons why. He is more "lovely" and less extreme. In contrast to the heat of a summer's day, he is "temperate": mild and pleasant. The word "temperate" is particularly suggestive since it derives from the Latin word *tempus*—meaning a "period of time." The echo of the Latin word suggests an emerging concern in the poem with time itself and its effects: aging, decay, and death.

In the following two lines, Shakespeare notes that the summer is itself temporally limited. It emerges from spring and falls into winter. Thus the buds of beautiful flowers are shaken by "Rough winds," which remind one of the winter that has been and the winter to come. The perfection has a short lease: it endures only for a brief moment. This concern with time itself increasingly occupies the poem—and becomes its central challenge as the speaker searches for a metaphor or simile that does not imply that his beloved will decay and die.

LINES 5-6

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;

In lines five and six, the speaker continues to ask whether the usual clichés of love poetry can adequately capture his beloved's beauty. Here he shifts from comparing the young man to a summer's day and instead compares him to the "eye of heaven"—that is, the sun. The sun is often invoked in Renaissance love poetry as a symbol of extraordinary beauty and brilliance. Moreover, the word "sun" sounds a lot like the word "son." In a culture obsessed with puns—and which did not yet have standardized spellings—the two words often blend together: the brightness of the sun figuring the brilliance and centrality of Christ himself. The speaker alludes to this tradition by describing the sun here as the "eye of heaven," associating its place in the sky with the place to which Christ ascends after his crucifixion. However, the speaker is once again unhappy with this traditional metaphor. He notes that the sun is itself imperfect: sometimes it's too hot. Often it's hidden behind clouds, "his gold complexion dimm'd." Once again, the speaker's concern is with time. The sun is—sometimes—as perfect as people claim, but it's not *always* that perfect. To compare the young man to the sun is thus to admit that he might change, that his beauty might be obscured. The speaker's underlying argument thus begins to become clear, and his complaint is consistent throughout: the traditional metaphors that his culture offers for describing beauty all imply that beauty is itself impermanent. One can discern a surprising and powerful claim in this argument: the young man's beauty is not impermanent. It will somehow survive aging, decay, and death.

LINES 7-8

And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;

In lines 7 and 8, the speaker provides a summary of the poem's argument so far. Everything "fair" eventually stops being fair: it decays, declines, becomes ugly. If line 7 serves as a thesis statement for the poem this far, line 8 serves to clarify why "every fair" eventually "declines." The speaker specifies two reasons: first, chance. Sometimes, he suggests, people are randomly injured or disfigured. One might hope to avoid such accidents. His second reason, though, allows for no escape. Much of the decay and death he laments comes from nature itself, its "changing course untrimm'd."

The phrase is complex and worth pausing over. The words "changing course" here refer to the cycles of birth, growth, and

decay that characterize almost all natural phenomena: from the changing seasons to the lives of all organisms, from the lowliest plants to the most beautiful human beings. The word "untrimm'd" means, in this context, stripped of ornament. The speaker suggests that ornaments—including poetic ornaments like metaphor and simile—serve to obscure the basic facts of life: that everything that's born will eventually die. In attacking the basic metaphors and similes of love poetry, he hopes to show his readers what "nature's changing course" looks like—and it doesn't look good. Nature's changing course will untrim every beauty of his ornaments.

The meter of these lines remains strong and regular. The confidence the speaker built across the opening four lines of the poem remains fully in effect here as he deploys broad, bold claims—and as he prepares to make even bolder claims about his own poetry.

LINES 9-12

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:

In the first 8 lines of the poem, the speaker deploys a series of clichés—and, in each case, finds that those clichés fail to adequately describe his beloved. The reason is simple: these clichés suggest that the young man's beauty is impermanent, subject to change and decay. In lines 9-12, the speaker insists that the young man's beauty is *eternal*. Compared to summer, which passes into fall, the young man's summer never ends. Compared to "every fair" which "from fair sometime declines," the young man will not lose possession of his fairness: he owns it forever. Even death cannot claim the young man: in line eleven, the speaker goes so far as to say that the death will never be able to brag about capturing the young man; he will never wander in death's "shade"—a reference to the biblical valley of the shadow of death. (Moreover, the association of death with shade completes the metaphors introduced in lines 1-6, which associate beauty with light, summer, and day; death, implicitly, is darkness, winter, and night).

These lines are initially puzzling: it's not clear *why* the young man is somehow exempt from death and decay. But line 12 provides a key clarification. The young man escapes from death because he lives—or, in the speaker's words, *grows*—in the poet's "eternal lines." As the speaker turns away from the traditional tropes of love poetry, he discovers a radically new analogy: the young man's eternal beauty is like the eternal life of poetry itself.

Some scholars have seen this as an important break in the history of poetry—a moment where poetry begins to reflect on and talk about itself and its own powers. Indeed, as the speaker compares the young man and his own poem, his argument slips into circularity. The young man's beauty may be eternal, but it is *only* eternal because of the poem. If the speaker doesn't consecrate his poem to the young man's beauty, the young man will wander in death's shade. The poem's action is circular, even recursive: it constructs the object that it praises. In this sense, one might wonder what the poem is actually praising here. While the poem is ostensibly about how beautiful the young man is, it may actually be about how powerful and important the poem itself is. As Joel Fineman writes about this moment (and others like it in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*), "the poetry of praise becomes a praise of poetry itself."

LINES 13-14

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

In the final 2 lines of the poem—which usually serves as the volta, or turn in a Shakespearean sonnet—the speaker summarizes the argument he has supplied in the previous 4 lines. He does so in bold, even presumptuous terms. As long as people continue to read his poem, the young man will continue to live. And, he claims in line 13, people will read this poem as long as there are people breathing and reading. The speaker has an almost absurd faith in the power of his own poetry to endure, to continue to interest readers far into the future.

Moreover, his faith in the power of his poem betrays some interesting assumptions about poetry itself. He assumes, for instance, that future readers will see what he sees in the poem: the young man's beauty, perfectly preserved. He does not allow the possibility that the poem itself will change—either because it is damaged or because new readers in new historical contexts will see it differently than he does. He does not admit the possibility that the poem will be forgotten. In this sense, the speaker may be said to exclude his readers from the process of interpreting the poem. Of course, one might imagine a different vision of the poem and its relation to its future readers: a vision that invites readers into the poem and allows them to remake it in their own images.

SYMBOLS

SEASONS

Seasons are units that divide up the year. In Western culture, the seasons unfold like a story: birth followed by maturity, maturity followed by decay and death. As such, the seasons are often used in poetry as metaphors for the progress of a human life from youth to old age. And, in a Christian context, the return of spring after the winter often serves to represent the possibility of resurrection.

"Sonnet 18" references this tradition at several key points in the poem. The poem opens by asking whether the speaker should compare the young man to a "summer's day." In line

three, he refuses, implicitly, to compare the young man to the "darling buds of May." In line five, he returns to summer as a symbol—and again refuses it, this time on the grounds that summer doesn't last long enough to represent the young man's "eternal summer."

The poem thus has a strained relationship with the tradition of using the seasons as a symbol for human life. It invokes that tradition only to refuse it. Because the symbol implies narrative—change, transformation, aging, decay—the speaker finds it inappropriate for his purposes. This raises interesting interpretative questions: one might wonder, for instance, if the poem also rejects a Christian model of resurrection (which requires death) in favor of its own, poetic form of eternal life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, / And summer's lease hath all too short a date;"
- **Lines 8-9:** "By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd; / But thy eternal summer shall not fade,"

THE SUN

In Renaissance love poetry, the sun is often used as a symbol for physical or personal beauty. Because the sun is the source of all light—and life—comparing someone or something to the sun suggests that they are unusually, even exceptionally beautiful. Further because "sun" sounds a lot like "son" (in Renaissance English, the two words were regularly spelled in the same way), the sun often becomes a symbol of Christianity (in reference to the fact that Jesus is the son of God).

In "Sonnet 18," the speaker considers comparing the young man to the sun, but rejects the comparison, noting that the sun's beauty is often dimmed by clouds. (In other sonnets, the speaker does compare the young man to the sun—precisely because the sun's beauty is variable. See Sonnet 33, for example, where he refers to the young man as "my sun" and then complains, "he was but one hour mine, / The region cloud hath masked him from me now"). To reject this metaphor—to say that the young man is *more* beautiful than the sun because his beauty is more eternal—raises questions about the poem's relationship to Christianity. The speaker might suggest here that the young man's beauty and importance rival that of the divinity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, / And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Sonnet 18" contains a number of instances of alliteration. These plays of sound bind together Shakespeare's lines: for example, the repeated *sh* sound in "shall" "shade" in line 11. Shakespeare's alliterations often reinforce the content of the poem. For example, in line 8 the connected sounds of "chance " and "changing" underscore the impermanence of the natural world. And in line 14, "lives" and "life" underline the connection between the eternal life of the poem and the young man's eternal life.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "chance," "changing"
- **Line 11:** "shall," "shade"
- **Line 13:** "long"
- **Line 14:** "long lives," "this," "this," "life," "thee"

ANAPHORA

"Sonnet 18" contains a single, important instance of anaphora. Both lines thirteen and fourteen begin with the same phrase "so long." The repeated phrase underlines the conceptual continuity between the ideal expressed in these lines. The poem survives as long—and only as long—as "men can breathe or eyes can see." This is an ambitious, even pretentious claim: Shakespeare imagines that readers will *always* be interested in his poem. But it also makes some of his assumptions about poetry and its readers clear. The poem depends on its readers to accomplish its goal: without them, the young man's beauty will not be eternal.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "So long"
- **Line 14:** " So long"

APORIA

The poem begins with an instance of aporia. The speaker poses a rhetorical question: should he compare his beloved to a summer's day? Needless to say, the speaker is not experiencing a real dilemma about how appropriate the metaphor is. Instead, posing the question allows him to show why the metaphor fails—and why the poem itself is a better image of the young man's eternal beauty.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

END-STOPPED LINE

"Sonnet 18" is entirely end-stopped. This underlines how organized the poem is—and how confident its speaker is. Almost all of his thoughts are precisely fitted to the size of a pentameter line, resulting in a pleasing, steady rhythm while reading the poem that allows the speaker to focus on his argument. Such precise organization underscores the speaker's assertion that the poem will always be read in a precise way that will preserve the beauty of its subject. The speaker again attempts to preclude reader interpretation of his words, and instead to assert control over the future of his poem.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "day?"
- **Line 2:** "temperate:"
- **Line 3:** "May,"
- **Line 4:** "date;"
- **Line 5:** "shines,"
- **Line 6:** "dimm'd;"
- **Line 7:** "declines,"
- **Line 8:** "untrimm'd;"
- **Line 9:** "fade,"
- **Line 10:** "ow'st;"
- **Line 11:** "shade,"
- **Line 12:** "grow'st:"
- **Line 13:** "see,"
- **Line 14:** "thee."

EUPHONY

"Sonnet 18" contains a number of euphonic moments. For example, lines 13 and 14 make use of muffled, soft consonant sounds like *l*, *m*, and *th*—giving the line a smooth, musical quality that helps the line flow off the tongue easily. As such, it stands in contrast to some of the poem's more dissonant moments, where hard, percussive consonants like *r*, *d*, and *b* interrupt the musical flow of Shakespeare's verse. Significantly, these harsher consonants tend to crop up when the speaker describes terrifying things—like death itself, in line 11. The poem thus juxtaposes its own smooth musicality against the discordant world of death. In so doing, it reinforces its own argument: the poem itself—with its euphony—is not just conceptually separate from death, it's also *sonically* distinct.

Where Euphony appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "long," "men," "breathe"
- **Line 14:** "long," "lives," "this," "this," "life," "thee"

DIACOPE

On first read, line 14 feels almost redundant. The first half of the line ("so long lives this") repeats almost exactly in its second half ("and this gives life to thee"). The same words are used close together and in almost the same sense in an instance of diacope that underlies the argument the speaker is making. As the poem comes to an end, it becomes difficult to distinguish the young man's life and the poem's life—and indeed, the speaker promises that they will blend together as the poem protects the young man forever.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "this," "this"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker occasionally personifies the natural world in the poem. For example, in line 5, he compares the sun to a part of the human body, an "eye." The speaker is comfortable thinking about the natural world in terms of the physical (and psychic) components of a human being. Yet the speaker also clearly resists personification at certain points. The poem's opening rhetorical question might be understood as a moment where the speaker pauses to consider whether he *should* personify a summer's day. Is there actually a meaningful resemblance between the summer's day and the young man, he wonders? The heart of the poem lies in the speaker's refusal to accept that there is.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, / And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;"
- **Line 11:** "Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,"

JUXTAPOSITION

Throughout the poem, the speaker juxtaposes nature's beauty with its ugliness: the "darling buds of May" lie side by side with "rough winds"; the heat of summer sits next to its shining beauty, and however "gold" its complexion, it is "dimm'd." These juxtapositions allow the speaker to show why the traditional clichés of love poetry fail to adequately capture the young man—and why a new set of metaphors might be necessary.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Rough winds," "the darling buds of May"
- **Line 5:** "Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,"
- **Line 6:** "And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;"

VOCABULARY

Temperate (Line 2) - Temperate as used in line 2 means that the speaker's beloved is not susceptible to extremes. The word often carries moral undertones and is closely related to the

word "temperance," which suggests moderation and self-control. Yet "temperate" can also refer to pleasant weather that is neither too hot nor too cold. Shakespeare latches onto the word's ability to reference both to emotionality and weather to underscore his beloved's mild, pleasing nature.

Lease (Line 4) - Lease in line 4 means, essentially, allotted time. Though the word often refers to a legal contract—for example, an agreement to rent an apartment—Shakespeare uses it here to refer simply to a limited span of time. The fiscal sense of the word does remain present, though, particularly in combination with the later use of the word "ow'st." The implication is that summer does not possess its beauty; it simply rents it for a little while.

Complexion (Line 6) - Complexion refers to the natural appearance of the skin, especially the skin of the face. In the poem, the speaker personifies the sun, giving it skin, in order to compare it to the young man's own complexion.The word also has an obsolete sense: it refers to the combination of the four humors in the body. In humoral theory, a person's health (and even personality) was determined by the mixing of four "humors": black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. Though the speaker is probably not referring to the humors explicitly here, Shakespeare's early readers may have heard this alternate sense as well. It suggests a broader reading of the line: instead of specifically comparing the young man's face to the sun, the speaker might be comparing the constitution of the young man's body to the constitution of the sun itself.

Fair (Line 7, Line 10) - One often uses the word "fair" when talking about whether something is just or unjust: one might say, for instance, that someone's prison sentence was fair or unfair. Shakespeare uses the word in a different sense. Here it refers to physical beauty. In the Renaissance, to call a man fair was to suggest that he was exceptionally beautiful. There are some remnants of this usage that survive in modern speech: for instance, one might refer to a blond-haired person as "fair-haired." This surviving use hints at some of the implications of the word "fair" in the Renaissance. It did not simply suggest that someone was beautiful; it implied a specific kind of beauty. During the Renaissance, there was a strong preference for pale skin and blond hair. (Renaissance ladies, for instance, avoided going out in the sun—lest they get a tan). To be fair was thus a mark of privilege: it implied that one had the ability to remain indoors, to send servants outside to work. The word "fair" implies a specific kind of aristocratic beauty: pale and privileged. It thus also suggests that the young man belongs to an elevated class.

Untrimmed (Line 8) - "Untrimm'd" means stripped of ornament or plain. There is a grammatical ambiguity in the line, however: one might read "untrimm'd" as a participle or an adjective. In the first case, the line means something like "stripped of its ornament by chance or by nature." In the second, the line means "Every beautiful thing declines / because of chance or because of the unadorned facts of life." Both readings are possible—and, as is often the case in Shakespeare's poems, the best solution is to keep both readings active at once. The line suggests two things then: first, that nature and chance will strip the young man's ornamental beauty; second, that nature itself is unadorned—naked, frank, and brutal.

Possession (Line 10) - To own or control something. The word ricochets against the word "lease" in line four. In contrast to the beauty that summer merely rents, the young man's beauty is his property, something he controls forever.

Ow'st (Line 10) - The word is a contraction of the verb "own," meaning to possess something. It works together with the word "possession" earlier in the line to give the strong sense that the young man's beauty is his property, permanently. The contraction, however, releases the alternate possibility: "ow'st" sounds a lot like a contraction of the verb "to owe." As such, it echoes other Shakespearean sonnets which—in contrast to this poem—meditate on the impermanence of the young man's beauty and describe that beauty as a "loan." (See, for example, Sonnet 6).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Sonnet 18" is a Shakespearean sonnet, meaning it has 14 lines written in iambic pentameter and that follow a regular rhyme scheme. This rhyme scheme can be divided into three quatrains followed by a couplet. Lines 1 through 12 follow and ABAB rhyme scheme—the first and third line of each four-line unit rhyme with each other, as do the second and fourth lines. In the final two lines, the rhyme scheme shifts: the two lines rhyme with each other.

These final two lines are the poem's *volta* or *turn*. In the volta of a sonnet, the poet often changes their mind, takes an opposing viewpoint, or complicates the argument the poem has so far made. The volta comes relatively late in a Shakespearean sonnet; in a Petrarchan sonnet, it falls at line nine. Because the Shakespearean sonnet was a new form in the 1590s, when Shakespeare likely wrote these poems, the Petrarchan sonnet sometimes haunts Shakespeare's writing. That's arguably the case here: the real change in the sonnet's perspective comes at line 9—where one would expect to find it in a Petrarchan sonnet. Instead of changing the argument of the previous 12 lines, the couplet of Sonnet 18 *restates* its argument. The sonnet is a thus a subtle hybrid between the two kinds of sonnets.

METER

Shakespeare writes "Sonnet 18" in iambic pentameter—a meter he uses throughout his work, in both poetry and plays. Shakespeare uses the meter so often because it mimics the way

people actually talk: unlike other meters, like trochaic tetrameter (the meter of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star"), iambic pentameter tends to fade into the background, a subtle rhythmic pulse that one notices only when it is disturbed by unnatural or unexpected metrical substitutions. An example of perfect iambic pentameter is seen here:

> And summer's lease hath all too short a date;

The poem does indulge in occasional metrical substitutions, yet these substitutions for the most part are smooth and do not significantly affect the way one reads the poem—either in terms of its rhythm or its content.

An exception occurs in line 3, which begins with a spondee—an unusual and disturbing variation:

> Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May

As a result, the line has six stresses instead of the usual five—a significant disturbance to the meter. In a poem concerned with time and decay, this metrical disturbance is thematically important. The rough winds trouble the perfection of summer; they also disturb the poem's own perfection, the rhythmic way it unfolds in time. The disturbance of the meter models the disturbance that the rough winds inflict on the "darling buds of May."

RHYME SCHEME

"Sonnet 18" observes the traditional rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet:

> ABABCDCDEFEFGG

Note the way the rhymes divide the poem up. In the first 2 lines, Shakespeare introduces the separate rhymes of "day" and "temperate"; in lines 3 and 4, he completes those rhymes. The pattern continues throughout line 12. Each set of 4 lines is its own sonic unit. In the final couplet, however, the rhyme scheme shifts: Shakespeare introduces a rhyme in line 13 and then completes it immediately in line 14. The final lines are thus their own sonic unit. This reflects that this couplet brings closure to the poem and provides a sort of answer to the riddle posed by the prior lines—that is, to the question of how best to capture the beloved's immortal beauty.

The rhymes of the poem are not always exactly perfect, and Shakespeare does frequently rhyme single syllable words with multi-syllable words (for example "temperate" and "date"). However, the poem's strong meter keeps the reader from hearing this as a moment of syncopation or rhythmic disturbance: "temperate" and "short a date" are rhythmically equivalent. The poem also contains a few significant instances of internal rhyme: for example, the slant rhyme between "line" and "time" in line 12. This sonic similarity encourages the reader to think about the conceptual relationship between "lines" and "time." The poem's strong rhyme overall reinforce its sense of permanence: the poem is so well constructed that it must endure for eternity.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Sonnet 18" is a subject of considerable controversy. Many people read the poem as an autobiographical statement, part of an actual love affair that the historical Shakespeare had with a young aristocrat. (In the movie *Shakespeare in Love*, for example, Shakespeare writes the poem for his lover, the imaginary lady Viola de Lesseps—though contextual clues in the *Sonnets* suggest the poem was written for a man). There is no evidence in the poem itself, however, to support an autobiographical reading; indeed, we don't even know whether the speaker of this poem is a man or woman. We don't know how long the affair has been going on—or what class each partner belongs to. The speaker and the beloved remain anonymous and genderless throughout.

We can say that the speaker of this poem is fluent in the clichés of Renaissance love poetry, and thus highly literate. The reader doesn't learn much about the speaker from the poem, apart from the fact that he (or even perhaps she) is in love with someone very beautiful and that he believes his own poetry will help preserve the beloved's beauty for all of eternity.

SETTING

Though not explicit, the setting of "Sonnet 18" could be interpreted as being Renaissance London, where a passionate affair between the poet and his beloved has begun to unfold. Yet while the poem—and the relationship it describes—arise from the conventions of Renaissance English love poetry, the poem itself refuses to be located in a specific historical moment. It insists that a poem is an eternal and unchanging object, independent of the historical context in which it is produced—or in which it is read. Whether the poem succeeds in escaping its own historical and social context will thus be a major question for interpreting it.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Sonnet 18" was most likely written during the 1590s. The sonnet first entered English in the 1530s and 1540s when poets like Thomas Wyatt began translating Francesco Petrarch's poems. Over the intervening half-century, the sonnet became an increasingly popular form, particularly among the aristocracy, who used it to write about their illicit affairs and to find favor at court.

Shakespeare—who was a commoner—thus approaches the form with some skepticism, interrogating and reformulating its clichés, testing the sonnet to see if and how he might use it for his own purposes. For example, the traditional subject of the sonnet is unrequited heterosexual love: a male poet writes about an exalted and unattainable woman whom he adores with a fervor that borders on worship. Shakespeare introduces an important—if not unprecedented—twist to that tradition: the first 126 of his sonnets are addressed to a man. (For other homoerotic Renaissance sonnets, see Richard Barnfield's roughly contemporary sequence, "Certain Sonnets").

Shakespeare's sonnets have become some of the most widely read and popular poems in the English language—and Sonnet 18 remains perhaps the best known of Shakespeare's poems. In Shakespeare's own time, they seem to have been not particularly popular; they were largely forgotten until Edmund Malone's 1780 edition rekindled interest in them—in part by casting them as an autobiographical document. (Whether we should or should not read these poems autobiographically remains a subject of major debate among scholars.)

In the context of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, "Sonnet 18" plays an important role. Literary scholars generally group the first 17 sonnets together. They're called the "procreation sonnets" because they urge the young man to reproduce as a way to preserve his beauty: "And nothing 'gainst time's scythe can make defence / Save breed to brave him when he takes the hence," Shakespeare writes in Sonnet 12. These sonnets consider the possibility that poetry might preserve the young man's beauty—and they reject that possibility. ("But wherefore do not you a mightier way / Make war upon this bloody tyrant time? / And fortify yourself in your decay / With means more blessed than my barren rhyme?" Shakespeare asks in Sonnet 16.) Sonnet 18 thus marks a major shift in the argument of Shakespeare's sequence: poetry replaces heterosexual reproduction as a way to preserve the young man's beauty. In doing so, it acquires a power and permanence that Shakespeare himself had denied it just two poems earlier.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although there is continuing debate among scholars about when Shakespeare wrote his sonnets (some say it was as early as the 1580s; some say it was as late as the first decade of the 17th century), most agree that they were likely written in the early 1590s, possibly when the theaters were closed due to plague. Certainly by the mid-1590s, individual poems began to appear in compilations like *The Passionate Pilgrim*. This places the sonnets in the midst of what C.S. Lewis called "the golden age" of 16th century literature, in the same decade that Spenser and Sidney's major works first appeared in print—and that Shakespeare himself wrote some of his most important plays.

It also places the sonnets in a period of relative political calm. After years of conflict abroad, Elizabeth had defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588. Though she was aging—and did not have an heir—she was secure on her throne, a universally admired figure. Though Shakespeare's culture was on the verge of dramatic and violent change, the *Sonnets*, with their focus on domestic matters, affairs of the heart, seem insulated from that change.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Sonnet 18" Read Aloud — Listen to actor David Tenant read "Sonnet 18" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nD6Of-pwKP4)
- Image of "Sonnet 18" in its 1609 Printing — An image of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" as it appeared in its first printing. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnet_18#/media/File:Sonnet_18_1609_2.jpg)
- Close Reading of "Sonnet 18" — Richard Price close reads "Sonnet 18" for the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/translating-shakespeares-sonnet-18)
- David Gilmour Sings "Sonnet 18" — David Gilmour from Pink Floyd performs a musical interpretation of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8Osse7w9fs)
- "Sonnet 18" Meter — Test your understanding of Shakespeare's meter with this interactive tool from the University of Virginia. (https://prosody.lib.virginia.edu/prosody_poem/sonnet-18/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE POEMS

- Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds
- Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun
- Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth
- Sonnet 29: When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
- Sonnet 30: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
- Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold

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