

SONNET XVIII

*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 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.*

This is one of the most famous of all the sonnets, justifiably so. But it would be a mistake to take it entirely in isolation, for it links in with so many of the other sonnets through the themes of the descriptive power of verse; the ability of the poet to depict the fair youth adequately, or not; and the immortality conveyed through being hymned in these 'eternal lines'. It is noticeable that here the poet is full of confidence that his verse will live as long as there are people drawing breath upon the earth, whereas later he apologises for his poor wit and his humble lines which are inadequate to encompass all the youth's excellence. Now, perhaps in the early days of his love, there is no such self-doubt and the eternal summer of the youth is preserved forever in the poet's lines. The poem also works at a rather curious level of achieving its objective through dispraise. The summer's day is found to be lacking in so many respects (too short, too hot, too rough, sometimes too dingy), but curiously enough one is left with the abiding impression that 'the lovely boy' is in fact like a summer's day at its best, fair, warm, sunny, temperate, one of the darling buds of May, and that all his beauty has been wonderfully highlighted by the comparison.

Commentary

1. *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*

This is taken usually to mean 'What if I were to compare thee etc?' The stock comparisons of the loved one to all the beautiful things in nature hover in the background throughout. One also remembers Wordsworth's lines:

*We'll talk of sunshine and of song,
And summer days when we were young,
Sweet childish days which were as long
As twenty days are now.*

Such reminiscences are indeed anachronistic, but with the recurrence of words such as 'summer', 'days', 'song', 'sweet', it is not difficult to see the permeating influence of the Sonnets on Wordsworth's verse.

2. *Thou art more lovely and more temperate:*

The youth's beauty is more perfect than the beauty of a summer day. *more temperate* - more gentle, more restrained, whereas the summer's day might have violent excesses in store, such as are about to be described.

3. *Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,*

May was a summer month in Shakespeare's time, because the calendar in use lagged behind the true sidereal calendar by at least a fortnight.

darling buds of May - the beautiful, much loved buds of the early summer; favourite flowers.

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

Legal terminology. The summer holds a lease on part of the year, but the lease is too short, and has an early termination (*date*).

5. *Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,*

Sometime = on occasion, sometimes;
the eye of heaven = the sun.

6. *And often is his gold complexion dimmed,*

his gold complexion = his (the sun's) golden face. It would be dimmed by clouds and on overcast days generally.

7. *And every fair from fair sometime declines,*

All beautiful things (*every fair*) occasionally become inferior in comparison with their essential previous state of beauty (*from fair*). They all decline from perfection.

8. *By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed:*

By chance accidents, or by the fluctuating tides of nature, which are not subject to control, *nature's changing course untrimmed*.

untrimmed - this can refer to the ballast (trimming) on a ship which keeps it stable; or to a lack of ornament and decoration. The greater difficulty however is to decide which noun this adjectival participle should modify. Does it refer to nature, or chance, or every fair in the line above, or to the effect of nature's changing course? KDJ adds a comma after *course*, which probably has the effect of directing the word towards all possible antecedents. She points out that *nature's changing course* could refer to women's monthly courses, or menstruation, in which case *every fair* in the previous line would refer to every fair woman, with the implication that the youth is free of this cyclical curse, and is therefore more perfect.

9. *But thy eternal summer shall not fade,*

Referring forwards to the eternity promised by the ever living poet in the next few lines, through his verse.

10. *Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,*
Nor shall it (your eternal summer) lose its hold on that beauty which you so richly possess. *ow'st* = ownest, possess.
By metonymy we understand 'nor shall you lose any of your beauty'.
11. *Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,*
Several half echoes here. The biblical ones are probably '*Oh death where is thy sting? Or grave thy victory?*' implying that death normally boasts of his conquests over life. And Psalms 23.3.: '*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil*' In classical literature the shades flitted helplessly in the underworld like gibbering ghosts. Shakespeare would have been familiar with this through Virgil's account of Aeneas' descent into the underworld in Aeneid Bk. VI.
12. *When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,*
in eternal lines = in the undying lines of my verse. Perhaps with a reference to progeny, and lines of descent, but it seems that the procreation theme has already been abandoned.
to time thou grow'st - you keep pace with time, you grow as time grows.
13. *So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,*
For as long as humans live and breathe upon the earth, for as long as there are seeing eyes on the earth.
14. *So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Critical Analysis of Sonnet 18:

We know that the individual human body cannot survive the passage of time and that it will eventually fade away. As a result of the process of aging, this body will die and decay, for man is mortal. It is said that to be born is to die. Thus no man can literally escape death. However, the death of a single man does not spell the death of the species. Man as a species will live on. And because of that, man's art will also live on. The poet knows that there is only one way to become immortal, and that is through the creation of timeless art. He is confident that his poetry will be read and held in high esteem for many generations to come. That is why the people of whom he speaks in his poetry will also live on. In this way, future readers of his poetry will get to know that there was once a beautiful woman who was the poet's muse and inspiration. Hence her beauty may not literally survive, but the praise of that beauty in the poet's words can never fade away entirely.

A Summary of Sonnet 18

Sonnet 18 is perhaps the best known of all sonnets. Shakespeare wrote 154 of them but this one tends to top most popular lists, mainly due to the opening line which every romantic knows off by heart.

But there is much more to this line than meets the eye, as you'll find out later in the analysis. And please be aware that not every line of every Shakespeare sonnet is written in pure iambic pentameter - a mistake made by many a supposed authority.

There may be metrical variations but the form is classic Shakespearean sonnet: three quatrains (3 x 4 lines) rounded off with a rhyming couplet (final 2 lines), making 14 lines in total.

William Shakespeare's sonnets are world renowned and are said to have been written for a 'fair youth' (1 - 126) and a 'dark lady' (127 - 154), but no one is 100% certain.

There are no definite names and no written evidence. Shakespeare may have been well known in his lifetime but he was also very good at keeping secrets.

The sonnets were first published in 1609, seven years before his death, and their

remarkable quality has kept them in the public eye ever since. Their depth and range set Shakespeare apart from all other sonneteers.

- His sonnet 18 focuses on the loveliness of a friend or lover, the speaker initially asking a rhetorical question comparing them to a summer's day.
- He then goes on to introduce the pros and cons of the weather, from an idyllic English summer's day to a less welcome dimmed sun and rough winds.

In the end, it is the poetry that will keep the lover alive for ever, defying even death.

Sonnet 18 Themes

One of the key themes in this sonnet is the brevity of youth and beauty—the shortness of summer, both literal and metaphorical. The poet refers to the "summer" of his beloved, meaning his youth and the period in which he is beautiful, and ponders whether he should compare this to summers in nature, which are "too short" for his liking. Beautiful things, the poet says, do not remain beautiful for long—"every fair from fair" will decline in the end.

However, the poet moves on to communicate the second key theme of the poem as a sort of expression of consolation. Although the physical beauty of his beloved may not endure, his summer will be "eternal" because it will be committed to paper. The theme of writing, then, and its enduring quality—even a capacity to confer immortality upon its subjects—is broached here. The poet suggests that the "eternal lines" of his work will prevent his beloved from being lost in the spell of Death. Although he may literally and physically die, the poem will "give life to" him for as long as people are still living to read it.

SONNET 130

*My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red, than her lips red:
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound:
I grant I never saw a goddess go,
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:
And yet by heaven, I think my love as rare,
As any she belied with false compare.*

Summary: Sonnet 130

This sonnet compares the speaker's lover to a number of other beauties—and never in the lover's favor. Her eyes are “nothing like the sun,” her lips are less red than coral; compared to white snow, her breasts are dun-colored, and her hairs are like black wires on her head. In the second quatrain, the speaker says he has seen roses separated by color (“damasked”) into red and white, but he sees no such roses in his mistress's cheeks; and he says the breath that “reeks” from his mistress is less delightful than perfume. In the third quatrain, he admits that, though he loves her voice, music “hath a far more pleasing sound,” and that, though he has never seen a goddess, his mistress—unlike goddesses—walks on the ground. In the couplet, however, the speaker declares that, “by heav'n,” he thinks his love as rare and valuable “As any she belied with false compare”—that is, any love in which false comparisons were invoked to describe the loved one's beauty.

Commentary

This sonnet, one of Shakespeare's most famous, plays an elaborate joke on the conventions of love poetry common to Shakespeare's day, and it is so well-conceived that the joke remains funny today. Most sonnet sequences in Elizabethan England were modeled after that of Petrarch. Petrarch's famous sonnet sequence was written as a series of love poems to an idealized and idolized mistress named Laura. In the sonnets, Petrarch praises her beauty, her worth, and her perfection using an extraordinary variety of metaphors based largely on natural

beauties. In Shakespeare's day, these metaphors had already become cliché (as, indeed, they still are today), but they were still the accepted technique for writing love poetry. The result was that poems tended to make highly idealizing comparisons between nature and the poets' lover that were, if taken literally, completely ridiculous. My mistress' eyes are like the sun; her lips are red as coral; her cheeks are like roses, her breasts are white as snow, her voice is like music, she is a goddess.

In many ways, Shakespeare's sonnets subvert and reverse the conventions of the Petrarchan love sequence: the idealizing love poems, for instance, are written not to a perfect woman but to an admittedly imperfect man, and the love poems to the dark lady are anything but idealizing ("My love is as a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease" is hardly a Petrarchan conceit.) Sonnet 130 mocks the typical Petrarchan metaphors by presenting a speaker who seems to take them at face value, and somewhat bemusedly, decides to tell the truth. Your mistress' eyes are like the sun? That's strange—my mistress' eyes aren't at all like the sun. Your mistress' breath smells like perfume? My mistress' breath reeks compared to perfume. In the couplet, then, the speaker shows his full intent, which is to insist that love does not need these conceits in order to be real; and women do not need to look like flowers or the sun in order to be beautiful.

The rhetorical structure of Sonnet 130 is important to its effect. In the first quatrain, the speaker spends one line on each comparison between his mistress and something else (the sun, coral, snow, and wires—the one positive thing in the whole poem some part of his mistress *is* like. In the second and third quatrains, he expands the descriptions to occupy two lines each, so that roses/cheeks, perfume/breath, music/voice, and goddess/mistress each receive a pair of unrhymed lines. This creates the effect of an expanding and developing argument, and neatly prevents the poem—which does, after all, rely on a single kind of joke for its first twelve lines—from becoming stagnant.

Line By Line Analysis of Sonnet 130

Sonnet 130 stands alone as a unique and startlingly honest love poem, an antithesis to the sweet conventions of Petrarchan ideals which were prominent at the time.

- Shakespeare doesn't hold back in his denial of his mistress's beauty. It's there for all to see in the first line. When Shakespeare was writing this sonnet it was all the rage to compare a lover's eyes to the sun and sunlight - Shakespeare completely negates this, using the phrase '*nothing like*' to emphasise the fact that this female's eyes are not bright. They were, according to a line in sonnet 127, raven black.

The second line focuses on the mistress's lips and informs the reader that they are not that red, not as red as coral (the marine corals), again the perfect colour for the perfect female.

These first two lines are caesura-free, there is no natural pause for the reader, and the iambic beat is dominant.

In lines three and four the anatomy of the mistress is further explored in unorthodox fashion. In Shakespeare's time the ideal woman was white, slender, blonde haired, red-lipped, bright-eyed and had silky smooth white skin.

Not so the woman of sonnet 130. Her breasts are a dull grey-brown colour, not snow white. And she has dark hair that stands out like wires. Imagine that, comparing your lover's hair to strands of thin metal.

Note the comma in both lines, a parallel, so the reader has to pause, breaking the rhythm, telling us that this is no ordinary poetic journey.

The first quatrain is all about the appearance of the mistress, what she isn't like.

The second quatrain takes the reader a little deeper and in the paired lines five and six the notion that this mistress is not your ideal female model is reinforced. She doesn't have rosy cheeks, even if the speaker has seen plenty of natural damask roses in the garden.

If the classic, lovely and fragrant English Rose is absent, at least this mistress has no pretence to a sweet smelling breath. Her breath reeks, which may mean stinks or may mean rises. Some say that in Shakespeare's time the word reeks meant to emanate or rise, like smoke. Others claim it did mean smell or stink. Certainly in the context of the previous line - some perfume - the latter meaning seems more likely.

Sonnet 130 becomes more abstract as it progresses. The third quatrain introduces the reader to the mistress's voice and walk and offers up no extraordinary claims. She speaks and walks normally. She hasn't a musical voice; she uses her feet to get around.

This is nitty gritty reality Shakespeare is selling the reader. No airs and graces from his mistress.

- So to the final couplet, a full rhyming affirmation of the speaker's love for the woman, his mistress. Not only is the speaker being blatantly honest in this sonnet, he is being critical of other poets who put forward false claims about woman. He's not prepared to do that, preferring instead to enhance his mistress's beauty, deepen his love for her.

In being brutally open, candid and unconventional, the speaker has ironically given his mistress a heightened beauty, simply because he doesn't dote on her outward appearance.