

A Closer Look at

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (Sonnet 18)

What's a sonnet?

The word 'sonnet' comes from the French word *sonet* and the Italian word *sonetto*, and originally meant 'little song'. The sonnet as we know it in English, though, is a particular kind of short poem.

Traditionally, the sonnet follows a specific form with a set number of lines and rhyme scheme, but there are variations.

Sonnets are often, but not always, about love. Francesco Petrarca (known as Petrarch in English) was the most famous of the early sonneteers, writing more than 300 sonnets to his beloved Laura in the 1300s. Sonnets first appeared in English in the early 1500s, and often followed the Petrarchan and Elizabethan forms. By the late 1500s and early 1600s, many English poets were creating sonnet sequences. Poets sometimes linked several of these short poems through a single narrative or theme to create a larger, more complex work.

Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets in the 1590s, but these weren't published until 1609. Some of the dialogue in Shakespeare's early plays appears in sonnet form. In *Love's Labours Lost*, characters write sonnets to the people they love and are mocked for it. The speeches delivered by the Chorus in *Romeo & Juliet* follow the sonnet form, and the titular characters' first, flirtatious exchange is in the form of a shared sonnet.



What's the story behind Shakespeare's sonnets?

The short answer is, we don't know. We have no idea what to make of the story the sonnets seem to tell. Some of the poems are addressed to a young man sometimes referred to as the 'fair youth'. Other poems are addressed to a woman sometimes referred to as the 'dark lady'. This might mean that Shakespeare was in love with a young man who had light skin and hair, and with a woman who had dark skin and hair. No one knows for sure whether the poems were autobiographical, and, if they are, who these people might have been. Many people over the centuries have tried to figure it out, but since evidence is so scarce, it's likely to remain a mystery.

It's fun to imagine the possibilities, though. For example, Morgan Lloyd Malcom's play *Emilia* and Jessica B. Hill's play *The Dark Lady* explore the idea that the 'dark lady' was Emilia Bassano, a contemporary of Shakespeare's who may have been England's first female professional poet and a proto-feminist.

Sonnet #18

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.



The sonnet: thought by thought

Breaking a sonnet into thoughts is a helpful way to unpack the poem because it allows you to think about the poem in smaller units. This is a subjective process, so the example below is just one way to break down the thoughts.

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Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

- **thee** - another way of saying 'you'
- **thou art** - you are
- **temperate** - gentle and mild
- **darling buds** - the tender, curled up future leaves or flowers of spring, which are dearly loved
- **summer's lease** - a lease is a contract with a time limit, and summer doesn't last long
- **the eye of heaven** - if the sky (or heavens) is a face, then the eye might be the sun
- **his gold complexion dimmed** - the face of heaven or the sun is clouded over
- **declines** - droops or lessens
- **nature's changing course** - nature changes from day to day as the seasons change
- **untrimm'd** - not carefully arranged; left to its own course
- **that fair thou ow'st** - the beauty you possess or own
- **thou wander'st in his shade** - you wander in the shadow of death
- **eternal lines** - lines of poetry that will live forever
- **to time thou grow'st** - your beauty and fame will only grow over time

Explore the language

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- If you're a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?
- What's the effect of this language?

Challenge the language

Words change meaning over time. William Shakespeare wrote his plays and poems more than 400 years ago, and his experience of the world was different from ours today. We encourage you to explore and interpret Shakespeare's language in your own ways, to discover how it resonates for you.

The word 'fair' originally meant beautiful. In England at the time Shakespeare was writing, lighter-coloured skin was often associated with wealth. Wealthy people didn't have to work out in the fields, so their skin often wasn't tanned like that of labourers who had to spend long hours working out in the sun and elements.

Because of its association with wealth, lighter-coloured skin became fashionable. People used toxic chemicals and harsh cosmetics to whiten their skin. Because of this fashionable association of light skin with beauty, the word 'fair' evolved to mean light skin. In Shakespeare's plays and poems, it can sometimes be hard to tell which meaning of the word 'fair' is being evoked.

How do you feel about the use of the word 'fair' in this poem?

Is there any other language in the poem that you'd like to challenge?

Explore the Verse

Before looking at the form of Shakespeare's sonnets, it will help to be familiar with some basic terms for talking about poetry:

- **Metre** is poetic rhythm. In English, it often concerns the arrangement of light and strong beats or syllables. Say the words *awake, happy, boyfriend, buffalo, interrupt*. Each of these words has a different combination of light and strong syllables.
- A **poetic foot** (also just called a *foot*) is a unit of light and strong beats or syllables in a line of poetry. Different kinds of feet have different combinations of light and strong beats or syllables.
- **Iambic** metre is built around *iamb*s, which are poetic feet that include two alternating beats: the first is light, and the second is strong, just like a heartbeat. Examples of iambic words include *awake, alive, behold, amuse, before*. Can you think of other examples?
- **Pentameter** is a poetic line of five feet.
- **Iambic pentameter** is a poetic line of five iambic feet. A classic example might be "If music be the food of love, play on", which is the first line of Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*. This form is very natural for English speakers. Even a sentence like "I can't believe she posted that online" fits into iambic pentameter.
- A **stanza** is a group of lines of poetry.
- A **quatrain** is a stanza of 4 lines.
- A **couplet** is two lines, often but not always rhyming.

What do you notice about the metre of Sonnet #18? Does every line of the poem fall easily into iambic pentameter? Are there lines that don't fit as easily? What's the effect when this happens?

What do you notice about the rhyming words in this sonnet? Do they form a pattern? What's the effect of this pattern?

Explore the ideas

Compare: In this poem, the poet compares their beloved to a summer's day. As you read the poem, how do you think the beloved measures up? Does the poet seem to prefer a summer's day or the beloved? How did you come to this conclusion?

Consider: Come up with your own comparison. Think of someone or something you love (someone you know, a celebrity, an imaginary person, or, if you're not feeling romantic, it can be something else: a pet, an activity, an idea, etc). Then think of something that is generally considered wonderful. How would you compare your beloved to this wonderful thing? Just like the poet in this sonnet, include as many details as you can in your comparison.

Create: What work of art could you create to express your comparison? Follow your own interests and impulses to write your own poem, compose a piece of music, create a movement or dance piece, build a playlist, make a TikTok, a painting, a sculpture, or some other form that interests you.