

Shall I compare thee a summer's day?

---William Shakespeare

About the poet: William Shakespeare(1564-1616) is considered one of the greatest English dramatists of all times. But he was an equally accomplished poet. He composed 154 sonnets (14-lined lyrical poem). His sonnets are broadly divided into two categories---the first 126 sonnets dealing with the virtues of a young male friend and the remaining ones dedicated to a mysterious dark lady. However, the last two sonnets (Sonnet 153 and 154) do not belong to any of these categories and speak of the pangs of love in general.

The 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 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.

Substance of the poem: Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 (Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?) belongs to the first category of his sonnets i.e. sonnets dealing with the virtues of his young male friend. A summer day is very pleasant and enjoyable in a cold country.

But, the poet firmly believes that even a summer day is no match for the loveliness of his friend. Here, Shakespeare follows a curious technique. He glorifies his friend by rejecting the virtues of summer. In the first quatrain (4-lined stanza in a poem) the poet speaks of the short-lived beauty of summer. In the second quatrain he goes on to describe the inconsistency of a summer day so far as the brightness of the sky is concerned. In the third quatrain the poet sings of the immortal qualities of the fair youth. In the final couplet (2-lined stanza) he expresses his conviction about the eternal appeal of his creative art.

Glossary:

Temperate: moderate

Lease: a legal term meaning duration

Eye of heaven: refers to the sun

Dimmed: diminished

Untrimmed: not taken care of or neglected

Eternal: never-ending

Ow'st: posses

Wand'rest: move about