. “Sonnet 18” by William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

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.

**Meaning of the Poem**

Basically, the narrator tells someone he esteems highly that this person is better than a summer’s day because a summer’s day is often too hot and too windy, and especially because a summer’s day doesn’t last; it must fade away just as people, plants, and animals die. But, this esteemed person does not lose beauty or fade away like a summer’s day because he or she is eternally preserved in the narrator’s own poetry. “So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” means “This poetry lives long, and this poetry gives life to you.”

From a modern perspective this poem might come off as pompous (assuming the greatness of one’s own poetry), arbitrary (criticizing a summer’s day upon what seems a whim), and sycophantic (praising someone without substantial evidence). How then could this possibly be number one? After the bad taste of an old flavor to a modern tongue wears off, we realize that this is the very best of poetry. This is not pompous because Shakespeare actually achieves greatness and creates an eternal poem. It is okay to recognize poetry as great if it is great and it is okay to recognize an artistic hierarchy. In fact, it is absolutely necessary in educating, guiding, and leading others. The attack on a summer’s day is not arbitrary. Woven throughout the language is an implicit connection between human beings, the natural world (“a summer’s day”), and heaven (the sun is “the eye of heaven”). A comparison of a human being to a summer’s day immediately opens the mind to unconventional possibilities; to spiritual perspectives; to the ethereal realm of poetry and beauty. The unabashed praise for someone without a hint as to even the gender or accomplishments of the person is not irrational or sycophantic. It is a pure and simple way of approaching our relationships with other people, assuming the best. It is a happier way to live—immediately free from the depression, stress, and cynicism that creeps into our hearts. Thus, this poem is strikingly and refreshingly bold, profound, and uplifting.

Finally, as to the question of overcoming death, fear, and the decay of time, an overarching question in these great poems, Shakespeare adroitly answers them all by skipping the question, suggesting it is of no consequence. He wields such sublime power that he is unmoved and can instead offer remedy, his verse, at will to those he sees befitting. How marvelous!

 *Evan Mantyk is president of the Society of Classical Poets and a high school English teacher in Upstate New York.*

*Źródło:* [*http://classicalpoets.org/10-greatest-poems-ever-written/*](http://classicalpoets.org/10-greatest-poems-ever-written/)