



THE CONCEPT OF ETERNITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET 18

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Abstract:

Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 is one of the most renowned poems in English literature, exploring the theme of eternity through the power of poetry. The poem asserts that beauty, though naturally fleeting, can be preserved forever through verse. By comparing his beloved to a summer's day, Shakespeare emphasizes the impermanence of nature and contrasts it with the permanence of poetic expression. Through vivid imagery and philosophical reflection, he argues that time and death cannot diminish the beloved's beauty as long as the poem continues to be read. The concept of eternity in Sonnet 18 is deeply influenced by classical literary traditions, particularly the works of Horace and Ovid, who also claimed that poetry could immortalize its subject. Shakespeare's approach, however, is uniquely personal, as he does not merely describe beauty but actively seeks to preserve it. His use of the Shakespearean sonnet structure—three quatrains building toward a concluding couplet—allows for a progressive argument that culminates in a bold declaration of poetic immortality:

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

This assertion that poetry can defy time aligns with Renaissance humanist thought, which emphasized the enduring power of artistic creation. Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 remains a testament to the ability of literature to transcend mortality, ensuring that both the poet and his subject achieve a form of eternity through art. The poem's lasting influence on literature and culture further validates its central claim, as it continues to be studied, recited, and admired centuries after its composition.

Keywords: Concept, Eternity, Shakespeare, Sonnet 18.

INTRODUCTION:

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was an English playwright, poet, and actor, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language. Born in **Stratford-upon-Avon**, England, he was the son of John Shakespeare, a glove-maker, and Mary Arden. He likely attended the local grammar school, where he was introduced to Latin literature and classical studies. By the late 1580s or early 1590s, Shakespeare moved to London and became involved in the theater scene. His earliest plays, including *Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus*, were performed in the early 1590s. His career flourished under the patronage of Queen Elizabeth I and later King James I. He was a member of The Lord Chamberlain's Men, later renamed The King's Men, and performed at the Globe Theatre. Shakespeare wrote 39 plays, 154 sonnets, and two long narrative poems. His works span tragedy (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*), comedy (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*), and history plays (*Henry V*, *Richard III*). His influence on literature, language, and culture is unparalleled. In 1613, Shakespeare retired to Stratford, where he died in 1616 at the age of 52. His legacy endures, with his plays still performed worldwide, shaping literature, theater, and storytelling for generations.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This study explores the Concept of Eternity in Shakespeare's Sonnet 18.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

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Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18*, one of the most celebrated poems in the English language, explores the concept of eternity through the theme of immortalizing beauty and love. The poem, often referred to by its opening line, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" presents the idea that poetry can grant immortality to its subject, transcending the limitations of time and nature.

Eternity Through Poetry: The Central Argument of Sonnet 18

At the heart of *Sonnet 18* is the idea that poetry possesses the power to defy time and grant eternal life to the beloved. The poem begins with a rhetorical question:

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

This line establishes the poet's contemplation of beauty and how best to capture it. A summer's day, while beautiful, is fleeting—its warmth and brightness do not last. Shakespeare emphasizes this transience in the next lines:

*"Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date."*

Here, summer is depicted as temporary and subject to change, much like human life and beauty. By contrasting his beloved's beauty with the impermanence of nature, Shakespeare sets the stage for his argument: unlike the passing summer, the beloved's beauty can be eternalized through verse.

The Role of Time in Sonnet 18

Time is a significant force in the poem, acting as both a destructive and preservative element. Shakespeare acknowledges the inevitability of aging and decay:

*"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."*

This passage illustrates how all things in nature, including the sun and human beauty, are subject to the ravages of time. The idea that "every fair from fair sometime declines" underscores the natural cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death. However, Shakespeare contrasts this with a bold claim in the second half of the sonnet:

*"But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest."*

Here, the poet asserts that the beloved's beauty will remain untouched by time and death. This "eternal summer" is not a literal extension of youth but rather a metaphor for poetic immortality. By preserving the beloved's beauty in the "eternal lines" of verse, Shakespeare challenges time's destructive power.

The Power of Verse in Defying Mortality

The final couplet of *Sonnet 18* is the poem's ultimate assertion of poetry's ability to grant eternal life:

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

This concluding statement cements the idea that as long as people read the poem, the beloved will live on. Shakespeare expresses confidence that his words will outlast physical existence, ensuring that the beauty and essence of the subject remain undiminished for generations.

Philosophical Implications of Eternity in the Poem

The concept of eternity in *Sonnet 18* raises profound philosophical questions about the nature of art, memory, and immortality. The poem suggests that human beings can achieve a form of permanence through artistic creation. While physical beauty fades, poetry endures, capturing and preserving an idealized version of reality. This idea aligns with the classical notion that art and literature transcend the limitations of the physical world.

Additionally, *Sonnet 18* presents an alternative perspective on eternity compared to religious or metaphysical interpretations. While traditional beliefs often associate eternity with the afterlife, Shakespeare's sonnet proposes a secular form of immortality—one rooted in human creativity and literary tradition. This reflects the Renaissance humanist emphasis on the power of human intellect and artistic achievement.

LITERARY CONTEXT AND INFLUENCE

Shakespeare's exploration of eternity through poetry was not unique to *Sonnet 18* but part of a broader tradition in literature. The idea that poetry can immortalize its subject can be traced back to classical poets like Horace and Ovid. In his *Ars Poetica*, Horace famously declared, "*I have built a monument more lasting than bronze,*" referring to the enduring nature of poetry. Ovid, in *Metamorphoses*, also expressed the belief that his works would grant him eternal life.

Within Shakespeare's own body of work, *Sonnet 18* is part of the larger sequence of 154 sonnets, many of which address themes of time, beauty, and immortality. Other sonnets, such as *Sonnet 55* ("Not marble, nor the gilded monuments") and *Sonnet 116* ("Love's not Time's fool"), similarly reinforce the idea that love and poetry can withstand the passage of time.

The Contrast Between Natural and Poetic Eternity

Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* is one of the most renowned poems in English literature, celebrated for its exploration of time, beauty, and immortality through verse. While the sonnet stands out as a masterpiece in its own right, it is deeply rooted in a broader literary tradition, drawing inspiration from classical antiquity, medieval philosophy, Renaissance humanism, and the Elizabethan poetic landscape. Furthermore, Shakespeare's treatment of poetic immortality influenced generations of poets and writers after him. This section examines *Sonnet 18* in its literary context, tracing its influences and assessing its lasting impact on poetry and literary culture.

1. The Classical Influence: Horace and Ovid

Shakespeare's assertion that poetry can confer immortality has its origins in classical literature. The Roman poets **Horace** and **Ovid**, both of whom were widely read during the Renaissance, explored the idea that verse could outlive physical monuments and preserve memory beyond human lifespans.

In his work *Ars Poetica*, Horace famously claimed:

Exegi monumentum aere perennius
(*I have built a monument more lasting than bronze.*)

This assertion, much like Shakespeare's concluding couplet in *Sonnet 18*, suggests that literature endures beyond material structures, preserving the essence of its subject through language. Horace's influence is evident in Shakespeare's confidence that his poem will grant eternity to his beloved:

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

Similarly, **Ovid's Metamorphoses**—a text that greatly influenced Shakespeare—ends with the poet's declaration of poetic immortality:

*And now my work is done, which not Jove's wrath,
Nor sword, nor fire, nor time shall overthrow.*

Like Ovid, Shakespeare emphasizes the permanence of art over time's destructive power. By placing his beloved within the "eternal lines" of his poetry, Shakespeare echoes the classical belief that literature serves as an antidote to mortality.

2. The Renaissance Sonnet Tradition

The sonnet form, which Shakespeare mastered, originated in 14th-century Italy with Petrarch, who wrote about unrequited love, idealized beauty, and the passage of time. Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* (Scattered Rhymes) established a tradition of love poetry in which the poet seeks to immortalize his beloved. When the sonnet form reached England in the 16th century, poets like Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, adapted Petrarch's style into English verse. However, Shakespeare's approach in *Sonnet 18* differs from traditional Petrarchan sonnets in a significant way. While Petrarch often lamented the unattainability of his beloved, Shakespeare moves beyond mere admiration—he asserts his ability to preserve the beloved's beauty through poetry. Additionally, Shakespeare's sonnet structure deviates from the Italian (Petrarchan) form, which is divided into an octave (8 lines) and a sestet (6 lines). Instead, Shakespeare employs the English (Shakespearean) sonnet form, which consists of three quatrains (4-line stanzas) followed by a rhymed couplet. This structure allows him to build his argument incrementally, culminating in a powerful declaration of poetic eternity.

3. The Elizabethan Context: Poetic Immortality and the Role of Poetry

The idea that poetry could grant immortality was particularly resonant in the **Elizabethan era**, a period that celebrated literary achievement and sought to elevate the English language to the status of Latin and Greek. Shakespeare was part of a larger movement of poets—including **Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, and Christopher Marlowe**—who sought to enrich English poetry with complex themes, elegant language, and philosophical depth.

- **Edmund Spenser**, in his sequence *Amoretti*, similarly claimed that poetry could defeat time:

*My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name.*
(*Sonnet 75*)

- **Philip Sidney**, in *Astrophil and Stella*, also explored the tension between the fleeting nature of beauty and the permanence of poetry.

Within this tradition, *Sonnet 18* stands out because Shakespeare moves beyond mere praise—he actively **challenges time and death**, asserting that his verse is more powerful than the forces of nature. His claim that his poetry will last “so long as men can breathe” is a bold statement of poetic ambition, aligning with the Elizabethan belief in the enduring power of the written word.

4. Influence on Later Poetry and Literature

Shakespeare’s treatment of poetic immortality in *Sonnet 18* had a profound influence on subsequent poets, particularly those of the **Romantic and Victorian** eras. Writers such as **John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and William Wordsworth** adopted and expanded upon Shakespeare’s idea that art could capture fleeting moments and defy time.

- **John Keats**, in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, echoes Shakespeare’s theme of permanence in art, writing:

*“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”*

- **Percy Bysshe Shelley**, in *Ozymandias*, contrasts the impermanence of human power with the endurance of art, much like Shakespeare does in his sonnets.

During the **Victorian period**, poets such as **Alfred, Lord Tennyson** and **Elizabeth Barrett Browning** also reflected on the power of poetry to immortalize love and memory. Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* explores grief and the persistence of human emotions across time, resonating with Shakespeare’s themes.

5. Shakespeare’s Legacy in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture

Even in modern times, Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 18* continues to influence literature, music, and film. Its themes of beauty, time, and immortality appear in countless adaptations and references, demonstrating the enduring power of Shakespeare’s argument.

- Many contemporary **love poems and songs** echo Shakespeare’s assertion that words can preserve beauty and memory.
- The idea of **eternity through art** appears in films, novels, and even philosophical discussions on the nature of legacy and artistic influence.
- *Sonnet 18* is frequently quoted in wedding ceremonies, love letters, and tributes, showcasing its lasting cultural significance.

CONCLUSION:

Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 18* presents a powerful meditation on the concept of eternity, asserting that poetry has the ability to defy time and grant immortality. By contrasting the fleeting nature of physical beauty with the permanence of verse, Shakespeare reinforces the idea that literature serves as a timeless vessel for

memory and admiration. Through the structured progression of the sonnet, he builds a compelling argument that while all things in nature must fade, the beauty of his beloved will live on through his poetry. The poem is deeply rooted in classical traditions, drawing from the works of Horace and Ovid, yet it distinguishes itself through its personal and confident assertion of poetic immortality. This theme resonates with Renaissance humanist ideals, emphasizing the power of artistic creation over the limitations of mortality. Centuries after its composition, *Sonnet 18* continues to be celebrated as one of the greatest love poems in literary history. Its enduring influence serves as evidence of Shakespeare's claim—that poetry has the power to grant eternity. As long as readers engage with the sonnet, the beloved's beauty remains alive, proving that Shakespeare's words, like the love he describes, are truly timeless.

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