



## Time and Eternity in the Concluding Couplet of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18"

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**Abstract:** *William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" has intrigued readers for generations. The poem's sheer virtue lies in disregarding the omnipotence of time. Its emphasis on timelessness has drawn us closer to see how time can be artistically dominated. In this paper I seek to see how the poet-speaker is simultaneously well aware of the ephemerality of physical existence and immortality of artistic excellence.*

**Key Words:** *Time, eternity, ephemerality, youth, sonnet.*

Wordsworth said, "With this key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart," and Browning said, " 'With this same key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart,' once more! / Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!" In once sense the artist is always unlocking his heart, in another he is always dramatic. (Auden 86)

A thought subtly imbedded in the concluding couplet of William Shakespeare's sonnet "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" is its four hundred years of relevance. Whenever the poem is read, no uncertainty is left in the reader's mind about the lines' eternal appeal. What rivets the reader further is the confirmation that is dexterously illustrated: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (13-14)<sup>1</sup>. The lyrical musing seizes life's meaningful existence before the doomsday of human civilization. In other words, the poet-speaker would continue to compare his Fair Youth to the omnipotent summer's day till the last human breath. By shifting his ambivalent question of the first line to an affirmation in the final couplet, the sonneteer obtains a free license in order to conquer impediments of any kind for imparting immortality both to the beauty of the Youth and his lofty poetic brilliance.

Shakespeare's sonnets, unequivocally, come upon a definite culmination, and that being the concluding couplet surmising or highlighting the central thought of the whole poem. The genius of Shakespeare consciously does so to leave a lasting impression upon his readers' mind. Following the procreation sonnets consisting of the first seventeen poems, the true mystery of permanence of this present poem witnesses a direct outcome from "the convergence of form and meaning" (Callaghan 103). The enigma of identifying the addressee (criticism tends to place the poet's Fair Youth in it) is ever present. The aim of this paper, however, is to abstain from solving this innate complexity so as to uphold and universalize the poem's scope and flexibility, and to certify the immortal nature in the final couplet rather than engaging to unknot whether it is the poet's deliberate endeavour or not:

The question we must ask about lyric verse is: how far is it personal, how far is it dramatic? Most of these sonnets were addressed to a man. That can lead to a variety of nonsensical attitudes from exercises in special pleading to discreet whitewashing. It is also nonsensical, no matter how accurate your results may be, to waste time trying to identify characters. (Auden 86)



When Shakespeare bespeaks that the “lease” of summer is transient, he is aware of reality of time (“Sonnet 18” 4). One can imagine the image of a clock constantly running away to indicate Time’s imperishable presence. Time in this poem brings us to the mundane reality wherein we worry about gradually decrepitude and waning from human activity. The sonneteer realized this bitter yet inescapable truth; he had in mind that physical beauty of his Fair Youth can better be exemplified only when it outwits a regular life-barrier and gets celebrated among the rest at his absence. Shakespeare knows that there is no hide and seek in reference to Time. The beautiful Youth cannot physically be evergreen; it is impossible to retain one’s grace for time unbound. But, the poet equally realizes that through art the glorious beauty of the Youth can be justified. When the poet-speaker says, “thy eternal summer shall not fade” (9), he is very much concerned with his Youth’s gradual decay. It is discernable to mention that the speaker cannot promise any confirmation at this ground because he himself is much disturbed by Time’s ceaseless proceedings. It is interesting to note that Helen Vendler, recognizing the vacillation in the poet’s mind, finds a paradox in the triumphant utterance of the final couplet: “Even the prophetic tense — *shall not fade, shall not brag* — gives way to a possibility (*can*) deceptively expressed in two rhyming present-tense verbs, *lives* and *gives*: this *lives*, this *gives* life” (122). However, there is no denying the fact that Shakespeare simultaneously adopts the authenticate technique of giving ever-youthfulness to physical existence by offering a renewed life through wording — by articulating life in lofty expression. And it is not difficult for the reader to discern that this lofty feeling comes from the sonneteer’s art of poetic creation. If Shakespeare takes pride in canonizing the grace of his Fair Youth, this can only be promised through ageless versification.

Commenting upon Shakespeare’s intention of immortalizing the youth’s beauty, Howard Felperin deconstructs:

The power of immortality which Shakespeare ascribes to his rhyme, and which his readers . . . freely concede to him, does not seem to be based on or sustained by any a priori relation, any close or detailed resemblance, explicit or implicit, between poetry and material or empirical reality whatever. The claim of power is based on nothing other than its own assertion of power. It is entirely tautological, self-referential, and rhetorical. (“Toward a Poststructuralist Practice” 103)

Before we move on to seek what is overlooked in this analysis, it is pertinent to quote T. S. Eliot’s words with which Felperin began his discussion: “About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong” (qtd. in Felperin 93). Nevertheless, it would be a relevant interrogation because “the power of poetic survival” cannot alone be the singular criteria of fruitful reading, nor can it be supported “to be entirely self-fulfilling” (103). It is assumed that no sense of self-fulfilling-ness enamoured Shakespeare; what might have been felt is a sense of caution, which can be overreached by ageless verbalization and what Shakespeare provided. In addition, the rhyming of these two lines adorned with adequate use of **anaphora**<sup>2</sup> enhances validation of the sonnet.

The poet-speaker is worried about the menace carried forward by the rough winds which will blow immediately or a little later, and he evinces how it fades the freshness of flowering buds. The Fair Youth’s grace is retained under the scorching heat of summer: “Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines” (“Sonnet 18” 5). For, such scorching heat of the sun fails to bring any menace to the physical grace of his Fair Youth, the poet-speaker claims. The concluding couplet of this poem ensures that with the poem’s eternity the ‘fairness’ of the Fair Youth will be celebrated and eternally framed. In a way, the Youth, rather than a victim of Time, will ascertain his growth with Time. The poet is furthermore content by holding that as long as human race exists or people breathe in the world, the “poem will endure, endowing you with life” (Hentschell 1103).

When Ben Jonson valued Shakespeare’s art by arguing his ageless relevance (“To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare” 31), the former’s evaluation might have been taken as a friendly eulogy. It has been a regular fact that the true greatness of a genius is felt more strongly after his demise; his prolonged absence becomes more and more profound when he is no more:



Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show,  
To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe.  
He was not of an age, but for all time!  
And all the Muses still were in their prime,  
When, like Apollo, he came forth to warm  
Our ears, or like a Mercury, to charm! (41-46)

The concluding couplet of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18", which exemplifies a mature and elegant lyrical exuberance in the optimistic vein, soothes our ears time and again. It subtly unveils a decisive flow that nurtures 'timelessness' as a recurrent theme. Shakespeare's handling of latent drama assesses the accepting truth and delineates a true craftsmanship of the sheer genius, wherein the poet-speaker is well aware of the ephemerality of physical existence and immortality of artistic excellence:

Poetry not only gives life to the young man, it also bestows upon him an enhanced and intensified life, as he is spared from death by the breath and sight of readers as they enunciate the verse or see it on the page. . . . Life and beauty may be fleeting, but the poet promises them for eternity, and he promises them via specifically literary means. . . . Indeed, Shakespeare's meditations on the relation between beauty in life and beauty in art—the "art of beauty," the "painted counterfeit"—suggest the powerful possibility and the power of representing, replicating, and preserving physical beauty. . . . (Callaghan 47-48)

### Notes

1. All textual references are from G. Blackmore Evans edited *The New Cambridge Shakespeare: The Sonnets*. New Delhi: Cambridge UP, 1997.
2. Repetition of a word or expression at the beginning of successive clauses or phrases for rhetorical or poetic effect.

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