

# Sonnet comparison: shakespeare and donne



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

'Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day ?' and 'Death be not proud' are both poems written in sonnet form, written by William Shakespeare and John Donne respectively. They share common themes and have distinct similarities, yet are also strikingly different.

One of the most obvious differences is that 'Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day ?' (hereafter known as poem 1) is written in the Shakespearean format, with its Shakespearean rhyme scheme being ABABCDDEFEGG, and 'Death be not proud' (hereafter known as poem 2) is written in the petrarchan format, its rhyme scheme being ABBAABBACDDCEE.

Both sonnets are written as if the poet is talking to the object itself (as 'thee' is used throughout both poems - the 2nd person address is used) ; in the first Shakespeare is addressing a lover and in the second Donne is talking to death directly.

In poem 1 Shakespeare is comparing his love for Summer to the love for his admiree, showing that however much he enjoys the feelings and changes in the world associated with this season, it is nothing compared to the woman to whom he is writing - he writes that 'thou art more lovely and temperate'. In the phrase 'Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines' we can infer that the reference to heaven gives this woman angelic properties.

As is common in many sonnets, there is a turning point after the first two quatrains - this is shown in the phrase 'But thy eternal Summer shall not fade' ; the 'but' indicates a change, and the 'eternal Summer' not fading is an implication that his love too shall not diminish, either with the passage of

time or by any other means. In lines 11-12 we meet the phrases 'Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade/When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st'. The theme of love's eternal transcendence is shown here too, as it seems that the couple's love will continue to live, even if their bodies do not.

In the final two lines of this poem Shakespeare reiterates the eternality of love as he explains that as long as there are people on the Earth, this poem too will live on, making his lover immortal.

In 'Death be not proud', there is also significant imagery and use of metaphors. In the first four lines Donne is mocking and denouncing death, stating blankly that 'he' is not mighty and dreadful, that death is only powerful to those who fear him ('For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow'), and that death cannot kill him. The repeated use of death as a person (calling death 'he') rather than a concept, and attributing various characteristics to death's 'personality' (e. g. desire, jealousy, pleasure) help the audience to identify with death and allow death to be personified in such a way so as to make the poem understood very deeply.

In the next quatrain he is teasing death, saying that death isn't such a bad thing, as rest and sleep (which people enjoy) are snapshots of death ; death on a lesser level - therefore by that logic death would in fact be very pleasurable. He goes on to say that even though death eventually takes away our loved ones ('best men'), it is in fact doing them a kind turn as their death gives their body rest and frees their soul.

In the following four lines Donne appears to be pitying death, claiming that he is no more than a slave to circumstance - kings (who put others to death)

and desperate men (i. e. those who commit suicide) can theoretically summon death whenever they please.

In the last couplet Donne refers to 'One short sleepe past' i. e. the moments of dieing - once these have passed we wake eternally i. e. pass through into the afterlife and are thus alive forever. The last line is particularly effective : 'And death shall be no more ; death, thou shalt die'. This shows that the soul is really in control - it has some sort of metaphysical power which transcends what death is able to achieve, and that Death will be no more, in turn it's really Death's funeral when a man dies.

In both sonnets the poet is talking paradoxically; on the one hand they are both addressing a subject matter as a person, yet at the same time it remains more of an idea than a concrete object. For example, in poem 1 Shakespeare begins with a question: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' and goes on to compare his lover with summer - 'thou art more lovely and more temperate'. This grows and seems to progress throughout the poem however, as the comparison turns to a representation. The lover almost becomes summer, as Shakespeare calls his friend's effect 'summer's lease'. He then goes on to exclaim that it is 'thy eternal Summer' that shall not fade.

In lines 11-12 of poem 1 Shakespeare writes that 'Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade/When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st', meaning that neither shall death claim you for his own (take you away), because in my eternal verse (i. e. this poem) - you will live forever. Here we see a contrast between light and darkness (the light being the summer and the

darkness being the 'shade'), and life vs. death. This is shown as Shakespeare explains that in his writings his friend shall be immortalised, therefore defying death. This is replicated strongly in 'Death be not proud', as Donne hints to the afterlife, 'One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally', also showing that people can dodge death and that dying can in fact be a pleasure, not a tragedy.

In conclusion, I feel that both sonnets are linked by a positive, optimistic, encouraging message portrayed by the respective poets, each of them feeling that what they can achieve in this lifetime must be able to go beyond the physical, mundane, material world. Shakespeare hopes that his love for his friend will be preserved in his writings and Donne visits various emotions while talking to Death, eventually deciding that it is man who can eventually triumph over death and come out on top, not the other way around.