

Comparing and contrasting Keats and Shakespeare essay samples

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Poetry is an apt form for expressing inner sentiments, which can sometimes seem impossible to relate to others. When a person sees beauty, it is an individual impression. But through poetry, removed and subjective notions can be explored. William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" and John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" both relate a concept of, love, beauty in art, and its weathering time. As will be shown, both Shakespeare and Keats convey these concepts in unique ways. Comparing and contrasting these two widely recited and studied works allows one to get to the heart of how they use the poetic form to convey these concepts.

Before diving into the heart of these themes, it is important to point out the different forms each poet utilized. One way that both of these works contrast in terms of the form each poet utilized. Shakespeare, who is renowned as being a writer of sonnets, employs the sonnet form for "Sonnet 18," better known by its first line "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day." In adherence to the form, "Shall I Compare Thee to a summer's Day" is a fourteen-line lyric poem that was written in iambic pentameter. Each line of the poem is ten syllables and contains an emphasis every second syllable. Every line in this poem follows this pattern. To see this in action italics have been added on the emphasized syllables: "

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (Shakespeare, 1). The form Shakespeare utilized for his sonnets is today called the Shakespearean form. "Sonnet 18" follows this form and as a result there are four parts to the poem. The first three parts are quatrain lines that follow an ABAB pattern. The last line is a rhyming couplet that follows a CC line.

Keats opts for a much different form with "Ode on a Grecian Urn", but still

one that adheres to its own governance. In this sense, we find a similarity in both poems in so far as they are both following a methodical form for their construction. Keats is following the tradition of an ode, which for the ancient Greeks was a song of praise. The poem, certainly, is filled with high flying words of praise for the object—a Grecian urn. As the Greeks were the culture that invented the ode, it seems appropriate that something Grecian is the object of Keats' ode. The poem contains five stanzas that are each ten lines long. The meter is the same as Shakespeare's sonnet, and roughly follows iambic pentameter. The first seven lines of every stanza follow an ABACDE rhyme scheme.

The objects of each poem are very different, yet the language used to speak of the objects is somewhat similar. The speaker in Shakespeare's sonnet is describing the beauty of an unnamed young woman. The speaker in Keats is praising an urn from ancient Greece that has survived through the ages.

Both poets employ rhetorical questions. Shakespeare leads with his, with his now famous line, " Shall I compare thee to a summer's day" (Shakespeare, 1). Keats employs a series of rhetorical questions to make his point, asking about " What leaf-fringe legend haunts about thy shape" (Keats, 5).

Though the objects are different, the speakers in both Keats and Shakespeare speak to the timelessness of their subjects. Keats' speaker is making a statement of something that has survived through the ages and will continue to live on beyond the generation that is currently appreciating the urn. Shakespeare's speaker is relating a timeless beauty existing in a young maiden. By asking if he should compare the unnamed maiden to a summer's day, he already is. The difference the speaker finds between the

maiden and a summer day is that the beauty of the maiden is more perfect, and more timeless than a summer's day. For "summer's lease hath all too short a date" for it's the beauty of it, but one beauty of the maiden the speaker says, "thy eternal summer shall not fade, Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st" (Shakespeare, 4, 9 & 10). In the present moment of contemplating this beauty, it is the beauty then that is transcendent of the moment, and as a result it is an ageless and timeless beauty.

Both the maiden and the urn have yet to be tainted. Keats' speaker says of the urn that it is "still unravish'd bride of quietness / Though foster-child of Silence and slow Time." For the maiden, this is because of her youth. The urn, because it is very old, ancient even, but has yet to succumb to anything that has destroyed its beauty.

Shakespeare does not use the word love, though the sonnet is a love sonnet. The love described is the love of yearning desire. It need not exclusively be interpreted as lust, but it certainly is a response to beauty. No inner qualities are described of the maiden, only her outward beauty that leads to speaker to sing her praises.

Keats on the other hand, though he is describing an inanimate object, uses the word or a variation of the word "love" four times in his ode. He calls the urn a "Bold Lover" that can never kiss. In the third stanza the speaker seems overcome by emotion and declares, "More happy love! More happy, happy love!"

If the title of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" were to be changed to something like "Ode to Mary" it is likely that few people would think that it is about anything other than a maiden similar to the object of Shakespeare's poem. So

romantically charged is the language that Keats employs that it seems almost impossible that he could be describing an object, an ancient urn. But these emotions come from something timeless, something beyond the object and instead something the object represents. For the speaker the Urn represents something living from something lost. At the time of the writing, the Greek civilization has long ceased to exist. It exists in small ways, as much of the Western world was shaped by it. The fact that Greece did exist will can never be erased, and that is what is causing such charged language to be invoked. It is not specifically for the urn, but for the whole of Greek culture, only intact through the art, literature, and philosophy that they passed onto subsequent generations.

In Shakespeare too there is a quality to his poem that transcends the individual object. His poem could just as easily be considered a praise of "youth" in its highest transcendental form as it is about one particular person.

Both Keats and Shakespeare use the word "fair" three times in describing their objects. Though fair has several meanings, both are invoking the definition that means pleasantly attractive. Keats' speaker uses "fair youth" to describe a quality that will never leave the urn: "For ever wild thou love, and she be fair." Shakespeare's speaker realizes that fair things do decline, "And every fair from fair sometimes declines," but to the maiden he describes, he excludes her from this fact, "But thy eternal summer shall not fade, Nor lose possession of what thou ow'st" (Shakespeare, 7 & 10).

Both speakers speak of the objects they are describing as eternal, or outside

of the withering effects that time wreaks equally on people and objects. Keats' speaker says, "Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu" (Keats, 12). Likewise Shakespeare's speaker says, "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" (Shakespeare, 11-14). It seems though, that in both poems there is a "The king is naked" moment. Both seem to allude to one important detail about time—on a long enough time line everything we love, everything we find beautiful, will fade and be destroyed.

In Shakespeare, this would seem more obvious that the object of the speaker's affection will eventually be an elderly person and not participating in the fair beauty of youth. With the urn, it could in theory last a very long time, but it is certainly not immune to human destruction. Here it is up to the reader to interpret what is really meant by the immutable descriptions of mutable objects. Both could be appealing to the concepts rather than the objects. It could also be the case that both are so enraptured at the beauty of the objects that are being described, that their corruptibility in the moment seems impossible.