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Beauty, Time, and *Amṛtatva*

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* is one of the best-known poems in English literature. It praises the beauty of an unnamed beloved, but it also discusses time, change, death, and the lasting power of poetry. Shakespeare first compares the beloved to a summer's day. He then shows that summer is short and unstable, whereas the beloved's beauty will remain alive through the poem. This paper studies the poem's literary devices, structure, themes, tone, historical background, audience, and purpose. It also compares the poem with teachings from the Vedas, Upaniṣads, *Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā*, *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, *Vachanāmṛta*, *Śikṣāpatrī*, and other scriptures. The paper argues that Shakespeare gives the beloved poetic immortality by preserving the beloved in human memory. Vedānta goes further by teaching that the body is temporary, while the jīva or ātman is eternal. According to Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, the highest victory over death is achieved through ātma-realization, becoming *akṣararūpa*, and offering devotion to Parabrahman Puruṣottama.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Sonnet 18*, beauty, time, death, immortality, Upaniṣads, Vedānta, Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* is included in his collection of 154 sonnets, first published in London in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe. Sonnets 1–126 are generally connected with an unnamed young man whom scholars call the "Fair Youth." However, *Sonnet 18* itself does not clearly state the identity or gender of the beloved.

The poem begins with a famous question:

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

At first, summer seems to be a suitable image of beauty. Shakespeare soon shows that summer is not perfect. Its winds are rough, its heat can be excessive, its sunlight may be hidden, and its duration is short. The beloved is "more lovely and more temperate" than summer.

However, the beloved's physical beauty must also face time and death. Shakespeare tries to overcome this problem through poetry. He claims that the beloved's "eternal summer" will remain alive in the "eternal lines" of the poem.

The sonnet therefore moves through three stages:

1. The beloved is compared with summer.
2. The weaknesses and shortness of summer are described.
3. Poetry is presented as a means of preserving beauty.

This paper also compares Shakespeare's ideas with Vedāntic teachings. There is no historical evidence that Shakespeare studied Indian scriptures. Therefore, this is a comparative study, not a claim of direct influence.

1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

1.1 Comparison and metaphor

The opening line introduces a comparison between the beloved and a summer's day. It is not a simple simile using "like" or "as." Instead, it begins an extended comparison that continues through the poem.

The speaker concludes that the beloved is:

"more lovely and more temperate."

The word "temperate" suggests gentleness, balance, and freedom from extreme change.

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A powerful metaphor appears in:

“And summer’s lease hath all too short a date.”

A lease gives temporary possession of something. Summer possesses its beauty only for a short time. This suggests that youth, physical beauty, pleasure, and worldly success are also temporary.

The main metaphor of the poem is:

“But thy eternal summer shall not fade.”

“Eternal summer” represents the beloved’s beauty as preserved by poetry. It does not mean a literal season that never ends.

1.2 Personification

The sun is personified as the “eye of heaven” with a “gold complexion.” Nature is also given a “changing course.”

Most importantly, Death is presented as a proud conqueror:

“Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade.”

Death is shown as someone who boasts about capturing human beings. The speaker claims that Death will not completely defeat the beloved because the poem will keep the beloved’s memory alive.

1.3 Imagery and symbolism

Shakespeare uses clear images from nature:

- “Darling buds of May” represent youth and new beauty.
- “Rough winds” represent danger, change, and adversity.
- The “eye of heaven” represents the sun and natural brightness.
- The dimmed “gold complexion” represents fading beauty.
- “Death’s shade” represents mortality and oblivion.
- “Eternal lines” represent poetry and lasting memory.

The imagery moves from light and beauty to darkness and decline, and finally to poetic permanence.

1.4 Sound and repetition

The repeated f sound in “fair from fair” emphasizes beauty and its loss. The repeated c sound in “chance” and “changing course” supports the idea of continuous change.

The final couplet repeats “So long”:

“So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

This repetition gives the conclusion strength and confidence. The word “this” refers to the poem itself.

1.5 Hyperbole, paradox, and irony

The claim that the poem will live as long as people can breathe or see is an example of hyperbole. No poem can provide physical immortality. However, Shakespeare’s prediction has partly become true because the poem is still read after more than four centuries.

The main paradox is that a mortal person becomes immortal through poetry. The beloved will not remain physically alive but will continue to exist in human memory. There is also irony in the fact that the poem gives almost no physical description of the beloved. It describes summer in detail but does not tell us what the beloved looks like. What becomes immortal is therefore not a clear portrait but the speaker’s love and admiration.

“Eternal summer” is not a strict oxymoron, but it contains a tension. Summer is temporary, while eternity has no end. Shakespeare joins these opposite ideas to create an image of poetic permanence.

2. Structure and Form

Sonnet 18 is a Shakespearean sonnet of fourteen lines. It contains three quatrains and one final couplet. Its rhyme scheme is:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

The poem is written mainly in iambic pentameter. Each line generally contains five metrical units, with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. This creates a regular and controlled rhythm. Small changes in the rhythm, such as the strong opening of “Rough winds,” add emphasis.

The poem develops its argument in four parts:

Section	Main idea
Lines 1–4	The beloved is more beautiful and balanced than summer
Lines 5–8	All natural beauty must decline
Lines 9–12	The beloved’s beauty will survive in poetry
Lines 13–14	Future readers will keep the poem and beloved alive

The main *volta*, or change in thought, occurs at line 9:

“But thy eternal summer shall not fade.”

Before this line, Shakespeare describes change and decline.

After it, he promises permanence through poetry.

3. Main Themes

3.1 Love and beauty

The poem expresses deep admiration for the beloved. However, the beloved’s beauty is not presented only as physical attractiveness. The word “temperate” also suggests inner balance, gentleness, and harmony.

3.2 Time and change

The poem accepts that everything in nature changes:

“And every fair from fair sometime declines.”

Every beautiful person or object eventually loses visible beauty because of accident, age, or the normal course of nature.

3.3 Mortality

Death is present throughout the poem. The flowers are damaged, summer ends, sunlight becomes dim, and beauty declines. The poem’s real conflict is therefore between beauty and time.

3.4 Nature and poetry

Nature creates beauty but cannot preserve it. Poetry also cannot stop bodily death, but it can preserve a person’s memory. Shakespeare changes temporary beauty into lasting literary beauty.

4. Tone, Mood, Historical Context, and Audience

The tone changes throughout the poem. It begins as thoughtful and admiring. It becomes serious when Shakespeare discusses decline and death. It then becomes defiant and ends with confidence.

The emotional movement is:

Admiration → awareness of loss → resistance → hope

The poem belongs to the English Renaissance, a period influenced by classical Greek and Roman literature, humanism, and the growth of new poetic forms. Renaissance poets often wrote about love, beauty, time, reputation, and fame.

The sonnet form came from Italy and became famous through Petrarch. English poets such as Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard adapted it into English. Shakespeare inherited this tradition but changed it. He does not simply praise summer; he points out that summer itself is imperfect.

The immediate audience is the beloved addressed as “thee.” The wider audience includes all future readers. Anyone who reads the sonnet helps fulfil Shakespeare’s promise that the beloved will continue to live through poetry.

5. “Summer’s Lease” and the Vedāntic Idea of Impermanence

The expression “summer’s lease” suggests that beauty is held only temporarily. This is similar to the Vedāntic teaching that all created and material objects are impermanent.

5.1 *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.12

परीक्ष्य लोकान् कर्मचितान् ब्राह्मणो

निर्वेदमायान्नास्त्यकृतः कृतेन ।

parīkṣya lokān karmacitān brāhmaṇo

nirvedam āyān nāsty akṛtaḥ kṛtena

The wise person examines the worlds produced by action and understands that the eternal cannot be produced by temporary actions.

Summer has a beginning and an end. In the same way, bodily beauty cannot become truly eternal merely by being remembered for a longer time.

5.2 *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.14

मात्रास्पर्शस्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः ।

आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥

mātrā-sparśās tu kaunteya śītoṣṇa-sukha-duḥkha-dāḥ

āgamāpāyino ’nityās tāṁs titikṣasva bhārata

The experiences of heat, cold, pleasure, and pain come and go. They are temporary and should be patiently endured.

Shakespeare’s summer shows these changing conditions. It can be pleasant, excessively hot, windy, bright, or cloudy. The *Gītā* describes such conditions as *āgamāpāyinaḥ*—things that come and go.

5.3 *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* 11.9.29

लब्ध्वा सुदुर्लभमिदं बहुसम्भवान्ते

मानुष्यमर्थदमनित्यमपीह धीरः ।

labdhvā sudurlabham idaṁ bahu-sambhavānte

mānuṣyam arthadam anityam apīha dhīraḥ

The human body is rare and capable of giving the highest benefit, although it is temporary.

This verse does not treat the temporary body as useless. Instead, it teaches that human life should be used for spiritual progress before its limited “lease” ends.

6. “Every Fair Declines”: Body, Change, and Death

Shakespeare writes:

“And every fair from fair sometime declines.”

This means that every beautiful person or object must eventually lose outward beauty.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.13 explains bodily change:

देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा ।

तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥

dehino ’smin yathā dehe kaumāraṁ yauvanam jarā

tathā dehāntara-prāptir dhīras tatra na muhyati

The embodied self passes through childhood, youth, and old age. The body changes continuously, but the conscious self remains the experiencer of these changes.

The *Gītā* 2.27 states:

जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च ।

jātasya hi dhruvo mṛtyur dhruvaṁ janma mṛtasya ca

Death is certain for one who is born. Shakespeare recognizes this truth through poetry, while the *Gītā* places it within the wider cycle of birth and death.

7. “The Eye of Heaven” and the Supreme Light

Shakespeare describes the sun as:

“the eye of heaven”

Yet its “gold complexion” may become dim. The physical sun is bright but not beyond change.

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2.2.15 declares:

न तत्र सूर्यो भाति न चन्द्रतारकं

नेमा विद्युतो भान्ति कुतोऽयमग्निः ।

तमेव भान्तमनुभाति सर्वं

तस्य भासा सर्वमिदं विभाति ॥

na tatra sūryo bhāti na candra-tāraṇaṁ

nemā vidyuto bhānti kuto ’yam agniḥ

tam eva bhāntam anubhāti sarvaṁ

tasya bhāsā sarvaṁ idaṁ vibhāti

The sun, moon, stars, and fire do not illuminate the Supreme Reality. Everything shines because of that supreme light.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* 15.6 similarly states that neither the sun, moon, nor fire illuminates the supreme abode of God. Shakespeare’s physical sun can be hidden by clouds, but the divine light described in these scriptures never fades.

8. “Eternal Summer” and Spiritual Immortality

The *R̥gveda* 10.90.2 states:

पुरुष एवेदं सर्वं यद्भूतं यच्च भव्यम् ।

उतामृतत्वस्येशानो यदन्नेनातिरोहति ॥

puruṣa evedaṁ sarvaṁ yad bhūtaṁ yac ca bhavyam

utāmṛtatvasyeśāno yad annenātirohati

The Supreme Puruṣa includes all that has been and will be and is the Lord of immortality.

Shakespeare's "eternal summer" depends upon the survival of his poem and its readers. Vedic immortality, however, is grounded in the eternal Supreme Puruṣa.

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.2.18 teaches that the conscious self is unborn, eternal, and not destroyed when the body is destroyed. The same teaching appears in *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.20:

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचिन्
नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो
न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥

na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin
nāyaṁ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ
ajo nityaḥ śāśvato 'yaṁ purāṇo
na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre

The ātman is never born and never dies. It is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.

The difference between Shakespeare and Vedānta is important:

- Shakespeare defeats oblivion by preserving the beloved in poetry.
- Vedānta overcomes the fear of death by revealing that the self is not the mortal body.

Three forms of life may therefore be distinguished:

1. Deha-jīvana: physical life;
2. Smṛti-jīvana: life in memory and literature;
3. Ātma-sattā: the eternal existence of the conscious self.

Shakespeare promises *smṛti-jīvana*, while Vedānta reveals *ātma-sattā*.

9. "Eternal Lines" and the Power of Sacred Words

Shakespeare believes that poetic lines can carry the beloved into the future. Indian traditions also place great value upon *śabda*, or sacred and authoritative speech.

The Vedas were preserved through careful oral systems such as *saṃhitā-pāṭha*, *pada-pāṭha*, *krama-pāṭha*, *jaṭā-pāṭha*, and *ghana-pāṭha*. These methods show how language can be preserved across many generations.

The *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* 1.5.11 describes the spiritual power of words about God:

तद्वाग्विसर्गो जनताघविप्लवो
यस्मिन् प्रतिश्लोकमबद्धवत्यपि ।
नामान्यनन्तस्य यशोऽङ्कितानि यत्
शृण्वन्ति गायन्ति गृणन्ति साधवः ॥

tad-vāg-visargo janatāgha-viplavo
yasmin prati-ślokaṁ abaddhavaty api
nāmāny anantasya yaśo-'ṅkitāni yat
śṛṇvanti gāyanti grṇanti sādhaṇaḥ

Words that describe the names and glory of the Infinite Lord can purify and transform human beings.

Shakespearean poetry preserves human beauty and memory. Sacred literature has a different aim: it awakens devotion, purifies consciousness, and guides the seeker toward liberation.

10. The *Vachanāmṛta* and Akṣara–Puruṣottama Darśana

The *Vachanāmṛta* offers a clear distinction between the temporary body and the eternal jīva. In *Vachanāmṛta* Gadhadā III-4, Bhagavān Swaminarayan explains that the jīva pervades the body through consciousness but does not die when the body dies.

This gives a deeper meaning to Shakespeare's statement: "Nor shall Death brag."

In Shakespeare, Death cannot fully defeat the beloved because poetry preserves the beloved's memory. In the *Vachanāmṛta*, Death cannot destroy the jīva because the jīva is different from the body.

10.1 Śikṣāpatrī 105

हृत्स्थोऽणुसूक्ष्मश्चिद्रूपो ज्ञाता व्याप्याखिलां तनुम्
ज्ञानशक्त्या स्थितो जीवो ज्ञेयोऽच्छेद्यादिलक्षणः ॥

hṛt-stho 'ṇu-sūkṣmaś cid-rūpo jñātā vyāpyākhilāṁ tanum
jñāna-śaktyā sthito jīvo jñeyo 'chedyādi-lakṣaṇaḥ

The jīva is subtle, conscious, and indestructible. It resides in the heart and pervades the body through its power of knowing.

Poetry does not make the beloved spiritually eternal. It only preserves the beloved's name and memory. Scripture reveals that the jīva is already indestructible.

10.2 Akṣarabrahman and Puruṣottama In *Vachanāmṛta* Gadhadā I-21, Bhagavān Swaminarayan describes two forms of Akṣara:

1. Akṣara as the eternal divine abode;
2. Akṣara as the personal form eternally serving Puruṣottama.

Gadhadā I-63 identifies Akṣara as the abode of Puruṣottama. Therefore, Shakespeare's "eternal summer" may be used only as a comparative image for the unfading radiance and bliss of Akṣaradhāma. It is not a literal description of Akṣaradhāma.

According to Akṣara–Puruṣottama Darśana, the devotee realizes the self as different from the body, becomes *akṣararūpa* through association with the Akṣarabrahma Guru, and offers devotion to Parabrahman Puruṣottama. This is higher than simply surviving in human memory.

The word *Vachanāmṛta* combines *vacana*, meaning discourse or words, with *amṛta*, meaning nectar or immortality. Shakespeare's words give poetic life; the divine words of the *Vachanāmṛta* guide the jīva toward liberation.

11. Other Scriptural Parallels

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.3.28 contains the famous prayer:

तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय ।
मृत्योर्मांमृतं गमय ॥

asato mā sad gamaya
tamaso mā jyotir gamaya
mṛtyor mā amṛtaṁ gamaya

“Lead me from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to light, and from death to immortality.”

Sonnet 18 also moves from fading beauty to “eternal summer,” and from Death’s shade to poetic life. However, the Upaniṣad seeks actual spiritual realization rather than literary remembrance.

The *Mahābhārata*’s Yakṣa–Prašna states that living beings die every day, yet those who remain think that they will continue permanently. Shakespeare responds to this universal fear through poetry, while the *Mahābhārata* directs the seeker toward dharma and wisdom.

Ādi Śaṅkarācārya’s *Bhaja Govindam* states:

मा कुरु धनजनयौवनगर्वं
हरति निमेषात्कालः सर्वम् ।

*mā kuru dhana-jana-yauvana-garvam
harati nimeṣāt kālaḥ sarvam*

Do not be proud of wealth, followers, or youth, because time removes everything in a moment.

This closely matches Shakespeare’s statement that every beautiful thing must decline. However, Śaṅkarācārya uses this

truth to teach *vairāgya*, or detachment from temporary things.

12. Comparative Understanding

Question	<i>Sonnet 18</i>	Vedāntic understanding
Is physical beauty permanent?	No	No
Is the body immortal?	No	No
What survives death?	The beloved’s poetic memory	The jīva survives bodily death
How is death challenged?	Through poetry	Through spiritual knowledge and liberation
What is the role of language?	It preserves beauty and memory	Sacred speech reveals truth and purifies
What is true immortality?	Cultural survival	Eternal spiritual existence and liberation

From an Akṣara–Puruṣottama perspective, the poem may be understood at three levels:

1. Physical beauty: The beauty of summer and the body is temporary.
2. Poetic immortality: Poetry preserves the beloved in human memory.
3. Spiritual immortality: The jīva becomes *akṣararūpa* and offers devotion to Puruṣottama.

This movement can be expressed as:

Deha-saundarya → Kāvya-smṛti → Ātma-jñāna → Akṣararūpatā → Puruṣottama-bhakti

Conclusion

Sonnet 18 begins as a poem praising the beloved’s beauty but becomes a serious reflection on time, change, death, and poetry. Shakespeare shows that summer is too short and unstable to represent perfect beauty. Rough winds

damage its flowers, heat becomes excessive, sunlight is hidden, and every beautiful thing eventually declines.

The speaker tries to overcome this problem through poetry. The beloved’s body cannot remain young forever, but the poem can preserve the beloved’s memory. The continued popularity of *Sonnet 18* shows that Shakespeare’s prediction has partly come true.

Upaniṣadic and Vedāntic teachings agree that natural beauty, youth, pleasure, and the body are temporary. However, they go beyond Shakespeare’s idea of poetic immortality. A poem can preserve a person’s name or image, but it cannot make the body eternal. The jīva does not become immortal through poetry; it is already unborn and indestructible.

From the perspective of Akṣara–Puruṣottama Darśana, the highest “eternal summer” is not permanent physical youth. It can be understood comparatively as the eternal radiance and bliss of Akṣaradhāma. The highest victory over death is achieved through understanding the self as different from the body, becoming *akṣararūpa*, and offering eternal devotion to Parabrahman Puruṣottama.

Shakespeare’s final statement—

“So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”—

may therefore be restated in Vedāntic terms:

Poetry gives the beloved lasting remembrance; ātma-jñāna reveals the immortal jīva; Akṣarabrahman helps the devotee become *akṣararūpa*; and Puruṣottama grants liberation and eternal divine bliss.

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