Model of a Literature Response

In William Shakespeare’s Sonnet number 18, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” he addresses his loved one directly, professing that their beauty will never be lost and that they will live eternally. The poet is comparing the object of his love with the natural world and declaring the superiority of the loved one over it. Throughout the poem, the poet through the speaker’s voice, constructs a case by which he proves that the loved one will live on indefinitely. With imagery of the natural world and diction which is accessible to the common man, Shakespeare brings his poem within the reach of the understanding of all. In this way, his notion that the love and beauty of the person to whom the poem is directed will outlast all, is brought to the everyday and so able to be perceived readily by everyone. The importance of love, especially Romantic love, is a central concern of Shakespeare and is the subject of many of his sonnets.

Furthermore, the case that the speaker constructs to convince the loved one that they will live on is conveyed by a tone which is presented in three stages. In quatrain one the speaker lightly, almost playfully asks the question, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” only to answer in an emphatic tone, “Thou art more lovely and more temperate.” There is no hint of doubt in the voice of this response, indicating surety about the superiority of the loved one. The second stage of the persuasive argument is conveyed in quatrain two in which the conversational tone is carried ably by the iambic pentameter and introduced with “Sometime”. In this informal tone the speaker adds more reasons regarding the natural world being not equal to the beauty and enduring nature of his love. The third quatrain carries the rebuttal, “But thy eternal...” with a confident and categorical tone, concluding the Sonnet with a resolute and definite voice, a prelude to the central premise contained in the final rhyming couplet.

The imagery which Shakespeare employs to contrast with the lover is largely of the natural world, which is shown to be ephemeral. “Summer’s lease hath all too short a date” and “every fair from fair sometimes declines” and even “death shall [not] brag thou wand’rest in his shade”. In contrast to these natural beauties and ultimate mortality, the resounding images through which the poet delivers his master argumentative stroke is of eternal life captured in the poetic conceit of the couplet, “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/ So long lives this and this gives life to thee”. While human beings can perceive through their senses, his love will ensure in the verse form.

It can be seen that Shakespeare's diction is in keeping with the formality required by the structure of the Sonnet form with it's designated line length and distinctive rhyming pattern (abab, cdcd, efef, gg) and of the conventions of chivalric love and gallantry “thee”, “thou” and “thy”. However, as it is a personal address and cast in iambic pentameter, it has the directness and intimacy of a monologue. Repetition is used to effect, “more lovely” and “more temperate” and “so long as men...” and “so long live this...” conveying the emphasis needed to deliver a winning persuasive argument. Whilst the poem is hyperbolic, claiming superiority for the loved one above all that life and death may offer, its belief in love and love's enduring quality, albeit in verse, has a charm emanating from the poet's beliefs and values.

Shakespeare's paramount belief in both the endurance of love and indeed the endurance of his verse is central to Sonnet 18. Both these notions, coupled in a winning argument, outweigh anything that the natural world has to offer. The accessible imagery and diction conveyed in Elizabethan English is nevertheless within the understanding of most, consequently the message is clear. The personal address is designed to convince the loved one and the reader that there is a way that the speaker's love is able to endure eternally and that is through the medium of verse, “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/ So long lives this and this gives life to thee.”