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Sonnet 116

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

Abstract

One of best-loved sonnets, Sonnet 116 attempts to define the nature of true love, using both negation and positive metaphor. However, the poem's placement in the sonnet sequence and certain stylistic features have led some readers to find a more complicated message than typical readings suggest.

Keywords

- Beauty
- Eternity
- Love
- Metaphor
- Rebuttal
- Time

Context

One of the most famous love poems in the English canon, William Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 has also been the subject of lively critical debate. The poem offers a clear and masterful declaration of true love's nature, but some readers have felt that aspects of its style and its position in the overall 154-sonnet sequence suggest that Sonnet 116 might act as a rebuttal. The first quatrain asserts the eternal nature of true love and attempts to define true love in terms of negation: "Love is not love / which alters when it alteration finds, / or bends with the remover to remove" (lines 2–4). Here, the speaker asserts that love does not diminish or change simply because something about a lover or situation has changed. The second

quatrain shifts to define love in positive terms through a nautical metaphor. Love is an "ever-fixed mark" (5), which could be a lighthouse or a star that guides "every wand'ring bark" (7).

The third quatrain shifts back to the negative model of defining what "love is not," as did the first quatrain, but the sonnet here specifies in physical terms the abstract "impediments" that were referred to in line 2: love is not subject to time, says the speaker, even though the passing of time eventually destroys the "rosy lips and cheeks" (9) of young lovers. In lines 11 and 12, the speaker echoes line 3 by again denying that love "alters," but he now describes love in more human terms as someone who "bears it out even to the edge of doom" (12). The final couplet insists on the speaker's authority by setting up a counterfactual statement: if he is proved wrong, then he never wrote, and no man ever loved. Because both these consequences are manifestly untrue, the implication is that the speaker must be right.

Sonnet 116 appears toward the end of the group of the 126 poems dedicated to the unnamed young man known as the Fair Youth. Previous sonnets, such as Sonnet 90 and others, address the failure of the speaker's relationship with the young man, and sonnets 126–154 address another lover known as the Dark Lady. In addition, Sonnet 116 speaks relatively impersonally of love, which is unusual compared to the other sonnets in the sequence, and it contains many negative words, with repetitions of "not," "no," and "never," suggesting a conflicted tone. The poem's context in the sonnet sequence and these stylistic details suggest to scholars such as Helen Vendler that the poem should be understood as the speaker's rebuttal to the young man's (imagined) claim that "impediments" now prevent him from remaining steadfast in love (488–93). With this interpretation, the sonnet's first sentence, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / admit impediments" (1–2), would emphasize "me," as the speaker responds to the end of his relationship with the young man by insisting that *he* would never agree with such flawed views of love. Yet, other readers have argued that Shakespeare's intended order of the sonnet sequence is not absolutely certain, and because the poem does not explicitly address a specific person, the rebuttal interpretation is not reliable.

The thematic context of the poem has a rich history

in art and literature both before and after Shakespeare's time. The characterization of "true" romantic love emerged in the songs of twelfth-century troubadours, who called this love *fin amor*, or pure love, and developed an elaborate system of beliefs, attitudes, and literary practices regarding it. The thirteenth-century poem *The Romance of the Rose*, written by Guillaume de Lorris and expanded upon by Jean de Meun, is a dream vision intended to teach the art of *fin amor*, which was then reserved for the aristocracy. By Shakespeare's time, this idealized characterization of true romantic love was firmly rooted in Western European culture. For example, the poem "A Farewell to False Love," by Shakespeare's contemporary Sir Walter Raleigh, describes false love in acid terms, comparing it to "a poisoned serpent covered all with flowers" (7).

More recently, scores of poems, songs, plays, novels, and films have been dedicated to defining and exploring the nature of true love. This theme in fact is the central focus of one of the very first novels written in the English language, *Pamela*, composed by Samuel Richardson and first published in 1740. Subsequent classics, such as Jane Austen's nineteenth-century novel *Pride and Prejudice*, have celebrated the struggles of true love in the contexts of class and other social constraints. This theme eventually developed into a popular genre in the twentieth century, in which writers specialized in stories of tragic, passionate love that endures in spite of cruel obstacles, fueling the ever-strong market for romance novels. Popular films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Titanic* (1997) overlay the human tragedy of the American Civil War and the famous shipwreck with stories of true love lost. The intensity and vulnerability of individuals within the thrall of romantic love help to explain the Western cultural obsession, from the Middle Ages to the present, with stories about the nature of true versus false love. With its insistence on true love as eternal and unchanging, Sonnet 116 remains an especially prized example in this tradition.

Ashleigh Imus

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For Further Study

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