**Sonnet 116**

Study Material by

Imrul Kayes Alam Sarkar

Asst. Professor & HOD

Dept. of English, S.F.S Mahavidyalaya

**SUMMARY** 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.*

**Summary: Sonnet 116**

This sonnet attempts to define love, by telling both what it is and is not. In the first quatrain, the speaker says that love—”the marriage of true minds”—is perfect and unchanging; it does not “admit impediments,” and it does not change when it find changes in the loved one. In the second quatrain, the speaker tells what love is through a metaphor: a guiding star to lost ships (“wand’ring barks”) that is not susceptible to storms (it “looks on tempests and is never shaken”). In the third quatrain, the speaker again describes what love is not: it is not susceptible to time. Though beauty fades in time as rosy lips and cheeks come within “his bending sickle’s compass,” love does not change with hours and weeks: instead, it “bears it out ev’n to the edge of doom.” In the couplet, the speaker attests to his certainty that love is as he says: if his statements can be proved to be error, he declares, he must never have written a word, and no man can ever have been in love.

[**READ A TRANSLATION OF SONNET 116 →**](https://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/shakespeare/sonnets/sonnet_116/)

**Commentary**

Along with Sonnets 18 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”) and 130 (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”), Sonnet 116 is one of the most famous poems in the entire sequence. The definition of love that it provides is among the most often quoted and anthologized in the poetic canon. Essentially, this sonnet presents the extreme ideal of romantic love: it never changes, it never fades, it outlasts death and admits no flaw. What is more, it insists that this ideal is the only love that can be called “true”—if love is mortal, changing, or impermanent, the speaker writes, then no man *ever* loved. The basic division of this poem’s argument into the various parts of the sonnet form is extremely simple: the first quatrain says what love is not (changeable), the second quatrain says what it is (a fixed guiding star unshaken by tempests), the third quatrain says more specifically what it is not (“time’s fool”—that is, subject to change in the passage of time), and the couplet announces the speaker’s certainty. What gives this poem its rhetorical and emotional power is not its complexity; rather, it is the force of its linguistic and emotional conviction.

The language of Sonnet 116 is not remarkable for its imagery or metaphoric range. In fact, its imagery, particularly in the third quatrain (time wielding a sickle that ravages beauty’s rosy lips and cheeks), is rather standard within the sonnets, and its major metaphor (love as a guiding star) is hardly startling in its originality. But the language *is* extraordinary in that it frames its discussion of the passion of love within a very restrained, very intensely disciplined rhetorical structure. With a masterful control of rhythm and variation of tone—the heavy balance of “Love’s not time’s fool” to open the third quatrain; the declamatory “O no” to begin the second—the speaker makes an almost legalistic argument for the eternal passion of love, and the result is that the passion seems stronger and more urgent for the restraint in the speaker’s tone.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Love is an emotion which all of us have a concept of, indeed many of us may even claim to have experienced what we would deem to be true love. However, does such a pure level of this emotion actually exist, and if it does are we as human beings able to define it? This is something that is examined by William Shakespeare in ‘Sonnet 116’.

Shakespeare adheres to the traditions of the sonnet stringently within ‘Sonnet 116’, as it consists of fourteen lines in total, with each line consisting itself of ten syllables. It also follows a regular stress pattern.

The sonnet opens with a line of proclamation, declaring that it is not the intention of the voice to prevent the ‘marriage of true minds’ [[1](https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/a-critical-analysis-of-sonnet-116-english-literature-essay.php" \l "ftn1)] . In essence the voice is pre-empting what is to follow in which the voice outlines their mandate of what true love actually is. This is something that is quantified by the following statement, ‘love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds’ (116 l.3); this outlines the voice’s main thesis that true love is unwavering and unchanging, it is not something that wavers or bends in the face of outside influences. However it is not only the influences of the outside world that are unable to effect it, as the voice goes on to state that it does not ‘bends with the remover to remove.’ (116 l.4), meaning that even when the object of the object of the affection itself is removed the love for that object or person remains. Indeed the voice continues with this assertion of true love as a permanent fixture by saying ‘is is an ever-fixed mark’ (116 l.5). The comparison of love as a ‘mark’ (116 l.5) is an interesting one as a mark can be interpreted as a blemish or indeed even as a form of deformity. William Blake uses the word as a identifier of negativity in his poem ‘London’, stating that the people that are shown in the poem exhibit ‘Marks of weakness, marks of woe.’ [[2](https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/a-critical-analysis-of-sonnet-116-english-literature-essay.php" \l "ftn2)] . Shakespeare however asserts that a person’s personality and conscious can also be marked with a positive emotion, therefore reversing the effect of the word ‘mark’ (116 l.5) from one of negative deformity to one of a positive identifier.

Shakespeare draws comparisons between true love and nature as he compares it to a ‘star’ (116 l.7) that guides ‘every wand’ring bark’ (116 l.7). This comparison is interesting on two levels, the first being that Shakespeare appears to have shown careful consideration in his choice of a star as the point of comparison with true love, in that a star is one of the brightest examples of beauty found in the natural world, thus drawing credence to his description of love as a shining beacon for the ‘wand’ring’ (116 l.7) souls of the world. This theme of love being a symbolical beacon of guidance and shelter is something that is found elsewhere in literature, Tennyson does so in his poem ‘Break, break, break’, when he comments on ‘stately ships’ [[3](https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/a-critical-analysis-of-sonnet-116-english-literature-essay.php" \l "ftn3)] retreating to ‘their haven under the hill’ (Bre l.10). It also works more significantly on the basis that a star is a heavenly body giving true love an almost heavenly and other worldly quality. The next line reaffirms the idea of true love as a mysterious and other worldly entity. As it is stated that it defies any attempt to decipher it’s material value. This despite the fact that it is a thing of worth and indeed substance as its ‘height’ (116 l.8) can ‘be taken’ (116 l.8).

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True love also appears to demonstrate properties that allow it to evade one of the main constraints of the man made world, time. This is exhibited in the following line, ‘Love’s not Time’s fool’ (116 l.9). This is an important factor to consider, as time is something that all of mankind regardless of status or beliefs will eventually fall victim to, our bodies, appearance and even our minds will decay over time until we will eventually submit to time totally in our death, ‘though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle’s compass come’ (116 l.9&10). True love however is not constrained by such shackles, ‘Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, / But bears it out even to the edge of doom.’ (116 l.11&12). This is perhaps the ultimate affirmation of the power of true love, in that it possesses the ability to live for eternity, something that man can only dream of.

The final two lines sees Shakespeare place his argument on what true love is in a position beyond reproach. In which he states that if any of what he has said ‘be error’ (116 l.13), then he ‘never writ, nor no man ever loved.’ (116 l.14). This statement provides Shakespeare an unbreakable get out clause, in that if any of the sonnet is proved to be untrue or disagreed with then not only does he deny any accountability of having written those untrue statements but also affirms that no man has ever experienced love, therefore placing the accuser in a position of weakness as they would be criticising his work without the grounding of experience. This perhaps shows itself to be a vivid example of how firmly Shakespeare believed what he had written. In that by inserting the final two lines in the manner that he did he made the argument put forward by the sonnet perfect and irreproachable to any attempt to spoil it from man or the outside world, much in the same way that he argued that love itself was.