

AQA English Literature A-level

Poetry: Love Through the Ages
Anthology (Pre-1900)
William Shakespeare: 'Sonnet 116'

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Brief Summary

'Sonnet 116' was written in the **late 16th century** by William Shakespeare at a time of abundance for **sonnets** in English literature - Shakespeare himself wrote 154. This sonnet in particular is celebrated for its **pronouncements on the nature of love**. It is believed to be inspired by Shakespeare's love for the **Earl of Southampton**.

Synopsis

- 'Sonnet 116' opens with pessimistic determiners such as "not", which are repeated. He does not object to the "marriage of two minds". He states what it is not, and from this we can **infer** what love is.
- From the ABAB rhyme scheme of the first stanza, together with the topic, we can immediately tell the poem is in sonnet form.
- The poem can be broken up into **three quatrains** and a **rhyming couplet**. A **volta** occurs at line 9, which the image of love as a guiding star is suddenly replaced by a personification of love as an eternal, everlasting force which can **resist death**.
- Time is a **main theme**. Shakespeare presents true love as timeless and this perhaps accounts for the sonnet's **continued fame**.
- Ends with an assertion that if he is wrong "[he] never writ, nor no man ever loved" - a strong statement due to his contemporary fame. Implies he is **willing to retract his other works** if he is proven wrong. Through such a **hyperbolic statement** the passion behind 'Sonnet 116' is revealed.

Summary

Context – English society had become much more peaceful during the reign of Elizabeth I - peaceful time in society allowed people to become introspective, hence the English sonnet craze with

Structure - Follows the rhyme scheme ABABCDDEFEBB// iambic pentameter // fourteen line sonnet// ends in rhyming couplet// late volta

Language – Hyperbole//enjambment // metaphor//personification//alliteration// Caesura

Key Points – Supposedly about the Earl of Southampton// challenges gender norms// idealistic and timeless love



Context

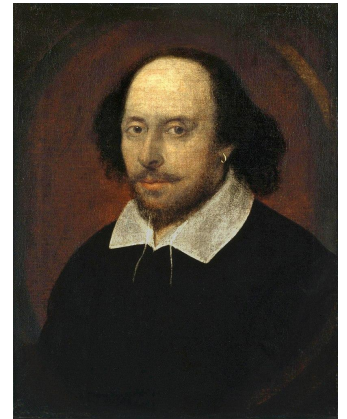
Literary Context - 1590s

It had **originated in Italy** in the **13th century** and spread throughout Europe in the following decades. The sonnet form did not reach England until relatively late: the 1530s, when Sir Thomas Wyatt composed 'Whoso List to Hunt, I Know Where is a Hynde', based on Petrarch's 'Sonnet 190'. However, it was only **in the 1590s** that **the sonnet started to gain real popularity**. Sir Philip Sidney is credited for inaugurating the '**craze**' with his 'Astrophil and Stella'.

Petrarchan sonnets were popular in **European courts** partly because their focus on the speaker-lover's experience of desire and inner struggle also made them amenable to articulating courtiers' **social and political experiences** and frustrations. Often they told of **unrequited love**, such as 'Whoso List to Hunt'. The Petrarchan sonnet was composed of an octave with an ABBAABBA rhyme scheme followed by a sestet rhyming CDECDE or CDCDCD. **Shakespearean sonnets** are **organised differently**: they contain three quatrains, typically rhyming ABAB CDCD EFEF, and conclude with a couplet, GG. Other English poets created other variations; Spenserian sonnets, for example, use a rhyme sound from the previous quatrain: ABAB BCBC CDCD EE.

Historical/ Authorial Context - Shakespeare

'Sonnet 116' was written at the beginning of **Queen Elizabeth's reign**. Elizabeth supported the arts, literature and poetry. Shakespeare was also living and working through a time of uncommon **peace** in terms of politics and wars. People, previous occupied with **external turmoil**, were for the first time able to begin **introspecting** and focusing on **matters of the heart**, perhaps accounting for the new popularity of the sonnet form - a form **synonymous** with love poetry.



<https://tinyurl.com/shakespeares-portrait>

The period of peace was short lived; Elizabeth died in 1603 leaving no heir, sparking chaos. Her reign, famously known as 'one of the most glorious', abruptly came to an end. However, 'Sonnet 116' was written before this **descent into turmoil**. 'Sonnet 116' was one of 154 sonnets that Shakespeare published in a *quarto*. They were **published posthumously** in 1609. Many critics have split these sonnets into three groups: the Fair Youth sonnets (Sonnets 1-126), the Dark Lady sonnets (Sonnets 127-152) and the Greek Sonnets (Sonnets 153-154). 'Sonnet 116' is considered one of the Fair Youth sonnets, which were **addressed to an unnamed young man**, rumoured to be either the Earl of Pembroke or



the Earl of Southampton. The poet writes of the young man in **romantic** and **loving language**. This has led several commentators to suggest a **sexual relationship** between them, while others have read it as **platonic love**.



Poem Analysis

Begins with a negative wish

'Is not' another negative - defining love by what it is not. Shakespeare believes true love cannot be 'altered' or 'bent'. If the lover departs (and becomes the remover) true love remains, although it perhaps becomes tortuous.

Exclamation reveals his passion and reinforces the negations of the first quatrain.

Beginning of metaphors. 'Ever fixed marke' would have referred to a lighthouse. Lighthouses guide ships and withstand harrowing storms (tempests). Love therefore can be a guiding light and can withstand many trials.

Bark = ship. In Elizabethan times ships were heavily guided by the stars; allusion to love's guiding qualities repeated.

The determiner 'the' highlights the importance of this star and makes it singular; it is the one aim of life.

'Time's' capitalisation indicates it has been personified, specifically as the Grim Reaper or Death, this is enforced by 'sickle' a scythe used by the grim reaper. Shakespeare is saying here that death is

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.

Immediately evokes the institution or sacrament of marriage. Yet the speaker suggests that the union of two suited minds should be free to join together. At the time, gay marriage would have been considered ridiculous - sex between two people of the same gender was illegal.

The speaker seems to suggest he is for the union of any truly suited minds, and that love need not be recognised by the law or the church because it is primarily spiritual. This is significant in light of the fact that this sonnet is one of a series addressed to a man.

Enjambment separates 'marriage of two minds' from 'admit impediments', emphasising that true love should have no impediments.

Seemingly contradictory. In those times nobody knew what stars were made of hence didn't know their worth but used them to measure alignment, hence 'heights taken'. Perhaps Shakespeare is saying that it can be measured in law ('height be taken') but only lovers know what it is worth - to outsiders it's worth cannot be determined.

'Edge of doom' refers to the last day/ the day of judgement. Shakespeare states that love will endure





ineluctable, hence physical attributes such as 'rosie lips and cheeks' will pale under 'compasses come' - the alliteration alluding to a clock ticking. However love is eternal and is **not** 'times foole'. Further return to negative definitions.

If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

until then. Huge jump from 'hours' and 'weeks', seems hyperbolic.

Another negative, reveals the strength of his convictions. The final, standalone rhyming couplet brings the sonnet together and leaves the reader with a sense of the strength and truth of his words.



Perspective

'Sonnet 116' is a **pronouncement** on the **nature of love**. Nevertheless, Shakespeare uses the **first person** at the end of the sonnet - "**I never writ**" (line 14) - and we can assume, since he references his writings, that voice is one and the same as himself. We get the impression that the speaker has had rich experience of love, including a "**marriage of true mindes**" (line 1), and this has left with him a clear picture of what love is.

The Opening

Shakespeare opens the **sonnet** by stating "**Let me not to the marriage of true minds/ Admit impediments**". He immediately **invokes the sacrament / institution of marriage** as well as the Anglican marriage ceremony, which typically includes the line 'If any of you know cause or just impediment why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony'. The speaker suggests that love is the marriage or union of two minds, and that their **compatibility is what matters** - not whether their union is **enshrined in law**. This is significant as we know Shakespeare was writing to a 'fair youth'; at that time, gay marriage did not exist and sodomy was illegal.

Shakespeare may have been **critiquing the institution of marriage**; he was married himself yet clearly felt deeply for this man. The impossibility of their legal union may have left him with the view that the institution of marriage is deeply flawed and does not reflect nature.

The **clear, calm tone** with which the sonnet opens is maintained throughout the sonnet. This reflects the **unchanging nature** of love.

Structure

Form, meter, and rhyme scheme

'Sonnet 116' is divided into **three quatrains**: an **octave**, a **sestet** and a final **rhyming couplet**. Shakespeare uses **iambic pentameter** almost consistently. **iambic pentameter** is commonly known to have a **heartbeat sound**, reflecting Sonnet 116's subject matter. The **first line's meter is irregular**, however; the stresses are reversed, falling on the first and third syllables ("**Let me not to**") rather than the second and fourth. Normally, sonnets start out with a regular meter, and any irregularities occur after the meter has been clearly established. Shakespeare's choice seems **unconventional**; the only example of an Elizabethan sonnet beginning with two **trochaic feet** is Donne's Holy Sonnet XVI ("**Fa-ther, part of**"). Whatever the reasoning behind his decision, one might



interpret the early irregular of meter as **illustrative of love itself**: it weathers and overcomes storms without altering its nature, just as the meter has some rocky parts but smooths out and conforms clearly to the sonnet form.

Volta

Volta is the 'Italian' term for 'turn', signifying, in poetic terms, a **shift in tone or argument**. They were a **standard feature** of sonnets. In Petrarchan sonnets they occur between the octave and the sestet, and in Shakespearean or English before the final couplet. In 'Sonnet 116', the volta **occurs early**, between lines 8 and 9. Here, the image of love as a guiding star is **replaced** by the personification of love as an eternal, everlasting force that resists (a personified) death, introducing the idea of the **immortality of love**. Despite the turn, there is **continuity** between the previous two quatrains and the final quatrain and couplet. This is provided by the negatives: "**Let me not**" (line 1), "**Love is not**" (line 2), "**Oh no!**" (line 5), "**never shaken**" (line 6), "**Love's not**" (line 8), "**Love alters not**" (line 10), "**I never writ, nor no man ever loved**" (line 14). This continuity **mirrors love's constancy**.

Language

The language used in 'Sonnet 116' is very **simple**. Over $\frac{3}{4}$ of words are **monosyllabic**, making this sonnet accessible to everyone. This is fitting as it is a statement about a **universal human experience**.

Hyperbole

Shakespeare uses **hyperbole** throughout 'Sonnet 116', which critics have argued makes its characterisation of love **unrealistic** and **outlandish**. While readers would likely agree with the statement that love "**Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks**" (line 11), less would agree that it bears out until the "**edge of doom**". Nevertheless, Shakespeare attempts to **counter any accusations of hyperbole** in the final couplet, when he says that if he is proven wrong, no man ever loved. Essentially, if he can be proved wrong, no man has loved - hence they don't know what love is. The hyperbole captures the **extremity** of his views on love. While love is defined **vaguely** and in **negative terms** in the first quatrain, the metaphors in the second stanzas help it to become more **concrete**.

Metaphor

Shakespeare uses a variety of **metaphors** to capture love's essence. First, it is a lighthouse and then a guiding star. These two metaphors are linked by the boat which follows both the stars and the lighthouse. Alternatively, you could argue that the second



metaphor is a **metaphor inside a metaphor**: love is a lighthouse, and the lighthouse's light is a star that the boats follow. Through these images, Shakespeare reveals the **elevated** nature of love.

Personification

After the volta, Shakespeare personifies first time and then love. This personification is signalled by the **capitalisation** of **"Time"** and the use of **personal pronouns** **"his"** (lines 9 and 10). The image of the **"sickle"** slicing **"rosy cheeks and lips"** is quite fear-inducing. Time is clearly equated with the Grim Reaper or Death. While Shakespeare admits that love cannot prevent death, it is not **"Time's fool"**. Love endures until the very last, and this is emphasised by the **elongated line**, which contains an **extra syllable**. The personification of love seems to make love a **impersonal** or **transpersonal entity**. It is present in humans but ultimately a force that outlives them.

Themes

True/ Platonic Love

While many poems in the pre-1900 anthology place a large emphasis on lust and physical intimacy, 'Sonnet 116' focuses on **platonic love**. Shakespeare portrays this clearly in the last **rhyming couplet** as he argues if he is ever proved wrong about the nature of love, then it is simply that men have not known true love. This **sonnet** is about the **purity of love** and less about physicality. It is imagined above all as a mental union: a **"marriage of two minds"** (line 1).

Change/ Everlasting Love

For Shakespeare, love is **constant** and outlasts mortal bodies. It alters not within a lifetime (**"his breefe hours and weekes"** (line 11)) and survives beyond it, **"even"** until Judgment Day. This counters other portrayals of love as being something that **matures** over time.

Critical Responses

Tucker Brooke

"110 of the simplest words in language and two simplest rhyme schemes to produce a poem ... strangeness of perfection"



[Tucker Brooke](#) comments on Shakespeare's ability to create something massively impactful out of simplicity. However, whether or not you agree with this view may depend on whether you agree with Shakespeare's characterisation or find it too **idealised and fantastical**.

Thomas Ledger

“Although [...] this sonnet was **almost universally read as a paean to ideal and eternal love**, with which all readers could easily identify, adding their own dream of perfection to what they found within it, modern criticism makes it possible to **look beneath the idealism** and to **see some hints of a world** which is perhaps **slightly more disturbed** than the poet pretends. In the first place it is important to see that the sonnet belongs in this place, **sandwiched between three [sonnets]** which **discuss the philosophical question of how love deceives both eye and mind and judgement**, and is then **followed by four others** which **attempt to excuse the poet's own unfaithfulness** and betrayal of the beloved. Set in such a context it does of course make it appear even more like a battered sea-mark which nevertheless rises above the waves of destruction, for it confronts all the vicissitudes that have afflicted the course of the love described in these sonnets, and declares that, in the final analysis, they are of no account.”

Here, [Thomas Ledger](#) places 'Sonnet 116' in the contexts of the sonnets that come before and after it in the *quarto*, in which love seems more **problematic** and **conflict-ridden**. It appears that Shakespeare is trying to dismiss these difficulties by making a strong statement about how eternal and perfect love is.

Comparisons

'Sonnet 116' - 'Ae Fond Kiss

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represents true and pure love • Both poems represent societal barriers and limitations to love (affair and homosexual relations) • Love is a “star of hope” in 'Ae Fond Kiss' and a guiding star “star to every wandering bark” in 'Sonnet 116' • Idealised and fantastical love
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Burns is saying goodbye while Shakespeare believes goodbye will never exist as true love lives on • Burns' poem is much more emotional - conveys distress at parting • 'Sonnet 116' is much more concise than 'Ae Fond Kiss', perhaps reflecting the fact that the speaker in 'Ae Fond Kiss' is trying to delay the moment of departure • 'Sonnet 116' is an general reflection on love whereas Ae Fond Kiss is a particular account of a love affair.
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'Sonnet 116' - 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Themes of fantastic love • Both see love as inalterable. 'Sonnet 116' states that love does not "ben[d] with the remover to remove". Accordingly, although the knight in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' has been abandoned by his lover, his love is still strong.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keats creates a story while Shakespeare has a short sonnet • Love causes distress in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' whereas in 'Sonnet 116' it is portrayed as perfect. • 'Sonnet 116' portrays love as pure and primarily spiritual whereas 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' contains erotic references • The knight in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' may be infatuated whereas Shakespeare seems to be describing perfect love, not infatuation.

