

**LECTURE -12****SHAKESPEARIAN SONNETS****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 wand'ring 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 prov'd,  
 I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

**Structure**

Sonnet 116 was first published in 1609. Its structure and form are a typical example of an English or Shakespearean sonnet. The English sonnet has three quatrains, followed by a final rhyming couplet. It follows the typical rhyme scheme of the form *abab cdcd efef gg* and is composed in iambic pentameter, a type of poetic metre based on five pairs of metrically weak/strong syllabic positions. The 10th line exemplifies a regular iambic pentameter:

x / x / x / x / x /

Within his bending sickle's compass come; (116.10)

This sonnet contains examples of all three metrical variations typically found in literary iambic pentameter of the period. Lines 6 and 8 feature a final extrametrical syllable or *feminine ending*:

x / x / x / x / x /(x)

That looks on tempests and is never shaken; (116.6)

/ = *ictus*, a metrically strong syllabic position. x = *nonictus*. (x) = extrametrical syllable.

Line 2 exhibits a mid-line reversal:

x / x / x / / x x /

Admit impediments. Love is not love (116.2)

A mid-line reversal can also be found in line 12, while lines 7, 9, and 11 all have potential initial reversals. Finally, line 11 also features a rightward movement of the third ictus (resulting in a four-position figure, **x x //**, sometimes referred to as a *minor ionic*):

/ x x / x x / / x /

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, (116.11)  
The meter demands that line 12's "even" function as one syllable.

### Analysis

Sonnet 116 is an attempt by Shakespeare to persuade the reader (and the object of his love) of the indestructible qualities of true love, which never changes, and is immeasurable. 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.

This Sonnet **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.

Sonnet 116 is about **love in its most ideal** form. The poet praises the glories of lovers who have come to each other freely, and enter into a relationship based on trust and understanding. The first four lines reveal the poet's pleasure in love that is constant and strong, and will not "alter when it alteration finds." The following lines proclaim that true love is indeed an "ever-fix'd mark" which will survive any crisis. In lines 7-8, the poet claims that we may be able to measure love to some degree, but this does not mean we fully understand it. Love's actual worth cannot be known – it remains a mystery. The remaining lines of the third quatrain (9-12), reaffirm the perfect nature of love that is unshakeable throughout time and remains so "ev'n to the edge of doom", or death.

In the final couplet, the poet declares that, if he is mistaken about the constant, unmovable nature of perfect love, then he must take back all his writings on love, truth, and faith. Moreover, he adds that, if he has in fact judged love inappropriately, no man has ever really loved, in the ideal sense that the poet professes.