Sonnet 116

By William Shakespeare

1564-1616
Sonnet 116

What do we understand from the title of the poem?
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.

Write a modern English version of this sonnet.
AO3: Context
William Shakespeare

1564-1616
Greatest writer in the English language

1564: Born
1582: Married to Anne Hathaway, 8 years his senior and pregnant! They have three children.
1587(?) - 1592: Departure from Stratford; establishment in London as an actor/playwright
1593: Preferment sought through aristocratic connections - dedicates Venus and Lucrece to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. Begins writing the Sonnets, probably completed by c.1597 or earlier.
1594: Founding member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men
1594-1596: Recognised as the leading London playwright
1597-1599: Artistic maturity; purchases New Place, Stratford with other significant investments
1612: Retires from public life and returns to Stratford
1616: Dies
Shakespeare’s Sonnets

While Wyatt introduced the sonnet into English, it was Shakespeare who became its most famous practitioner.

Sonnets tell a story; or rather, are built around a story – a story of love: love unrequited, love requited but unfulfilled, love so fleetingly fulfilled as merely to make suffering keener, love thwarted by the beloved's absence, or aloofness, or prior possession by another. Impediment is as central to the sonnet as love. Impediment produced the lyric voice. Without impediment, the lover would have no need to resort to poetry; he would have something better to do.

Shakespeare’s sonnets also tell this story, using characters: the poet; the fair youth; the dark lady; and the rival poet.

Sonnets 1-126 are addressed to a ‘fair youth’. The language used is romantic and loving. Sonnets 127-152 feature the ‘dark lady’ and become more sexual in tone. An affair is later indicated between the fair youth and the dark lady, but the nature of the relationship between ‘the poet’ (Shakespeare?) and the fair youth is ambiguous.

Henry Wriothesley at 21. Shakespeare's patron, and one candidate for the Fair Youth of the sonnets.
AO2: Language
Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments.

What is the poet saying here?

What kind of love is suggested by the first line? (AO5: This is often interpreted as ‘true love’ – do you agree?)

The sonnet starts with a negative wish ‘let me not’

Accept; agree that there are

**Let me not**

True = unchanging, faithful, truthful

AO3: This is reminiscent of the marriage ceremony: “If any of you know cause of just impediment why these two persons should not be conjoined together in holy matrimony...”

Notice how the *enjambment* keeps the ‘impediment’ and the ‘marriage of true minds’ separated.

How does this *metaphor* add to the idea of love presented here?
Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:

Love is being defined by what it is not.

One who moves or changes
To make oneself different—contrary to ‘unmoving’ or unchangeable.

What is the poet saying here?

How is love being defined? What qualities does it have?

What is the effect of the poet’s use of repetition?
O no; it is an ever-fixed mark, That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;

What is the poet saying here?

How is love being defined? What qualities does it have?

What is the effect of the poet’s shift from what love is not to what love is?

How does the poem mark this shift?

AO3: a ‘sea mark’ in Elizabethan times was a nautical image – a lighthouse or spire of a coastal church; an ‘ever-fixed’ mark for the ships to navigate by.

Because of their height, the sea-marks would ‘look [down] on’ the storm below; their solidity and height meant the storm would have no effect on them.

How does this metaphor add to the idea of love described?
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

What is the poet saying here?

What is the effect of using ‘the star’ rather than ‘a star’?

What might be implied about the bark by the adjective ‘wandering’?

AO3: Ships in Elizabethan times would navigate by the stars, particularly the unmoving North Star or Polaris.

At the time, it was not known what stars were made of (‘whose worth unknown’) although an angle of elevation above the horizon could be measured (‘his height be taken’). This measurement helped sailors measure the ship’s latitude.

What does this metaphor add to the idea of love represented?
A return to what love is **not**

**Love's not Time's fool,** though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's **compass** come;

**A03:** Elizabethans would recognise a reference to the ‘fool’ of the King; a court jester whose wit livened up the day but whose position was precarious at best.

Time (along with Love) is **personified**, and the image in the poem links him closely with the Grim Reaper and his sickle (or scythe). Here, he is reaping youth (‘rosy lips and cheeks’). He is also pictured, as convention dictates, with a time-piece or compass - this could refer to the arc of the circle created by his scythe, or it could be an extension of the nautical metaphor of the previous lines.

**What is the effect of the inclusion of Time here?**

**What is the poet saying here?**

**What is the effect of these images?** What do they add to the idea of love presented by the poet?

**Alliteration** echoes the sound of the clock ticking (time passing).
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

‘His’ refers to Time – this is an extension of the metaphor introduced in the previous lines.

A repetition of the idea that love ‘alters not’

Endures; continues faithfully

AO3: ‘edge of doom’ is a reference to Doomsday, or the end of the world and time itself. It could also be a reference to an individual’s day of death.

What is the poet saying here?

Which do you find the most likely here?

What is the effect of the repetition of the idea that love ‘alters not’?

Why is it significant that Time’s hours and weeks are ‘brief’? How do they compare to Love?

What does the word ‘But’ mark a return to? Why has the poet chosen to do this here, at the end of the final quatrain?
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

What is the poet saying here?

What is the effect of the shift from love to the poet himself: what he has said about love?

Can he be proved wrong? How does the last line add to the challenge of this?

Why has he ended the poem this way?
AO2: Imagery
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Is this a traditional or typical image of marriage?

Marriage is a formal contract and, in Shakespeare’s time, it was far from a contract between equals. Women were more or less surrendered into the control of their husbands when they got married. Was this a marriage of true minds? Is Shakespeare using a more idealistic, transcendent vision of marriage?

How does our AO3 knowledge help us interpret (AO5) this image?
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AO2: Form / Structure
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Can you identify the rhyme scheme?
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Shakespeare’s sonnets are almost all constructed from three quatrains, and a final couplet composed in iambic pentameter. Sonnet 116 follows this structure and this meter.

The rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg. Often, the beginning of the third quatrain marks the volta ("turn"), or the line in which the mood of the poem shifts, and the poet expresses a revelation or epiphany.

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The structure and form of this sonnet are entirely standard.
AO4/5: Links and Interpretations
The imagery of this poem is fairly standard within sonnets, especially that of Time wielding a sickle, and the image of love as a guiding star. 75% of the words in the sonnet are monosyllabic.

“In short, the poet has used one hundred and ten of the simplest words in the language and the two simplest rhyme-schemes to produce a poem which has about it no strangeness whatever except the strangeness of perfection.” – Tucker Brooke (1936)

What does this statement add to our understanding of the poem? Do you agree?
AO4/5: place within the sonnets

Sonnet 113: My most true mind thus maketh mine eye untrue
Sonnet 114: 'tis flattery in my seeing
Sonnet 115: Those lines that I before have writ do lie,
Even those that said I could not love you dearer

Sonnet 117: Accuse me thus: that I have scanted all
Sonnet 118: Drugs poison him that so fell sick of you
Sonnet 119: What wretched errors hath my heart committed
Sonnet 120: your trespass now becomes a fee

“Set in such a context [Sonnet 116] appears even more like a battered sea-mark which 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 they are of no account” -- Thomas Ledger

Do you agree?
AO5: the ‘fair youth’

How does the fair youth affect our reading of the poem?

- Is this idealistic, idealised love?
- Is this platonic love?
- Is this romantic love?
- Is Shakespeare playing with traditional gender roles as an artistic project?
- Something else?
AO1: What kind of love is presented in this poem?

Think about:

• The characteristics of love
• The representation of the people involved
• The feelings of the speaker
• Any imagery or language used
• The way the structure and form reflects this

You can either:

Write a side of A4 to explain your answer.
Write a detailed plan of your answer.

Make sure you include and analyse quotations from the text.
Fill in your CLIFS sheet for this poem. Remember, this will be a revision aid!

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