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| **SONNET 116** | **PARAPHRASE** |
| Let me not to the marriage of true minds | Let me not declare any reasons why two |
| Admit impediments. Love is not love | True-minded people should not be married. Love is not love |
| Which alters when it alteration finds, | Which changes when it finds a change in circumstances, |
| Or bends with the remover to remove: | Or bends from its firm stand even when a lover is unfaithful: |
| O no! it is an ever-fixed mark | Oh no! it is a lighthouse |
| That looks on tempests and is never shaken; | That sees storms but it never shaken; |
| It is the star to every wandering bark, | Love is the guiding north star to every lost ship, |
| Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken. | Whose value cannot be calculated, although its altitude can be measured. |
| Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks | Love is not at the mercy of Time, though physical beauty |
| Within his bending sickle's compass come: | Comes within the compass of his sickle. |
| Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, | Love does not alter with hours and weeks, |
| But bears it out even to the edge of doom. | But, rather, it endures until the last day of life. |
| If this be error and upon me proved, | If I am proved wrong about these thoughts on love |
| I never writ, nor no man ever loved. | Then I recant all that I have written, and no man has ever [truly] loved. |

### Notes

**marriage...impediments (1-2):** T.G. Tucker explains that the first two lines are a "manifest allusion to the words of the Marriage Service: 'If any of you know cause or just impediment why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony'; cf. *Much Ado* 4.1.12. 'If either of you know any inward impediment why you should not be conjoined.' Where minds are true - in possessing love in the real sense dwelt upon in the following lines - there can be no 'impediments' through change of circumstances, outward appearance, or temporary lapses in conduct." (Tucker, p. 192).   
  
**bends with the remover to remove (4):** i.e., deviates ("bends") to alter its course ("remove") with the departure of the lover.   
  
**ever-fixed mark (5):** i.e., a lighthouse (mark = sea-mark).  
Compare *Othello* (5.2.305-7):

Be not afraid, though you do see me weapon'd;  
Here is my journey's end, here is my butt,  
And very sea-mark of my utmost sail.

**the star to every wandering bark (7):** i.e., the star that guides every lost ship (guiding star = Polaris). Shakespeare again mentions Polaris (also known as "the north star") in *Much Ado About Nothing* (2.1.222) and *Julius Caesar* (3.1.65).   
  
**Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken (8):** The subject here is still the north star. The star's true value can never truly be calculated, although its height can be measured.   
  
**Love's not Time's fool (9):** i.e., love is not at the mercy of Time.   
  
**Within his bending sickle's compass come (10):** i.e., physical beauty falls within the range ("compass") of Time's curved blade. Note the comparison of Time to the Grim Reaper, the scythe-wielding personification of death.   
  
**edge of doom (12):** i.e., Doomsday. Compare *1 Henry IV* (4.1.141):

Come, let us take a muster speedily:  
Doomsday is near; die all, die merrily.

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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. The details of Sonnet 116 are best described by Tucker Brooke in his acclaimed edition of Shakespeare's poems:

[In Sonnet 116] the chief pause in sense is after the twelfth line. Seventy-five per cent of the words are monosyllables; only three contain more syllables than two; none belong in any degree to the vocabulary of 'poetic' diction. There is nothing recondite, exotic, or metaphysical in the thought. There are three run-on lines, one pair of double-endings. There is nothing to remark about the rhyming except the happy blending of open and closed vowels, and of liquids, nasals, and stops; nothing to say about the harmony except to point out how the fluttering accents in the quatrains give place in the couplet to the emphatic march of the almost unrelieved iambic feet. In short, the poet has employed 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. (Brooke, p. 234)

This poem is about love, not between a speaker and his lover, but as a concept or idea. The poem **explores what is meant by love**, and proposes that, if it is true, love is one of life's constants which does not change with time or circumstance.

Structure

The Shakespearean sonnet has 14 lines divided into three stanzas of four lines each and a final couplet. The rhyme scheme can be described as a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g. This predictability and use of a regular pattern is frequently found in older poetry as writers tended to stick to the restrictions of a set format. This poem follows the conventional structure and includes the usual 'turn' at the end - a pair of lines (or couplet) that either shifts the mood or meaning of the poem, or asserts some sort of revelation.

Language

Sonnet 116 uses repeated pairs of words: "love is not love", "alters when it alteration finds" and "remover to remove" are examples from the first three lines. This mirroring of words is suggestive of a loving couple. As well as pairs of words, there are some opposites and negatives used to stress the qualities of love by saying what it is not: true love can observe storms ("tempests") and not be affected; "Love's not Time's fool".

Shakespeare uses metaphors based on natural elements: love "looks on tempests and is never shaken" and "is the star to every wand'ring bark". So love is presented as an essential part of our physical world; it's a fixed point of light in the sky - a "star" - guiding a boat ("wand'ring bark") lost at sea.

The opening lines of the poem echo the conventional Christian marriage service and they stress the idea that love ("the marriage of true minds") should be without "impediments" or barriers and obstacles. These lines can also be interpreted as meaning that love, if it is true, should be without fault.

There are lots of references to the idea of love enduring in Sonnet 116. As well as being "unshaken" by storms, "Love alters not" - it is a constant, an "ever-fixed mark", just as a "star" is reliably found in the night sky.

As well as not changing appearance or position, love "bears it out even to the edge of doom". Shakespeare is using language associated with extremes to show the power of love, confirming love as a positive force that triumphs over the prospect of "doom".

Attitudes, themes and ideas

Sonnet 116 acknowledges that love is a mysterious force "Whose worth's unknown", implying love is priceless and beyond the ability of man to evaluate even though "his height be taken".

The poem also proposes that love is a constant. The metaphor of "the star" is important in this respect because love, like the stars in the night sky, can be observed across the globe throughout time. Love is not restricted by time or place, but exists above all considerations.

The traditional idea of love and time being enemies is explored briefly in Sonnet 116. Shakespeare is clear about the positive virtues of love: even when the "rosy lips and cheeks of youth" fall victim to Time's "sickle" (an agricultural tool used for harvesting grain) love will remain.

The poem ends with a defensive challenge: if the poet has made an error, and love is not enduring, then he has never written and no man has ever loved.

Comparison

To His Coy Mistress

To His Coy Mistress explores the idea of time and its effect on love, although it suggests that death will bring an end unlike Sonnet 116, which suggests that love is greater than death.

Sonnet 43

Sonnet 43 is about defining love, although unlike Sonnet 116, it seeks to define personal love rather than love in general.

Sample question

In your exam you will be asked to compare a certain aspect of one poem with another. In order to do this, we need to get to know this poem a bit better by considering one of its main aspects.

What follows is a sample question which concentrates on one feature of the poem and an answer (not necessarily complete!) to the question.

Question

Write about the attitudes to love in Sonnet 116 and Hour.

Answer

Points you could make:

Both poems explore the power of love. In Sonnet 116 love's ability to endure "even until the edge of doom" is praised.

In Hour, "love spins gold, gold, gold from straw".

In Hour love is said to have the ability to defy time.

In Sonnet 116 love endures until time’s end.

Both poems are very optimistic about love. Imagery associated with riches illustrates this in Hour.

Language associated with endurance and constancy shows a positive attitude to love in Sonnet 116.