

Sonnet No. 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.

Sonnet No. 116 Paraphrase

Let me not declare any reasons why two
True minded people should not be married. Love is not love
Which changes when it finds a change in circumstances,
Or bends from its firm stand even when a lover is unfaithful:
Oh no! It is a light house
That sees storms but it never shaken;
Love is the guiding north star to every lost ship,
Whose value cannot be calculated, although its altitude can be measured.
Love is not the mercy of Time, though physical beauty
Comes within the compass of his sickle.
Love does not alter with hours and weeks,
But, rather, it endures until the last day of life.
If I am proved wrong about these thoughts on love
Then I recant all that I have written, and no man has ever [truly] loved.

Summary

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 even 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.

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.

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