

Let me not to the
marriage of true
minds



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The theme of Love's constancy and everlasting nature permeates each line of Shakespeare's 116th sonnet. Sonnet 116 "is about love in its most ideal form, praising the glories of lovers who have come to each other freely, and enter into a relationship based on trust and understanding" (Mabillard). It attempts to define love by stating both what it is and what it is not.

According to T. G. Tucker, Shakespeare strongly supported the idea of marriage and even alludes to a marriage service with his word play in the first two lines of the work. Those lines are "echoes of The Book of Common Prayer": "If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, ye are to declare it" (Davies). The sonnet's first quatrain introduces the theme of true, steadfast love. The first two lines explain that true love, the "marriage of true minds", does not "admit impediments" or change when a loved one changes; thus, it is unconditional. The third and fourth lines inform the reader what love is not. It does not "bend" or waver when faced with external pressures such as temptation from other lovers, and it is not changeable (Sonnet). While the first quatrain states what love is not, the second quatrain focuses on what love is. Until this point in the sonnet, Shakespeare's language and diction have been simple and relatively unremarkable. The second quatrain, however, consists of a major metaphor comparing love to "an ever-fixed mark", or a star that guides every lost ship safely through the "tempests" and is "never shaken". The word "mark" is actually defined as "a beacon to warn mariners of dangerous rocks" (Mabillard). With this translation, the author portrays love as an unshakeable and invincible constant that is fully aware of all dangers awaiting a traveler, as well as a beacon, guiding the voyager onwards (Let). Furthermore, this

constant prevents the navigator of life's ship from becoming the subject of any harm, ultimately putting itself in the face of danger to protect the beloved traveler. "Tempests", or storms to a ship also symbolize the storms that may take place within a relationship, showing that true love "is a steady eye that looks upon troubles and does not lose faith" in the relationship (Explanation). In line eight, the speaker states that this love's value is unfathomable. It cannot be measured by human means, like height or stars, and is thus beyond human comprehension. The author's interpretation of true love is practically "cerebral", and therefore remains a mystery because love's actual worth cannot be known (Mabillard). The final quatrain begins with another powerful yet simple statement: "Love's not Time's fool". The weight of this opening transcends to the reader a sense of passion the speaker must be feeling. The rhythm and varied tone in the poem, however, are balanced, keeping the flow from appearing too heavy, and instead adding to the beauty of the sonnet. This quatrain continues to tell the reader what love is not. Love is not "subject to change in the passage of time" (Sonnet), but "outlasts time itself in spite of physical beauty being diminished by time" (Davies). It is also important to note that time is capitalized in this line, signifying the importance of the argument and the role Time plays. Line ten consists of the speaker stating that beauty will bend "within his sickle's compass come". This may refer to the previous metaphor of the second quatrain, in which Love is portrayed as a constant star, guiding one throughout life. The compass's sickle is similar in that it also serves as a guide for the lost ship to return to a safe haven. Or perhaps the "sickle" (a bent blade or arc) is that of the Grim Reaper, a popular symbol portraying death and the passage of time. Since beauty is "

portrayed as bending contrary to true love's unbending character" (Davies), this line may also be taken to refer to the Grim Reaper's sickle that "ravages beauty's rosy lips and cheeks" (Sonnet). Love may fall into this Reaper's arc, but although physical attractiveness diminishes, true love will not. In line eleven, the word "alter" appears for the third time, reiterating the clearly significant point that love is completely unconditional and does not depend on circumstances. The simplicity and directness of this line is what makes the point so dramatic; this love is extreme, it will not change with hours and weeks, and is not temporary. The final line of the third quatrain goes beyond human comprehension. The love that the author speaks of, true love, will overcome and outlast death, "even to the edge of doom" because it is unchangeable, permanent, and even immortal. In the sonnet's closing couplet, the speaker announces rather bluntly that he is certain all he writes is correct. "It insists that this ideal is the only love that can be called true" (Sonnet), and leaves no room for compromise. Love will either bear all these qualities and values, or it is simply not love at all; there is no middle ground. If error is found in his statements, then he declares he does not know what he is writing about, has never written a word, and lastly, that no man could have ever loved. This poem is the "extreme ideal of romantic love". Nothing can change or harm it, it will not fade with time, it isn't subject to death, and it will admit no flaw (Sonnet). The way Shakespeare has utilized rhythm and variation of time, and how he has framed the passion of the poem into the disciplined rhetorical structure of the sonnet (Sonnet), adds an essential key to the impact the poet's words impress upon the reader. The sonnet uses three quatrains, each with a powerful opening remark to make three arguments about true love, giving an almost legalistic appeal about true

love's nature. The distinct division of each quatrain also gives a natural pause to reflect on what has been said before shifting to the next idea. The poem, ironically, uses simple words and phrases and states no new idea about love. This proves that it isn't necessarily what Shakespeare says, but how he phrases his thoughts that add to the total effect. Because the poem has so many simple statements, it dramatically contrasts major metaphor and imagery with the prominent simple diction of the rest of the poem. Shakespeare concludes Sonnet 116 with typical irony. However, the use of "three negatives (never, nor, no) stack to create a definitive closing, heightened by the sonnet's rhymed couplet" (Explanation). Shakespeare's purpose in writing the sonnet is to inform the reader what does and does not constitute true love, making several points throughout the work. The sonnet's theme revolves around the idea of Love's constancy and how genuinely true love does not waver in the face of outside pressures (Davies). This central idea is displayed by the author's specific statements, as well as the lone metaphor consisting of "an ever-fixed mark" and "the star to every wandering bark". The fact that Shakespeare chooses to compare true love to a fixed star guiding a lost ship symbolizes that only a faithful, constant relationship can be classified as true love. Yet it's also important to note that the author included his one, striking image (Time's bending sickle) for good reason. Within the passage, this one instance of imagery reinforces a complementary idea to the central theme of Love's constancy; that is, the idea of Time and the role it plays in determining if love is real. For the author states, "Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks within his bending sickle's compass come..." which emphasizes that "Time triumphs over flesh, and Love over all" (Let). Though physical beauty is at the mercy

of time, true love is not. It is important to point out the fact that there are indeed other interpretations of Sonnet 116 that offer a contrast to the central idea agreed upon by many criticisms. For instance, Walker states that Shakespeare's sonnet revolves around "insecurity about the nature of change in human love" and that the work represents a "dark, repressed underside of the unassailable affirmation of a mature, self-giving love". Furthermore, this affirmation may be seen as a kind of "bad faith" or "false dread", because love should not be seen as immortal, but quite possible of succumbing to death (Walker). Though this opinion is reasonable, it cannot compete with the fact that the sonnet "burns with emotion and love" and echoes the idea of Love's constancy (Let). In closing, Shakespeare has written a sonnet informing the reader of Love in its truest form. His thoughts are expressed through usage of unique phrasing, simple diction, and two dramatic forms of figurative language. The central ideas of the poem ring of Love's constancy and the passage of Time. In short, Shakespeare has produced a poem which has about it no strangeness whatsoever except the strangeness of perfection (Mabillard).