

Two faces seen as
one



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Innumerable poems address the concept of love, with the written battle between positive love and negative love continuing to be waged today. Not surprisingly, there are not, nor would we expect many future poets to write, many poems that juxtapose both the positive and negative characteristics of love. Shakespeare, an unconventional poet, does just that in his Sonnet CXVI. Shakespeare's initial impression offers a seemingly positive outlook on love, though further insight reveals that his intentions may have been the complete opposite. His explicit details of an ideal love disguise his implicit use of form and vocabulary to show that love is rarely as perfect as we would like it to be. Shakespeare begins the sonnet imperfectly, perhaps as a way of foreshadowing how he later intends to describe love. While traditional sonnets are written in iambic pentameter, the first line of Sonnet CXVI starts with two trochees, exemplified in, " Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments" (lines 1-2). Ironically, this sentence does " admit impediments" by opening with a contradiction in form. Because Shakespeare emphasizes a " marriage of true minds," he implies that only in an unblemished relationship can these impediments be forgone. His straying from iambic pentameter indicates hindrances to such perfection, evident even at the start. It is the first implication that love is never completely perfect. Deviances from standard form used to emphasize the deficiencies of love further occur in the sonnet with the violation of traditional metric use. Despite his expected adherence to iambic pentameter in a sonnet, Shakespeare includes a few lines that have eleven syllables rather than ten. These lines are meant to draw the reader's attention and to emphasize their meaning. He compares love to a star " whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken" (line 8). This raises the idea that the value of love often

goes unnoticed and that it is not as revered as it should be. Instead, people tend to measure its extent or magnitude superficially. He implies that while we may long for unconditional love in our lives, we are often sidetracked by the restrictions we place on it. Shakespeare also breaks from form when comparing love to time: " But bears it out even to the edge of doom" (line 12). A hasty reading of the line could be interpreted as the idea that love stands strong amidst disaster and tragedy. A closer look, however, raises the question of why love cannot transcend doom instead of merely meeting it at its edge. Shakespeare's purpose in his wording could be to bring to light the idea that love is not as invincible as people would like it to be, that it can only withstand up to a certain point before weakening. Shakespeare also implies imperfection in his seemingly happy sonnet through the repeated use of negation. A cursory understanding of the overall sonnet is that love is positively described as unchanging and withstanding. Looking closer at each description, however, reveals that they may not be as positive as we initially thought due to the use of negation. He chooses his words to convey a sense of cynicism. For example, rather than simply saying something along the lines of " love is unchanging," Shakespeare emphasizes what love is not: " Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds" (lines 2-3). He also does this when stating that love is not affected by time: " Love's not Time's fool" (line 9). This is, in a sense, a more effective way of describing love. More often than not, people are overly concerned with what love is when sometimes the best way to understand it is to look at what it is not. Shakespeare forces people to reexamine their preconceived notions of love, and come to grips with the fact that sometimes what they believe is love, really is not. Words are used to disguise what he actually means, that love

can be a damaging facade. On the surface it may appear a lovely and wonderful thing, but behind the pretense is the harsh reality of this emotion. Shakespeare also employs negative language to exemplify love's flaws. The sonnet is littered with words that are not often associated with love: "impediments," "remove," "tempests," "fool," "sickle," "brief," "doom." Rather than conjuring ideas and images of romance and affection, the sonnet instead uses words that denote melancholy. The reference to "his bending sickle's compass come" (line 10), for example, signifies the image of death and the Grim Reaper. Shakespeare also makes a reference to "his brief hours and weeks" (line 11), which leaves ambiguous whether the "his" refers to love or Time. In the case of love, "brief" suggests love is short-lived and fleeting. A master at obscuring alternate meanings behind the apparent, Shakespeare alludes to more unsatisfactory features of love throughout the sonnet. He repeats particular words, but what brings attention to them is the fact that the form of each word changes each time. "Alters" develops from "alteration," back to "alters" again. "Bends" turns to "bending", while "remover" becomes "remove." Shakespeare's choice of words is not unintentional. These three root words ("alter," "bend," and "remove") are all associated with change, most likely indicating the changing nature of love. The connotations Shakespeare embeds in the sonnet offer a refreshing view of love. Though this may capture particular essences of what love is, it cannot be seen as only one extreme. Shakespeare's technique of tackling the dual nature of love truly gives readers a sense of the facade it often takes in order to hide its dark side. Just as he uses form and vocabulary in the sonnet, Shakespeare brings to our attention the times we are blinded by

the good that we see in the people we love, and our failure to notice anything unpleasant simply because we do not look hard enough.