***Sonnet 116 - Commentary***

**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 ev’n 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.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/shakesonnets/section7.rhtml>

**What's he saying?**

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments. Love is not love"

*I will not allow myself to admit that true love has any restrictions. Love is not real love*

"Which alters when it alteration finds / Or bends with the remover to remove:"

*If it changes in response to change, or if it allows itself to be changed by the one who is changing:*

"O no! it is an ever-fixed mark / That looks on tempests and is never shaken;"

*Not at all! Love is a permanent mark that persists unshaken despite the harsh winds of change;*

"It is the star to every wandering bark / Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken."

*Love is the guiding, constant star for every wandering ship, a fixed point whose nature is unknown, although its height can be measured.*

"Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle's compass come:"

*True love is not subject to the changes of Time, although beautiful faces do fall victim to the sweep of Time's curved scythe:*

"Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks / But bears it out even to the edge of doom."

*Love does not change with Time's hours and weeks, but endures through Time right up until the day of reckoning.*

"If this be error and upon me proved / I never writ, nor no man ever loved."

*If the above is false and proved against me, it would be as impossible as if I had never written anything, or if nobody had ever loved.*

**Why is he saying it?**

Sonnet 116 is one of the most famous of the sonnets for its stalwart defense of true love. The sonnet has a relatively simple structure, with each quatrain attempting to describe what love is (or is not) and the final couplet reaffirming the poet's words by placing his own merit on the line. Note that this is one of the few sonnets in the fair lord sequence that is not addressed directly to the fair lord; the context of the sonnet, however, gives it away as an exposition of the poet's deep and enduring love for him.

The opening lines of the sonnet dive the reader into the theme at a rapid pace, accomplished in part by the use of enjambment - the continuation of a syntactic unit from one line of poetry to the next without any form of pause, e.g., "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments ..." This first quatrain asserts that true love is immortal and unchanging: it neither changes on its own nor allows itself to be changed, even when it encounters changes in the loved one. Quatrain two embarks on a series of seafaring metaphors to further establish the permanence of true love: in line 5 it is an "ever-fixed mark," a sea mark that navigators could use to guide their course; in line 7 it is a steadfast star (the North Star, perhaps), whose height we are able to measure (as with a quadrant) although we may know nothing of its nature (the science of stars had hardly progressed by Shakespeare's time). Both of these metaphors emphasize the constancy and dependability of true love.

Finally, quatrain three nails home the theme, with love's undying essence prevailing against the "bending sickle" of Time. Time's "hours and weeks" are "brief" compared to love's longevity, and only some great and final destruction of apocalyptic proportions could spell its doom. Note here the reference back to the nautical imagery of quatrain two with the use of the word "compass" in line 10.

Sonnet 116 closes with a rather hefty wager against the validity of the poet's words: he writes that if what he claims above is proven untrue, then he "never writ, nor no man ever loved."

In comparison with most other sonnets, sonnet 116 strikes readers as relatively simple. The metaphors are reasonably transparent, and the theme is quickly and plainly apparent. The overarching sentiment of true love's timeless and immutable nature is presented and developed in the first eight lines, but there is no twist at the third quatrain - rather a continuation of the theme. Even the couplet is but a simple statement like "there you have it." The simplicity is noteworthy, and perhaps it was deliberate: Shakespeare's goal may have been unaffected candor, sincerity of conviction. It should come as no wonder that the lines of sonnet 116 often are quoted as Shakespeare's authentic definition of love.

Another interesting fact is that this sonnet is found misnumbered (as 119) in all extant copies of the Quarto (early editions were printed in small books called quartos) but one. Even this fact has produced speculation about additional encoded meanings.

<http://www.gradesaver.com/shakespeares-sonnets/study-guide/section10/>

**Structure and language**

**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.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english_literature/poetryrelationships/sonnet116rev4.shtml>