

Line-by-Line Explanation of Sonnet 116

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Lines 1-2:

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

The speaker insists that true love (the "marriage of true minds") should not be hindered by obstacles.

The phrase "Admit impediments" echoes the wording of traditional wedding vows, suggesting that nothing should stand in the way of genuine love.

Lines 3-4:

"Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds, / Or bends with the remover to remove:"

True love does not change when circumstances change.

If love fades when tested, it was never true love to begin with.

"The remover" could symbolize time, separation, or external forces trying to break love apart.

Lines 5-6:

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

Love is compared to a lighthouse or a guiding star, which remains constant even during storms ("tempests").

This suggests that real love is steadfast and unbreakable, even in adversity.

Lines 7-8:

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

The guiding star (possibly the North Star) helps sailors navigate, just as true love provides direction in life.

While the star's value cannot be measured, its guidance is undeniable-just like love, which is priceless yet immeasurable.

Lines 9-10:

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

Love is not controlled by time, unlike physical beauty, which fades.

"Rosy lips and cheeks" symbolize youth and beauty, which time (personified as a grim reaper with a sickle) inevitably takes away.

But true love is deeper than physical appearance.

Lines 11-12:

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

Love does not change over time; it endures forever.

"The edge of doom" refers to Judgment Day, suggesting that true love lasts beyond life itself.

Lines 13-14 (Final Couplet):

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

The speaker ends with a bold challenge: if he is wrong about love's permanence, then he has never written anything, and no one has ever truly loved.

Since Shakespeare did write and people do love, his argument must be true.

Overall Meaning:

Shakespeare defines true love as unchanging, unwavering, and eternal.

Love is not dependent on beauty or circumstances; it guides and endures through time.

This idealized view of love has made Sonnet 116 one of the most famous and beloved love poems in history.