

William Shakespeare

'Sonnet 116'

One of the most popular Shakespearean sonnets, 'Sonnet 116' brings together two of Shakespeare's favourite themes, love and the passing of time. It is based on the wording of the Christian marriage service from the *Book of Common Prayer*.

We must also remember that this sonnet belongs to the group of sonnets dedicated to a young man: interesting, then, that it speaks about marriage, but it is the 'marriage of true minds.'



BEFORE READING

- 1 As the poem is dedicated to a man, how would you interpret the expression 'the marriage of true minds'? What type of love-relationship is it speaking about?
- 2 Now read and listen to the sonnet defining its tone. Choose from the following.
 - self-assured
 - romantic
 - melancholic



'Sonnet 116'



MP3 56

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments¹. Love is not love
 Which alters when it alteration finds,
 Or bends² with the remover to remove³.
 5 Oh, no! it is an ever fixed mark⁴
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken⁵;
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark⁶,
 Whose worth's⁷ unknown although his height be taken⁸.
 Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
 10 Within his bending sickle's compass⁹ come;
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
 But bears it out¹⁰ even to the edge of doom¹¹.
 If this be error and upon me proved,
 I never writ¹², nor no man ever loved.

1. **Admit impediments:** ponga impedimenti.
2. **bends:** tende a svanire.
3. **with the remover to remove:** quando l'altro si allontana.
4. **fixed mark:** punto di riferimento.
5. **shaken:** scosso.
6. **wandering bark:** naviglio errante.
7. **worth:** valore.
8. **although ... taken:** benchè la distanza sia nota.
9. **bending sickle's compass:** cadono sotto la sua curva lama.
10. **bears it out:** lo sopporta.
11. **edge of doom:** fino alla morte.
12. **I never writ:** non ho mai scritto.



OVER TO YOU

- 1 Find the lines in the poem which state the following about love.**

 1. Love is a constant reference point when a person feels lost.
 2. Love does not change when the circumstances in life change.
 3. Love can put up with the passing of time till the end.
 4. Love can survive even the biggest problems.
 5. Love is not influenced by the physical changes of growing old.

- 2 Answer the following questions.**

 1. What image is developed in lines 5-8?
 2. In the first two lines what does the poet state he would never do?
 3. In line 9 who or what will effect 'rosy lips and cheeks'?
 4. Which words or lines tell us that the poet is convinced about what he is saying?

- 3 Thematically the sonnet could be divided into three quatrains with a concluding couplet. Think of a suitable title for each of the quatrains.**

- 4 How would you describe the language of the poem? Choose from the following.**

<input type="checkbox"/> complex	<input type="checkbox"/> conversational
<input type="checkbox"/> rich	<input type="checkbox"/> humorous
<input type="checkbox"/> symbolic	<input type="checkbox"/> didactic

- 5 The structure and rhythm of this poem is less rigid than the other sonnets we have read. What effect does this have on the overall mood? Does it make it more formal or more informal?**

- 6 What is the significance of the metaphor in l. 7 referring to love as 'the star to every wand'ring bark'?
In a relationship what could it mean if a person 'wanders'?**

- 7 'Love's not Time's fool' (l. 9). What does the poet mean by this?**

- 8 Do you agree with the sonnet's message of eternal love? Would your answer be different for a platonic relationship?**

- 9 This sonnet was originally interpreted as a praise to ideal and eternal love. More modern interpretations, however, see it in the context of a world which is not perfect. Modern critics say that the sonnet has a more realistic view of a relationship, seeing its many ups and downs and moments of crisis, but stating that it is the test of true love that it can overcome these moments. Which interpretation do you feel best fits the sonnet? Give your reasons by referring to the poem.**