Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



Sonnet 116

by William Shakespeare

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.5

Sonnet 116 was published in 1609 in Shakespeare's Sonnets. It is a Shakespearean sonnet (three quatrains and a couplet, ABAB CDCD EFEF GG). It is one of the most-read poems at weddings. Much of its argument is made with negatives: love is "not" this, "never" that.

THE POEM

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

VOCABULARY

impediments — obstacles (an echo of the wedding service)

alters — changes

remover — one who leaves or changes

mark — here, a landmark or beacon for ships

tempests — violent storms

bark — a ship

sickle — a curved blade used to cut grain; Time's tool

compass — range, reach

doom — Judgment Day, the end of the world

writ — wrote

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to the first quatrain, what does true love NOT do?

2. In the second quatrain, love is compared to a "mark" and a "star." What do these images have in common?

3. What does "Love's not Time's fool" mean? What does Time do to "rosy lips and cheeks"?

4. How long does real love last, according to line 12?

5. Explain the couplet. How does the speaker prove he is right?

WRITING PROMPT

Write your own definition poem of 8–14 lines about friendship, courage or kindness. Use at least three "is not" statements and two metaphors.

Sonnet 116 — Answer Key

1. It does not change when the other person changes ("alters when it alteration finds") or fade when they leave or drift ("bends with the remover to remove").
2. Both are fixed points that guide ships: the "ever-fixed mark" survives storms "and is never shaken," and the "star to every wandering bark" guides lost sailors. Love is steady and guides us.
3. Love is not made a fool of by Time. Time's "bending sickle" cuts down youth and beauty, but love does not change "with his brief hours and weeks."
4. "even to the edge of doom": until the end of the world.
5. If this is wrong and can be proved wrong, then he never wrote anything and no one ever loved; since both are clearly false, his claim must be true.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/sonnet-116-let-me-not-to-the-marriage-of-true-minds-william-shakespeare/