

8. Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare

POET

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Shakespeare was an English poet, playwright, and actor. He is most famous for his 37 plays. He was brought up in Stratford-upon-Avon where he married Anne Hathaway at the age of 18. They had three children: Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith. Between 1585 and 1592, Shakespeare moved to London, becoming a successful actor, writer and owner of a theatre company. He returned to Stratford-upon-Avon an enormous success in 1613. He died three years later, aged 52.

BACKGROUND

Sonnets are fourteen line poems with a set rhythm and rhyme scheme. They were invented in the mediaeval period in Italy. The rhythm is iambic pentameter which means there are ten syllables in every line and every second syllable is always stressed or emphasized. The rhyme scheme of a sonnet depends on whether it is an Italian/Petrarchan sonnet or an English/Shakespearean sonnet. Here the rhyme scheme is the one made famous by Shakespeare and which was later given his name: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. This means the sonnet is divided into three sets of four lines which rhyme together, called quatrains. At the end of the sonnet, the two lines are meant to rhyme with each other as a sort of conclusion or summary – these lines are called a rhyming couplet. Sonnets were the novels of their day; they were written in sequences with each sonnet forming another chapter in a story. That is why this sonnet is number 116. Shakespeare actually wrote 154 sonnets in his collection. Sonnets were traditionally written by aristocratic men with titles to show off their cleverness. By contrast, Shakespeare came from a relatively poor background; his father was a glove maker. The traditional subject of sonnets is the adoration of a female Beloved figure who is beautiful, but too pure and religious to consider human love. By contrast, Shakespeare wrote 126 of his sonnets to a young male friend, and only 28 sonnets to a Dark Lady with whom the poetic voice has a passionate sexual relationship. Many critics view the poems as autobiographical, but there is little evidence for this. More likely, Shakespeare took all the traditional ingredients of a sonnet sequence and turned them on their heads to show how original and clever he was. Shakespeare's sonnets may be an attempt by him to be seen as a more serious and inventive writer. It may seem surprising to us, but in Shakespeare's life time the writing of plays was considered great entertainment, but not necessarily great art.

SUMMARY

The sonnet attempts to explain and define what true love is. The requirements of perfect love become increasingly difficult to express and to achieve during the course of the poem. The end of the sonnet leaves the reader wondering if a true love is something we can ever attain in the real world.

ANALYSIS

The first line of the sonnet plunges the reader into the middle of a thought. The poet says that he does not want to allow "impediments" or obstacles to "the marriage of true minds". The word "impediments" alludes to the marriage service which pauses to ask if any of the congregation know of any obstacles to the couple's marriage. Thus immediately the poem

places us in the world of married love. However, the phrase “marriage of true minds” is interesting. Here the poet seems to be saying that only people who bring together “true minds” should be allowed to marry. This is locating the site of love in the mind or head. It is not about hearts being brought together, or even bodies. Instead, Shakespeare is suggesting that the only sort of love which should be allowed to exist is one which is based on spiritual or intellectual compatibility. This immediately sets the bar very high and begins a discussion about what true love really is.

This attempt to define or explain true love is clearly a painful one for the poet as the sonnet is peppered with nine negative words – “not”, “no” and “never” – repeated again and again. It is as though Shakespeare finds perfect love so difficult to explain that he can only describe it by saying what it is not. For instance, in line two the poet says “love is not love”. He goes on to explain that real love does not alter “when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove”. This is suggesting that one of the key aspects of true love is constancy. It does not change. However, Shakespeare’s description is stronger than this. He is saying that a lover should not stop loving, not only if their Beloved changes, but also if their Beloved removes their love. He is suggesting true love will not be flexible or “bend” with the Beloved if they decide to “remove” that love. In one way, this sounds faithful and true, but in another, this could be seen as frighteningly single minded, and lacking in an appreciation of the partner’s wishes to leave the relationship.

Indeed, the complexity of this idea of never changing is expressed at the start of line five, when the poet exclaims “O”. This is an outburst of emotion. It appears Shakespeare is really pushing himself to make sense of the concept of love. He goes on, “O no, it is an ever-fixed mark”. This is another image of constancy. This metaphor compares love to a “mark” which cannot move. The steadiness of love seems very positive here. However, the word “mark” does not only mean a point, it sometimes means a stain. This could be describing love as a stain which cannot be washed out. It is a mark which brands you forever. Again, this is highlighting the fact that a perfect love may be something so difficult to achieve that it is not even possible in the real world.

In line six, Shakespeare introduces the metaphor of a storm. He explains true love “looks on tempests and is never shaken”. A tempest is a tumultuous storm. Therefore love is not altered by the troubled moments in a relationship. He offers us another metaphor; this time love is “the star to every wandering bark”. A “bark” is a ship. Here the ship is “wandering”. The verb makes the boat sound aimless or lost. The metaphor compares love with a star which would have been used by sailors to navigate ships in the past. Therefore love is a guide in life which helps you when you are off course. This is a lovely image. The metaphor is extended on line eight; here the poet describes the star as an entity “Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken”. In order to navigate by the stars, sailors would use a sextant to calculate the angle from the pole star. This would allow them to work out what direction to go in. Shakespeare’s detailed description shows that while some aspects of the star can be measured or “taken”, the vast majority of its wonder remains “unknown”. If the star is like love, then this suggests that love will forever be something we cannot fully know or appreciate wholly.

Shakespeare changes direction here to introduce a new image of love. This metaphor is also a personification. The poet says “Love’s not Time’s fool”. Here Shakespeare is saying real

love will not perform like a jester in the court of Time's kingdom. In other words, real love is not made fun of by the years passing. Shakespeare explains this in more detail by imagining the beauties of youth, the "rosy lips and cheeks" which Time will destroy with his "bending sickle". This is an image of time as the Grim Reaper, a figure with a blade to cut down human life. Therefore true love will not diminish even when the Beloved is no longer beautiful and young.

Again, the poet repeats that real love will not change in line eleven. He says it "alters not with his brief hours and weeks". Instead, love "bears it out even to the edge of doom". The word "doom" here alludes to Doomsday or Judgement Day in the Bible. It was believed that the world would end on Doomsday when God would return to the earth and judge all the souls, both living and dead once and for all. After this time, the world would be destroyed. Therefore Shakespeare is saying that true love "bears it out". The verb to bear suggests carrying a burden or doing something strenuous and difficult. Thus a perfect love must remain faithful to their Beloved not only during life, but also after it. They must remain in love in the afterlife, until God returns to decide their fate or judge them. This sort of love, beyond our own death and the death of our loved one, is almost unimaginable, and yet Shakespeare is saying that our love is not true unless we can do this.

By this stage of the sonnet, the reader is coming to realise that Shakespeare has set the bar so high for love that it almost seems impossible to reach. We have to wonder if any couple could really live up to such high standards of fidelity and constancy.

In lines thirteen and fourteen, Shakespeare moves to the rhyming couplet. In traditional sonnets, this should be a happy summary of the poem's content. However, this seems to be impossible for Shakespeare to do, having spent twelve lines of verse tying himself and the reader up in knots about the lofty standards of true love. Indeed the first word of the couplet suggests that a conclusion is not going to be easy because it begins with "If". This word is a conditional. It says that something is only true when other conditions or circumstances are met. The poet says "If this be error". This makes him sound uncertain as to whether or not he has adequately described true love. It seems to wonder if he has made a mistake or an "error". However, the last line claims that if he is wrong about love then "I never writ". This is one thing we can be sure of, Shakespeare clearly did write. Apart from all the plays, he has also just written the first 115 sonnets of his sequence. Therefore this suggests that it must be true; this must really be what love is. Yet the line goes on to say "nor no man ever loved". This means there are three negatives in one line "never", "nor" and "no". All these negatives do ultimately suggest that what Shakespeare is describing must be correct or no man has "ever loved", but they mount up making the reader feel uncertain.

The uncertainty is only added to by the rhyme in the rhyming couplet. The last two lines of an English or Shakespearean sonnet are meant to rhyme with each other to provide a happy conclusion, but here "proved" and "loved" appear to rhyme on paper, but when read aloud do not. They are what is called a half rhyme. Thus Shakespeare has ended his poem defining the beauty of love with a deformed and misshapen couplet. It is as though the whole idea of people coming together in a perfect union is deconstructed in this rhyme; if a couplet explaining love cannot reach harmony and perfection, then how can a couple of human beings hope to live up to Shakespeare's standards of love.

The sonnet leaves us wondering if true love can ever be described, and if true love can ever be achieved.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“La Belle Dame Sans Merci” – provides interesting comparisons with this sonnet as it describes an unhealthy type of love in which the man is emasculated by the Beloved.

“My Last Duchess” – provides a contrasting view of love. Unlike Shakespeare’s sonnet, the poem describes a love that changes with sinister consequences.

“Remember” – provides strong comparisons as it is also a sonnet about love which challenges the traditional subject matter and poetic voice of the form.