

Hello Students.

You're with me, Roxana Singh and stay with me as I take you through one of the world's most famous **love poems** ever written - Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare. We will explore the theme style and structure of this poem. At the end of this module, you will appreciate not only one of the world's most famous poems, but also 'see' the real Shakespeare - Shakespeare the realist whose feet are firmly planted on the ground. Shakespeare, the lover, whose love is one of flesh and blood; an earthy passionate love, and not the airy, fairy idealistic lover of a Petrarchan sonneteer. You will also look at a different kind of a volta here, which will occur much later only towards the end of the poem. So let's begin.

Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare

*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 wand'ring 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.*

The picture you see is of Swans, because in all the legends and stories, and literature and music and opera, Swans are a symbol of steadfastness in love. They mate for life, and legend has it that once they become mates when one of them, one of a pair dies, the other pines to death.

Let's now look at the first quatrain. OK, it is simple, he says - when two people come together in mind and heart and body, there should be no obstacle; and the love, if it is true love, will be unchangeable. It is constant. It will not alter; it will survive any crisis; it will never waver; It will face any adversity, any obstacle, and nobody can convince the true lovers otherwise. No remover can remove this feeling, this passion and ardour that exists between two people who have willingly come together because there has been a

meeting of minds. Shakespeare says - it is an ever fixed mark and the metaphor he uses here is that of the North star. There's only one thing that has remained constant through the centuries. The Pole Star - it is always in one fixed place. It will never be fickle. When sailors are lost at sea or when you are lost while hiking and if you do not have a compass, there is one thing that will guide you home. The Pole Star or the North Star. With the Pole Star, a ship's Captain can set his course, navigate and find his way back to the shore, to port and harbour. Again, the metaphor reminds one of the fact that already England was a maritime power.

' It is the star to ev'ry wand'ring barkwandering bark is ship, and England at this time had many 'wandering barks'; many ships all across the seven seas; sailing all over the world to the different colonies that had already been established and were in the process of being established by a nation as part of it's ambitious plans of becoming a great imperialistic power.

Shakespeare says there's something very enigmatic about true love. What is the worth of true love? Nobody knows, though we have been able to see that love can move mountains. There is no way that you can measure true love. It is not measurable. It is steadfast; it is unfathomable, almost mystical. Where does this strong feeling come from? So he says, you know, in the second quatrain. He's still talking about true love, and then he talks about what 'Time' the tyrant is always trying to do - put obstacles in whatever we plan for ourselves in our lives. But love's not 'Time's fool'. Love cannot be fooled by Time. Yes, time can rob you of rosy lips and cheeks, and you can grow old and haggard and wrinkled. But true love will not die. True lovers will have the same feeling for each other that they used to even when they are old and wrinkled and close to death. 'Up to the edge of Doom' - love is not brief or fleeting. Love is constant. It lives forever, right? So constancy, the constancy of perfect love is what Shakespeare is talking about in the third quatrain.

Now you see the 3 quatrains are done, 12 lines are over. Where is the **volta**? It hasn't come yet. A sonnet has a problem and a solution, and generally you know by now the poet should have started working towards coming to terms and resolving the problem. But then you have this brilliant couplet. Brilliant epigram. 'If this be error and upon me proved/ I never writ, nor no man ever loved. In line 13 comes the volta. Suddenly Shakespeare says something that takes your breath away. This - that if you can prove to me that something like the true love I'm describing does not exist, then there are no love stories. Then take all the great love tragedies that I have written and throw them into the dustbin. There is no Romeo and Juliet. There is no Antony and Cleopatra. There is no Desdemona, Othello, Kate & Petruccio. None of the great love stories ever existed. So actually what is he saying? He (Shakespeare) is throwing this challenge. He threw it 400 years ago; 400 years down the line we can still see how the

lines that he wrote have so much relevance to us; as applicable; as important to us as air and water !

This 'upstart crow' is very cocky. He is very sure that nobody can ever prove that true love does not exist. So he says, if I am not a good judge of true love, then I, Shakespeare, the writer of Romeo and Juliet, the writer of Anthony and Cleopatra; If you think I am not a good judge of love, then no man who has walked the planet has ever loved ! (Shakespeare was attacked and criticised by the University Wits, the schooled and learned writers, of his time. One of them, Robert Greene, called him “ an upstart crow beautified by our feathers”.)

What perfection in that epigram or the epigrammatic couplet.! The epigram is a witty, wise, pithy statement that is very difficult to argue with.

The rhyme scheme typically of a Shakespearean sonnet is **abab; cdcd; efef; gg.**

The volta, I have already said occurs in line 13, so you know he goes on for 12 lines, three quatrains and then suddenly there is a turn. Of course ! Yes!!! He is talking about all of these themes of steadfastness, of constancy, of the fact that love survives every adversity, but it cannot be measured. It is very puzzling. It is very elusive. It's not something that can be quantified. Life may be transient. Rosy cheeks and lips may fade, but love is immortal. And more so because, you know, Shakespeare the lover of lovers is covertly saying more. What he is also saying is because I write about it because of that, even if lovers die, even if people forget the great stories, the fact that I have written about them, my audiences, audiences down the centuries, down the ages, across generations, across boundaries of nationality, race and class will remember ! will enjoy, will be enthralled ! how arrogant, yet prophetic ! 400 years after Shakespeare wrote his great love stories - Yes, we remember them, we love them, we are as bewitched and enthralled as any Elizabethan audience !

These are the References. Bye bye!