

*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 ev'n to the edge of doom:  
     *If this be error and upon me proved,  
     I never writ, nor no man ever loved.**

This famous, emphatically positive poem contains nine negatives, three of them in the last line. It is also in contradictory juxtaposition with the preceding sonnet, whose beginning confesses to previous lies, whereas Sonnet 116 begins and ends with avowals of truth. Pairing them illustrates the paradoxes of permanent change and permanence despite change.

In Sonnet 115 the speaker tries to explain his own confusion about the varying degrees of love (and hate) that he has experienced and their changes over a period of time. In Sonnet 116, he emphatically asserts that true love never alters. "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds." (ll. 2-3) This comment on the vicissitudes that threaten love is at the heart of the whole sequence, the fabric of which is fluctuating emotions.

The speaker in Sonnet 115 has told us that he was "certain o'er uncertainty." (l. 11) In Sonnet 116, he announces his firm belief in love's stability. The threats of time and old age have disappeared. Even sensuality has been set aside. The marriage is that of true minds, not bodies. "Rosy lips and cheeks" (l. 9) can be victims of time's sickle, but love lasts "even to the edge of doom" (l. 12). For the first time in the sequence, immortality does not depend on procreation or poetry. And time itself is defeated. It cannot make a "fool" (a toy) of love (l. 9)

and it cannot last longer because at the day of  
doom all time will cease.

One crucial fact about this poem is that it is not  
addressed to the friend, unlike the vast majority of  
the sonnets so far. The implication is clear: the  
perdurance of love does not depend on him.