**Shakespeare's Sonnets Summary**

The sonnets are traditionally divided into two major groups: the fair lord sonnets (1-126) and the dark lady sonnets (127-154). The fair lord sonnets explore the narrator's consuming infatuation with a young and beautiful man, while the dark lady sonnets engage his lustful desire for a woman who is not his wife. The narrator is tormented as he struggles to reconcile the uncontrollable urges of his heart with his mind's better judgment, all the while in a desperate race against time.

1. The sonnets begin with the narrator's petition to the fair lord, exhorting him to preserve his beauty for future generations by passing it on to a child. This theme is developed until sonnet 18, where the narrator abandons it in favor of an alternative plan to eternalize the fair lord's beauty in his verse. But it is not long before the narrator's mellifluous depictions of the fair lord's beauty are replaced with the haunting lament of unrequited love. The narrator grows increasingly enamored with the fair lord, eventually becoming emotionally dependent upon him and plagued by the inability to win his heart. The narrator is further distressed by the incessant passing of time, and he fears the detriment time inevitably will bring to the fair lord's youthful beauty.

The narrator's emotions fluctuate between love and anger, envy and greed. We find poignant examples of the narrator's jealousy in the rival poet sonnets (79-86), where the fair lord's attention has been caught by another. The narrator's fragile psyche collapses in bouts of self-deprecation as he agonizes over the thought of forever losing the object of his affection. In sonnet 87, the narrator bids the fair lord farewell - but his heartache long persists.

The remainder of the fair lord sonnets are characterized by the vicissitudes of the narrator's emotional well-being. After his parting with the fair lord in sonnet 87, the narrator grows introspective, waxing philosophical as he begins to probe the very fabric of love. Throughout these developments we are made privy to the narrator's mounting apprehension that his time is running short. Finally, in sonnet 126, his love matured and yet still beautiful, the narrator points out that the fair lord too will one day meet his doom.

1. The following sonnet begins the dark lady sequence, the group of sonnets dealing with the narrator's irresistible attraction to a dark and beautiful woman. Here the allure is not of love but of lust, and the narrator is torn between his hunger for the woman and his disgust at the sinfulness of carnal desire.

The dark lady is described as freely promiscuous, the epitome of lustful endeavor. Drawn by and at the same time repelled by her darkness, the narrator once again reverts to meditative mind-wandering to cope with his situation. In the end, the narrator's lust is expressed as an incurable disease, a burning sensation that can only be quenched, if temporarily, by the eyes of the dark lady.

## About Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare's sonnets comprise 154 poems in sonnet form that were published in 1609 but likely written over the course of several years. Evidence for their existence long preceding publication comes from a reference in Francis Mere's 1598 *Palladis Tamia, Wits Treasury*, where his allusion to Shakespeare's "sugred Sonnets among his private frinds" might indicate that the poet preferred not to make these works public. It is unclear whether the 1609 publication, at the hands of a certain Thomas Thorpe, was from an authorized manuscript of Shakespeare's; it is possible that the sonnets were published without the author's consent, perhaps even without his knowledge.

This is but one of the mysteries of Shakespeare's sonnets. Another, which continues to spur debate among literary scholars today, is the identity of the publication's dedicatee, the collection's "onlie begetter," a Mr. W. H. Speculation largely vacillates between two main candidates: Mr. William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke; and Mr. Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. Both possibilities are tenable, as both were men of means and of literary interest enough to be patrons to Shakespeare. In fact the poet dedicated other works to each: his First Folio to Herbert and his *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* to Wriothesley. Those who favor one man or the other draw on circumstantial evidence concerning his life and character, such as the amicable terms on which Shakespeare is known to have been with Wriothesley, or events in Herbert's life that may be intimated in the exploits of the sonnets' "fair lord."

The fair lord is one of three recurring characters in the sonnets, together with the dark lady and the rival poet. The real-world referents of these persons are yet another locus of controversy. Some critics suggest that the fair lord and the collection's dedicatee are one and the same, while others disagree. Still others question the autobiographical nature of the sonnets, arguing that there is no hard proof that their content is anything but fictional.

These mysteries and others, including the ordering of the sonnets, the date of their composition, and seeming deviations from the otherwise rigid format (one sonnet has 15 lines, another only 12; sonnets 153 and 154 do not fit well in the sequence), have generated an abundance of scholarly criticism over the years, and the dialogues they provoke remain highly contentious to this day.

The 1609 publication of Shakespeare's sonnets is today referred to as the "Quarto" and remains the authoritative source for modern editions.

## Major Themes

**The Ravages of Time**

Shakespeare's sonnets open with an earnest plea from the narrator to the fair lord, begging him to find a woman to bear his child so that his beauty might be preserved for posterity. In sonnet 2, the poet writes, "When forty winters shall beseige thy brow / And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field ... How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use / If thou couldst answer 'This fair child of mine / Shall sum my count and make my old excuse' / Proving his beauty by succession thine!" The poet is lamenting the ravages of time and its detrimental effects on the fair lord's beauty, seeking to combat the inevitable by pushing the fair lord to bequeath his exquisiteness unto a child. By sonnet 18 the poet appears to have abandoned this solution in favor of another: his verse. "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see / So long lives this and this gives life to thee." But the ravages of time return to haunt the narrator: in sonnet 90, the poet characterizes time as a dimension of suffering, urging the fair lord to break with him "if ever, now"; "Give not a windy night a rainy morrow," he writes, pleading with him to end the desperation of hopeful unrequited love. The theme resurfaces throughout the sonnets in the narrator's various descriptions of himself as an aging man: "But when my glass shows me myself indeed / Beated and chopp'd with tann'd antiquity" (sonnet 62); "And wherefore say not I that I am old?" (sonnet 138). It has also been suggested that the poet implies that he is balding in sonnet 73, where he writes, "That time of year thou mayst in me behold / When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang / Upon those boughs ..."; such an interpretation fits well with the idea that Shakespeare is in fact the narrator of the sonnets, as extant portraits of Shakespeare show the poet to have been balding in his later years.

**Platonic Love vs. Carnal Lust**

The divide between the fair lord sonnets and the dark lady sonnets is also a divide between two forms of interpersonal attraction. While the narrator of the sonnets is clearly infatuated with both the fair lord and the dark lady, the language he uses to describe these infatuations shows them to be of disparate natures. The lack of explicit sexual imagery in the fair lord sonnets has led most scholars to characterize this infatuation as an example of Platonic love, i.e., a form of amorous affection bereft of any sexual element. Meanwhile, the dark lady sonnets are replete with sexual imagery, implying an attraction based largely on carnal lust. The poet seems to glorify the former while condemning the latter; his heart is at odds with his libido. If we take the angel of sonnet 144 to be the narrator's fair lord, we see this contrast clearly: "To win me soon to hell, my female evil / Tempteth my better angel from my side / And would corrupt my saint to be a devil / Wooing his purity with her foul pride." It might be argued that this very incompatibility between the two distresses the narrator most as he learns of their affair.

**Selfishness and Greed**

The themes of selfishness and greed are prevalent throughout the sonnets as a whole, emerging most perceptibly in the narrator's hypocritical expectation of faithfulness from the fair lord and the dark lady. The poet seems at times to advance a double standard on the issue of faithfulness: he is unfaithful himself, yet he condemns, is even surprised by, the unfaithfulness of others. The rival poet sonnets (79-86), for example, capture the poet's jealousy of his fair lord's having another admirer; dark lady sonnets 133-134 and 144 do the same, and they may even include a reference to an affair between her and the fair lord that perhaps was alluded to previously in sonnets 40-42. (For this reason and others, it is sometimes suggested that the ordering of the sonnets does not wholly parallel the actual chronology of the events they describe.) Although the narrator does indeed chastise himself for his own unfaithfulness, perhaps in reference to his wife, his distress at the unfaithfulness of those with whom he himself has been unfaithful makes him out as wanting to have his cake and eat it too.

**Self-Deprecation and Inadequacy**

Self-deprecatory language frequently appears regarding the poet's various inadequacies, in particular his ability to keep his fair lord's interest. In sonnet 76 the poet basically calls himself a bore. He begins, "Why is my verse so barren of new pride / So far from variation or quick change?" His expressions of inadequacy reach a pinnacle in the rival poet sonnets, where they transform into pathetic outbursts of jealousy. In sonnet 80 we read, "But since your worth, wide as the ocean is / The humble as the proudest sail doth bear / My saucy bark inferior far to his / On your broad main doth wilfully appear"; in sonnet 84, "Who is it that says most? which can say more / Than this rich praise, that you alone are you?" The poet's self-deprecation continues as he blames himself for much of that which he disapproves of both in the fair lord and in the dark lady. He himself is the cause of their abandoning him; his will is inadequate for resisting the temptations of Love.

**Homoerotic Desire**

Although a fair number of scholars argue that the sonnets do not reflect any intimation of homosexual desire whatsoever on the part of the narrator, others find sonnets 1-126 rife with homoerotic undertones--at times appearing as explicit expressions of the narrator's love for the fair lord. In sonnet 20, for example, the poet expressly laments the fact that Nature fashioned the fair lord with male genitalia ("she prick'd thee out"). In sonnet 29, the narrator bemoans his "outcast state," perhaps a direct reference to a homoerotic desire he fears cannot be accepted by society. Still, just as it is intellectually necessary to confront the idea that homoerotic desire is prevalent to some extent in the sonnets, it is incumbent on readers not to let the imagination go astray.

Scholars who accept that homoerotic undertones are present in the sonnets are, nevertheless, divided regarding what this desire really means. Unlike the sonnets featuring the dark lady (127-154), the fair lord sonnets contain no explicit reference to sexual desire; even if the narrator lusts for the fair lord, it is debatable whether this lust has as its goal any act of sexual consummation.

**Financial Bondage**

Throughout the sonnets there is considerable imagery of financial debt and obligation, bondage and transaction. Many scholars are convinced that the fair lord is not only the object of the poet's affection but also his financial benefactor. Such speculation has led to the identification of the fair lord with the begetter of the sonnets, Mr. W. H. Although this argument is difficult to prove, it certainly has its merits.

In sonnet 4, financial imagery is ubiquitous: "unthrifty," "spend," "bequest," "lend," "frank," "niggard," "profitless," "usurer," "sum," and "audit," and more. Sonnet 79 likewise includes "aid," "numbers," "robs," "pays," "lends," "stole," "afford," and "owes." Support for the hypothesis that the dark lady of the sonnets was in fact a prostitute comes in part from sonnet 134, where the language includes "mortgaged," "forfeit," "bond," "statute," "usurer," "sue," "debtor," and "pays," although it could also be argued that the narrator is merely describing the dark lady as a whore out of jealousy of her affair with the fair lord.

**Color Symbolism**

This theme emerges most palpably in the dark lady sonnets, where the poet's repeated use of the color black to describe the dark lady's features, both physical and intangible, ascribes her with the evilness or "otherness" that the color has often symbolized in the Western mentality. However, color imagery is present in the fair lord sonnets as well, especially in conjunction with the theme of passing time. In sonnet 12, for example, the poet draws a parallel between the "aging" of nature with the aging of human life, opposing "the violet" and "summer's green" with the silver and white of age. Note, though, that the opposition here is not between black and white, as might be expected, but rather between color and absence of color, the latter of which is a product of passing time. The poet dreads both the passing of time as well as the sinfulness of his dark lady, and it is conceivable that the goal of his symbolism is to represent that which he fears by that which is without color. This argument is complicated, however, by sonnet 99, where "purple," "red," and "white" appear to take on more convoluted roles. Still, it is possible to find consistencies in the poet's use of color symbolism: all three instances of "yellow" (in sonnets 17, 73, and 104) are used in the context of passing time, while green is largely symbolic of youth (such as in sonnet 63).

**William Shakespeare**

**Sonnet 116**

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 proved,   
    I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

## The Poem

Sonnet 116 is generally considered one of the finest love poems ever written. In this sonnet, William Shakespeare raised the theme of romantic love to the status of high philosophy. At a time when love between man and woman was not often recognized as essentially other than a form of family obligation, Shakespeare spiritualized it as the motivator of the highest level of human action. Love of that kind has since become the most sought-after human experience.

The poem is a regular English sonnet of fourteen lines arranged in three quatrains and a concluding couplet. It begins by using the language of the Book of Common Prayer marriage service to make an explicit equation of love and marriage. It not only suggests that marriage is the proper end of love, but it also goes beyond to make love a necessary prerequisite. The quatrain continues by describing the essential constituents of the kind of love that qualifies. Such love does not change under changing circumstances; in fact, constancy is its first element. It continues even when unreciprocated or betrayed. Further, true love does not depend on the presence of the beloved, but actually increases during absence.

The second quatrain uses a series of metaphors to flesh out the character of proper love. Its constancy is such that it not only endures threats but actually strengthens in adversity. Its attractive power secures the beloved from wandering, and it sets a standard for all other lovers. Although conspicuous s and easily identifiable, its value is inestimable. Aspects of it can be measured, and many of its properties are tangible, but it resides in another dimension, assessable by normal instruments in space and time.

The third quatrain considers the constancy of true love under the threats of time and aging. It declares that love is unaffected by time. To begin with, love far transcends such mundane physical characteristics as size, appearance, condition, and shape. For that reason, it ignores physical changes caused by age or health. It defies time and everything in its power, including death. True love operates in the realm of eternity. Not even death can part true lovers; their union endures forever. Because love has the capacity to raise human action to this exalted state, it alone enables humans to transcend temporal limitations. Humankind becomes godlike through love.

The sonnet ends with a simple couplet which transfers the focus from the ethereal region of eternal, transcendent love to the routine present of the poet-speaker. He merely observes that if he is ever proved wrong, then no man has ever loved. It seems a trivial conclusion, until one recognizes that this is exactly the feeling that allows men and women to continue to fall in love and to endow that feeling with meaning.

**Themes and Meanings**

In this sonnet, Shakespeare presents an argument, forcing the double conclusion that love transcends normal human measures and that it represents the highest level of human activity. Yet, as a famous love poem, it is highly unusual: It is not a declaration of love but a definition and demonstration. It still accomplishes the object of a love poem, however, because the inspirer of this statement could not possibly be flattered more effectively.

Sonnet 116 develops the theme of the eternity of true love through an elaborate and intricate cascade of images. Shakespeare first states that love is essentially a mental relationship; the central property of love is truth—that is, fidelity—and fidelity proceeds from and is anchored in the mind. The objective tone and impersonal language of the opening reinforce this theme. This kind of love is as far removed from the level of mere sensation as any human activity could be. Like all ideal forms, it operates on the level of abstract intellect, or of soul. Hence it is immune to the physical, emotional, or behavioral “impediments” that threaten lesser loves. It is a love that fuses spirits intuitively related to each other.

The poem proceeds to catalog a number of specific impediments. The first involves reciprocation. Does true love persist in the face of rejection or loss of affection? Absolutely, even though those might be sufficient grounds for calling off a wedding. True love endures even the absence of the beloved: not that the heart grows fonder in such a case, as in the cliché, but that it operates independently of physical reminders. Such love stabilizes itself, as if possessing an instinctive self-righting mechanism. Shakespeare himself uses this kind of gyroscopic and autopilot imagery; like the navigational devices to which he alludes, true love serves as a standard for others, maintains its course under stress, and guarantees security against storm and turmoil.

This imagery duplicates the sequence of promises exchanged by true lovers in the marriage service that Shakespeare quotes in the opening of the poem. True love vows constancy regardless of better, worse, richer, poorer, sickness, health—all the vagaries of life and change. The simple series, however, seems to minimize the intensity of love necessary to do this. On the contrary, love is absolutely secure against external assault. In particular, it holds firm against the ravages of time. Since the poem begins by dissociating love from the limits of time, this should not be surprising, especially since the marriage service insists on the possibility of love surviving time and its consequence, change. So strong is the popular belief that love is rooted in physical attractiveness, however, that the poem is forced to repudiate this explicitly. It does it in the starkest way imaginable, by personifying time as the Grim Reaper and by bringing that specter directly before the eyes of the lover. This happens; the threat is real, but the true lover can face down even death.

The marriage service does that also, by asking the thinking lover to promise fidelity “until death do us part.” Shakespeare’s poem uses imagery to give form to this belief that true love has to be stronger than death, set as a seal upon the lover’s heart.

## Forms and Devices

In spite of being one of the world’s most celebrated short poems, Sonnet 116 uses a rather simple array of poetic devices. They include special diction, allusion, metaphor, and paradox. All work together to reinforce the central theme.

Shakespeare establishes the context early with his famous phrase “the marriage of true minds,” a phrase which does more than is commonly recognized. The figure of speech suggests that true marriage is a union of minds rather than merely a license for the coupling of bodies. Shakespeare implies that true love proceeds from and unites minds on the highest level of human activity, that it is inherently mental and spiritual. From the beginning, real love transcends the sensual-physical. Moreover, the very highest level is reserved to “true” minds. By this he means lovers who have “plighted troth,” in the phrasing of the marriage service—that is, exchanged vows to be true to each other. This reinforces the spirituality of loving, giving it religious overtones. The words “marriage” and “impediments” also allude to the language of the service, accentuating the sacred nature of love.

Shakespeare then deliberately repeats phrases to show that this kind of love is more than mere reciprocation. Love cannot be simply returning what is given, like an exchange of gifts. It has to be a simple, disinterested, one-sided offering, unrelated to any possible compensation. He follows this with a series of positive and negative metaphors to illustrate the full dimensions of love. It is first “an ever-fixéd mark/ That looks on tempests and is never shaken.” This famous figure has not been completely explained, although the general idea is clear. Love is equated with some kind of navigating device so securely mounted that it remains functional in hurricanes. It then becomes not a device but a reference point, a “star,” of universal recognition but speculative in its composition; significantly, it is beyond human ken.

In “Love’s not Time’s fool,” Shakespeare moves on to yet another metaphorical level. To begin with, love cannot be made into a fool by the transformations of time; it operates beyond and outside it, hence cannot be subject to it. This is so although time controls those qualities which are popularly thought to evoke love—physical attractions. Shakespeare conjures up the image of the Grim Reaper with his “bending sickle,” only to assert that love is not within his “compass”—which denotes both grip and reckoning and sweep of blade. Love cannot be fathomed by time or its extreme instrument, death. Love “bears it out”—perseveres in adversity—to the “edge of doom”—that is, beyond the grave and the worst phase of time’s decay.

The final device is a conundrum in logic. It establishes an alternative—“If this be error”—then disproves it. What remains, and remains valid, is the other. It also bears a double edge. If this demonstration is wrong, Shakespeare says, “I never writ,” which is an obvious contradiction. The only possible conclusion is that it is not wrong. He proceeds then to a corollary, “nor no man ever loved,” which is as false as the previous statement.