

Poetry Model Analysis

Question:

Write an essay in which you discuss how details of diction, syntax, figures of speech and structure are employed in order to shape and express the theme/s in this sonnet.

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.

Answer:

The purpose of this essay serves to provide you with a model analysis for how you might approach a question such as the above when analysing a sonnet. If you have any questions about or comments on this analysis, please do post such under the 'Poetry Model Analysis Discussion' topic in the Study Unit 4 forum. [***Note:** *I am briefly introducing the model analysis here, but—as I am writing this analysis in an 'explanation' style—this is not an example of how you should write your essay introduction. Please refer to the 'Writing/Structuring a Proper Academic Essay' topic in the Study Unit 1 forum for full guidance on and examples of how your essay introduction should read*].

As you would have most likely noted, the predominant theme in Sonnet 116 is love, while a secondary identifiable theme is time. The purpose of this analysis of the sonnet then is to explore how Shakespeare's choice of diction, syntax, figures of speech and structure combine to shape and express the identified themes of love and time. [**Note:** Identifying the theme/s in the poem is the 'why' of the text essentially stated. You can elaborate on this point somewhat]. It is important, when dealing with two or more themes, that we first explore what the poet is saying about each respective theme before we determine the specific message that is created by the combined themes. The

latter is nonetheless highly important—if we do not comment on the creation of meaning and the message of the poem, our answer to the ‘why’ question would be incomplete.

Notice how Shakespeare’s choice of words and phrases [the *diction* of the poem], reinforce the theme, even when he is not specifically utilising the terms “love” or “time”.

The phrase “marriage of true minds” (Line 1) in simplest terms refers to the ‘meeting’, union or coming together of true-minded individuals, yet Shakespeare specifically employs the word “marriage” as an allusion to the actual marriage ceremony and the institution of being married. Beyond simply referring to two people getting married, the word choice in “true minds” furthermore creates an image of two people who have a true intellectual compatibility, as opposed to a physical connection driven by lust, thus contributing to an interpretation of the phrase as denoting ‘true love’.

The image of “rosy lips and cheeks” (Line 9) is an image for youth, while “brief hours and weeks” (Line 11) is a more direct reference to the passage of time. These two phrases reinforce the notion that, while youth is fallible and the passage of time is inevitable, true love is not determined or eradicated by the passage of time.

The *syntax* of the poem (i.e. the sentence structure of each of the lines within the poem) supports the *diction* in creating the imagery that illustrates/conveys the theme. The syntactical order, or word order, of the elements within the lines of the poem does this by drawing the reader’s attention to the themes of love and time—and the distinction or disparity between these two themes. A number of the lines in Sonnet 116 follow the structure of ‘Love is **not** [this], but [this]’ which emphasises the contrast between love and time. In the lines “Love is not love Which alters when it alteration finds ... it is an ever fixed mark” (Line 2 – 3 & 5) and “Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, But bears it out even to the edge of doom” (Line 11 – 12) one can see this contrasting syntactical order of what love *is* and what it *is not* exemplified.

The *figures of speech* in Sonnet 116 are indistinguishable from the *diction* of the poem. The words chosen do, after all, form and add impact to the figures of speech. You should note, at this stage, that the details of the poem—and of any poem for that matter—are not mutually exclusive and cannot be separated. Instead, poetic details and devices combine to create meaning. To that point, the creation of theme and meaning within poems is dependent on and determined by the interaction of the elements and features of the text. When looking at *figures of speech* in a poem, it is advisable to do a line by line analysis of the poem in the planning stages of your essay, then (in your final essay draft) write [a] full, proper paragraph/s addressing the *figures of speech* you have found in your analysis [***Note: Remember that your analysis cannot consist of merely identifying/listing the figures of speech and linguistic devices in the text, of key importance is that you proceed to comment on how the figures and devices identified shape and express the theme/s in the poem overall. See the examples of how I did so below**].

We have already touched on the significance of the interpretation of allusion “marriage of true minds” in Line 1, though from a structural point of view we might further note the fact that the metaphor specifically serves as the opening of the poem, thus setting a strong tone for the rest of the poem. The opening statement, that true love does not admit impediments, is then explored and expanded upon throughout the rest of the poem. In essence, the opening metaphor asserts the theme of the poem at the outset, with the poem building on this key statement thereafter.

To further comment on the structure of the poem, we can look again at the progression in the poem. The four five lines of the poem are centred on the negative “not”. Shakespeare makes a number of assertions about what love is *not*, but he does not leave the reader hanging thereafter. He immediately follows up in the next lines by stating the positive converses of what love *is*. These eight lines contain strong statements about love’s triumph over time and thus show clear progression from the somewhat negative opening statements. The last two lines punctuate this progression, by making an exceptionally strong statement which we will explore further below.

In the lines “Love is not love /Which alters when it alteration finds” (Line 2 – 3), we see the personification of Love (How does love “find” anything, if it is an abstract concept?), which is carried through in the lines that follow. Note how, whilst specific human qualities are not directly attributed to love (as we would normally expect in a case of personification), Love is spoken about as though it is a conscious person with specific features. The personification of Love almost makes it the protagonist of the poem, which allows the reader to identify with the theme of the poem. That fact that Love is discussed as though it is a person with certain characteristics also aids in *defining* the abstract concept of true love.

The image of love as “the *star* to every wandering bark” (Line 7)—i.e. the guiding star to lost ships—creates a high expectation of love (literally), though the speaker acknowledges that the worth of the star (or specifically, love) is not always known or appreciated (Line 8). The image of love as a star furthermore reiterates the permanence and infallibility of love as identified in the opening lines of the poem, thereby reinforcing the theme and the speaker’s attitude towards love.

In Line 9 the secondary theme of Time is introduced, and from “Love’s not Time’s fool...” (Line 9) to “...edge of doom” the contrast between love and time is drawn and explored. As noted, the speaker points out that, while Time (which is also personified, perhaps as the antagonist to Love) destroys youth, true love bears it out to the end of time (“the edge of doom”).

A final figure of speech evident in the *diction* and *syntax* of the poem is parallelism, which continually draws the parallel between love and time, with the former ultimately winning out over the latter. In the final two lines, the speaker (which at this point we can assume to be Shakespeare himself) makes an exceptionally strong statement to support his assertion about true love. He states that, if what he has said about love is proven to not be true, he

has never written and no man has ever loved. This bold statement concludes the theme, declaring it indisputable that true love wins out over time.

In conclusion, the connotative and allusive diction, syntactical order, identified figures of speech and structure of Sonnet 116 combine to shape and express the identified themes of love and time respectively, with the two themes being contrasted to have love ultimately be victorious over time—and death.

While this analysis is not exhaustive or conclusive (you might have taken a somewhat different approach or have noted certain additional elements), I hope that this model analysis has aided your approach to analysing a question about the theme, subject or core concern of a poem through details of diction, syntax, figures of speech and structure. Again, if you require clarification or elaboration on any point I have made above or on any aspect of my analysis, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me via the Study Unit 4 forum under the 'Discussions' tab.