This essay will be a reflection on Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116.

Shakespeare starts this sonnet off with a line that draws on Anglican sacramental theology, specifically concerning matrimony. In Anglican (as well as Roman Catholic and Orthodox) theology, for a marriage to be valid, it is necessary that anything that could impair the marital relationship be made known up front. They do not invalidate the marriage in and of itself, but if kept hidden, would mean that the spouse did not have full knowledge and free consent (which is one of the four necessary things for a valid marriage). For Shakespeare, Love is something that transcends human imperfections, and so, with any flaws that are a result of the imperfection of this world made known, still accepts the beloved. This theme of Love looking beyond the constraints of human limits is one that runs through this sonnet, and we will return to it later.

Shakespeare also writes that Love is like a mariner’s star or a lighthouse, leading ships (Shakespearian double meaning there) through storms and darkness safe to land. This reminds me of how medieval theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas would compare Mary to a mariner’s star. While Shakespeare almost certainly did not make this connection himself, this seems to fit a pattern I noted in the essay on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where women are viewed through the lens of the Virgin and treated and spoken to appropriately. While here Love as a concept, rather than the lady herself, is regarded as the guiding light, the significance of the feminine influence remains the same.

True Love, Shakespeare insists, is not dependent on temporal characteristics such as “rosy lips and cheeks”, which are subject to time. The implication is, then, that Love is based on what humans have that does not change: an immortal soul. Thus, it is one of the few things not subject to time as a phenomenon of change, as it is not dependent on what is changeable in humanity but rather what remains even beyond fate. Much of what in the modern day is called “love” is not truly Love, but a cheap imitation which is built on the shifting sands of man’s bodily desires. Love instead looks to eternity, to the beautiful and changeless One whom humanity images. While Shakespeare has primarily romance in view here, this idea of Love can equally be applied to all human relationships.

In the end, Sonnet 116 paints a moving image of what Love is, and ties seemingly disparate parts of the culturally Christian context this sonnet was written in together very well. Pointing the reader back to the timeless One who is the template of Love, it is a reminder of what human love should look like in light of who he is.