# since feeling is first

## 📝 SUMMARY

Because people feel emotions before anything else, why would anyone bother to fixate on small, insignificant rules and details that will pale in comparison to the feeling of a good kiss?

The idea of being a complete fool during spring is something I wholeheartedly embrace.

After all, leading a life full of kisses is better than leading a life full of knowledge. Lady, I promise on the beauty of nature that this is true. Don't be sad. My best, most impressive thoughts can't even measure up to the movement of your eyelids, which confirm to me that we are meant for each other.

So just laugh and fall into my arms, since life is meant to be lived and enjoyed, not approached like some boring piece of writing.

For that matter, we should live life to the fullest before we die, since I think when death comes it will last forever, unlike a parenthesis.

## ☉ THEMES

### 🎭 FEELING VS. THINKING

The speaker of "since feeling is first" encourages people to stop overthinking things. This, the poem implies, is because *thinking* pales in comparison to the gratification of simply *experiencing* and *enjoying* life as it happens.

When the speaker says that "feeling is first," this means that people process life on an *emotional* level before processing it on an *analytical* level. To illustrate this point, the speaker suggests that the "syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you." In other words, analyzing life like it's a piece of writing won't lead to the kind of fulfillment and pleasure a simple kiss can create. As such, the speaker believes it's best to for people to embrace their feelings, since overthinking life will never lead to complete happiness or satisfaction.

In fact, the speaker is perfectly happy to look like a "fool" if this is what it takes to lead a life dedicated to feeling. This means that the speaker would like to fully embrace the immediate joys of love and springtime, regardless of whether doing so seems logical. After all, the speaker firmly believes that even the most respectable intellectual activity can't measure up to the excitement of watching a lover's eyelids "flutter." For the speaker, no amount of analysis can beat the emotions that arise directly from life itself—emotions that strike people in immediate, intimate ways.

As such, the poem implies that those who honor their feelings live more honestly and freely because they don't waste time trying to make everything fit into some arbitrary order. Overthinking, then, is like agonizing over grammar and syntax (that is, the arrangement of words in a sentence). The speaker views this overly logical approach to life as rigid and formulaic, one that keeps people from fully appreciating life in the moment.

The speaker ends the poem by insisting that life isn't a "paragraph" and that death isn't a "parenthesis," thereby highlighting the fact that existence isn't mean to be neatly organized or analyzed like a block of text. Instead, life is something that people should merely *experience*; life is about living it, not analyzing it.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-16

### ❤️ LOVE AND APPRECIATION

"since feeling is first" is, above all, a love poem. The speaker argues that people shouldn't overthink or overanalyze love, and instead must allow themselves to be open to romance and to fully feel their emotions. This aligns with the poem's overall message that emotions overshadow logic, as the speaker frames love as something that is so fulfilling that it makes all other considerations seem insignificant in comparison.

The speaker's main point is that people shouldn't overthink things that they could instead just *feel*. To illustrate this, the speaker considers the feeling of being in love, which doesn't require any kind of thinking or structured analysis. For instance, the speaker points out that kissing somebody or watching a lover's eyelids flutter aren't things that need to be analyzed. Rather, they only need to be felt and experienced. In keeping with this, the poem presents love as something very intuitive and natural.

The speaker also connects this romantic mindset to life itself by associating romance with springtime and flowers, which represent vitality and the beauty of existence. Like love, these things don't need to be analyzed in order to be enjoyed. This suggests that people who are capable of opening themselves up to love are also able to more thoroughly appreciate life than people who spend their time thinking about and getting hung up on insignificant details. In turn, the speaker casts love as something that not only overshadows logic and thought, but also enhances a person's ability to be open and present in the world.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

• Lines 1-16

## 🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-4

*since feeling is ...*
*... wholly kiss you;*

The speaker begins by suggesting that "feeling is first." This means that people experience feelings and emotions before experiencing anything else. In other words, people process life on an emotional level before analyzing their experiences on a logical or rational level.

With this in mind, the speaker wonders who would bother to stop and think about "the syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you." This is a [metaphorical](#) question, as the speaker uses the word "syntax"—which basically refers to the arrangement of words in a sentence—to imply that overthinking arbitrary details is a useless thing to do, especially when these details will never bring the kind of happiness or satisfaction that comes from a good kiss. In this way, the first stanza ("since feeling ... wholly kiss you") lays out the speaker's belief that feelings are more valuable and rewarding than thoughts.

The speaker's combined use of [alliteration](#) and [sibilance](#) in these lines also make them sound pleasing to the ear. For instance, the /f/ sound repeats in the first line:

since **f**eeling is **f**irst

This alliteration connects the word "feeling" to the word "first," and this ultimately helps the speaker emphasize the idea that people experience things emotionally before experiencing them in any other way.

What's more, sibilance runs throughout the first stanza, as the speaker uses not only the standard sibilant /s/ sound, but also the /z/, /th/, and /f/ sounds:

**s**ince **f**eeling i**s f**ir**s**t
who pay**s** any attention
to **th**e **s**yntax of **th**in**gs**
will never wholly ki**ss** you;

This sibilance creates a satisfying hissing sound, one that makes the speaker sound relaxed. This tone is appropriate for the poem, since the speaker's general attitude is one of happiness and contentment. In turn, the sound of the speaker's words reflects the poem's overall mood.

On another note, the first stanza establishes the poem's lack of [meter](#) and form. Although these four lines are all roughly the

same length (containing between five and seven syllables), they don't adhere to any kind of meter, nor do they set forth a [rhyme scheme](#). As such, the first stanza establishes a free-flowing style that continues throughout the rest of the poem.

### LINES 5-7

*wholly to be ...*
*... my blood approves,*

These three lines ("wholly to be ... blood approves") might sound pretty confusing. Simply put, the idea here is that the speaker is completely okay with looking like a "fool" if this is what it takes to enjoy life's various pleasures—such as, for instance, spring.

This isn't a complicated idea, but the way the speaker expresses it *is* hard to follow. This is because the speaker inverts the order of words in a fairly uncommon way, reordering the syntax of the sentence by putting the phrase "my blood approves" at the very end. Instead of saying something like "my blood approves of being a complete fool during spring," the speaker chops up the sentence in a way that is unexpected and strange, making it that much harder for readers to understand what's being said.

It could be argued that the speaker forces readers to simply experience the poem by using this off-beat style, since the jumbled phrase washes over readers before they can actually make sense of it.

On the other hand, one might argue that this strange use of language creates a feeling of [irony](#), since the speaker has already suggested that paying attention to the "syntax of things" pales in comparison to simply *feeling* or *experiencing* life as it happens. Indeed, the speaker's odd syntax in this moment might force readers to go with the flow at first, but it also might stop people and force them to closely examine how the speaker is using language. In this way, then, the speaker ironically *encourages* readers to pay attention to the "syntax of things"!

The speaker's use of [enjambment](#) is one thing that makes it ever so slightly easier to understand these lines. Indeed, there is a line break before the phrase "my blood approves." This enjambment makes the entire sentence a bit clearer, since lines 5 and 6 ("wholly to be a fool / while Spring is in the world") don't make sense on their own and, therefore, must be connected to line 7 ("my blood approves"). Accordingly, readers will see that "my blood approves" is supposed to apply to the speaker's words about being a "fool" during spring.

And yet, there is also a stanza break between lines 6 and 7, ultimately isolating the phrase "my blood approves." Consequently, the speaker cuts off the very phrase that gives the entire sentence meaning. As a result, the enjambment that ties the sentence together actually *isn't* all that clear—a fact that once more forces readers to try extra hard to understand what, exactly, the speaker is saying.

Setting aside the meaning of these lines, though, it's also worth

noting that the speaker uses personification by saying "my blood approves." This personification underlines the extent to which the speaker prioritizes feeling over thinking; the idea that the speaker's blood approves of acting a certain way demonstrates that the speaker is guided not by rational thought or analysis, but by feeling and intuition, which manifest themselves in the body, not the mind.

## LINES 8-9

*and kisses are ...*
*... than wisdom*

Lines 8 and 9 ("and kisses are ... than wisdom") suggest that the speaker would be happier living a life full of kisses than living a life full of knowledge. This aligns with the speaker's belief that the act of *feeling* is more valuable or worthwhile than the act of *thinking*. Rather than spending a life analyzing arbitrary ideas, the speaker wants the simple pleasures that come along with love.

These lines are two of the most straightforward in the entire poem, and this is reflected by the simple language the speaker uses to express this idea. Rather than packing these lines full of poetic devices and strange syntactical maneuvers, the speaker uses plain language. This, however, is not to say that the two lines don't still sound quite poetic and well-delivered. In fact, the speaker's sparing use of assonance makes these lines sound pleasantly cohesive:

and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom

With the repeated short /i/ sound, the speaker makes the words "kisses" and "wisdom" sound connected. This effect is further accentuated by the consonant /z/ sound that appears in both words ("kisses" and "wisdom"). By including these subtle devices, then, the speaker manages to make an otherwise simplistic section of the poem feel vibrant and lush.

## LINES 10-13

*lady i swear ...*
*... for each other;*

In these lines, the speaker makes grandiose statements to an unidentified lover. Although the word "you" appears in line 4 ("will never wholly kiss you"), it is unclear if that's meant to be a general "you" meant to describe *anyone* or an address to a specific person. Now, though, the speaker uses apostrophe to address an actual individual, and it becomes clear that this person is the lover who has inspired the entire poem (which is, again, a love poem).

When the speaker says, "lady i swear by all flowers," the person in question is the lover to whom the poem is addressed. This line is abstract, since it's difficult to say what it means to "swear by all flowers." One reasonable interpretation, though, is that

the speaker is willing to swear on the beauty of nature that it's better to live a life full of kisses than a life full of knowledge.

When the speaker says, "i swear by all flowers," it's helpful to remember just how much the speaker respects the beauty of nature. After all, the speaker has already expressed a willingness to look like a "fool" if that's what it takes to fully enjoy things like springtime. With this in mind, it becomes clear that "swear[ing] by all flowers" is a meaningful thing to the speaker, who adamantly believes that "kisses are a better fate / than wisdom."

Going on, the speaker continues to argue that thoughts pale in comparison to feelings. To illustrate this, the speaker personifies the brain to suggest that nothing the mind can do will ever measure up to the lover's eyelids when they flit up and down. This is because the simple motion of the lover's eyelids communicates something to the speaker—namely, that the speaker and the lover are meant for each other.

The fact that watching this simple movement makes the speaker feel such profound feelings is exactly why emotions are so much more powerful than thoughts. Rather than analyzing life, the speaker implies, it is best to merely experience moments of beauty and appreciate them on an intuitive level.

On another note, it's worth acknowledging the phrase "Don't cry," which the speaker quickly drops in before moving on to consider the "best gesture" of the brain. This is an odd moment, since nothing else in the poem indicates why, exactly, the lover would cry in the first place. Given the lack of context, it's best to simply interpret this moment as an ambiguous sign of just how much the speaker cares about the lover, since the only thing that's clear is that the speaker wants to keep the lover from feeling sad.

Lines 10 through 12 are full of consonance, especially when it comes to the repetition of the /l/ sound and the sibilant repetition of the /s/ and /z/ sounds:

lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
– the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says

This combined use of consonance and sibilance connects the words to one another, emphasizing important words like "swear" and "flowers" (both of which also happen to share the /w/ sound).

Similarly, the speaker uses an internal slant rhyme to connect lines 12 and 13, even though they are separated by both a line break *and* a stanza break:

your eyelids' flutter which says
we are for each other [...]

By rhyming "flutter" and "other," the speaker unites these two

lines even though they're separated in such a visual way. This ultimately makes the enjambment between the two lines sound more natural, as the internal slant rhyme ties the phrases together across the stanza break.

## LINES 13-16

*then ...*
*... is no parenthesis*

In this section, the speaker tells the lover to relax into the speaker's own arms, urging the lover to laugh. The lover should do this, the speaker implies, because people ought to enjoy things like love while they still can—after all, spending time overanalyzing one's feelings is useless because "life's not a paragraph."

By saying that life isn't a paragraph, the speaker builds upon the assertion in the first stanza ("since feeling ... kiss you") that nobody in their right mind would pay attention to "the syntax of things" that don't create joy or pleasure. This idea sets forth a metaphor about life, one that compares life itself to a piece of writing. Now, though, the speaker goes out of the way to suggest that life is *not* a piece of writing. Rather, it is a finite time period during which people should embrace and experience their feelings while they still can.

One reason the speaker encourages the lover to enjoy life is that death "is no parenthesis." In writing, parentheses often contain asides that are separate from the main idea, and these asides are usually short. Therefore, the speaker's mention of parentheses implies that death isn't a short, finite thing like the kind of ideas that usually appear in parentheses. Instead, death is everlasting—once a person dies, death will extend forever, unlike a sentence enclosed by parentheses.

It is perhaps ironic that the speaker uses writing-related metaphors to express these ideas, given that the entire message of "since feeling is first" is that treating life like it's a piece of syntax is misguided. Indeed, the great irony of the poem is that it actually uses somewhat complicated syntax even though the speaker criticizes anything that overcomplicates life!

Nonetheless, the speaker reiterates in these lines that what really matters is that people allow themselves to be present in their lives, which will someday end. What's most important, the speaker upholds, isn't how people think about or conceptualize their lives, but how they *enjoy* their time amongst the living. Because death brings life to an end once and for all, then, people should simply feel and experience life instead of wasting time overthinking things.

These lines contain alliteration, as the speaker repeats the /l/ sound three times in lines 14 and 15:

laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

In addition to this alliterative repetition, the speaker also repeats the assonant /ah/ sound:

laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

This use of assonance and alliteration accentuates the words "laugh," "leaning," "life," and "paragraph," which are several of these lines' most important words. Furthermore, the assonant /ah/ sound combines with the /f/ sound to create an internal rhyme between the words "laugh" and "paragraph." This adds musicality to the penultimate stanza.

Similarly, the final lines contains consonance, as the speaker repeats the /th/ sound:

And death i think is no parenthesis

The repetition of the /th/ sound creates a hissing quality often associated with sibilance. For this reason, it's worth pointing out that this line also includes the /z/ and /s/ sounds in the words "is" and "parenthesis." As such, the poem ends with this soft, lulling sound, one that perhaps reflects the speaker's belief that people should relish any enjoyment and pleasure they encounter in life—including, of course, the act of reading this poem, which sounds pleasing and is, above all, a celebration of life and love.

## ⚛ SYMBOLS

### ✒ SYNTAX AND WRITING

Throughout the poem, the speaker points to syntax and other writing-related terms as representations of how people often overthink or overanalyze life. In this capacity, syntax (which is the arrangement of words in a phrase) comes to stand for the kind of arbitrary considerations people fixate on instead of simply enjoying life. This, in turn, is why the speaker states that "life's not a paragraph," ultimately arguing that it's misguided to approach life like it's a piece of writing. As a result, writing, syntax, and punctuation become symbols of the nit-picky details that distract people and prevent them from honoring their feelings.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 2-4:** *"who pays any attention / to the syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you;"*
- **Lines 15-16:** *"for life's not a paragraph / And death i think is no parenthesis"*

## NATURE

For the speaker, nature is symbolic of the kind of beauty and joy that people should focus on in life. Instead of overthinking and analyzing things, the speaker upholds, people should simply *feel* and *experience* things like romance and happiness. To that end, the speaker has no problem looking like a "fool" if this is what it takes to fully appreciate things like spring.

Similarly, the speaker swears on the beauty of nature that it's better to lead a life full of love than a life full of wisdom. Indeed, the mere fact that speaker would "swear by all flowers" to make this point illustrates the extent to which the speaker respects nature. In turn, nature itself comes to stand for the simple contentment that can come from opening oneself up to life in an emotional, rather than intellectual, way.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 5-6:** "wholly to be a fool / while Spring is in the world"
- **Line 10:** "lady i swear by all flowers."

# ⚒ POETIC DEVICES

## ALLITERATION

The speaker of "since feeling is first" uses alliteration sparingly throughout the poem, quickly moving from one alliterative sound to the next. This adds a subtle sense of melody and cohesiveness to the poem without making it sound *overly* poetic or constructed. Alliteration helps the speaker create a unified sound, one that draws readers through the poem and smooths out the somewhat haphazard way that the stanzas are organized.

The first line features clear alliteration with the /f/ sounds of "feeling is first," immediately drawing readers' attention to this important phrase that outlines the overall message of the poem—namely, that emotions are the most immediate and therefore meaningful types of human experience. By repeating the /f/ sound, the speaker connects the words "feeling" and "first" to highlight this idea.

Later, the speaker repeats the /l/ sound before switching to the /p/ sound in the last three lines of the poem:

> laugh, leaning back in my arms
> for life's not a paragraph
> And death i think is no parenthesis

The repetition of the /l/ sound links the words "laugh," "leaning," and "life"—all words that carry importance in the poem, as the speaker tries to convince the lover to enjoy life on an emotional,

experiential level before it's too late. In other words, the speaker believes that people should laugh and embrace their loved ones while they still can, since life is finite.

To that end, the alliteration of the /p/ sound in the final two lines calls attention to the words "paragraph" and "parenthesis," reminding readers of the poem's extended metaphor that compares life to writing and syntax. In this way, the speaker's use of alliteration helps spotlight an important idea in the poem, which is that life actually *isn't* a "paragraph," nor is death a "parenthesis." The speaker argues existence shouldn't be approached like a piece of writing, even if the speaker, somewhat ironically, expresses and underscores this idea by using clever syntax and literary devices like alliteration.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "feeling," "first"
- **Line 4:** "wholly"
- **Line 5:** "wholly"
- **Line 6:** "while," "world"
- **Line 7:** "blood"
- **Line 8:** "better"
- **Line 11:** "best," "brain"
- **Line 14:** "laugh," "leaning"
- **Line 15:** "life's," "paragraph"
- **Line 16:** "parenthesis"

## CONSONANCE

Consonance often appears in "since feeling is first," as the speaker interlaces various consonant repetitions with one another. Sometimes this use of consonance overlaps with the speaker's use of alliteration, as is the case with the repetition of the /f/ sound in the first line: "since feeling is first." However, this isn't the only consonance that exists in this line, since the /s/ sound appears three times:

> since feeling is first

In this way, the speaker uses sibilance, which is a form of consonance, to create a gentleness that supports the opening line's repetition of the soft /f/ sound. Consequently, the first line has a relaxed overall effect that demonstrates the speaker's easygoing, calm nature.

Sibilance is also quite noticeable in other moments, like when the speaker repeats the /s/ sound several times in line 11:

> – the best gesture of my brain is less than

This recurring /s/ sound also interacts with the brief moment of assonance, which otherwise doesn't factor very heavily into the poem. In this moment, though, the sibilant /s/ combines with the /eh/ sound to create internal slant rhymes between the

words "best," "gesture," and "less."

Elsewhere, the speaker uses consonance to subtly connect significant words to each other. For instance, the /l/ sound repeats three times in line 10, ultimately linking (and therefore highlighting) some of the line's most important words:

> lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry

By repeating the /l/ sound, the speaker carves out the words "lady," "all," and "flowers." What's more, there is also the consonant repetition of the /r/ sound, which appears in the words "swear," "flowers," and "cry." All this consonance helps the line stand out in the poem, effectively calling attention to the grandiose way that the speaker "swear[s] by all flowers" that it is better to lead a life full of kisses than a life full of wisdom.

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**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "since," "feeling," "is," "first"
- **Line 2:** "pays," "any," "attention"
- **Line 3:** "the," "syntax," "things"
- **Line 4:** "will," "wholly," "kiss"
- **Line 5:** "wholly," "fool"
- **Line 6:** "while," "world"
- **Line 7:** "blood," "approves"
- **Line 8:** "kisses," "better"
- **Line 9:** "wisdom"
- **Line 10:** "lady," "all," "flowers," "cry"
- **Line 11:** "best," "gesture," "brain," "less"
- **Line 12:** "eyelids," "flutter," "says"
- **Line 13:** "are," "for," "other," "then"
- **Line 14:** "laugh," "leaning," "my," "arms"
- **Line 15:** "for," "life's," "paragraph"
- **Line 16:** "And," "death," "think," "no," "parenthesis"

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## ENJAMBMENT

Many of the lines in "since feeling is first" are enjambed, meaning that the speaker stretches phrases from one line to the next. In certain moments, this creates a feeling of tension, anticipation, and release. This is because the meaning of a given phrase isn't always clear until it draws to an end. For instance, consider the enjambment of the following lines:

> who pays any attention
> to the syntax of things
> will never wholly kiss you

The line "who pays any attention" doesn't make sense in and of itself, nor do the lines "to the syntax of things" or "will never wholly kiss you." For this reason, the speaker's use of enjambment has a noticeable impact on the way readers understand this question, forcing them to keep reading in order to grasp its overall meaning.

This, in turn, creates a certain kind of irony, since the way the speaker poses the question—and the way enjambment breaks it up—ultimately forces readers to pay *extra* attention to the speaker's syntax, even though the speaker's main point is that it's a waste of time to focus on such things!

In fact, the speaker's unique and idiosyncratic use of syntax actually has a notable effect on the way the lines are broken up. For example, one might think that the following three lines are all enjambed, but in reality the first line is the only one that features enjambment:

> wholly to be a fool
> while Spring is in the world
> my blood approves,

This is an interesting moment because the speaker inverts the way most people would say this. Instead of saying something like, "my blood approves of being a complete fool during springtime," the speaker scrambles the order, putting the phrase "my blood approves" at the *end* of the statement. This, in turn, separates it from the first two lines.

And though the speaker doesn't include any punctuation in line 6, the entire sentence reads as if there is a comma after the word "world." There is, however, a stanza break before the phrase "my blood approves," thereby setting the phrase apart from the rest of the sentence and reinforcing the idea that the line "while Spring is in the world" is end-stopped, not enjambed.

Overall, though, the speaker determines whether something is enjambed not by the poem's structural configurations, but by the syntax, as made evident by the following example of an enjambed phrase that runs from one stanza to the next:

> your eyelids' flutter which says
> we are for each other; then

This moment of enjambment proves that things like stanza breaks don't always create end-stopped lines. As a result, readers must pay close attention to the speaker's wording in order to determine whether something is enjambed. Again, this emphasizes the irony of this poem, which discourages people from scrutinizing things like syntax while simultaneously forcing readers to do exactly that.

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**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 2-3:** "attention / to"
- **Lines 3-4:** "things / will"
- **Lines 5-6:** "fool / while"
- **Lines 8-9:** "fate / than"
- **Lines 11-12:** "than / your"

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- **Lines 12-13:** "says / we"
- **Lines 13-14:** "then / laugh"

## IRONY

There is an inherent sense of irony built into "since feeling is first" because the speaker's unique use of language forces readers to pay close attention to the poem's syntax—even though the speaker's main point is that people shouldn't bother analyzing such things in the first place!

This dynamic emerges in the very first stanza ("since feeling is … kiss you"), in which the speaker implies that it's not worth stopping to think about "the syntax of things" because they "will never wholly kiss you." This statement suggests that the speaker believes that overanalyzing seemingly insignificant details, like syntax, is a waste of time; such details will never be able to give a person true happiness or satisfaction, the speaker argues.

However, the *way* the speaker expresses this idea isn't all that straightforward. After all, the phrase "will never wholly kiss you" is very poetic and abstract. Consequently, readers have to stop to interpret what, exactly, the speaker is saying. And in doing so, they end up doing the exact thing the speaker says isn't worthwhile: paying attention to "the syntax of things."

This irony is central to the poem because of the mere fact that "since feeling is first" is, well, *a poem*. Indeed, the speaker's argument that thinking isn't worthwhile is undermined by the mere fact that writing a poem invites people to read it and, in turn, *think* about what it means. In other words, people can only connect with and feel the importance of this message *after* reading and thinking about the poem.

With this in mind, it seems fair to conclude that the acts of thinking and feeling aren't *quite* as separate from one another as the speaker implies. Rather, thinking might actually contribute to the way a person feels, even if it's also true that experiencing life on an emotional level is richer and more fulfilling than constantly analyzing small details.

> **Where Irony appears in the poem:**
>
> - Lines 1-4
> - Lines 5-7
> - Lines 11-12
> - Line 15

## JUXTAPOSITION

The poem's speaker juxtaposes the act of feeling with the act of thinking. In fact, the entire poem is based on the premise that these two things are very different. This argument emerges in the first stanza ("since feeling is … wholly kiss you"), when the speaker upholds that it's better to focus on one's feelings

rather than one's thoughts. After all, the speaker contends, "feeling is first," meaning that people experience life emotionally before experiencing it mentally or analytically.

Because of this, the speaker argues, people ought to prioritize their feelings. By setting this forth, the speaker draws a stark distinction between thoughts and feelings, juxtaposing them with one another as a way of underscoring how important it is for people to honor their feelings.

The speaker differentiates thoughts and feelings by celebrating the joys and pleasures that arise from simple experiences. For instance, the speaker suggests that watching the lover's eyelids "flutter" is more rewarding than even the most impressive thought the speaker might have. Similarly, the speaker juxtaposes a life full of kisses with a life full of wisdom, arguing that it's much better to lead a loved-filled life than one devoted to knowledge. Once again, then, a contrast emerges between the life of the heart and the life of the mind, as readers are encouraged to view feelings as more valuable, worthwhile, and fulfilling than thoughts or analysis.

> **Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 1-4:** "since feeling is first / who pays any attention / to the syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you;"
> - **Lines 8-9:** "and kisses are a better fate / than wisdom"
> - **Lines 11-12:** "– the best gesture of my brain is less than / your eyelids' flutter"

## METAPHOR

The metaphor the speaker uses to compare life to a piece of writing or "syntax" is a key part of the poem. By suggesting that people shouldn't pay attention "to the syntax of things" because they "will never wholly kiss you," the speaker invites readers to view the act of overthinking in metaphorical terms. According to this metaphor, overanalyzing life is like fixating on arbitrary grammatical matters.

Other metaphors also crop up throughout the poem. For instance, the speaker talks metaphorically about the speaker's own blood, personifying it and saying that it "approves" of acting like a fool during springtime. In this context, the speaker's blood is presented as something (or, rather, somebody) that wholeheartedly loves the joys of springtime. This, in turn, implies that the speaker embraces such pleasures without reservation. In keeping with this, the speaker metaphorically links "kisses" to "fate," equating love and affection with a desirable kind of destiny—a destiny that is much better than a life devoted to knowledge.

On another note, the speaker uses a metaphor to refer to the "flutter" of the lover's eyelids, personifying this movement by suggesting that it is able to communicate something—namely, the fact that the speaker and the lover are meant to be together. This metaphor ultimately indicates that even the

slightest physical embodiment is full of deeper meaning. And if this is the case, it makes sense that the speaker would think it's a waste of time to overthink things; after all, people apparently only need to experience simple gestures on an emotional level in order to arrive at some kind of deeper meaning or sense of fulfillment.

With this in mind, the speaker inverts the poem's central metaphor in the last two lines ("for life's ... no parenthesis"). Whereas the first stanza compares the act of overthinking to the uselessness of "syntax," the final two lines explicitly state that existence is *not* like a piece of writing: "for life's not a paragraph // And death i think is no parenthesis."

As such, the speaker argues that existence can't be mapped out like the written word, ultimately speaking metaphorically by *rejecting* the metaphor established in the first stanza. In this way, the speaker's use of metaphor in "since feeling is first" is quite sophisticated, since the poem both employs and subverts its own metaphors—a dynamic that aligns with the ironic fact that the speaker has no choice but to express these ideas through the very means the poem calls into question in the first place.

> **Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 2-4:** "who pays any attention / to the syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you;"
> - **Lines 7-9:** "my blood approves, / and kisses are a better fate / than wisdom"
> - **Lines 12-13:** "your eyelids' flutter which says / we are for each other"
> - **Lines 15-16:** "for life's not a paragraph / And death i think is no parenthesis"

## PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses personification to vividly illustrate that feelings create the most immediate and profound forms of human experience. To demonstrate this, the speaker says things like "my blood approves," a line that suggests that the very fiber of the speaker's entire being has agency. This, in turn, suggests that the speaker experiences life very intensely, so intensely that it is the speaker's blood—not the speaker's mind—that informs the way the speaker moves through and reacts to the world. By personifying the speaker's own blood, then, the speaker is able to underline the importance of paying attention to feelings.

In another moment, the speaker personifies the "flutter" of the lover's eyelids, a movement the speaker believes communicates love. This use of personification helps readers understand why the speaker places so much value on feelings and so little value on the act of thinking, since the movement of the lover's eyelids causes the speaker to *feel* the strength of their love. Indeed, this doesn't require the speaker to think or analyze anything.

Instead, the speaker only needs to watch the lover's gestures, which are capable of conveying great emotion.

Conversely, the speaker uses personification to suggest that overthinking things will never make a person feel fully satisfied or happy. Fixating on the "syntax of things," the speaker upholds, is pointless because that metaphorical "syntax" is incapable of expressing the kind of emotion that a mere gesture of love, like the flutter of eyelids, can communicate.

By saying this, the speaker ends up personifying these arbitrary preoccupations (the "syntax of things"), saying that these "things" cannot "wholly kiss" people. Even though the speaker clearly states that these preoccupations are unrewarding, the mere idea that they *can't* "kiss" people gives them a certain amount of agency, since it implies that there actually are certain "things" that *can* "kiss" people. In this manner, the speaker subtly personifies "the syntax of things," but does so in a way that frames them as useless. As a result, readers see that the speaker uses personification both to depict the power of feelings and to diminish the value of overthinking.

> **Where Personification appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 3-4:** "to the syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you;"
> - **Line 7:** "my blood approves,"
> - **Lines 12-13:** "your eyelids' flutter which says / we are for each other;"

## ASSONANCE

The assonance in "since feeling is first" adds subtle melody and musicality to the free-flowing poem. It also often creates internal slant rhymes that make up for the fact that the poem lacks a formal rhyme scheme.

For example, consider the assonant repetitions of the /i/, /eh/, /ee/, and /uh/ sounds in lines 10 through 13:

> lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
> – the best gestures of my brain is less than
> your eyelids' flutter which says
> we are for each other; then

There is quite a bit of assonance in these lines. But the most prominent examples are the ones that lead to internal rhymes, like when the long /i/ sound repeats in the line "lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry." Similarly, the repetition of the /eh/ sound creates several internal slant rhymes in the line "– the best gestures of my brain is less than." Furthermore, the /ee/ sound creates yet another internal slant rhyme in the line "we are for each other; then."

On the whole, this kind of assonance knits the lines together and connects certain words with one another. In turn, the poem takes on a song-like quality that makes the language sound rich

and creates an overall tone that matches the speaker's celebratory attitude toward life and love.

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**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "since," "is"
- **Line 3:** "syntax," "things"
- **Line 4:** "will," "kiss"
- **Line 5:** "wholly," "to," "be," "fool"
- **Line 6:** "Spring," "is," "in"
- **Line 8:** "kisses," "fate"
- **Line 9:** "wisdom"
- **Line 10:** "lady," "i," "by," "cry"
- **Line 11:** "best," "gesture," "my," "less"
- **Line 12:** "eyelids," "flutter"
- **Line 13:** "we," "each," "other"
- **Line 14:** "laugh," "leaning," "back"
- **Line 15:** "paragraph"
- **Line 16:** "think," "is," "parenthesis"

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## ▤ VOCABULARY

**Syntax** (Line 3) - The arrangement of words or phrases in a sentence.

**Wholly** (Line 4, Line 5) - Completely.

**Fate** (Line 8) - The outcome of a person's life or a given situation. In this case, the speaker expresses the desire to lead a life that is full of kisses.

**Swear** (Line 10) - To "swear" is to make a promise that something is true or that something will happen.

**Gesture** (Line 11) - Typically, the word "gesture" refers to a kind of movement that indicates something. In this case, though, the speaker uses it more like the word "effort," meaning that no matter how hard the speaker tries to think of something brilliant, the resulting thought will inevitably fail to measure up to the lover's beauty.

**Flutter** (Line 12) - To quickly move in a light, trembling way (like the wings of a butterfly).

**Parenthesis** (Line 16) - A rounded bracket that marks the beginning or end of a phrase that has been inserted into a larger passage. In this case, the speaker means that death isn't like the kind of short, secondary phrases that would normally appear in parentheses; once it begins, it never ends.

## ⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"since feeling is first" does not have a set form. Rather, its 16 lines are broken up into stanzas of varying lengths. This is made evident early on, when the opening quatrain is followed by a

couplet that establishes the poem's overall lack of consistency. In fact, *none* of the stanzas are the same length, as the poem includes a stanza with as many as six lines and a stanza with just one line. This loose structure aligns with the speaker's belief that people should simply *experience* things instead of constantly overthinking. It is for this reason, it seems, that the poem is so disorganized, as the speaker breaks the lines up in idiosyncratic ways that have more to do with the general feeling of the poem than with arbitrary formal conventions.

### METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning that it lacks an overarching metrical pattern. Instead of focusing on the rhythm of the words, then, the speaker uses poetic devices like alliteration and consonance to tie the lines together. Combined with the speaker's somewhat unexpected and unusual use of enjambment, this lack of meter aligns perfectly with the poem's main message, which is that it's a waste of time to obsess over small details if these details distract people from simply feeling and experiencing life. Accordingly, the poem's free-flowing rhythm reflects the speaker's desire to move through life without getting hung up on insignificant details.

### RHYME SCHEME

"since feeling is first" lacks any kind of formal rhyme scheme. This makes sense, considering the speaker's belief that people shouldn't waste time thinking about small, insignificant details. However, the poem *does* rhyme in certain moments. Indeed, the speaker uses a number internal slant rhymes. For instance, this is evident in line 11:

> – the **best gesture** of my brain is **less** than

Of course, these are not perfect rhymes, but they do tie the line together, giving it a musical sound. Similarly, the word "flutter" in line 12 ("your eyelids **flutter** which says") creates another internal slant rhyme with the words "each other" in line 13 ("we are for **each other**; then"). In this way, the speaker manages to use rhyme without depending upon a set rhyme scheme, which would contradict the poem's overall message, which is that it's foolish to obsess over things like syntax and other seemingly arbitrary concerns.

## 💬 SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem has no clear identity. What *is* clear, though, is that the speaker is in love with an unidentified person, to whom the speaker's words are—at least in certain moments—addressed. Readers also know that the speaker is someone who thinks that thoughts, logic, and rationality are inferior to feelings and emotions. Rather than getting wrapped up in petty details, the speaker is the kind of person who just

wants to enjoy the beauty of romance, especially since life will not last forever. The lack of specificity regarding the speaker's identity makes the poem feel universal and encourages readers to identify with its message.

## 🌐 SETTING

The specific setting of "since feeling is first" is never made clear, nor are there any contextual clues that might help readers identify when or where the poem is set. To that end, the poem is so general and universal that it doesn't make sense to associate it with a particular contextual backdrop. Rather than concerning itself with a time or place, the poem focuses on the speaker's celebration of human feeling and, more specifically, love. Because these considerations are universal and applicable to seemingly all humans, the poem has a broad appeal.

## ⓘ CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Like many of E. E. Cummings's best known poems (such as "i carry your heart with me(i carry it in" or "love is a place"), "since feeling is first" is a love poem. It prioritizes love and feeling over logic and uses naturalistic imagery to express its ideas.

This appreciation of nature aligns with the fact that Cummings is often associated with the Romantic poets. This was a group that rose to prominence in the 1800s and included people like William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—all of whom embraced the simple joys of emotion and the beauty of nature.

Cummings's poem reflects number of stereotypically Romantic virtues but, of course, was published in 1926—at least 30 years after the end of Romanticism (though many believe that Romanticism truly ended long before the 20th century). And despite his work's Romantic themes, Cummings is perhaps even more well-known for his unique use of language and his tendency to break from standard poetic forms. To that end, Cummings's free-flowing poetry helped popularize the use of free verse in the early to mid 1900s and beyond.

In fact, his idiosyncratic use of syntax, paired with his unstructured approach, ultimately served as a precursor to Postmodern poetry, which is more open-minded and structurally loose than poetry from the periods preceding it (namely, the Romantic, Victorian, and Modernist periods). As such, many people view Cummings as an innovator who presented familiar ideas about love, emotion, and nature in interesting new ways.

### Historical Context

"since feeling is first" first appeared in E. E. Cummings's poetry collection *Is 5*, which was published in 1926. The collection

includes a number of anti-war poems, most likely because the book came out just eight years after the end of World War I, in which Cummings served in France.

Economic growth and prosperity after the war made the 1920s an extremely vibrant period, especially in the United States and Europe. Often deemed "The Roaring Twenties" for their decadence and carefree attitude, the 1920s also saw the widespread popularity of jazz music—the syncopated rhythms of which often influenced the writing of the time. More Americans lived in urban areas and also had access to cars, telephones, and radios as well—leading to a newfound sense of freedom and cultural connection.

Fashion reflected shifting cultural norms too, famously becoming less restrictive for both women and men—all the better for taking part in new dance crazes (it'd be pretty difficult to do the Charleston in a corset or petticoat!). Cummings's poem, though ultimately timeless in its theme, seems to reflect the youthful exuberance and carefree attitude that categorized the decade.

## 📚 MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a dramatic reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTNNwILmQ2c)

- The Life of the Poet — Read more about E. E. Cummings in this concise overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/e-e-cummings)

- Cummings's Unique Style — Learn more about E. E. Cummings's innovative use of structure and form in his writing. (https://owlcation.com/humanities/EE-Cummings-The-Power-of-Structure-and-Form)

- The Poet as a Painter — In addition to writing poetry, Cummings was also a skilled painter, as illustrated by this impressive self-portrait in the National Portrait Gallery! (https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.73.26)

- A Stylized Approach — A New Yorker essay by the poet Paul Muldoon about Cummings's characteristically strange – but very intentional – stylistic decisions. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/03/capital-case)

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER E. E. CUMMINGS POEMS

- anyone lived in a pretty how town
- i carry your heart with me(i carry it in

# HOW TO CITE

## MLA

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