A Complaint

POEM TEXT

There is a change—and I am poor;
Your love hath been, nor long ago,
A fountain at my fond heart's door,
Whose only business was to flow;
And flow it did; not taking heed
Of its own bounty, or my need.

What happy moments did I count!
Blest was I then all bliss above!
Now, for that consecrated fount
Of murmuring, sparkling, living love,
What have I? shall I dare to tell?
A comfortless and hidden well.

A well of love—it may be deep—
I trust it is,—and never dry:
What matter? if the waters sleep
In silence and obscurity.
—Such change, and at the very door
Of my fond heart, hath made me poor.

SUMMARY

Something has changed and left me feeling poor. It wasn't that long that your love flowed like a fountain into my heart. All that fountain of love cared about was flowing, and so that's exactly what it did; that love simply flowed without paying any attention to just how bountiful it was, or even to how much I needed it.

We had so many good times together! I felt like the happiest person in the world! Now what, in exchange for that lively, flowing wellspring of love, am I left with? Do I even want to say it? All I have now is a well that's hidden away and doesn't offer any comfort.

The well of love I have now is certainly deep, and it's never empty, but what does that even matter, given that the waters of love that once flowed so freely are now lying low, hidden and silent? This change, within my loving heart itself, has left me bereft.

THEMES

LOSS, LOSS, AND MEMORY

"A Complaint" explores the lasting pain of a broken heart. The poem's speaker has experienced a major "change," in the sense that a deep, meaningful relationship has ended. Whereas a "fountain" of love once flowed in abundance in the speaker's heart, love's metaphorical waters lie stagnant now that the speaker's beloved is gone. The poem thus presents love as a kind of wealth—a rich, vitalizing force, the loss of which makes the speaker feel "poor." What's more, the fact that the speaker keeps comparing memories of this relationship to the miserable present suggests that the hardest part of losing someone isn't necessarily the *absence* of love itself, but the constant *memory* of what used to be.

The poem begins by recalling the "fountain" of love that, not long ago, flowed in the speaker's heart. The speaker remembers the "bliss" of this "murmuring, sparkling, living love," and the many "happy moments" it created. Yet this love having once been so great, the poem implies, has simply made its loss harder to bear. As the poem goes on to contrast this free-flowing love fountain with the speaker's current "comfortless and hidden well," it becomes clear that recalling all this past "bliss" just makes the speaker's present misery stand out more starkly.

The speaker seems to be struggling so much, at least in part, precisely because the speaker is so conscious of this "change" in circumstances—that is, of the *difference* between what the speaker *once* had and what the speaker *now* has. By attributing this current poverty specifically to "change" rather than the simple *absence* of the speaker's beloved, the poem indirectly makes the point that to have loved and lost—to have experienced bliss only to have it taken away—is possibly more painful than to have never loved at all.

The pain of lost love is so intense and all-consuming, in fact, that neither happy memories nor the expectation of future love can provide the speaker any consolation. Though the speaker knows that their well is "deep" and "never dry"—implying the speaker's love for this other person is still there (or, to use the water-related metaphor, hasn't dried up)—that doesn't matter. Right now, the mere idea of love only reminds the speaker that this well's waters are currently silent and hidden away. With no outlet, those fond feelings and the speaker's capacity to love become useless.

The poem's final lesson, then, is perhaps that nothing can bring magical comfort when faced with the loss of love. Pleasant memories and the assurance that one will love again both turn

out to be poor comfort. They serve, instead, only to compound the pain.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

There is a change—and I am poor;

In two short, declarative statements, the speaker sets the tone for the rest of the poem. Something has "change[d]," and not for the better! Whatever this change is, it's left the speaker "poor."

These quick, clipped phrases, separated by a clear caesura in the middle of the line (in form of a dash), are at once straightforward and filled with distress. The end-stop here also adds a sense of finality—there's not arguing with the speaker's point. The speaker seems to be simply relaying the facts, but also rather agitated or confused.

On their own, this pair of statements is also vague, and the relationship between "change" and being "poor" remains ambiguous for the moment. It's also not yet clear whether the speaker is literally, *financially* poor, or poor in the sense of being deprived of something. The line thus works as a kind of hook, inviting readers to continue on if they wish to discover the exact nature of the speaker's plight.

This line also introduces the poem's meter of iambic tetrameter, meaning it has four iambs (poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern):

There is | a change | —and I | am poor;

This steady meter will continue throughout the poem.

LINES 2-4

Your love hath been, nor long ago,
A fountain at my fond heart's door,
Whose only business was to flow;

These three lines start to provide an answer to the mystery set up in line 1: the "change" that the speaker refers to is the loss of love. These lines also introduce an extended metaphor that will continue throughout the poem, comparing the speaker's past loving relationship to a fountain or wellspring that used to flow freely. This metaphor suggests that love, like water, is something nourishing and, indeed, vital to life itself.

The speaker starts directly addressing someone whose love the speaker no longer has (most critics take this person be Wordsworth's friend and fellow poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge). In the not too distant past, this person's fountain of love flowed abundantly, as though pouring into or knocking upon the speaker's "fond heart's door."

The phrase "heart's door" suggests the intense intimacy of this relationship. The adjective describing the speaker's heart, "fond," also has two important meanings, one obvious and the other more subtle:

1. "Fond" can mean "affectionate" or "loving," suggesting the speaker's *fondness* for the beloved.
2. At the same time, "fond" also has an old-fashioned meaning of "foolishly tender" or "naïve." The point may be to suggest the speaker's state of blissful innocence or even foolishness in imagining that this abundance of love would last forever.

That fountain of love had no job—no "business"—other than flowing. In other words, it was a pure, seemingly endless love that asked nothing of the speaker.

Finally, these lines complete the opening quatrain's rhyme scheme, which follows an ABAB pattern. Lines 1 and 3 rhyme with each other ("poor"/"door"), and lines 2 and 4 rhyme with each other ("ago"/"flow").

LINES 5-6

And flow it did; not taking heed
Of its own bounty, or my need.

The speaker repeats the word "flow," and in doing so emphasizes the freedom and abundance of this love. (Note that this is specifically an example of the poetic device anadiplosis, since "flow" appears at the end of line 4 and then the start of line 5.) This love's only job was to "flow" into the speaker's heart, and that's exactly what it did! This love was pure, it seems, a love for love's sake.

Continuing this idea, the speaker says that this fountain of love paid no attention to the great "bounty" or treasure that it encompassed. These lines imagine love as a source of great metaphorical *wealth* for the speaker. The word "bounty" also gives some added context to the speaker's feeling "poor" in the poem's present, since the speaker has presumably lost this seemingly infinite source of wealth (rather than literal money).

What's more, the beloved's love used to flow freely and generously regardless of the speaker's "need" (implying that this love was far more than the speaker even required). This adds to the speaker's sense of being overwhelmed by an unconditional and spontaneously flowing love.

The idea of "need" also subtly ties into the poem's wider reflection and emphasis on "change," or difference, itself as the most poignant part of loss. Though the love is more than the speaker *needed* in the first place, having it taken away after experiencing that love's great richness leaves the speaker feeling "poor." This is because *this* love has effectively set a new

bar for the speaker's relationships.

Finally, note how these two lines break with the alternating ABAB rhyme scheme the poem used in its opening quatrain (i.e., its first four lines). Instead, lines 5 and 6 form a rhyming couplet; "heed" rhymes immediately with "need." This adds a sense of closure and resolution to the stanza.

LINES 7-8

What happy moments did I count!
Blest was I then all bliss above!

In the first stanza, the speaker described love itself as something free-flowing and bountiful. Now, the speaker turns to memories of how that love made the speaker feel. This love granted the speaker more happy times than can be counted, and made the speaker feel like the luckiest person around.

These lines are filled with emotion, and the speaker's exclamations highlight the heights of "bliss" that this relationship once provided—in turn, helping to explain why the speaker prized this love so highly. The fact that each statement takes up exactly one line and that the lines are grammatically unconnected makes them stand out even more from the rest of the poem, suggesting that the speaker has reached an emotional height.

At the same time, the alliteration and consonance of "Blest" and "bliss" links the two words and helps to underline just how much the speaker's sense of *blessedness* through this relationship outstripped ordinary happiness (or "bliss"). There is enough ambiguity in the statement, however, to make it unclear if this is how the speaker felt at the time or is only now realizing how happy they were in hindsight, now that the love is gone.

The lines are also richly ambiguous in tone. It's unclear if the speaker at this point is happily absorbed in memories or if the speaker is already lamenting what used to be (as in, "alas, how happy I used to be!"). The fact that the lines pull in both directions suggests the poem's general lesson about the painfulness of memory: how what was once a source of bliss can be a source of sadness in the present.

LINES 9-12

Now, for that consecrated fount
Of murmuring, sparkling, living love,
What have I? shall I dare to tell?
A comfortless and hidden well.

This section continues the poem's extended metaphor, in which love is like a fountain or wellspring, and also sets up a juxtaposition between the speaker's past and present.

The speaker intensifies the praise for this fountain of love by describing it as "consecrated," idealizing it to the point of seeing it as something holy or sacred. The asyndeton of "murmuring, sparkling, living" has a similar effect, creating the impression that the speaker is almost breathlessly listing the virtues of this past love, constantly finding new things to praise about it. (This stringing of adjective after adjective also suggests the free-flowing abundance of the love itself.)

But glorifying this lost love only serves to make its *absence* in the present all the more painful! The speaker's hurried rhetorical questions—"What have I? shall I dare to tell?"—betray a deep anguish: the speaker cannot quite bring themselves to verbally acknowledge this enormous loss.

The speaker then finally admits to having, in the present, a well that is "comfortless and hidden"—adjectives starkly different from the "murmuring, sparkling, living" of just two lines above. The juxtaposition of these two wells/fountains—one vibrant, nourishing, and abundant, the other obscure and cold—highlights the sharpness of this major "change" in the speaker's life.

Within the structure of the poem overall, the juxtaposition of this stanza also serves as a transition—from recalling the pleasant memories of love in stanza 1 to lamenting the present state of affairs in stanza 3 (more on that in a moment). Through the broader movement from one state to the other, the poem suggests that, when love is gone, happy memories only serve to make the present all the more painful by contrast.

LINES 13-16

A well of love—it may be deep—
I trust it is,—and never dry:
What matter? if the waters sleep
In silence and obscurity.

Whereas the previous stanzas dealt with the speaker's past, lines 13-16 turn to the future. The stanza opens with anadiplosis, the speaker repeating the word that ending the previous line near the beginning of the following line:

> A comfortless and hidden **well**.
> A **well** of love—it may be deep—

Remarkably, the poem adds that although the speaker's well is "comfortless and hidden," it is still a "well of love" even in the beloved's absence. In other words, this well hasn't dried up completely—it still runs deep, implying that the speaker is never without love or that the speaker will still have the ability to love in the future. And yet, this brings no comfort. The use of dashes and abrupt, clipped phrases in lines 13-14 once again suggest the continuing confusion and agitation of the speaker.

Indeed, the poem provides this ray of hope only to destroy it, with the sudden rhetorical question "What matter?" With this question, the speaker seems to emphasize how meaningless the promise of *future* love is. That is, it doesn't "matter" to the speaker that this well of love is not totally "dry." The speaker doesn't want any old love; the speaker wants the specific love

that they've lost.

By the end of this passage, the speaker is more aware than ever of being "poor," with waters of love that are sleeping when they could be "murmuring, sparkling, living" as they once were. The rhyme of "obscurity" with "dry," a half rhyme rather than the expected full rhyme, captures the sense of letdown and the speaker's feelings of loss and resignation. Despite efforts to find comfort, the speaker is back to square one.

The poem thus suggests that nothing—not thinking about the glorious past nor the future—can truly alleviate feelings of loss in the present. The speaker must simply face the bare fact of loss, accepting grief as it comes.

LINES 17-18

—Such change, and at the very door
Of my fond heart, hath made me poor.

The poem's final rhyming couplet adds some closure to the speaker's reflection about loss, more or less summarizing the rest of the poem.

The first thing to note is that these lines echo the poem's opening. The poem's repetition and circularity makes readers feel that the speaker ends up just where they began, still trapped in the same cycle of grief. This possibly reinforces the poem's point that grief itself is circular rather than linear—that sufferers simply return to their grief again and again.

Despite this echo, however, there is an important *difference* in these final lines as well:

- The poem's first line made statements about a "change" and the speaker's being "poor" but didn't define a clear link between these two things—between change and subsequent poverty.
- This line, however, finally makes clear that it is "change" that *makes* the speaker feel "poor." This, in essence, is the poem's main takeaway: that what makes the speaker feel most bereft is being aware of the *difference* between what the speaker once had and what the speaker now has. Even if the enriching love which the relationship provided was far beyond what the speaker needed in the first place, it is hard to fall from its highs without suddenly feeling "poor."

Thus, even though this final echo suggests that the speaker has made no real progress, the fact that the speaker is finally able to clearly define the relationship between emotional poverty and change suggests that the speaker has at least made some headway in understanding the *cause* of their grief.

POETIC DEVICES

EXTENDED METAPHOR

Throughout "A Complaint," the speaker uses an extended metaphor to explore and explain feelings of loss. This metaphor compares the love that the speaker's relationship once offered to a richly flowing fountain, which becomes stagnant and still upon that love's loss. In this way, the metaphor helps readers visualize the "change" that the speaker mentions in line 1—that is, the difference between life *during* and *after* this relationship.

In stanza 1, the metaphor presents the beloved's love as a nourishing and life-enriching force, bringing the speaker a "bounty." It presents this love as abundant, unconditional, and freely given: the fountain's "only business was to flow," the speaker says, and the wealth it brought was beyond the speaker's "need."

The meaning of the metaphor shifts slightly, however, as it is developed in stanza 2. The speaker notes that, with the end of the relationship, the fountain is no longer full of "murmuring, sparkling, living" waters, and instead is now a "comfortless and hidden well." Rather than a metaphor for the relationship, then, this fountain-turned-into-a-"hidden"-well is more a metaphor for the speaker's emotional state before and after the end of this relationship.

The metaphor continues to reflect the speaker's emotional state in stanza 3. Though the speaker hasn't lost *everything* (the speaker still has a "well of love"), the speaker also knows that the waters of love "sleep" and are relatively inactive. It seems that the speaker can't help but continually compare the present, with its lesser love, to the great love that used to be.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-6
- Lines 9-16

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker uses juxtaposition, together with the extended metaphor of love as a kind of fountain or well, to illustrate the painful contrast between life during and after this relationship.

For example, the poem broadly juxtaposes the free-flowing "fountain" of love in stanza 1 against the waters that "sleep," stagnant, in stanza 3. The contrast between abundant, seemingly endless "bounty" and dormant, obscure waters emphasizes just how much the speaker has lost along with the end of this relationship.

What's more, the poem illustrates how pleasant *memories* of love can make people feel the *absence* of love all the more acutely. In other words, thinking of that past love makes the speaker feel *more* alone than the speaker otherwise might.

To emphasize this, take a look at the more focused juxtaposition of stanza 2. Here, the poem sets the "murmuring, sparkling, living" fountain of the past directly against the "comfortless and hidden well" of the present. Through this immediate juxtaposition, the poem is able to draw out the contrast between the two states of the fountain—that is, between life *during* and *after* love.

Finally, in stanza 3, the speaker juxtaposes two attitudes toward love. Lines 13-14 seemingly make an optimistic statement about the continuing potential for love, only for this to be immediately followed up with the dismissal of lines 15-16. The contrast between these cup-half-full and cup-half-empty mindsets suggests just how meaningless and ineffectual the speaker's attempts to find consolation are. The immediate letdown also highlights the feelings of despair that, the poem implies, inevitably return when people are constantly aware of what they're missing.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-6
- Lines 7-18

ALLITERATION

"A Complaint" uses alliteration to create pleasant music througout and to draw connections between certain words.

In the poem's first half, the alliteration specifically evokes the lovely memories in which the speaker is immersed. In line 3, for example, the gentle, pleasant /f/ sounds of "fountain" and "fond" evoke the idyllic love that speaker once felt. The shared sound here also suggests the intimate *connection* between the beloved's love-fountain and the speaker's heart, into which that love flowed. That same /f/ sound is then picked up by the repeated "flow" in lines 4-5, suggesting the seemingly endless movement of this fountain of love.

In the next stanza, bold alliteration adds oomph to the speaker's declaration of past happiness:

> Blest was I then all bliss above!

(Note that "above" can be considered alliterative because the shared sound falls at the start of a stressed syllable, "above.")

All this musical alliterations then culminates in the phrase "living love" in line 10. Here, those liquid /l/ sounds not only sound nice, but also draw a connection between love and life itself—a connection that makes sense, given that the speaker has treated love as a nourishing force throughout the first half of the poem.

Another striking moment of alliteration, and broader sibilance, pops up in lines 15-16:

> What matter? if the waters sleep
> In silence and obscurity.

Here, both the /w/ and /s/ sounds evoke the muffled hush of these love waters.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "love," "long"
- **Line 3:** "fountain," "fond"
- **Line 4:** "flow"
- **Line 5:** "flow"
- **Line 8:** "Blest," "bliss above"
- **Line 10:** "living love"
- **Line 13:** "deep"
- **Line 14:** "dry"
- **Line 15:** "What," "waters," "sleep"
- **Line 16:** "silence"
- **Line 18:** "made me"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem uses rhetorical questions to highlight the speaker's confusion and increasing despair at the loss of love.

The first two rhetorical questions appear in line 11, when the speaker asks, "What have I? shall I dare to tell?" The speaker is asking what they now possess in the absence of love. The speaker asks this not in search of an answer, but more so to give voice to the distress that the speaker feels in *anticipation* of that answer: that what the speaker has now is simply a "comfortless and hidden well." In this sense, the questions provide a dramatic build-up, suggesting the speaker's hesitation to face the fact that love is gone.

Another rhetorical question comes in lines 15-16. After acknowledging that the speaker still has a "well of love" even after this relationship has ended, the speaker goes on to say dismissively, "What matter? if the waters sleep / In silence and obscurity." In modern English, that might read: "Why does having a well of love matter, if its waters are stagnant and hidden?"

The question emphasizes just how meaningless having a little love (or the potential to love in the future) feels to the speaker. *Why bother having the ability to love at all*, the speaker seems to be saying, *when any future love will pale in comparison to this past relationship?*

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "What have I? shall I dare to tell?"
- **Lines 15-16:** "What matter? if the waters sleep / In silence and obscurity."

REPETITION

The poem's repetition highlights the speaker's obsessive focus on the past. Instead of moving on, the speaker dwells on how great this love once was.

Some of this repetition is on the level of individual words, as in the anadiplosis of lines 4-5:

> Whose only business was to **flow**;
> And **flow** it did; not taking heed

And of lines 12-13:

> A comfortless and hidden **well**.
> A **well** of love—it may be deep—

These examples contribute to the speaker's sentimental tone. In lines 4-5, the fact that the speaker says twice that the rich fountain of love "flows" suggests the very *abundance* these lines describe. And in lines 12-13, the repetition of "well" suggests that the speaker will continue to dwell on this well (which, remember, is part of an extended metaphor for the speaker's love and emotional state).

More broadly, the speaker repeats words and phrases from the beginning of the poem at its end:

> There is a change—and I am poor;
> Your love hath been, nor long ago,
> A fountain at my fond heart's door,
> [...]
> —Such change, and at the very door
> Of my fond heart, hath made me poor.

This general parallelism creates a kind of envelope structure that contains the rest of the poem. While this repetition has the effect of neatly summarizing the poem, it also works to illustrate the cyclical nature of grief. The very structure of the poem, in other words, implies that the process of grieving a loss is rarely easy or straightforward, and that one can often end up in a place similar to where one began.

At the same time, however, readers are probably meant to make note of the minor *differences* in this repetition. The poem at the end more clearly states the nature of the relationship between the "change" that has occurred and the speaker's continuing sense of poverty or bereavement (that is, the speaker explicitly says that "[s]uch change" is what has "made" the speaker "poor"). The implication may be that the speaker has obtained, if nothing else, some further insight into their own feelings over the course of the poem.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "change," "poor"
- **Line 3:** "fond heart," "'s door"
- **Line 4:** "flow"
- **Line 5:** "flow"
- **Line 12:** "well."
- **Line 13:** "well"
- **Line 17:** "change"
- **Lines 17-18:** "door / Of my fond heart"
- **Line 18:** "poor"

CAESURA

The poem contains many caesurae throughout, which add to the poem's thoughtful, sentimental tone. The speaker is not speeding through memories here, but rather dwelling (often to the speaker's own detriment) on the past. And all those caesurae slow the poem down.

Lines 5-6, for example, elaborate on how the fountain of love once nourished the speaker:

> And flow it **did; not** taking heed
> Of its own **bounty, or** my need.

Short breaks occur in the middle of these lines, granting the speaker space to draw out this praise regarding the abundance of love that this relationship once offered.

In other moments, caesurae can create a jarring rhythm, highlighting the speaker's distressed and confused mental state. At times, this can give the poem an erratic, abrupt energy and make it seem almost as if the speaker is interrupting themselves, as in line 1: "There is a change—and I am poor," and line 14: "I trust it is,—and never dry." These instances are typically punctuated with a dash (though there is also the question mark in line 11: "What have I? shall I dare to tell?"), highlighting how tumultuous the speaker's emotions are. Alternatively, this pause may also mark the speaker's hesitation to admit what the relationship has become.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "—"
- **Line 2:** ","
- **Line 5:** ";"
- **Line 6:** ","
- **Line 9:** ","
- **Line 10:** ",," ","
- **Line 11:** "?"
- **Line 13:** "—"
- **Line 14:** "—"
- **Line 15:** "?"
- **Line 17:** ","
- **Line 18:** ","

ASYNDETON

There is only one instance of asyndeton in "A Complaint," though it contributes a great deal to building up the speaker's fondness for the relationship that used to be.

Asyndeton occurs in the string of adjectives in line 10, "murmuring, sparkling, living," which describe the waters of love the speaker once enjoyed. Omitting the expected "and" creates a sense of breathlessness and spontaneity, as if the speaker is simply finding new qualities to praise from moment to moment. The speaker's praise of the fountain is free-flowing and spontaneous, like the fountain of love itself.

What's more, adding in a conjunction to make the phrase "murmuring, sparkling, and living" might have made the speaker's praise seem too premeditated and perhaps comprehensive, as if the virtues ended there. The effect of the asyndeton is, instead, to make it seem as if the list of that love's virtues are inexhaustible, as if the speaker could go on listing them forever.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "murmuring, sparkling, living love"

PERSONIFICATION

"A Complaint" uses personification within its broader extended metaphor in order to build on its image of love as a generous, life-granting force that exists separately from the speaker.

The first half of the poem personifies the fountain of love at the speaker's heart, granting it a sense of free will and agency. In line 4, the speaker comments on the fountain having no "business" but to "flow," as if it were a human being capable of choosing otherwise, and "not taking heed" of the great richness that it brings to the speaker's heart.

These comments are surprising precisely because of how obvious or redundant they may seem. One would normally expect a fountain to do nothing else but "flow" and not to take "heed" of anything, but the speaker goes out of the way to make these points in order to highlight the unconditional nature and generosity of this love.

The speaker further personifies the fountain as "murmuring" and "living" in line 10, possibly implying that the love was once so vitalizing for the speaker that it itself seemed alive.

In the poem's second half, personification works more to characterize the speaker's leftover condition once this great source of love has been taken away. The fact that love's waters "sleep" in line 15 suggest that they might day awaken. The poem makes the point that the speaker is so distraught not because love is completely *gone*, but because that once active and lively love now lies dormant.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-6:** "A fountain at my fond heart's door, / Whose only business was to flow; / And flow it did; not taking heed / Of its own bounty, or my need."
- **Lines 15-16:** "if the waters sleep / In silence and obscurity."

VOCABULARY

Taking Heed () - Taking notice of/expressing concern for.

Complaint () - The title of the poem, the word immediately announces the genre of the poem. A "complaint," used generally as a word for a grievance or concern, is also used by poets more specifically to refer to a poem lamenting a personal misfortune or failed love. In this case, the complaint is about the end of a cherished relationship.

Change (Line 1, Line 17) - A key word in the poem, "change" refers to the change that has come over the speaker with the loss of the relationship. There's also a possible pun on "change" as an uncountable noun meaning "money returned after paying a price." This is especially plausible as the poem deals with love as an enriching force and the speaker's feeling "poor" afterwards, with the little that the speaker is left with ("a well of love") being much less than what the speaker once had.

Fond (Line 3, Line 18) - The poem describes the speaker's heart as "fond," a word meaning "affectionate," but with an archaic, nowadays less common meaning of "foolishly tenderhearted" or "naïve." The poem plays on this double meaning in order to suggest not only the speaker's affection for the beloved but perhaps also their naïveté in thinking that this state of bliss would last forever.

Bounty (Line 6) - The word "bounty" can be used to refer to a treasure or a lavish gift. I can also mean abud.

Consecrated (Line 9) - Used to describe the fountain of love that the speaker once enjoyed, this word usually refers to something that is or has been declared "sacred" or "holy." In this context, of course, it's used not literally but metaphorically, with the relationship being thought of as something so precious that it's almost like an object of religious devotion.

Obscurity (Line 16) - The speaker is saying that those metaphorical waters of love are hidden or unimportant.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Complaint" is made up of three stanzas of six lines each (a.k.a. three sestets). The division into three helps to organize the speaker's emotional journey:

1. The first stanza is largely about memories of the great, nourishing love that the relationship once offered.
2. The second stanza acts as a transition that shifts the focus from these blissful memories to the speaker's present circumstances.
3. The third stanza continues to focus on the speaker's current emotional state and compounding feelings of despair.

In this way, the three-part structure of the poem itself reflects its thematic point about how happy memories can only cause someone to feel only more painfully a lack of love in the present.

Readers can also think of each stanza being further broken into a quatrain followed by a couplet, based on the patterns of rhyme sounds. We'll discuss that more in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide.

METER

The overarching meter of the poem is iambic tetrameter. That means each line has eight syllables, broken up into four iambs—poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM).

Overall, the poem's use of this meter is fairly regular. Take the first line of the poem, for example:

There is | a change— | and I | am poor;

Most of the poem falls into this steady pattern, which grants it the predictable rhythm of a heartbeat. That said, there are a few moments in the poem when the speaker changes things up in a meaningful way. Line 3 is a good example:

A foun- | tain at | my fond | heart's door,

There are still eight syllables here, but there are more than four stressed beats. Though it's possible to scan "heart's" as being an unstressed syllable (or, when reciting the poem out loud, to pronounce it softly), the three words "fond," "hearts'," and "door" each seem to have enough importance that a reader may want to stress them. The point of this triple stress, at just this moment, may be to give added weight to the intimacy of the relationship described by the speaker.

Another interesting variation comes in line 9:

Now, for | that con- | secra- | ted fount

Beginning the line with a stressed beat followed by an unstressed beat creates a foot known as a trochee. This is one of the most common inversions of iambic meter in English poetry, so the meter is still fairly conventional here. Yet it's still worth noting how the trochee calls attention to the word "Now," and in doing so signals the speaker's return to focus on the present. The inversion also slows the poem's rhythm, making readers feel the speaker's heaviness and deepening despair.

RHYME SCHEME

Each stanza of the poem follows the rhyme scheme:

ABABCC

Each six-line stanza can thus be broken into an opening quatrain with an alternating rhyme pattern, followed by a quick rhyming couplet (two rhymes in a row). This is one of the most common rhyme schemes for six-line stanzas in English poetry, and this pattern has several interesting effects.

In general, the first four lines of each stanza, with their alternating ABAB rhymes, are used to advance a dynamic development around a theme or idea. The rhyming couplet then *responds* in some way to that theme/idea; the change in rhyme sound noticeably sets the final lines of each stanza apart from the rest, as in lines 11-12:

What have I? shall I dare to tell?
A comfortless and hidden well.

After the exclamatory passages and turmoil of lines 7-10, the rhyme here settles readers in to the speaker's sense of resignation.

It's also worth noting that the rhymes here are full and clear. The only half or slant rhyme is that of "obscurity" with "dry" in stanza 3, which adds to the sense of letdown as the speaker, again, becomes resigned to having lost this great love.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is someone whose close relationship with a friend or a lover has recently come to an end, and who feels "poor" as a result. The speaker's perspective is that of someone looking back fondly on the past, seemingly unable to stop reliving, through memories, the precious love that used to be.

The exact identity of the speaker is unclear beyond this, with no gender, age, nor occupation given in the poem. It has been argued that the speaker is in fact Wordsworth himself, and that he wrote this poem after his falling out with his close friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The poem, however, is vague enough that this isn't necessarily the case, and the speaker's pain might resonate with anyone who has experienced heartbreak. Readers simply know that the speaker is also an introspective person, who is sensitive to the effect that the end of this relationship has had on them emotionally. But the speaker ultimately develops little if at all

throughout the poem, as it ends with the speaker still unable to overcome their grief.

SETTING

The poem takes place not "long" after the end of the speaker's relationship, when the speaker's pain still feels remarkably fresh and raw. Beyond this vague sense of time, however, the poem has no specific setting, taking place instead entirely within the speaker's mind and memories. The poem goes from focusing on the speaker's blissful past in stanza 1 and the first half of stanza 2 to focusing on the speaker's feelings of loss in the present at the end of stanza 2 and in stanza 3.

The lack of broader setting makes the speaker's pain feel all the more endless; readers don't know how much time has actually passed, and thus don't know how long the speaker has been dwelling on this relationship—nor how long the speaker will continue to do so.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Wordsworth first published "A Complaint" in his collection *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1807. The Romantic movement in British poetry was by then in full swing, and, in many ways, this poem is typical of the era.

For example, though it may sound somewhat fancy to modern readers, "A Complaint" actually uses relatively ordinary, straightforward language for its time period. The Romantic movement was in part a reaction to the Neoclassical tendencies of earlier 18th-century poetry, which typically focused on high-brow, elitist subjects and used highly sophisticated language that only a select few could understand. The Romantics, by contrast, sought to capture the diction and rhythms of common speech—or, as Wordsworth himself puts it in his landmark collection *Lyrical Ballads*, "the language really used by men."

Romantic poetry was also influenced by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the French philosopher who helped to inspire the French Revolution, and Romantics tended to emphasize the individual and the inner life of the mind. And whereas the earlier Enlightenment/Age of Reason emphasized rationality, objectivity, and scientific understanding, Romantics put a premium on intuition, spontaneity, personal expression, inspiration, and emotional exploration.

As a deeply introspective poem focused on the landscape of the speaker's inner world, "A Complaint" fits right in with many Romantic ideals. One difference worth noting, however, is that the speaker in a typical Romantic poem, after presenting a problem or situation, will typically end with a resolution, or having come away with some kind of epiphany or insight. Somewhat unconventionally for a Romantic poem, then, "A Complaint" ends simply by circling back to its problem, perhaps the better to emphasize the cyclical nature of the speaker's grief.

Finally, as the poem's title suggests, "A Complaint" more broadly belongs to a genre of poetry called complaints, or plaints, which don't have a specific form but always grapple with unrequited love or misfortune.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Broadly speaking, Romanticism was a reaction to the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the United States, which saw the development of large-scale industry and population growth in cities. In this era of rapid growth and urbanization, the Romantic literature and art attempted to assert the virtues of quiet contemplation and introspection.

There is, moreover, a deeply personal context that is usually assumed to have informed the poem's creation. "A Complaint" is often taken as being about Wordsworth's personal falling out with his friend and fellow Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, with whom he published the influential collection *Lyrical Ballads* in 1789. Together regarded as pioneers of the British Romantic movement, Wordsworth and Coleridge were close collaborators, with Wordsworth even becoming something of a mentor figure for the younger Coleridge.

Tensions, however, quickly developed between the two men after Coleridge developed both an addiction to opium and an unrequited love for Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law. The situation worsened after Coleridge spent a Christmas with the Wordsworths in December 1806, during which his behavior became increasingly erratic and unstable.

Over the next two years, Coleridge would move away from England, hopeful that a change of scene would be good for his health. In "A Complaint," according to some scholars, Wordsworth laments both his physical and emotional distance from his old friend.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a recording of "A Complaint." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOGz5HGzWhA&ab_channel=poemrecital)
- Biography of William Wordsworth — Find out more about William Wordsworth, the man and the poet, through the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)
- Coleridge and Wordsworth — Learn more about Coleridge's infatuation with Sara Hutchinson and

his falling out with Wordsworth after the eventful Christmas of 1806. (https://wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2015/12/27/did-wordsworth-really-betray-coleridge-the-strange-events-of-27th-december-1806/#:~:text=On%20the%2022%20December%201806,Sid%20Passion%20for%20'Asra'.)

- British Romanticism — Find out more about the roots and central tenets of the British Romantic movement. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152982/an-introduction-to-british-romanticism)
- Complaints — Learn about the widespread genre of "complaint" via this article on the Encyclopædia Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/art/complaint-literature)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- A Slumber did my Spirit Seal
- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- Lines Written in Early Spring
- London, 1802
- My Heart Leaps Up
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The Tables Turned
- The World Is Too Much With Us
- We Are Seven

HOW TO CITE

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