# Abou Ben Adhem

## POEM TEXT

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
An angel writing in a book of gold:—
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
And to the presence in the room he said,
"What writest thou?"—The vision raised its head,
And with a look made of all sweet accord,
Answered, "The names of those who love the Lord."
"And is mine one?" said Abou. "Nay, not so,"
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
But cheerly still; and said, "I pray thee, then,
Write me as one that loves his fellow men."

The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night
It came again with a great wakening light,
And showed the names whom love of God had blest,
And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

## SUMMARY

The speaker blesses Abou Ben Adhem, who has just woken up from a deep, peaceful sleep. Looking around his moonlit bedroom, Ben Adhem notices that the room is filled with a sense of pure loveliness, like that of a blooming lily, by the presence of an angel who is writing in a golden book. Ben Adhem's peaceful life thus far has made him fearless, and so he asks the angel what it is writing. Looking up compassionately, the angel answers that it is making a list of the people who love God. Ben Adhem asks if his name is on this list. It isn't, replies the angel. Unworried, Ben Adhem implores the angel to record his name as some that loves other people instead.

The angel fulfills Ben Adhem's request before disappearing. The next night it returns in a blaze of light, holding a new list of people blessed by God. Ben Adhem's name is at the top.

## THEMES

### FAITH, LOVE, AND HUMANITY

"Abou Ben Adhem" is a short, fable-like poem that suggests people can best express love for God by simply loving their fellow human beings. Compassion and empathy are presented as the true principles of religion, above the need to pay lip service to a jealous or attention-hungry God. In fact, the Lord in this poem is so approving of Abou Ben Adhem's commitment to his fellow man that it is *Ben Adhem* who becomes the most "blest" in the end—and not those who have focussed their efforts in demonstrating their love for God. The poem ultimately argues that love of humankind *is* love of God—because people are God's creation. In essence, the poem is saying that anyone who claims to love God, without putting this into practice first through a love for their fellow human beings, doesn't really love God at all.

The angel's two separate visits to Ben Adhem present two different religious perspectives, drawing a distinction between love of other people and what the poem suggests is a more superficial love of God. The first visit wakes Ben Adhem from a "deep dream of peace." This hints to the reader that there is something fundamentally *right* about Ben Adhem's worldview—after all, there are no moral dilemmas or anxieties keeping him up at night! The wish in the first line that his "tribe" may increase also suggests that this is a man worth emulating; in other words, the world could use more men like Ben Adhem.

Yet Ben Adhem isn't on the angel's first list, which records the names of those who love God. That a man filled with such "exceeding peace" would be missing suggests that there's something off about this list itself. And the fact that this list is printed in "a book of gold"—a flashy and expensive material—further hints at its superficial nature. There is a gentle suggestion that these are people who act out of self-interest and self-preservation, and, in contrast to Ben Adhem, focus their faith on flattering a higher power. The poem implies by its end that this book is a shiny ledger filled with people who are very concerned with *looking* like they love God.

That's why, when Ben Adhem learns from the angel that he is *not* down as one of those who "love the Lord," he doesn't grow worried or panic. In fact, his response comes to him readily—instead, he wants to be recorded as "one that loves his fellow men." Ben Adhem knows that because God created human beings, loving of God isn't meaningful without also loving other people.

The poem, then, can be seen as a kind of test—instead of begging to have his love for God officially acknowledged and

confirmed, Ben Adhem chooses instead to demonstrate love his love of God by prioritizing his love for humanity. In other words, he charitably puts others before himself—an idea that is arguably at the core of both Christianity and Islam.

In its short final stanza the poem clearly endorses Ben Adhem's perspective and urges its readers to look at the world in the same way. By embodying the principle of universal love—and trusting that this brings him closer to God—Ben Adhem gains God's approval ahead of everyone else. Love of humanity isn't *better* than love of God—it *is* love of God, and God blesses Ben Adhem because he understands this core religious principle. The poem, then, is unambiguous in terms of its moral argument. Beautifully and succinctly expressed, it asks its readers to place love of humanity at the forefront of daily life—and argues that, through this, they become closer to God. In times of entrenched religious differences, this message is perhaps more relevant than ever.

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

- Lines 1-18

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-5

*Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)*
*Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,*
*And saw, within the moonlight in his room,*
*Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,*
*An angel writing in a book of gold:—*

The poem begins by establishing its narrative voice. This is a speaker whose main purpose is to relate to the humanity of Abou Ben Adhem. The use of Ben Adhem's name as both the title of the poem and the first words makes it clear that he is the central focus here. Yet the poem's actually speaker is not entirely detached, as the bracketed phrase in the first line makes clear. This is an apostrophe, in which the speaker makes clear their approval of Ben Adhem by blessing him. The speaker hopes for more people like Ben Adhem in the world—and the rest of the poem will justify this position.

The use of "tribe" is also religiously evocative, harking back to the idea of different peoples as distinct "tribes" that runs throughout Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The speaker doesn't want Ben Adhem's tribe to increase in the sense of his literal descendants growing more numerous; instead, this is a point about spirituality, religious life, and love of humanity. The tribe referred to is the group of people who actively love their "fellow men"—by showing compassion, empathy, and selflessness.

Abou Ben Adhem is the anglicized name of the Sufi saint, Ibrahim ibn Adham. Leigh Hunt read about him in Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale*, first published in 1697. Ben Adhem is a semi-historical figure whose story took on mythical properties. He famously renounced his position as a king to become an ascetic—someone who practices a devoutly religious life and rejects material wealth. This is important to consider when looking at the poem: the poem also rejects one way of life and argues for another.

The second line relates how Ben Adhem was awoken from a "deep dream of peace." The alliteration and consonance here make the "depth" of that peace all the more pronounced—and indeed, makes the reader wonder about the source of that peace (later revealed to be an assured love for mankind). The assonance ("deep dream of peace") serves a similar function.

The angel's appearance in Ben Adhem's room brings with it a particular adjustment of the light—making it more "rich." The use of the word "rich" deliberately hints at the conflict between material and spiritual wealth—likewise the fact that the book in which the angel writes is "gold." The goldness is suggestive of both religious authority *and* material riches (the kind of which Ben Adhem rejects). Lilies have a long-standing association with purity and light, and perhaps this is why Hunt opts for this particular simile here. The consonance across "like a lily in bloom, / an angel" has a luxurious /l/ sound, suggesting the vibrancy of the angel's visit.

It's possible that the poem tells the story of the "Night of Records," in which it is believed that God decides people's destiny for the following year—including whether they will be summoned to be with God through death. While this is perhaps in the background of the poem, Hunt's emphasis is very much on the specific distinction between love of humankind and love of God (and how they are indispensable from one another).

### LINES 6-10

*Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,*
*And to the presence in the room he said,*
*"What writest thou?"—The vision raised its head,*
*And with a look made of all sweet accord,*
*Answered, "The names of those who love the Lord."*

Line 5 picks up on the idea of Ben Adhem's "deep dream of peace," but also suggests this "peace" is a kind of permanent state (most likely based on his love for humankind). "Exceeding" doesn't mean excessive here, but rather abundant. This "peace" makes Ben Adhem "bold," as in courageous. That is, he doesn't fear God or God's angelic messenger because he knows that ultimately he is a good servant of the Lord. It also marks Ben Adhem as a prime example of "peace," in that his life is governed by a love for humanity.

The angel is referred to euphemistically as "the presence of the room." This emphasizes the heavenly nature of the angel and the rarity of the encounter. An unspoken question is *why* the angel comes to Ben Adhem's room to make its list—and perhaps the answer is that this is a kind of test and/or a way of

demonstrating the importance of love for humanity.

The look of "sweet accord" on the angel's face is indicative of agreement and harmony. While this might just be the angel's heavenliness, it could also suggest a deeper unity between the angel and Ben Adhem—both as true servants of God. The steady iambs in the angel's reply in line 10 feel solid and firm, lending his words religious authority:

> "The names | of those | who love | the Lord."

Also important here is the alliteration "love" and "Lord." The two words are tied together conceptually, suggesting the importance of the one to the other. Indeed, the whole poem argues for love itself as the ultimate expression of the Lord.

## LINES 11-14

> *"And is mine one?" said Abou. "Nay, not so,"*
> *Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,*
> *But cheerly still; and said, "I pray thee, then,*
> *Write me as one that loves his fellow men."*

In these lines, Abou learns of his position in relation to the list of "names of those who love the Lord." Of course, the reader presumes that being on that list is desirable and would indicate to Ben Adhem that he is living his life appropriately and in accordance with his religion. The angel's reply indicates that his name is *not* on there, however.

Here, it is Ben Adhem's reaction that is most important. Where others might grow fearful and panicked to learn that they, by implication, don't love the Lord, Ben Adhem's response is fundamentally different. His voice lowers to indicate his own authority on the matter of his spiritual beliefs. He knows that a vital aspect of religious practice is loving "fellow men," and this knowledge prevents him from being unnecessarily concerned. His use of "pray" in his reply to the angel in line 13 also reinforces the idea that Ben Adhem, contrary to the implications of not being on this first list, stands on firm religious ground.

Ben Adhem is contented to not be on the first list, as long as the angel records his universal love for humankind. Though it is a message that easily gets obscured, this love for others is fundamental to both Islam—which this poem is directly linked to—and Christianity. Though the poem is not ostensibly about Christianity, the use of singular "Lord" and the presence of the angel makes Ben Adhem's position applicable to the Abrahamic religions more generally (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism). Indeed, the poem implicitly argues that there is little point in religious belief unless it translates to the way people treat each other—with a love that acknowledges humans as God's creatures and therefore treats loving them as loving God.

The steady iambs of Ben Adhem's speech mirror that of the angel's, again lending it the air of authority.

Whether the lines are read as:

> Write me | as one | that loves | his fel- | low men

or

> Write me | as one | that loves | his fel- | low men

there is a sense of personal strength and assuredness in the steady meter, which are ultimately confirmed by the final stanza. The use of alliteration and assonance in line 14 links "me" with "men," and "one" with "men" respectively. The actual sounds of the poem here thus link Ben Adhem with the idea of universal love, and likewise join "one"—the individual—with humanity more generally ("men").

## LINES 15-18

> *The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night*
> *It came again with a great wakening light,*
> *And showed the names whom love of God had blest,*
> *And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.*

The angel fulfills Ben Adhem's request, which indicates a kind of mutual respect between them. Its return the next night reinforces the idea that there is a specific reason behind the angel's presence in Ben Adhem's house—it appears not once, but twice.

This second appearance is once again couched in a very specific type of light, which is this time intensified into "great wakening light." This bright light, which "wakens," lends credence to the idea that Ben Adhem is of religious and spiritual significance and that there is an important lesson to learn from his story.

On this second night, the angel comes bearing a second list, which is in part a response to the first. In fact, it is God's reply to the second list. The expectation, of course, is that the second list will largely mirror the first, in that love of God will translate into God's blessing ("blest"). But not only is Ben Adhem's name on the second list—despite its absence from the first—but it *leads all the rest*. That is, Ben Adhem's *response* to the first list has earned him God's blessing ahead of all those that professed to love the Lord.

Implied, then, is that it is *more important* to love "fellow men" than to worship the Lord. That's not because these two practices are mutually exclusive—instead, it's because love of humanity is the best way to express one's love of God. Humans are God's creation (in this type of religious belief), and so to love to them is to actively practice the truest principles of religion.

The lines here make use of polysyndeton. This doesn't just help the narrative advance and keep the meter, but also sounds distinctly religious in tone. That is, with many readers of this poem being familiar with the sound of the King James Version

of the Bible—which is full of polysyndeton—the words here seem to take on the aural quality of religious scripture. Again, this adds authority to Ben Adhem's insistence that he be recorded as "one that loves his fellow men." Likewise, the caesura in the final line expresses the surprise at this turn of events—there is an element of shock in the speaker's use of "lo" that denotes the unexpectedness of Ben Adhem's turnaround.

## SYMBOLS

### THE BOOK OF GOLD

The golden book in which the angel writes in the first stanza can be read as representing a shallow form of religious love. Gold is an expensive material and a book made from it would be decidedly impressive. While this in part simply reflects the power of the angel and/or the Lord—who's not going to write in just any old notebook—it also subtly suggests a certain preoccupation with appearances. The names recorded in the angel's first list profess love of God, yet, as the rest of the poem reveals, they don't seem to actually put God's teachings into practice as well as Abou Ben Adhem does. In other words, they are implied to be highly concerned with just *appearing* as though they love God.

Ben Adhem, by contrast, notably doesn't seem to care that his name doesn't appear in the book at first; he is not concerned with his devotion to God being acknowledged in a fancy book because he's confident that he's expressing genuine love of God through his actions.

It's worth noting that the semi-historical figure of Abou Ben Adhem is said to have rejected the trappings of material wealth, and as such would likely have been unimpressed by a flashy golden book. This is reflected in the poem, as he focuses on caring for his fellow human beings rather than worrying about aggrandizing himself.

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

- **Line 5:** "book of gold"

## POETIC DEVICES

### APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe occurs once in "Abou Ben Adhem"—in the very first line. The speaker, who is fairly detached throughout as part of the overall narrative style of the poem, interjects here using parentheses. At the mention of Abou Ben Adhem's name, the speaker offers him a kind of verbal blessing: "may his tribe increase!"

It's not specified to whom this blessing is addressed; rather, it is a general remark that perhaps has its ultimate target in God. It shows that the speaker of the poem thinks approvingly of Abou Ben Adhem and sees something illustrative in the example of his life that follows. The apostrophe makes clear that the speaker would like Abou Ben Adhem's "tribe" to increase—that is, the speaker believes there should be more people like Abou Ben Adhem in the world. Essentially, this is because, if everyone were to follow Abou Ben Adhem's example of loving their "fellow men" (and women!), the world would be a more peaceful, spiritually richer place.

**Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "(may his tribe increase!) "

### ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs in many spots throughout the poem, but its most meaningful use appears in lines 2, 14, 16, 17, and 18.

In line 2, "deep" and "dream" alliterate to emphasize the depth of Abou Ben Adhem's "peace." This sets the poem up as a kind of demonstration and justification for that peace, as the reader seeks to understand Ben Adhem's way of seeing the world and religion.

The alliteration in line 14 links "me" with "men." As this is a direct quote from Abou Ben Adhem himself, the alliteration serves to link him with his fellow men—which is exactly the worldview that he is advocating. That is, he thinks it's vital to love other people and thus it's fitting that this line draws a subtle linguistic connection between Ben Adhem and other human beings.

Lines 16, 17, and 18 present by far the most important example of alliteration in the poem even though it is comparatively spread out over the stanza. Here, "light," Love," "lo!" and "led" are all linked together. The /l/ sound also links up with the repeated "Lord" that occurs throughout the entire poem. Light, love and the Lord are tied together both sonically and conceptually, indicating they are part of the same way of being—the "leading" example of which is Ben Adhem. That is, his love of fellow men provides the clearest example for how best to love God and earn God's blessing, and this is reflected in the sonic connections that alliteration builds throughout the poem.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "A," "A"
- **Line 2:** "A," "d," "d"
- **Line 4:** "l," "l"
- **Line 5:** "A," "a"
- **Line 6:** "B," "b"
- **Line 10:** "l," "L"
- **Line 11:** "N," "n"

- **Line 13:** “th,” “th”
- **Line 14:** “m,” “m”
- **Line 15:** “n,” “n”
- **Line 16:** “l”
- **Line 17:** “l,” “b”
- **Line 18:** “l,” “B,” “l”

## SIMILE

Simile occurs once in "Abou Ben Adhem," in line 4. Here, the angel is likened to a "lily in bloom" (although this simile could also be read as applying to the specific effect the angel has on the light in the room). White lilies are often associated with purity and heaven, and accordingly the image selection in this line is probably meant to conjure the outward appearance of the angel. It's not specified, but this lily whiteness could be a reference to the angel's clothes—perhaps the angel is dressed dazzlingly in white. Or, maybe the whiteness provided by the lily simile might point towards the Islamic belief that angels are created from light; the lily provides a relatable context for the type of pure, heavenly light that the angel might embody.

Also, it's important that the lily is in *bloom*—blooming flowers are, in a way, at the height of both their beauty and their purpose. Accordingly, the angel is also implied to be beautiful and purposeful.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** “like a lily in bloom”

## CAESURA

Caesuras occur in lines 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 18.

Essentially, the caesura becomes important from the moment Abou Ben Adhem starts interacting with the angel. These pauses allow for the poem to develop its sense of narrative, while also suggesting the dramatic quality of the conversational exchange. That is, the words spoken between the angel and Abou Ben Adhem are presented as carrying great importance, and the way the caesuras slow the pace of the poem in this section lends the words greater weight.

The caesura in line 8, for example, creates a brief and dramatic pause before the angel reveals what, exactly, it's recording in its book of gold.

The caesura in line 13 adds another pause, this time suggesting the surefooted formation of Ben Adhem's reply to the angel (in his mind). That is, he takes a moment to collect himself before responding to the news that he's not on the angel's list.

The caesura in line 15—the full stop after "vanished"—creates dramatic anticipation. The angel is gone for a brief moment, seemingly leaving Ben Adhem out of favor with the Lord. But, of course, on the other side of that full stop is the angel's return.

The caesura in line 18 introduces the moral of the story. The use of "lo" indicates surprise, and that what follows is something remarkable.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** “,”
- **Line 4:** “,”
- **Line 8:** “—”
- **Line 10:** “, ”
- **Line 11:** “.”
- **Line 12:** “.”
- **Line 13:** “;,” “,”
- **Line 15:** “,” “. ”
- **Line 18:** “! ”

## ASSONANCE

The first obvious occurrence of assonance (well, beyond that present in Ben Adhem's name itself!) is in line 2, when the long vowel sounds in "deep dream of peace" lend the line a sleepy and relaxed sound—which is then interrupted from the following line.

Across lines 1, 3, 4 and 5 is a development of an /o/ sound. This seems to call back to the sound of "Abou" in the first line, and then increases in emphasis in "moonlight," "room," "bloom," "book," and, arguably, even "gold." This serves to tie Ben Adhem's character with the other words, all of which are gently suggestive of ethereal majesty—the implication being that there is something holy about Ben Adhem too. The sounds also have a luxuriant feel, which ties in with the mention of "rich," lilies, and gold.

In a sense, the rhyme scheme also dictates that the end words form assonant pairs. That is, "increase" rhymes with "peace," "room" with "bloom" and so on. The relentlessness of paired vowel sounds here lends the story a sense of inevitability and purpose, as it drives forward from line 1 to 18.

As with the alliteration present in these two words, "love" and "Lord" are further linked conceptually by the shared vowel sound (it is not pure assonance, but is still sonically and visually similar enough to imply a sort of connection). The poem's overall message is about the way love for the Lord can best be expressed, and so the alliteration/assonance here can be said to contain the entire poem in miniature form.

The poem's final line presents another important moment of assonance, as the short /e/ of Ben Adhem's name is linked to that in "led" and "rest." This suggests the connection between Ben Adhem and his fellow men and also asserts Ben Adhem's primacy over them on the Lord's list.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “A,” “e,” “A,” “e,” “ea”

- **Line 2:** “ee,” “ea,” “ea”
- **Line 3:** “oo,” “oo”
- **Line 4:** “i,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “oo”
- **Line 5:** “A,” “a,” “oo”
- **Line 6:** “ee,” “ea,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 10:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 12:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 14:** “o,” “o,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 16:** “a,” “ai,” “ea,” “a”
- **Line 17:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 18:** “e,” “e,” “e,” “e”

## CONSONANCE

Consonance occurs all throughout the poem, and is especially clear with the repetition of /b/, /d/, and /m/ sounds in Abou Ben Adhem's name itself. This establishes his presence throughout the entirety of the poem, and in certain points also serves to connect Ben Adhem directly to the lines' content. For instance, it sonically links him to the phrase "deep dream of peace" in line 2 (which, as we've already noted, is also brimming with alliteration and assonance). A similar thing happens in line 6, with:

> Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,

The line overflows with /d/, /b/, and /m/ sounds, sonically connecting Ben Adhem to the idea of both peace and boldness.

The consonance lines 3, 4, and 5 develops the sense of majesty and beauty evoked by the angel's presence (and comparison to a "lily in bloom.") Here, the most important sound employed is /l/, which can be heard in "moonlight," "like," "lily," "bloom," "angel," and "gold." Just as the simile compares the angel to a lily, and the speaker remarks on the particular effect the angel has on the lighting in the room. The use of the /l/ sound ties the angel's presence to both the moonlight and the lily.

Also important is the consonance between "one" and "men" in line 14. Just as the alliteration of "me" and "men" has linked Abou Ben Adhem to his "fellow men," the link between "one" and "men" speaks to the poem's core message regarding the relationship between an individual and the rest of humanity. Ben Adhem's position argues for unity between people, and the closeness of the sounds here is a way of mirroring this argument in the aural effects of the poem.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** “b,” “B,” “m,” “m,” “b”
- **Line 2:** “n,” “n,” “f,” “m,” “d,” “p,” “d,” “m,” “f,” “p”
- **Line 3:** “m,” “m”
- **Line 4:** “M,” “l,” “l,” “l,” “bl,” “m”
- **Line 5:** “l,” “b,” “l”
- **Line 6:** “c,” “d,” “c,” “d,” “m,” “d,” “B,” “d,” “m,” “d”
- **Line 10:** “l,” “L”
- **Line 11:** “N,” “n”
- **Line 12:** “l”
- **Line 13:** “l,” “ll,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 14:** “m,” “n,” “l,” “ll,” “m,” “n”
- **Line 15:** “n,” “t,” “n,” “t ”
- **Line 16:** “g,” “g,” “t ,” “t”
- **Line 17:** “l,” “d,” “d,” “l”
- **Line 18:** “l,” “n ,” “d,” “m,” “m,” “l,” “d,” “ll”

## POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton occurs once in "Abou Ben Adhem," in lines 17 and 18. The repeated use of "and" gives the sense that the fable-like poem is reaching its conclusion, and in line 18 sets up for the surprise/surprised interruption of "lo!"

Though the specific content of the poem relates to Islam, the use of polysyndeton gives the lines a more religious quality. That is, the use of "and" here is reminiscent of the way in which it is used throughout the King James Version of the Bible. In many readers' minds, this is the version of the Bible which sounds most biblical. Indeed, it was during the early 19th century that the KJV became the dominant version of the Bible and the use of polysyndeton in turn began to have a distinctly scripture-like sound.

This repetition of "And" could also be argued as an example of anaphora; in either case, it lends a sense of religious authority to the lines that, not coincidentally, assert Ben Adhem's primacy in the eyes of the Lord. And, as such, it hammers home the moral message of the poem: that love of God is best expressed by loving of other people.

**Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 17-18:** “And showed the names whom love of God had blest, / And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest. ”

## ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs only once in "Abou Ben Adhem," between lines 15 and 16. The enjambment contrasts with the punctuation that ends all of the other lines and here serves to represent the passage of time from one night to the next. Given that the rest of the poem has arguably employed exclusively end-stopped lines, this sudden break in the pattern is significant. Enjambment pushes the reader to continue from one line to the next to complete the thought; it's a sort of cliffhanger, building a sense of anticipation regarding what's going to happen with the angel the following night—and what Ben Adhem's fate will be. The angel is not absent for long, however, and the lack of punctuation subtly reflects its swift return; readers' eyes quickly jump from line 15 to 16, where

they find the angel back in Ben Adhem's room—this time with a new message.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Line 15:** "night "

## END-STOPPED LINE

All lines except for line 15 end with a punctuation mark and as such are (*arguably*) end-stopped. This helps make the poem feel like an unfolding narrative, a methodically plotted story that is concerned with relaying a clear message.

However, there are two full stops at the ends of lines—line 14 and 18—which both emphasize the solid, virtuous position that Ben Adhem takes in relation to his "fellow men." Line 14 is Ben Adhem's clear expression of his worldview, and line 18 is the proof of God's approval. Throughout, the end-stops also give the text a subtly scripture-like feel. The end-stops also function to help propel the rhyming couplets forward, with the reader's ear anticipating each end word combined with either a comma, dash, or full stop.

End-stop and enjambment can be rather subjective, however, and it's worth pointing out that even some lines with punctuation here could reasonably be thought of as enjambed. Lines 3 and 4, for example, have pauses at their ends indicated by commas, yet the full meaning of these lines isn't apparent without reading them in succession. Whether thought of as a soft end-stop or actual enjambment, the format of these lines creates the sense of an extended introduction and builds anticipation for the angel's arrival.

**Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "!"
- **Line 2:** ", "
- **Line 3:** ", "
- **Line 4:** ", "
- **Line 5:** ":— "
- **Line 6:** ", "
- **Line 7:** ", "
- **Line 8:** ", "
- **Line 9:** ", "
- **Line 10:** "." "
- **Line 11:** ";" "
- **Line 12:** ", "
- **Line 13:** ", "
- **Line 14:** "." "
- **Line 16:** ", "
- **Line 17:** ", "
- **Line 18:** ". "

## PARALLELISM

Though not *exactly* parallel, there is a degree of grammatical similarity between "The names of those who love the Lord" in line 10 and "the names whom love of God had blest" in line 17.

The poem is essentially a poem of two halves—the angel's first visit and the second. Likewise, this dual nature is reflected in the ideas that the poem contains. On the one hand, there is loving God; on the other, loving humanity. The poem's aim is to present a clear choice between the two, and to then clarify that choosing the latter is actually a major part of doing the former; that loving other people *is* loving God, since people are God's creations. The parallel structure between these two sentences, then, supports this idea of duality, of choosing this or that.

The similarity in iambic rhythm in both sentences supports the idea that they are interconnected:

> The names of those who love the Lord.

and

> the names whom love of God had blest,

This parallelism ultimately asks the reader to examine the relationship between "those who love the Lord" and those "whom love of God" blesses—to see that they are not one and the same, and to investigate why one is more important than the other within the context of Ben Adhem's blessing.

**Where Parallelism appears in the poem:**

- **Line 10:** "The names of those who love the Lord."
- **Line 17:** "the names whom love of God had blest"

## VOCABULARY

**Abou Ben Adhem** (Line 1) - Abou Ben Adhem is a Sufi saint who reportedly gave up being king in order to live a simpler, more religious existence.

**Tribe** (Line 1) - Tribe here means "people like Abou Ben Adhem." The speaker feels there should be more people who prioritize a love of humanity.

**Exceeding** (Line 6) - This means abundant.

**Writest** (Line 8) - An archaic form of "write."

**Thou** (Line 8) - An archaic form of "you."

**Accord** (Line 9) - Agreement and harmoniousness.

**Cheerly** (Line 13) - Cheerfully.

**Blest** (Line 17) - An archaic form of "blessed."

**Lo!** (Line 18) - An exclamation meant to draw attention to something, often noteworthy of surprise, alarm, or wonder. The word is used frequently in the King James Version of the Bible.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"Abou Ben Adhem" is comprised of two stanzas, the first with fourteen lines and the second with four. As the poem is a fable-like narrative in two parts, the poem's form is split into two as well. This represents both the two separate visits from the angel to Abou Ben Adhem, and the two types of love that the poem compares (love for God and love for humanity). The poem's form thus mirrors the poem's central idea that people have a choice about how best to love God—whether by going through the motions of worship, or embodying the ideal of universal love by treating others with compassion and empathy.

The first stanza is 14 lines and thus echoes the form of a sonnet, though its rhyme scheme does not match that of a sonnet. The poem *could* almost end after line 14, with the reader left to ponder the implications of Ben Adhem's words. Importantly, however, the second stanza brings with it God's *reaction* to Ben Adhem's commitment to universal love.

### METER

Generally speaking, the meter of "Abou Ben Adhem" is iambic pentameter. This is perfectly exemplified by line 17:

> And showed | the names | whom love | of God | had blest,

However, many of the lines vary one foot or another. In line 2, for example, the poem employs a spondee:

> deep dream

The use of two stresses in this line works with the alliteration of the /d/ sounds in these words to emphasize the depth of Ben Adhem's peacefulness.

In line 10, the poem substitutes a trochee for the first foot:

> Answered, | "The names | of those | who love | the Lord."

The start of this line is bold and declarative, thus embodying the majesty and religious authority that the angel possesses as a direct servant of God.

A mirroring of line 10 is achieved in line 14, which could either be read with the scansion as above or with straight iambic pentameter, i.e.:

> Write me | as one | that loves | his fel- | low men.

or

> Write me | as one | that loves | his fel- | low men.

or, perhaps, even with another spondee:

> Write me | as one | that loves | his fel- | low men.

Either way, Ben Adhem's speech matches the angel's in terms of its rhythm and tone, suggesting to the reader that Ben Adhem's way of being brings him close to God as well. Whether the stress is on "write," "me," or both, Ben Adhem asserts confidence his in response to the angel, underscoring his faith in his way of showing his love for God.

The consistent iambs in the last couplet affirm the poem's fable-like quality, the regularity of the rhythm suggesting the ending has moral authority.

> And showed | the names | whom love | of God | had blest,
> And lo! | Ben Ad- | hem's name | led all | the rest.

### RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "Abou Ben Adhem" is extremely simple, employing rhyming couplets throughout:

> AABBCCDD

...and so forth right up through the end of the poem.

The rhymes are pure and full throughout—a.k.a. perfect rhymes—and give the story told by the poem a sense of easy forward motion.

The couplet as a narrative form harks back to medieval verse, and was used to great effect by Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*. The 18th century poetry world thus perceived a strong link between couplets and narrative, and perhaps that explains Leigh Hunt's decision to follow the couplet rhyme scheme. This is a poem that tells a story, rather than explores an idea or image—and the expectancy of the rhyme can help the story travel from its beginning to its end.

## SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem is an omniscient narrator, a kind of fly on the wall that witnesses an event of spiritual and religious importance. The speaker is intended to be relatively unseen/unheard, in order to allow for the narrative to unfold and to help the reader maintain focus on Ben Adhem and his story. This lends the text an air of objectivity, as though it is a fable handed down over centuries and removed from its original authorship.

However, there are two distinct interventions made by the speaker that give an indication of their own view on Abou Ben Adhem's story. The first is in the very first line, when the

speaker utters the parenthetical "may his tribe increase!" Clearly, the speaker feels an affinity with Ben Adhem's view of the world—and it is up to the rest of the poem to explain why. This is a kind of blessing tied to the mention of Ben Adhem's name (similar to the use of "Peace Be Upon Him" that traditionally follows any mention of the prophet Mohammed).

The second is in the final line, with the usage of "lo!" This exclamation expresses an element of surprise, which helps to highlight the fact that Ben Adhem might have expected to be excluded from the angel's second list too.

## SETTING

The poem takes place in the bedroom (most probably) of Abou Ben Adhem over the course of two nights. The moonlit room is depicted as a decidedly calm place, in which Ben Adhem sleeps the restful slumber of a man very much at peace. This quickly establishes the noble character of Ben Adhem, whose peaceful abode suggests he's likely doing something right in his life and is setting a good example for others to learn from.

The entrance of the angel brightens the room, filling it with a pure whiteness suggested by the reference to "a lily in bloom" in line 4. When the angel returns later in the poem, it again fills the room with a bright light that wakes Ben Adhem up. That the angel repeatedly visits Ben Adhem in a personal chamber suggests his importance in the eyes of
God, even if—at first—he does not appear on the angel's list of men "who love the Lord."

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Though not remembered as one of its great poets, Leigh Hunt was a key figure of the British Romantic poetry scene. Romanticism was broadly concerned with a focus on emotion, love of nature, and the "sublime" (essentially, something that evokes a sense of extraordinary thought and feeling). The Romantics as a label is generally said to cover poets such as Percy Shelley, John Keats, William Blake, Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Coleridge. As with most labels, the simplicity of the term masks the complex relationships that helped facilitate the works of the movement's poets. Leigh Hunt was just that—a master facilitator. His endorsement and tireless commitment helped bring the work Byron, Keats, Shelley, and essayist William Hazlitt into public view.

With his brother, John, Leigh Hunt founded the influential newspaper *The Examiner*, which published contemporary poetry, essays, and think pieces, and which aimed to pursue "truth for its sole object." Hunt's particular circle of poets was sometimes referred to disparagingly as the Cockney School, which in essence was a targeted criticism of these writers' perceived working class upbringing (and, by extension, unworthiness).

In summary, Hunt is important to Romanticism less as a poet than as an individual deeply involved in the movement's development and public visibility. Among his other poems, perhaps only "Jenny Kissed Me" is commonly read nowadays.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Early-19th century Britain was a time of upheaval and competing worldviews. Hunt and his circle looked approvingly at the French Revolution of 1789, feeling an affinity with its (supposed) expression of fraternity, equality, and freedom. "Abou Ben Adhem" as a poem embodies a kind of radical combination of all three, with Abou Ben Adhem freed from the constraints of proving his worthiness by the knowledge that treating others as equal members of the human family is, ultimately, the best expression of loving God.

Leigh Hunt did not shy away from public criticism of figures of authority, and he and his two brothers were imprisoned in 1813 for attacking Prince Regent George (later King George IV) in *The Examiner*. Hunt and his associates were attracted to Italy, and believed that from there they would be able to publish freely without fear of censorship or retribution. In Italy, Hunt aimed to create a journal called *The Liberal* alongside Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. The idea, however, was short-lived, ultimately put off course by the untimely death of Shelley, who drowned at sea.

Ben Adhem himself was a quasi-mythical figure, partly based on a real person and partly the product of centuries of story-telling. His life was written about by the legendary Persian poet, Rumi, in his *Masnavi*.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Read Other Poems and a Biography of Hunt — Further resources provided by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/leigh-hunt)
- The Funeral of Shelley Painting — A painting by Louis Fournier that depicts Leigh Hunt at his friend and fellow Romantic poet Percy Shelley's funeral. Hunt is the second from the left of the main figures by the body. (https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-funeral-of-shelley/uwFW5-eMuEhgAA)
- Hunt's Essays — A collection of essays published by Leigh Hunt. (https://archive.org/details/essaysleighhunt00conggoog/page/n15)
- The Manuscript of "Abou Ben Adhem" — An image of the poem as written by Hunt. (https://www.bonhams.com/

auctions/18992/lot/89/)

- A Reading of "Abou Ben Adhem" — A good reading of the poem (accompanied by an unsettling animation). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d32tg85rYLk)

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Howard, James. "*Abou Ben Adhem*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jan 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Abou Ben Adhem*." LitCharts LLC, January 23, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/leigh-hunt/abou-ben-adhem.