Love After Love

SUMMARY

The speaker promises those who are heartbroken that they'll find happiness again. They will do so by getting back in touch with their true selves: an experience the speaker compares to greeting yourself happily at the door, or in the mirror, and inviting yourself to a meal.

The speaker further compares this experience to falling back in love with yourself after a period of estrangement. The speaker tells heartbroken people to bond with, and nourish, the part of themselves they've neglected during their last relationship—the inner "stranger" who knows and loves them completely.

The speaker then urges them to dispose of the mementos of the failed relationship: love letters, photos, unhappy notes, and, metaphorically, the self-image they took out of the experience. The speaker invites them to relish all that their lives still have to offer.

THEMES

SELF-LOVE AFTER HEARTBREAK

"Love After Love" is a poem of consolation addressed to anyone who's suffered a breakup or other romantic disappointment. Assuring such sufferers that things will get better, the speaker depicts the recovery process as one of reconnecting with—and relearning to love—one's inner self. By paying overdue attention to this neglected "stranger," the speaker advises, people can rediscover a durable, sustaining love. Moreover, this love won't stem from vanity or illusion but rather from the mature appreciation of all one's life has to offer. To this speaker, true "love after love" doesn't involve finding a new partner but finding *yourself* again.

The speaker frames the poem as one of reassurance to the heartbroken: the title "Love After Love" promises that the end of *one* love won't be the end of *all* love—that love, in fact, is something continuous and renewable. But in a twist on the romantic cliché of "meeting someone new," the speaker promises that the "new" person "you will" meet after heartbreak is "your self." In other words, breakups grant people the chance to reconnect with who they are.

Again playing on romantic tropes, the speaker imagines this encounter as a kind of date, in which "you" and "yourself" greet each other with "smile[s]" of "welcome" before "Eat[ing]" together. The speaker also imagines it as a kind of communion, using images of "wine" and "bread" (reminiscent of the Christian ritual of Holy Communion) to suggest that getting reacquainted with yourself entails a kind of deeply spiritual, and even holy, connection.

Through this connection, the speaker says, you will "love again" a part of yourself that has been a "stranger"—that is, the part of yourself that you'd neglected during your relationship. And this, the speaker says, will be like the discovery of a *new* romantic spark, with a "stranger who has loved you / all your life" but whom you have "ignored / for another."

The speaker indicates that learning (or relearning) to love yourself after heartbreak won't come without cost: it will also mean letting go of the old love. "Give back your heart / to itself" is an instruction not only to love yourself but to withdraw love from where it's no longer wanted or needed. To that end, the speaker advises getting rid of tokens of the old love: "letters," "photographs," "desperate notes." Cleaning these things up, the speaker implies, will feel internally cleansing, helping you reconnect with yourself and move on.

The speaker further implies that love of self will be the most authentically nourishing kind, sustaining you even in the absence of a romantic partner. Asserting that you are the one who "knows you by heart" indicates that love of the self has a unique authenticity, intimacy, and depth. Rather than dwelling on pain, then, the poem treats heartbreak as an opportunity for personal growth: a chance to rediscover who you are, and to find joy in the independent self no breakup can take away.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The time will ...
... your own mirror,

The poem's opening line builds on its title, describing the "love" that one may find "after love"—that is, after heartbreak. Addressing the reader directly, the speaker claims that it is "yourself" you will someday find (again, implicitly, after *losing* some previous love).

The tone is confident and optimistic: the speaker reassures the heartbroken that the "time **will** come" (as opposed to *might* come). The word "elation" also implies that the process the speaker will go on to detail (of rediscovering yourself after a breakup) can bring more than mere relief or contentment; it can be exciting!

In a surprising, fantastical image, the speaker then promises that "you" will joyfully encounter "yourself arriving / at your own door, in your own mirror." Notice that "greet[ing]" yourself in the mirror is an everyday possibility, whereas greeting yourself at the door is not (it would require some sort of doppelgänger situation). The image seems to hover between reality and fantasy, like romance itself. Metaphorically, it suggests the experience of "reconnecting with yourself" after a time in which you've felt estranged from your own interests, needs, or identity, as might happen in an unsatisfying relationship. The speaker promises that this experience will bring "elation," a word that again suggests the thrill of romance.

The enjambment after line 3 ("you will greet yourself arriving") creates a brief pause that adds emphasis to "arriving." For a moment, the word hangs by itself without any elaboration. This effect might bring to mind other, metaphorical ways of "arriving": at a new and better stage of life, for example.

LINES 5-7

and each will ...
... was your self.

Lines 5-7 build on the image of "greet[ing] yourself" after a breakup or similar heartbreak. Now the speaker predicts that "you" and "yourself"—or "the stranger who was your self"—will joyfully welcome each other, invite each other to share a meal, and fall back in love with each other.

Line by line, the poem's scenario escalates, becoming more surprising and surreal. It portrays the "yous" almost as clones or mirror images come to life, identical in behavior ("each will smile") and speech ("sit here. Eat."). At the same time, it makes sense as a metaphor for getting back in touch with your true self. The image of "you" and "yourself" rekindling their romantic spark, like old lovers over dinner, wittily suggests that the recently heartbroken can find comfort and strength in their own personalities and passions. In fact, the speaker promises that this *will* happen. This is a poem of optimistic reassurance (raising the possibility that the poet is reassuring *him*self as well as the reader!).

Line 7 introduces a crucial difference between "you" and "your self." One represents who the person is *after* the recently failed relationship; the other represents who they were *before*. During the relationship, the two became "stranger[s]." In other words, the relationship significantly changed the person, distancing them somewhat from their true personality—their "self." (Notice how, unlike in line 3, this word is set apart from "your" to emphasize that the speaker is talking about the person's core identity.) Now, after the breakup, there's a chance to bridge the gap. Again, the speaker assures that this "will" happen.

The sibilance in these lines ("smile," "say," "sit," "stranger," "self") creates a soothing sound that matches the speaker's tone of reassurance. The alliterative link between "stranger" and "self" also reinforces the idea that these two are one and the same.

LINES 8-11

Give wine. Give ...
... you by heart.

Lines 8-11 mark a transition in the poem, as the speaker shifts from reassuring to advising the heartbroken "you." This shift might be compared to the significant "turn" that often happens around line 8 or 9 of a sonnet. ("Love After Love" isn't a sonnet, but it resembles that form in some ways: for example, it's just one line over 14, and it's about romance, the classic sonnet subject.) Now the speaker isn't just telling "you" that life will improve after a breakup but instructing "you" on how to improve it.

As if to emphasize the shift, line 8 falls into a strong iambic rhythm (alternating unstressed and **stressed** syllables):

Give **wine**. Give **bread**. Give **back** your **heart**

The alliteration of "**b**read" and "**b**ack," followed by "**l**oved" and "**l**ife" in lines 9-10, adds extra emphasis to the speaker's advice here.

That advice builds on the previous line, which promises that "you" will rediscover your love of the person you used to be (before the failed relationship). The speaker instructs the reader to care for that other self, as if feeding them: "Give wine. Give bread." This metaphor evokes both romantic bonding (like a dinner date) and spiritual bonding (like the Christian ritual of Holy Communion, which involves bread and wine). The speaker urges the heartbroken person to devote their primary love and loyalty to themselves: "Give back your heart / to itself."

The speaker then mixes a hint of judgment into the advice, portraying the person's inner self as "the stranger who has loved you / all your life, whom you ignored / for another, who knows you by heart." This implies that the heartbroken person has neglected their own needs in favor of their ex-partner's. In the speaker's view, *you* (whoever you are) know and love yourself best, so you should learn to prioritize yourself, at least in the immediate aftermath of a breakup. There's even the suggestion of a kind of love triangle, as if the previous partner was interfering with the bond between "you" and "yourself"! Though the poem is primarily a celebration of independence and self-discovery, it can also be read as expressing skepticism about traditional romance.

Line 11, like line 8, ends with "heart"—an identical rhyme that reinforces the poem's theme of doubling and the importance of the inner self (often symbolized by the heart).

LINES 12-14

Take down the ...
... from the mirror.

Having urged heartbroken people ("you") to prioritize and care for themselves, the speaker now urges them to let go of their previous relationship.

Specifically, the speaker advises them to get rid of the mementos of the relationship—"love letters," "photographs," "desperate notes"—or at least to get them out of sight. These three items evoke the entire relationship arc: romance/courtship (love letters), being together (photographs), then coming apart (desperate notes). "Desperate" suggests that the relationship was under intense strain by the time it ended, and that it may have caused one or both parties to write to each other in an artificial or unnatural way. This detail reinforces the necessity of getting back to a more authentic self.

More strangely and surprisingly, the speaker advises "you" to "peel your own image from the mirror." Whereas the "mirror" in line 4 seemed to offer an *authentic* self, this time it seems to hold a false self-"image," presumably one developed during the failed relationship. The speaker advises letting go of that false self like one more memento of the past:

- The primary meaning of "image" here is "reflection," but the word also implies artificiality. "Image" can mean any artificial or constructed picture, whether of the self or the surrounding world. It can also specifically suggest a fake or exaggerated version of the self, as in a celebrity's "public image."
- Advising the heartbroken to "peel your own image from the mirror" thus suggests that they must discard a superficial self-image—perhaps a negative one they developed in their previous relationship—in favor of their more authentic identity.
- "Image" is also a literary term; poets are said to represent the world through their imagery. If the poem is read as Walcott addressing himself, perhaps he's encouraging himself to abandon a version of himself he's created through his writing and get back to his authentic self.

As a line-ending word, "mirror" here doubles "mirror" in line 4, while "bookshelf" (line 12) makes an imperfect rhyme with "self" (line 7). These formal elements reflect the poem's preoccupation with doubles and mirror images, without tying the poem—which is about relaxing and letting go—to a strict form or rhyme scheme.

LINE 15

Sit. Feast on your life.

The closing line consists of two brisk instructions. Though the tone is commanding, the intent is comforting. In a callback to line 6 ("sit here. Eat") and line 8 ("Give wine. Give bread."), the speaker urges the person who's been unlucky in love to make a "Feast" of solitude and savor all that their life still has to offer.

The wording of this line alludes to a famous religious poem, George Herbert's "Love (III)." This 1633 lyric addresses "Love," meaning God's love or God himself, and concludes:

> You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
> So I did sit and eat.

The speaker of Herbert's poem feels ashamed and unworthy of God's love before accepting it in the end. In Walcott's poem, the allusion suggests there's something spiritually healing and nourishing about being alone and appreciating your life for what it is.

The abrupt life advice might also be inspired by one of the famous endings in all of poetry. Rainer Maria Rilke's sonnet "Archaic Torso of Apollo" (1908) closes with the mysterious command: "You must change your life." This isn't as clear a parallel as the Herbert allusion, but if it's intentional, it implies that this "Feast[ing]" should not be temporary. Instead, it should represent a major life change, a long-term commitment to one's true self.

SYMBOLS

MIRRORS

Mirrors are symbolically associated with identity and self-image. They can also be linked with truth or artifice, depending on whether the mirror in question is supposed to be accurate or not.

The poem draws on both of these associations. The image of the self "arriving" in the "mirror" (lines 3-4) symbolizes reconnecting with one's own identity after the loss of a romantic relationship:

> you will greet yourself arriving
> at your own door, in your own **mirror**,

The speaker implies that this identity—this "self"—is authentic, satisfying, and even thrilling (meeting it brings "elation").

On the other hand, the poem implies that the "image" in the "mirror" in line 14 is dissatisfying and false:

> peel your own image from the mirror.

Notice the difference between seeing "yourself" in the mirror and a mere "image" of yourself: one sounds real, the other artificial. Thus, this second mirror is associated with superficiality and unreality—things that one needs to "peel" away in order to get back to one's real "life."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "you will greet yourself arriving / at your own door, in your own mirror,"
- **Line 14:** "peel your own image from the mirror."

WINE AND BREAD

The "wine" and "bread" in line 8 carry religious symbolism. In particular, they evoke the Christian ritual of the Eucharist or Holy Communion, in which worshipers consuming bread and wine are said to receive (either literally or symbolically) the body and blood of Christ. Informally, the word "communion" can also describe any deep and/or ritual bonding between people.

Here, the giving of wine and bread conveys the idea of connecting, or communing, with the self on a deeply spiritual level. It is set in parallel with the giving of the "heart," implying that the self who's been "ignored" has been hungry for *love* as well as general connection.

The poet is also using wine and bread as stand-ins for food and drink in general—especially shared food and drink, as in the expression "breaking bread." Thus, these words are linked with "Eat" in line 6 and "Feast" in line 15. The food and drink mentioned throughout the poem suggests that reconnecting with yourself is emotionally *nourishing*: as satisfying as a hearty meal in the short term, and as sustaining as regular meals over the long term.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "sit here. Eat."
- **Line 8:** "Give wine. Give bread."
- **Line 15:** "Sit. Feast on your life."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses several kinds of repetition. First, it repeats, or nearly repeats, several line-ending words: "mirror" (lines 4 and 14), "heart" (lines 8 and 11), and "come"/"welcome" (lines 1 and 5). Like a very loose rhyme scheme, these pairings add a degree of structure to the poem, while tying in with the poem's theme of divided/paired selves. The doubling of "mirror" is especially appropriate, since mirrors create doubles.

The poem also depends heavily on repetition in the form of parallelism. Roughly half of the poem is structured in parallel clauses, as in line 4:

> at your own door, in your own mirror

Later, the repetition of "Give" is more specifically an example of anaphora:

> Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart

More parallelism follows after this as well. Note the repeated structures in the clauses below:

> to itself, to the stranger who has loved you
> [...] whom you ignored
> [...] who knows you by heart
> [...] the love letters
> [...] the photographs, the desperate notes.

Lines 6 and 15 are yet *more* examples of parallelism, as each contains double commands with similar phrasing ("sit here. Eat"; "Sit. Feast").

The inclusion of all these repetitive structures makes the poem strongly rhythmic. The rhythm, in turn, sounds soothing—as fits the poem's reassuring message—but also authoritative, as the speaker layers instruction on top of instruction. In other words, the poem's repetitions reinforce not only its themes but also its tone, as the speaker guides the reader through the aftermath of heartbreak.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "yourself"
- **Line 4:** "your own door," "your own mirror"
- **Line 6:** "sit"
- **Line 7:** "your self"
- **Line 8:** "Give wine. Give bread. Give," "heart"
- **Line 9:** "to itself, to the stranger," "who has loved you"
- **Line 10:** "whom you ignored"
- **Line 11:** "who knows you," "heart"
- **Line 12:** "the love letters"
- **Line 13:** "the photographs," "the desperate notes"
- **Line 14:** "mirror"
- **Line 15:** "Sit"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem contains five clear enjambments, with phrases spilling over line and stanza breaks. This is a free verse poem, and the use of enjambment, broadly speaking, adds to its unstructured, casual tone. The looseness contributes to the mood of a poem that's intended to ease and reassure.

The enjambments also add emphasis to certain words and phrases, especially those that come just before the line break (which creates a small moment of anticipation, as readers wait for the conclusion of a phrase). It's as if the phrase hangs in the air for an extra fraction of a second. In line 1, this effect subtly emphasizes the fact that a better time "will come" (as opposed to, say, "*might* come"):

> The time will come
> when, with elation,

In line 3, it might briefly make the reader process "you will greet yourself arriving" as a complete phrase, which would indicate a more figurative kind of "arrival" (such as success):

> you will greet yourself arriving
> at your own door [...]

And in lines 9 and 10, it stresses the fact that your inner self "loved you" while you "ignored" it—and possibly ratchets up the guilt in the process!

> all your life, whom you ignored
> for another, [...]

Enjambment can also highlight the word or phrase that comes just *after* the line break. This effect is noticeable in lines 8-9, where "Give back your heart" might normally set up a sentiment like "Give back your heart to the person you loved." Instead the sentiment is surprising: "Give back your heart / to itself." Here enjambment is almost like the pause between setup and punchline.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "come / when"
- **Lines 3-4:** "arriving / at"
- **Lines 8-9:** "heart / to"
- **Lines 9-10:** "you / all"
- **Lines 10-11:** "ignored / for"

METAPHOR

To some degree, all of "Love After Love" is an extended metaphor. The whole scenario of greeting "yourself" at the door, inviting yourself to dinner, and falling back in love with yourself is impossible on the literal level. (So is "peel[ing] your own image from the mirror.") But on the figurative level, all of this represents the process of reconnecting with yourself after heartbreak and finding renewed joy in your own personality, interests, and needs. This joy—which the speaker compares to romantic "elation"—is the "Love After Love" promised in the poem's title.

Within this broader metaphor, the poem's images of food and feeding are metaphors for emotional and spiritual nourishment. To "Give wine" and "Give bread" to yourself, or to "Feast on your life," is to find fulfillment in your own identity and experience rather than depending on someone else. Meanwhile, "peel[ing] your own image from the mirror" figuratively implies ridding yourself of a false self-image, or an artificial self you've been projecting to others (as you might during a strained relationship).

These metaphors do what figurative language so often does: dramatize feelings, impressions, and experiences whose vividness literal language would struggle to capture. As a literal translation of what the speaker is describing, "finding happiness in solitude after the end of a relationship" would be accurate—but it sounds very dry! Walcott's metaphors bring the idea to life, conveying the thrill of the experience.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-6:** "you will greet yourself arriving / at your own door, in your own mirror, / and each will smile at the other's welcome, / and say, sit here. Eat."
- **Line 8:** "Give wine. Give bread."
- **Line 14:** "peel your own image from the mirror."
- **Line 15:** "Feast on your life."

ASYNDETON

At several points, asyndeton makes the poem's parallel clauses more rhythmic and emphatic. In line 8, for example, the parallel clauses might normally be joined with "and":

> Give wine, give bread, and give back your heart

Instead, they're presented as three brisk sentences with no coordinating conjunction:

> Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart

This effect sounds more concise, dramatic, and authoritative, heightening the urgency of the poem's tone.

Similarly, "and" might normally appear before "who knows you by heart" in line 11, before "the desperate notes" in line 13, and before "peel" in line 14. Each time, the conjunction is omitted for greater concision and faster rhythm, adding emphasis to the poem's language as the speaker shares important life advice. (The rhythm has a soothing quality, too, in keeping with the reassuring nature of that advice.)

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart"
- **Lines 9-11:** "who has loved you / all your life, whom you ignored / for another, who knows you by heart."
- **Lines 12-14:** "Take down the love letters from the bookshelf, / the photographs, the desperate notes, / peel your own image from the mirror."

ALLITERATION

Several examples of alliteration are sprinkled throughout the poem. For example, four words in lines 6-7 begin with /s/ sounds: "say," "sit," "stranger," "self." Alliteration across /s/ sounds is known as sibilance and can create, as it does here, a

soothing sound—one that fits the speaker's tone of gentle reassurance. The alliteration in line 7 also highlights the connection between "stranger" and "self": in this poem, the two are one and the same.

The alliteration on "bread" and "back" (line 8) lends extra emphasis to a line that already stands out due to its iambic rhythm:

> Give wine. Give bread. Give back [...]

The poet may be emphasizing this line so heavily because it marks an important transition in the poem: from reassuring predictions to direct advice.

Alliteration also links "loved" and "life" in lines 9-10 (as well as the stock phrase "love letters" in line 12). Walcott is hardly the first writer to use the expression "loved you all your life," but it gains fresh meaning here from the unexpected context. Like the enjambment across lines and stanzas ("loved you // all your life"), alliteration draws the reader's attention to the key message this phrase contains: *you're* the one who's always loved you!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "when," "with"
- **Line 6:** "say," "sit"
- **Line 7:** "stranger," "self"
- **Line 8:** "bread," "back"
- **Line 9:** "loved"
- **Line 10:** "life"
- **Line 12:** "love," "letters"

ALLUSION

This poem about spiritual connection with the self alludes to other poetic and spiritual literature. The references to "wine" and "bread" suggest the Christian rite of Holy Communion (a.k.a. the Eucharist), in which the worshiper is said to receive the body and blood of Christ by consuming bread and wine. This ritual derives from the biblical account of the Last Supper (see 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Informally, "communion" can suggest any kind of deep bonding experience or ritual. Walcott is invoking this idea, as well as the Last Supper, in a playful and rather irreverent fashion. As he describes the self reconnecting with the self—bonding over wine and bread, whether literal or symbolic—the reader is meant to imagine a kind of date, but also a spiritual communion.

Meanwhile, the final line of the poem recalls the ending of a famous 17th-century devotional poem, George Herbert's "Love (III)." Here, "Love" is synonymous with God's love, or God himself:

> You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
> So I did sit and eat.

These lines themselves contain an allusion to the Bible (Luke 12:37). Once again, the poem implies that this reconnection with the self—this "Love After Love"—is profound and even sacred, resembling a divine connection sought through religious ritual or prayer.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Give wine. Give bread."
- **Line 15:** "Sit. Feast on your life."

VOCABULARY

Elation (Lines 2-3) - "Elation" is joyous excitement.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Love After Love" is a free verse poem that doesn't follow a particular form. It consists of 15 lines broken into four stanzas.

Interestingly, the poem resembles a sonnet in several ways:

- It has 15 lines (just one more than the sonnet's 14);
- It deals with love and heartbreak (typical sonnet themes);
- And it even features (as many sonnets do) an important structural "turn" in lines 8-9, where it shifts from declarative to imperative sentences. In other words, it shifts from stating what will happen ("The time will come") to telling the reader what to do ("Give wine. Give Bread.").

If he'd wanted to, Walcott—who wrote numerous sonnets during his career—could easily have combined two shorter lines to make this a non-traditional sonnet. So why didn't he? Maybe he wanted to sidestep the associations the sonnet carries, or maybe he wanted to invoke them informally while still setting his poem apart. After all, the poem does elevate a kind of love: love of the self. It doesn't fit neatly in the sonnet tradition, but in making it seem *close* to that tradition—in a way, *expanding* on the sonnet form—reflects the way that the poem expands upon ideas about romance.

METER

"Love After Love" is written in free verse and does not keep a regular meter. The poem feels casual and intimate, without predictable constraints on its form.

However, Derek Walcott was widely regarded as a master of metrical verse, and the sound of the poem is nevertheless

informed by his ear for poetic rhythm. Certain lines fall into an iambic rhythm, for example—a pattern of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables. Take the first three lines:

> The time will come
> when, with elation,
> you will greet yourself arriving

The following lines are rhythmically looser, however. These choices give the poem a gentle musicality that isn't strict or strained—and feels appropriate to the kindly, reassuring advice it provides.

Strong iambs reappear in line 8:

> Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart

Here the sudden rhythm places strong emphasis on the line, which marks an important shift in the poem: from declarative to imperative sentences, from comforting predictions ("The time will come") to authoritative instructions ("Give wine."). This shift is almost like the "turn," or "volta," that occurs around lines 8-9 of a traditional sonnet: an iambic form that Walcott may intend his poem to resemble in some respects.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Love After Love" has no rhyme scheme.

However, Walcott did often work in rhyme, and his talent for this effect seems to have guided many of his choices here. For example, the poem's repetitions of two line-ending words ("mirror" and "heart"), plus the near-repetition of "come" (line 1) in "welcome" (line 5), could be classified as identical rhyme. (And, of course, the doubling of "mirror" ties in with that word's meaning as well.)

The pairings of "come"/"welcome," "mirror"/"mirror," and "heart"/"heart" account for nearly half of the poem's line endings. Together, they suggest that Walcott wanted a ghostly *hint* of rhyme within a generally free-wheeling form. The fact that some lines are "paired" while others are "unpaired" reinforces the themes of the poem—which is about singleness and romantic connection at the same time!

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker adopts a voice of experience, the voice of someone who's survived romantic disappointment and learned to move on. The speaker addresses the reader directly, with calm sympathy and authority, dispensing consolation and advice. Though the advice is intended to be healing, it also carries shades of judgment, as in the claim that the heartbroken have "ignored" their "lov[ing]" selves in favor of their partners. In elevating the love of the self, the speaker could be seen as taking a skeptical view of traditional romance.

Since there's no evidence of a persona or ironic gap between poet and speaker, it's reasonable to assume that the speaker reflects the attitudes and experience of Derek Walcott (who, during the year the poem was published, was in his mid-40s—and going through his second divorce). It's possible that the poem represents advice and consolation that the poet is giving himself.

By speaking with serene reassurance, the speaker models the kind of serenity they're advising heartbroken people to find in themselves. Keeping the speaker general also allows the poem's advice to feel universal—like anyone who's ever been through heartbreak can learn from it.

SETTING

The poem doesn't specify a time period or geographical setting. It's meant as universal advice about getting over heartbreak, and keeping the setting nonspecific allows its message to resonate far and wide.

That said, the poem does imply a physical setting: "your own" home, whoever "you" may be. As the poem recommends reconnecting with the self, it imagines this process taking place at said home, surrounded by "your own door," "your own mirror," and mementos of the past relationship ("love letters," "photographs," "desperate notes"). It recommends putting away those mementos, too, and focusing inward.

These details reinforce the poem's larger message about rediscovering independence after a breakup rather than remaining dependent on someone else. The speaker believes that home and solitude are the best setting in which to find "love after love"—all the emotional nourishment ("Feast[ing]") you'll need for a while.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Derek Walcott was born and raised in Saint Lucia, where much of his writing is set. Critics have praised his body of work as a landmark of postcolonial literature. One of the most decorated poets of the 20th and early 21st centuries, Walcott received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, with the prize committee citing his "historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment."

Of course, "Love After Love" doesn't wrestle with history or politics, and it isn't specifically set in Saint Lucia or any other location. It's a personal, yet widely applicable, lyric about loss and love. Published in the collection *Sea Grapes* in 1976, when Walcott was 46, it's both a mid-life and a mid-career poem, the work of an author who had a successful literary "life" to "Feast"

on. Though it doesn't stick to any traditional poetic form, it has some structural and thematic links with the sonnet tradition, as well as such lyrics of crisis and spiritual healing as George Herbert's "Love (III)" (1633).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Unlike much of Walcott's work, "Love After Love" doesn't engage deeply with historical themes or locate itself in a specific cultural context. Its language and images are fairly timeless—with the possible exception of those physical "love letters," which used to be more common in a pre-digital age!

The poem's use of religious imagery, particularly its allusion to the rite of Communion in line 8, may have some connection to Walcott's cultural background. He was raised in a Methodist family but educated at a Catholic secondary school in Saint Lucia, which remains predominantly Catholic due to its past colonization by majority-Catholic France.

Communion is a central ritual in the Catholic tradition. Its importance in the cultural atmosphere of Walcott's youth may have inspired him to incorporate it into his poetry—though in a playful and arguably irreverent way. (As a postcolonial writer, Walcott had a complex, original, sometimes skeptical relationship with the literary and religious traditions of the "Old World.")

Walcott's own relationship history might also factor into "Love After Love." The poem was published in 1976, the same year as his second of three divorces. Since the poem celebrates the joys of keeping yourself company, it may reflect the personality of a writer whose romantic life was sometimes troubled and troubling, but who found great success in the solitude of writing.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Watch poet Linton Kwesi Johnson's recitation of "Love After Love" via the BBC. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_3QbH_aNmc)
- The Poet's Biography — Read about Derek Walcott's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/derek-walcott)
- A Recitation by Oprah — Listen to a reading of "Love After Love" by Oprah Winfrey. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aY2I9jnKjTs)
- An Interview with the Poet — Watch a 2010 interview with Derek Walcott that includes readings of some of his poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_6mgbRSUzo)
- The Poet as Nobel Laureate — Read a biography of Derek Walcott, his citation for the 1992 Nobel Prize in Literature, and his Nobel lecture at the Nobel Prize website. (https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1992/walcott/biographical/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER DEREK WALCOTT POEMS

- A Far Cry from Africa

HOW TO CITE

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