Music, When Soft Voices Die

POEM TEXT

Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory—
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heaped for the belovèd's bed;
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on.

SUMMARY

The sounds of a song echo in one's memory even after people have stopped singing. When lovely flowers wither, their scent lives on in the minds of those who smelled them.

When roses die, their petals are piled upon a loved one's bed. Likewise, when you're no longer around, love itself will rest atop thoughts of you.

THEMES

LOVE, DEATH, AND MEMORY

"Music, When Soft Voices Die" meditates on the way love lingers on even when a beloved is "gone," whether just temporarily or for good. Just as "Music" continues to echo through one's mind after it's stopped playing, and the memory of a violet's scent lingers in memory after the flower has wilted, the speaker's loving "thoughts" of their beloved will remain no matter where the beloved is. This poem suggests that, through the power of memory, love can survive any separation—even the ultimate separation of death.

Memories of delightful experiences, the speaker observes, stick around long after those experiences have ended. "When soft voices die," for instance, the "Music" they sang continues to "Vibrate[] in the memory" of those who heard it. And although "sweet violets" eventually "sicken" and die, the perfumes they once emitted still "Live within the sense they quicken." In other words, one can remember the flower's pleasing fragrance long after the flower itself has shriveled.

In the same way, the speaker says, their *beloved* will remain in their memory no matter where the beloved is. Just as a dead rose's "leaves" (that is, petals) can form a "bed" for a "beloved" to lie on, the speaker's "thoughts" of the beloved when they're gone will form a bed for "Love itself to slumber on." In other words, the speaker's love for this person won't wither and die while the sweetheart is away: it will only rest gently on a bed of memories.

The speaker's frequent images of death even suggest that their love will persist past the *final* separation of the grave. If music lasts past when "soft voices die," scent remains when the violet "sickens," and rose petals are still lovely after the rose is "dead," then neither the speaker's love nor their beloved can die completely, either: even if the speaker's beloved is dead and gone, the speaker will go on loving them in memory.

Through memory, the poem thus suggests, love never dies: people can carry their beloved with them as long as they live.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory—

Each of the poem's four couplets provides a different example of how things live on in people's thoughts even after the things *themselves* have ceased to exist. The poem's opening couplet focuses on music. Just because "voices" stop singing, the speaker begins, that doesn't mean the listener no longer *hears* them. An echo of those voices "Vibrates" in the listener's "memory."

The comma after "Music" creates a pause (a caesura), making "Music" stand out in the poem much like it stands out in listeners' memories. Consider how differently the poem would read if the poet had instead started with something like, "When soft voices die / Music vibrates in the memory." There would. be less emphasis on the "Music" being discussed.

Part of the poem's own "Music" comes from its steady meter: it's written mostly in trochaic tetrameter, meaning that lines each contain four trochees (metrical feet that follow a stressed-unstressed pattern, creating a DUM-da rhythm). Here are the first two lines scanned:

Music, | when soft | voices | die,
Vibrates | in the | memor- | y—

All these trochees create a propulsive, galloping rhythm. The meter contains variations, however, that keep readers on their toes. For example, readers might scan the second foot of line 1 as an iamb (an unstressed-stressed foot); some might even argue that this foot is a spondee (two stressed beats, "when soft"). Both lines are also *catalectic*, meaning they're missing their final expected syllables. As a result, they end with firm, stressed beats—perhaps subtly conveying the way the "Music" described lives on rather than fades away.

The poem also follows a straightforward couplet rhyme scheme. These rhyme pairs make the poem feel tightly knit, a subtle nod to the enduring connection between each of the elements described (and, maybe, to the speaker's own partnership with their beloved, something they'll get to later in the poem). The first rhyme (between "die" and "memory") is slant, which prevents the poem from sounding overly stiff or formal. Still, this neat rhyme scheme helps to emphasize the organization of the poem's argument.

In addition to meter and rhyme, these lines also use sibilance: there's the repetition of /s/ and /z/ sounds in "Music," "soft voices," and "Vibrates." This buzzing sibilance mimics those "soft voices" vibrating in listeners' ears.

LINES 3-4

Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken.

Even "when sweet violets" inevitably "sicken," or wither and wilt, the memory of their fragrance continues to bring pleasure. It lives on "within the sense they quicken"—that is, it survives within the memory of those who got to smell them.

Notice that the grammatical structure of line 3 mirrors that of line 1 exactly. This parallelism reflects the fact that lines 3-4 are serving the same rhetorical purpose as lines 1-2. That is, they're meant to prove the same point: that people's memories preserve beautiful experiences even after those experiences have ended.

There's more sibilance here as well, as both /s/ alliteration ("sweet"/"sicken"/"sense") and more general consonance ("violets," "sense"). These hushed sounds evoke the soft, gentle scent of those "sweet" flowers.

These lines also continue to use trochaic tetrameter:

Odours, | when sweet | violets | sicken,
Live with- | in the | sense they | quicken.

The second foot of the third line ("when sweet") can again be read as either an iamb (unstressed-stressed) or a spondee (stressed-stressed). Either way, the slight variation in the rhythm emphasizes the "sweet[ness]" of those "violets," an adjective that echoes the "soft[ness]" of the "voices" in the first line. The experiences the speaker is describing are clearly pleasant, comforting ones.

LINES 5-6

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heaped for the belovèd's bed;

The speaker begins the poem's second quatrain with another image that illustrates the enduring quality of beauty. After a "rose" dies, its "leaves" decorate "the belovèd's bed." Roses are common symbols of love, and their mention here points to the speaker's enduring affection for their beloved.

Note the use of diacope in line 5:

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,

Differentiating between "the rose" itself and its "leaves" subtly supports the speaker's point: the beauty of the rose (its lovely red petals) may persist even after the flower itself "is dead."

Given that the poem has already talked so much about death, the "bed" in line 6 might very well be the beloved's death bed (or even a grave, over which the speaker spreads flowers). Fittingly, the pounding /b/ alliteration and /d/ consonance of "belovèd's bed" adds weighty importance to this image.

Line 5 once again uses parallelism, echoing the grammatical structure of lines 1 and 3. Here are all three lines for comparison:

- "Music, when soft voices die,"
- "Odours, when sweet violets sicken,"
- "Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,"

The repetitive structure helps readers follow the speaker's argument; they're making the same point again and again.

Note, too, that there's a subtle shift in meter in line 6. While previous lines have all been in trochaic tetrameter, line 6 is in *iambic* tetrameter:

Are heaped | for the | belov- | èd's bed;

Iambs are the *opposite* of trochees, so this line follows an unstressed-stressed rhythm (da-DUM). This change in the poem's sound mirrors the speaker's change in subject: the speaker is no longer talking about "Music" or fragrances, but about a dearly loved *person*.

LINES 7-8

And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on.

In the poem's final couplet, the speaker directly addresses "the belovèd" mentioned in line 6:

And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,

The speaker acknowledges that this person will one day die (perhaps one day soon). Yet just as "Music" and "Odours" linger in the mind even after the "voices" and "violets" that created them disappear, so too will the beloved's "thoughts" live on in the speaker's memory.

The speaker personifies "Love itself" as sleeping on those thoughts, just as the beloved rested on a bed of rose petals. The speaker may no longer be able to see or touch their loved one when they have "gone," but they will always have memories of their time together.

Line 7, like line 6, is written in iambic tetrameter:

> And so | thy thoughts, | when thou | art gone,

This continues to draw attention to the fact that the reader has arrived at the heart of the poem's argument: that *people*, too, continue to "Live within" others even after they have died.

The last line is then brimming with sibilance and lilting /l/ consonance:

> Love itself shall slumber on.

The poem sounds soft, gentle, and reverent in its final moments. This line also returns to catalectic trochaic meter, ending the poem on a firm stressed beat that suggests the enduring quality of "Love":

> Love it- | self shall | slumber | on.

SYMBOLS

ROSES

Roses are common symbols of love. The speaker builds on this symbolism when they say that "Rose leaves" may be "heaped for the belovèd's bed." Adorning this bed with rose petals reflects the speaker's enduring affection for their loved one.

Given the poem's many references to dying, that bed might *also* refer to the beloved's *death* bed, or even to their *grave*—that is, their final "resting" place. Scattering a "heap" of rose petals over this bed thus reflects the way that the speaker's love persists beyond death.

The speaker further compares those "Rose leaves" to "thoughts" of their beloved. Just as the beloved themselves rests on a bed of rose petals, personified "Love" rests atop the speaker's memories of this person. These memories are like the "Rose leaves": an enduring testament to love.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Rose leaves, when the rose is dead, / Are heaped for the belovèd's bed;"

POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

The poem is filled with parallelism: the speaker returns to the same grammatical structure again and again. This makes the poem's argument easy to follow and adds some emphatic rhythm to its language.

Each of the poem's four couplets begins with a grammatically identical line. There's a noun ("Music," "Odours," "Rose leaves," and "thy thoughts"), followed by a comma (creating a caesura); the second part of the phrase then begins with the word "when," followed by a reference to death. Take lines 1-2:

> Music, when soft voices die,
> [...]
> Odours, when sweet violets sicken,

The odd-numbered lines, meanwhile, each *respond* to this image of something pleasant dying, insisting that these things continue to exist in the minds of those who survive them. This lends the poem a kind of AB AB AB AB logical structure. Through this steady parallelism, the speaker makes it clear that these images are all meant to illustrate the *same* point: that love, beauty, and so on live on in people's memories.

Line 7 breaks up the rhythm a little by adding "And so" at the beginning of the line, before jumping right back into the expected pattern:

> And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,

This slight shift in the rhythm adds emphasis to the speaker's final point about love enduring beyond death. That "And so" indicates that the everlasting nature of love was the speaker's point all along, the natural conclusion to all of the poem's previous points.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Music, when soft voices die,"
- **Line 3:** "Odours, when sweet violets sicken,"
- **Line 5:** "Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,"
- **Line 7:** "thy thoughts, when thou art gone,"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses personification throughout, treating various inanimate things as though they were living, breathing beings. For instance, in the first line, the speaker doesn't just say that

the "voices" singing "Music" stop or fade away; they "die." Likewise, in line 3, the speaker says that "sweet violets sicken."

The personification in both instances is subtle, but it hints to the reader that the speaker is thinking about more than literal music and violets here: they're also thinking about their beloved, whose own "soft voice" and "sweetness" are apparently dying.

The speaker more explicitly personifies "Love" in the last line of the poem, saying that even after their beloved is dead and gone,

> Love itself shall slumber on.

This personification separates "Love itself" from the beloved. Love, here, transcends death, living on and resting peacefully upon "thoughts" of the speaker's beloved.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "when soft voices die,"
- **Line 3:** "when sweet violets sicken,"
- **Line 8:** "Love itself shall slumber on."

SIBILANCE

The poem contains quite a bit of sibilance throughout. These soft, smooth sounds add to the poem's gentle, reverent tone. Listen to the mixture of /s/ and /z/ sounds in lines 1-2, for example:

> Music, when soft voices die,
> Vibrates in the memory—

These buzzing sounds evoke the "vibration" of that music that lingers on "in the memory." The poem's *language* thus helps to bring its *images* to life.

Sibilance becomes even stronger in lines 3-4, where it overlaps with alliteration ("sweet"/"sicken"/"sense"):

> Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
> Live within the sense they quicken.

Again, the sounds of the lines evoke the image described. The language is smooth, gentle, and quiet, reflecting the sad sweetness of those wilting flowers.

Sibilance combines with consonance of the lilting /l/ sound in the poem's final line:

> Love itself shall slumber on.

These soothing sounds end the poem with an appropriate hush, bringing to life the image of "Love itself" resting upon thoughts of the speaker's beloved.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Music," "soft," "voices"
- **Line 2:** "Vibrates"
- **Line 3:** "Odours," "sweet," "violets," "sicken"
- **Line 4:** "sense"
- **Line 8:** "itself," "slumber"

ALLITERATION

The poem includes a few examples of alliteration, which makes certain phrases and images stand out to the reader's ear.

Some of this alliteration overlaps with sibilance, as is the case in lines 3-4 with "sweet," "sicken," and "sense." Again, the soft, smooth sounds here lend the line some gentle music, evoking the beauty and "sweet[ness]" of both the "violets" and the "belovèd" that those violets seem to represent.

The alliteration in "voices" and "Vibrates" creates a buzzing sensation that mimics the way that music "Vibrates in the memory." The /v/ sounds of "violets" and "live," while not strictly alliterative, add to the effect of music reverberating throughout the poem.

Finally, note the strong /b/ alliteration in line 6:

> Are heaped for the belovèd's bed;

These bold sounds call attention to the image of the beloved's resting place (subtly implied to be their death bed or, perhaps, even their grave). The consonance of the /d/ sounds ("belovèd's bed") adds yet more weight to the phrase.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "voices"
- **Line 2:** "Vibrates"
- **Line 3:** "sweet," "sicken"
- **Line 4:** "sense"
- **Line 6:** "belovèd's," "bed"

VOCABULARY

Odours (Line 3) - Scents or fragrances.

Rose leaves (Line 5) - That is, rose petals.

Heaped (Line 6) - Piled up.

Belovèd's (Line 6) - Someone who is loved or adored by someone else. Note that the accent mark over the "e" just means the word should be pronounced with three syllables (be-lov-ed) rather than two (be-lov'd).

Thy/Thou (Line 7) - An archaic version of *your/you*.

Art (Line 7) - An archaic version of *are*.

Slumber (Line 8) - Sleep.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Music, When Soft Voices Die" contains eight lines arranged into two quatrains (four-line stanzas), each of which contains two rhyming couplets.

The poem's brevity is part of what makes it so striking: the speaker conveys the *enduring* quality of love through memory in just a few *fleeting* lines.

Note that such brevity is uncharacteristic of Shelley, however, and it isn't clear whether he considered this piece a finished poem or whether it was simply a draft he might have later reworked. His wife, the novelist Mary Shelley, found it among his notebooks after his death and published it, along with many other fragments.

METER

Overall, the poem uses trochaic tetrameter. This means each line contains four trochees, metric feet that follow a stressed-unstressed pattern (DUM-da). Line 4 is a perfect example of this meter in action:

> Live with- | in the | sense they | quicken.

This meter lends an insistent, driving rhythm to the poem, echoing its main idea that "sweet" things such as "Music," fragrances, beauty, and "Love" live on after death.

That being said, the poem's meter isn't exactly rigid. For instance, lines 1-2 are both catalectic, meaning that they're missing their final expected syllables:

> Music, | when soft | voices | die,
> Vibrates | in the | memor- | y—

In ending these lines on stressed beats, the speaker makes them sound more emphatic; the lines land firmly rather than simply fading away. There's also an arguable iamb in the second foot of line 1, though readers might scan this as a spondee: "when soft"; either way, the poem keeps readers on their toes. Lines 5 and 8 are both catalectic as well.

Notice that lines 6-7 are actually in *iambic* tetrameter, following an unstressed-stressed rhythm—the *opposite* of trochaic meter:

> Are heaped | for the | belov- | èd's bed;
> And so | thy thoughts, | when thou | art gone,

This subtle shift in the poem's rhythm corresponds with the speaker's movement from talking about more abstract loss—the fading of "Music" and the "sicken[ing]" of flowers—to the death of their "belovèd." It thus helps to emphasize what the poem is *really* about: the way "Love" continues to exist even after a person dies.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a simple AABB CCDD rhyme scheme. The first of these rhymes, "die" and "memory," is slant, keeping the poem's sounds musical but not overly rigid.

Each of the poem's rhyming couplets corresponds with a different set of images: lines 1-2 describe "Music," lines 3-4 describe "Odours," lines 5-6 describe "Rose leaves," and lines 7-8 describe memories of a loved one. In this way, the poem's simple yet orderly rhyme scheme helps to emphasize the organization of the speaker's argument.

The use of couplets might also subtly reflect the *partnership* between the speaker and their beloved.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is anonymous, never given a name, age, gender, occupation, and so on. This is appropriate for a poem about something most people can relate to. Though not everyone has lost a "belovèd," everyone, one hopes, knows what it's like to remember a beautiful or wonderful experience that has since ended.

While the poem seems to be describing a *general* experience of love, death, and memory rather than a specific one, Shelley himself had lost several loved ones (including a daughter) by the time he wrote it, and he was undoubtedly drawing on his own experiences.

SETTING

The poem doesn't have a specific setting. Its themes are quite broad and can apply to any time or place, so it's fitting that its imagery doesn't tie it down to one location. Even when the speaker mentions "violets" and "rose[s]," they're not pointing to *literal* flowers. Instead, they're using the image of such flowers to describe the way beautiful things can live on in one's memory.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was a major figure in the artistic and literary movement known as Romanticism. This movement emerged in response to the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and rationality (itself brought about by advances in scientific inquiry, technology, and industry in the 1700s).

Shelley's work, like a lot of Romantic poetry, was concerned with deep feeling, the power of the natural world, and a desire for political and personal freedom. Where earlier Enlightenment-era writers like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift aspired to elegant phrasings and satirical wit, Shelley and many of his contemporaries preferred to write passionate verse that valued the mysteries and terrors of the imagination over crisp rationality.

Shelley wrote "Music, When Soft Voices Die" in 1821, only a year before his untimely death by drowning. The poem is rather uncharacteristic of Shelley in that it is shorter and simpler than many of his other famous poems, such as "Mont Blanc," "Adonais," or even shorter but still complex poems such as "Ozymandias." It isn't known whether he considered the poem finished or if he planned to revise or expand it. His wife, the novelist Mary Shelley (author of *Frankenstein*), discovered it among his notebooks after he died. It was published in 1824, in the *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, which included a preface by his wife.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shelley's short life was marked by tragedy. For example, while traveling in Italy in 1818, his 17-month-old daughter Clara fell ill and died. Mary Shelley fell into a severe depression after this event and grew distant from her husband, whom she held partly responsible for their daughter's death. Shelley himself died tragically young, drowning in a shipwreck in the Bay of Naples after he insisted on sailing out in a storm.

As a Romantic writer, Shelley's work was responding, in part, to the massive social changes spurred by the Industrial Revolution. During this time, factory work began to overtake farming as the country's primary form of labor, and cities like London and Manchester became bigger and more powerful as people moved there from the countryside, looking for work. This earthshaking period changed England from a largely rural society to a mostly urban one—and, many Romantic poets thought, robbed the world of its magic and natural beauty.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life — A biography of Shelley from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/percy-bysshe-shelley)
- Shelley's Posthumous Rise to Fame — An article written on the 200th anniversary of Shelley's death. (https://theconversation.com/percy-bysshe-shelley-at-200-how-the-poet-became-famous-after-his-death-186616)
- A Look at British Romanticism — The Poetry Foundation's introduction to one of the most important movements in English literature. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152982/an-introduction-to-british-romanticism)
- A Documentary on Shelley's Life — A 2012 Write Like documentary looking at Shelley's upbringing and literary accomplishments. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAv-40vNPhY)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxTINZibpDo)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY POEMS

- England in 1819
- Love's Philosophy
- Mutability
- Ode to the West Wind
- Ozymandias
- Song to the Men of England
- Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples
- To a Skylark

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