Renouncement

POEM TEXT

I must not think of thee; and, tired yet strong,
I shun the thought that lurks in all delight—
The thought of thee—and in the blue heaven's height,
And in the sweetest passage of a song.
Oh, just beyond the fairest thoughts that throng
This breast, the thought of thee waits hidden yet bright;
But it must never, never come in sight;
I must stop short of thee the whole day long.
But when sleep comes to close each difficult day,
When night gives pause to the long watch I keep,
And all my bonds I needs must loose apart,
Must doff my will as raiment laid away,—
With the first dream that comes with the first sleep
I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart.

SUMMARY

I definitely shouldn't be thinking about you. But no matter how tired I am, I'm determined to reject the thought that hides behind every little pleasure throughout the day: the thought of you, which also hides in the blue of the sky up above and in the loveliest parts of any song. Oh, the thought of you burns just behind every good and beautiful thought that crowds my heart. Still, I can never look at the thought of you directly. All day, I stop myself just before I reach it. But when I go to sleep at the end of a long, hard day, the night pauses my endless vigilance. I have to unfasten the ties holding me back and set aside my willpower as though I were taking off a piece of clothing for the night. As soon as I fall asleep and start to dream, I run toward your embrace.

THEMES

THE INTENSITY OF UNATTAINABLE OR FORBIDDEN LOVE

The speaker of "Renouncement" is desperately trying not to think about a person she can't have, believing that doing so will, presumably, protect her from heartbreak. (The poem never states why the speaker can't be with her beloved, but it was inspired by poet Alice Meynell's own love for a Catholic priest.) The speaker knows she must "renounce[]" (or give up) her feelings for this person, even though thoughts of her beloved are better than "the sweetest passage of song"; they hide up "in the blue heaven's height" and "beyond the fairest thoughts that throng / This breast." In other words, such thoughts are the most wonderful, joyful, intoxicating thoughts around—a source of delicious, agonizing pain.

If the speaker's not careful, her mind will peek at those "hidden" thoughts, which remain "bright" and enticing as they "wait" for the speaker to let down her guard. The heart wants what it wants, the poem suggests, and the fact that this love is off-limits seems only to make the speaker want it *more*. Indeed, the poem suggests that trying desperately not to think about this person only makes the thought of them even more tantalizing at night! When she gets to the end of "each difficult day," she must loosen up the "bonds" that have been holding her thoughts prisoner. As she drifts off to sleep, she is confronted with all these banished thoughts of the person she loves and is ready to fling herself into this person's arms.

The poem's final moments, when the dreaming speaker is "gathered" up by her beloved's heart, feel all the more ecstatic coming after 12 lines of self-denial and buildup. Sometimes, the poem suggests, desire is more potent precisely *because* it's forbidden.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

WILL VS. DESIRE

In "Renouncement," the speaker is trying desperately not to dwell on a love that, for unexplained reasons, cannot be. What *is* clear is that the speaker's willpower is only so strong in the face of overwhelming desire. Though the speaker can stave off thoughts of this person during the day, keeping thoughts of this person at bay requires constant, exhausting effort that proves futile at night: the speaker's resolve unravels the moment she goes to sleep and, defenses down, gives in to her desires in her dreams. Determined as she may be, she simply can't control her unconscious mind, and desire isn't something that can just be shut off.

All day long, the speaker tries to steer her thoughts away from the person she wants but cannot have. Everything from the distant "blue" skies to "the sweetest passage of a song" reminds her of this person, but she turns her attention away again and again, choosing "never, never" to let the thought of her beloved "come in sight." Clearly, she is strong-willed and determined to move on.

But no matter how diligent she may be about turning her attention to other things during the day, the speaker isn't able to control the *unconscious* thoughts that come to her in dreams. When "each difficult day" comes to a close, "night gives pause to the long watch [she] keep[s]." She's worn out by this constant vigilance and sets aside her "will" like a garment one takes off in order to sleep. But as soon as she does so, her mind floods with the thoughts she tried so hard to push aside all day. "With the first dream" she finds herself running to this person, "gathered to [their] heart." All the conscious discipline in the world, the poem illustrates, can't change how she feels.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 7-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I must not think of thee; and, tired yet strong,
I shun the thought that lurks in all delight—
The thought of thee—and in the blue heaven's height,
And in the sweetest passage of a song.

The poem's title readers know what the poem will be about: *renouncement* refers to the act of giving up something one enjoys or desires. The poem itself begins with the speaker announcing exactly what it is she intends to let go of:

> I must not think of thee; [...]

"Thee" sounds formal, but it just means "you." The speaker, for reasons that aren't revealed in the poem itself, has chosen to give up fantasizing about someone she clearly longs to be with.

Alice Meynell wrote the poem after falling in love with the Catholic priest who helped convert her, and the poem reflects the fact that this love was never going to be realized (priests take vows of celibacy and can't marry). The speaker's motivations in the poem are left vague, however, allowing the reader to imagine any number of possible scenarios. Perhaps this "thee" is already married; perhaps they just don't love the speaker back. What's clear is that thinking about this person won't do the speaker any good.

The firm caesura created by the semi-colon in the middle of line 1 makes the speaker's opening statement sound utterly resolute. She might be "tired," worn out by the effort it takes not to think about this person, but she's *determined* to get them out of her head:

> I must not think of thee; and, tired yet strong,

She escalates things in line 2 when she declares, "I shun the thought that lurks in all delight." The verb *shun* means to forcefully, vehemently avoid or reject something. The anaphora of lines 1 and 2 ("I must," "I shun") make the speaker sound more emphatic still. She actively, consciously rejects this "thought"—the "thought of thee," despite the fact that it "lurks in all delight."

In other words, this thought sneakily hides within everything that brings the speaker joy: "in the blue heaven's height," or up in the bright blue sky, and "in the sweetest passage of a song." Basically, everything lovely or happy thing reminds the speaker of her beloved. The breathy alliteration of "heaven's height" and the gentle sibilance of "sweetest passage of song" make these lines themselves sound lovely. It seems that the speaker *enjoys* thinking about this person, which makes her efforts to stop thinking about them all the more difficult.

A Petrarchan sonnet, "Renouncement" consists of 14 lines of iambic pentameter. This is a meter in which each line contains five iambs, poetic units that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM). Here are lines 1-2 as an example:

> I must | not think | of thee; | and, tired | yet strong,
> I shun | the thought | that lurks | in all | delight—

This firm, propulsive meter reflects the speaker's confidence and resolve. And yet, already, there's a subtle irony in these lines that *undermines* that resolve. The speaker uses apostrophe here and throughout the poem, directly addressing the person she is trying to push from her mind. On the one hand, this apostrophe makes the poem sound more intimate and vulnerable; the speaker is quite love-sick, though trying very hard to take control of her feelings. At the same time, this apostrophe undercuts the speaker's claim that she's not going to this person; she's talking to them directly, and has written a whole poem about them!

LINES 5-8

Oh, just beyond the fairest thoughts that throng
This breast, the thought of thee waits hidden yet bright;
But it must never, never come in sight;
I must stop short of thee the whole day long.

"Oh," the speaker begins, this exclamation conveying a sense of weariness, agony, and, perhaps, subversive delight. The caesura after "Oh" suggests the way that thoughts of her beloved seem to stop her in her tracks.

Behind the most wonderful ("fairest") thoughts the speaker has, the poem continues, the thought of this person "waits hidden yet bright." This is a somewhat paradoxical statement: how can something "hidden," or out of sight, be "bright"? The thought of this person, it seems, is no less vivid or urgent just because it's tucked away. It's a constant, beautiful glimmer in the back of the speaker's mind. Trying not to pay attention to

this thought must be like trying not to look at a beautiful view; knowing this thought will bring her pleasure is a constant source of temptation.

The firm, forceful alliteration of "breast" and "bright" evokes the power of this tempting thought. It also calls attention to the place where this thought lives: in the speaker's "breast," or heart. Her brain is trying to control her feelings, but her feelings don't want to listen.

The thought of her beloved "must never, never come in sight," the speaker continues, the epizeuxis here ("never, never") emphasizing the speaker's resolve. Still, the speaker insists that she "stop[s] short" of giving into these thoughts "the whole day long." No wonder she's so "tired"—trying not to fantasize about this person is a full-time job!

LINES 9-12

But when sleep comes to close each difficult day,
When night gives pause to the long watch I keep,
And all my bonds I needs must loose apart,
Must doff my will as raiment laid away,—

The "But" in line 9 introduces the sonnet's *volta* or turn. The speaker spent the octave (or first eight lines) describing her self-discipline throughout the day; she'll spend the sestet (or final six lines) describing what happens at night.

The speaker doesn't immediately tell readers what she does "when" the day ends, however, and the anaphora of lines 9-10 create a sense of building anticipation:

> But **when** sleep comes to close each difficult day,
> **When** night gives pause to the long watch I keep,

The day is "difficult" because the speaker has spent all her time trying to control her thoughts, but the arrival of night invariably "gives pause" to the speaker's "long watch"—her vigilant attempt to keep thoughts of her love at bay.

At night, she "must" undo the "bonds" that keep her conscious thoughts in check. She's essentially been keeping her thoughts prisoner all day, but in order to sleep she has to relax and set them free. She must lay aside her "will" (or ability to choose and act accordingly to her choice) like one "doff" a "raiment." In other words, she must cast off her will as one would toss aside a garment before going to bed.

This simile is particularly striking considering when "Renouncement" was written. Women in Victorian England wore very constricting clothes (including corsets) throughout the day, making it difficult for them to move or breathe normally. This suggests that the speaker's choice not to think about the person she loves inhibits her from being able to think and act naturally. But by the end of the day, when she climbs into bed, she's completely exhausted and ready to surrender herself to whatever dreams may come.

LINES 13-14

With the first dream that comes with the first sleep
I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart.

The speaker makes a confession in the poem's final two lines. At night, she gives in to the very fantasies she spent all day trying to avoid. As soon as sleep hits, "With the first dream that comes," she finds herself racing toward her beloved.

The diacope of "first" in line 13 emphasizes just how quickly the speaker's subconscious desires take over once she has fallen asleep:

> With the **first** dream that comes with the **first** sleep

Metrically, this line emphasizes these "firsts" even more with two spondees (feet made up of two stressed syllables in a row):

> With the | **first dream** | that **comes** | with the | **first** sleep

The rhythm of this line is forceful and intense, underscoring just how strong the speaker's desire is.

The speaker concludes, "I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart." Epizeuxis (the repetition of "I run, I run") and anaphora (the repetition of "I") make the poem's final moments extremely dramatic. She doesn't just imagine the person she loves—she imagines herself sprinting towards them and being caught up in their embrace. The forcefulness of the ending suggests that all the speaker's attempts to reject her desire for this person have backfired; pushing these thoughts away has only made them stronger.

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

Frequent anaphora makes the language of "Renouncement" sound more emphatic and intense. In the opening lines, for instance, the repetition of the word "I" helps to convey the speaker's passionate conviction:

> **I** must not think of thee; and tired yet strong,
> **I** shun the thought that lurks in all delight—

She declares that she "must not think" of her beloved, and then doubles down on this statement in the very next line: she "shun[s]," or actively, vehemently rejects, "the thought" of this person. This is easier said than done, of course, given that everything "delight[ful] seems to remind the speaker of her beloved—something the anaphora of "and in the" in lines 3-4 makes clear:

> [...] and in the blue heaven's height,
> And in the sweetest passage of a song.

The thought of this person "lurks" both "in the blue heaven's height [...] And in the sweetest passage of a song." Anaphora (and polysyndeton with that repetition of the word "and") creates the sense that the speaker could go on and on; there are likely plenty more places where thoughts of her beloved hide.

Anaphora also creates a sense of forward momentum here and throughout the poem. Listen to the repetition of "When" in lines 9-10, which calls attention to the shift that happens as day turns to night and the speaker can no longer control her desire:

> But when sleep comes to close each difficult day,
> When night gives pause to the long watch I keep,

Anaphora drags the transition from night to day out, building anticipation. That anticipation then gets released with the exuberant anaphora in the poem's final line: "I run, I rum, I am gathered to thy heart."

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I"
- **Line 2:** "I"
- **Line 3:** "and in the"
- **Line 4:** "And in the"
- **Line 9:** "But," "when"
- **Line 10:** "When"
- **Line 14:** "I," "I," "I"

EPIZEUXIS

Epizeuxis, like anaphora, adds drama to the poem, making the speaker sound more passionate and intense. The device first appears in line 7, where the speaker says that "the thought" of the person she loves "must never, never come in sight." While a single "never" would have gotten the speaker's point across well enough, repeating the word "never" twice in a row makes this declaration sound much more emphatic. The speaker absolutely cannot afford to let herself daydream about her beloved!

Epizeuxis pops up again in the poem's final line (where it overlaps with anaphora). The speaker says that when the day is finally over and she falls asleep, her ability to resist the person she's not supposed to be thinking about falls away. With the very "first dream," she says, "I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart." This phrase is also an example of parataxis. The swift, clipped language mirrors the fact that the speaker, in sleep, has thrown caution and control to the wind. Now that she's not awake to reign in her thoughts, she's immediately carried away by them. Repetition conveys her enthusiastic desire to give in to the fantasy she spent all day resisting. The repetition also draws attention to the particular verb the poet has chosen: the speaker doesn't *walk* to her love, she "run[s]" as fast as she can.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "never, never"
- **Line 14:** "I run, I run,"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds pops of music and emphasis to "Renouncement." Take the breathy /h/ and smooth /s/ alliteration of lines 3-4, which highlight two things that remind the speaker of her beloved: "the blue heaven's height" and "the sweetest passage of a song." The gentle sounds of the poem's language mirror the pleasant beauty of the sky and this music. (Alliteration overlaps with more general sibilance as well here, in "sweetest" and "passage.")

In the next line, unvoiced /th/ sounds connect "thoughts" with "throng." Once again, the poem's sounds mirror its content: to *throng* means to crowd, and the /th/ sound here seems to crowd the phrase itself! Later, bold /br/ alliteration emphasizes "breast" and "bright," calling attention both to the speaker's heart and the vivid power of the thoughts that dwell there.

Finally, in line 9, the sharp alliteration of "comes to close" and the pounding of "difficult day" emphasize the speaker's weariness at the end of the day; trying to avoid thinking about this person is taking up every ounce of energy she has!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "heaven's height"
- **Line 4:** "sweetest," "song"
- **Line 5:** "thoughts," "throng"
- **Line 6:** "breast," "bright"
- **Line 9:** "comes," "close," "difficult day"

CAESURA

Caesurae appear almost exclusively in the poem's octave: the first eight lines that describe the speaker keeping a lid on her desire for the lover she can't have. Not incidentally, filling these lines with caesurae makes them feel slower and more self-conscious, echoing the speaker's attempts to reign in her thoughts while she's awake. In the first line, for example, there are two caesurae in a row:

> I must not think of thee; and, tired yet strong,

The firm pause created by the semi-colon after "thee" makes the speaker's opening statement sound more determined and final. The comma after "and" then subtly evokes the speaker's weariness as she pushes away the thoughts that she would

actually like nothing more than to indulge in.

There's another caesura in the middle of line 3, thanks to a dash after the phrase "The thought of thee." In fact, this phrase is sandwiched between *two* dashes:

> I shun the thought that lurks in all delight—
> The thought of thee—and in the blue heaven's height,

The dash on either side of "The thought of thee" makes this phrase stand out; it is, after all, the central idea of the poem, the thing the speaker can't get out of her head.

These pauses don't mean that the speaker isn't passionate. On the contrary, they create the sensation of listening to a person who is trying desperately to *control* her passion. The caesura near the beginning of line 5 ("Oh, just beyond the fairest thoughts that throng") draws attention to the speaker's exclamation of pleasure and desire. The pause suggests the way the speaker must stop to catch her breath when she thinks of her love. The caesura in line 6 ("This breast, the thought") works similarly while also calling attention to the speaker's lovelorn heart.

Most of the second half of the poem contains no caesurae. Instead, it plows ahead, building momentum as the speaker "loose[ns]" the "bonds" she's placed on her mind and heart.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "thee; and, tired"
- **Line 3:** "thee—and"
- **Line 5:** "Oh, just"
- **Line 6:** "breast, the"
- **Line 7:** "never, never"
- **Line 14:** "run, I," "run, I"

SIMILE

The speaker uses a simile to describe the way she must set aside her self-control at the end of the day and go to sleep. She says she "Must doff" (or remove) her "will as raiment laid away." A *raiment* is a garment, so the speaker is comparing falling asleep to taking off a restrictive item of clothing. Just as a person can't fall asleep wearing their tight, uncomfortable daytime clothes (all the more tight and uncomfortable for a woman in Victorian England, when corsets were still in vogue), the speaker can't fall asleep while controlling her thoughts. But as soon as she gives up control and falls asleep, her heart takes over and sends up images of what she really desires: to be united with the person she loves.

The image of setting aside her clothes/will and then joining her love also suggests the speaker's vulnerability in sleep. Once she is no longer conscious, she is not the "strong," "shun[ning]," moral beacon she's been throughout the day, but simply a person who desires another person. Of course, the simile of removing one's clothes is a decidedly sensual one—particularly for a woman of this time period!

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Must doff my will as raiment laid away"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker addresses her beloved directly throughout. This person is not there and cannot respond, making this an example of apostrophe. On one level, apostrophe makes the poem sound more intimate and vulnerable: the repeated use of "thee" and "thy" makes it sounds like the speaker is actually talking directly to the *reader*, who gets a glimpse into the speaker's innermost desires.

At the same time, however, apostrophe creates some subtle irony. The speaker insists that she "must not think" of her beloved and that she actively rejects any thought of this person. And yet, she spends the whole poem addressing this person directly! Clearly, this "thee" is on the speaker's mind all day!

It isn't apparent from the text whether this person is aware of the feelings she has for them, whether they would reciprocate those feelings, and what it would mean for her if they did—it's only clear that the speaker has decided actually being with this person isn't a possibility. Despite her resolve, though, the speaker addresses the object of her desire as if deep down inside she wants this person to know exactly how she feels.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I must not think of thee"
- **Line 3:** "The thought of thee"
- **Line 6:** "the thought of thee waits hidden yet bright"
- **Line 8:** "I must stop short of thee the whole day long"
- **Line 14:** "I run, I run, I am gathered to thy heart"

VOCABULARY

Thee/Thy (Line 1, Line 3, Line 6, Line 8, Line 14) - Old-fashioned terms for "you"/"your." Despite sounding stuffy to modern ears, these words were initially used as casual forms of address.

Shun (Line 2) - Firmly reject, avoid, or steer clear of.

Lurks (Line 2) - To hide or lie in wait.

Throng (Line 5) - Crowd together.

Breast (Line 6) - Heart.

Needs must loose apart (Line 11) - The speaker is saying that she must unfasten the metaphorical "bonds" around her thoughts.

Doff (Line 12) - Take off and set aside.

Raiment (Line 12) - A piece of clothing.

Laid away (Line 12) - Set aside.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Renouncement" is a Petrarchan sonnet: a 14-line poem written in iambic pentameter. Petrarchan sonnets can be split into two distinct parts: an octave (an 8-line stanza) followed by a sestet (a six-line stanza). These stanzas can be further divided into two quatrains followed by two tercets, based on the poem's rhyme scheme (ABBA ABBA for the octave, and CDE CDE for the sestet).

The octave of a Petrarchan sonnet presents a kind of argument or problem—in the case of "Renouncement," the speaker's struggle not to think about the person she loves. The sestet then *responds* to this problem. The shift between sections is called the sonnet's *volta*—a turn in the poem's thinking that can provide a resolution or a counterargument to everything that's been said so far. The volta here coincides with the speaker's admission that she can't control her thoughts at night and ultimately surrenders to the fantasies she spends all day trying to avoid.

METER

The poem is written in iambic pentameter, meaning each line contains five iambs—feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM). For example, here are lines 1-2:

> I must | not think | of thee; | and, tired | yet strong,
> I shun | the thought | that lurks | in all | delight—

The poem's steady, driving rhythm helps to convey the speaker's self-control and discipline. The meter is very regular throughout the poem, but there are a few variations that keep things interesting. For example, there's a spondee (two stressed syllables in a row) in the fourth foot of line 10:

> When night | gives pause | to the | long watch | I keep

This spondee stands out all the more clearly coming on the heels of two unaccented syllables in a row, and it emphasizes the intensity of the speaker's "long watch" (that is, her vigilant attempts to think of anything other than the person she desires).

Spondees pop up again in line 13:

> With the | first dream | that comes | with the | first sleep

Here, each spondee again follows two unaccented syllables in a row, so that "first dream" and "first sleep" ring out loud and clear. It isn't just that the speaker dreams about this person; it's that the *moment* her guard is down, these dreams come rushing in with great urgency—revealing just how hard it's been for her to keep these thoughts at bay all day.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows one of the rhyme schemes possible for a Petrachan sonnet: ABBAABBACDECDE.

The poem's octave, the ABBA ABBA part, describes the speaker's waking hours, when she must resist thoughts of the person she wants to be with. The poem's sestet then introduces new rhyme sounds (CDECDE) to coincide with a shift in content: now, the speaker describes what happens when night comes—and she is powerless to control her unconscious desires.

The poem's rhymes are all perfect (i.e., "strong" and "song," "delight" and "height"), ringing out clearly to the reader. This, along with the use of steady iambic meter, makes the speaker feel confident and self-assured throughout.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Renouncement" is someone who is in love with someone she can't be with and is trying with all her might not to think of this person. However, the more she fights off fantasies of being with this person, the more her unconscious desire for this person seems to grow.

The poem itself never offers any biographical details about the speaker, who might be any age or gender; we're using female pronouns in this guide for clarity and because the poem was almost certainly inspired by Alice Meynell's real life. The poet fell in love with a Roman Catholic priest. Catholic priests take vows of celibacy and can't marry, so this love was doomed from the start! The speaker likewise knows that this love can never be, but that doesn't stop her true feelings from rushing in the second she lets her guard down.

SETTING

Readers can think of the first part of the poem (the octave, lines 1) as taking place during the day, when everything from blue skies to pleasant music reminds the speaker of a love she can't have and is trying not to dwell on. The second part of the poem (the sestet, lines 9-14) then takes place at night, when the tired speaker sets aside her "will" as though it were a restrictive piece of clothing and lets her mind and heart run free. In her dreams, she rushes toward the person she loves.

Other than day/night, the poem doesn't have a specific setting—it could be happening anywhere in the world at any

point in history.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

English poet, journalist, and activist Alice Meynell (1847-1922) published "Renouncement" in her second collection, *Poems*, in 1893. Meynell had written the poem (and her equally popular "After a Parting") after converting to Roman Catholicism in 1868 and falling in love with Father Augustus Dignam, the priest who had helped convert her. Since Catholic priests take vows of celibacy and cannot marry, this love was doomed from the start.

Known for her short lyric poems, Meynell was particularly adept at writing sonnets. The sonnet originated in 13th-century Italy and was later popularized by the 14th-century poet Francesco Petrarca (and, after that, popularized in English by William Shakespeare). The sonnet was the go-to form for love poems (including the unrequited or forbidden kind) for Renaissance writers, so it's a fitting choice for "Renouncement." Other famous Petrarchan sonnets include "How Do I Love Thee" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Our Mothers" by Christina Rossetti, and "I, being born a woman and distressed" by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Meynell's father was close friends with Charles Dickens, and as a result, the young poet grew up surrounded by literary figures. In addition to Dickens, Meynell was acquainted with Christina Rossetti, George Eliot, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (the latter was her third cousin, in fact), and John Ruskin. Alfred Lord Tennyson, who became England's poet laureate in 1850, was also an admirer of her work. After Tennyson's death in 1892, Meynell was considered for the position of poet laureate; the only other woman who had been considered up until that point was Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Alice Meynell's life mostly coincided with the rule of Queen Victoria, an era marked both by revolutionary change and reactionary conservatism. The Victorians were innovators and empire-builders, and England reshaped itself considerably under the reign of its first truly powerful queen since Elizabeth I. A primarily rural population made an unprecedented shift to the cities as factory work outpaced farm work, and writers from Dickens to Hardy worried about the human effects of this kind of change.

Yet even as this period ushered in a great deal of innovation and expansion (often through colonial violence—which Meynell spoke out against in her journalism), it saw a return to traditional family values. Perhaps in response to this speedy reconfiguration of the world, Victorian social culture became deeply conservative. English women were expected to adhere to a strict code of sexual morals: a woman must be chaste, pliant, and submissive, and any deviation could mean social exile. This poem's speaker's "strong" control over her thoughts throughout the day reflects qualities that were considered important for women at the time; keeping a tight rein on her desires would have been precisely what was expected of her.

In her daily life, Meynell was not so quiet. A member of the Women's Suffrage Movement, Meynell also pursued working rights for women.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "Renouncement." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQIWdVfouK4)
- Meynell's Biography — Learn more about Alice Meynell's life and the inspiration for "Renouncement." (https://poets.org/poet/alice-meynell)
- An Introduction to Victorian Poetry — Check out a brief overview of the era in which Meynell wrote. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/victorian)
- The Poems of Alice Meynell — View a a June 1923 issue of The Atlantic in which a posthumous review of Meynell's collected poems appears. (https://cdn.theatlantic.com/media/archives/1923/06/131-6/132384654.pdf)

HOW TO CITE

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