She was a Phantom of Delight

POEM TEXT

1 She was a Phantom of delight
2 When first she gleamed upon my sight;
3 A lovely Apparition, sent
4 To be a moment's ornament;
5 Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;
6 Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;
7 But all things else about her drawn
8 From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;
9 A dancing Shape, an Image gay,
10 To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

11 I saw her upon nearer view,
12 A Spirit, yet a Woman too!
13 Her household motions light and free,
14 And steps of virgin liberty;
15 A countenance in which did meet
16 Sweet records, promises as sweet;
17 A Creature not too bright or good
18 For human nature's daily food;
19 For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
20 Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles.

21 And now I see with eye serene
22 The very pulse of the machine;
23 A Being breathing thoughtful breath;
24 A Traveller betwixt life and death;
25 The reason firm, the temperate will,
26 Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;
27 A perfect Woman; nobly planned,
28 To warn, to comfort, and command;
29 And yet a Spirit still, and bright
30 With something of an angel light.

SUMMARY

She was an alluring spirit when I first saw her, a beautiful ghost sent to earth to make life lovelier. Her eyes shone like the evening stars and her hair was also the color of the early evening. In every other way, though, she resembled spring and the brightness of the morning. She was a dancing figure, a happy picture, sent to surprise and disorient me.

As I got closer to her, I realized she wasn't just a spirit—she was also a human being! She moved about the house gently and gracefully, her steps free and pure. Her face bore evidence of her kindness and promised good things to come. This woman wasn't above the ordinary emotions that are part of human nature: she felt moments of sadness and had her feminine charms. She was fully capable of expressing admiration and anger, of feeling love, of kissing and crying and laughing.

Now that I've known her for a while, I can see with calm clarity what makes this woman tick. She's a living, breathing human being, thoughtfully making her way through the world on a journey from birth to the grave. She is smart and good-natured, patient, wise, strong, and capable. She's the ultimate woman; nothing's been overlooked or left out in her creation, and she's able to offer advice, provide solace, and also take charge. Even so, there's still something spirit-like about her, and she glows with a divine light.

THEMES

INFATUATION, INTIMACY, AND LOVE

In "She Was a Phantom of Delight," which Wordsworth wrote about his wife, Mary Hutchinson, the speaker recounts three stages of falling in love. At first, the speaker is simply struck by this woman's otherworldly beauty. As he gets to know her, however, he sees that she's as human as anyone else. Rather than put a damper on his feelings, however, the speaker begins to admire this woman on an even deeper level. He eventually sees her as both a "perfect Woman" and "a Spirit still," someone who's not above everyday human emotions yet also possesses an "angelic light." In this way, the poem illustrates how seeing and appreciating people *fully* can lead to deeper intimacy and love.

The speaker's initial impressions of this woman suggest intense, yet perhaps shallow, infatuation. She first appeared to him as "a Phantom of delight" and a "lovely Apparition." In other words, there was something unreal or otherworldly about her beauty. Her "eyes" shone like "stars," her "hair" was the dark as the evening, and she seemed as "cheerful" as "Dawn." The speaker describes her as "a moment's ornament"—as a beautiful decoration. So lovely did she appear, in fact, that the speaker says her merry "Image" was sent "to haunt, to startle, and way-lay" (or ambush). The speaker really didn't think of this woman as a *person* at all, it seems. Instead, he was captivated and enthralled—and wary—of her appearance, as if her beauty were some sort of trap (a common sentiment in Wordsworth's day).

But as he got to know this woman better, he discovered she

was quite human after all. And this, in turn, only made him admire her *more*. As he "saw her upon nearer view," the speaker discovered she wasn't *just* a "Spirit"; she was a flesh and blood "Woman." He realizes that she's "not too bright or good / For human nature's daily food": "transient sorrows, simple wiles" (charms or deceits), and "Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles." In other words, this woman is real and complex. She might *look* like an angel, but she's still a human being, with human wants, needs, sorrows, and joys.

The speaker concludes by saying that this woman is *both* earthly *and* spiritual, a flesh and blood person who is nonetheless lit by some mysterious, radiant "light." The speaker says he can now see his wife "with eye serene," suggesting he knows her well enough to see her clearly. He describes her as "A Being breathing thoughtful breath, / A Traveller between life and death." That is, she's a person! A real, living, breathing human being just like himself. And yet the speaker says he can still see that "angelic light" that first drew him to her; she still seems somehow extraordinary, perhaps *because* she's so human.

The poem thus charts the speaker's movement from physical infatuation with a strange woman to more deeply knowing, admiring, and loving her. This trajectory suggests that genuine intimacy and lasting love require seeing people fully, for who they really are.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> - Lines 1-30

🔖 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

> *She was a Phantom of delight*
> *When first she gleamed upon my sight;*
> *A lovely Apparition, sent*
> *To be a moment's ornament;*

The poem begins with the speaker describing his first glimpse of a beautiful woman. "She was a Phantom of delight," he says, a [metaphor](link) that compares the woman to some kind of enchanting spirit. That she "gleamed upon [the speaker's] sight," meanwhile, suggests that she seems to flash or shine before him, a radiant creature whose otherworldly radiance has caught his eye. Together, these opening lines suggest that she's captivating to behold, but also that she's somehow not quite *real*.

Indeed, the speaker next calls her a "lovely Apparition," or ghost, who was "sent" (to the speaker, or perhaps down to earth) "To be a moment's ornament." She's a kind of decoration, an object making the moment lovelier—not a full human being.

The poem is written in [iambic](link) tetrameter, meaning that each line is composed of four iambs (feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a **stressed** syllable). This [meter](link) gives the poem a bouncy, steady rhythm. The poem also follows a very straightforward couplet [rhyme scheme](link), where every two lines end in a rhyme ("delight" and "sight," "sent" and "ornament," etc.). These rhymes add to the overall musicality of the poem while also emphasizing key words and ideas (i.e., the "delight" the speaker felt the first time he saw this woman).

Finally, notice all the /n/, /m/, and /t/ [consonance](link) and /ent/ [assonance](link)/consonance in these lines ("Pha**n**to**m** of deligh**t**," "glea**m**ed upo**n** my sigh**t**," "s**ent** / to be a **m**o**ment**'s or**nament**"). These sounds add musicality, evoking the woman's ethereal beauty and the intensity the speaker feels upon seeing her for the first time.

LINES 5-10

> *Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;*
> *Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;*
> *But all things else about her drawn*
> *From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;*
> *A dancing Shape, an Image gay,*
> *To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.*

The speaker elaborates on this woman's otherworldly beauty. Using a [simile](link), he compares her "eyes" to the "stars of Twilight fair." Her eyes are dark, perhaps, and sparkle like lovely stars. Her hair, is "Like Twilight's, too": it's dark like "dusk."

Both of these descriptions" suggest there is something mysterious about her beauty; it seems to come from the half-light of evening. [Diacope](link) (the [repetition](link) of "Twilight"/"Twilight's") emphasizes the shadowy, ethereal quality of her appearance.

The speaker says that everything else about her is "drawn / From May-time and the cheerful Dawn." In other words, while her *looks* may be dark and delicate, her *demeanor* is bright and cheerful, like early morning or springtime.

In lines 9-10, the speaker reiterates his initial feeling that this woman wasn't quite *human*; he describes her as:

> A dancing Shape, an Image gay,
> To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

By describing her as a "Shape" and an "Image," the speaker suggests that, at first, he found her captivating in only a surface kind of way. Like someone staring at a mesmerizing piece of art, the speaker was inspired and "haunt[ed]" by her beauty—but he was also a little distrustful of it. To "way-lay" is to ambush or trap someone, suggesting that her beauty holds some kind of power over him.

All in all, though, the speaker's first impression of this woman is complimentary but also pretty shallow: he finds her completely

alluring, but he's really only thinking about the way she *looks*.

LINES 11-16

I saw her upon nearer view,
A Spirit, yet a Woman too!
Her household motions light and free,
And steps of virgin liberty;
A countenance in which did meet
Sweet records, promises as sweet;

In the second stanza, the speaker says that he then saw this woman "upon nearer view." She's no longer just "gleaming" past his sight; he's getting to know her.

As he does so, he realizes that she's not *just* a "Spirit." She's also a real, flesh-and-blood "Woman." He describes her "household motions" (or the way she moved around the house) as "light and free," and mentions her "steps of virgin liberty," perhaps referring to her innocence, purity, gentleness, graceful movements, etc.

He says that her "countenance" (or facial expressions) bore evidence of past and future "Sweet[ness]." In other words, the speaker discovered that this woman wasn't merely beautiful: she was also quite pleasant to be around!

Notice all the gentle /t/ consonance and smooth sibilance in lines 14-16:

> And s**t**eps of virgin liber**t**y;
> A coun**t**enance in which did mee**t**
> **S**wee**t** record**s**, promi**s**e**s** a**s s**wee**t**;

These soft, flitting sounds help to evoke the woman's lighthearted and gentle ways. There is also diacope in line 16, with the word "Sweet" occurring at both the beginning and end of the line. This repetition emphasizes the idea that this woman's kindness extends into the past and future—the speaker feels certain she has always been this way and always will be.

LINES 17-20

A Creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles.

The speaker goes on to say that in spite of the woman's delicate appearance, she isn't "too bright or good / For human nature's daily food." He's not saying that she's *not* bright or good; rather, he's saying that she's not *above* basic human wants, needs, emotions, and so forth.

The speaker calls these things the metaphorical "food" of "human nature," which consists of "transient" (or passing) "sorrows, simple wiles" (charms or deceits), and "Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles." In other words, no matter how

elegant, beautiful, shining, ethereal, etc. the woman appears to be, she is still fully human.

Anaphora in lines 18-19 (the repetition of "For") adds momentum to the poem while also emphasizing the speaker's point that this woman is fully human. Notice, too, the change in meter in line 20:

> **Praise**, **blame**, | **love**, **kis**- | ses, **tears** | and **smiles**.

Instead of four iambs, this line contains two spondees (feet made up of two **stressed** syllables in a row) and two iambs. The presence of these forceful spondees suggests how important it is to the speaker that this woman is capable of feeling and expressing all these natural human sentiments. Beauty is great, the poem seems to imply, but the ability to feel strongly and express those feelings is even more important.

Lines 19-20 also contain quite a bit of sibilance (if defined to include both /s/ and /z/ sounds):

> For tran**s**ient **s**orrow**s**, **s**imple wile**s**,
> Prai**s**e, blame, love, ki**ss**e**s**, tear**s**, and **s**mile**s**.

These smooth, soft sounds make the speaker's language all the more lyrical, suggesting how delightful it is for the speaker to be around this woman.

LINES 21-24

And now I see with eye serene
The very pulse of the machine;
A Being breathing thoughtful breath;
A Traveller betwixt life and death;

In the third stanza, the speaker says that he can now "see" this woman "with eye serene." In other words, now that he knows her better, he is able to see her clearly and calmly. (Perhaps his initial infatuation has calmed down!)

He says that "The very pulse of the machine" is "A Being breathing thoughtful breath." That is, regardless of how she appears, this woman is just another person trying to navigate life the best she can. Like the speaker, she is "A Traveller betwixt life and death." She isn't some lovely but deceptive "Apparition"; she's a "thoughtful," "breathing," mortal being moving from the cradle to the grave.

The /b/ alliteration and long /ee/ assonance in line 23 ("A **Be**ing **b**reathing thoughtful **b**reath") add emphasis to this line, in which the speaker recognizes this woman to be no different from himself. Likewise, polyptoton (the repetition of the root word "breath") stresses the importance of her being *alive*—she isn't just an idea or an "Image" or a "Shape."

Keep in mind that this poem was written in the early 1800s, when attitudes about women were often highly restrictive, relegating them to either the beautiful, inspiring, spirit-like

muse *or* the flesh-and-blood person with real thoughts and desires; either pure and virginal and good *or* sexual and morally corrupt; etc. The speaker's initial attitude toward this woman is very much in keeping with the era in which the poem was written, and his changing perception of her as he gets to know her just goes to show how limiting the stereotypes of the time actually were.

LINES 25-30

The reason firm, the temperate will,
Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;
A perfect Woman; nobly planned,
To warn, to comfort, and command;
And yet a Spirit still, and bright
With something of an angel light.

The speaker continues to praise this woman's many virtues, saying that her "reason" (or intellect) is "firm" and her "will" (her drive or resolve) is "temperate." In other words, she is smart and mild-mannered, and she keeps her emotions under control.

According to the speaker, she also has "Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill." Notice the [sibilance](#) in this line, which again evokes the graceful way this woman navigates the world, and the ease of being around her.

All in all, the speaker says, she is:

A perfect Woman; nobly planned,
To warn, to comfort, and command;

It's as if she were a perfectly constructed "machine" in which absolutely nothing has been overlooked or left out. What's more, the fact that she is able to "warn," "comfort," and "command" suggests that he trusts her thoughts and opinions. His estimation of her has grown considerably since the first time they met!

Finally, the speaker says that although he has come to see her as the full human being that she is, he still sees in her the "angel light" that first drew him to her. (Note that the poem is sometimes printed with this final phrase reading "angelic light.") This suggests that his opinion of her hasn't just merely changed—it's *grown*. He appreciates her for all the things he can see as well as those things which seem to illuminate her from within. She is both down-to-earth *and* mysterious, "thoughtful" *and* beautiful, flesh *and* "Spirit." In this way, the poem suggests that getting to know and see this woman for who she really is has resulted in deeper intimacy and love.

⚒ POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem starts with a [metaphor](#) in which the speaker compares a woman he has just met to "a Phantom of delight."

This metaphor suggests there is something deliciously unreal or otherworldly about this woman; she is some sort of enchanting spirit, not entirely solid or human.

The speaker reiterates this impression in line 3, calling her "A lovely Apparition"—or a beautiful ghost—apparently "sent / To be a moment's ornament." In other words, he thinks she's a beautiful decoration, but that's about it.

He goes on to compare her to "A dancing Shape" and "an Image gay." This suggests he's struck by her form the way a person might be captivated by a work of art: the sight of her "haunt[s]" him, surprises him, and even "way-lay[s]"—or traps—him, perhaps suggesting that he can't stop thinking about her. These metaphors all imply that the speaker's first glimpse of this woman is an intense one; he can't not notice her.

At the same time, they imply that he's only drawn to her in a shallow way. He's mesmerized by the way she *appears*, but he doesn't actually know the first thing about her, and he seems to think of her more as an alluring object than a person with thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams, etc.

There's also a metaphor at the end of the second stanza, where the speaker refers to the full range of human emotions and experiences—"transient sorrows, simple wiles, / Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles"—as "human nature's daily food." This metaphor implies that one cannot live without feeling and expressing love and its corresponding emotions.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "She was a Phantom of delight"
- **Line 2:** "When first she gleamed upon my sight;"
- **Line 3:** "A lovely Apparition,"
- **Lines 3-4:** " sent / To be a moment's ornament;"
- **Lines 9-10:** "A dancing Shape, an Image gay, / To haunt, to startle, and way-lay."
- **Lines 17-20:** "A Creature not too bright or good / For human nature's daily food; / For transient sorrows, simple wiles, / Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles."

SIMILE

In addition to [metaphor](#), the poem uses [similes](#) to convey the speaker's first impression of this woman. Describing her ethereal beauty, the speaker says:

Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;
Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;

In other words, she has bright, shining eyes and dark hair that remind the speaker of evening. Everything else about her, meanwhile, reminds him of spring and sunrise. That is, she

seems to have a bright, friendly, and happy demeanor.

The contrast between "Twilight" and "Dawn" also subtly mirrors the speaker's later description of the woman as "A Traveller betwixt life and death" and a mix of both "Woman" and "Spirit." In other words, even though the speaker is drawn to her in a purely physical way at first, the poem is already hinting at the fact that she is more than she appears to be.

> **Where Simile appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 5-8:** "Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair; / Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair; / But all things else about her drawn / From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;"

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](link) (as well as occasional [consonance](link), [assonance](link), and [sibilance](link)) makes the poem more musical and memorable. In the first two lines, for instance, /f/ alliteration in "**Ph**antom" and "**f**irst" draws attention to the first thing the speaker noticed about this woman: her unearthly beauty.

Much of the poem's alliteration overlaps with its use of broader sibilance, such as in line 16 ("**S**weet record**s**, promi**s**es as **s**weet"), or lines 19-20:

> For transient **s**orrow**s**, **s**imple wile**s**,
> Prai**s**e, blame, love, ki**ss**e**s**, tear**s**, and **s**mile**s**.

All of these smooth /s/ and /z/ sounds help to evoke the woman's pleasant nature and kind "countenance" (or facial expressions). Sibilance and long /ee/ assonance in lines 21-22 ("And now I **s**ee with eye **s**er**e**ne / The very pul**s**e of the machine") also suggest the smooth, calm way that the speaker is now assessing his love for this woman.

In line 23, there is pronounced /b/ alliteration and /ee/ assonance:

> A **B**e**i**ng **b**rea**t**hing thoughtful **b**reath;

These insistent sounds emphasize the existence of the woman's *body*: she isn't just a "Spirit," but "A Traveller betwixt life and death." In other words, she's very much alive!

There is more /s/ alliteration and sibilance in the last few lines of the poem ("Enduran**c**e, fore**s**ight, **s**trength, and **s**kill," "a **S**pirit **s**till," etc.), again highlighting the woman's sweet-tempered and quiet fortitude. She may "warn" and "command," but it seems she does so in a "bright," mild-mannered way.

> **Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 1:** "Phantom"
> - **Line 2:** "first"
> - **Line 7:** "drawn"
> - **Line 8:** "Dawn"
> - **Line 9:** "dancing"
> - **Line 19:** "sorrows," "simple"
> - **Line 20:** "smiles"
> - **Line 21:** "see," "serene"
> - **Line 23:** "Being," "breathing," "breath"
> - **Line 24:** "betwixt"
> - **Line 26:** "strength," "skill"
> - **Line 28:** "comfort," "command"
> - **Line 29:** "Spirit," "still"
> - **Line 30:** "something"

REPETITION

The poem contains various kinds of [repetition](link), which add rhythm, momentum, and emphasis.

For instance, the poem uses quite a bit of [anaphora](link), like the repetition of "A" at the beginnings of lines 3, 9, 12, 15, 17, 23, 24, and 27. This repetition allows the poem to keep returning to the speaker's impressions of this woman: he compares her to "A lovely Apparition," "A dancing Shape," "A Spirit," and so on. It also makes the poem more rhythmic and musical in general.

There is also anaphora (and more general [parallelism](link)) in lines 10 ("**To** haunt, **to** startle"), 18-19 ("**For** human nature's [...]; / **For** transient sorrows [...]"), 25 ("**The** reason firm, **the** temperate will"), and 28 ("**To** warn, **to** comfort"). These repetitions again make the poem more rhythmic while also keeping the speaker's thoughts organized and easy to follow.

The poem also uses [diacope](link). Take a look at lines 5-6:

> Her eyes as stars of **Twilight** fair;
> Like **Twilight's**, too, her dusky hair;

The repetition of "Twilight/Twilight's" emphasizes the woman's dark beauty, which contrasts with her "bright" demeanor.

In line 16, diacope emphasizes her "Sweet" nature:

> **Sweet** records, promises as **sweet**;"

The word "Sweet" bookends this line, implying that she has always been this way and always will be.

Finally, the poem uses [polyptoton](link) in line 23, with the repetition of the root word "breath":

> A Being **breathing** thoughtful **breath**;

This repetition draws attention to the woman's mortality; like any other flesh and blood "Creature," she "breath[es]" in and out, "A Traveller betwixt life and death." This suggests her vulnerability; she isn't a "Phantom" but a "Woman," made of both "Spirit" and flesh.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "A"
- **Line 5:** "Twilight"
- **Line 6:** "Twilight's"
- **Line 9:** "A"
- **Line 10:** "To," "to"
- **Line 12:** "A"
- **Line 15:** "A"
- **Line 16:** "Sweet," "sweet"
- **Line 17:** "A"
- **Line 18:** "For"
- **Line 19:** "For"
- **Line 23:** "A," "breathing," "breath"
- **Line 24:** "A"
- **Line 25:** "The," "the"
- **Line 27:** "A"
- **Line 28:** "To," "to"

📑 VOCABULARY

Phantom (Line 1) - A spirit or ghost.

Gleamed (Line 2) - Shone brightly or glimmered.

Apparition (Line 3) - A ghost.

Ornament (Line 4) - Decoration.

Twilight fair (Line 5) - The beautiful half-light right after the sun's gone down.

Dusky (Line 6) - Dark (the color of "dusk," or early evening).

An Image gay (Line 9) - A merry figure.

Way-lay (Line 10) - To ambush someone or throw off course.

Household motions (Line 13) - Her movements around the house.

Virgin-liberty (Line 14) - The speaker seems to be saying that the woman moves with pure, free movements (or that her gentle movements reflect her freedom and purity).

Countenance (Line 15) - Facial expression.

Sweet records (Line 16) - The speaker is describing her face as bearing "records"—or evidence—of past "Sweet[ness]." In other words, he sees her kind disposition in her facial expressions.

Transient (Line 19) - Passing; impermanent.

Wiles (Line 19) - Charms, tricks, or deceits.

The temperate will (Line 25) - Her pleasant or agreeable nature.

Nobly planned (Line 27) - The speaker is saying this woman has been made exceptionally well.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem contains 30 lines of iambic tetrameter, broken into three ten-line stanzas. Each stanza can be further broken down into five rhyming couplets. These couplets subtly call attention to the *couple* at the heart of the poem.

The three larger stanzas, meanwhile, correspond with three distinct phases of the speaker's relationship with this woman:

- The first stanza describes the first time he laid eyes on her;
- The second explores his changing perception as he gets to know her;
- And the third expresses his admiration for her now that he sees her fully.

METER

The poem is written in iambic tetrameter. This means that each line contains four iambs: poetic feet that follow an unstressed-**stressed** syllable pattern, for a rhythm of da-**DUM** da-**DUM** da-**DUM** da-**DUM**.

Take lines 1-4, for example:

> She **was** | a **Phan-** | tom of | de**light**
> When **first** | she **gleamed** | u**pon** | my **sight**
> A **love-** | ly **Ap-** | pa**ri-** | tion, **sent**
> To **be** | a **mo-** | ment's **or-** | na**ment;**

The consistent, bouncy rhythm of these lines is pleasing to the ear and sweeps the reader up in the speaker's story.

Note that there are irregularities in the poem's meter. For example, it's possible to scan that opening line a bit differently:

> **She** was | a **Phan-** | tom **of** | de**light**

Scanning that first foot as a propulsive trochee (**stressed**-unstressed) creates immediate momentum and emphasizes the poem's subject ("She").

Line 20 is the most irregular line in the poem:

> **Praise, blame,** | **love, kis-** | ses, **tears,** | and **smiles.**

While the second half of the line is iambic, the first half is made up of two spondees (two **stressed** syllables in a row). The speaker places a *lot* of emphasis on the first half of the line: the woman's capacity for "Praise, blame, love, [and] kisses" is of utmost importance. Because this line feels full to bursting with stressed syllables, one gets the sense that the speaker simply can't contain themselves thinking about this woman's admirable qualities—there are just so many of them!

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a very straightforward rhyme scheme: AABBCCDDEE, and so forth. This tight, simple rhyme scheme adds a very pleasing and consistent musicality to the poem, one that perhaps subtly evokes the woman's beauty, grace, and "temperate will." The choice to use couplets perhaps reflects the fact that this is a poem about a *couple*—two people are bound together by mutual love and respect.

👤💬 SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is someone who has fallen in love with a woman whom he at first found merely beautiful. As he has gotten to know her better, though, the speaker has discovered this woman is far more than just "a lovely Apparition"—indeed, she seems to be "perfect" in just about every way!

While he describes the woman he loves in great detail, the speaker doesn't say much about himself. He's completely focused on *her* qualities; the reader doesn't learn anything about his own. Still, since Wordsworth wrote this poem about his wife, Mary Hutchinson, it's safe to say that the poem's speaker is some version of the poet himself.

🖼 SETTING

The poem doesn't have a specific setting, apart from taking place over the course of the speaker's developing relationship with his beloved. When the poem begins, the speaker doesn't know her well. Readers can assume that they've moved in together by the second stanza, given the reference to "household motions," and that they've been a couple for quite some time by the third stanza. Otherwise, the poem could take place anywhere at any time.

This lack of a clear setting makes sense because the speaker isn't *just* describing the woman he has fallen in love with. He's also gesturing to the way seeing people up close—really getting to know them—leads to deeper intimacy and love in general.

ⓘ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) wrote "She was a Phantom of Delight" in 1803 and published it in 1807, in a collection called *Poems, in Two Volumes*. While many other poems from this collection, such as "The World Is Too Much With Us" and "London, 1802," deal with social issues such as the impact of the Industrial Revolution on England, "She was a Phantom of Delight" focuses on Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson, a childhood friend.

Wordsworth is considered one of the greatest thinkers and poets of the Romantic era, an artistic movement during the late 1700s to mid-1800s that glorified emotion over reason and expressed deep awe for the natural world. Wordsworth and his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge helped kick off the English Romantic movement with their 1798 book *Lyrical Ballads*, a collaborative collection that proclaimed poetry should use everyday, folksy language (that's the "ballad" part) to explore the depths of the soul and the imagination (the "lyrical" part). These were very new ideas in the 18th century, whose most prominent writers (like Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope) were more interested in satirical, elegant wit than plainspoken sincerity. But Wordsworth's and Coleridge's innovations would change poetry forever.

Wordsworth had a tremendous influence on generations of poets who followed him—though the younger Romantic poets, like Keats and Byron, became disenchanted with him as he lost the fervor of his youth and settled into a comfortably conservative old age. By the time Queen Victoria made him Poet Laureate in 1843, his best and most important work was behind him. That work nonetheless lives on; poems like "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" remain some of the most famous and influential in the world to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wordsworth wrote "She was a Phantom of Delight" in 1803 about his wife, Mary Hutchinson, whom he had married the previous year. The couple remained married until Wordsworth's death in 1850, and love letters discovered in the 1970s suggest that the couple's relationship was marked by genuine passion, admiration, and affection.

Wordsworth's poetry was part of a Romantic backlash against the elegant, satirical, and often merciless clarity of the Age of Enlightenment. This period of the 18th century was marked by huge scientific advances, but also by what the later Romantics saw as a bit too much reason. Where earlier Renaissance scholars and artists tried to know a little bit about everything, Enlightenment thinkers were categorizers and organizers, increasingly interested in sharp divisions between disciplines.

The art of that era, similarly, had an orderly, reasoned wit that Wordsworth and his followers began to find rather deadening. Romantics like William Blake and John Keats wanted to break out of the crystalline prison of Enlightenment-era poetry, preferring the wide, dark, glimmering world of the imagination.

It's worth noting, though, that in many ways Wordsworth was a man of his time, and that "She was a Phantom of Delight" reflects some pretty stereotypical 19th-century attitudes about women. English women of the era were expected to run the household, bear children, and generally see to their husbands' needs. As such, it isn't surprising that the speaker of this poem first sees the woman he is describing as nothing but "a moment's ornament" (in other words, she's just there to look

good) and suspects her of being sent "To haunt, to startle, and way-lay." That is, he thinks her beauty is some sort of trap meant to lead him astray. Even as he gets to know her, the speaker's description of "A perfect Woman" is based on 19th-century stereotypes: women should be beautiful, "sweet," graceful, patient, and "angel[ic]."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Introduction to Wordsworth's Life and Career — A biography of the poet from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-wordsworth)

- Listen to the Poem Read Aloud — A reading of the poem by Antony Wordsworth—the poet's great great great grandson! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tP4kbIgMXKg)

- Love Letters Provide a Window into Wordsworth and Hutchinson's Marriage — A Washington Post article discussing the discovery of correspondence between Wordsworth and Mary Hutchinson. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1982/02/14/a-correspondance-of-hearts/1502858c-1b31-490a-a435-b07c1a20e3ea/)

- A Look at Georgian Era Gender Roles — An article discussing society's expectations for men and women in 18th- and early 19th-century England. (https://victorian-era.org/georgian-era-facts/georgian-era-gender-roles.html)

- Wordsworth's "Strange Fits of Passion" — A New Yorker essay on what made Wordsworth's work so revolutionary—and why he's always divided critics and audiences alike. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/12/05/strange-fits-of-passion)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM WORDSWORTH POEMS

- A Complaint
- A Slumber did my Spirit Seal
- Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802
- Expostulation and Reply
- Extract from The Prelude (Boat Stealing)
- It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free
- I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
- Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey
- Lines Written in Early Spring
- London, 1802
- Mutability
- My Heart Leaps Up
- Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room
- Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood
- She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways
- The Solitary Reaper
- The Tables Turned
- The World Is Too Much With Us
- We Are Seven

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*She was a Phantom of Delight.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 Jun 2022. Web. 19 Jul 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*She was a Phantom of Delight.*" LitCharts LLC, June 25, 2022. Retrieved July 19, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/william-wordsworth/she-was-a-phantom-of-delight.