

Why So Pale and Wan Fond Lover?



POEM TEXT

- 1 Why so pale and wan fond lover?
- 2 Prithee why so pale?
- 3 Will, when looking well can't move her,
- 4 Looking ill prevail?
- 5 Prithee why so pale?

- 6 Why so dull and mute young sinner?
- 7 Prithee why so mute?
- 8 Will, when speaking well can't win her,
- 9 Saying nothing do't?
- 10 Prithee why so mute?

- 11 Quit, quit for shame, this will not move,
- 12 This cannot take her;
- 13 If of herself she will not love,
- 14 Nothing can make her;
- 15 The devil take her.

friend can do about it, and he's only making a fool of himself by pining. The poem unromantically suggests that the best thing to do about unrequited love is to move on as quickly as possible: longing for what you simply can't have is foolish.

Describing his heartbroken buddy, the speaker paints a sly portrait of a classic lover, a guy who's "pale and wan" (or frail and sickly) with unrequited love—a [well-known way](#) to look, feel, and behave in the 17th century (when this poem was written). To this speaker, however, all that pining looks pretty ridiculous. If the friend's beloved isn't attracted to him when he's "looking well" and "speaking well," the speaker says, then she *certainly* won't change her mind now that he's "dull and mute," silent and sick with misery over her. Behaving like the picture of a heartbroken, melancholy lover simply isn't useful!

The speaker thus advises his friend to "quit, quit for shame," arguing that he's only embarrassing himself by pining away over a woman who'll never love him back. "If of herself she will not love," the speaker warns, "nothing can make her": behaving like a heartbroken lover changes nothing.

Love hurts, this poem suggests, but refusing to move on hurts more, and makes you look like a fool in the process. If someone won't love you back, the only sensible thing to do is throw up your hands and say, "The devil take her."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15



SUMMARY

Why do you look so sickly and pale, silly loverboy? Come on now, why? If she won't love you back when you're looking your best, why would she change her mind now that you're looking ill? So why mope around like this?

Why are you so silent, you young ne'er-do-well? Why so quiet, huh? If she won't love you back when you're eloquent and talkative, what makes you think she'll change her mind when you don't say a word? So why sit here in silence?

Come on now, stop it, you're embarrassing yourself. None of this behavior will move her, and none of it will persuade her to love you back. If she won't love you on her own, nothing can change that—so the hell with her.



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

*Why so pale and wan fond lover?
Prithee why so pale?
Will, when looking well can't move her,
Looking ill prevail?
Prithee why so pale?*

"Why so pale and wan fond lover?" begins with some good old-fashioned teasing. The poem's speaker, fed up with a friend who won't stop moping around about a lady who doesn't love him back, asks:

Why so pale and wan fond lover?
Prithee why so pale?

Asking why his friend looks so "pale and wan" (that is, pasty-faced and sickly), the speaker isn't just asking why his friend seems so ill and gloomy, though he's certainly doing that. He's



THEMES



THE PAIN AND FOLLY OF LOVE

The speaker of "Why so pale and wan fond lover?" tells his lovelorn friend to buck up. Sighing and looking pale might be the traditional signs of love, the speaker says, but they won't change his friend's predicament. If the friend's beloved doesn't love him back, there's nothing the

also subtly mocking his friend for looking like the [very picture](#) of a heartbroken 17th-century lover.

To this speaker's mind, pining like that is just plain silly; the word "fond" here doesn't mean "affectionate," but "foolish." If your lady-love didn't like you when you were "looking well," the speaker reasons with his friend, why should she change her mind now that you're "looking ill"? Moping around like this is useless at best and counterproductive at worst.

In this speaker's opinion, then, behaving like a conventional heartbroken lover is both pointless and more than a little ridiculous. He gets that idea across, not only through that mildly insulting "fond," but through his use of [rhetorical questions](#).

Every sentence in these first lines is a question the speaker already knows the answer to. For instance, when he asks, "Will, when looking well can't move her, / Looking ill prevail?" what he *means* is, "If she didn't like you when you were cheerful and healthy, she certainly won't like you now that you're mopey and sickly."

Phrasing these points as questions, the speaker sounds like he's trying to cajole his friend out of his misery a little: the [tone](#) here is both exasperated and affectionate. That becomes even clearer when the speaker [repeats](#) the line "Prithee, why so pale?" twice in one stanza. It's as if he's sitting down next to his friend and nudging him: *Come on, buddy, why the long face?* *Hmm?*

The meter here also helps to characterize this frustrated-but-caring speaker. The poem uses [trochees](#), metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm (as in "Prithee"). That stress-first rhythm helps to make the speaker sound forceful and insistent.

The speaker also alternates between lines of:

- tetrameter (four strong stresses in a row, as in "Why so | pale and | wan fond | lover?")
- and trimeter (*three* stresses in a row, as in "Prithee | why so | pale?")

The back-and-forth pattern makes it sound as if the speaker is in turns cajoling his friend and getting fed up with him—especially when the stanza concludes with two short, brusque trimeter lines in a row!

LINES 6-10

*Why so dull and mute young sinner?
Prithee why so mute?
Will, when speaking well can't win her,
Saying nothing do't?
Prithee why so mute?*

As the second stanza begins, the speaker [repeats](#) himself, strengthening his argument against lovesick moping through intense [parallelism](#). The structure and phrasing of this second

stanza are almost identical to that of the first.

For instance, the speaker kicks things off again with a [rhetorical question](#) that begins with a "Why so," a moment of [anaphora](#) that suggests he hasn't quite gotten through to his friend yet: he's trying again, with a slightly different tack.

Now, he asks why his lovelorn friend is so "dull and mute," so lifelessly silent—another traditional 17th-century sign of lovesickness, and another habit that, in the speaker's eyes, can only make his friend more of a drag! He also calls the poor "fond lover" a "young sinner" here—an affectionate, gentle scolding, sort of like calling him a scalawag.

Besides making the same point again—that making yourself sick with heartbreak does absolutely no good—these repetitions make this poem sound like what it is: a song. ("Why so pale and wan fond lover?" first appeared as a musical interlude in Suckling's 1637 play *Aglaure*.) Listen not just to the parallel phrasing, but to the harmonious [alliteration](#) here:

*Will, when speaking well can't win her,
Saying nothing do't?*

All those /w/ sounds in a row (plus the internal [slant rhyme](#) of "will" and "well") make these words sound as jaunty as exasperated.

LINES 11-15

*Quit, quit for shame, this will not move,
This cannot take her;
If of herself she will not love,
Nothing can make her;
The devil take her.*

The first two stanzas, framed as an argument against lovesickness, have set up strong patterns of [parallelism](#) and [repetition](#). The third stanza energetically breaks them. Now, the fed-up speaker tells his friend:

*Quit, quit for shame, this will not move,
This cannot take her;*

The intense [epizeuxis](#) of "quit, quit" and the [anaphora](#) of "this will not move, / This cannot take her" make a change from the cajoling [rhetorical questions](#) the speaker has used before. The time for gentle reasoning, the speaker seems to feel, has passed; the time for plain old instruction has arrived.

The [meter](#)—so far pretty steady—makes some surprising changes here, too. The first two stanzas were written in consistent [trochees](#) (feet with a DUM-da rhythm, remember, as in "Prithee"). Now the speaker introduces some [iambes](#)—the opposite foot, with a da-DUM rhythm, as in line 13:

If of | her self | she will | not love,

Then, in line 14, the usual line of trochaic trimeter is replaced with a line of dimeter: there are just two stresses here. One comes from a rumbly [dactyl](#), a foot with a DUM-da-da rhythm:

Nothing can | make her;

These disturbances in the rhythm suggest that the speaker's voice is getting a little less controlled as he finally tells his friend exactly what he thinks.

So far, readers might have imagined this speaker as an unromantic, cynical type. The poem's closing lines, however, suggest the picture might be more complicated. Finally, the speaker tells his friend that, if his beloved doesn't return his affections, "nothing can make her"—and concludes with a muttered curse:

The devil take her.

On the one hand, readers might interpret these words (a common 17th-century [idiom](#)) as a lighthearted "to hell with her! Get on with your life." On the other, readers might wonder why the speaker feels so certain he knows how unrequited love works, and why his voice is getting shakier! Perhaps this closing curse reflects the speaker's own painful experience; the "her" he curses here might well be a [synecdoche](#) for all women who don't love back.

Lovesickness, this poem suggests, will only make a fool of you. But perhaps most people will have to spend some time looking "pale and wan" over a broken heart, one time or another.



POETIC DEVICES

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The first two stanzas of this poem are built from nothing but [rhetorical questions](#)—a choice that helps to make the speaker sound cajoling, brusque, and sensible.

The first of these questions gives the poem its title:

Why so pale and wan fond lover?

The speaker's tone in this question is clear from his use of the word "fond," which doesn't mean "affectionate" here, but "foolish." There's a "Why the long face?" tone here: the speaker is making fun of his friend and trying to buck him up at the same time.

That teasing tone gets even clearer when the speaker repeats "Prithee, why so pale?," as he does twice in the first stanza. It's as if his friend has just looked away moodily and the speaker is snapping his fingers under his nose: *Come on, seriously, why?*

The big central question here, though, is this one:

Will, when looking well can't move her,
Looking ill prevail?

In other words: *If she didn't like you when you looked good, why would she like you now that you look like you're wasting away?* To this speaker, the performance of unrequited love—whether that means looking "pale and wan" or sounding "dull and mute" (as he complains his friend does in the second stanza)—is nothing but a waste of time. It gets no results from the beloved, it's no fun for anyone else, and it's just plain embarrassing for the mopey lover himself.

The rhetorical questions here thus present the speaker as a guy who knows what he's talking about—and as a friend who's as fed up as he is affectionate.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 6-10

PARALLELISM

The speaker uses frequent, striking [parallelism](#) to make his point clear: it's absurd, he repeatedly insists, to make yourself sick with love over someone who can't and won't love you back.

The two first stanzas of the poem use intense parallelism to ask the same kinds of [rhetorical questions](#) twice. Compare the first lines of stanzas 1 and 2:

Why so pale and wan fond lover?
Prithee why so pale?
[...]
Why so dull and mute young sinner?
Prithee why so mute?

The [anaphora](#) here means these two sets of questions ("Why are you looking so sickly?" and "Why are you sitting around like a lump and not saying anything?," in essence) start with exactly the same language. The echo suggests that the speaker is going to make the same basic point about all of these behaviors. And so he does in another moment of parallelism—compare lines 3-4 to lines 8-9:

Will, when looking well can't move her,
Looking ill prevail?
[...]
Will, when speaking well can't win her,
Saying nothing do't?

In both of these cases, the speaker's point is the same: making yourself sickly (lines 3-4) and boring (lines 8-9) by moping about love is useless at best and counterproductive at worst. These repetitions make it sound like the speaker has just about

had it with his friend. Even as he tries to buck his lovelorn buddy up, he's putting things *very simply* and repeating himself *very clearly* so that he's sure to be understood.

That exasperated tone gets even stronger when the speaker begins the third stanza with a different flavor of [repetition](#): "Quit, quit for shame." That moment of [epizeuxis](#) feels like an outburst of frustration after lots of patient cajoling. So does the parallelism of "this will not move, / This cannot take her." Moping *won't* change anything and *can't* change anything, that parallelism insists—so the speaker's friend might as well cut it out now.

While these repetitions paint a funny picture of a frustrated, cynical speaker, they're also just plain musical: this poem makes annoyance sound [euphonious](#).

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Lines 3-4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Lines 8-9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12

IDIOM

At the end of this poem, having made an emphatic case that his friend should stop moping around and move on with his life, the speaker concludes with a muttered curse: "The devil take her." This old-fashioned [idiom](#) means something like a modern "the hell with her"—a fairly lighthearted way of saying, *Get over her already*.

But perhaps there's a hint of darker feeling here, too. Take a look at the line in context:

If of herself she will not love,
Nothing can make her;
The devil take her.

The speaker's certainty that "nothing can make her" love the friend back hints that he speaks from bitter experience! Perhaps this speaker has seen enough of love to know that it can't be willed or forced.

If that's true, then that closing "the devil take her" lands a little more like a real curse than a light "get on with your life." If the speaker has been through the romantic wringer a few times himself, the "her" he's thinking of here might be not just his friend's beloved, but one of his own lost loves—or even a stand-in for unresponsive womankind in general. The speaker's advice

to his friend thus ends up sounding more like general advice to young men in love with women who don't like them back.

Where Idiom appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** "The devil take her."

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) gives this poem its music and helps to evoke the speaker's frustration with his lovesick friend.

In line 2, for instance, the strong plosive /p/ sound of "Prithee why so pale?" makes this question sound like an outburst; when the speaker [repeats](#) the same words a few lines later, the effect only intensifies.

And listen to the interweaving sounds of the speaker's pointed [rhetorical question](#) in lines 3-4:

Will, when looking well can't move her,
Looking ill prevail?

Here, the alliterative /w/ of "will," "when," and "well" works alongside a [consonant](#) /l/ sound: "will" and "well" echo each other, creating something close to an [internal rhyme](#). That little echo feels bouncy and even a little comical; the speaker is making a joke at his friend's expense here. What's more, the /p/ of "prevail" in line 4 gets picked up by the repeated "Prithee, why so pale?" in line 5.

A similar pattern of sounds appears in lines 8-9:

Will, when speaking well can't win her,
Saying nothing do't?

"Will," "when," and "well" are here joined by yet another /w/ word: "win." Repeating and intensifying this /w/ pattern, the speaker sounds just that bit more irritable.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "pale"
- **Line 2:** "Prithee," "pale"
- **Line 3:** "Will," "when," "well"
- **Line 4:** "prevail"
- **Line 5:** "Prithee," "pale"
- **Line 8:** "Will," "when," "well," "win"



VOCABULARY

Wan (Line 1) - Sickly-looking, ill, pasty-faced.

Fond (Line 1) - "Fond" here doesn't mean "affectionate," but "foolish."

Prithee (Line 2, Line 5, Line 7, Line 10) - A contraction of "I pray

thee," words meant to encourage someone to speak. A modern-day equivalent might be somewhere between "Excuse me" and "come on!"

Prevail (Line 4) - Win, work, succeed.

Young sinner (Line 6) - In calling his friend a sinner, the speaker isn't saying he's done something horribly wrong: the tone here is affectionate, in the vein of "you young scalawag."

Do't (Line 9) - A contraction of "do it," pronounced somewhere between "doot" and "doo-ut."

If of herself she will not love (Line 13) - In other words, "If she won't love you of her own free will."

The devil take her (Line 15) - An old-fashioned way of saying "to hell with her!"



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Why so pale and wan fond lover?" is written in three stanzas of five lines apiece (also known as [cinquains](#)). Short, sharp lines and a repetitive [rhyme scheme](#) make the speaker sound straightforward, funny, and a bit fed up with the lovesick friend he's addressing.

By keeping this poem brief and forceful, the speaker suggests that moping around doesn't do a lick of good. The only sensible thing to do after a romantic disappointment, the poem's form suggests, is to dust yourself off and get back to your life as quickly as possible (after taking a moment to curse your unresponsive beloved's name).

METER

"Why so pale and wan fond lover?" uses a mixture of [trochaic tetrameter](#) and [trochaic trimeter](#). Here's what that means:

- A trochee is a metrical foot with a DUM-da rhythm, as in "Prithee."
- Trochaic tetrameter means a line of four trochees in a row: "Why so | pale and | wan fond | lover?"
- Trochaic trimeter, meanwhile, means a line of *three* trochees: "Prithee | why so | pale?" (Note that the speaker uses shortened trimeter lines in this poem, cutting off the final unstressed syllable.)

All those emphatic, stress-first trochees and clipped-short trimeter lines make the speaker sound as if he's just about had it with his friend's moping.

The first two stanzas stick pretty closely to this pattern. In the third stanza, though, variations in the meter match a change in the speaker's [tone](#) as he finally tells his friend exactly what he thinks of this situation. For instance, his outburst in line 11 can be read as a [spondee](#) (a foot with a DUM-DUM rhythm): "Quit,

quit."

The speaker also introduces some [iamb](#)s, which follow a da-DUM rhythm. Here's line 13, for example:

If of | herself | she will | not love,

Variations like this reflect the speaker's building exasperation, as though he's losing his grip on the poem's rhythm.

RHYME SCHEME

The [rhyme scheme](#) of "Why so pale and wan fond lover" runs like this:

ABABB

This jaunty, insistent pattern includes one identical rhyme: lines 2 and 5 of each stanza always rhyme on the exact same word. Besides making the speaker sound as if he's teasing, this repetition sets up the poem's final joke. If the friend's behavior "cannot take her" (that is, can't persuade the friend's beloved to love him back), the speaker concludes, then "the devil take her"—the hell with her!



SPEAKER

This poem comes from Suckling's play *Aglaura*; the speaker here is a cynical character named Orsames. However, the poem has taken on its own life, and most readers encounter it as a stand-alone song in which a pragmatic, jaded guy tells his friend to stop moping over a lady who doesn't love him back.

This speaker questions a lot of his era's romantic ideals about what a lover should look and behave like. All that mooning around looking sick, this speaker says, isn't interestingly melancholic: it's just foolish.

That's not to say that he doesn't understand the pain of unrequited love. When he spits "the devil take her" at the end of the poem, he might just be lightly saying "the hell with her!"—but he might also be cursing this lady (or womankind in general) a little more seriously, perhaps remembering a lady who didn't return *his* affections.



SETTING

The play this poem comes from takes place in a fantastical version of ancient Persia. Really, though, the poem's story could come from any place and any time that some guy has made a fool of himself over unrequited love.

Some details, however, suggest neither a timeless setting nor a fairy-tale one, but Suckling's own 17th-century world. The speaker's observation that his heartbroken friend looks "pale and wan" and "dull and mute" draws on traditional Renaissance ideas about the symptoms of lovesickness. Perhaps the speaker

is even teasing his friend for embracing all the trappings of heartbreak as a style choice.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Sir John Suckling (1609-1641 or '42) was one of the foremost Cavalier poets, a group of aristocratic English writers who supported King Charles I during the English Civil War.

Alongside contemporaries like [Richard Lovelace](#) and [Robert Herrick](#), Suckling made himself a reputation as a poet, a lover, a fighter, and a politician.

During his short life, Suckling was a popular courtier, attracting the notice of King Charles and Queen Henrietta Maria for his elegant writings. This poem appears as a song in his 1637 play *Aglaura*, which Suckling staged as a masque, an elaborately designed spectacle meant to impress his fellow noblemen. While *Aglaura* is now obscure, "Why so pale and wan fond lover?" took on a life of its own—in part because its vision of a sad lover moping around uselessly is both timeless and funny.

Suckling's witty, sometimes cynical poetry shows the influence of [Ben Jonson](#) (a leading light for many of the Cavaliers, some of whom thought of themselves as the "Sons of Ben").

Uncharacteristically for a Cavalier, Suckling also learned from the work of Metaphysical poet [John Donne](#), whose passionate religious verse was far less popular at the time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sir John Suckling was a textbook Cavalier: that is, a royalist supporter of King Charles I during the English Civil War. In this earthshaking conflict, the Roundheads, led by Oliver Cromwell, rose up against King Charles I and against the monarchy in general, arguing for increased Parliamentary power as a curb on kingly tyranny. (That argument would start to look ironic when a temporarily victorious Cromwell began to exercise dictatorial power in his role as "Lord Protector.")

The war came to a dramatic climax in 1649 when Cromwell's forces tried, convicted, and beheaded Charles I for treason. This execution was a huge shock to a country whose recent monarchs had proclaimed the "divine right of kings," the idea that kings and queens were appointed by God himself.

The Cavalier poets didn't much like the attitude of the Roundheads, who tended to be Puritanical and pleasure-hating

as well as anti-monarchical. Suckling was one of many writers whose poetry about wine, women, and song also reflected a political commitment: writing about being a pleasure-lover (and a lover, full stop!) was one way of saying you preferred the King's splendid, libertine court to Cromwell's austerity.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Suckling the Card Sharp](#) — Learn about Suckling's other claim to fame: he invented the game of cribbage, and then cheated at it! (<https://heartwood.com/blogs/history/history-of-cribbage>)
- [A Portrait of Suckling](#) — Admire a portrait of Sir John Suckling (looking every inch the romantic Cavalier lover himself). (https://www.frick.org/exhibitions/van_dyck/87)
- [A Brief Biography](#) — Learn more about Sir John Suckling at the Poetry Foundation's website. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sir-john-suckling>)
- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a crisp, funny reading of the poem. (<https://youtu.be/tnXNCsfCbBY>)
- [The Cavaliers](#) — Learn more about the Cavalier poets, the group of Royalist writers of which Suckling was a part. (<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-95606;jsessionid=12371216A8662>)



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