AQA English Literature A-level

Poetry: Love Through the Ages Anthology (Pre-1900)

John Wilmot: ‘Absent from Thee’

Absent from Thee

John Wilmot

Brief Summary

"Absent from Thee" is a four stanza poem, divided into quatrains which follow a regular rhyme scheme. The poem is satirical in the way it subverts the conventions of traditional love poetry by speaking of serial unflaithfulness.

Summary

Context - Written during the Restoration period which took place in the United Kingdom in 1660 under King Charles II. The period was seen as one of freedom and liveliness. Wilmot too was known for his vivacious character and disreputable lifestyle. The speaker of the poem is often considered to be Wilmot himself, considering his choices and reflecting on the life he chose.

Structure - Four stanzas arranged into quatrains following iambic tetrameter.

Language - The speaker of the poem is insincere and unloving towards the woman he addresses. This is clear through the language, which is often used as a means of inserting a malicious message within false compliments. The speaker uses the mode of love poetry to his advantage, arguing his infidelity is in the woman's best interest.

Key points - The poem was written as a song, reflected in its regular shape. However, the poet subverts the expectation of a melodious ode to a lover and instead delivers a lustrous and deceptive message whereby the speaker aims to persuade his lover to allow him to sleep around.

Synopsis

- The poem opens with the speaker establishing that without their lover, they are **weak with longing**: **"Absent from thee, I languish still"** (line 1). He asks not to be questioned on his return because **"The straying fool 'twill plainly kill"** (line 3); in other words, obviously being away for too long will kill him.
- The second stanza deals with the speaker's **unique perspective on infidelity** and asks his lover to allow him to suffer the **"torments"** of infidelity. The speaker suggests that the only way he can prove to his lover than he is truly in love with her is by testing the limits of their relationship through these **"torments"**. He suggests that this will mean that when he returns to her, he will be faithful.
- The third stanza sees the speaker then ask for **forgiveness**, which he expects to be easily given by the **"safe bosom"** (line 10) and to die happily with her.
- Finally, he suggests that if he doesn't die with her, he may end up with other women, succumbing to his desires and being **"faithless to thee, false, unforgiven"** (line 15). He seems to ignore the fact that should he have his way, he will have been unfaithful anyway, but he suggests in this final stanza that unfaithfulness with **"base heart unblest"** (line 14), with a prostitute, is somehow more unfaithful than the infidelity he talks of in earlier stanzas.
- Wilmot uses the **form of a love poem** and **religious language** to **satirise traditional ideas of love and religion**. Instead of using these themes traditionally,

to emphasise their importance in life, he suggests that they are not the most important ways to live. Instead, emphasis is put on lust.

Context

The Restoration:

- The **Restoration** took place in the United Kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland in 1660 when King Charles II returned from exile in Europe.
- The period saw a new **political settlement**, and was seen by some as **"a divinely ordained miracle"** where there was sudden and unexpected deliverance from political chaos and a return to a perceived natural and divine order.
- The poem was written in the mid to late 1600s after Charles II became King
- The **repression** felt by the people was lifted and swung to **license**; there was a new sense of freedom, this was seen both in speech and popular literary genres as well as in the reopening of theatres.
- Charles II's reign is known as one of liveliness and new life.
- Wilmot can be seen in the same light, known for his vivacity, freedom of speech, exploits with women and chaotic lifestyle. The speaker of the poem is frequently considered to be Wilmot himself, considering his choices and reflecting on the life he has chosen for himself.
- Gossip and accounts such Vottaire's *Lettres Philosophiques* (1734) *"Tout le monde connoit de réputation le Comte de Rochester"* (Everyone knows of the reputation of the earl of Rochester) paint a portrait of Wilmot in society. These provide interesting evocations of the time, such as the renewed enjoyment of satire and exaggeration.

John Wilmot:

- English poet and **courtier** of King Charles II's Restoration court
- Known for his disreputable lifestyle and poetry, which has meant that often his poetry is read in terms of how he lived his life.
- Although he was praised contemporaneously by the likes of Andrew Marvell (an English Metaphysical poet, satirist and politician) who called him **"the best English satirist"**, his poetry was censored during the Victorian era due to his **libertinism** (a lifestyle of self-indulgence and promiscuity).
- Wilmot's unruly reputation meant there were concerns for his morals but he was a **nihilistic atheist.** This has alarmed and disturbed religious audiences since his publication.
- Sir Sidney Lee said of Wilmot "He is the **writer of the filthiest verse** in the language" in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.
- Wilmot was frequently banned from court and prone to violent temper, flagrant indiscretions and drink.

- Divided by a domestic life in the country and a riotous life in court, Wilmot was an alcoholic. Gilbert Burnet wrote that "for 5 years together he was continually drunk and not master of himself".
- He had several affairs and had a mistress, Elizabeth Barry, who he trained as an actress and had a daughter with.

The Title

- The title is the same as the first line which creates an echo and reinforces its significance.
- It implies that this will be a traditional love poem. We know that this poem is for someone, it is intimate and private. This is also a poem that Wilmot did not publish during his lifetime and kept only for a small audience of friends.
- The repetition of "Absent from Thee" in the title and then first line creates a great sense of the lover's absence; **"absent"** is the striking word here, repeated and at the front of both lines.

Absent from Thee

Anastrophe: emphasis put on him being away from his lover and he goes on to contend that this is the reason for his inner turmoil.

Doesn't want to be questioned because he is conscious he is in the wrong.

Play on words: morning and mourning his lover because of their separation

Address to his lover

Sexual and religious connotations: hell and religious punishment and sexual torment (maybe prostitutes) keeping him from her.

Alliteration slows down the line.

Return to his woman and to God where he finds comfort. He assumes both will be waiting for him.

Reference to death: he doesn't have much time left.

Absent from thee, I languish still;

Then ask me not, When I return?

The straying fool 'twill plainly kill

To wish all day, all night to mourn.

Dear! from thine arms then let me fly,

That my fantastic mind may prove

The torments it deserves to try,

That tears my fix'd heart from my love.

When, wearied with a world of woe,

To thy safe bosom I retire,

Where love, and peace, and truth does flow,

May I contented there expire!

The speaker is lovesick and it is like a disease. This links to later references to death which Wilmot uses to comment on the hyperbolic language used by romantic poets.

His self-contempt

The speaker knows his own failing and inability to resist temptation, so suggests he should indulge his fantasies.

Self punishment is a value system upheld by both Chrisitan mysticism and bondage parlours.

He misses her but only in the context of his promiscuous behaviour.

Triplet- gentle sounding and wishful through use of syndetic rhythm.

Contented suggests a serenity or calmness rather than happiness in death knowing he has loved.
When he is away from his love and God, he loses faith and succumbs to temptation. 'Base' suggests he is drawn to prostitutes, a contrast to 'safe bosom' in the earlier stanza.

Fears his behaviour will damn him forever- a prediction of his death. He also suggests that if his woman doesn't take him back, she will also be to blame for his eternal damnation.

Lest, once more wandering from that heaven,

I fall on some base heart unblest;

Faithless to thee, false, unforgiven—

And lose my everlasting rest.

Religious imagery of 'heaven' shows the speaker in a peaceful state. 'Wandering'. However, implies his inability to be truely happy as he is always looking for more than he has, he will always want sexual relations with other women.
Alliteration and fricative words emphasise his self-annoyance.

The Opening

"Absent from thee I languish still;
Then ask me not when I return.
The straying fool 'twill plainly kill
To wish all day, all night to mourn."

- The reader's **expectations are subverted** as the first line and title make them expect a traditional love poem.
- The speaker directly addresses his lover who is not present in reality (as we have been told repeatedly, he is "absent" from her).
- The speaker is **dramatic** in his description; **"I languish still"/ "'twill plainly kill"**, he suggests that his longing for her makes him physically weak and unwell and could eventually kill him.
    - The **"languishing"** speaker **recalls the "palely loitering" knight of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'** yet the knight is truly suffering whereas the speaker is not suffering and is being disingenuous.
- The second line is important to establishing the tone of the stanza - a stanza which opens like a traditional love poem. In the second line the speaker moves to asking her to stop pestering him about his return. Thus, the tone changes here and we start **questioning the nature of the relationship** between the speaker and his lover.

- The sound of this question also instigates the change:

"Absent from thee I **l**anguish sti**ll**;
Then ask me no**t** when I re**t**urn."

- The first line repeats "l" sounds and the second is cut through with curt "t" sounds. This **consonance** makes it seem like the speaker **moves quickly from flattery to despondency and annoyance**. This makes his voice **untrustworthy**.
- There is a definite sense therefore, that this "love poem" is nontraditional and not what the reader first expected.
- The speaker goes on and tries to persuade his lover through this l**ove-poetry discourse which acts as a mask** for the insincere relationship he is suggesting.
- The final 2 lines of the stanza see the speaker explain to his lover his plans for infidelity as an expression of sincere affection. His proposal can be compared to Ernest Dowson's "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" whose speaker protests in a poem to his lover that he is faithful **"in my fashion"**.

Structure

- "Absent from Thee" is a song.
- It is regular in shape: 4 stanzas arranged into quatrains.
- Wilmot has used the **clean, classic love poem structure** to subvert the expectations of the reader who expects a melodious ode to a lover but instead gets a witty and lustrous man who wants to persuade his lover to allow him to sleep around.

Metre

- The basic metre of the poem is **iambic tetrameter** (each line uses 4 iambs that follow an unstressed-stressed rhythm).

"The **stray**ing **fool** 'twill **plain**ly **kill**" (line 3)

- **Iambic rhythms** are **common in English poetry** and are especially perfect for love poems as they mimic or resemble a **heartbeat**.
- Wilmot plays with the basic iambic pattern. In the first line, for example, the speaker starts with a trochee (stressed-unstressed) rather than an iamb.

"**Ab**sent from **thee** I **lang**uish **still**" (line 1)

- This puts stress on the first word **"absent"**; the speaker is away from his lover.

- There are also trochees in lines 5 **"Dear!"** and 15 **"Faith**less" and where they appear they create a slight change which creates emphasis.

Rhyme Scheme

- Steady ABAB rhyme is used.
- This rhyme ties in with the **musical essence** of the poem and also fits with the traditional conventions of love poetry whilst the speaker delivers his unconventional message.
- Although the rhyme is consistent throughout, the speaker does use some **slant rhyme.**

"Return" and **"mourn"** (stanza 1)
"Heaven" and **"unforgiven"** (stanza 4)

- The half rhymes here may hint at the incompatibility of the poem's romantic style and the unromantic message.

Language

Speaker:

- The speaker of the poem is **insincere and unloving** towards "thee" (whomever the woman is; he never addresses her by her name).
- He is lustful and deceitful as he tries to persuade his lover of his faithfulness whilst being blatantly unfaithful.
- It is often suggested that the speaker is similar to Wilmot himself, who was famous for being **lascivious** and philandering.
- The speaker carefully **manipulates the language of love poetry** to his advantage and uses conventions to argue that it is in the woman's best interests to allow him to be unfaithful.
- We can ascertain from this that the speaker is selfish and self-serving but also that the speaker expects to be addressing like-minded readers who understand his joke.

Sound:

"**F**aithless to thee, **f**alse, un**f**orgiven, / And lose my **everlasting rest**"

- Harsh "f" sounds are aggressive and curse-like, possibly reflecting the (apparent) self-loathing of the speaker
- Losing his **"everlasting rest"** is the final consequence of the speaker's infidelity. It has a double meaning: He will both lose the possibility of going to heaven and to his **"lover",** to whose bosom he **"retire[s]"** (line 10).

Anastrophe:

"Absent from thee, I languish still;" (line 1)

- The speaker addresses a woman, "thee", directly which makes the poem intimate and alerts the reader to the poem's superficially romantic nature.

Alliteration:

"When, wearied with a world of woe," (line 12)
"Faithless to thee, false, unforgiven—" (line15)

- The speaker uses alliteration throughout the poem which add to its dramatic effect.
- The repeated "w" sounds in line other draw the reader's attention and help to underline the speaker's sincerity. The effect of the alliteration is that the line is slowed down, especially if spoken out loud, and this relates to the theme of the line. The slowing aurally connects the speaker's imagining of his weariness if were allowed to sleep around.
- The alliteration is dramatic enough that it is possibly **over-the-top** and could suggest that the speaker is trying to nudge the reader into interpreting the line as a bit of a **joke**. After engaging in sexual acts with many women, yes, the speaker will be very tired.
- Despite this possible double entendre, the line is also biblical in sound. **"World of woe"** recalls the Christian phrase "vale of tears" (referring to the tribulations of life). The **sombre religious language** is **at odds** with what he is describing: indulging his sexual desires.

Religious imagery:

"The torments it deserves to try" (line 7)
"once more wandering from that heaven" (line 13)
"I fall on some base heart unblest;" (line 14)

- Religious language is used throughout the poem and is often contrasted with the romantic.
- The religious themes throughout the poem hint at the **sacred nature of the speaker's relationship** with his lover, as though he wouldn't want to lose her in the same way he wouldn't want to lose God. In fact, the two are often **conflated**, as in the last line, when the place of **"everlasting rest"** can be interpreted as both his lover's bosom and Heaven.

- The speaker seems to make a case that their love is sacred and can therefore withstand the infidelity which he proposes.

Themes

Love and loss:

- The speaker addresses a woman who is not there and his love for her is seen in **passionate exclamations** like "Dear!" (line 5), as well as the use of language which insinuates his pain when she is not around:
    - "The **torments** it deserves to try, / That **tears** my fix'd heart from my love" (line 7-8)
        - The idea of violent separation is presented here, the speaker has no control over his actions but he is at a loss when she is not around.
- There is also a sense that the speaker is fearful of losing his lover. In the first stanza, words like **"languish", "fool"** and **"mourn"** show that he knows what he wants is wrong but he is **unable to stop himself fantasising about infidelity.** The way he wraps his desires in a traditional love poem and confesses to his lover that without her he is in pain, **"I languish still"** (line 1), and suggests he is fearful she will leave him and he tries to prevent this by presenting his ideas in a softer manner.
- The wanderings of his mind and the desires of his heart seem to be at odds. His mind fantasises but his heart seeks rest, and he **self-flagellates "fool"** (line 3) anticipating his faithlessness. This split between heart and mind can also be likened to the idea of the split between mind and body that was prevalent at the time, where the mind is the righteous ruler and the body wayward and likely to lead the owner into sin.

Truth and deception:

- The speaker uses the classical form of lyrical love poetry disingenuously. He does not use it to express raw emotion and love but instead **uses self-serving logic** to persuade his supposed "lover" that she should be approving of his philandering.
- The **speaker displays insouciance** towards the reader or listener of the song. It is **typical of the Restoration period** and Cavalier poetry in the sense that it is amoral and the speaker is a **rakish figure** who seeks only sexual gratification, disregarding for Christian marriage values. He lives hedonistically and according to the motto "carpe diem", while pretending the opposite.
- The poem is a **one-sided dialogue** which makes us **wary** of what he has to say.
- Wilmot has **taken a standard form and filled it with language designed to offend**. Using the cloak of the love poem form, he hide his scandalous infidelity and un-Christian desires.

Love through the ages according to history and time:

- Wilmot uses the language of love and religion throughout the poem which was common of the period.
- It is notable that a lot of the language **relies on cliche**:
  - Romantic: **"from thine arms"** (line 5)
  - Religious: **"lose my everlasting rest"** (line 20)
- The **navigation between these two forms** makes it seem like the speaker is addressing God. In a time when religion was strictly upheld and most people were devout, the speaker's dismissal of religion (in being polyamorous) would have been shocking. By comparing the speaker to **"heaven"** (line 17) and intimating that her bosom is a place of **"everlasting rest"** (line 20), the poem could be considered **sacrilegious or idolatrous**. The **irony** is that the woman, his idol, is simultaneously disrespected by the speaker.

Love and sex:

- The speaker is lustful. He is not occupied by a pure or emotional love, rather he is looking to be satiated by women. He wants sex.
- His love is portrayed thinly from the first line **"Absent from thee I languish still;/ Then ask me not when I return."** (line 1-2). The second line has a **hint of annoyance** in it, which **tempers** the first line. We can assume that **the first line is a placater**, used to make the woman more likely to give him what he wants.

Critical Views

Feminist perspective:

- A feminist perspective may highlight that the woman in the poem is being **degraded**. The speaker is willing to sleep around for his personal pleasure and expects his **"lover"** to be waiting for him once he is done.

"His mind possesses no power to keep him off certain misery and it is obviously unlikely ever to gain such strength; in other words, only death can stop his straying." (Marianne Thormahalen, 2000).

- Thormahlen is conclusive in her analysis when the language of the poem is ambiguous. The speaker argues that his infidelity is foolish and it causes him torture but he also suggests that he is unlikely to change.

- The weakness of the speaker's mind is seen in lines such as:
  - **"I languish still"** (line 1)
  - **"My fantastic mind"** (line 6)
  - **"The torments it deserves to try"** (line 7)
  - **"Lest, once more wandering from that heaven"** (line 12)

Comparisons

"Absent from Thee" and "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare":

1. Romantic love of many kinds
   Both "Absent from Thee" and "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare" consider **a form of love that is removed from the romantic** and relies heavily on physical attraction and lust. Both the speakers desire the physical satisfaction found in a woman's body; in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare", this is shown through the speaker's use of a prostitute - **"the bought red mouth"** - and similarly, in "Absent from Thee", the speaker uses **"some base heart unblest"** to (ambiguously) refer to a prostitute or, at least, a woman with low moral standards. In both cases, the speaker intimates that this is insufficient in some way and they will always return to their lover. In "Absent from Thee", this is seen in **"wearied with a world of woe,/ To thy safe bosom I retire"** (lines 9-10) and in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare", the speaker continually mentally returns to Cynara who plagues his mind and casts her **"shadow"** on him during his sexual endeavours with other women.

   In "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare", the speaker names his lover which marks the poem as more romantic than "Absent from Thee". The lack of naming in the latter creates a **more impersonal feel** and the reader is left wondering whether the speaker is calling to God or to his lover. The love in "Absent from thee", unlike in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare", is therefore **religiously entwined.**

2. Love and loss
   In "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare", the speaker's loss is very apparent: He is unable to rid Cynara from his mind and unable to move on with other women. It is unclear whether Cynara has left him or whether she has died but it is obvious that her absence has a significant mental effect on the speaker as he seems to **descend into madness** in the final stanzas: **"I cried for madder music and stronger wine,/ but when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,/ then falls they shadow"** (final stanza). In "Absent from Thee" the speaker does not grieve in the same way when he is away from his lover. Rather, he tells her to **"ask [him] not when [he] return[s]"** (line 2), and it seems the date of his return is as of

yet undecided. We can see from this, that the roles are opposed to those in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare". It seems that the speaker of "Absent from Thee" is the one who has left. His loss is in what he has left behind, not what has left him. This is significant as it gives the speaker in "Absent from Thee" more power and control over his situation than the speaker of "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare".

3. Truth and deception

   Both the speakers in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare" and "Absent from Thee" are **deceptive in their insistence on their infidelity and their justifications for their innocence**. In "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare", the speaker insists multiple times that he has been faithful **"in [his] fashion"** (a clause which comes after the exclamatory **"I have been faithful to thee, Cynara!"** and therefore sounds deflated). Cynara's lover invents a new form of faithfulness, whereby he engages in sexual acts with other women but thinks of her during these acts. As readers, we are doubtful of his protestations. Similarly, in "Absent from Thee" the speaker asks his lover to allow him these sexual experiences but remain waiting for him when he is ready **"To thy safe bosom I retire"** (line 10). The men are deceptive in their insistence that they truly love the women they address. It is evident that they are aware of their faults by subtle indications in the language. In "Absent from Thee", the speaker takes pains to let his lover know that without her he struggles and is weak, and in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare", the speaker's **insistence on his faithfulness alerts the reader** that he is aware **he has been the opposite.** As readers, we are made aware of both the truth in the men's words and the deceptive nature in which they **warp the truth i**n attempts to remain favourable in their lover's eyes.

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "Absent from thee":

1. Love and sex

   Sex in "Absent from Thee" is negotiated as a means of satiating a desire for physical contact and attraction. Through the speaker demanding a polyamorous relationship, and the suggestion of prostitutes, we can glean that the speaker views **sex as a form of physical satiation** rather than an act of love. In "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", sex is infered at points such as **"she looked at me as she did love/ and made sweet moan"** (lines 19-20). The important element here is the use of "love". Whereas the knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" **conflates love and sex** - in this phrase they are one and the same - the speaker of "Absent from Thee" sees sex as physical experimentation his mind **"deserves to try"** (line 8).

   Love in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is stifling for the knight. It changes his complexion and makes him weak. The evidence of this is not from his mouth but

from another narrator who introduces us to him as **"alone and paley loitering"** (line 2). The reader feels that they can **trust this voice** who comes across the knight by the lake. In "Absent from Thee", the voice of the speaker is biased; he aims to persuade his lover to accept his infidelity and to do this uses manipulative techniques. Therefore, as readers we question how truthful he is when he explains to her that he **"languish still"** and is weak in her absence. The knight's love makes him **physically unwell** whereas the speaker in "Absent from Thee" fantasises about infidelity and seems loath to return.

2. Truth and deception

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is concerned with an element of magic and this other-worldly force appears to have a significant effect on the knight and his ability to move on from the **"faery's child"** he talks of. The **woman is portrayed as the deceptive person** in the relationship as she appears to trick him into love and then abandon him, leaving him alone and yearning for her touch. In contrast, the deceptive partner in "Absent from Thee" is the speaker.

3. Love and loss

The loss in "Absent from Thee" is less dominant than in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". The **loss appears to be self-imposed** in "Absent from Thee" as the speaker alludes to the fact that he is able to return to his lover on his own account: **"ask me not when I return"** (line 2). The knight, however, experiences a different kind of loss, one that is **involuntary, raw and intense,** and which leaves him **"palely loitering"** (line 2), stuck in a bleak **liminal space** between the time he had with his lover and death from love sickness. Whereas the knight is driven to obsess over his lover in her absence, the speaker in "Absent from Thee" is drawn to the opposite. We find the speaker instead imagining sexual relations with other women. As readers, we are led to question how the loss, expressed in the absence of a lover in both poems, contributes to the states of the men and the truthfulness of their love for their "lovers".