

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Poetry Collection: Relationships

A Complaint - *William Wordsworth*

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A COMPLAINT

William Wordsworth

Brief Summary

“A Complaint” tackles the loss or separation of a relationship, though it is contextually implied that it is the end of a friendship. The speaker laments the positive memories he has from the friendship, by comparison to the loss and emptiness he now feels.

Synopsis

- The speaker opens the poem by addressing the reader (who also acts as addressee) that there has been a change in one of his relationships, and as a result he feels negatively impacted by the separation.
- He compares love to a fountain: perhaps to imply that it is necessary for survival, like water is.
- In the second stanza, he references the positive memories from the relationship / friendship, by comparison to the loss he now feels.
- In the final stanza, he refers back cyclically to the first stanza, referencing how badly the separation or loss of friendship has affected his life, to further emphasise this person’s impact on him.



Context

William Wordsworth (1770 - 1850)

Wordsworth was born in Cumberland, but had a troubled relationship with father and other relatives, and both parents died during his adolescence. As a result, he was split up from his siblings and sent to live with different relatives. He spent a lot of time avoiding his mother’s family, who treated him so badly to the extent he considered suicide, by staying outside, and developed a deep affection for the Lake District.



Wordsworth was a **romantic poet**, which meant he was in favour of resisting growing industrialism by remembering a simpler, natural past. The changing shape of industrial Britain is likely the force that inspired him to explore his own moral and spiritual development through the medium of his autobiographical epic poem 'The Prelude'. The poem also comes with a message of warning to the contemporary society that was transforming fields to factories, woods to roads.

Romantic Movement

Romanticism stemmed from the enlightenment period, but the writers within it wanted to reject the cold unemotional rationalism of enlightenment culture which had a focus on objective science, logic and rationality. Instead they used a more **emotional and subjective view** of the romanticised world, looking to the beauty of nature and past life in order to protest against the industrial, changing face of the world.

The romantic writers would also follow enlightened values of **protesting institutions and sources of power** (church / monarch / army), and use their work to **comment on society** and how it should be reformed. They tended to use **everyday language** to make poems **accessible** to all, and can be considered a reaction to the industrial revolution, as they'd express their dislike of urban life and embrace of nature. They'd also deal with loss primarily through writing poetry, and would often focus on larger, general themes of love, loss, and grief, rather than a specific focus on an individual.

Coleridge

It is widely thought that the poem is about Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom Wordsworth wrote and worked with for many years. However, when Coleridge began to use drugs such as opium to try and inspire his work, he quickly became addicted and his life quickly became ruined. He eventually moved from the UK and it is both this physical separation and emotional distance between the two poets that critics believe is explored within 'A Complaint'. Both Coleridge and Wordsworth are considered the pioneers of the English Romantic movement.



A Complaint

The speaker implies that he has lost a lover or friend and this relationship has recently dissolved, so is a very current pain in his life. It is widely thought that Wordsworth is in fact writing about his friend Coleridge.

Takes a very personal outlook to the general theme of friendship and love, which is rather unconventional for a romantic poet. This may express the severe impact of this loss in friendship has had on the speaker, and by extension, Wordsworth.

Continues the extended metaphor of the fountain, and also ties in the idea of sacredness with the 'fount' which are sometimes used in churches.

The idea of a well continues the theme of fountains but introduces a connotation of secrecy, concealment and disguise.

The poet reliterates the first few lines of the poem, ending with the reference to "poor" that is in the first stanza, and this creates a sense of cyclical narrative, perhaps suggesting the universal and ongoing way love works.

There is a change—and I am **poor**;

Your love hath been, **nor long ago**,

A **fountain** at my fond heart's door,

Whose only business was to **flow**;

And flow it did; not taking heed

Of its own bounty, or **my** need.

What **happy** moments did I count!

Blest was I then all **bliss** above!

Now, for that **consecrated fount**

Of murmuring, sparkling, living love,

What have I? shall I dare to tell?

A comfortless and hidden **well**.

A well of love—it may be deep—

I trust it is,—and never dry:

What matter? if the waters sleep

In silence and obscurity.

—Such change, and at the very door

Of my fond heart, hath made me poor.

This could have the literal meaning of being financially poor, or could take a less literal meaning of being deprived of experience, health, love, etc. This opens the poem with a somber tone.

At the time, fountains were considered a symbol of status, and perhaps this image is used to show the strength of love. They also provide water to the public, which is essential for survival, which may be the speaker implying they need love and friendship in order to live.

Juxtaposes his current unhappy emotional state with the memories he has before the loss / separation, to emphasise his emotional situation.

By using rhetorical questions, the speaker is perhaps displaying if he's unsure whether the separation was the correct idea.

The heavy use of caesura over these two lines suggest that the speaker's mind is confused and racing.



The title “A Complaint”

A vague title, which doesn't reveal much to the reader, but intrigues them enough to read on.

Suggests that the poet will be expressing a grievance through the poem, but is nonspecific of what it is

A Complaint

Begins the poem with a formal tone, which juxtaposes the intimate and personal content and relationship explored through the actual poem.

Perspective

The poem is widely considered to be Wordsworth addressing his friend Coleridge after he moves away from England. It is written in a **second person narrative**, with the speaker addressing someone through the **direct address** “*your*”. However, this is the only example of direct address in the whole poem, so it can largely be considered to be just a **first-person narrative**. It is a very reflective, personal poem, and the speaker can be considered an extension of Wordsworth himself.

Opening

*There is a change—and I am **poor**;
Your love hath been, nor long ago,
A **fountain** at my fond heart's door,
Whose only business was to flow;
And flow it did; not taking heed
Of its own bounty, or my need.*

The poem's first stanza immediately introduces a character **deprived of love**, suggesting there has been a change in one of his relationships and is therefore suffering from its loss. The **speaker** implies that he has lost a lover or friend and this relationship has recently dissolved, so



is a very current pain in his life.

The opening takes a very **personal** outlook to the general theme of friendship and love, which is rather unconventional for a romantic poet. This may express the severe impact of this loss in friendship has had on the speaker, and by extension, Wordsworth.

→ By using the **adjective “poor”**, Wordsworth could have intended the literal meaning of being financially poor, or could take a less literal meaning of being deprived of experience, health, love, etc. This opens the poem with a **somber tone**.

On the other hand, at the time of the poem being written, **fountains were considered a symbol of status**, and perhaps this image is used to show the **strength of love**.

They also provide water to the public, which is **essential for survival**, which may be the speaker implying they need love and friendship in order to live.



Structure

Stable Structure

The **consistent rhyme scheme [ABABCC]** results in a lighthearted rhythm, which **juxtaposes** the serious content and sentiment of the poem. It also works to imply a **sense of solidity and structure** which reflects the serious themes discussed throughout the poem.

This theme is also mirrored in the stanza structure - three stanzas of six lines each. The odd number of stanzas could imply that the two individuals involved in the relationship have a **barrier** between them.

Cyclical Narrative

The first line opens with the speaker reflecting on how the loss of this relationship has left him **“poor”**, this idea is revisited on the poem’s conclusion in the line:

Of my fond heart, hath made me poor.

The **repetition** of **“poor”** emphasises the **loss and detachment** he feels after losing connection with his friend. The **cyclical narrative** suggests a **universality** to this feeling of lost love, and helps solidify the theme in the poem.



Caesura

Wordsworth employs **caesura** to show the **emotional disruption** his loss of relationship has caused him. For example, the punctuation in the lines: **“a well of love—it may be deep—/I trust it is,—and never dry”** implies the damage and confusion the speaker now feels towards his friendships and relationships.

Iambic Tetrameter & Pentameter

IAMBIC PENTAMETER | Technique where the poet uses eight syllables in each line, with pairs of sounds going da-DA with the emphasis on the second syllable.

Wordsworth uses **Iambic Tetrameter** for the entire poem, aside from the line:

Of **murmuring**, sparkling, **living love**,

Here, Keats uses **Iambic Pentameter** (ten syllables instead of eight) to place particular importance on the line. As this line is in the centre of the poem it could act like a **volta** as the **poem shifts in tone**. This change in tone is furthered by the speaker changing his discussion from a fountain to a well.

Language

Semantic Field of Fountains

Wordsworth employs the **semantic field of water** through the references:

- **“A fountain at my fond heart’s door, // Whose only business was to flow”,**
- **“consecrated fount // Of murmuring, sparkling, living love”**
- **“A comfortless and hidden well.”**
- **“A well of love—it may be deep— // I trust it is,—and never dry: // What matter? if the waters sleep”**

And these phrases **juxtapose** the two specific vessels of water described: the well and the fountain.

Whilst the **fountain is public and obvious**, the **well is concealed and hidden**. This may reflect the different facets of the emotions of loss and love - **emotions can be both outwardly displayed and expressed and inwardly felt**. It is



also suggested perhaps that love is compared to water, which can be taken to mean that Wordsworth considers **love crucial for survival** just as water is.

Personification

PERSONIFICATION | Describing a non-human object using human characteristics.

In the line “*Of murmuring, sparkling, living love*”, Wordsworth **personifies the fountain**, suggesting it has the human-like quality of being able to “*murmur*” and “*live*”. As the **fountain is used as a metaphor for the vessel of love** this line may imply that love and relationships are forever changing.

