

# Edexcel English Literature GCSE

## Poetry Collection: Relationships

One Flesh - *Elizabeth Jennings*

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## ONE FLESH

Elizabeth Jennings

### Brief Summary

Jennings' poem 'One Flesh' is from the perspective of someone reflecting on their parent's relationship. Their relationship seems physically distant with hints that they are not close intellectually or emotionally either. The poem also concerns time and how it affects relationships as well as individuals' lives in general.

### Synopsis

- The couple are introduced as sleeping in separate beds, with the mother asleep and the father reading. However, he is unable to concentrate on the book and she cannot sleep.
- It is revealed that they "hardly ever touch" and seem to be afraid of physical intimacy.
- The speaker doesn't know which extreme the relationship has become - whether their parents love each other more than ever or not at all.
- The speaker shifts to the realisation that her parents are coming to the end of their lives, and the speaker wonders if they are aware of this too.

### Context

#### Elizabeth Jennings (1926 - 2001)

Jennings was an English poet, born in Lincolnshire but educated in Oxford, whose work often reflected her devout Roman Catholicism. Whilst her early work was published in several journals, her first book wasn't published until she was in her late twenties. She cited poets including W. H Auden and Robert Graves as her influences in lyrical poetry. She was considered a traditionalist and mastered the form of simplistic but effective metre and rhyme.

Throughout her life, she experienced severe mental illness but did not write autobiographical poetry. On the other hand, her life contributed many of the themes she explores through her poetry. These themes, central to most of her poetry, included fundamental explorations of human life including love, religion and death. She ended up publishing 27 books of poetry in the period of fifty years.



<https://cornerstone-forum.org/?p=3229>



## One Flesh

*By referencing childhood, the speaker may be continuing the theme of separation into the different periods of the female character's life and the changes made between them, or alternatively it could present the mental regression often experienced in old age.*

*Could be an implication that physical items get in the way of life and emotions. The book could be the bible.*

*"Flotsam" are debris in water. Suggests the relationship is no longer novel nor exciting.*

*The sibilance here could suggest the sound of whispering, which suggests an element of shame that the relationship has ended like this.*

*The references to time demonstrate how the speaker's focus shifts from love to time - perhaps the speaker has come to the realisation that her parents are coming to the end of their lives, even if her parents are unaware of this.*

Lying **apart** now, each in a **separate** bed,

**He** with a book, keeping the light on late,

**She like a** girl **dreaming of childhood**,

All men elsewhere - it is as if they wait

**Some new event**: the **book** he holds unread,

Her eyes fixed on the shadows overhead.

Tossed up like **flotsam** from a former passion,

How cool they lie. They hardly ever touch,

Or if they do, **it is like a confession**

Of having little feeling - or too much.

**Chastity** faces them, a destination

For which their whole lives were a preparation.

**Strangely apart, yet strangely close together,**

Silence between them like a thread to hold

And not wind in. And **time** itself's a **feather**

Touching them gently. **Do they know they're old,**

*Immediately, Jennings implicates a semantic field of detachment and physical distance.*

*The use of simile may imply that the female character is unsure of how to actually define herself or her situation.*

*The pronouns "he" and "she" are separated physically in the poem onto two separate lines*

*Could be a reference to death and / or the afterlife.*

*Connotations of Catholicism introduces the religious language used in the poem - perhaps they feel uncomfortable or immoral interacting?*

*Paradoxical sentence highlights the complicated nature of the couple's relationship. May suggest the speaker is naive - whilst the speaker cannot imagine a relationship where the couple are constantly physically together, they couple are actually close.*

*"Feather" has connotations of freedom and escape. May refer to the fragile nature of being old, both physically and mentally.*



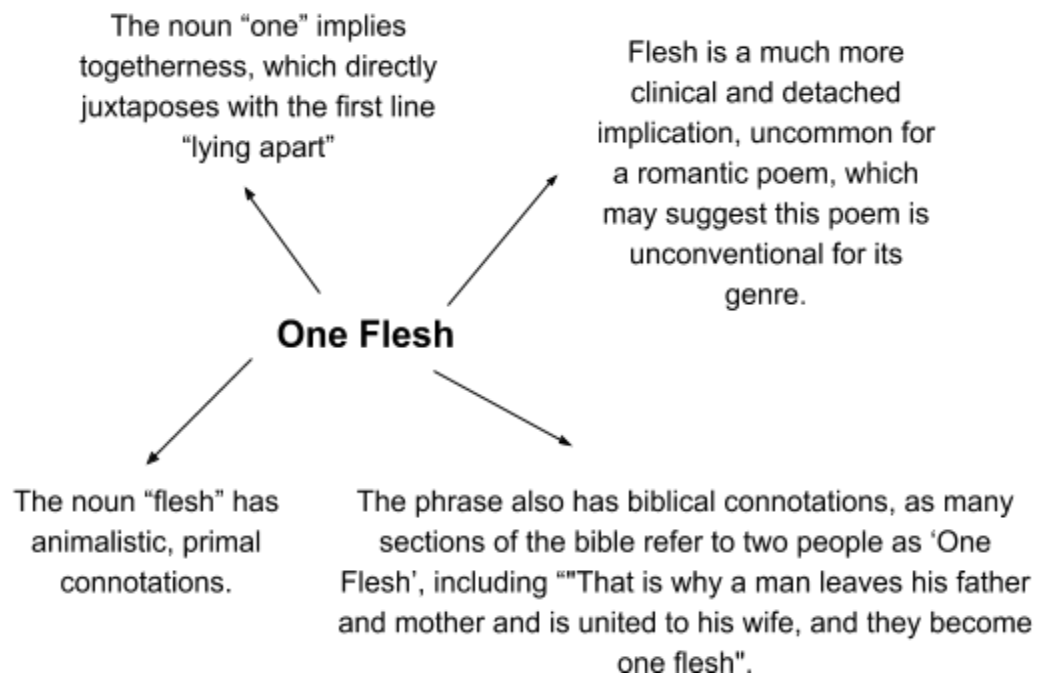


These two who are **my father and my mother**

Whose fire from which I came, has now grown cold?

*Could be an implication that the pair remain together due to their child, and this holds them together. Puts the poem into context.*

### The title “One Flesh”



## Perspective

The poem is from the perspective of the couple's child. The **personal pronouns** "my" and "I" are not used until the final stanza, so initially it appears that the poem is written in a **third person narrative**. However, it seems to switch to **first person** at the end, which serves to inform the reader of the subjective nature of the speaker's relationship to the man and woman discussed in the poem.

## Structure

### Even Stanza Structure

The poem is structured into three even stanzas of six lines, which may reflect the stagnation which has occurred within the couple's relationship. The symbolism of having three stanzas could be to suggest that there is a **barrier or disruption between the couple causing their separation**. Overall, it implies that their distance is normal and part of everyday life.

### Iambic 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.

There is a mixture of lines conforming to **iambic pentameter**:

**He with a book, keeping the light on late,  
She like a girl dreaming of childhood,**

However, some lines don't stick within this meter. This may further the theme of confusion and complication in the couple's relationship, and also places emphasis on those words and lines.

An example of a line which doesn't conform to iambic pentameter is:

***"Strangely apart, yet strangely close together,"***

This line is also where the **tone changes** and an alternative interpretation of the poem (that the couple are content and happy despite not being physically together often) is introduced. The concept of the couple being "**strangely close together**" doesn't fit with the rest of the poem in the same way the words don't work in iambic pentameter.



## Parallelism

**PARALLELISM** | The use of grammatically identical / similar components repeated in a sentence or multiple sentences.

Throughout the poem, there are lines which are structurally the same and are sat one after the other. These include:

***“He with a book, keeping the light on late,  
She like a girl dreaming of childhood,***

***Some new event: the book he holds unread,  
Her eyes fixed on the shadows overhead.”***

The effect of this is to **juxtapose the semantic field of separation** which is employed throughout the poem. Perhaps they suggest that whilst the couple are physically separated, they complete the same or similar actions or thought processes at once.

The line **“who are my father and my mother”** similarly sets up the syntax of “my \_\_\_\_\_” and then repeats it for both her father and mother, to continue **semantic parallelism**.



## Language



### Biblical language

Jenning’s devout Catholicism shows intensely with the references she makes to religion throughout the poem, for example **“confession”**, **“chastity”** and the implication that the **“book”** is the Bible.

The title also **connotes religious allusion**; **“one flesh”** is a phrase used in Genesis in the Bible:

*“That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh”.*



## Theme of separation

*“Lying **apart** now, each in a **separate** bed,”*

By opening the poem immediately on the phrases *“lying apart”* and *“separate bed”*, Jennings implies the permanence of the couple’s distance.

*“**He** with a book, keeping the light on late,  
**She** like a girl dreaming of childhood,*

*Some new event: the book **he** holds unread,  
**Her** eyes fixed on the shadows overhead.”*

In these two sets of lines, the **pronouns** *“he” and “she”* and *“he” and “her”* are physically separated into two separate lines. This **separation** continues the **theme of distance** though onto the structure and formatting of the text.

The speaker says that the couple *“hardly ever touch”* which explicitly shows the reader the physical separation that the couple are experiencing. This could suggest that their relationship has **transcended** [gone beyond] the physical realm and is purely intellectual / emotional due to their old age.



Despite this, the **paradoxical sentence** *“Strangely apart, yet strangely close together”* continues the **semantic field of distance and separation**, but at the same time it highlights the complicated nature of the couple’s relationship. This may suggest the speaker is naive as they cannot imagine a relationship where the couple are constantly physically together.

## Dual meanings

**Dual meanings** are used in the poem to highlight the complicated nature of the speaker’s parents relationship. For example, the **verb** *“lying”* could connote that there have been untruths or unfaithfulness in the relationship, or could literally mean they are lying not physically next to each other.



### Sensory language

To contrast the lack of physicality between the couple, Jennings uses a range of **sensory language** and references such as:

- Reference to **touch**: *“How cool they lie. They hardly ever touch”, “little feeling”, “Touching them gently”, “now grown cold?”*
- Reference to **sound**: *“silence”*
- Reference to **sight**: *“Her eyes fixed on the shadows overhead”*

The effect of this is to involve the reader and to reflect the multiple facets of love and relationships which can affect an individual or couple.

