AQA English Literature A-level

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

Ernest Dowson: ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’

Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae

Ernest Dowson

Brief Summary

This **Decadent poem** sees the speaker muse over his inability to forget his former lover, Cynara. The poem is 4 stanzas, each of 6 lines and at the end of each line is an alternate rhyme (ABACBC). The poem doesn't stick to this strictly, mimicking the speaker's **unruly behaviour**. The poem is decadent in its **fascination with excess and indulgence** as the speaker attempts to drown out the ever-present Cynara.

Summary

Context

- Written in the period of the Decadent movement and follows the radical themes expected from this period. The speaker engages with self-indulgence and rebellion in his attempts to rid Cynara from his mind. He dances, throws roses and eats lavishly.
- Victorians at the time who believed poetry should display virtuousness and promote ethics and morality.
- The poem additionally concerns itself with eroticism in the way it controversially talks of sex work and the speaker's ambiguous definition of faithfulness.

Structure

- Regular with 4 stanzas of 6 lines, the 5th line of each slightly shorter than the rest.
- The uniformity is satisfying
- The metre contrasts the unconventional use of iambic hexameter.
- The rhyme scheme is also regular but unusual

Language

- The speaker uses alliteration to great effect to create contrasting tones which mimic his confused mental state.

Key Points

- The poem concerns itself with the turmoil of lost love and the pain of absence.
- The poem is formally regular certain poetic techniques such as alliteration, rhyme and metre reflect the waves of pain the speaker experiences.

Synopsis

Stanza 1: The speaker addresses Cynara, telling her that the previous night when he was with another woman, the memory of her, the **"shadow"** (line 2) of Cynara, fell between them. He feels terrible with the **"old passion"** (line 4) he maintains for the woman Cynara. Note that the two refrains that are first introduced in stanza 1 continue throughout the poem. These are: **"But i was desolate and sick of an old passion**" and **"I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! In my fashion"**.

Stanza 2: The reader is informed that the woman the speaker is with is a prostitute, **"bought red mouth"** (line 9).

Stanza 3: The speaker confesses his attempts to move on without Cynara, and to enjoy his life without her. Despite this, he cannot shake the memories of **"old passion"** he felt for Cynara.

Stanza 4: The speaker says that despite his efforts to enjoy himself, with music, dancing and wine, the memories of her remain and when he goes to bed, his thoughts return to

Cynara. The refrain **"I have been faithful to you Cynara! In my own fashion"** refers to his inability to rid her from his mind.

Context

Historical Context:

- Victorian England was **prosperous and conservative** as well as constantly and rapidly changing.
- Over the course of the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution pushed wealth into the cities at the peril of those in the country.
- By 1900, the year Dowson died in London, the city was crowded and dirty but also full of wealth and potential. There was a deep divide between the rich and the poor as a result.
- The turn of the century also saw Queen Victoria take the throne and this is often thought of as a turning point in history as she was an extremely influential ruler.
- Under Queen Victoria, Britain became an empire with extreme self-belief in its own moral rightness and its role as a model Kingdom for the rest of the world.
- Despite this, near the end of the period, there was a **pining for simpler times** and people grew tired of the power assigned to Britain.
- This period was also defined by a growing **political and artistic cynicism** and an **interest in romanticised childhood** and the blissful ignorance of the infantile mind. This was especially popular among the upper classes. Dowson's poem belongs to a world of **wearied longing** for an idealised golden age.

Literary Context:

- The poet Ernest Dowson led a life troubled by poverty. He was supposedly in love with a girl half his age and this tormented him through his last years.
- The Decadent Movement which Dowson contributed to, was a movement led by the belief in "art for art's sake" and nostalgia.
- "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" embodies the movement in the speaker's miserable lament whilst indulging in expensive pleasures of life such as fine feats of food and wine.
- Dowson also took **inspiration from the Pre-Raphaelite** movement in which poets wrote of legend, love and tragedy. This inspiration can be seen in the **"lily"**-like appearance of Cynara

The Rhymers' Club:

- A group of male poets based in London founded in 1890 by W B Yeats and Ernest Rhys. This group included Downson.
- It was mostly a social club but the group produced two anthologies of poetry.

The Decadent Movement:

- The Decadent Movement emerged in the 1890s. It consisted of **radical themes** such as **self-indulgence, eroticism and rebelliousness.**
- This **horrified the Victorians** who generally believed literature should promote ethics and morality. There was a belief that literature could be used as a mode of encouraging virtuousness, which the Decadent Movement seemed to work against.
- Many people saw the **uncoupling of art and morality** as dangerous. The Decadent movement shook the Victorian establishment with its sensuality and political experimentation.
- Perhaps the most famous figure associated with the movement was Oscar Wilde.
- There are **3 aspects** of the poem which define Dowson's poem as belonging to the Decadent movement; its **perversity,** its **love of excess** and its **egotism**.

1. Perversity:
    - Perversity is evident in the way the speaker is unable to banish the memory of Cynara while he indulges with a new lover.
    - The speaker assures the reader: **"I was desolate and sick of an old passion"** (line 4) but it seems that he gets a **perverse pleasure** from the experience of thinking about her whilst with another woman. While we know nothing about Cynara, we know that the woman the speaker is with in the poem is a prostitute from line 9: **"her bought red mouth"**. This adds to the **decadent atmosphere** of the poem.
    - We are unsure whether Cynara is dead or not. The speaker, however, addresses the poem to her in a strange attempt to reassure her that he has been faithful **"in my fashion"** (line 6) which also entails a certain amount of perversity.

2. Love of excess:
    - The perversity of the speaker engaging sexually with multiple women, despite his insistence to Cynara that he is faithful, leads into the second characteristic of Decadent poetry: love of excess.
    - The poet recounts, with pride, his **excessive emotionalism** and behaviour in attempts to expunge the memory of Cynara.
    - For example, he talks of flinging roses and dancing (stanza 3), engaging in music, drinking wine and eating lavishly (stanza 4).
    - His efforts are in vain, however, and the image erected is one of **hysteria and madness**.

3. Egotism:
    - He holds up the two elements: perversity and excess, which together can be summed up as egotism. In this way, the poem is a **nod to the poet and his psychopathy**.

    - It is his **conflicted response to the dilemma that drives the poem**. This is why we learn so little about the other characters of the poem. The only description we have of Cynara is of her **"pale, lost lilies"** (line 15) which contrasts the **"bought red mouth"** (line 9).
- The structure of the poem reinforces each of these elements; **every 4th line** of the stanza is **a reminder of his desolation** and **every 6th a guilty justification**.
- Every line apart from the 5th is a **12-syllable French Alexandrine** which draws the speaking voice out longer than the usual pentameter. This gives the poem a **breathless feel** and emotion pushed almost to the limit.
- The repetitive structure emphasises the **obsessive and excessive nature** of the speaker.

Ernest Dowson:

- The poet led a tragic life. Born in London 1867, he became a key figure in the Decadent movement but died at the young age of 32 from tuberculosis. He made very little money and had a problem with drugs and alcohol.
- His parents died within months of each other; first his father from a chloral hydrate overdose and then his mother committed suicide.
- Ironically, he wrote a lot about passion and love but **never seemed to have a reciprocal lover** himself.

The Title

- The title is **taken from a great Latin poem** written by **Horace.**
- In the poem written by Horace, the speaker empolres Venus to stop raging erotic wars on him, warning he is advanced in years and she should wage her wars on a younger man better endowed. There is a volta in the poem which sees the speaker finally confess a love and attraction to a man called Ligurinus.
- Literally translated, it means **"I am not as I was under the reign of the good Cyanara."**
    - Ultimately, the original poem is about not being able to let Cynara go and seeing her in everything he does now.
    - The speaker implies he is past his prime. Later, we discover that the speaker longs for a woman who is gone; he is love-sick.
- Downson, through titling the poem after Horace's (Book 4 of his *Odes*), **places himself in a long poetic tradition.**

Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
When I awoke and found the dawn was grey:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind,
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;
And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

Metaphor- Cynara appears as a shadow which has the connotation of darkness and the unconscious mind. The memory of Cynara infiltrates everything; it even gets into the tiny distance between their lips.
Bowing head is also suggestive of prayer and religion, he prays to God to save his soul. The monosyllabic words capture the doom and dread of his infidelity.
Exclamation- her name pains him

Contextually, sex work during the Victorian times wasn't uncommon but to talk about it and to write about it was.
Pathetic fallacy creates a depressing atmosphere. Downing contrasts expectation of dawn as bright and the promise of a new day with "grey". This illustrates the clouded perception of the speaker in his miserable state

Alliteration is passionate yet frustrated and a bit aggressive.
Alliteration here is calmer and speaks of loss and grief. Lilies are a symbol of death; he mourns the loss of their relationship.
Reader questions his perception of faithfulness.

The rhyme returns us to a calmer state, echoing the way his emotions come in waves. For the speaker, Cynara is all consuming, so much so that she always takes his enjoyment away.
Hyperbole: as though his infatuation is so powerful it speaks to something animalistic. Desire is assigned a body ("lips") and thus personified; perhaps the speaker is conflating desire with Cynara

Sibilance- suggestive of Cynara's silent presence slipping in
Repetition and epimone
Monosyllabic- that he bows his head suggests the speaker acknowledges the shame and guilt that he is unable to move on or that he now engages in unloving sexual acts.

Rhyme is satisfying and suggests that in this moment of love making, the speaker is fulfilled.
The woman the speaker is with is a prostitute.
Reduction through synecdoche of woman to her mouth is dehumanising
Sibilance which is suggestive of the sting of grief; he chastises himself for his behaviour of getting drunk and sleeping around.

Speaker references his unpredictable behaviour. It could be romantic but it is also dangerous to be out of control.

Lists the things he's done to try and forget Cynara. Nothing seems to help him.

Alliteration- exacerbates the frustration in his voice as he tries to drown out Cynara with the sound of music.

Cynara returns endlessly, his desire for her is insatiable.

Themes

Love and loss:

- The speaker laments the loss of Cynara, his former lover. The poem is set after the woman has left him and he attempts, unsuccessfully, to fill the void she has left with other women.
- The speaker uses emphatic sounds like **"ah"** (line 1) and **"yea"** (line 2)
- To numb the pain of Cynara's absence and the desire he has for her presence, the speaker seeks indulgence, joy and **substitute intimacy**. Regardless of his reckless **philandering**, Cynara is always in his mind.
    - There is an interesting dichotomy, therefore, between absence and presence which can be related to love and loss. Cynara is **physically distant but emotionally present** in the speaker's mind which results in his confused and reckless state.
    - The speaker's love for Cynana ensures she is ever-present but it remains undeniable that he has lost her. Her lingering presence in his memory and mind are not a substitute for her real-life presence.
    - This lingering presence can be compared to the struggle of the knight in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" where the knight's elfish lover disappears and he struggles with the pain of losing her. In contrast to Dowson's poem, where the former lover's presence lingers, the knight feels excruciatingly alone and this is reflected in his stark surroundings and pale countenance.
    - Possibly, the two characters, the speaker in Dowson's poem and the Knight in "La Belle Dame", share the fact that the woman they pine after is beyond them and out of their reach. It is the pain of being unable to have what they want that makes them grieve so much for their losses.
- The reference to the speaker's soul in line 3; **"upon my soul between the kisses and the wine"** suggests that the speaker believes Cynara has a **special connection** with him, like she is the only one who can reach this intimate part of him. This is contrasted to the loveless encounter he has with the woman in the poem.
- Even though the speaker engages in the act of love making within the poem, he is not present, his mind is with Cynara and the soul connection. Although love may be defined differently from person to person, Dowson here implies the speaker and Cynara experienced a **spiritual and deep love**. This is contrasted with the shallowness of making love to a woman whom he does not care for, a woman whom he reduces to a mouth in the line **"bought red mouth"** (line 9).

- The **epimone** **"I was desolate"** in stanza 1 emphasises the speaker's loneliness and the wretchedness of his mental state now Cynara is gone.
- The speaker seems to have no hope of Cynara returning, although it is not clear whether this is because she is dead or has left him. Theirs is an **"old"** passion and this word suggests the speaker realises it has no future, it cannot become current once more.

Love through the ages according to history and time:

- The employment of the same title as another historically acknowledged poem is important as a means of acknowledging that **the same tumultuous emotions exist across time.**
- The speaker makes no indication when his lover, Cynara, left him. Referencing lilies **"pale, lost lilies"** (line 15), the speaker may indicate that Cynara is dead, as lilies are the traditional flowers of funerals. However, this line can also be interpreted as the speaker's acknowledgement of the **death of their relationship**. The poem is not grounded in time or concrete facts and the pain of loss feels endless and unintelligible.

Truth and deception:

- Something can be said of the speaker's perception of the woman he sleeps with, **"her bought red mouth" (line 9).** The speaker's dehumanising reduction of the woman, through synecdoche, to her lips is a striking contrast to the more tender line that precedes it **"night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay"** (line 8)
- Does the speaker think the sleeping woman in his arms is in love? For he is certainly not.
- He brushes away her love **"Surely the kisses...were sweet"** (line 9) as he cannot care for her because he is so preoccupied with the memory of Cynara. **"Surely"** implies emotional distance; he knows in any other time or to another person they would have been, but he does not experience them as such, and simultaneously posits and questions their sweet nature. However, his emotional distance from her does not stop him from sleeping with her and getting his sexual fulfilment and satisfaction, and this **quick path to sexual satisfaction** is **implied in the easy rhyming** of **"beat"** and **"sweet"**.
- The mention of his hiring a prostitute leads the reader to question how trustworthy the speaker is if he is so willing to use and dismiss women in such ways.
- We are also sceptical of his insistence on faithfulness when we know that he is constantly unfaithful.

- He is deceptive in his sexual engagement with the **"red mouth"** (line 9), allowing her to sleep in his arms and talking of the close proximity of their beating hearts, implying a level of intimacy which he clearly does not feel.
- He is deceptive in his definition of **"faithful"** when addressing Cynara as we know he has committed infidelity. For this reason, his insistence **"in my fashion"** seems like an extremely weak argument for his case. The clause **"in my fashion"** follows an exclamation. Coming after this exclamation, it sounds **deflated.** The clause sounds rather **subdued**, as if the speaker has realised the cheapness of his version of fidelity or the hollowness of his assertion that he has been faithful, and therefore felt the need to attenuate it with **"in my fashion".**
- As readers, we ask how much the speaker really does love Cynara if he is willing to engage with other sexual partners in her absence. H**ow does the speaker define love?** Possibly, the love he feels for Cynara is more of an obsession, like that experienced by the knight in "La Belle Dame", and he is fixated on the idea of the woman Cynara whom he cannot have.

Love and sex:

- Dowson, rather scandalously for the time, makes reference to sex work in his poem through the **"bought red mouth"** (line 9). Although prostitution was common in Victorian times, it was **taboo** to write about it.
- By insinuating that the woman is a prostitute, the speaker brings in to question whether sex is an act of love. Nevertheless, he seems to conflate it in **"within mine arms in love and sleep she lay"** (line 8); we can assume that **"love"** here is a euphemistic reference to sex.
- The connection the speaker has with Cynara seems to be more intimate and closer to what we socially define as **"love"** than he has with the woman he performs the love-making act with.
- The reader is led to question the speaker's perception of love and what he uses sex for. The pleasing rhyme of the second stanza implies fulfilment after the sex act but the lapse into the refrain creates a **disconnect with the act of making love and actually being in love.** The speaker is not in love with the woman who he has sex with.

Proximity and distance:

- Something can be said of the simultaneous proximity and distance of the character of Cynara.
- Although she is mentioned repeatedly and noticeably (thanks to the exclamation and its pausing effect), she is never physically present in the poem. She is lost, far away and the r**eader is unsure whether or not she is dead**. However, she maintains an persistence presence throughout. She dogs the speaker's thoughts, and this is **mirrored** in the way the refrain interrupts the events the speaker relates.

- Perhaps in Cynara's absence, she becomes even more proximate to the speaker because she fills his mind.
- This creates a strange dichotomy whereby someone who is not present has an overwhelming presence. This speaks to the speaker's sense of loss, grief and mental turmoil.

Structure

Form:

- The form is **unconventional** in that it doesn't use a traditional love poetry form, such as a sonnet.
- Instead, it has its own unique shape.
- There is regularity in its form: 4 stanzas totalling 24 lines. Each stanza is made up of a sestet (6 lines) and the 5th line of every stanza is slightly shorter than the others.
- This regularity is **pleasurable** when accompanied by the use of repetition. Together they reflect the **cyclical and predictable nature** of the speaker's memories of Cynara.
- The consistency in form means that it is **easier for the reader to accept the poem's constantly changing pace and rhythm** from line to line.

Metre:

- The metre is similarly unconventional. At first it appears to follow iambic hexameter (lines of 6 feet: da-dum):

"Last night, ah yes-ternight, betwixt her lips and mine" (line 1)

- However, this steady opening line gives no indication of the strange metre that is to follow. For the rest of the stanza the stresses are very irregular:

"There fell thy sha-dow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul | between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion" (stanza 1)

- The iambic rhythm is lost and instead, **many kinds of iambic feet** are used.
- Line 4 for example, ends with an anapest (unstressed, unstressed, stressed) followed by a trochee (stressed, unstressed) which creates an unsteady and offbeat

rhythm, perhaps mirroring the speaker's unsteady state as he roams about getting drunk and living recklessly, trying to forget Cynara.

- It is important to note that although the poem does not conform to a strict metre, it is not in free verse. A **loose iambic hexameter** is vaguely followed.
- The irregularities in metre are juxtaposed with the **metrical regularity** of the fifth line's refrain. This line is in pentameter, so 5 beats instead of 6. This creates an **element of consistency** in a poem which is otherwise very **rhythmically diverse**.
- Like Cynara's ghostly visitations, the poem's metre is unpredictable.

Rhyme Scheme:

- The rhyme scheme of "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" is constant and follows the pattern **ABACBC**.
- The C rhymes here are always with the same words: **"passion"** and **"fashion".**
- They repeat in each of the 4 stanzas, emphasising the speaker's faith in his **"passion"**, if only in his own idiosyncratic way.
- Although the rhyme scheme is regular, it is quite not commonly found in English poetry.
- The first three lines have an ABA rhyme, and by then it seems like the poem will follow a conventional shape of ABAB. But then the C rhyme is introduced, separating the B rhymes.
- This connects to the narrative of the poem as the speaker and Cynara are **permanently connected** but also **separated** from each other.
- It is also possible the C rhyme is representative of the **intrusive way** Cynara comes into the speaker's mind when he is engaging in sexual or romantic acts with another partner.

Language

The Title:

It is possible to read Dowson's poem in light of the poem from which it takes its title.

- In Horace's poem, Cynara has a different function completely. Cynara is the speaker's **former flame** and her name is only invoked in order to highlight the speaker's age; he is no longer youthful and capable of withstanding emotional **"tumults"** as he was when he was with Cynara. He begs his new lover Venus to **"spare [him]"** the torments of passion. Cynara in Horace's poem is unimportant to the speaker; his heart is with Venus. **Dowson's poem is the exact opposite**: Dowson has a new lover (if just for an evening) but Cynara casts her metaphorical **"shadow"** (line 2) over this woman.
- Dowson's Cynara is a representation of the lost love developed into an obsession.
- The image the speaker draws of her is idealistic, pre-Raphaelite, **"pale, lost lilies"** (line 15) which contrasts with the prostitute's **"bought red mouth"** (line 9)

Use of phrases:

- The speaker's repetition in the form of the refrain **"I have been faithful to three, Cynara! In my own fashion"**, makes the poem song-like and draws on the speaker's honest and true belief that his inability to rid Cynara from his mind is a form of faithfulness. He acknowledges through the clause **"in [his] fashion"** that this form of faithfulness is not commonly accepted but the repetition creates a **sense of pleading** for Cynara, to whom the poem is addressed, to listen and appreciate his unique form of loyalty.
- **"Gone with the wind"** (line 13), a phrase which provided author Margaret Mitchell with the title of her 1936 novel, is one of several images of things passing and fading in the poem. Others with similar implications are:
  - **"The feast is finished and the lamps expire"** (line 20)
  - **"Betwixt her lips and mine / there fell thy shadow"** (line 1)
  - **"When i awoke and found the dawn was grey"** (line 11)
- This sense of good times being over links back to the title **"I am not as I was under the reign of the good Cynara"** which also contains a sense of the best moments having passed.

Taking a closer look at **"I have forgotten much, Cynara! Gone with the wind"** (line 13)

- The subject of the second sentence is unclear - is it the speaker, who has gone with the wind, or is it Cynara?
- It appears to be the **"I",** which reveals the lover's **frantic onward movement**
- The speaker's frantic motion links to the poem's erratic metre, the ebbing and flowing which rushes the reader back to the refrain and Cynara's constant presence in the speaker's mind.

The tense shift:

- In the **final stanza**, the tense moves into the present; **"when the feast is finished and the lamps expire"** (lines 20-21)
  - This evokes the present importance of the speaker's compulsion.
  - The speaker's use of **"sick"** emphasises the pain he feels is not a poeticism, what he is experiencing is **closer to disease**, to real and acute sickness.
- The shift into the present tense in the second line of the final stanza is striking, particularly because the preceding line **"I cried for madder music and for stronger wine"** (line 19) maintains the past tense and carries on the narrative of the feast from stanza 3.
  - The reader is brought to the present, into his current pain.
  - The unspecified present tense **"When the feast is finished and the lamps expire"** creates the sense that the speaker's pain is regular, that it never fails to present itself.

Use of exclamation:

- Although there is a **certain element of movement and progression** throughout the poem, there are **carefully choreographed stops and pauses** as well.
- An exclamation mark after every **"Cynara!"** creates a natural **caesura** when the poem is read aloud; her name is paused on.
- It is as if the sound of Cynara's name causes so much emotion that he naturally exclaims.
- Visually, it is **abrupt and forceful**. The reader is forced to pause over the word which consequently extends for an extra half beat. Consequently, emphasis is given to the name.
- In relation to Horace's poem, Cynara sounds to the untrained ear, like an **attractive and elegant name** for a lost lover, despite its translation in Greek to "artichoke".
- The emotions that Horace attaches to the loved figure of Ligurinus, Dowson attaches to the figure of Cynara.

Epimone:

"And I was desolate and sick of an old passion, / Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head" (line 4-5)

- The phrase is repeated to encourage readers to reflect on the speaker's despondent emotional state.
- The speaker becomes **fixated on his emotions** and caught up in the past he desires.
- Consequently, the epimone draws out a strong sense of his grieving for the past and for Cynara, because he repeatedly emphasises his present mental turmoil.
- The use of the word **"desolate"** is important also; the speaker experiences great unhappiness and loneliness despite being in the company of another woman. Cynara's absence is enough to make him feel alone.
    - This compares to the desolation of the landscape and knight in "La Belle Dame sans Merci".

Rhyme in the second stanza:

"All night upon mine heart, I felt her warm heart beat,
Night-long within mine arms in love and sleep she lay;
Surely the kisses of her bought red mouth were sweet;" (line 7-9)

- The rhyming of the second stanza is satisfying and implies that in the moment of love making, the speaker is fulfilled. This satisfaction, as it transpires, is **purely physical.**

- He **revels in the sensuality** of the state he is in after making love to the woman but recognises the sweetness of her kisses are meaningless and subsequently loses a sense of their sweetness (**"Surely"** paradoxically implies an element of uncertainty)

"And I am desolate and sick of an old passion, / Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire" (line 22-23)

- In the last stanza, it is evident that the speaker's desire is **insatiable**.
- Cynara torments him, or his idea of her does, and he is unable to escape from the thought of her. In this way, he is **unable to escape from himself**, because Cynara is not really there.
- Like the prostitute, Cynara's lips are referenced. **Cynara is conflated with the speaker's desire**, just as sex is called **"love"** earlier in the poem (line 8). This is the inverse of reality, then, as the speaker has only lust for the prostitute but is sick with love for Cynara - a love that cannot be reduced to merely animal desire.
- Victorians had a fear of primitive and base sexual desires because they prided themselves on being civilised. Many people believed humans were created by God, yet this view was being contested by Darwin's theory of evolution, which posits that humans evolved from but from ape-like species. This theory frightened many Victorians and the idea that they developed from a perceived lowly and base-like animal was discomforting for many. As a result, many were eager to **dissociate themselves from the base and the animal**, but Dowson, in accordance with the Decadent tradition, does not shy away from lust and desire.

Critical Views

Stephanie Kuduk Weiner: "Sight and Sound in the Poetic World of Ernest Dowson"

"Dowson's poems depict a world of grey shadows in which bright colours belong to a fleeting, lost existence."

- This is reflected in the way the **"bought red mouth"** (line 9) provides the speaker with a momentary relief from the loss of Cynara. However, when he remembers his former lover once more, **"the dawn was grey"** (line 11)
- Weiner demonstrates how Dowson uses colour and the surroundings to **mimic the speaker's mood**, he also uses the actions of **"dancing"** (line 15) and **"fl[i]ng[ing] roses"** (line 14) to the same effect.

"Dowson's poem does not depict an minutely observed, artificial beauty"

- Cynara is rather **under-described** and so is the woman the speaker is with at the start of the poem; she is only represented by her **"bought red mouth"** (line 9) and Cynara by her **"shadow"** (line 2) and the **"pale lost lilies"** (line 15).

- It is interesting to consider why Downson does this, when for example, in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” and “She Walks in Beauty”, a lot of effort is put into describing female features. Furthermore, in Elizabethan love poetry - notably Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 - **blazon** was a popular device in which women’s features - her lips, he eyes, etc - were **minutely described and praised**.
- Thus, in contrast, we question why Cynara appears in such a shadowy physical form. Possibly, it is her presence the speaker mourns, not necessarily her beauty but her essence, her mind and even their sexual chemistry (hinted at in **“hungry for the lips of my old desire**” (line 23); he misses the companionship of a lover, rather than the aesthetics. This may **hint at a more mature love** than one that initially flourishes from physical attraction.

“Dowson’s poetry is closer to Hardy’s strained awkwardness”

- The tone and tension derived through the poet’s arrangement of words leads to what Weiner suggests is “awkwardness”. This can be felt in the speaker’s inability to rid Cynara from his mind despite her absence and the overwhelming sense that she will not return. Similarly, in Hardy’s “At an Inn”, the speaker has a **levelness to his approach to the loss** of a loved one or an opportunity for a relationship to flourish. He is accepting of circumstance as the speaker’s sexual actions in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare” suggest he is, despite his narratorial suggestion that he remains **tortured** by Cynara’s absence.

Comparisons

“Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare” and “The Ruined Maid”:

1. Romantic love of many kinds
   Both “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare" and “The Ruined Maid” consider **situations that are less than romantic**. In the case of “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare", the speaker hires a prostitute, which Amelia in “The Ruined Maid” uses a relationship as a means of ascending the social ladder, Both poems in fact **explore the idea of prostitution**. “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”, in its Decadent mode, describes the speaker’s sexual interaction with a **“bought red mouth”** (line 9). Meanwhile, “The Ruined Maid” **forgoes any explicit sexual language** but Hardy, in his repeated use of “ruin” strongly implies Amelia’s sexual endeavours have resulted in her new luxurious lifestyle; she may not be hired for the night like the woman in Dowson’s poem, but she is probably a **kept woman**. However, one key difference between the two poems is that “The Ruined Maid” considers a less emotionally charged form of relationship to lay bare the way in which **relationships can be manipulated** for means other than emotional satisfaction. In contrast, Dowson’s speaker is tortured by the absence of Cynara, and despite his **unsavoury actions**, his love is intense.

2. Love and loss

   In “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”, the speaker’s loss is evident as he is unable to rid Cynara from his mind and finds that despite his hedonism, he is unsatisfied and unhappy. Loss in the poem is **grotesque**; it forces the speaker to go to extremes in order to attempt to overcome his loss and pain and ends with him being **morally degraded** by his activities. The loss in “The Ruined Maid” is in great contrast to this form of loss. The poem explores how Amelia has left her previous, more morally sound (as dictated contextually by the Victorian period) life behind in order to live a more lavish lifestyle. We see that in this process she has left behind a whole community of people and her friend, who remains unnamed. This is evident in the way the two interact and the friends points out the ways in which Amelia has changed, ostracising herself. We question whether her aspirations for material things and a comfortable life are worth the loss in friendship and potential for other forms of love within the country community, as her position as a mistress is unstable and on the terms of rich man she works to satisfy.

3. Social conventions and taboos

   Social conventions are challenged in both “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare” and “The Ruined Maid” as they **engage with a topic that was highly taboo** within Victorian societies: prostitution.

4. Approval and disapproval

   The **question of approval, in both cases, is up to the reader**; they must ask themselves whether they think Amelia’s actions are justified and in the same way whether the speaker in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare” is right in his justification of faithfulness when he engages in sexual affairs with another woman when he writes and is so emotionally tied to Cynara. The general contextual consensus was that such activities (of both Amelia and the speaker in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”) were wrong. We must, as readers, then **contest with contemporary opinion** and **bring a modern perspective which has the capability to be more forgiving**. Possibly, this is simpler in the case of Amelia where we, in the 21st century, are more accommodating to the female case, a woman in many areas of the world, is now able to work for herself and there is more acceptance of women and men equality than there was in the Victorian period. Socially, however, in the case of the speaker in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”, we may condemn his behaviour and dismiss his professions of **“faithfulness”**; however, we can be accepting of his mental state of turmoil. Loss and grief is a deeply painful experience and the speaker in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare” is unguided in his methods of dealing with how he feels.

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare":

1. Love and sex

   Although sex in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is not overt, we can interpret a certain amount of sexual activity between the two **"lovers"** which increases the knight's infatuation with his **"lady in the meads"**. The insinuation in **"she looked at me as she did love / and made sweet moan"** is subtle and fitting of the time it was written, when talk of sexual activity was scarce and especially rare in writing because of the social shock factor it had. The **"sweet moan"** gives the man the power, a shift in the power dynamics, as he is able to pleasure the **"faery"** woman and assert his masculine identity. This is later subverted as she **"lull[s him] asleep"**; the woman reclaims control and uses her powers to send the exhausted knight to sleep. The sex in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare" is **much more explicit and shocking** for its time. This is particularly because of the mention of the **"bought red mouth"** (line 9) which tells us that the speaker is paying for the company of a woman. Her **"red"** **mouth is symbolic of lust, desire and passion**. The speaker enjoys the physicality of the woman's company, they lie together with her in his arms, but this is where the love appears to end. Similarly, for the knight, the love ends where the couple are together, one falling asleep. The idea of sleep and love is interesting as a person is **most vulnerable in sleep** and to fall asleep with another person **implies complete trust**. This therefore, links to the theme of truth and deception as in both the partnerships, there is one person who is more willing to trust and to fall in love than the other.

2. Love and loss

   The loss experienced by the knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is intense and raw. This is emphasised by the pace of the poem when the couple are together and the number of things they do together. The poem is a **rush of love and emotion in the middle**, straddled by the two scenes where the knight wallows **"palely loitering"**. The knight's loss is emphasised by the barren landscape which he inhabits; **"the cold hill's side"**, **"no birds sing"**. The speaker in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare" does not like the knight accept his loneliness, but instead attempts to fill the emptiness with other women, dancing, feasting and wine.

   The love of the two men is **similar in its obsessive nature**. The knight cannot extricate himself from the grip of the **"faery's child"** (line 14) because the love he feels is so strong that it is constantly compared to something other worldly, something so intense it cannot be mortal. The woman is a seductress, a sorcerer, a **"faery"**. The sense that he has been bewitched illustrates the intensity with which love is felt. The love experienced by the speaker in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare" is **different in that is is interruptive**, the speaker has **moments of redress where he is able to forget his former lover**. For example,

when he sleeps with the **"bought red mouth"** (line 9) the tone and metre of the stanza implies a comfort found in the physical pleasures of the sexual experience. However, this is then interrupted by the resurfacing of Cynara "**When i awoke and found the dawn was grey"** (line 11).

Another similarity between the two is their obsession which is founded in their own conjuring-up of the women they desire. We meet neither woman in the flesh in the poems, they are both **iterations of the man's mind**. In "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare", the speaker remembers Cynara and is haunted by **"thy shadow"** (line 2) and in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" the knight **"awoke and found me here"** which gives the impression all that came before the awakening was a dream. Is it possible that **the men conjure up the women they most deeply desire**? The knight wants an all encompassing, rich and intense love from a beautiful and pure woman, the height of femininity and purity but perversely also wants to be slave to this love; he wants a love so intense that he would do anything for it. The speaker in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare" wants a love which satisfies him both physically and mentally. The Cynara figure is never given much substance, except for her pre-Raphaelite **"pale lost lilies"** (line 15) complexion. Could this mean that he desires a submissive woman, a woman that doesn't stop him from acting as he pleases yet remains faithful to him and hangs around like a "shadow" (line 2)?

3. Truth and deception

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is full of **supernatural references**, especially concerning the "faery's child" which insinuates a certain amount of unworldly "magic" or influence over the knight. The woman is portrayed as the deceptive character, she appears "full beautiful" (line 14), implying an external beauty as well as a moral and internal purity, through the use of "full". However, the knight appears to discover that she is not such a woman and he is ultimately deceived by the visage of her feminine beauty and purity. Firstly, he suggests that the woman was not pure; **"I saw pale kings and princes too…/ they cried - "La Belle Dame Sans Merci/ Thee hath in thrall!"**. This suggests that the woman has duped many men and is not the pure, idyllic woman a man of the time would see fit and desirable. Despite this, the knight still yearns for her, which suggests to contemporaneous readers that her witchery and deception is so strong that the knight is helpless and unable to break free from whatever spell she has cast upon him. In a way, **gender expectations are subverted**, as the woman has all the power and leaves the knight weak and helpless. We question whether Keats wanted to expose the weakness of man (his counterpart, the woman) and demonstrate a shocking female power or whether he wanted to warn male readers of the deceptive nature of the female. Secondly, the woman abandons him and is not the subservient female ideal of the time.

In “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”, the deception is plainly exposed in the speaker’s reiterations of **“I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! In my fashion”** (line 6, 12, 18, 24). The poem is addressed to Cynara, the former lover of the speaker and that he blatantly tells her in his work of his sexual endeavours with other women; **“bought red mouth”** (line 9), demonstrates a different form of deception to that found in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. Whereas in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, the deception is presented at face-value, in the appearance and actions of the female, in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”, the speaker presents himself as an honest lover. That he continues to try to persuade Cynara of his faithfulness exposes a level of **self-deception**; he convinces himself of his faithfulness through the explanation “in my fashion” when really it is clear he is unfaithful. In “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” **the knight also engages in a level of self-deception** as he remains in the clearing waiting for a woman that will never return to him; **“I sojourn here,/ alone and palely loitering”** (line 45-46). Both men engage in self-deception and this leads us to question the truthfulness of their female counterparts. Is the woman in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” real or a figment of the knight’s imagination? How truthful is the speaker in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”? Was he really in love with Cynana or does he simply desire what he cannot have? Is this the same case for the knight?

“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”** (line 9) and similarly, in “Absent from Thee”, the speaker uses **“some base heart unblest”**. In both cases, the speaker alludes to their listener or reader (who the poem is addressed to), 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”** and in “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”, the speaker continually returns to “Cynara” who plagues his mind and 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 of a romantic gesture** than in “Absent from Thee”. The lack of naming in the latter makes for a more impersonal address 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 intertwined**. However, some may have at the time considered the use of religious imagery to address a lover **sacrilegious.**

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 “**ask me not when i return**”. In this respect, the two poems are opposed. Further, the speaker of “Absent from Thee” is the one who has left, while Downson’s speaker has been left behind. 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 fidelity** and their justifications for their innocence. In “Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynare”, the speaker insists numerously that he has been faithful **“in own fashion”**. He **invents a new form of faithfulness**, whereby he engages in sexual acts with other women but thinks of Cynara whilst doing so. Similarly, in “Absent from Thee” the speaker asks his lover to allow him to prove his faithfulness through the **“torments”** that come with sleeping with other women. The men are deceptive in their insistence of truly loving 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 continuous insistence of his faithfulness alerts the reader that he is aware he has been the opposite, and the deflated and subdued nature of **“in my fashion”** after the emotive **“I have been faithful to thee, Cynara!”** signals some awareness that this faithfulness is cheap. As readers, we are made **aware of both the truth in the men’s words** and the ways in which they **warp the truth** in attempts to remain favourable in their lovers’ eyes.