Absent from thee (A Song)

POEM TEXT

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

5   Dear! from thine arms then let me fly,
6   That my fantastic mind may prove
7   The torments it deserves to try
8   That tears my fixed heart from my love.

9   When wearied with a world of woe
10 To thy safe bosom I retire,
11 Where love, and peace, and truth does flow,
12 May I contented there expire,

13 Lest, once more wandering from that heaven,
14 I fall on some base heart unblest,
15 Faithless to thee, false, unforgiven,
16 And lose my everlasting rest.

SUMMARY

When I'm away from you, I'm weak and feeble with longing. So don't ask me when I'm coming back. It would obviously kill me, wandering fool that I am, if I had to stay away and pine for you all day and night.

In that case, my darling, let me go! That way, my fantasizing brain can get a good taste of all the pains of infidelity it deserves to suffer—the infidelity that rips my devoted heart away from you, my love.

Then, when I've suffered the agony of cheating on you, and I return to the security of your breast (in which I find true love, rest, and loyalty), let me die happy with you—

Because if I don't die, I might find myself leaving the paradise of your embrace again and chasing after some lowly, unholy love—and then, being truly faithless and past redemption, I'll lose the eternal, heavenly peace of being with you.

THEMES

INFIDELITY AND THE POWER OF LUST

The insincere speaker of "Absent for thee" assures his beloved that he longs for her when he's away from her—and then goes on to say that she should therefore let him sleep around, knowing that he'll always come back to his true love for her in the end. His flowery declarations of eternal passion sound less than sincere, however—especially when he hopes to die in his lover's arms, but only because that's the one way he can guarantee he won't cheat on her again! This satirical poem plays on all the tropes of love poetry to deliver a deeply unromantic message: the power of lust, this speaker suggests, beats the power of love any day.

While the speaker assures his lover that his pure, deep affection for her will always win out over his dalliances with other women, he's not-so-subtly implying that the exact opposite is true. His argument that he needs to test out the "torments" of infidelity so that he can appreciate his love for her more deeply is really just an excuse to keep sleeping around.

Even if he does have sincere feelings for his lover, the poem suggests, they're never going to be powerful enough to rein in his lust. And in any case, he doesn't seem too interested in even trying to restrain himself: after all, this whole poem is an argument that he should get to sleep with whomever he wants.

Comparing his lover to a precious "heaven" that his infidelity might expel him from, the speaker suggests that her love is like paradise: but even paradise isn't powerful enough to make him give up other women. Imagining how he'd love to "expire" in his lover's heavenly embrace, he goes on to say that, if he doesn't die in her arms, he's probably going to go right back to philandering, "faithless" to her holy love: that is, only death has the power to stop him from sleeping around. By framing this argument in religious terms, he suggests that neither the laws of God nor man can stand up to his lust: his sexual appetite can and will overpower any barrier short of death itself.

To this speaker, big ideas about love and holiness are dust in the wind compared to the power of sexuality. Neither affection nor the threat of damnation can quench his ravenous sexual appetite. Only fools fall in love, this poem suggests: those in the know attend solely to their own pleasure.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> - Lines 1-16

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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 first line of "Absent from thee" makes it seem as if this is going to be an old-school love poem. The speaker begins with an apostrophe to his lover, telling her that, while he's away from her, he "languish[es]," practically wilting from his longing for her. So far, so familiar.

But the second line abruptly changes course. "Knowing that I long for you when I'm away," the speaker basically goes on, "can you please stop bugging me about when I'm going to come back?"

It's not just the meaning of this question that feels like an abrupt change, but the sound. Listen to the way consonance works in these first two lines:

> Absent from thee I languish still;
> Then ask me not when I return.

The first line repeats languorous, liquid /l/ sounds; the second, on the other hand, is marked with crisp, curt /t/ sounds. It's as if the speaker moves speedily from flattering his lover to cutting her off.

Already, then, readers get the sense that this "love poem" isn't what it seems. This will be a poem, not about true love, but about the speaker's desire to have as much sex as he likes with whomever he likes.

His one problem is that his current girlfriend isn't so into that idea. As such, he'll communicate his real desires in the language of love poetry, framing his plans to sleep around as an expression of sincere affection for the lady he's addressing. This poem will be a satire of love poetry, and even of the clichéd "power of love" itself: love's power, this speaker will suggest, is no match for the force of lust.

The rest of this stanza shows exactly how the speaker will go about mocking the conventions of love and poetry. Having warned his girlfriend to stop asking him when he's coming back, he goes on to add that it would absolutely kill him to stay away from her any longer. But take another look: he doesn't exactly say that it would kill *him* to stay away, but that it would kill a hypothetical "straying fool"—that is, the sincere, devoted kind of lover he's mocking here.

He conceals that sly little moment in florid poetic language. Take a look at how he uses chiasmus in line 4 here:

> The straying fool 'twill plainly kill

To wish **all day, all night** to mourn.

The flipped grammar there draws a lot of attention to itself—and makes it sound as if the speaker is putting on an elegant Poet Voice to deliver his insincere message of love. Watch out for that kind of dramatic, disingenuous poetic diction: this speaker is about to use it a lot.

LINES 5-8

Dear! from thine arms then let me fly,
That my fantastic mind may prove
The torments it deserves to try
That tears my fixed heart from my love.

If the poem's first stanza hints that this speaker isn't quite the sincere lover he claims to be, then the second removes all doubt. Crying out to his girlfriend with a passionate apostrophe—"Dear!"—the speaker goes on to explain how she should let him cheat on her all he wants. He loves her best, he assures her: it's just that he has to *experience* how painful infidelity is and how inferior other women are in order to really appreciate her. He "deserves" all the "torments" of infidelity—torments his "fantastic" (or wildly inventive) mind seems pretty good at dreaming up.

The speaker delivers this obviously self-serving, insincere, and unromantic suggestion in a torrent of clichéd poetic language. The line "Dear! from thine arms then let me fly," for instance, could be right out of an utterly boring and traditional love poem if the speaker just changed the word "from" to "to." And the speaker's "fixed heart" is a melodramatic image of fidelity that the speaker undermines right from the get-go: if his heart were really "fixed," stuck on a single lover, then nothing would be able to "tear[]" it away! Again, the speaker turns the language and traditions of love poetry against themselves.

The poem's meter makes this mockery even clearer. Take a look at the way the speaker plays with his meter in line 5:

> **Dear**! from | thine **arms** | then **let** | me **fly**,

This poem is written in iambic tetrameter, meaning each line uses four iambs (metrical feet that follow a da-**DUM** rhythm). But here, the speaker starts his line with a trochee (**DUM**-da) rather than an iamb, leaning hard on the word "Dear!"—a word that sounds more and more insincere as he describes what he wants his lover to let him get away with.

Using the language of love poetry to argue that he should be allowed to have all the debauched sex he could possibly dream of, the speaker begins to make his point clear: love just can't stand up to the force of his lustful fantasies.

LINES 9-12

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,

In the third stanza, the speaker imagines returning at last to his lover after cheating on her with every woman he can find. By then, he'll be worn out from all the terrible sufferings of infidelity, he says, and ready to die in his true love's arms.

Once again, the seemingly earnest surface message here gets undercut by the language it's delivered in. For instance, take a look at the speaker's intense /w/ alliteration in line 9:

When wearied with a world of woe

Alliteration can be dramatic, but too much of it starts to sound a little silly. (Consider the intentionally absurd play at the end of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, in which a terrible actor describes how a heartbroken lover "with bloody blameful blade [...] bravely broached his boiling bloody breast.") All those /w/ sounds in a row feel more ridiculous than heartfelt. And they draw attention to another sly little joke: if this speaker has indeed slept with everyone he can get his hands on, he very well might be worn out and "wearied" by the time he gets back to his lover!

There's a similar hint of mockery in the speaker's polysyndeton when he describes his lover's embrace as a place "where love, and peace, and truth does flow." All those "and"s make it sound as if he's laying this flattery on pretty thick—and not very sincerely.

And as the next stanza will reveal, even his seemingly earnest desire to die "contented" in his lover's arms isn't all it seems.

LINES 13-16

Lest, once more wandering from that heaven,
I fall on some base heart unblest,
Faithless to thee, false, unforgiven,
And lose my everlasting rest.

At the end of the previous stanza, the speaker described his desire to die "contented" in his lover's embrace, once his philandering days are done. In this stanza, he turns that romantic idea on its head: in fact, he concludes, he'd *better* die, or else he's pretty likely to get right back to philandering again. Only death, the speaker concludes, will truly put an end to his womanizing ways.

Yet again, he frames this cynical idea in clichéd romantic terms. This time, he turns to a hoary old metaphor: the idea of a beloved's embrace as "heaven" itself. If his lover is heaven, this speaker says, then straying from her again would be like heresy: it would make him "faithless" both romantically and spiritually.

But he doesn't seem too upset about that idea. If his lover is heaven, he seems to imply, then he's pretty darn likely to end up chasing after "some base heart unblest"—that is, some other, lowlier woman whose embrace is considerably less holy. While

he frames that as a terrible thing—if he cheated again, he'd be "false, unforgiven," oh no!—the tone of this whole poem suggests that, honestly, heaven was never his idea of a good time in the first place.

This poem's witty, satirical speaker has no interest in traditional ideas of love and devotion: for him, the unbridled indulgences of promiscuity and debauchery are where the real fun is at.

⚒ POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The speaker of "Absent from thee" uses moments of strong alliteration to make his insincere "love" song sound all the more dramatic.

For instance, take a look at the intense alliteration in line 9:

When wearied with a world of woe

All those /w/ sounds in a row draw a lot of attention to themselves—and help to underline the speaker's insincerity. This is a line in which the speaker imagines how exhausted he'll eventually be by the "woe" (or sorrow) of sleeping around—a "woe" that might not actually be all that woeful for him.

Here, his alliteration is so dramatic it's almost silly, and works like a nudge and a wink, letting readers know that this stormy "woe" is purely imaginary. (It also draws attention to the possible joke in the word "wearied": perhaps the speaker will indeed be pretty worn out after sleeping with every woman in a ten-mile radius.)

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "torments," "try"
- **Line 8:** "tears"
- **Line 9:** "When," "wearied," "with," "world," "woe"
- **Line 14:** "base," "unblest"
- **Line 15:** "Faithless," "false"

CONSONANCE

The poem's contrast between soft and sharp flavors of consonance mirrors the contrast between the devoted love the speaker *claims* to feel and the gleeful promiscuity he *actually* values.

One clear example turns up in the first two lines:

Absent from thee I languish still;
Then ask me not when I return.

The first line, in which the speaker insincerely describes how he "languish[es]" (or pines) for his lover when he's away from her, uses long, liquid /l/ consonance. But in the next line, the

speaker's tone changes: as he tells his lover to quit asking him when he's going to come back, a couple of short, brisk /t/ sounds make him sound pretty curt, as if he's trying to cut off his lover's desperate questions.

Similar patterns of long /l/ and brisk /t/ sounds alternate through the whole poem. That clipped /t/ is especially pronounced when the speaker imagines all the "torments" of infidelity in the second stanza—"torments" that his "fantastic mind" actually seems pretty eager to "try" out. There, those repeating /t/ sounds don't just sound sharp, but full of relish: it's as if he's savoring his infidelities before he's even committed them, tasting them on the tip of his tongue.

> **Where Consonance appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 1:** "languish," "still"
> - **Line 2:** "not," "return"
> - **Line 3:** "fool," "twill," "plainly," "kill"
> - **Line 5:** "let," "fly"
> - **Line 6:** "That," "fantastic"
> - **Line 7:** "torments," "try"
> - **Line 8:** "That," "tears," "heart"
> - **Line 11:** "love," "flow"
> - **Line 14:** "fall," "heart," "unblest"
> - **Line 15:** "false"
> - **Line 16:** "lose," "everlasting"

APOSTROPHE

The apostrophe to the speaker's lover in "Absent from thee" makes this poem what it is: a satirical and insincere "love" poem.

This whole poem is addressed to the speaker's lover—a lover who seems pretty concerned about the speaker's philandering. When the speaker admonishes her, "ask me not when I return," there's the suggestion that she's been begging him to quit fooling around and come back to her. This poem is his answer to those pleas: a brush-off disguised as a declaration of true love.

The speaker keeps directly assuring his lover that he "languish[es]" (that is, pines away with love) for her all the time that he's away. But, he goes on, it's exactly for that reason that she should "let him fly" into the arms of other women: she should simply trust that the "heaven" of her embrace is so sublime that he'll always come back to her in the end.

That the speaker addresses this obviously insincere argument directly to his lover suggests that he has a pretty low opinion of her intelligence—and thus, the intelligence of anyone who takes love seriously. But this framing also mocks love poetry itself: the traditional form of the love poem, in which a speaker professes true love directly to their beloved, gets cynically repurposed here.

> **Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:**

> - **Lines 1-2:** "Absent from thee I languish still; / Then ask me not when I return."
> - **Line 5:** "Dear! from thine arms then let me fly,"
> - **Line 10:** "To thy safe bosom I retire,"
> - **Line 15:** "Faithless to thee, false, unforgiven,"

END-STOPPED LINE

Most of this poem's lines are end-stopped. All the pauses at the ends of lines help to evoke the speaker's tone: it's as if he's drawling, unruffled, in no hurry to deliver his insincere message of "love."

End-stops also help to set up some of this poem's sly jokes. For instance, take a look at the way the end stops work in the first two lines:

> Absent from thee I languish **still**;
> Then ask me not when I **return**.

Here, end stops help to juxtapose the speaker's two different tones: the falsely romantic and the more straightforwardly selfish. The poem starts with the thought that the speaker longs for his lover every moment he's away from her. But that makes the second line—which says, in essence, "quit bugging me about when I'm coming back"—feel rather jarring. The pause at the end of the first line makes the second line feel even more incongruous, almost as if it's the punchline to a joke. And the emphatic period at the end of the second line makes it clear that the speaker is shutting his girlfriend's questions down pretty firmly.

The speaker's end-stops also help to make his rare enjambments stand out. For instance, take a look at the way end-stops and enjambments work together in the second stanza:

> Dear! from thine arms then let me **fly**,
> That my fantastic mind may *prove*
> *The* torments it deserves to *try*
> *That* tears my fixed heart from my **love**.

Here, the end-stopped first line delivers a jolt: the speaker, who has just been going on about how much he misses his girlfriend, now wants nothing more than to run away from her. Then, smoothly-flowing enjambed lines explain his twisted reasoning: only by "try[ing]" out a whole world of other women can he fully appreciate his true love for his girlfriend. The movement between end-stops and enjambments here evokes the speaker's whole personality: this is a guy who swerves in an instant between shocking declarations and oily insincerity.

> **Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "still;"
- **Line 2:** "return."
- **Line 4:** "mourn."
- **Line 5:** "fly,"
- **Line 8:** "love."
- **Line 10:** "retire,"
- **Line 11:** "flow,"
- **Line 12:** "expire,"
- **Line 13:** "heaven,"
- **Line 14:** "unblest,"
- **Line 15:** "unforgiven,"
- **Line 16:** "rest."

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The speaker of "Absent from thee" caps a satirical poem with a satirical extended metaphor. At the end of his explanation of why his lover should be totally fine with him sleeping around all he wants, he imagines the contentment he'd feel if he were to die in her arms; if he *didn't* die, he goes on, he'd be liable to cheat again, and in doing so rob himself of "everlasting rest" in the "heaven" of his lover's embrace.

Casting his lover as a metaphorical paradise and imagining himself losing eternal peace if he were to cheat on her again, the speaker plays into a well-worn tradition of poets describing their lovers' embrace as heaven itself. But he's doing so in a sneaky way. If his lover is heaven, he implies, it seems pretty likely he's going to be damned: only death will keep him from falling from her "heaven" into another "faithless" liason or twelve.

He doesn't seem worried about this fate, or even apologetic. Instead, he's hinting that this metaphorical damnation is basically inevitable—and that maybe he rather enjoys being a "false, unforgiven" sinner.

At the end of the poem, then, the speaker uses a common metaphor to make an uncommon point. Lust is the truly powerful force in this world, he insists, not love, and not even the power of heaven itself can stop him from satisfying his desires.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-16:** "Lest, once more wandering from that heaven, / I fall on some base heart unblest, / Faithless to thee, false, unforgiven, / And lose my everlasting rest."

CLICHÉ

"Absent from thee" uses the clichés of love poetry only to undermine them.

The poem begins with a very familiar idea: that of the "languish[ing]" lover, weak with passion for a faraway beloved. When he's not around his lover, this speaker says, he pines

terribly for her. But he undercuts that sincere-sounding idea only a line later when he tells his girlfriend to quit asking him when he's going to come back to her.

In other words, he's using the clichéd idea that separated lovers long for each other to disguise the fact that he's not really longing for his lady friend all that much: he's too busy having sex with other people to miss her too badly. "Of *course* I'll come back," he seems to say, "because that's what lovers do—so in the meantime, leave me alone!"

He does something similar in the poem's closing metaphor, when he describes his lover's embrace as a paradise that offers him "everlasting rest." Plenty of poets have imagined being with their true love as heaven itself. Fewer of them have gone on to say that, if their true love is heaven, they're pretty likely to end up in the hell of infidelity instead. And even fewer have sounded quite so cheerful about that prospect. The clichéd "heaven" of his girlfriend's love, this speaker suggests, can never be quite so enticing as another affair or twelve.

Clichés thus help this speaker to satirize love poetry: he raises well-worn tropes about love only so that he can mock them.

Where Cliché appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Absent from thee I languish still;"
- **Lines 3-4:** "The straying fool 'twill plainly kill / To wish all day, all night to mourn."
- **Lines 13-16:** "Lest, once more wandering from that heaven, / I fall on some base heart unblest, / Faithless to thee, false, unforgiven, / And lose my everlasting rest."

REPETITION

A few different flavors of repetition help to give this poem its satirically "romantic" tone.

In lines 5-8, for instance, anaphora marks a passage of intentionally confusing reasoning:

> Dear! from thine arms then let me fly,
> **That** my fantastic mind may prove
> The torments it deserves to try
> **That** tears my fixed heart from my love.

While the word "that" begins both lines 6 and 8, it means something different in each of those places. The first "that" means "so"—in other words, "let me run away from you **so** I can try out all the infidelity I imagine." The second "that" describes what those imagined infidelities do: "let my mind suffer the pains of the infidelities **that** pull my loyal heart away from you." If that seems confusing—well, it is! As the speaker explains that cheating on his lover will only make his love for her stronger, his language becomes as tricky as his argument.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses repetitive polysyndeton to flatter his suspicious lover:

Where love, and peace, and truth does flow,

The speaker is laying it on pretty thick here: he could just say "love, peace, and truth," but those "ands" make his praise sound even more rapturous—and thus even more insincere.

The [chiasmus](#) in line 4 also helps the speaker to frame his manipulative declarations of love. Phrasing the line so that its grammar repeats in reverse ("To wish all day, all night to mourn") makes the romantic idea of perpetual longing feel even more pronounced here: "day" seems to slide right into "night" in this phrasing. This self-consciously poetic bit of language is just one more smoke screen for the speaker's true feelings: whatever he feels for his lover, it's not enough to keep him from loving philandering considerably more than he loves being with her.

> **Where Repetition appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 4:** "To wish all day, all night to mourn."
> - **Line 6:** "That my fantastic mind may prove"
> - **Line 8:** "That tears my fixed heart from my love."
> - **Line 11:** "and," "and"

ASYNDETON

[Asyndeton](#) helps the speaker to play up this poem's sarcastic sincerity.

Take a look at how asyndeton works in line 15:

> Faithless to thee, false, unforgiven,

Describing how "afraid" he is that he'll fall back into infidelity after he returns to his lover—that is, hinting that this is exactly what he intends to do—he imagines his future cheating in a string of increasingly dramatic words connected, not with conjunctions, but with commas.

Those commas make it seem as if he's imagining this future in more and more intense terms: "I'd be faithless—no, I'd be *false*—no, I'd be downright *unforgiven*, I know you could never forgive me after that!" The melodrama of this phrasing makes it clear that he's got his tongue pretty firmly in his cheek—and that he's more than prepared to be "unforgiven" for what he's obviously going to do.

There's a gentler version of the same effect in line 4:

> The straying fool 'twill plainly kill
> To wish all **day, all** night to mourn.

Here, the lack of conjunctions sounds high-flown and self-consciously poetic. It's all part of the speaker's overarching plan here: to frame his commitment to his own philandering as a song of true and lyrical love.

> **Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 4:** "To wish all day, all night to mourn."
> - **Line 15:** "Faithless to thee, false, unforgiven,"

▤ VOCABULARY

Thee, Thine, Thy (Line 1, Line 5, Line 10, Line 15) - "Thee," "thine," and "thy" are old-fashioned ways of saying "you" and "your." While they might sound fancy now, they were once an intimate and informal way to address someone.

Languish (Line 1) - To pine or long for someone; to grow weak or feeble.

Still (Line 1) - Always, constantly.

Straying (Line 3) - Wandering (with connotations of infidelity).

'Twill (Line 3) - A contraction of "it will."

Plainly (Line 3) - Clearly, obviously.

Fly (Line 5) - Run away, escape.

Fantastic (Line 6) - Full of fantasies, imaginative.

Prove (Line 6) - Test.

Torments (Line 7) - Agonies, sufferings.

Fixed (Line 8) - Loyal, faithful; set on one thing.

Bosom (Line 10) - A woman's chest, but also a romantic way to describe someone's heart, their deepest feelings.

Retire (Line 10) - To return to or withdraw to a particular place.

Expire (Line 12) - Die.

Lest (Line 13) - In case.

Base (Line 14) - Lowly or immoral.

Unblest (Line 14) - Unholy, sacrilegious.

Faithless (Line 15) - Disloyal, treacherous.

False (Line 15) - Lying, deceitful.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Absent from thee" is a song, a musical little poem with an even, balanced shape. It's built from four quatrains (stanzas of four lines apiece).

This is a deceptively simple shape for a poem with a sting in its tail. At first glance, this looks like a classic love song, in which a lover pours his heart out in melodious verse. The speaker here wittily uses that shape to smuggle in a rather unromantic proposition: that his girlfriend should let him "try" the "torments" of infidelity so that he can fully appreciate how good it is to be with her.

Using the form of a love song to write a poem about sexual infidelity, Rochester slyly satirizes traditional ideas about romance.

METER

The basic meter in "Absent from thee" is iambic tetrameter. That means that each line uses four iambs, metrical feet that follow an unstressed-stressed, da-DUM rhythm, like this:

> Then **ask** | me **not** | when **I** | re**turn**.

Iambic rhythms are common in English poetry, but they're especially well-suited to poems that deal with love and sex: that da-DUM rhythm sounds a lot like a pounding heartbeat.

This poem likes to play with that basic iambic pattern. Even in the very first line, the speaker experiments with his stresses, starting the poem with a trochee (a **stressed**-unstressed foot, **DUM**-da) rather than an iamb:

> **Ab**sent | from **thee** | I **lan-** | guish **still**;

In fact, that pattern shows up more than once: you can also find a trochee at the start of lines 5 and 15. Wherever one of these initial trochees appears, it gives the poem a little extra oomph. Whether the speaker is exclaiming "**Dear**!" or imagining how "**Faith**less" he might end up being, his trochees make him sound insistent and serious—an effect that only serves his own selfish ends.

RHYME SCHEME

"Absent from thee" uses a steady rhyme scheme throughout. It runs like this:

> ABAB

This musical pattern is a tried-and-true rhyme scheme for a "song," and fits in with the way this speaker uses the conventions of love poetry to deliver his unconventional message.

While the basic rhyme scheme stays steady across the poem, some of the rhymes here aren't perfect, but slant: "return" and "mourn" in the first stanza, and "heaven" and "unforgiven" in the last stanza. Perhaps those little mismatches gesture at the "mismatch" between this poem's romantic style and its deeply unromantic meaning. (Note, though, that another rhyme a modern reader might hear as slant, "prove" and "love," was likely to have matched perfectly in Rochester's time!)

💬 SPEAKER

The speaker of "Absent from thee" is an insincere, smooth-talking, lustful charmer who bears a more than passing resemblance to Rochester himself—a man so famously lascivious that his contemporaries wrote plays about his philandering.

This speaker knows the language of love poetry well enough to imitate it, talking of how he "languish[es]" while separated from his beloved and longs to return to her "safe bosom." But he's using all these conventions only to argue that, really, it's in his beloved's best interests to let him cheat on her. Only by experiencing the "torments" of infidelity, he says, can he truly be faithful to her.

It doesn't take a genius to spot the ways in which this argument might be a little self-serving. But then, this knowing, witty speaker expects his reader to be in on the joke.

🏞 SETTING

While there's no specific setting in "Absent from thee," the poem's style and themes place it in the time and place it was composed: the court of King Charles II. The poem fits right into a tradition of 17th-century English poems in which a man tries to persuade a woman to let him do what he wants with her. The twist here is that this speaker isn't begging his lover for sex; they're already well beyond that point. Instead, he's arguing that she should let him have sex with other people—only so that he can return and be truly faithful to her, of course!

This kind of argument (and these ideas about sexuality) are straight out of the Restoration, the era when Charles II made a triumphant return to the English throne after years of exile. Charles's reinstatement marked the end of an intensely moralistic, Puritanical period of English history, and the English upper classes were more than ready for some fun. Plenty of poetry from this period reflects a hunger for wild sexual freedom.

ⓘ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647-1680), was a scandalous poet in an age when people were pretty hard to scandalize. A member of King Charles II's debauched court, Rochester wrote irreverent (and often out-and-out dirty) poetry that was mostly about sex, sometimes about politics, and occasionally about both at once.

"Absent from thee," with its proclamation of unquenchable lust, fits right into Rochester's body of work. Rochester was infamously preoccupied with sex—so much so that contemporaries wrote plays about what a notorious philanderer he was. But if his lustful ways made his reputation, they also caused his downfall: he died of a venereal disease, likely syphilis, at the age of only 33.

Courtiers like Rochester saw publishing one's poetry as rather

vulgar; haughty noblemen didn't want any old commoner reading their work. Instead, Rochester circulated his work in handwritten manuscripts among his fellow courtiers (some of whom, like Dryden, were important poets in their own right).

A lot of Rochester's work therefore didn't get published until long after his death. Even once he'd been recognized as an important poet, much of his poetry was so filthy that generations of scholars felt it was too scandalous to be reprinted; some of it didn't see the light until the 1960s. But much of Rochester's writing was only an intensification of themes common in Restoration poetry. Other poets of the period often wrote of infidelity and passion in veiled terms; Rochester just made things (very) explicit.

But Rochester's work also cut across the grain. In an era that valued clarity, reason, and elegance, he famously once remarked that he'd rather be a monkey or a dog than a human. Unlike humans, he observed, animals don't pat themselves on the back for being "rational"—and thus don't fool themselves into thinking they're smarter than they are.

The things that once made Rochester's poetry unmentionable have today made him famous. He's known not only as a poet, but a character, the very model of a libertine.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rochester was one of the foremost writers of the Restoration: that is, the wild, fun-loving, and often debauched era that followed King Charles II's return to the English throne in 1660. Charles had been in exile since 1649, when the Puritan rebel Oliver Cromwell overthrew—and beheaded—his father, King Charles I. But the intensely moralistic government Cromwell installed in the place of the monarchy was neither popular nor stable, and it didn't take long for the country to welcome its exiled king-in-waiting back.

When Charles II took the throne, he ushered in a new era of freedom and pleasure. Cromwell, a strict Puritan, had cracked down on art, holidays, and fun in general. The canny Charles realized that one way to win his people's affections was to encourage all the pleasures that Cromwell had outlawed. His court was full of poets and artists—and also full of unbridled sexuality. The kind of wild philandering "Absent from thee" describes was just another day at work for Charles's courtiers. Rochester might have been the most famous libertine in

Charles's court, but he was far from the only one; Charles himself was a notorious womanizer.

📖 MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- **A Brief Biography** — Read about Rochester's short and scandalous life at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-wilmot)

- **The Poem Aloud** — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://youtu.be/mjQfgyxpeJE)

- **Rochester in his World** — Read about how Rochester's libertine poetry fit into the Restoration court he lived and worked in. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/feb/03/biography.historybooks)

- **Rochester the Iconoclast** — Read a witty article about how Rochester's lewd poetry reflects his iconoclastic philosophy. (https://daily.jstor.org/the-restorations-filthiest-poet-and-why-we-need-him/)

- **Rochester in Manuscript** — See images of Rochester's poetry in its original form: as a handwritten manuscript meant to be passed around among courtiers. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/miscellany-of-poems-by-the-earl-of-rochester)

💬 HOW TO CITE

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