Adam's Curse

POEM TEXT

We sat together at one summer's end,
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world.'
And thereupon
That beautiful mild woman for whose sake
There's many a one shall find out all heartache
On finding that her voice is sweet and low
Replied, 'To be born woman is to know—
Although they do not talk of it at school—
That we must labour to be beautiful.'
I said, 'It's certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
There have been lovers who thought love should be
So much compounded of high courtesy
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
Precedents out of beautiful old books;
Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.'

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
We saw the last embers of daylight die,
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love;
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

SUMMARY

At the end of summer, the three of us—you, me, and that lovely, gentle woman you're good friends with—sat around talking about poetry. I said that it might take hours to write a single line of verse, but if the result doesn't seem totally spontaneous, all the drafting and erasing that went into it will amount to nothing. You'd be better off scrubbing a kitchen floor on your bony hands and knees, or breaking rocks in all weathers like a penniless laborer, because making beautiful poetry is an even harder job—even though the loud people saints call "the world" (such as people in finance, education, and religion) will think you're lazy for writing it.

At that point, your lovely, gentle friend—who will make many people heartsick when they hear how low and musical her voice is—said that all women know, even though they're never taught, that beauty requires hard work. I replied that, ever since the biblical Fall of Adam (which doomed men to labor for a living), *everything* good in life has required hard work. Some lovers have believed love should require such lofty courtship that they would quote old, romantic literature while sighing and looking wise. But these days, it seems like a pretty lazy business.

The mention of love made us fall silent. We watched the dying fire of daylight and saw the moon in the intense, bluish-green sky. The moon looked as worn down as if it were a seashell eroded by the ocean of time, which flows in waves through the universe and creates the days and years.

I had a thought I didn't say aloud, because it's meant only for you. I thought that you were lovely, and that I'd tried to court you in the old, lofty way. Everything had seemed happy between us, but somehow, we'd become as tired and unromantic as the moon's hollow shell.

THEMES

THE DIFFICULTY OF CREATING BEAUTY

"Adam's Curse" explores the idea that beauty, including art and love, doesn't come naturally to people; it's the product of hard work. Talking with two female companions (his unrequited love interest and her friend), the poem's speaker argues that poetry is much more difficult than it seems. When the "friend" tells him that women know *all* beauty requires "labour," the speaker replies that love used to be considered hard work, too—a subtle jab at the woman who's been unmoved by all his romantic efforts! With bitter sadness, the poem suggests that art, beauty, and love are all forms of

exhausting labor that may not even be appreciated in the end. In fact, the speaker argues that they're often a kind of martyrdom: the noble effort that goes into them may be repaid only with suffering.

The poem argues that poetry is much more difficult work than the world imagines. The speaker, a clear stand-in for the poet himself, explains (or maybe complains) that individual lines of poetry can take hours of work, yet must sound effortless in the end or the whole poem is a waste. He also claims that poets' work is harder than manual labor, yet viewed as laziness by the rest of "the world." In other words, the fact that good poets make it *look* easy makes others assume that it *is* easy—or even intuitive and natural.

The exchange between the speaker and the "close friend" extends this same principle to beauty and love. That is, neither of these things comes naturally, and both require great effort. After the speaker's talk of poetry, the friend retorts that all women know "we must labour to be beautiful." In other words, all beauty, not just the literary kind, takes hard work. Alluding to the biblical curse laid on Adam (forcing him, and all men, to "toil" to survive), the speaker then pointedly replies by saying that lovers used to work hard at courtship, but that this practice has apparently gone out of fashion. The implication is that the woman he "strove" to win has rejected his laborious courtship—probably in favor of someone who didn't court her as seriously.

The speaker's disappointment raises the possibility that the "labour" of art, beauty, and love might never be rewarding in any ordinary sense. At best, such work is a noble but all-consuming sacrifice. The speaker dryly says that love itself now seems an "idle trade," with "idle" meaning both *lazy* and *pointless*.

The hard work and greater purpose he once associated with it seem to have disappeared. Earlier in the poem, he contrasted poets with what "the martyrs call the world," meaning people who work in the everyday, practical, transactional world. But now, at the poem's end, this contrast suggests that laborers on behalf of art, beauty, and love are themselves "martyrs"—that is, idealists who sacrifice themselves for their values.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14
- Between Lines 14-15
- Lines 15-38

ROMANTIC WEARINESS AND DISILLUSIONMENT

"Adam's Curse" is not only about the hard work of love; it's also about growing older and more skeptical of love in the first place. Its allusions to the biblical Fall of Man (or "Adam's fall") suggest that, for the speaker, losing his youthful, romantic hopes has felt like losing a kind of paradise. Beyond that, the poem suggests that *both* the speaker and his beloved have grown "weary-hearted"; that the "close friend" has a kind of jaded wisdom; and that the culture around them isn't as romantic as it used to be. Whether this is because the speaker has outgrown his dreams or the world itself has changed and left him nostalgic for the more hopeful past—or both!—is open to debate. Regardless, the poem expresses weary disillusionment with romance, art, and the modern world as a whole.

The poem portrays the speaker as a tired and disappointed man, a young idealist turned aging cynic. He indicates that he was once "happy" in romance and is now "weary-hearted," meaning tired and jaded by romance. He also describes his love—and his beloved's beauty—in the past tense, suggesting that age and experience have squashed his romantic dreams.

But the speaker isn't alone: the poem hints that the beloved, the friend, and their surrounding culture have lost their romantic innocence as well. The speaker claims that "we'd grown / As weary-hearted as that hollow moon," meaning that his beloved seems as tired and jaded as he does. Meanwhile, the close friend speaks with a voice of worldly wisdom when she says that *all* women know how much hard work beauty requires. In other words, she seems to speak from experience with the world's often taxing and unfair beauty standards (which are as demanding as any expectations placed on poets).

All three characters also fall "quiet" at the mention of love, as if embarrassed or embittered by the whole subject. And while the speaker is mostly talking about *his* failed courtship, his comments about "lovers" suggest that the art of courtship, in general, is dying out.

In the end, even if he's just projecting his own feelings, *everything* around the speaker seems as exhausted and disappointed as he is. The poem is set at "summer's end": symbolically, the end of life's "season" of youth and romance. This setting adds to the sense that the poem is an elegy for the speaker's romantic hopes. The moon itself (another romantic symbol) strikes the speaker as "worn" and "hollow," suggesting that his disillusionment has extended to love in general—or even the universe in general!

Maybe the speaker has matured beyond his naive, youthful hopes; maybe those hopes were snuffed out by a cynical world. Either way, he's not the same romantic dreamer he once was, either in his personal or his creative life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Between Lines 14-15
- Lines 15-38

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

We sat together at one summer's end,
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

Lines 1-6 set the scene of the poem and begin the dialogue that continues through line 27.

The poem is framed as a reminiscence. The setting is an unspecified location at "one summer's end." There are three characters:

- The speaker, who turns out to be a male poet very much like Yeats;
- A "you" who turns out to be the woman he loves;
- And her "close friend," a "beautiful mild woman."

The speaker recalls the three of them sitting around and "talk[ing] of poetry," although the speaker seems to do most of the talking on this subject. He argues that poetry takes many hours of hard work, yet must seem utterly spontaneous:

> I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe;
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

Here, "stitching and unstitching" is a metaphor for the work of poetry: the laborious drafting, erasing, revising, etc. that poets have to do in order to make their lines sound smooth and natural. (As if to prove the point, Yeats revised some of the lines in *this* poem after its original publication!)

These opening lines also establish the poem's form. Its meter is iambic pentameter, meaning that its lines typically contain five iambs (metrical feet consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable). Basically, the lines follow a "da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm. But this is only a basic pattern with many variations; for example, line 3 is "perfect" iambic pentameter, while lines 1-2 aren't:

> We sat | toge- | ther at | one sum- | mer's end,
> That beaut- | iful | mild wo- | man, your | close friend,
> And you | and I, | and talked | of po- | etry.

These pentameter lines form rhymed couplets, which, in turn, stack up into larger stanza units. Most of the rhymes in the poem are exact, as in these opening lines ('end"/"friend," etc.), but others are slant rhymes. Couplets seem to fit the poem's subject (romance, couples, etc.), but the handful of less-than-"perfect" rhymes may hint that the poem is about *failed* or *flawed* romance.

LINES 7-11

Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these,

Lines 7-11 present an extended simile about the difficulty of poetry. According to the speaker, you'd be "Better" off "go[ing] down upon your marrow-bones" (i.e., on your hands and knees) to "scrub" kitchen floors, or "break[ing] stones" like a "pauper" (very poor person) forced to do menial outdoors labor, than trying to make a living as a poet. Why? Because poetry is, supposedly, an even tougher job: "to articulate sweet sounds together / Is to work harder than all these."

There are two especially interesting things to notice here:

- First, the speaker defines poetry as the art of making pleasing verbal music: "articulat[ing] sweet sounds together." Not every poet would agree with that definition, but in many ways, "Adam's Curse" tries to live up to it. For example, "sweet sounds" is itself a smoothly flowing, alliterative phrase.
- Second, the speaker's claim is wildly debatable! Almost anyone who's done manual labor for a living would dispute the idea that poetry is easier. It's unclear whether the speaker is making a literal claim here or using hyperbole to make a point. Either way, the point is clear: poetry may *look* easy to people who don't write it, but it's hard, tiring work.

The meter in lines 8-9 gets rough and uneven, as if to match the description of hard, menial labor:

> And scrub | a kitch- | en pave- | ment, or | break stones
> Like an old | pauper, | in all | kinds of | weather;

The assonance in "pavement"/"break" and "pauper"/"all" places extra emphasis on two words ("break" and "all") that are already stressed syllables in metrical positions where they'd normally be unstressed. As a result, this part sounds significantly less sweet and smooth than the following line about "sweet sounds."

LINES 11-14

and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world.'

Lines 11-14 finish the thought that lines 7-11 began. After

claiming that poetry is harder work than scrubbing floors or breaking rocks, the speaker adds that skeptics *think* poets are lazy:

> [...] and yet
> Be thought an idler by the noisy set
> Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
> The martyrs call the world.'

These skeptics are "bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen": members of the professional classes, who themselves hold jobs that are much cushier than manual labor. They're the people "The martyrs call the world": that is, the practical, worldly types with whom saints and religious martyrs are typically at odds.

By setting up an opposition between poets and this "world," the speaker suggests that poets and artists are also martyrs of a kind: idealists who live by different values than mainstream society and often suffer as a result. (For example, the speaker feels that good poets work quietly and carefully with language, as lines 4-6 make clear, while the mainstream professional world is "noisy"—loud, abrasive, and careless with language.)

The end of the speaker's monologue about the difficulty of poetry is followed by a dramatic caesura. Line 14 becomes a "dropped line": that is, its second part is dropped and indented to the point where the first part broke off. The indentation signals that it's a continuation of the same line (in fact, it will complete a rhyming couplet with line 13).

Although there isn't a stanza break here, the effect is like that of a paragraph break in prose; it signals a transition in the poem's dialogue, as the speaker has stopped talking and the "beautiful mild woman" is about to respond. (The break also occurs in the poem's 14th line, as if disrupting or complicating a potential sonnet; for more, see the Form section of this guide.)

BETWEEN LINES 14-15, LINES 15-17

> *And thereupon*
> *That beautiful mild woman for whose sake*
> *There's many a one shall find out all heartache*
> *On finding that her voice is sweet and low*

The second part of line 14 (a dropped line) forms a slant rhyme with line 13: "clergy**men**"/"thereup**on**." The word "thereupon," which means "right after that" or "as a result of that," marks a shift in gears after the speaker finishes opining about poetry.

From line 15 through line 17, the speaker describes his beloved's "close friend," who is about to reply to his opinions. The speaker delivers this description as a kind of aside before quoting her reply. He calls her:

> That beautiful mild woman for whose sake
> There's many a one shall find out all heartache
> On finding that her voice is sweet and low [...]

In other words, he describes her as an attractive, mild-mannered young woman whose sultry voice will break a lot of hearts. Notice how "sweet" echoes the phrase "articulate sweet sounds together" (referring to poetry) in line 10; the repetition may suggest that there's something poetic about her voice.

This description doesn't necessarily suggest that the speaker has any romantic interest in the "beautiful mild woman." Mainly, it seems intended to contrast her relative youth with his own (and his beloved's) age, experience, and world-weariness. But even this juxtaposition is complicated, because when the woman actually speaks in the following lines, she doesn't sound young and innocent. In fact, she sounds pretty worldly-wise herself!

(Interestingly, Yeats based this character on Kathleen Pilcher, the sister—not the "close friend"—of his real-life love interest, Maud Gonne. At the time he wrote "Adam's Curse," Pilcher was in her thirties and married with children, not a very young woman just starting to break hearts. In the original version of the poem, the speaker twice calls this character "young," but Yeats later revised that adjective out. In other words, the poem's details were inspired by real life, but carefully tweaked in order to suit the themes Yeats wanted to explore.)

LINES 18-22

> *Replied, 'To be born woman is to know—*
> *Although they do not talk of it at school—*
> *That we must labour to be beautiful.'*
> *I said, 'It's certain there is no fine thing*
> *Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.*

Lines 18-22 contain the "beautiful mild woman's" reply to the speaker and the beginning of the speaker's response. After listening to the speaker's complaint about the difficulty of writing poetry, the woman says:

> [...] To be born woman is to know—
> Although they do not talk of it at school—
> That we must labour to be beautiful.'

Although the speaker has called her "mild," her reply sounds fairly pointed! She's suggesting that all women, whether they're poets or not, already know the general principle that the speaker has been explaining with respect to poetry. Because they're constantly held to demanding (often male-defined) standards of beauty, they know that beauty doesn't come naturally. A beautiful appearance or personality requires at least as much "labour" as a sweet-sounding poem.

And yet, the woman suggests, society doesn't officially recognize or appreciate this labor. "[T]hey do not talk of it at school"; in other words, it's something you have to learn on your own, or in informal settings, because no one formally teaches you. (The original version of this line read, "Although we never heard of it at school.") Implicitly, the woman links "the

world['s]" ignorance of the hard work poetry requires (see lines 10-14) with its ignorance of—or indifference toward—the hard work "beaut[y]" in general requires.

Immediately, the speaker makes this general principle even more general. The woman has effectively said: "Not only does beautiful poetry require hard work; *all* beauty requires hard work." Now he effectively says: "*Anything worthwhile* requires hard work." He expresses this idea through a biblical allusion:

> I said, 'It's certain there is no fine thing
> Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.

In the Book of Genesis, when human beings are expelled from the Garden of Eden (a.k.a. Paradise) for eating its forbidden fruit, God places a curse on both Adam and Eve, along with all their male and female descendants. He condemns Adam (and all men) to work for their daily sustenance; he condemns Eve (and all women) to suffer pain during labor and childbirth. Thus, the speaker's retort here puns on two senses of "labouring": doing strenuous work, and going through labor. Basically, he's saying that every worthwhile thing humans make—including other humans—requires great pain and effort.

This allusion, along with the title "Adam's Curse," has other overtones, too. Because he's been disappointed in love, the speaker himself may feel like a cursed man. He certainly seems to feel underappreciated, both as a poet and a lover. By the end of the poem, it's clear that he feels his "happ[iest]" days are behind him (see lines 37-38), so he may even feel as if he's been expelled from the paradise of his youth.

LINES 23-27

> *There have been lovers who thought love should be*
> *So much compounded of high courtesy*
> *That they would sigh and quote with learned looks*
> *Precedents out of beautiful old books;*
> *Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.'*

Lines 1-22 have discussed the hard work that goes into poetry, beauty, and "fine thing[s]" in general. Now, in lines 23-27, the speaker mentions a specific "fine thing" that requires hard work: love.

He isn't choosing this example randomly, of course; he's making a point. The whole poem is addressed to a "you" whom the speaker is in love with, or at least used to be. As the ending of the poem reveals, he courted her but failed to win her. So when he describes "lovers" who worked hard at an old-fashioned style of courtship, he's largely talking about himself:

> There have been lovers who thought love should be
> So much compounded of high courtesy
> That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
> Precedents out of beautiful old books [...]

He may be poking a little fun at these "lovers" and their "sigh[ing]," but he also admires and relates to their "high courtesy"—their refined, courtly approach to wooing. By "quot[ing] ... / Precedents out of beautiful old books," these lovers place themselves within a tradition (partly literary, partly real) of grand, romantic love. The speaker is placing himself in the same tradition without quite saying so; he takes pride in being the kind of old-fashioned suitor who loves (and writes!) romantic books.

On the other hand, the speaker doesn't seem to have much respect for *modern* lovers. Nowadays, he says dryly, love "seems an idle trade enough." *Idle* here could mean several related things: lazy, frivolous, worthless, pointless, etc. Basically, the speaker means that successful lovers these days don't put much work into courtship—and possibly also that old-fashioned, romantic love doesn't seem to be worth much anymore. (Remember, Yeats wrote this poem when the woman he loved was about to marry a man he hated!)

Notice that the lines about courtly, romantic love are full of lush musical devices, including alliteration ("lovers"/"love," "compounded"/"courtesy," "learned looks," "beautiful"/"books") and internal rhyme ("high"/"sigh"). On the other hand, the "idle trade" line contains none of these things; it's a touch of blunt, unpoetic sarcasm after the lofty lyricism.

LINES 28-29

> *We sat grown quiet at the name of love;*
> *We saw the last embers of daylight die,*

Line 28 marks the poem's first transition to a new stanza. (The earlier "dropped" line, line 14, didn't technically mark a stanza break.)

Notice that the stanza break here divides a rhymed couplet in two: the "love" in line 28 completes an imperfect rhyme with "enough" in line 27. The fact that this couplet is broken up, and that the rhyme with *love* isn't perfect, may tie in subtly with the poem's themes: after all, this is a poem about a couple who didn't work out!

The speaker's talk of "love" (lines 23-27) brings the conversation to a screeching halt: "We sat grown quiet at the name of love." As the poem's ending reveals, the speaker has unsuccessfully courted his beloved (the "you" of the poem) and probably still loves her on some level. Under the circumstances, then, his sarcasm about how love isn't what it used to be comes off as both pointed and awkward.

After falling silent, the characters watch "the last embers of daylight die." In other words, the sun sets and twilight begins. There's some heavy symbolism here: like the "summer's end" mentioned in line 1, the coming of twilight seems to represent the end of youth for both the speaker and his beloved. (Yeats published the poem the year he turned 38 and his longtime love interest, Maud Gonne, turned 37.) The metaphor of dying

"embers" also reflects the speaker's cooling romantic hopes. Basically, the fire has gone out of whatever relationship he had with his beloved, or wanted to have.

LINES 30-33

And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.

In lines 30-33, the moon rises over the poem's three characters. In an extended simile, the speaker compares this moon to a worn-down seashell floating in "time's waters":

> And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
> A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
> Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
> About the stars and broke in days and years.

The phrase "trembling blue-green" seems to compare the sky to the ocean, which the speaker imagines as the ocean of time itself. Time seems to flow out of this ocean in waves, traveling through "the stars" and washing over Earth in a series of "days and years." In the process, these waves erode the "shell" of the moon, making it look old and "worn."

It's a sad and beautiful image, but what is it doing in the poem? Symbolically, the moon is often associated with time, change, and romance. For the speaker, then, this "worn"-looking moon seems to reflect his own advancing age, weariness, and disillusionment with love. It looks tired because he *feels* tired, and he's projecting his feelings onto nature. (At the very end of the poem, the speaker will compare himself and his beloved to this "shell" of a moon.)

Alliteration ("worn"/"Washed"/"waters") and assonance ("blue-green"/"moon," "Washed"/"waters," "rose"/"broke") accentuate many of the stressed syllables in these lines, intensifying their wave-like rhythm.

LINES 34-38

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love;
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

Lines 34-38 end the poem on a note of bitter wistfulness. This final stanza is framed as a "thought" that crossed the speaker's mind, but that he didn't speak aloud in company because it was meant only for his beloved ("for no one's but your ears"). Whereas "Adam's Curse" began with a conversation among the speaker, the beloved, and her friend—although the beloved never actually speaks in the poem—it now ends in awkward silence, as the speaker keeps his "thought[s]" to himself.

But, of course, he shares those thoughts with the reader. Here's what he *wanted* to say to his beloved:

> That you were beautiful, and that I strove
> To love you in the old high way of love;
> That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
> As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

The language here becomes unusually direct, a reflection of the fact that he's sharing his uncensored feelings. Basically, he's saying: *You were beautiful, and I tried to win you over through old-fashioned courtship. Everything between us seemed happy, but somehow, we became as old and sad as the moon.*

"[T]he old high way of love" refers back to the kind of old-fashioned, "courte[ous]" courtship described earlier in lines 23-26. "As weary-hearted as that hollow moon" layers a second simile on top of the one in lines 30-32; having earlier compared the moon to a "worn" seashell in the ocean of time, the speaker now compares himself and his beloved to that same "hollow" object. They, too, seem worn down by time and empty inside, their sense of romance replaced by weariness.

The poem's final enjambment lingers briefly on the phrase "we'd grown," emphasizing that these two characters have outgrown their early, "happy" days. Their maturity may have brought wisdom, but it's also brought sadness. The word "grown" then forms a slant rhyme with "moon," the poem's final word, ending the poem on a slightly unsettling or inconclusive note. (Most of the rhymes in the poem are full rhymes.) The slight mismatch in vowel sounds here might point to the mismatch between the speaker and his beloved; in other words, this "imperfect" couplet might mirror the imperfection of the couple.

SYMBOLS

THE MOON

The moon is a traditional symbol of time, change, and romance. All three of these associations relate to the moon in "Adam's Curse"—a poem about romantic feelings that have changed over time.

The moon strikes the speaker as "worn" (line 32) and "weary-hearted" (line 39). As it floats in the sea-green sky, he compares it to a seashell that has been gradually eroded by the ocean of time. (Note that the ocean is also symbolically linked with time and change—and sometimes with romance, too!) Of course, the moon's "feelings" here are really a projection of the speaker's own weariness and romantic disillusionment, which his beloved seems to share. The speaker is attributing human feelings to this natural object (an example of the pathetic fallacy).

The rising moon also signals the end of day (see line 29) and the beginning of night. Like the end of summer (see line 1), which

often symbolizes the end of youth, twilight traditionally symbolizes the start of old age, or one's "twilight years." The very presence of this moon, then, is a sign that the speaker and his beloved are no longer young.

Overall, this worn-looking moon evokes youthful love—or a youthful dream of love—that has deteriorated with age. Specifically, it suggests the way the relationship between the speaker and his love interest has changed over the years: from "seem[ing] happ[iness]" (line 38) to jaded exhaustion.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 30-33:** "And in the trembling blue-green of the sky / A moon, worn as if it had been a shell / Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell / About the stars and broke in days and years."
- **Lines 37-38:** "That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown / As weary-hearted as that hollow moon."

THE END OF SUMMER

Much like the coming of twilight (see lines 29-33), "summer's end" (line 1) symbolizes the end of one's younger years and the approach of old age.

In general, the four seasons are traditionally associated with phases of life: spring is youth, summer is the prime of life, fall is late middle age, and winter is old age and decline. Spring and summer are also seasons associated with romance, so the end of summer is sometimes symbolically associated with the end of relationships.

In other words, the late-summer setting fits the mood and themes of "Adam's Curse," which is about growing older and letting go of romantic hopes and dreams.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We sat together at one summer's end,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Adam's Curse" is a highly musical poem that shows off Yeats's ability "to articulate sweet sounds together," as the speaker puts it in line 10. One of the musical devices the poem uses is alliteration, which makes its language more harmonious and pleasant. The alliterative phrase "sweet sounds" is a perfect example of this kind of verbal "sweetening"!

Notice, too, that alliteration increases in lines 21-26, as the speaker describes a traditional, chivalrous style of courtship. As part of this courtship, lovers used to quote "Precedents out of beautiful old books"—in other words, beautiful passages of classic literature. Alliteration helps the language in these lines rise to a similar level of grandeur:

> I said, 'It's certain there is no fine thing
> Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
> There have been lovers who thought love should be
> So much compounded of high courtesy
> That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
> Precedents out of beautiful old books [...]

But the alliteration disappears in the next line, as the speaker disparagingly describes *modern* love. Partly as a result of these sound effects, this line sounds blunt and anticlimactic.

Alliteration also adds force to the phrase "daylight die" (line 29), making the "death" of the light seem more dramatic. (Symbolically, it reflects the passing of the speaker's youth, much like the "summer's end" in line 1.)

The repeated /w/ sounds in "Washed by time's waters" (line 32) evoke the wavelike motion the speaker is describing. Repeated /w/ sounds also combine with /h/ alliteration in the final two lines:

> That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
> As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

These soft consonants add a quiet, wistful lyricism to the poem's unhappy ending.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sat," "summer's"
- **Line 10:** "sweet sounds"
- **Line 18:** "be born"
- **Line 20:** "be beautiful"
- **Line 21:** "fine"
- **Line 22:** "fall," "labouring"
- **Line 23:** "lovers," "love"
- **Line 24:** "compounded," "courtesy"
- **Line 25:** "learned looks"
- **Line 26:** "beautiful," "books"
- **Line 29:** "daylight die"
- **Line 32:** "Washed," "waters"
- **Line 37:** "had," "happy," "we'd"
- **Line 38:** "weary-hearted," "hollow"

ASSONANCE

Assonance enhances the poem's musicality and underscores its meaning. Readers can hear it doing both of these things in lines 29-33, for example:

> We saw the last embers of daylight die,
> And in the trembling blue-green of the sky

A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.

The partial internal rhyme between "embers" and "trembling," together with the shared vowel sounds in "blue-green"/"moon," "Washed"/"waters," and "rose"/"broke," makes this passage sound beautifully harmonious. At the same time, assonance helps illustrate the thing being described; the extra emphasis it places on "Washed," "waters," "rose," and "broke" evokes the pulsing, wave-like rhythm of time.

By contrast, assonance makes for a rougher sound in lines 8-9:

And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;

The words "break" and "all" are stressed syllables that would normally be unstressed under the poem's metrical pattern (more on that in the Meter section of this guide). As if drawing attention to this variation, assonance places extra stress on both words. The result is a rough, jagged, off-kilter sound that perfectly complements the image of hard labor (including "break[ing] stones" into rough fragments).

Assonance and internal rhyme can also highlight thematic links between words, as with "high" and "sigh" in lines 24-25. Here, the rhyme suggests that the heights of love correspond with dramatic shows of emotion.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "together," "one summer's," "end"
- **Line 4:** "take," "maybe"
- **Line 8:** "pavement," "break"
- **Line 9:** "pauper," "all"
- **Line 24:** "high"
- **Line 25:** "sigh"
- **Line 29:** "embers"
- **Line 30:** "trembling," "blue"
- **Line 31:** "moon"
- **Line 32:** "Washed," "waters," "rose"
- **Line 33:** "broke"
- **Line 35:** "you," "beautiful"

METAPHOR

The poem uses several metaphors, beginning with a famous one in lines 4-6:

I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

Here the speaker (or poet) compares the process of drafting, deleting, and revising lines of poetry to "stitching and unstitching." In other words, it's slow, meticulous work that requires a lot of correcting oneself. At the same time, the finished product, in order to be successful, must seem totally natural and spontaneous ("a moment's thought").

A subtler metaphor occurs in line 27, when the speaker gripes that modern love "seems an idle trade enough." This loosely figurative language compares love to a "trade," or industry, that is no longer as thriving and industrious as it once was. Those who practice it (lovers) seem lazy and unimpressive (*idle* can mean *not busy*, but also *frivolous* or *worthless*).

The last metaphor in the poem is a seemingly simple one: "We saw the last embers of daylight die" (line 29). The speaker compares the dwindling light in the sky to the last "embers" of a fire going out. Notice, though, that this image also evokes the dying *romantic* fire between the speaker and his beloved—the awkwardness that causes them to fall "quiet at the name of love" (line 28). It might also symbolize the dying fire of youth, since these "weary-hearted" characters (line 38) seem to be getting up there in years.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "'A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught."
- **Line 27:** "Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.'"
- **Line 29:** "We saw the last embers of daylight die,"

SIMILE

The poem's elaborate similes are central to its meaning. The first of these comes in lines 7-11, as the speaker claims that poetry is harder work than the grittiest manual labor:

Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these [...]

In other words, making poems sound "sweet" is more strenuous than scrubbing floors or breaking rocks. The following lines might be described as an extension of the simile, as the speaker complains that "the world" thinks poets have it easy:

[...] and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world.'

Notice that "bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen" all work

in fairly comfortable, middle-class professions. The speaker is saying, then, that the professional "world" thinks poets have cushier jobs than theirs, but in fact, the poet's work is *less* cushy than a manual laborer's. It's unclear whether the speaker (or Yeats!) literally believes this, or whether he's indulging in comic hyperbole.

Two linked similes near the end of the poem highlight the speaker's weariness, which he seems to project onto the world around him. Lines 30-33 compare the rising moon to a worn-down shell:

> And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
> A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
> Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
> About the stars and broke in days and years.

Notice how "trembling blue-green" helps set up the simile by implicitly comparing the sky to a blue-green sea. In this striking image, "time's waters" seem to arise from eternity and "[break] in days and years" like a series of waves. In doing so, they seem to have worn away the moon, just as the sea wears away even the hardest shell.

Lines 37-38 build a second simile on top of this one, comparing the speaker and his beloved to this "hollow" shell: "[...] we'd grown / As weary-hearted as that hollow moon." In an extension of the earlier thought, the speaker suggests that time has worn *him* down, too, along with the woman he loved. It's drained away their youth, passion, and happiness, leaving them both "weary-hearted." The moon, traditionally a symbol of romance, here represents their emotional "hollow[ness]."

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-11:** "Better go down upon your marrow-bones / And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones / Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather; / For to articulate sweet sounds together / Is to work harder than all these,"
- **Lines 30-33:** "And in the trembling blue-green of the sky / A moon, worn as if it had been a shell / Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell / About the stars and broke in days and years."
- **Lines 37-38:** "and yet we'd grown / As weary-hearted as that hollow moon."

ENJAMBMENT

Many of the lines in "Adam's Curse" (in fact, almost half) are enjambed. Enjambment serves a few different purposes in the poem, one of which is to create brief, suspenseful pauses in places where they wouldn't occur in a prose sentence (i.e., in places that don't coincide with punctuation or natural grammatical pauses). This technique helps hold the reader's interest from line to line. A few examples:

- The enjambment after "and yet" (line 11) briefly raises a kind of question that only the following line can answer: "and yet *what?*"
- The enjambment after "And thereupon" creates a momentary flicker of narrative suspense. (And thereupon—*what* happened?)
- Similarly, the enjambment after line 30 ("And in the trembling blue-green of the sky") inserts a dramatic pause that suggests something significant is about to appear. Immediately, in the next line, it arrives: "A moon."

Enjambment can also place extra emphasis on the word that occurs just before the line break. in "Adam's Curse," this effect helps underscore emotion, as when "heartache" is emphasized in line 16, and action, as when "strove" is emphasized in line 35. These words wouldn't be stressed quite as hard in a prose sentence, but thanks to enjambment, both the ache and the striving seem more intense.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "marrow-bones / And"
- **Lines 8-9:** "stones / Like"
- **Lines 10-11:** "together / Is"
- **Lines 11-12:** "yet / Be"
- **Lines 12-13:** "set / Of"
- **Lines 13-14:** "clergymen / The"
- **Between Lines 14-15:** "thereupon"
- **Line 15:** "That"
- **Lines 15-16:** "sake / There's"
- **Lines 16-17:** "heartache / On"
- **Lines 17-18:** "low / Replied"
- **Lines 21-22:** "thing / Since"
- **Lines 23-24:** "be / So"
- **Lines 25-26:** "looks / Precedents"
- **Lines 30-31:** "sky / A"
- **Lines 31-32:** "shell / Washed"
- **Lines 32-33:** "fell / About"
- **Lines 35-36:** "strove / To"
- **Lines 37-38:** "grown / As"

REPETITION

The repetition of important words and phrases helps make the poem's structure logical and easy to follow. It also helps tie the poem's main ideas, images, and themes together.

In terms of structure, for example, the repetition of "We sat" in lines 1 and 28 (which begin their respective stanzas), as well as the repetition of "We" in lines 28 and 29, helps the reader follow the poem's action. Though the characters in the poem remain sitting still, these repetitions trace a narrative sequence: *We did this, this, and this.*

- Since they occur at the start of successive stanzas or lines, these repetitions are also examples of anaphora.
- Similarly, the repetition of "That" at the beginning of lines 35 and 37 adds some structural clarity, introducing separate elements within a single complex "thought" (line 34).

Meanwhile, repeated words (and word variants) such as "beautiful," "sweet," "labour"/"labouring," "idler"/"idle," and "love"/"lovers" help develop the poem's themes in subtle ways. Take "beautiful," for example, which is first used to describe "That beautiful mild woman" in line 2:

- This same phrase is repeated at the beginning of line 15, as if it's a fixed epithet that expresses an inherent feature of this woman's identity.
- Yet in line 20, the woman makes clear that beauty *isn't* an inherent part of her, or anyone's, identity; it's something everyone has to work for ("we must labour to be beautiful").
- Later, the speaker uses "beautiful" to describe "old books" that he finds romantic. But he's already noted that the beauty of *books* doesn't come naturally, either: lines 4-14 are all about the difficulty of writing.
- Finally, he calls his beloved "beautiful" (line 35). By this point, it seems clear that the word implies some appreciation for the hard work that went into her beautiful appearance and/or personality. Yet the speaker seems bitter that *she* doesn't appreciate, in turn, the hard work he put into his "love" (line 36).

In this way, the simple word "beautiful" gains increasingly complex associations and nuances with each repetition. Similarly, the speaker describes the poet's mission as "articulat[ing] sweet sounds together" (line 10) and then calls the voice of his beloved's friend "sweet" (line 17)—thereby suggesting that her voice has a poetic quality.

The speaker uses polyptoton as well, repeating words with the same root to again add nuance to the poem's thematic ideas. The speaker rejects the world's judgement that poets are "idlers," for example, but passes the same judgement on modern lovers (members of an "idle trade"). The contrast seems pointed and deliberate, but it might make readers wonder if the speaker is being too harsh, or speaking purely out of bitterness.

By linking the word "labour" (line 20) with the biblical story of Adam and Eve, the speaker also adds another connotation to the word "labouring" (line 22), because God's curse on Eve forced women to experience pain during labor and childbirth.

Finally, the various repetitions of "love"/"lovers" reflect the speaker's preoccupation with—and very mixed feelings about—that subject!

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "We sat"
- **Line 2:** "That beautiful mild woman"
- **Line 10:** "sweet"
- **Line 12:** "idler"
- **Line 15:** "That beautiful mild woman"
- **Line 17:** "sweet"
- **Line 20:** "labour," "beautiful"
- **Line 22:** "labouring"
- **Line 23:** "lovers," "love"
- **Line 24:** "high"
- **Line 26:** "beautiful"
- **Line 27:** "idle"
- **Line 28:** "We sat"
- **Line 29:** "We"
- **Line 31:** "moon"
- **Line 35:** "That," "beautiful"
- **Line 36:** "love," "high," "love"
- **Line 37:** "That"
- **Line 38:** "moon"

ALLUSION

The title of "Adam's Curse," along with lines 21-22 of the poem, alludes to the Bible. Specifically, it refers to Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden for eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In this story, God punishes Adam's disobedience with a curse condemning all men to work for their daily food. Here's how that passage is translated in the King James Version of the Bible (Genesis 3:17-19):

> 17 And unto Adam He said: 'Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying: Thou shalt not eat of it; cursed is the ground for thy sake; in toil shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.
> 18 Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field.
> 19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.'

God punishes Eve, in part, by cursing women with the pains of pregnancy, labor, and childbirth. Thus, the speaker's comment in lines 21-22—"[T]here is no fine thing / Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring"—slyly alludes to the curse of both Adam *and* Eve. More broadly, it hints that the speaker feels he's lost a kind of paradise: the "happy," hopeful, romantic days of his youth (see line 37).

The poem's symbolic references to "summer's end" (line 1) and the "last embers of daylight" (line 29) suggest that the speaker

and his beloved are getting older—that is, entering their *autumn* or *twilight* years. While this symbolism is traditional, its presentation here may have been influenced by William Shakespeare's famous Sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold"). Here's an excerpt from that poem:

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang [...]
> In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
> As after sunset fadeth in the west [...]
> In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
> That on the ashes of his youth doth lie [...]

Notice the mix of autumn imagery, twilight imagery, and dying-fire imagery, all of which reinforce the idea that the speaker is getting older. This combination is pretty similar to the one found in "Adam's Curse"!

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-22:** "I said, 'It's certain there is no fine thing / Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring."

CAESURA

The poem's metrical verse generally flows smoothly; it isn't broken up by an especially high number of caesuras. However, one particularly dramatic caesura does occur in the middle of line 14. This is a "dropped line" that creates a sort of paragraph break within the single long stanza spanning lines 1-27:

> [...] and yet
> Be thought an idler by the noisy set
> Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
> The martyrs call the world.'
> And thereupon
> That beautiful mild woman for whose sake [...]

This break marks a transition between two speakers of dialogue (the male poet and the "beautiful mild woman"). It also seems to fracture line 14, preventing the poem's first 14 lines from completing a tidy sonnet. Sonnets are 14-line poems traditionally written in rhymed iambic pentameter (as "Adam's Curse" is); they're also traditionally associated with romantic yearning. The way this caesura seems to cut off, or disrupt, a potential sonnet may reflect the poem's jaded attitude toward romance!

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "woman, your"
- **Line 3:** "I, and"
- **Line 4:** "said, 'A"
- **Line 8:** "pavement, or"
- **Line 9:** "pauper, in"
- **Line 11:** "these, and"
- **Line 13:** "bankers, schoolmasters, and"
- **Line 14:** "world.'"
- **Between Lines 14-15:** " And"
- **Line 18:** "Replied, 'To"
- **Line 21:** "said, 'It's"
- **Line 31:** "moon, worn"
- **Line 35:** "beautiful, and"
- **Line 37:** "happy, and"

VOCABULARY

Mild (Line 2) - Mild-mannered; gentle.

Stitching and unstitching (Line 6) - Sewing and undoing one's sewing to start over again. A metaphor for the laborious process of writing poems.

Marrow-bones (Line 7) - An intensified way of saying "bones." In context, "go down upon your marrow-bones" means "get right down on your hands and knees."

Pavement (Line 8) - Any kind of paved (non-dirt) floor; could be made of tile, stone, etc.

Pauper (Line 9) - A very poor person, often one forced to rely on charity or perform menial labor.

Idler (Line 12) - A loafer; someone who doesn't work or do anything useful with their time.

The martyrs (Line 14) - People who suffer or die for their faith or ideals.

Thereupon (Between Lines 14-15) - Right after that (and/or as a result of that).

Labour/Labouring (Line 20, Line 22) - Hard work (with a pun on the sense of *going through labor* before giving birth).

Adam's fall (Line 22) - An allusion to the biblical Fall of Man (Genesis 3), in which Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden for the sin of disobeying God's will.

Compounded (Line 24) - Made up of; constructed out of.

Courtesy (Line 24) - Here meaning chivalry or genteel romance.

Precedents (Line 26) - Old literary passages, scenarios, etc. (here quoted as models for romantic love).

Idle (Line 27) - Here meaning both *lazy* and *frivolous* or *worthless*.

Embers (Line 29) - The glowing remnants of a dying fire. (Here used metaphorically.)

Strove (Line 35) - Tried hard; labored.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Adam's Curse" is divided into one long stanza (27 lines) and two shorter ones (6 and 5 lines). The stanzas are made up of rhymed couplets (i.e., the poem's rhyme scheme is AABBCCDDEE and so forth), and their meter is iambic pentameter (i.e., the poem's lines generally consist of 10 syllables arranged in a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm).

The long stanza appears broken in the middle, as line 14 is a dropped line that indicates a kind of paragraph break. However, this is not an actual *stanza* break: the two phrases count as part of a single line, which is in turn part of one stanza (lines 1-27).

Interestingly, this drop, which coincides with a caesura and the start of a new sentence, occurs right before the poem completes its 14th line. Sonnets are rhymed, 14-line, iambic pentameter poems conventionally associated with romance, so it's as if "Adam's Curse"—which is about romantic disillusionment—cracks or breaks before it forms a sonnet!

A similar effect occurs in lines 27-28 and lines 33-34. In each of these cases, the rhymed couplet is divided by a stanza break—perhaps a formal echo of the tension or division between the poem's central couple (the speaker and "you").

METER

"Adam's Curse" uses the most common meter in English-language poetry: iambic pentameter. This means that its lines are generally made up of five iambs: metrical units (feet) consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. In other words, the typical rhythm of each line is: da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM. Readers can hear this rhythm clearly in line 3, for example:

> And you | and I, | and talked | of po- | etry.

Just because this is the basic pattern, though, doesn't mean every line follows it precisely. Poems that use meter usually include some rhythmic variations (otherwise the rhythm gets boring and predictable), and "Adam's Curse" is no exception. Notice how line 1, for instance, departs slightly from the standard pattern:

> We sat | toge- | ther at | one sum- | mer's end,

Instead of an iamb, the third foot here is a pyrrhic foot (two unstressed syllables), while the fourth is a spondee (two stressed syllables). The number of stressed and unstressed syllables is the same as in the standard pattern; the rhythm is just a bit different. Small variations like these pop up throughout the poem.

In general, the poem's handling of meter is smooth and flexible, producing a lush, musical sound. This style fits with the speaker's description of the poet's mission: "to articulate sweet sounds together" (line 10). The poem comments on how hard this task is, and Yeats wants the reader to hear his hard work pay off!

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's stanzas are of irregular length and composed of rhyming couplets. In other words, its rhyme scheme is AABBCC... and so on.

Most of the poem's rhymes are exact, but some are slant. These include "clergymen"/"thereupon," "school"/"beautiful," and perhaps most significantly, the closing rhyme, "grown"/"moon."

The poem's use of couplets reflects its thematic emphasis on coupling and romance. But the imperfection of some of these rhyme pairs might reflect the imperfection and/or deterioration of the romance being described (the speaker's failed courtship of his beloved).

The closing rhyme, in particular, ends the poem on a less than ringing note, as if the mismatch between vowel sounds echoes the mismatch between speaker and beloved. In this way, the slant rhymes might serve a purpose similar to the "broken" line 14, which looks like a physical crack in the poem. That is, they're subtle flaws in a formal surface that appears smooth at first—like the surface of a romance that only "seemed happy" (line 37).

SPEAKER

The speaker of “Adam’s Curse” is a male poet who has become disillusioned by love.

His gender is implied by the “friend’s” remark about being “born woman” (lines 18-20), which suggests that the speaker hasn’t had this experience himself. His vocation is implied by the poem's first bit of dialogue, in which he “talk[s] of poetry” and describes the challenges facing "us" (that is, poets). His disillusionment grows clear toward the end of the poem, as he complains that love has become an “idle trade" and laments the loss of “happy” times with the woman he “strove to love.”

The speaker doesn't identify himself or the other characters by name; he addresses his beloved as “you” and describes her female companion as her “close friend” (lines 2-3). However, it's generally accepted among scholars that the speaker is based on Yeats himself, "you" is based on Yeats's longtime love interest Maud Gonne, and the "close friend" is based on Gonne's younger sister, Kathleen Pilcher.

In Gonne's memoir *A Servant of the Queen*, she recounts the real-life conversation on which Yeats based the poem. Yeats also wrote many other poems for, and about, Gonne, with whom he was romantically obsessed for many years (and with whom he had a short-lived romantic relationship). He tended to

keep her name out of his poetry, but readers familiar with his life and work can easily guess who "you" is!

Basically, "Adam's Curse" is an autobiographical poem with minor details fictionalized: the "sister" changed to a "friend," for example. There's very little separation between poet and speaker, and the poem reflects Yeats's bitter disappointment at the time he wrote it: shortly before Gonne got married in 1903.

SETTING

The poem takes place one evening in late summer. It doesn't specify a physical or geographical setting—just the season ("summer's end," line 1) and the time of day (the hour when "the last embers of daylight die," line 29). It describes a moonrise in a "blue-green" sky (lines 30-31) but doesn't mention any other features of the environment. Both the twilight and the end of summer have symbolic overtones, suggesting the end of youth and the approach of old age. (See the Symbols section for more.)

"Adam's Curse" is known to be based on a real-life conversation between Yeats, his love interest Maud Gonne, and her sister Kathleen Pilcher. However, certain details are fictionalized (e.g., Gonne's sister is called a "close friend"), so it's impossible to say for sure where the conversation in the poem is taking place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Adam's Curse" appeared in William Butler Yeats's collection *In the Seven Woods: Being Poems Chiefly of the Irish Heroic Age*, published in 1903. It remains one of the best-known poems from that collection, along with the sonnet "The Folly of Being Comforted." *In the Seven Woods* is sometimes considered the beginning of Yeats's "middle period," a phase of his career when he began to trade the more old-fashioned diction and myth-heavy content of his previous books for a simpler, more modern style.

That style subtly reflects the era in which "Adams Curse" was written. Starting in the first decade of the 1900s, many English-language poets began abandoning traditional meter and rhyme in favor of free verse and other experimental techniques. Many also began writing in a more colloquial style and focusing on the images and conflicts of 20th-century life. These new approaches helped define what is now called "Modernist" poetry.

"Adam's Curse" uses meter and rhyme (as Yeats would do throughout his career), but it takes pride in its ability to make poetic language sound spontaneous and natural—as if it were "a moment's thought" (line 5). In fact, the poem's diction is rather relaxed, natural, and colloquial compared to Yeats's earlier style; while it contains some stylized, "poetic" phrases such as "shall find out all heartache" (line 16), it also contains blunt, slangy phrases such as "Be thought an idler by the noisy set" (line 12). It's also a poem about an ordinary conversation among friends, as opposed to, say, a subject from Irish mythology (as many early Yeats poems were). At the same time, the speaker of the poem sounds a bit wary of modernity: in lines 23-27, he compares modern love unfavorably with an older style of courtship (the "old high way of love" mentioned in line 36).

In some ways, then, "Adam's Curse" reads like a poem of the late Romantic period (the era of English-language poetry stretching from the mid-1800s through the early 1900s). In others, it seems to anticipate the changes of Modernism. Similarly, its speaker—a stand-in for Yeats—seems like man caught between two eras.

"Adam's Curse" also alludes explicitly to the biblical story of the Fall of Man (Genesis 3), a.k.a. the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The poem's natural and seasonal symbolism—including its references to "summer's end" (line 1) and the dying fire of "daylight" (line 29), which evoke the speaker's advancing age—may be partly inspired by William Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold").

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

W. B. Yeats is widely considered the most influential Irish poet in modern history. He was the central figure of the Irish Literary Revival (a.k.a. the Celtic Twilight), a movement that brought renewed attention to Ireland's literature, culture, and Gaelic heritage during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For his contributions to his country's poetic heritage, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923.

"Adam's Curse" is based on a real-life conversation among Yeats, his longtime love interest (and, briefly, lover) Maud Gonne, and Gonne's younger sister Kathleen Pilcher (disguised as a "close friend" in the poem). Gonne herself revealed the poem's origins in her autobiography, *A Servant of the Queen*. The scholar Nicholas Grene speculates that Yeats fictionalized the incident slightly in order to maintain a thin veil of privacy for all involved:

> Yeats is following his general practice of discretion in relation to living individuals. [...] There is a degree of 'you know who' mystifying involved. We are admitted to a conversation among intimates but with the identities of the individuals blanked out.

Yeats's decades-long passion for Gonne is one of the most notorious cases of unrequited love in literary history. By the time he wrote "Adam's Curse," he had already proposed unsuccessfully to Gonne four times! (Later, in old age, he

proposed unsuccessfully to her daughter.) He wrote many famous poems that channeled his obsession and frustration, including "When You Are Old," "No Second Troy," and "The Song of Wandering Aengus." His frustration in "Adam's Curse" is especially bitter, as he wrote it shortly before Gonne married the Irish republican leader John MacBride—a man Yeats loathed.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Curse of Adam — Read Genesis 3 (about "Adam's curse" and the expulsion from Eden) in the original Hebrew and in English translation. (https://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0103.htm#14)
- A Letter from Gonne to Yeats — Read an ambiguously romantic letter from Maud Gonne (the "you" of "Adam's Curse") to Yeats. (https://poets.org/text/letter-w-b-yeats)
- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to "Adam's Curse" read aloud by poet Robert Pinsky. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNl6ZC7Be9s)
- More on Yeats and Gonne — A New York Times piece about the correspondence and tumultuous relationship between W. B. Yeats and Maud Gonne. (https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/20/arts/design/20dwye.html)
- The Poet's Life and Writing — Read a biography of Yeats at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats)
- Paul Muldoon on Yeats — Acclaimed Irish poet Paul Muldoon discusses Yeats's life and works. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZB7ji8tEHPk)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- Among School Children
- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- A Prayer for my Daughter
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- The Second Coming
- The Song of Wandering Aengus
- The Wild Swans at Coole
- When You Are Old

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