An Apple Gathering

POEM TEXT

I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple-tree
And wore them all that evening in my hair:
Then in due season when I went to see
I found no apples there.

With dangling basket all along the grass
As I had come I went the self-same track:
My neighbours mocked me while they saw me pass
So empty-handed back.

Lilian and Lilias smiled in trudging by,
Their heaped-up basket teased me like a jeer;
Sweet-voiced they sang beneath the sunset sky,
Their mother's home was near.

Plump Gertrude passed me with her basket full,
A stronger hand than hers helped it along;
A voice talked with her through the shadows cool
More sweet to me than song.

Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth
Than apples with their green leaves piled above?
I counted rosiest apples on the earth
Of far less worth than love.

So once it was with me you stooped to talk
Laughing and listening in this very lane;
To think that by this way we used to walk
We shall not walk again!

I let my neighbours pass me, ones and twos
And groups; the latest said the night grew chill,
And hastened: but I loitered; while the dews
Fell fast I loitered still.

SUMMARY

I picked the pink flowers from my apple tree so I could wear them in my hair that night. Later, when it was time to harvest apples, I went back and found that none had grown.

Carrying my empty basket on my arm, I walked back over the grass the same way I'd come. My neighbors made fun of me when they saw me returning with no apples.

The sisters Lilian and Lilias smirked at me as they passed. Their basket, overflowing with apples, seemed to mock me. The sisters sang together under the light of the sunset; they were almost all the way to their mother's house.

The curvy Gertrude went past with a basket full of apples, too—and a strong man helped her to carry it. As she made her way through the shadows of dusk, a voice that I found more beautiful than music talked to her.

Oh Willie, Willie! Did my love mean less to you than a crop of apples in a leafy green tree? I've seen the loveliest, ripest apples in the world, but they're not worth nearly as much as love.

Once upon a time, you deigned to talk to me in just the same way you're talking to Gertrude now, laughing with me and listening to me on this selfsame path. How strange it is to reflect that we used to make this journey together, but never will again!

I let my neighbors go past me, alone and in pairs and in groups. The last few who went past said it was getting chilly out and hurried along. But I stayed put. Even as the dew began to fall, I stayed exactly where I was.

THEMES

SEXISM AND DOUBLE STANDARDS

"An Apple Gathering" tells the sad tale of a woman whose life is ruined by the sexual double standards of British society in the 1800s—a time and place when women were supposed to have sex only after marriage, while men could essentially do what they liked. Early in the year, the poem's speaker picked all the "blossoms" from her apple tree to make herself beautiful for her lover Willie, an image that suggests she offered him her virginity. Now, it's autumn, her tree has of course grown no apples, and Willie has left her for a woman with a more bountiful "harvest"—in other words, a woman who has reaped all the rewards of playing by society's rules. Through these symbolic images of fruit and flowers, the poem explores the consequences of sexist double standards. The same act that destroys a woman's life, the poem observes, makes no difference whatsoever to a man's.

The speaker makes the mistake of giving all her love away to the treacherous Willie too soon. The "pink blossoms" she plucks from her apple tree to adorn her hair one fateful "evening" symbolize that young love—and, likely, the speaker's virginity, which it would have been taboo for a woman to lose before marriage in this poem's 19th-century world.

This premature gift leaves the speaker with no apples to harvest later on, suggesting that her world sees her as diminished by her relationship with Willie. It's as if she herself were now a barren, used-up tree with nothing to offer. The women who *didn't* give their blossom-like love away, meanwhile, have plenty of apples—that is, plenty of value in the eyes of society.

Worse still, no one has any sympathy for the speaker: she's the laughingstock of the town. The sisters "Lilian and Lilias," with their full baskets, seem to "jeer" at her, and "Gertrude" blithely walks right past her on Willie's arm, flaunting her new relationship. Women's sexual choices, the poem suggests, can turn them into outcasts in the blink of an eye.

Willie himself, on the other hand, can skip right off to enjoy Gertrude's apple harvest without consequences—an image that suggests he still gets to reap all the benefits of a societally approved relationship, including security and respectability. While the speaker, a woman who gave her love away "too soon," suffers fearful consequences, the man involved in the very same act gets off scot-free.

Sexual double standards, the poem thus shows, have serious consequences for women. The speaker ends the poem completely alone in the frosty orchard, unable to return to a town that despises her. The speaker and Willie were both involved in whatever happened that fateful "evening" in spring—but only the speaker is shamed and ostracized for it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

THE PAIN OF HEARTBREAK AND BETRAYAL

The speaker of "An Apple Gathering" laments the behavior of her no-good, two-timing lover Willie, and seems to feel she might never recover from his betrayal. Back in the spring, she recalls, she gave him her whole heart (and likely her virginity), only for him to dump her for another woman by the time autumn rolled around. Through images of a failed apple harvest, the poem suggests that heartbreak and betrayal can feel as painful as hunger and frostbite, leaving a person feeling abandoned, starved, and sunk in icy despair.

The speaker, the poem suggests, was once so head-over-heels for Willie that she gave him everything—perhaps even more than was prudent. Remembering the previous spring, the speaker recalls that she stripped all the "pink blossoms" from her apple tree to dress up for a big "evening" out with Willie, an image that symbolically hints she might also have offered him all her young love—heart, soul, and body—on that fateful night.

But when fall rolls around and the bare apple tree can't produce any fruit, the speaker realizes that Willie loved her more for what she could give him than for who she was. He's gone off with "Gertrude," a woman who *didn't* give all her symbolic "blossoms" away—and who thus now reaps a secure harvest of both apples and love. It's precisely *because* the speaker gave Willie everything she had that she's emptyhanded now: loving Willie with her all, she's left with nothing when he abandons her.

The pain of romantic betrayal, the poem concludes, can be deep enough to destroy a life. As the poem ends, the speaker "loiter[s]" all alone in the orchard as the rest of the happy apple-harvesters make their way home through an increasingly "chill" and frosty evening; the poem implies that the speaker might never go home at all, but stay in the orchard until she freezes, apple-less and outcast. A broken heart, this final image suggests, can hurt so badly it feels as if the pain might be fatal.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple-tree
And wore them all that evening in my hair:
Then in due season when I went to see
I found no apples there.

The first stanza of "An Apple Gathering" reveals that this will be a poem about unforeseen consequences. The speaker begins by recalling the past spring, when she "plucked" all the "pink blossoms" from her apple tree to adorn her hair one memorable night. Now, it's harvest time—and with no blossoms for fruit to grow from, her "apple-tree" is bare.

There's plenty here to suggest that those blossoms are symbolic ones. When the speaker says she gathered blossoms to make herself beautiful for "that evening," she gives readers the sense that this was a special night, a memorable one. And if it was a night upon which she wanted to look especially lovely, it seems as if something romantic must have been going on. The blossoms she gathered, in other words, seem to represent the youthful love she offered to a beloved back in the spring.

The imagery here suggests that this love was probably physical as well as emotional. Those blushing "pink blossoms," suggesting warm flesh, hint that the speaker might have lost her virginity (or at least engaged in more physical intimacy than was considered proper at the time) as well as her heart "that evening" back in spring. But whatever might have happened "that evening," the speaker is in trouble now. In giving up all her blossom-like love, she's left empty-handed when harvest time rolls around: her apple tree can't bear fruit.

The poem's meter evokes just how shocking this discovery feels to her. The poem begins in steady iambic pentameter—lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this:

I plucked | pink blos- | soms from | mine ap- | ple-tree

But the last line of the stanza is in iambic trimeter, with only three iambs:

I found | no ap- | ples there.

This changed rhythm suggests both that the speaker is brought up short by the sight of her sad, bare apple tree, and that other things might have been cut short as well—her love affair, for instance.

Even the assonance and alliteration in these lines hints that there's sorrow ahead:

Then in due season when I went to see
I found no apples there.

Those interweaving sounds make these lines sound like a musical lament, a song of heartbreak.

And that's exactly what this poem will turn out to be: the lament of a woman suffering a betrayal—and worse, suffering it in a sexist world that judges women and men very differently for the exact same choices.

LINES 5-8

With dangling basket all along the grass
As I had come I went the self-same track:
My neighbours mocked me while they saw me pass
So empty-handed back.

Stunned by the lack of apples on her tree, the speaker begins making her way home, her empty basket "dangling" in her hand. But going home won't be so easy as all that, she discovers. As she passes her "neighbours," she finds that they're utterly unsympathetic to her plight: rather than offer her consolation (or apples, for that matter), they "mock[]" her, making it clear that she's no longer welcome in the community.

Here, the poem's symbolism really begins to crystallize. In giving away her "blossoms" to a lover and being left empty-handed, the speaker also finds herself the butt of a whole town's scorn. This situation would have felt plainly symbolic when Rossetti wrote this poem. In the Victorian era, women were expected not only to devote their lives to marriage and children, but also to remain scrupulously virginal until marriage came along. A woman who had sex before she was married might well become a pariah if she were found out.

And the poor speaker's predicament is all too visible here: she has no apples! In other words, by giving up the "blossoms" of her virginity too early, she's lost the "fruit" of her reputation. Her community sees her as "empty-handed": without her good standing as an innocent, virginal girl, she's seen as having nothing left to offer.

Listen to the way the speaker describes her thwarted attempt to make her way home:

With dangling basket all along the grass
As I had come I went the self-same track:

In other words, she's trying to retrace her steps, going back to where she started. But her neighbors' mockery makes it clear that this just isn't an option for her anymore. In the language of the time, she's a "ruined" woman now—and in society's eyes, she has only herself to blame.

LINES 9-10

Lilian and Lilias smiled in trudging by,
Their heaped-up basket teased me like a jeer;

Two sisters, "Lilian and Lilias," walk past the speaker and smile at her. But there's a lot to suggest that their smiles are more mocking than kind.

Listen to the simile the speaker uses here:

Lilian and Lilias smiled in trudging by,
Their heaped-up basket teased me like a jeer;

In other words, Lilian and Lilias, unlike the speaker, have a basket positively overflowing with apples; their sexual reputations are perfectly intact. The mere sight of that basket feels "like a jeer" to the speaker—in other words, like a scornful laugh. The simile hints that the sisters' smiles are similarly jeering.

The assonance in this line makes that point even clearer:

Their heaped-up basket teased me like a jeer;

All those long /ee/ sounds have a taunting quality; it's as if the basket is saying *neener-neener*.

Note the sisters' names, too. "Lilian and Lilias" both have a *lily* in them—a flower that's a common symbol of purity, virginity, and innocence. (Think of how people sometimes talk about having a "lily-white" conscience or reputation.) They're the very picture of respectable young womanhood, in other words.

And perhaps being the picture of respectable young womanhood, these lines suggest, also means being downright mean to people who have been less guarded and less careful. Nothing makes a person seem purer, after all, than rejecting the "impure."

LINES 11-12

Sweet-voiced they sang beneath the sunset sky,
Their mother's home was near.

Not only do "Lilian and Lilias" seem to "jeer" at the speaker and her misfortune, but they also represent a happy world the speaker can no longer rejoin. Remember, a few lines ago she was trying to follow the same path back home that she'd taken out to the orchard, only to be stopped in her tracks by her neighbors' cruel mockery. Now, she watches as the smug sisters make their way back to their own secure home, singing as they go.

The sisters' song is "sweet" to hear. But now, it can only remind the speaker of her own isolation. Listen to the way the sibilance in this line evokes her misery:

> Sweet-voiced they sang beneath the sunset sky,

All those hushed /s/ sounds echo not the "sweet" singing the words describe but the speaker's hollow, lonely whisper as she watches Lilian and Lilias go. Even if she were in the mood for singing anything more cheerful than a lament, she doesn't have anyone to sing with.

These lines stress that the speaker has lost, not just her supposed purity, but her *community*. Lilian and Lilias have each other, and their "mother" waits to welcome them back "home." The speaker, meanwhile, seems to have become an outcast. Even the man who *took* her virginity is nowhere to be seen.

LINES 13-16

Plump Gertrude passed me with her basket full,
A stronger hand than hers helped it along;
A voice talked with her through the shadows cool
More sweet to me than song.

Now, another neighbor comes along to mock the speaker even more cruelly than "Lilian and Lilias" did. As the speaker watches, "Plump Gertrude" trots onto the scene, with not only a "basket full" of apples, but company.

The speaker doesn't immediately reveal who's helping Gertrude to carry her apples. Instead, she just observes:

> A stronger hand than hers helped it along;
> A voice talked with her through the shadows cool
> More sweet to me than song.

The anaphora here only reveals Gertrude's companion piece by piece. But readers get a pretty good sense of whose manly "stronger hand" might be on that basket handle. The speaker's former lover has left her for Gertrude—and the pain of this sight is so great that the speaker can't even say so right out.

Instead, she uses imagery to evoke the shock of this awful moment. Describing Gertrude and her lover making their way through the "shadows cool," she paints a picture of *herself* hiding away in the shadowy dusk, afraid to meet the happy couple. Those "cool" shadows also suggest her inner life, evoking the shivery chill of jealousy and heartbreak.

The pain is all the worse because her lover's voice is still "sweet" to her—"more sweet" even than "song," in fact. This simile, which paints the treacherous lover's voice as a kind of heavenly music itself, suggests just how deeply in love the speaker once was. She didn't just give her "blossoms" away to this man on a whim; she truly adored him.

LINES 17-20

Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth
Than apples with their green leaves piled above?
I counted rosiest apples on the earth
Of far less worth than love.

At last, the speaker can no longer hold back her pain. The next stanza begins with a tormented outburst, a rhetorical question she knows the answer to already:

> Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth
> Than apples with their green leaves piled above?

In other words, the speaker can't believe that the wholehearted love she offered to this "Willie" character—all the "blossoms" of her young affection, and her virginity to boot—means less to him, in the end, than the "apples" Gertrude has harvested. Perhaps it's even *because* the speaker offered all her love to Willie that he's betrayed her now, seeking the secure symbolic harvest of respectability and status that he can find with a "purer" girl.

These lines suggest just how crushing sexist double standards can be for women. Willie seems to have been perfectly happy to avail himself of the speaker's affection back in spring, and he still gets to enjoy all the benefits of a more proper match later on. The speaker, meanwhile, is left an outcast, condemned for an act that Willie had an equal part in.

But the speaker's pain isn't purely political. Her tormented epizeuxis—"Ah Willie, Willie"—makes that clear. And listen to her declaration of her beliefs here:

> I counted rosiest apples on the earth
> Of far less worth than love.

In other words: *I always believed that love was worth more than even the loveliest apple that grows on the planet*. The image here might invite readers to imagine love as a kind of apple itself—a heavenly fruit that one would choose over any kind of earthly pleasure. Or so the speaker feels, at least. The unromantic Willie doesn't seem to share this faith in the value of love.

LINES 21-24

So once it was with me you stooped to talk
Laughing and listening in this very lane;
To think that by this way we used to walk
We shall not walk again!

The speaker has just finished expressing her shock that Willie ultimately saw her love as of "less worth" than Gertrude's ripe apple harvest. (For that matter, he *robbed* the speaker of her own harvest by accepting her gift of virginal "blossoms.") There was a kind of courage in this declaration, as well as pain and sadness; the speaker was making a statement of faith in love.

In this stanza, though, all she can do is look back on her time with Willie and grieve. Listen to the alliterative sounds she uses as she remembers how she and Willie used to walk together:

> So once it was with me you stooped to talk
> Laughing and listening in this very lane;
> To think that by this way we used to walk
> We shall not walk again!

Those many drawn-out /w/ and /l/ sounds have a wailing, lamenting quality that makes the poem seem to weep. And the passage of /th/ sounds feels thick and choked, like the voice of someone who's been crying so hard their nose is swollen.

Even as the speaker remembers how things used to be, she knows that everything has changed forever now, and struggles to get her head around the idea. Her diacope here evokes her disbelief:

> To think that by this way we used to walk
> We shall not walk again!

The repetition of "walk" makes it sound as if the speaker is dazed by Willie's betrayal, still trying to make sense of it.

LINES 25-28

I let my neighbours pass me, ones and twos
And groups; the latest said the night grew chill,
And hastened: but I loitered; while the dews
Fell fast I loitered still.

The poem closes with an image that turns from tragic to downright ghostly. Heartbroken, scorned, and exiled, the speaker seems frozen by her misery: as everyone else walks home, she just stays where she is in the orchard, aimlessly "loiter[ing]" with nowhere to go.

This final picture makes an emotional predicament into a concrete, dramatic one. Here, the speaker is literally abandoned in an ominous, "chill" night that's only going to get colder. This, the poem suggests, is just how heartbreak can feel: like being left all alone in the icy dark.

Take a look at the way the speaker uses enjambment and repetitions here:

> I let my neighbours pass me, ones and twos
> And groups; the latest said the night grew chill,
> And hastened: but I loitered; while the dews
> Fell fast I loitered still.

The enjambments here break sentences at places one would never naturally pause in ordinary speech, giving the stanza a herky-jerky quality; it's as if the speaker is shivering, or choking back tears. And the repetition of the words "I loitered" stresses the idea that the speaker has absolutely nowhere to go. Willie's betrayal has left her miserable, lonely, and with no good options. The poem leaves her "loiter[ing]" alone, perhaps forever.

Rossetti's choice of the word "loitered" to describe the speaker's final predicament might subtly allude to the earlier Romantic poet John Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," another poem of seduction and heartbreak. In that poem, a fairy seduces and abandons a knight, who "loiter[s]" forever after in a chilly, "withered" autumnal landscape a lot like the one in this poem. Rossetti, like a lot of her fellow members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, was a big fan of Keats. But this poem might offer a rejoinder to Keats's portrait of a heartless *femme fatale*. *Sure, women might break men's hearts sometimes*, "An Apple Gathering" seems to say, *but men's betrayals can ruin women's whole lives.*

SYMBOLS

APPLES, BLOSSOMS, AND THE HARVEST

The poem's apple harvest—or the lack thereof—symbolizes women's sexual purity and reputations.

When the poem's speaker goes out to harvest apples in the fall, she discovers that there's nothing in her tree: she picked all the apple blossoms to adorn her hair in the spring, back when she was falling in love with "Willie," the lover who has betrayed her now. The suggestion here is that she gave Willie too much love, too soon: she's been foolhardy in plucking the symbolic "blossoms" of young love for him right away. Perhaps she even lost her virginity to him—a huge taboo in the Victorian world in which this poem was written.

The other women of the town, meanwhile, have a bountiful harvest of symbolic apples: the sisters Lilian and Lilias are happy together and secure in their "mother's home," while "plump Gertrude" has harvested Willie himself. In other words, they've done what the world expects of them, hanging on to their sexual purity and reaping the rewards of social approval.

The poem's images of blossoms, apples, and harvests all thus

reflect the dangers of romantic love—especially in the Victorian era, when losing one's virginity before marriage could make a woman a pariah.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-10:** "I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple-tree / And wore them all that evening in my hair: / Then in due season when I went to see / I found no apples there. / With dangling basket all along the grass / As I had come I went the self-same track: / My neighbours mocked me while they saw me pass / So empty-handed back. / Lilian and Lilias smiled in trudging by, / Their heaped-up basket teased me like a jeer;"
- **Line 13:** "Plump Gertrude passed me with her basket full,"
- **Lines 17-20:** "Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth / Than apples with their green leaves piled above? / I counted rosiest apples on the earth / Of far less worth than love."

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery helps to turn this tale of sexism and betrayal into a little play, inviting readers into the speaker's experiences.

In the very first line, the speaker describes the choice that becomes her downfall: she picked all the blossoms from her apple tree so that she could make herself beautiful for her lover Willie. The image of those "pink blossoms" invites readers to imagine an apple tree in spring, with its clouds of flowers. This vision suggests, not just how the speaker's tree looked, but how her heart felt at the time: as if it had burst into bloom. And the blossoms' pinkness also suggests the blush of love—a bodily image that reminds readers those blossoms are a symbol, not just for the speaker's feelings, but for her virginity.

Later on, though, the speaker finds that this choice has left her empty-handed: with no blossoms to grow from, no apples have appeared on her tree. The imagery in the rest of the poem helps readers to feel the contrast between the speaker's lonely, hungry predicament and the happy security of the women around her.

The contrast between the speaker's too-light, "dangling basket" and the "heaped-up basket" the sisters Lilian and Lilias carry speaks for itself. But she also notices the beauty of the landscape itself—a beauty she can no longer take part in. When the sisters sing "sweet-voiced" beneath a lovely "sunset sky," the speaker can only feel the loveliness of the scene as a kind of mockery, reminding her she has no friends and no lover to share this time with. Her tempting picture of the "rosiest apples" in a nest of "green leaves" similarly suggests the pleasures and comforts of societally approved love, now forbidden to her.

It's even worse when she hears Willie's voice—one even "more sweet" to her than music—making its way through the "shadows cool." This image expresses the speaker's feelings *through* the landscape; the coolness of those shadows suggests both the chilling pain the speaker feels as she watches Willie walk past with another woman and Willie's chilly indifference to the speaker.

By the end of the poem, it seems as if the "chill" of both the coming night and the speaker's heart might prove fatal. As all her neighbors stroll past, remarking that it's getting cold out, she "loiter[s]" in the orchard. To this heartbroken speaker, this image suggests, it hardly matters whether she goes home or not; her whole life feels like freezing slowly to death now.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple-tree"
- **Lines 5-6:** "With dangling basket all along the grass / As I had come I went the self-same track:"
- **Lines 10-11:** "Their heaped-up basket teased me like a jeer; / Sweet-voiced they sang beneath the sunset sky,"
- **Lines 15-16:** "A voice talked with her through the shadows cool / More sweet to me than song."
- **Lines 18-20:** "Than apples with their green leaves piled above? / I counted rosiest apples on the earth / Of far less worth than love."
- **Line 26:** "the latest said the night grew chill,"

SIMILE

The poem's similes give shape to the speaker's emotions. Listen to what happens in stanza 3, for instance:

> Lilian and Lilias smiled in trudging by,
> Their heaped-up basket teased me like a jeer;

Here, the contrast between Lilian and Lilias's friendly "smile[s]" and the basket of apples that seems to "jeer" at the speaker might hint that those smiles aren't so friendly after all. The simile suggests that, well-stocked with apples themselves, Lilian and Lilias might be taunting the speaker with insincere grins here. Of course, those jeering apples might also reflect the speaker's own feelings back at her: perhaps merely seeing the harvest she doesn't have stings her as much as mockery would.

The poem's later similes are subtler ones, taking a less usual form. Rather than making a direct comparison using the words "like" or "as," these similes make comparisons using the word "than":

- When the speaker says that Willie's voice is "more

sweet to [her] than song," for instance, she doesn't just suggest that Willie's voice is pleasant, but that it has a music of its own—one *better* than any earthly tune.
- Similarly, observing that even the "rosiest apples on the earth" are nothing compared to love, the speaker invites readers to imagine love itself as a kind of heavenly fruit.

The poem's similes thus invite readers to see the world the way the speaker does, feeling her regret and sorrow.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Their heaped-up basket teased me like a jeer;"
- **Line 16:** "More sweet to me than song."
- **Lines 17-20:** "was my love less worth / Than apples with their green leaves piled above? / I counted rosiest apples on the earth / Of far less worth than love."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker's agonized rhetorical question evokes her desperation and confusion. In lines 17-18, the speaker cries out:

> Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth
> Than apples with their green leaves piled above?

This question sums up the poem's whole painful dilemma. In giving up her "blossoms" for Willie's sake—that is, sleeping with him before they were married—the speaker also gave up the harvest of "apples" the rest of the town's women enjoy. In other words, she doesn't get to enjoy the social benefits of being a woman who plays by the rules. Willie, meanwhile, can scamper right off to "Gertrude," enjoying her "harvest" of societal approval without attracting any criticism or scorn himself.

The speaker's rhetorical question makes it clear that she didn't make the choices she made for the reasons her judgmental society might think: she's not the kind of person to whom sex means nothing. Rather, her cry suggests that she was sincerely in "love" when she slept with Willie and believed that Willie loved her back.

This rhetorical question—which Willie seems pretty unlikely even to notice—thus helps readers to feel the depth of her pain. Betrayed, she can only helplessly wonder why he would ruin her life like this.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth / Than apples with their green leaves piled above?"

REPETITION

Repetitions give the speaker's voice its mournful tone. Many of the poem's strongest repetitions appear in stanza 5, in which the speaker cries out to the treacherous Willie, knowing he'll never answer her. Take a look at all the different kinds of repetition she uses:

> Ah **Willie, Willie**, was my **love less worth**
> Than **apples** with their green leaves piled above?
> I counted rosiest **apples** on the earth
> Of far **less worth** than **love**.

There's a lot going on here:

- The epizeuxis of "**Willie, Willie**" makes the speaker sound desperate.
- The diacope on "apples" makes it sound as if the speaker is developing an argument—saying, in essence, "My love wasn't worth as much as **apples** to you? What good are **apples** compared to love?"
- Finally, chiasmus on the words "love less worth" means the stanza ends where it started, answering its own question with the same words in reverse.

All in all, the repetitions in this stanza suggest the speaker's circular thoughts. She seems to be obsessively rehashing her predicament in her mind, asking the same questions again and again.

Simpler repetitions elsewhere in the poem reflect the speaker's actions and their consequences:

- The repetition of the word "apple[s]" in the first stanza, for instance, works like a cause-and-effect diagram: pluck all the flowers from an "**apple**-tree" and there'll be no "**apples**" come harvest time!
- And the diacope on "walk" in lines 23-24 shows just how much has changed: the speaker and Willie used to "**walk**" this path together, but will never "**walk**" that way "again."

The poem's last lines, meanwhile, use a final, chilling bit of diacope:

> [...] the latest said the night grew chill,
> And hastened: but **I loitered**; while the dews
> Fell fast **I loitered** still.

All that sad loitering suggests that the speaker feels she might just loiter forever: a heartbroken outcast, she feels she might as well just die of cold, hunger, and sorrow out in the orchard.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “apple”
- **Line 4:** “apples”
- **Line 17:** “Willie, Willie,,” “love less worth”
- **Line 18:** “apples”
- **Line 19:** “apples”
- **Line 20:** “less worth,” “love”
- **Line 23:** “walk”
- **Line 24:** “walk”
- **Line 27:** “I loitered”
- **Line 28:** “I loitered”

ENJAMBMENT

By modulating the poem's pace, enjambments help to evoke the speaker's feelings.

For example, listen to the way enjambments bring the speaker's cry of pain to life:

> Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth
> Than apples with their green leaves piled above?
> I counted rosiest apples on the earth
> Of far less worth than love.

These enjambments speed the pace of the lines right up—and form a sharp contrast with the previous two stanzas, which both bring most of their lines to a neat close with an end-stop. By running sentences swiftly over the line break, the enjambments here make this passage sound like an outburst of misery.

But the most striking enjambments in the poem turn up in the final stanza:

> I let my neighbours pass me, ones and twos
> And groups; the latest said the night grew chill,
> And hastened: but I loitered; while the dews
> Fell fast I loitered still.

These enjambments break sentences in particularly awkward places, spots where you'd never introduce a break in ordinary speech. That gives these closing lines a halting, hiccupy feel—a pace that fits right in with the image of the speaker "loiter[ing]" in the cold orchard as everyone else goes home. The enjambments here might evoke both her tears and her shivers.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “apple-tree / And”
- **Lines 3-4:** “see / I”
- **Lines 5-6:** “grass / As”
- **Lines 7-8:** “pass / So”
- **Lines 15-16:** “cool / More”
- **Lines 17-18:** “worth / Than”
- **Lines 19-20:** “earth / Of”
- **Lines 23-24:** “walk / We”
- **Lines 25-26:** “twos / And”
- **Lines 27-28:** “dews / Fell”

PARALLELISM

Parallelism (and the more specific device anaphora) helps to highlight the poem's contrasts: between the speaker and the other women in the town, and between the speaker's past and her present.

The anaphora in the first stanza gives one clear example of the way the speaker's life once was, and the way it is now:

> I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple-tree
> And wore them all that evening in my hair:
> Then in due season when I went to see
> I found no apples there.

The two similarly-phrased line openings here—"I plucked" and "I found"—draw a clear connection between the speaker's past actions and her present predicament. It's because she plucked those symbolic blossoms (that is, because she had premarital sex, or was physically intimate, with her lover) that she's now lost the fruits of her sexual reputation.

Shortly thereafter, parallelism sets up a comparison between the speaker and the other, more "respectable" young women of the town. Stanzas 3 and 4 both begin with a description of the women who walk past: "Lilian and Lilias smiled in trudging by," and "Plump Gertrude passed me with her basket full." By beginning both of these stanzas in the same way, the speaker makes it clear that she's not like any of these luckier women with their heavy apple baskets.

And in stanza 4, anaphora makes an even more painful point:

> Plump Gertrude passed me with her basket full,
> A stronger hand than hers helped it along;
> A voice talked with her through the shadows cool

The disembodied "hand" and "voice" here suggest that the speaker can hardly bear to face the fact that Willie has abandoned her for "plump Gertrude." She won't even introduce her treacherous lover's name until the next stanza.

The poem's parallelism thus makes it clear how much has changed for the speaker, and how terrible that change feels.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “I plucked”
- **Line 4:** “I found”
- **Line 9:** “Lilian and Lilias smiled in trudging by,”

- **Line 13:** "Plump Gertrude passed me with her basket full,"
- **Line 14:** "A stronger hand"
- **Line 15:** "A voice"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives this poem music and feeling, helping readers to hear the pain in the speaker's voice. When the speaker mourns her lost relationship with Willie, for instance, the alliteration flies thick and fast:

> Ah Willie, Willie, was my love less worth
> Than apples with their green leaves piled above?

The lamenting /l/ sounds and wailing /w/ sounds here make it seem as if the speaker is weeping even as she tells this story.

It makes sense, then, that the same patterns of sound continue into the next stanza:

> So once it was with me you stooped to talk
> Laughing and listening in this very lane;
> To think that by this way we used to walk
> We shall not walk again!

All those hushed /w/ and /l/ sounds might subtly suggest the voice of someone whose nose has swollen from tears.

Back in line 11, meanwhile, when the sisters "Lilian and Lilias" stroll cheerfully by, sibilant alliteration helps to conjure a world the speaker can no longer be part of:

> Sweet-voiced they sang beneath the sunset sky,

All those /s/ sounds don't so much evoke Lilian and Lilias's singing voices as the speaker's distance from their happiness. It's as if the speaker feels like a whispering ghost in comparison to this lively, apple-rich pair.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "plucked pink"
- **Line 3:** "season," "when," "went," "see"
- **Line 7:** "mocked me"
- **Line 9:** "Lilian," "Lilias"
- **Line 11:** "Sweet," "sang," "sunset sky"
- **Line 14:** "hand," "hers," "helped"
- **Line 16:** "sweet," "song"
- **Line 17:** "Willie," "Willie," "was," "love less," "worth"
- **Line 18:** "leaves"
- **Line 20:** "less," "love"
- **Line 21:** "So," "once," "was with," "stooped"
- **Line 22:** "Laughing," "listening," "lane"
- **Line 23:** "way," "walk"
- **Line 24:** "We," "walk"
- **Line 28:** "Fell fast"

ASSONANCE

Assonance works with alliteration to give the poem its sorrowful music.

For instance, listen to the sounds in lines 3-4:

> Then in due season when I went to see
> I found no apples there.

Here, the two long /ee/ sounds of "season" and "see" bookend the shorter /eh/ sounds of "when" and "went." (Notice the /s/ and /w/ alliteration here, too!) That movement back and forth between different kinds of sounds makes this line musical; it's as if the speaker isn't just telling a story, but singing a lament.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "season," "when," "went," "see"
- **Line 5:** "basket," "grass"
- **Line 9:** "Lilian," "Lilias," "smiled," "by"
- **Line 10:** "heaped," "teased," "jeer"
- **Line 11:** "Sweet," "beneath"
- **Line 13:** "passed," "basket"
- **Line 15:** "through," "cool"
- **Line 16:** "sweet," "me"
- **Line 18:** "green leaves"
- **Line 19:** "earth"
- **Line 20:** "worth"
- **Line 24:** "not walk"
- **Line 25:** "twos"
- **Line 26:** "groups"

SIBILANCE

Sibilance helps to give the speaker's voice a hushed, haunted sound.

For example, listen to this passage, in which the speaker describes seeing her beloved Willie with another woman:

> Plump Gertrude passed me with her basket full,
> A stronger hand than hers helped it along;
> A voice talked with her through the shadows cool
> More sweet to me than song.

The mixture of sibilant /s/ and /sh/ sounds here makes it sound as if the speaker can barely raise her voice above a whisper to describe this terrible scene—underlining the fact that the speaker can't immediately bear to say Willie's name, either!

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "season," "see"
- **Line 5:** "basket," "grass"
- **Line 6:** "self-same"
- **Line 7:** "neighbours," "pass"
- **Line 8:** "So"
- **Line 9:** "Lilias smiled"
- **Line 10:** "basket teased"
- **Line 11:** "Sweet," "sang," "sunset sky"
- **Line 13:** "passed," "basket"
- **Line 14:** "stronger"
- **Line 15:** "voice," "shadows"
- **Line 16:** "sweet," "song"
- **Line 17:** "less"
- **Line 18:** "apples," "leaves"
- **Line 19:** "rosiest apples"
- **Line 20:** "less"
- **Line 21:** "once," "stooped"
- **Line 22:** "listening"
- **Line 23:** "used"
- **Line 25:** "neighbours pass"
- **Line 26:** "latest"
- **Line 27:** "hastened"
- **Line 28:** "still"

VOCABULARY

Mine (Line 1) - My.

In due season (Line 3) - At the appropriate time (harvest time, in other words).

The self-same track (Line 6) - The exact same path.

Jeer (Line 10) - A scornful taunt.

Stooped (Line 21) - This word might mean both "bent your head" and "deigned." In other words, Willie might have bent his head down to listen to the speaker talking, or he might have behaved as if he were bestowing his company on the speaker like a special honor.

Hastened (Line 27) - Hurried along.

Loitered (Line 27, Line 28) - Lingered, dawdled, stayed behind.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"An Apple Gathering" is broken into seven quatrains (or four-line stanzas) with an alternating rhyme scheme. This steady, familiar stanza form gives the poem the flavor of an old ballad, a lament over lost love. This speaker seems to be fitting her pain into a timeworn tradition: she's neither the first woman nor the last, the poem's form suggests, to sit alone and heartbroken after a lover's betrayal.

But while folk songs usually use a steady meter, the irregular line lengths here break the poem's stride, reminding readers that the speaker's heartbreak still feels fresh, raw, and all too personal.

METER

"An Apple Gathering" uses its changing meter to evoke the speaker's heartbreak. The first three lines of each stanza are written in steady iambic pentameter: that is, they're built from five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 1:

I plucked | pink blos- | soms from | mine ap- | ple-tree

This familiar rhythm (it's one of the most common in English-language poetry) feels lulling as a steady heartbeat. But at the end of each stanza, the speaker breaks the pattern with a truncated line of iambic trimeter—only *three* iambs, as in line 4:

I found | no ap- | ples there.

That broken-off line mirrors the speaker's shock: stunned by romantic betrayal and a failed apple crop, she, like the meter, is brought up short.

RHYME SCHEME

"An Apple Gathering" uses this alternating rhyme scheme:

ABAB

This singsong pattern often turns up in folk songs and ballads. By using a familiar, musical old rhyme scheme, the speaker makes her heartbreak sound like just one more catastrophe in the long history of romantic disaster: she's neither the first nor the last person to sing of her sorrow.

But those neat rhymes also sit uneasily next to the poem's cut-short meter, reminding readers that, to the speaker, this story *isn't* just a sad old song: it's an all-too-immediate tale of heartbreak.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a heartbroken young woman who seems to have made some mistakes in love. Plucking symbolic apple blossoms too early, she finds herself with no apples later on. In other words, she might have given too much love, too soon to her former boyfriend "Willie," only for him to abandon her and leave her with no "harvest." Perhaps, readers suspect, she slept with him (or was otherwise physically intimate) early on—a huge taboo in the Victorian world this poem was written in.

While the poem's speaker is in some senses a stock

character—the Heartbroken Young Woman—the details she gives about her predicament make this poem feel personal. She knows all the names of the people who go past her, and suffers from their mockery; having given up a secure "harvest," she's become an outcast, and no one seems to have any sympathy for her.

SETTING

"An Apple Gathering" is set in an apple orchard near what seems to be a small country town—a place where all the inhabitants know each other by name. The speaker recognizes all the people who pass her by and knows where they live and what their story is. Sadly for her, they seem to know her whole story, too, and they cruelly smirk at her and her symbolically empty apple basket.

In fact, the poem's whole setting feels pretty symbolic. The "orchard" in which these apples grow seems like the land of love itself: a place that can either provide a bounteous harvest of fruit or a whole lot of withered nothing.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) was one of the most important poets of the Victorian era. A popular writer of strange and fantastical poems, Rossetti contributed to a growing 19th-century vogue for fairy tales and old romances. This poem first appeared in her 1862 collection *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, the title poem of which tells the tale of two sisters' sinister adventures in fairyland.

Rossetti was associated with the Pre-Raphaelites, an artistic movement dedicated to recapturing the beauty of a (much-mythologized and romanticized) Middle Ages; her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a founder of the group known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, was also an accomplished painter and poet.

Many of Rossetti's contemporaries saw her as a successor to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the wildly popular and famous poet of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Like Browning, Rossetti wrote movingly about her inner life (and had a fondness for Italy—Browning because she moved there, Rossetti because she was half-Italian). But Rossetti's poetry often followed a wilder and weirder path than Browning's, exploring visions both dreamy and nightmarish. Perhaps Rossetti's contemporaries *mostly* associated her with Browning because the two were those rarest of Victorian birds: celebrated, successful, widely-read poets who also happened to be women.

Today, Rossetti is often remembered as a proto-feminist figure for her poetry's explorations of women's hopes, sufferings, and desires—and the ways in which male shortsightedness and cruelty can smash women's lives. This poem, with its tale of a young woman ruined by love, is one example among many.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Alongside writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot, Rossetti was part of a 19th-century upswelling of women's voices. Many women writers of the Victorian era struggled to find a place for themselves in a rigidly sexist society that saw women more as men's possessions than as independent people. "George Eliot," for instance, was the masculine pen name of one Mary Ann Evans, a mask that helped open the difficult door to publication in a world that mostly wanted women to keep quiet.

Not only were respectable Victorian women not expected to become writers, but they also weren't expected to do much besides get married and have children. As this poem's plot suggests, 19th-century Englishwomen were expected to be modest, virtuous, and chaste. Premarital sex was considered a major sin, and might easily ruin a woman's life. (Victorian men, on the other hand, could mostly do what they pleased.)

Poems like this one—in which a young woman is mocked and shunned after her lover abandons her for another woman—reflect Rossetti's complex feelings about the gender politics of her time. On the one hand, the poem seems to suggest that its speaker might indeed have made a mistake in picking her "blossoms" too early; on the other, the speaker has clearly been hard done by!

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/3V6esqbNGq8)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Rossetti's life and work at the British Library's website. (https://www.bl.uk/people/christina-rossetti)
- Rossetti and Gender — Read an article exploring Rossetti's reflections on being a woman (and writing as a woman) in the Victorian era. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/christina-rossetti-gender-and-power)
- More of Rossetti's Poetry — Visit the Poetry Foundation to find more poems by Rossetti. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/christina-rossetti)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER CHRISTINA ROSSETTI POEMS

- Cousin Kate
- In an Artist's Studio

- Maude Clare
- No, Thank You, John
- Remember
- Song (When I am dead, my dearest)

HOW TO CITE

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