

Living in Sin



SUMMARY

A young woman "living in sin" with her partner had imagined that their small apartment would take care of itself. Love seemed like an ideal state that transcended mundane problems like dusty furniture. In her fantasy scenario, it would be almost blasphemous to wish for quieter faucets or cleaner windows. She had pictured pears on a plate, a piano with a Persian cover, and a cat chasing a charmingly funny mouse at her partner's urging. She hadn't imagined that, at five a.m., every stair on the staircase would groan under the milk deliveryman's feet. Or that daylight would fall with such harsh clarity on the cheese and three gloomy bottles left over from last night's meal. Or that a beetle would stare back at her from the plates on the kitchen shelf, like an ambassador from an insect colony in the walls. Meanwhile, her partner yawned, noodled around on the keyboard, said it needed tuning, shrugged at his own reflection, scratched his facial hair, and left to buy cigarettes. Feeling taunted by small "demons" of unhappiness, she tidied up the bed, dusted the table with a towel, and allowed a pot of coffee on the stove to boil so long that liquid flowed up and over the sides. As the day ended, she fell in love with her partner again—but not so in love that she wouldn't wake up sometimes at night and feel morning approaching like a grim, persistent milkman.

thought the studio would keep itself" and that there would be "no dust on the furniture of love." In other words, she assumed that her love would be a kind of shield against the humdrum realities of domestic life like battling dust, grime, and vermin. Yet now she finds herself annoyed by things like the sound of the pipes, the creaking stairs, and the sight of leftover food on the counter.

The poem implies that her partner isn't all she dreamed he would be, either. It's not just that he's messy, but that he, too, is abandoning his youthful, romantic ambitions. Instead of working on his music each day, he makes excuses and wanders off to buy cigarettes. While the idea of "living in sin" might suggest thrilling, forbidden romance, the truth is that she spends much of her time tidying up alone. And rather than feeling condemned by God, society, etc., the woman in this "sinful" romance is simply "jeered by the minor demons": nagged by ordinary dissatisfaction, boredom, loneliness, and so on.

The poem thus reveals the mundanities of everyday life to be as present in this relationship as any other, and it might also suggest that the woman's disappointment is all the more painful *because* of her romantic fantasies. She dreads the "morning light," for instance, because it falls "coldly" on the remains of their meager meals from the night before and thus exposes their circumstances as more desperate and deadening than romantic. And though she's no longer "wholly" in love, she feels better toward the "evening" (when the light is less harsh, conceals more, etc.) than in the clear light of day.

She doesn't want to confront the cold reality of her situation, in other words, even as her failure to consider everyday reality (while blinded by the promise of rebellious love) perhaps led her into this situation in the first place. Yet the poem's final [simile](#), comparing daylight to "a relentless milkman [coming] up the stairs," suggests that the harsh light of reality will only *keep* exposing the flaws of this situation. The woman seems trapped in a cycle of disappointment as predictable as the sunrise, or the daily milk delivery.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-26



THEMES



ROMANTIC ILLUSIONS AND DISAPPOINTMENT

"Living in Sin" portrays a young woman's growing disappointment and disillusionment with her romantic relationship. The title implies that she's living with a male partner she isn't married to, a situation once known as "living in sin" and frowned upon in conservative quarters while celebrated in others as rebellious and romantic. The poem doesn't judge the young couple by traditional moral standards, but it does deflate their romantic fantasy by showing them living not so much in sin as in squalor. They may be leading an unconventional, bohemian life, but they're stuck in a lackluster relationship and dingy apartment that's no more exciting for being forbidden. Rebellion against convention, the poem suggests, is not an escape from the hard realities that threaten all romantic illusions.

The poem contrasts the idealized fantasy of "living in sin" with the messy, mediocre reality this young couple is living through. Before moving in with her partner, the young woman "had



DOMESTICITY AND GENDER INEQUALITY

"Living in Sin" highlights the inequalities within a young couple's relationship. The phrase "Living in Sin" implies that, by living together without marrying, this couple is defying their era's social conventions. In practice, though, their relationship looks a lot like many old-fashioned

marriages, in which men's careers come first while women get stuck with domestic tasks. From a woman's point of view, the poem implies, this supposedly subversive relationship is just more of the same old thing: ditching the traditional institution of marriage doesn't necessarily eliminate long-standing inequalities between men and women.

The poem shows a bohemian couple falling into old, imbalanced gender roles: as the man supposedly focuses on his career ambitions, the woman is forced to take on all the domestic chores. Originally, the woman "had thought the studio would keep itself"; in dreaming of this bohemian life, she hadn't given any thought to who would maintain the apartment. Now she's found out the answer: her, not him. The woman handles a variety of household tasks (making the bed, dusting, etc.) while the man seems to do very little at all. The poem implies that she's supporting his ambitions as a musician, but he's not working hard or accomplishing anything. Meanwhile, the poem makes no mention of *her* ambitions, and that's part of the point: whatever dreams or goals she might have brought to this situation have disappeared under housework.

As radical as the couple might wish they were, then, their relationship repeats an ancient and unfair dynamic. The situation seems so wrong that the [ironic](#) title "Living in Sin" even has a grain of truth to it. The poem does imply a judgment on the relationship and the man's behavior—but from a feminist rather than a traditional religious viewpoint. Arguably, the poem shows the man committing the "sin" of sloth (laziness) and hints that, even though the couple hasn't sworn marriage vows, this romance is based on a kind of lie. In the end, the woman seems unhappy in part because she's trapped in an old, restrictive role. For her, abandoning marriage hasn't solved the fundamental problem of gender inequality.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-26



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*She had thought ...
... relieved of grime.*

The opening lines of the poem introduce a nameless young woman—"She"—and describe her former fantasy of a bohemian lifestyle.

As the title indicates, this woman and her partner are "living in sin": an old-fashioned way of saying that they're living and sleeping together without being married. (Doing so is considered sinful in some religious traditions.) When they decided to live this "sin[ful]" bohemian life, the woman imagined that their small "studio" apartment "would keep itself"

In other words, she didn't give any thought to practical concerns like cleaning the apartment; she figured those things would somehow take care of themselves. She was so romantically smitten that she couldn't imagine any "dust" accumulating on "the furniture of love." Basically, she imagined their love nest as a place where mundane problems either wouldn't occur or wouldn't matter.

To the extent that she *did* notice or anticipate difficulties, she saw them as part of the romantic adventure of "living in sin." She was so committed to this adventure that she considered it "Half heresy"—almost blasphemy—to wish that the apartment's faucets were less "vocal" (noisy) and that its windows were less "grim[y]." If their love nest were sparkling clean and in perfect working order, she wouldn't find it nearly as romantic!

Notice how, within the context of "living in sin," the religious word "heresy" has an [ironic](#) or [paradoxical](#) ring to it. Mainstream society may consider this woman's lifestyle sinful, but to her, undertaking it is almost like committing to a faith, and she wants to do it properly.

The poem narrates events in the third person, reporting the woman's thoughts from a seemingly detached perspective. This detachment creates an ironic tone throughout, as reality undermines the woman's fantasy and the reader comes to understand (better than she does) how bleak her situation is.

These opening lines also establish the poem's form: unrhymed [iambic pentameter](#), a.k.a. [blank verse](#). A standard line of iambic pentameter contains 10 syllables that follow an unstressed-stressed rhythm: "da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM." In practice, though, the syllable count and rhythm often vary a bit. Look at how this pattern plays out in lines 1-2:

She had **thought** | the **stu-** | **dio** | would **keep** | **itself**;
no **dust** | upon | the **fur-** | **niture** | of **love**.

Line 2 fits the pattern perfectly, but line 1 contains a small variation: an extra unstressed syllable at the beginning. (This isn't a particularly noticeable variation, since "She had" sounds and reads almost like a single syllable, as in the contraction "She'd.")

LINES 4-7

*A plate of ...
... at his urging.*

Lines 4-7 continue to describe the woman's romantic fantasy of "living in sin." When dreaming of this lifestyle, she created a whole "picturesque" image in her mind:

[...] A plate of pears,
a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat
stalking the picturesque amusing mouse
had risen at his urging.

The syntax here is a bit slippery; "his" probably refers to, and introduces, the woman's romantic partner (who, in the fantasy, has "urg[ed]" the cat to go chase the mouse). But the general idea is that, before this couple actually started living together, the woman imagined that life in their small "studio" would be like a charming painting. There would be a "plate of pairs" (as in many still-life paintings), a "piano" covered with an elegant "Persian shawl," and just a touch of squalor: a "picturesque amusing mouse" chased by a faithful cat. (In other words, there might be a minor vermin problem, but it would be funny and well under control.) The painterly language and the mention of a piano—which the man later noodles around on—might suggest that one or both members of this bohemian couple have musical or artistic aspirations. In other words, they might be starving artists.

Strong /p/ [alliteration](#) ("plate," "pears," "piano," "Persian," "picturesque"), along with the [assonance](#) in "shawl" and "stalking," ties this fantasy together into a unified, pleasing portrait.

LINES 8-11

*Not that at ...
... three sepulchral bottles;*

So far, the poem has described what the young woman expected out of this studio apartment: a little grime, maybe a mouse here and there, but a beautiful experience overall. In lines 8-11, the poem starts describing what she *didn't* expect—and what she actually got:

Not that at five each separate stair would writhe
under the milkman's tramp [...]

In other words, she didn't count on waking every morning at five a.m. to the sound of a milkman stomping up the stairs. The stairs are so decrepit that they seem to "writhe" under his weight, buckling and groaning as if in pain. The [alliteration](#) in "separate stair," as well as the [assonance](#) of "five"/"writhe" and "milkman's tramp," cause the words themselves to land with a heavy, plodding emphasis. (Alliteration also links the "milkman[...]" with the "morning," a connection that will become important in the poem's closing [simile](#).)

Likewise, the woman never expected that, rather than a lovely "plate of pears" (line 4), she would wake up to "the scraps / of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles." The "morning light" falls "coldly" on these grody leftovers, "delineat[ing]" them clearly as if in contrast with the earlier, hazy fantasy. The bottles look somber and "sepulchral," like items at a tomb. The fact that there are *three* of them is also interesting: if these are bottles of alcohol (as opposed to, say, milk), this detail might be a hint that one or both halves of the couple is drinking heavily.

In short, the clear daylight ([symbolizing](#) the light of truth) shows the sad reality of the woman's situation, as opposed to

the romantic illusions she began with.

LINES 12-14

*that on the ...
....*

Lines 12-14 describe another unfortunate reality the young woman didn't expect: a serious vermin problem in the apartment.

In her fantasy version of bohemia, she imagined a cat chasing a single "amusing mouse" around the studio (lines 5-6). There would be a pest problem, sure, but it would be cute and manageable. But once again, the poem [ironically juxtaposes](#) fantasy with reality. In the actual apartment, she finds a beetle "on the kitchen shelf among the saucers"—a bug crawling right on the dishware. Worse, it's clearly an "envoy from some village in the moldings"; that is, it's part of a whole colony living in the walls. (The word "village" here might be a subtle New York City joke; Manhattan's Greenwich Village neighborhood, a.k.a. "the Village," was once synonymous with bohemian life.) In an especially creepy detail, the beetle stares right at her: its "beetle-eyes [...] fix her own." Now that the fantasy's over, reality seems to be staring her in the face!

The beetle infestation may hold some [symbolism](#) as well. Just as the one beetle is a sign of a larger problem hiding behind the walls, the "minor demons" and everyday frustrations described in the poem seem to suggest bigger problems—anger, fear, etc.—lurking below the surface of the couple's relationship. Ultimately, these problems threaten to ruin the relationship just as the infestation threatens to overrun the apartment.

LINES 15-18

*Meanwhile, he, with ...
... out for cigarettes;*

Lines 15-18 describe the woman's male partner, using [parallel](#) clauses and [asyndeton](#) to provide a concise sketch of his habits.

Basically, he doesn't seem to do much! He "yawn[s]," fools around on the "keyboard," then gives up, claiming the piano is "out of tune." He then "shrug[s]" at his reflection, "rub[s]" at his beard, and "[goes] out for cigarettes."

This character sketch is brief but revealing. Though he could simply be "yawn[ing]" because it's morning, and "shrug[ging]" a jacket on, the verbs *yawn* and *shrug* seem to hint that he's bored, apathetic, and/or lazy. His attempt at piano-playing, as well as the fact that this struggling couple has a piano in their small apartment, suggests that he might be an aspiring musician or composer. (The "keyboard" is probably a piano keyboard, because the poem was written before electronic/portable keyboards became widely available. However, the piano isn't necessarily new, full-sized, etc.) If his work involves music, he's not exactly giving it his all: he plays only "a dozen notes" before wandering off. Although he pompously

"declare[s]" that the piano is out of tune, the reader might wonder if he's just making excuses. (A verb like "found it out of tune" would leave no doubt that he's telling the truth.)

His beard-rubbing indicates that he's unshaven, in an era when scruffy facial hair was often associated with bohemian artist-types. It also suggests a thoughtful scratching of the chin, as if he's unsure what to do next. (He doesn't seem to be dressing for work and rushing out the door to a conventional job.)

Finally, it might suggest that his face itches—perhaps a [symbolic](#) reflection of his restless itch to leave the apartment. His cigarette errand might be partly an excuse to avoid helping his partner clean; it also points to an unhealthy habit, which may stand in for other ways in which his lifestyle and/or relationship are unhealthy.

Although the poem offers only a sketch rather than a full portrait, this character comes off as directionless, unambitious, and possibly a bit of a loafer. As the next lines make clear, he definitely isn't pulling his weight around the apartment.

LINES 19-22

*while she, jeered ...
... on the stove.*

Lines 19-22 depict the woman's experience while her partner is out getting cigarettes. As he wanders off, she's stuck tidying up the messy apartment:

[she] pulled back the sheets and made the bed and
found
a towel to dust the table-top,
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.

The "dust" on the table-top is a reality that directly disproves her earlier fantasy: that there would be "no dust upon the furniture of love" (line 2). Again, the [juxtaposition](#) of her romantic illusions with her current reality suggests an unhappy progression from innocence to experience. The [polysyndeton](#) in line 20 ("pulled back the sheets **and** made the bed **and** found") drives home the tedium of her cleaning routine. Without help from her partner, tidying the apartment involves one chore after another (making the bed, *and* dusting, *and*...).

Meanwhile, the coffee pot has [symbolic](#) overtones: she *lets* it boil over, as if letting it express the frustration and anger boiling inside her. Even though she's cleaning her home, she allows this mess to happen—perhaps in a kind of sabotage, or inward rebellion against the domestic arrangement she's outwardly maintaining. After the shorter line 21, line 22 itself "boil[s] over" the formal container of the poem. It's [iambic](#) hexameter (12 syllables) rather than pentameter (10):

and let | the cof- | fee-pot | boil o- | ver on | the stove.

LINES 23-26

*By evening she ...
... up the stairs.*

Lines 23-26 conclude the poem on an ominous note. At first, things seem to be looking up: "By evening," according to the speaker, the woman is "back in love again." Maybe she missed her partner while he was out of the apartment or enjoyed his company when he returned. Either way, "evening"—with its dimmer, more flattering light and [connotations](#) of romance—seems to contrast [symbolically](#) with the clearer, harsher light of morning.

But she's not "wholly" back in love, even during the nighttime (and the speaker doesn't say *they* were in love, so it's unclear how her partner feels). As morning approaches, the romance starts to fade again. The poem ends with an eerie [simile](#):

[...] she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming
like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

That is, morning seems to approach with a heavy, sinister, unstoppable tread, like the actual milkman who makes the staircase groan. The steady march of the [iambic meter](#) evokes the steady approach of daylight, which again symbolizes the harsh light of truth. Like dreams scattering at dawn or steps buckling under a milkman's weight, this young couple's romance seems to be giving way in the face of cold reality.



SYMBOLS



MORNING AND EVENING

Daylight is often [symbolically](#) associated with truth and clarity, while darkness is linked with the opposite: ignorance, falsehood, illusion, etc. The poem plays into this symbolism, using morning (daylight) and evening (darkness) to illustrate the woman's changing attitudes toward (or her changing perceptions about) her situation.

Morning in the poem brings a harsh dose of reality. The stairs of the couple's cheap apartment building "writhe," or buckle and groan, under the milkman's weight, while "morning light" clearly and "coldly" shows the depressing "scraps" of last night's meal. In other words, morning acts as an unpleasant wake-up call, clearly illuminating the reality of this couple's lifestyle. The woman seems to recognize that, rather than living in bohemian glamour, they're living in messy mediocrity.

Lines 23-26 expand on this symbolism. "By evening," the woman is "back in love again"—with her partner and, by extension, their lifestyle. It's as if the dimming light hides the full, messy truth and allows for romantic fantasy. (In general, evening and twilight are often associated with romance.) But even when the light dims, the woman isn't "wholly" in love

anymore, and "throughout the night," she can "feel the daylight coming." Symbolically, even when she immerses herself in fantasy, she can sense the cold reality that will soon shake her out of it. This rude awakening arrives with each sunrise, like the "relentless milkman"; in other words, it's predictable and routine. Not a day goes by when she doesn't feel a dawning sense of dissatisfaction.

By implication, if a simple change in lighting—a small dose of reality—can weaken this fantasy, it must have been pretty fragile in the first place!

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-11:** "Not that at five each separate stair would writhe / under the milkman's tramp; that morning light / so coldly would delineate the scraps / of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;"
- **Lines 23-26:** "By evening she was back in love again, / though not so wholly but throughout the night / she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming / like a relentless milkman up the stairs."



THE MILKMAN

The milkman serves as a [symbol](#) of the humdrum, repetitive reality of everyday life. Like the sunrise, the milkman's arrival is a routine, daily occurrence. The two things are even linked by the poem's closing [simile](#): "she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming / like a relentless milkman up the stairs." His heavy step on the stairs sounds ominous to the woman because, in her unhappy situation, she dreads the coming of each new day. The way the stairs seem to "writhe" under his weight suggests that, psychologically, *she* is writhing in pain.

There's also some subtle [irony](#) in the fact that she fears his arrival, because the milk he brings—like the accompanying daylight—would normally seem nourishing, wholesome, and welcome. That it strikes her as the opposite is another sign of how unfulfilling her life is.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "Not that at five each separate stair would writhe / under the milkman's tramp;"
- **Lines 25-26:** "she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming / like a relentless milkman up the stairs."



MESS AND DECAY

Before moving in with her partner, the woman in the poem imagined that there could be "no dust upon the furniture of love." In other words, she imagined love as a pure, ideal state, free of everyday messes and problems. In reality,

her love nest is full of dust and bugs—which, in turn, [symbolize](#) the decay of the relationship and the kind of mundane problems she thought she was escaping.

At worst, she thought she'd be dealing with leaky faucets, some "grime" on the windows, and a single "amusing mouse" chased by a cat (lines 3-7). That is, she imagined that this relationship and living situation might have *some* flaws, but nothing too serious or hard to manage. Instead, she has to deal with leftover meal "scraps" and "bottles" (lines 10-11), "beetle[s]" that infest the walls and crawl over the dishes (lines 12-14), rumpled "sheets" (line 20), and yes, "dust[y]" furniture (line 21). She pretty much has to deal with these things by herself, because her partner doesn't seem to be helping. She even "lets the coffee-pot boil over" and create a *new* mess (line 22)—a symbol of the anger bubbling up inside her, and perhaps a sign that part of her wants to sabotage rather than maintain this domestic situation.

In other words, the decay and mess in the apartment seem to represent the decay of the couple's "love," or the messy problems and emotions that threaten its survival. Like beetles hiding in the walls or coffee about to boil over, terrible tensions lurk just below the surface of this relationship.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "She had thought the studio would keep itself; / no dust upon the furniture of love. / Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal, / the panes relieved of grime."
- **Lines 5-7:** "a cat / stalking the picturesque amusing mouse / had risen at his urging."
- **Lines 9-14:** "that morning light / so coldly would delineate the scraps / of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles; / that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers / a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own— / envoy from some village in the moldings . . ."
- **Lines 20-22:** "pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found / a towel to dust the table-top, / and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove."



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) reinforces the poem's meaning in subtle but clever ways. It's most noticeable in the early lines of the poem, which describe the woman's fantasy of bohemian life. Listen to the prominent /h/ and /p/ sounds in lines 3-6:

Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,
the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,
a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat
stalking the picturesque amusing mouse [...]

The plosive /p/ sounds, especially, help unify the passage into a pretty, pleasing picture: a verbal representation of the woman's "picturesque" dream.

Alliteration then fades into the background as the poem begins describing the couple's actual, gritty lifestyle. It's as if the language becomes less musical as bare reality sets in. There are a few exceptions: for example, the /s/ sounds in line 8 help emphasize the *separateness* of the two words "separate stair." The /m/ sounds in "milkman's" and "morning" (line 9) draw a subtle connection between these two words—one that becomes important in the poem's closing [simile](#), which compares morning light to "a relentless milkman."

Alliteration pops up once again in the description of the woman doing household chores (lines 20-21):

[...] pulled back the sheets and made the bed and
found
a towel to dust the table-top,

Here, it's as if the repetition of /b/ and /t/ sounds is imposing some order on the language, much as the woman is straightening out the messy apartment.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Half heresy"
- **Line 4:** "panes," "plate," "pears"
- **Line 5:** "piano," "Persian"
- **Line 6:** "picturesque"
- **Line 8:** "separate stair"
- **Line 9:** "milkman's," "morning"
- **Line 20:** "back," "bed"
- **Line 21:** "towel," "table-top"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) (along with [internal rhyme](#)) adds small touches of musicality to the poem's [blank verse](#). It also reinforces the meaning of particular lines. Here are a few examples of the device in action:

- Like [alliteration](#), assonance ("panes"/"plate," "shawl"/"stalking") helps tie together the [imagery](#) in lines 4-6, making the woman's fantasy of bohemian life sound more harmonious and appealing.
- The long /i/ assonance in line 8 ("five"/"writhe") places extra emphasis on the line-ending word "writhe." This makes the "writh[ing]," or buckling and groaning, of the stairs sound all the more unpleasant (and helps suggest how heavy the milkman's stomping is).
- The internal rhyme between "over" and "stove" in line 22 links two accented (stressed) syllables, including the last one in the line. This effect helps

highlight the line's unusual length—the way the language seems to overrun the poem's form just as the coffee "boil[s] over on the stove."

- The internal rhyme between "night" and "daylight" (lines 24-25) strengthens the conceptual link between these two things. They're opposites, but one leads inevitably to the other—just as one half of a rhyme pair sets up the second. (For the woman in the poem, who prefers the night to the day, this inevitability creates a sense of dread.)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "panes," "plate"
- **Line 5:** "shawl"
- **Line 6:** "stalking"
- **Line 8:** "five," "writhe"
- **Line 9:** "milkman's tramp"
- **Line 11:** "cheese," "three"
- **Line 17:** "shrugged"
- **Line 18:** "rubbed"
- **Line 20:** "found"
- **Line 21:** "towel"
- **Line 22:** "over," "stove"
- **Line 24:** "night"
- **Line 25:** "sometimes," "daylight," "coming"

IRONY

[Irony](#) is central to the poem's structure and meaning from the title onward.

The overarching irony of the poem is that this young couple imagined "living in sin" as a romantic, rebellious escape from social norms—including marriage—but now find their actual situation squalid, disappointing, and, in many ways, conventional. In particular, the young woman (whose viewpoint the poem adopts) finds herself stuck in a once-conventional housewife's role, doing domestic drudgery without any help from her male partner. Yet they live in a tiny apartment, not a house, and she isn't his wife.

Meanwhile, her partner doesn't seem to be fulfilling what was traditionally considered a husband's role: providing financial support. In fact, he may be something of a loafer; it's not clear that he has a job, or any ambitions beyond playing a few notes at the piano now and then. If he's a starving artist, he's not working very hard at his art! The piano might not even be "out of tune," as he "declare[s]" in line 17, and his "[going] out for cigarettes" (line 18) may be an excuse to escape chores and leave the apartment.

Instead of the "picturesque" life she'd fantasized about (lines 1-7), the woman has gotten a raw deal; instead of a life of glamorous "sin," she's gotten a life of mess and mediocrity. All this adds up to a deep situational irony. The poem has an

element of [dramatic irony](#), too, in that the reader understands the situation better than the characters currently do. The reader can see that this relationship isn't healthy and that the woman is more dissatisfied than she's willing to admit. (As line 23 dryly says, she sometimes feels "in love again"—at least partly.) In the end, the protagonist seems as trapped by irony as she is by her dingy apartment.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-26

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem as a whole [juxtaposes](#) the young woman's fantasy of "living in sin" with the dismal reality she's currently experiencing. Lines 1-7 ("She had thought [...] his urging:") describe the way she *imagined* bohemian life with her partner would be, while the rest of the poem portrays the way it's actually turned out.

Several aspects of the fantasy and the reality contrast with each other, creating a deep situational irony. Instead of a lovely "plate of pears" (line 4), the apartment contains a sadder, messier tableau: "the scraps / of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles" (line 11). Instead of "a cat / stalking" a single "amusing mouse" (lines 5-6), as if for the couple's entertainment, the apartment has a real vermin problem: a whole "village" of beetles in the walls (lines 13-14). And whether or not the piano has a pricey "Persian shawl" (line 5), it's not getting much use: her partner barely plays it and claims it's "out of tune" (lines 15-18). Basically, her fantasy of bohemian rebellion has turned into a life of mediocrity, petty hassles, and disappointment.

Within that larger juxtaposition, the poem also contrasts *her* experience of this relationship with her partner's. This contrast is clearest in lines 15-22 ("Meanwhile [...] on the stove."), which describe her partner slacking off while she tidies their apartment. Specifically, he plays "a dozen notes upon the keyboard," then wanders off "for cigarettes" without helping her clean. If he's a musician, he's a pretty lazy one; if not, it's unclear what his work is or what he's doing to improve their situation. (His keyboard noodling and cigarette errands are daytime activities.)

Meanwhile, she's stuck making the bed, dusting the table, and brewing coffee. This juxtaposition highlights one of the poem's main points: even outside the institution of marriage, old inequalities continue to plague relationships between men and women. Rebelling against the one doesn't necessarily remedy the other.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-26

PARALLELISM

The poem uses [parallel](#) phrases to create concise, layered descriptions and evoke the monotony of the woman's routine. For example, the parallel phrases in lines 3-4 ("the taps less vocal, / the panes relieved of grime") and 4-6 ("A plate [...] a piano [...] a cat") efficiently sketch the woman's "picturesque" fantasy life.

[Asyndeton](#) (specifically, the omission of "and") makes these descriptions even more concise, as it does in later passages as well. And because these phrases involve the repetition of a word at the beginning of successive clauses (i.e., "A plate [...] a piano [...] a cat"), they're also examples of [anaphora](#).

The longer parallel clauses in lines 8-13 ("Not that at five [...] that morning light [...] that on the kitchen shelf;" etc.) paint a detailed picture of the disappointing studio apartment. Parallelism makes the description easier to follow as it moves from stairs to leftover food to the beetle-infested kitchen, and it again creates a sense of repetitive monotony.

Parallelism also structures the separate descriptions of the man's habits (lines 16-18, "sounded [...] cigarettes;") and the woman's (lines 20-22, "pulled back [...] stove."). These descriptions are themselves set in parallel (he did *this*, *this* and *this* while she did *this* and *this* and *this*). Whereas the description of the man's habits uses asyndeton, making the lists items speed by, the description of the woman's uses [polysyndeton](#), inserting *extra* "and"s ("pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found") to capture the drawn-out tedium of her household drudgery.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 4-6
- Lines 8-13
- Lines 16-18
- Lines 20-22

METAPHOR

The poem uses [metaphor](#) and [figurative language](#) to capture both the fantasy and the reality of "living in sin."

In fantasizing about this bohemian lifestyle, the woman imagined there would be "no dust upon the furniture of love" (line 2). In a literal sense, this means that she didn't think about who would dust the furniture in the couple's shared apartment. Metaphorically, it suggests the idea that love is too pure, lofty, and beautiful to allow for anything as petty and ugly as dust. However unconsciously, the woman imagined that the power of love would somehow keep everyday messes and problems out of their love nest.

The next lines contain several miniature metaphors:

Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,
the panes relieved of grime.

This language suggests that, when living the bohemian life, it would be "heresy" to wish that your apartment were perfectly clean. In other words, "living in sin" is ([ironically](#)) like an act of faith, and once you've committed to it, wishing for a tame version of it would be blasphemous. The metaphorical language that follows idealizes the experience further: leaky faucets aren't annoying, they're just *vocal*; dirty windowpanes don't necessarily need to be *relieved* of their grime. (It's almost as if the grime is a burden they willingly carry.)

But once the poem portrays the reality of the couple's living situation, the metaphors get bleaker. The stairs in this cheap apartment building don't just creak or groan; they "writhe," as if in torment (line 8). The empty "bottles" littering the apartment look "sepulchral": that is, gloomy as a *sepulcher* or tomb (line 11). The beetle the woman spies in the kitchen area isn't just a lone visitor: it's an "envoy," or ambassador, from a whole "village," or colony (line 14). Finally, the woman isn't haunted by God (or Satan) for "living in sin"; she's just figuratively "jeered by the minor demons" (line 19)—in other words, she feels humiliated by everyday boredom and dissatisfaction.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "no dust upon the furniture of love."
- **Lines 3-4:** "Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal, / the panes relieved of grime."
- **Lines 8-9:** "each separate stair would writhe / under the milkman's tramp"
- **Line 11:** "three sepulchral bottles"
- **Line 14:** "envoy from some village in the moldings . . ."
- **Line 19:** "while she, jeered by the minor demons,"

SIMILE

"Living in Sin" contains only a single [simile](#), but it's an important one: in fact, it's the ending of the poem. It ties back to the [imagery](#) in lines 8-11:

Not that at five each separate stair would writhe
under the milkman's tramp; that morning light
so coldly would delineate the scraps
of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles [...]

These images portray the disappointing reality that confronts the woman upon waking. The closing simile (lines 25-26) further suggests that this disappointment is a daily reality—like the morning milk delivery, or sunrise itself:

[...] she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming
like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

Daylight is like the milkman, the poem suggests, because both are punctual, routine, and (in context) ominous. Visually, the pale light is reminiscent of the milkman's crisp uniform, as well as the milk he carries. Much as the milkman's tread seems to cause the stairs to "writhe" in torment, the arrival of daylight torments the woman with the reality she's forced to face. Both sunlight and milk are supposed to be healthy and nourishing, but for her, they're "relentless" reminders of how unfulfilling her life is. She doesn't really fear the light or the milkman: she fears the day itself, and the disappointment it will bring.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-26:** "she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming / like a relentless milkman up the stairs."

IMAGERY

The poem's [imagery](#) paints a vivid, and unpleasant, picture of its [setting](#). This sound, sight, and touch imagery helps

First, there's the "picturesque" fantasy version of the apartment (lines 1-7, "She had [...] his urging"), complete with a "plate of pears," elegant "piano" and "Persian shawl," and "amusing" cat and mouse. In this fantasy, it doesn't seem possible that the "furniture of love" could even accumulate "dust" (line 2). Then comes the reality: "last night's cheese" and "sepulchral bottles" left lying around, a "pair of beetle-eyes" spied in the kitchen (evidence of an infestation), and a bunch of grubby furniture the woman is stuck cleaning.

The only annoying sound in the fantasy version of the apartment is the "vocal" plumbing, which doesn't sound too bad. In reality, there are stairs that "writhe," or groan and buckle, "under the milkman's" heavy step—an unpleasant wake-up call each morning. ([Metaphorically](#), of course, this whole situation has been a rude awakening for the woman.) The poem also mentions the "dozen notes" the man plays on the allegedly "out of tune" piano. This is the only music readers hear in the poem, and it's not exactly romantic!

The phrase "rubbed at his beard" (line 18) even introduces a little tactile (touch) imagery. The man's unshaven face feels itchy: a hint that he's as disheveled as his surroundings, and perhaps a [symbolic](#) reflection of his itch to leave the apartment.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-18
- Lines 20-22
- Lines 25-26

ASYNDETON

The poem contains several examples of [asyndeton](#), typically for concision and/or rhythmic effect.

For example, an "and" would normally appear between the two

[parallel](#) phrases in lines 3-4 (as in: *to wish the taps less vocal and the panes relieved of grime*). Instead, the poet leaves it out: "to wish the taps less vocal, / the panes relieved of grime." The omission makes the phrasing more concise and avoids derailing the [meter](#) with an extra syllable. It also makes the list feel casual and illustrative rather than exhaustive; the woman could list off any number of things that she wishes were different about the apartment and is just using these two examples to make a point.

Similarly, readers would expect an "and" between the phrase that ends in line 11 ("that morning light [...] bottles"). Again, the asyndeton here suggests that these are just two examples among any number of issues with the apartment. Later, the asyndeton of line 18 makes things speedier and more concise, in turn evoking the swiftness of the man's actions and the way he seems to be in a hurry to leave the apartment:

rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;

Interestingly, the poem then uses the opposite device, [polysyndeton](#), in line 20. Polysyndeton *inserts* conjunctions where they *wouldn't* usually go (or don't strictly need to go). Notice the several "and"s here:

[...] pulled back the sheets **and** made the bed **and** found
a towel to dust the table-top,
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.

This could have been phrased as: *pulled back the sheets, made the bed, found a towel to dust the table-top, and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove*. Instead, the additional "and"s make the sentence longer and less broken up by punctuation. This phrasing reflects the long, tedious series of chores the woman is stuck with: the way she has to do one task *and* another *and* another.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "to wish the taps less vocal, / the panes relieved of grime."
- **Lines 5-6:** "a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat / stalking the picturesque amusing mouse"
- **Lines 9-13:** "that morning light / so coldly would delineate the scraps / of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles; / that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers / a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own—"
- **Line 18:** "rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;"

Christian societies, cohabitation and sex before marriage are considered sinful.

Studio (Line 1) - A small, one-room apartment.

Heresy (Line 3) - Belief that departs from religious doctrine; [metaphorically](#), any kind of improper departure from social norms.

Taps (Line 3) - Faucets (in the couple's apartment).

Persian shawl (Line 5) - A woven shawl of Persian origin or with a traditional Persian design, here being used as a piano cover.

Picturesque (Lines 5-6) - Pleasingly scenic or appropriate to a scene. (Here, the woman imagines the mouse as a charming feature of her idealized bohemian lifestyle.)

Milkman (Lines 8-9) - A milk deliveryman. (Daily milk delivery was more common before modern home refrigeration became widespread.)

Tramp (Lines 8-9) - A heavy step or tread.

Writhe (Lines 8-9) - To twist or contort in agony. (Here used somewhat [metaphorically](#): the implication is that the stairs are buckling and groaning *as if* writhing in agony.)

Delineate (Lines 9-10) - Outline; portray or represent clearly.

Sepulchral (Lines 10-11) - Suggestive of the grave (*sepulcher*); funereal or gloomy.

Fix (Line 13) - Transfix; hold steadily (here meaning hold a gaze steadily).

Moldings (Line 14) - Decorative trim around walls, doors, etc.

Envoy (Line 14) - An ambassador, messenger, or other representative sent out on behalf of a nation, community, etc.

Sounded (Line 16) - Caused to make sound. (Could also, [metaphorically](#), mean "tried out or explored.")

Jeered (Line 19) - Taunted; mocked.

The minor demons (Line 19) - Not necessarily a specific [allusion](#), but a [metaphorical](#) reference to small anxieties, problems, etc.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Living in Sin" is a single-stanza poem of 26 lines; its [meter](#) is [blank verse](#) with occasional variations. In other words, it consists almost entirely of unrhymed [iambic pentameter](#) (10-syllable lines following a "da-DUM, da-DUM" rhythm). The fairly regular meter, combined with the lack of [rhyme](#) and [stanza](#) breaks, helps evoke the young couple's regular, unbroken—and, to the woman, stifling—domestic routine.



VOCABULARY

Living in Sin () - The poem's title is an old-fashioned expression for living together as an unmarried couple. In traditional

METER

The poem is written in [iambic pentameter](#), with variations here and there. In other words, its lines typically contain five metrical units (feet) called *iamb*s, each of which consists of an unstressed followed by a **stressed** syllable. The resulting rhythm sounds like this: da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM | da-DUM. The poem is unrhymed, and unrhymed iambic pentameter has a special name: [blank verse](#).

Here's how this meter sounds in the first few lines:

She had **thought** | the **stu-** | **dio** | would **keep** | **itself**;
no **dust** | **upon** | the **fur-** | **niture** | of **love**.
Half her- | **esy**, | to **wish** | the **taps** | less **vocal** [...]

Notice the small variations from the standard pattern. The first foot of line 1 contains two unstressed syllables ("She had") rather than one, but this doesn't throw off the pattern much because the ear tends to run these two syllables together, as in the contraction "She'd." The first foot of line 3 substitutes a [spondee](#) (stressed-stressed) for an iamb: a common substitution that doesn't disrupt the flow much, either. The last foot of line 3 contains an extra unstressed syllable (-cal) at the end, but this is a very common metrical feature (not even technically a variation) known as a feminine ending.

Overall, then, the meter is pretty regular, in keeping with the dull regularity of the couple's domestic routine. It's also notable that iambic pentameter is the most common meter in English-language poetry; in other words, the form of "Living in Sin" is very traditional. By "living in sin," of course, the couple is trying to *reject* tradition, especially the institution of marriage.

[Ironically](#), however, they're still falling into age-old patterns: for example, the woman is doing all the domestic work while the man just putters around. The poem's traditional meter drives home this irony.

At the same time, the poem's occasional metrical variations suggest some instability beneath the surface of the relationship: lines 7, 15, and 21 are shorter than normal, while line 22 is longer. In fact, line 22 has six iambic feet, making it a line of iambic hexameter ("and **let** | the **cof-** | **fee-pot** | **boil o-** | **ver on** | the **stove**"). Here, the variation aligns with the image: the line itself seems to "boil over" its formal container.

RHYME SCHEME

"Living in Sin" is written in [blank verse](#), or unrhymed [iambic pentameter](#).

The absence of [rhyme](#) might suggest a certain lack of spice in the couple's domestic routine. Since rhyme gives poems a song-like quality, the lack of rhyme might also point to the ominous lack of *music* in the couple's apartment. The young man seems to be an aspiring musician or composer, but as lines 15-18 ("Meanwhile [...] cigarettes;") make clear, he isn't working very

hard at his art: he's just noodling around and taking long breaks.



SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is anonymous and narrates events in the third person. The speaker is able to report the woman's thoughts and feelings (as when she's "jeered by the minor demons" or "back in love"), but never gets inside her partner's head in the same fashion. This narration style is called *close third person*, meaning third person that stays close to a particular character's viewpoint. In this poem, it allows for a generally sympathetic portrait of the main character: a woman who's partly "in love," trying to rebel against convention, but unable to escape a pattern that's trapped many women in more traditional relationships.

At the same time, the speaker comes off as wiser and more knowing than both characters, giving the poem an [ironic](#) flavor. For example, when the poem describes the woman's fantasy of a bohemian life, including the "picturesque" mouse (line 6), it's as if the speaker is gently making fun of her romantic illusions. (When the woman has to deal with real vermin in her real apartment, the experience doesn't sound so picturesque.) Similarly, the word "minor" in "jeered by the minor demons" seems like ironic commentary by the speaker. "Living in sin" hasn't landed this woman in a grand moral drama, like a struggle between salvation and damnation; she's just battling the petty, everyday "demons" of frustration and unhappiness.



SETTING

The poem's [setting](#) is a "studio" (line 1), or a small one-room apartment, shared by a young man and woman. As the title indicates, the couple is "Living in Sin" there, meaning that these two are living and sleeping together without being married (an arrangement considered sinful in some religious traditions). The man seems to have some kind of musical aspirations (hence the "keyboard" in line 16), so this is probably a couple living a bohemian or starving artist's life.

Lines 1-7 describe the woman's fantasy of how this apartment would be: somewhat gritty, but in a limited and charming way. In her mind, she decked it out with a "plate of pears" (as in a still-life painting), a "piano" draped with an expensive "Persian shawl," and a cat chasing a single "picturesque" mouse.

Instead, the apartment is dingy and vermin-infested, and the woman seems to be the only one cleaning it. Rather than a plate of pears, she wakes up to the "sepulchral" (gloomy) remnants of the previous night's supper: "scraps" of cheese, empty "bottles." Rather than a funny cat-and-mouse chase, she has to deal with "beetle[s]" creeping out of the walls. As for the piano, her partner plunks a few keys on the "keyboard," then claims it's "out of tune." (In reality, he seems to be making excuses for not

playing.)

While her partner slacks off, the woman is left to "ma[k]e the bed," wipe up "dust," and generally do the chores of a stereotypical housewife in an old-fashioned marriage. (But she doesn't own a house and isn't a wife.) For her, this setting has come to feel like a trap, to the point where she dreads the approaching "daylight" (line 25) that clearly shows how disappointing it is.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Living in Sin" first appeared in *The New Yorker* in January 1954, when Adrienne Rich was 24, and was collected in Rich's second volume of poetry, *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955). *The Diamond Cutters* is something of a transitional book between Rich's debut collection (*A Change of World*, 1951), which was relatively traditional in its style and subject matter, and *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), which was more formally experimental and signaled Rich's turn toward more explicitly feminist themes.

Along with friends such as Audre Lorde and June Jordan, Rich helped lead a generation of female and LGBTQ poets whose work challenged patriarchal, racist, and homophobic power structures in America and beyond. Some early elements of this approach were already present in Rich's first book (including the often-anthologized poem "[Aunt Jennifer's Tigers](#)"), and "Living in Sin," from her second, reflects her deepening exploration of gender, love, and inequality during the 1950s. The poem's formally traditional style contrasts with Rich's later adoption of [free verse](#), which she found less "distancing" and restrictive than [meter](#). However, its use of (mostly) regular [pentameter](#) helps convey the protagonist's regular routine, while its metrical variations suggest an inner frustration that threatens to "boil over" (see line 22).

Rich's commitments to feminism and left-wing politics grew over the course of the 1960s, in parallel with the growing [women's liberation movement](#) and other social movements of the era. Her collections from the late '60s (including *Leaflets*) and early '70s (including *The Will to Change* and *Diving into the Wreck*) are considered landmarks of feminist and LGBTQ literature. *Diving into the Wreck*, whose [title poem](#) explores women's erasure from cultural narratives, shared the National Book Award for Poetry in 1974.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As both a writer and activist, Adrienne Rich was a leading voice in what is now known as [second-wave feminism](#) (or "women's liberation," the term she preferred). After leaving an unhappy marriage and coming out as a lesbian, Rich also became a leader in the modern LGBTQ rights movement.

Second-wave feminism extended from the 1960s through the 1980s and sought to redress a wide range of social injustices. Where first-wave feminism had largely focused on women's suffrage, the second wave centered on issues such as reproductive freedom, workplace opportunity and equality, and legal protections against sexual harassment and domestic violence. Its advocates opposed the belief (widespread in post-World War II America) that a woman's proper place was in the home, keeping house, raising children, and supporting men's ambitions. Betty Friedan's bestseller [The Feminine Mystique](#) (1963), which directly challenged the notion that women should be content with this "housewife-mother" role, is often credited with launching second-wave feminism.

"Living in Sin" was published almost a decade before this movement began. While it's not as politically confrontational as Rich's later work, it does portray a woman's dissatisfaction in the domestic sphere. The couple in the poem may be living outside the traditional (and, historically, patriarchal) institution of marriage, but the woman still finds herself trapped in a subordinate role, just as married women had for generations. Basically, her male partner expects her to be a housewife, even though she has no house and isn't a wife. By portraying the [irony](#) and injustice of this situation, "Living in Sin" looks ahead to the politics of Rich's most famous poetry—and the social changes of the '60s and beyond.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [An Interview with the Poet](#) — Watch a 1973 interview with Adrienne Rich. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AZvCNEX5fw>)
- [The Poet's Life](#) — A biography of Adrienne Rich at the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/adrienne-rich>)
- [Rich and Feminism](#) — An article on "Adrienne Rich's Feminist Awakening" in the late 1960s and early '70s. (<https://newrepublic.com/article/132117/adrienne-richs-feminist-awakening>)
- [Rich on Love and Power](#) — The poet discusses power dynamics in romantic relationships. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogWSt7zBE1k>)
- [More on Rich and Politics](#) — An in-depth exploration of Rich's work as a political poet and essayist. (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/11/30/the-long-awakening-of-adrienne-rich>)
- [The Poet's Obituary](#) — Read Rich's 2012 New York Times obituary. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/29/books/adrienne-rich-feminist-poet-and-author-dies-at-82.html>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ADRIENNE RICH POEMS

- [Amends](#)
- [Aunt Jennifer's Tigers](#)
- [Diving into the Wreck](#)



HOW TO CITE

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