Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae

POEM TEXT

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

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

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

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

SUMMARY

Last night, the thought of you fell like a shadow between my lover's lips and mine, Cynara! I could feel you breathing on my soul between kisses and sips of wine. And once again I was miserably lonely and lovesick. Yes, I was miserable and bent my head down: I've been loyal to you, Cynara—in my own way.

All night, I felt my new lover's heart beating against mine; all night, she cuddled up to me in loving sleep. Her kisses (which I paid for) were certainly delicious—but I was miserably lonely and lovesick again by the time I woke up to a dismal sunrise. I've been loyal to you, Cynara—in my own way.

I've forgotten a lot of my life, Cynara—it has blown away on the wind. I've ecstatically thrown roses around in huge crowds of dancers, trying to forget about your fragile, lily-like beauty. But all the while, I was miserably lonely and lovesick—yes, even during those endless nights of dancing. I've been loyal to you, Cynara—in my own way.

I've called out for wilder music and stronger drinks, but every time the party's over and the candles have burned down, thoughts of you come to me again, Cynara! The night is all yours. And yet again, I'm miserably lonely and lovesick, and starving for your kiss. I've been loyal to you, Cynara—in my own way.

THEMES

OBSESSIVE LOVE

In "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae," a sorrowful speaker laments Cynara, his lost love. No matter how much he parties, no matter how many women he sleeps with, he's still "faithful" to her "in [his] fashion": thoughts of her constantly intrude on him and draw him back into hopeless longing. Love, in this poem, is like a chronic illness. No matter what, the speaker will never be free of his lost Cynara: his obsessive love makes him helplessly "faithful" in spite of all his philandering.

The speaker seems to have done everything he can to distract himself from his lost love. He's living a life of sex and parties, "[flinging] roses" among crowds of dancers and sharing a warm bed with a new lover. This life centers on pleasure and self-indulgence; he cries out for "madder music and for stronger wine," and lingers on sweet kisses from his new lover's "bought red mouth" (a line that suggests he has turned to sex workers for comfort).

But all through this debauched new life, his former lover, Cynara, is never really gone. Her "shadow" falls between the speaker and his new lover, and reappears nightly after the party is over. "The night," the speaker says, addressing Cynara herself, "is thine."

In contrast to the worldly pleasures of the "roses," "kisses," and "wine" in which the speaker drowns his sorrows, Cynara is a ghostly presence. She's a "shadow," a "breath," and "pale, lost lilies": pure, remote, and untouchable. It's not clear whether she died or merely left the speaker. Either way, she's completely out of reach, but also everpresent in the speaker's mind and heart. The actual Cynara is never really there, but her specter is never gone for long. As soon as "the feast is finished and the lamps expire," she possesses the speaker's thoughts again. His perpetual return to the words "I am desolate and sick of an old passion" evokes the circular torment of his love: he can't have

Cynara, but neither can he be free of her.

Because the thought of Cynara is never far from his mind, the speaker insists that he has been faithful to her in spite of all his efforts to distract himself from the pain of her absence: "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion," he repeats. Even though he's busy sleeping with other women and drinking his troubles away, the speaker feels faithful to Cynara because of his incessant thoughts about her. The speaker's obsessive love therefore comes to seem like an illness: he is always "sick of an old passion," and even Cynara's ghostly paleness might be read as a sickly pallor. Love, in this poem, is not just a disease, but an incurable one.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;

The first lines of "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" plunge readers into a luxuriant world of wine, kisses, and hauntings. Right from the start, the poem's tone is both sensuous and sad.

The speaker begins with a direct apostrophe:

> Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
> There fell thy shadow, Cynara! [...]

This Cynara seems to be a lost lover—and one the speaker can't forget, even as he relishes the "kisses and the wine" of what otherwise sounds like a pretty enjoyable evening. Whether she's dead or simply absent, Cynara is a "shadow" that remains out of his reach. But his apostrophe to her suggests that she's also always with him—at least in some way.

The speaker's use of archaic words like "yesternight" and "betwixt"—along with his image of Cynara's "breath" falling on his very "soul"—makes him seem like a romantic fellow. So does the rhythm of his verse. Take a look at the way he uses caesura in these first three lines:

> Last night, || ah, || yesternight, || betwixt her lips and mine
> There fell thy shadow, || Cynara! || thy breath was shed
> Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;

These mid-line pauses slow the poem's rhythm down before it's even had a chance to get into gear, inviting readers to linger over these words. The "ah" emphasizes this effect, since it sounds drawn out like a long sigh between commas.

This stanza also starts a pattern of caesura that will continue throughout the poem: the speaker never once says Cynara's name without following it up with a dramatic exclamation point. The thought of her, it seems, stops him sharply in his tracks.

Although these opening lines (and the entire poem, for that matter) don't provide any identifying information about the speaker, it's clear that the speaker bears a strong resemblance to the poem's author, Ernest Dowson. Dowson was a member of the melancholy but pleasure-loving Decadent movement, and often wrote about (and suffered from) tragic love. Since it's clear that this poem will explore those themes, it seems fair to conflate the speaker with Dowson himself.

LINES 4-6

And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

The visitation of Cynara's "shadow" doesn't seem to have done the speaker much good. She's not a comforting presence, but one that leaves him "desolate"—and not just "desolate" (that is, miserable and lonely), but "sick of an old passion."

This doesn't mean the speaker is tired of his passion for Cynara. Rather, the idea that he's "sick of an old passion" is a metaphor that presents love as a recurrent disease. The speaker had it bad for Cynara—so bad that he can't move on, even now that he seems to have found a new lover. This old sickness comes upon him so strongly that he repeats the word "desolate" twice in two lines, a moment of diacope that insists he's in serious pain.

But who was this Cynara? The poem doesn't say, here or anywhere else. Even her name is a pseudonym—the speaker borrows it from the quotation in the poem's Latin title, "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae." This comes from the ancient Roman poet Horace, and roughly translates to "I am not as I was in the reign of good queen Cynara." The speaker's lost love, then, is someone remote and ideal: not just any old ex-girlfriend, but the queen of his heart. (See the Poetic Devices section on "allusion" for more on how this reference shapes the poem.) At the same time as the speaker longs for his love, he presents her as remote, ideal, and dreamlike.

At last, from the midst of his pain, he calls out to her, using a refrain that will end every stanza of the poem:

> I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

There's a lot going on in this single line. The passionate cry "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara!" sits a little uneasily next to the caveat, "in my fashion." In one sense, the speaker is just being scrupulously accurate here. He certainly hasn't been

faithful to Cynara in the traditional "fashion." After all, he begins the poem in bed with another woman. But Cynara's haunting presence means that he's never really left her, either. He'll always love her best, faithful in his heart if not in his body.

But the tone of this caveat—"in my fashion"—adds just a bit of tongue-in-cheek humor to the poem, too. If the speaker were really beating himself up for his partying, he might say something more along the lines of, "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in spite of my failings!" But "in my fashion" is a pretty dry, jaded way to put it. The alliterative /f/ sound in "faithful" and "fashion" only draws attention to the tonal contrast between those two words.

In spite of this faint cynicism, there's no doubt that the speaker feels his passion deeply. He's not just yearning for Cynara, he's obsessed with her memory—and nothing, it seems, will change that.

LINES 7-12

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

The speaker gives the reader a vivid picture of his post-Cynara life in the second stanza. It seems he's been trying hard to drown his sorrows with the help of a new lover, and here he remembers spending the night in bed with her. But this isn't a particularly romantic scene: his reference to that lover's "bought red mouth" suggests that she's a sex worker and thus paid for her time, not a true love who will chase away the memory of Cynara.

And yet, the speaker's experience with her isn't totally empty. He speaks of lying wrapped up with her in "love and sleep," feeling her "warm heart beat" against his—and her "bought red mouth" gives "sweet" kisses. It isn't necessarily that the speaker can't enjoy the pleasures of the world around him, it's that those pleasures pale in comparison with the purity and intensity of his love for Cynara. He'll always "[awake]" from his sexy nights to "grey" mornings of remembrance.

The poem's sounds underline this point. By now, readers will have noticed that each stanza features two refrains: "[...] I was desolate and sick of an old passion" and "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion." These lines turn up in the same place in every stanza, so that "passion" and "fashion" always rhyme, evoking the speaker's obsessive return to thoughts of lost love.

But that constancy runs up against a lot of uncertainty, too. The poem doesn't use a regular meter, but switches between lines of pentameter and hexameter. The fifth line of every stanza is in pentameter, meaning that it contains five metrical feet. All of the other lines, though, are in hexameter, meaning that they contain *six* metrical feet.

To add to this sense of inconsistency, the rhyme scheme in each of its sestets (or six-line stanzas) runs ABACBC, a pattern that feels somewhat unstable and is rare in English poetry. These unusual choices make the poem sound drawn-out and weary: there's no overt feeling of consistency here keeping time, and no neat, predictable back-and-forth between rhymes. These are the sounds of a life that's fallen into luxurious disorder.

LINES 13-18

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

In spite of his pain, the speaker has certainly tried his best to wring some pleasure out of life. In this stanza, he broadens his view from one night in bed with a lover to a whole series of indulgent, hedonistic parties.

He's been at it for years, it seems, living a wild life with other revelers and dancing the night away. He remembers recklessly throwing roses into a "throng" of dancers—an activity that sounds more like something out of a Bacchanalia than a party game. The epizeuxis and alliteration of "roses, roses riotously" creates an image of countless flowers flying through the air.

The speaker has danced the night away in these clouds of roses without ever managing to change the fact that he is "desolate and sick of an old passion." Instead, he only feels like "the dance was long"; in other words, in the midst of these frenzied parties, he just feels jaded and tired.

Those sensuous, blood-red roses also create a sharp contrast with Cynara's "pale, lost lilies." These lilies—a metaphor for Cynara herself—evoke her fragile, almost holy beauty. Lilies often symbolize purity and virginity. Here, they imply that the speaker's love for Cynara is sacred, too good for this earth—and far superior to the earthly pleasures he seeks out at the parties he attends.

LINES 19-21

I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;

Desperate, the speaker persists, calling for "madder music and for stronger wine" in an effort to distract himself from his pain. But the evening always comes to an end: the "feast is finished and the lamps expire," and he's left alone with his sad thoughts. The strong alliterative /m/ sounds of "madder music" tail off into the hush of /f/ sounds when the "feast is finished": it's as if someone has come to blow out the candles, leaving the speaker

alone in the dark.

And in the dark, Cynara always visits. Here, the speaker repeats himself: "Then falls thy shadow, Cynara!" he cries, echoing his first address to her back in line 2. This circling-back, like the circling of the refrain, suggests just how inescapable that "shadow" is. "[T]he night," the speaker tells Cynara, "is thine"—but then, so is the gray "dawn" of line 11, when the speaker wakes up from a night of sex and drinking. Morning or night, as soon as the party's over, Cynara is there.

Here, again, Cynara is a "shadow," an intangible patch of darkness. A shadow is also only an outline, a suggestion. The reader has likely noticed by now that the speaker's memories of Cynara aren't the most detailed: she's all symbolic lilies and hazy shadows, not actual flesh and blood. Perhaps some part of the speaker's longing isn't just for a real person he's lost, then, but for an *idealized* person he has never actually found in the first place. Or, more likely, the idea of Cynara as a "shadow" makes her seem like a ghost—a memory that will always haunt him.

LINES 22-24

And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

The speaker ends the poem just the way readers might expect, returning once more to the two refrains: "And I am desolate and sick of an old passion" and "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion." This time, however, the speaker uses a new tone in the line that separates the two refrains.

In all the previous stanzas, the line that comes between the two repeated phrases has been about weariness, loneliness, and the hollowness of life. The speaker has "bowed his head" in line 5, "found the dawn was grey" in line 11, and sighed that "the dance was long" in line 17. But here, he finds a new energy. His "old passion" suddenly makes him "hungry for the lips of [his] desire." The remote, ideal Cynara becomes a real woman with actual lips to kiss—lips the speaker will forever hunger for, eternally unsatisfied. The energy of the speaker's partying suddenly inhabits Cynara's "shadow," and his suffering becomes more physical and urgent as a result.

But there's yet another twist. The speaker doesn't say he's hungry for the lips of his *lover*, but for the "lips of [his] desire," as if desire itself were a kissable woman. It's almost as if the speaker is in love with love—it's as if he's clinging to the agony of love because that agony is in itself a strange pleasure. Simply put, he can't get enough of his own sense of longing.

There's no question that this speaker is genuinely suffering and feeling very tormented. But he's also drinking in the pleasure of his own suffering. After all, what feeling is more intense, more pure, or more stereotypically *poetic* than perpetually unsatisfied love? In longing for the perfect Cynara, the speaker paints a portrait of *himself:* heartbroken, jaded, lustful, sensitive, invigorated, and distraught. He is, in other words, the very figure of a Decadent poet.

SYMBOLS

WINE AND ROSES

The luxurious parties of "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" overflow with wine and roses—both symbols of fleeting sensual pleasure.

The author of this poem, Ernest Dowson, famously coined the phrase "the days of wine and roses" in one of his other poems, "Vitae Summa Brevis Spem Nos Vetat Incohare Longam"—a poem that presents these kinds of "days" as delicious but all too short. The same sort of symbolism is at play in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cyanrae," in which the speaker "[flings] roses, roses riotously with the throng" and calls for "stronger wine" but can never find lasting relief from his pain.

The poem also links such pleasures with the thrills of sex, spotlighting the "kisses and the wine" of the speaker's debauched nights and focusing on his new lover's "red mouth." But sex doesn't last, either: bodies are mortal, just like flowers. Roses always lose their petals, bottles are always empty sooner or later, kisses always end—and reveling in sensual delight can't make the speaker forget his lost, eternal love. Although things like wine and roses might *seem* like symbols of satisfaction and happiness, then, they actually serve as reminders that earthly pleasure never lasts.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "the kisses and the wine;"
- **Line 9:** "the kisses of her bought red mouth"
- **Line 14:** "Flung roses, roses riotously"
- **Line 19:** "I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,"

LILIES

When the speaker metaphorically imagines Cynara as "pale, lost lilies," he draws on a symbolic tradition in which lilies represent purity, virginity, and holiness. The lily has carried this symbolic weight for centuries. Beautiful, fragrant, and white (a color the Western world often associates with purity), it's also used as an emblem of the Virgin Mary. Dowson, who converted to Catholicism as a young man, would have had all these associations in mind as he imagined Cynara.

The poem's lilies make Cynara seem almost too good, too pure, or too holy for this world—and certainly too holy for the life of debauchery that the speaker leads. But there's also a hint of tragedy associated with lilies, since they're often used in

funeral wreaths. This connection with death emphasizes the fact that Cynara is no longer in the speaker's life, which is why he mourns for her so deeply. It makes sense, then, that he thinks of lilies when she comes to mind, since lilies represent both her perfection and her absence from the speaker's life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** "thy pale, lost lilies"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The alliteration in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sum regno Cynarae" supports both the poem's beauty and its irony. Perhaps the most noticeable bit of alliteration in the poem is the repeated /f/ sound in the refrain: "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion." Here, alliteration gives the line its balanced, musical sound. It also adds a hint of dry humor, as the speaker claims that he's been faithful to Cynara in his "fashion." He has, in other words, been loyal to her in his own special way—a way, the reader might note, that still seems to involve sleeping with a lot of other women. The alliterative /f/ creates a witty bridge between these contrasting ideas.

Elsewhere in the poem, alliteration intensifies the speaker's imagery. At wild, bohemian parties, he throws "roses, roses riotously," but still can't get Cynara's "pale, lost lilies" out of his head. There's a contrast here not just in the imagery of vibrant red roses against fragile white lilies, but in the rich round /r/ sound against the lilting /l/ sound.

Later, the speaker's call for "madder music" has its own musicality, though this excitement seems to fizzle at the end of the night, when the "feast is finished." The /m/ sound in the words "madder" and "music" is strong and bold, whereas the /f/ sound in "feast" and "finished" is muted and quiet—a contrast that highlights the idea that the speaker's fun can't last forever. Any party he attends will always come to an end, leaving him with his sorrow and his longing for Cynara.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "shadow," "shed"
- **Line 6:** "faithful," "fashion"
- **Line 8:** "love," "lay"
- **Line 12:** "faithful," "fashion"
- **Line 13:** "with," "wind"
- **Line 14:** "roses," "riotously"
- **Line 15:** "put," "pale," "lost," "lilies"
- **Line 18:** "faithful," "fashion"
- **Line 19:** "madder," "music"
- **Line 20:** "feast," "finished"
- **Line 24:** "faithful," "fashion"

ALLUSION

The title alludes to a poem written by the Roman poet Horace. Drawn from Horace's *Odes*, it translates to "I am not as I was in the reign of good Cynara." In the poem, a world-weary speaker begs the love goddess Venus to leave him alone: he's had enough of romance, which he claims to have left behind in his younger days, back when Queen Cynara reigned.

By giving his lost lover a pseudonym taken from Horace's poem, the speaker of this poem plays a couple of tricks. He suggests that his Cynara, too, was a sort of queen of his youth, perhaps a first love—and that he and the world are both older and more tired than they were during her "reign." But he's also drawing on a grand tradition of poems written to idealized lady-loves with elegant classical names. These women often lack any identity of their own: they're just perfect figures for poets to pine for. Sometimes they're even allegorical, representing virtues or aspirations. (See the 17th-century poet Richard Lovelace's To Althea, from Prison for just one famous example: the woman the poem's speaker longs for while unjustly imprisoned has a name that means "truth.")

Allusion thus makes the speaker's lost love feel melancholy, ideal, and profound, a passion that fits into an ancient tradition of longing and woe. But the astute reader might note that there's a little joke hidden here, too. "Cynara" might be the name of a glorious queen in Latin, but in Greek it means "artichoke"!

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "There fell thy shadow, Cynara!"
- **Line 6:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 12:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 13:** "I have forgot much, Cynara!"
- **Line 18:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 21:** "Then falls thy shadow, Cynara!"
- **Line 24:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."

APOSTROPHE

"Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" prominently features apostrophe, as the speaker communicates directly to his lost lover, Cynara. This happens as early as the poem's second line:

> Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
> There fell thy shadow, Cynara!

And while he sometimes drifts off into less direct passages (like when he recalls nights spent with other lovers), he always renews his cries to Cynara in the poem's refrain: "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."

This apostrophe serves some subtle purposes. The reader might at first think that the speaker is making odd choices about what to tell his lost love. Surely she—of all people—doesn't want to hear about the "sweet" kisses of his new lover's "bought red mouth"! But it's exactly this oversharing that underlines the speaker's big point: Cynara isn't there, and she'll never be there again. He's lost her completely.

But she's also never truly going to leave him alone, and apostrophe makes that clear, too. Even though the real Cynara is gone, the memory of her haunts him like a ghost. She's always there, for this speaker, and his apostrophe to her suggests that she's perpetually within shouting distance in his mind.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine / There fell thy shadow, Cynara!"
- **Lines 2-3:** " thy breath was shed / Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;"
- **Line 6:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 12:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Lines 13-15:** "I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind, / Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng, / Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind,"
- **Line 18:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 21:** "Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;"
- **Line 24:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."

CAESURA

"Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" is riddled with caesurae. These frequent mid-line pauses give the poem a swinging, lilting rhythm—and call attention to the speaker's wild cries of pain.

For a poem about miserable, obsessive love, "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" sounds pretty good. The lines flow languidly, like streams of wine, and caesurae make little ripples in those streams. For instance, take a look at the pauses in the third stanza:

> I have forgot much, || Cynara! || gone with the wind,
> Flung roses, || roses riotously with the throng,
> Dancing, || to put thy pale, || lost lilies out of mind,

Combined with the wandering meter, the caesurae in this section help ensure that the poem never builds up too much momentum. Little pauses keep the pace slow and sensuous, inviting the reader to linger over every word. Besides making the poem sound good, this slowness evokes the speaker's emotional state. He's tired of life, even the delectable parts.

The speaker's use of caesura also helps bring out his dry humor. For instance, the final caesura in the poem's refrain makes the speaker sound a bit sheepish: "I have been faithful to thee, || Cynara! || in my fashion." The second caesura in this line makes the phrase "in my fashion" sound like a small afterthought that the speaker reluctantly adds to the end of the line, as if trying to sneak it in without much notice. This highlights the humorous fact that the speaker's version (or "fashion") of faithfulness isn't actually that faithful at all.

The use of caesura also draws attention to the speaker's pain. There's not a single instance of the name "Cynara" here that isn't followed by a dramatic exclamation point—a pretty emphatic caesura! These little mid-line shocks are therefore as startling to the reader's ear as the thought of Cynara is to the speaker's heart.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "night, ah, yesternight, betwixt"
- **Line 2:** "shadow, Cynara! thy"
- **Line 5:** "Yea, I"
- **Line 6:** "thee, Cynara! in"
- **Line 12:** "thee, Cynara! in"
- **Line 13:** "much, Cynara! gone"
- **Line 14:** "roses, roses"
- **Line 15:** "Dancing, to," "pale, lost"
- **Line 17:** "Yea, all the time, because"
- **Line 18:** "thee, Cynara! in "
- **Line 21:** "shadow, Cynara! the"
- **Line 23:** "Yea, hungry"
- **Line 24:** "thee, Cynara! in"

END-STOPPED LINE

Nearly every line in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" is end-stopped. These frequent pauses between lines evoke the speaker's world-weary misery, adding to his tired overall tone.

Since Cynara went away (perhaps dying, perhaps leaving him), the speaker feels like life is a chore. While he struggles to distract himself with wine, women, and dancing, he's always melancholy, haunted by thoughts of his lost love. The slow end-stops highlight this deep weariness. Even "riotous[]" parties can't really distract him for long, and he speaks of dances and desolation using the same measured, swinging pace.

The only lines in the poem that cut against these slow end-stops are the first two, which are both enjambed:

> Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
> There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
> Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;

Here, the lines spill over, running quickly into each other—and suggesting how suddenly thoughts of Cynara can spoil the speaker's fun. The poem's movement from these rapid, liquid enjambments into halting end-stops evokes both the speaker's lightning-quick pain and the drawn-out inescapability of that pain.

The end-stops also make the speaker's language sound segmented and rhythmic. Consider, for example, the way that lines 4 through 6 stack on top of each other as the speaker layers complete and end-stopped phrases:

> And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
> Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
> I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

The fact that all of these lines are end-stopped adds a feeling of consistency to the speaker's language—a feeling of consistency the poem might otherwise lack, since its meter varies significantly. By using so may consecutive end-stopped lines, then, the speaker manages to give the poem a predictable rhythm while still using irregular metrical patterns.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "wine;"
- **Line 4:** "passion,"
- **Line 5:** "head:"
- **Line 6:** "fashion."
- **Line 7:** "beat,"
- **Line 8:** "lay;"
- **Line 9:** "sweet;"
- **Line 10:** "passion,"
- **Line 11:** "grey:"
- **Line 12:** "fashion."
- **Line 13:** "wind,"
- **Line 14:** "throng,"
- **Line 15:** "mind,"
- **Line 16:** "passion,"
- **Line 17:** "long:"
- **Line 18:** "fashion."
- **Line 19:** "wine,"
- **Line 20:** "expire,"
- **Line 21:** "thine;"
- **Line 22:** "passion,"
- **Line 23:** "desire:"
- **Line 24:** "fashion."

METAPHOR

The most prominent metaphor in the poem compares love to a disease. In every stanza, the speaker reminds readers that he is "desolate and sick of an old passion"—which doesn't mean that he's tired of his passion (though perhaps he is), but that his passion is flaring up, like an illness he's had before.

In this metaphor, love isn't like chicken pox—get it once and you're immune. It's more like cold sores, which never really go away, but spring up again at the most inconvenient times. The speaker will never be cured of this persistent "passion."

The speaker also thinks of Cynara as a metaphorical "shadow" or an icy "breath" that falls over his days, suggesting that he experiences her presence as both immaterial and cold. He can't embrace this shadow, but he can feel its ever-present chill.

The speaker also imagines Cynara as a bouquet of "pale, lost lilies": beautiful, ethereal flowers often symbolically associated with purity and virginity. This metaphor puts her in contrast with the riotous "roses" the speaker throws around at parties as he tries to forget her—roses that might echo the "bought red mouth" of the speaker's new lover. The speaker tries to immerse himself in a world of lusty sensuousness, but those "pale, lost lilies" always call him back in the end.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed / Upon my soul"
- **Line 4:** "sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 10:** "sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 15:** "thy pale, lost lilies out of mind"
- **Line 16:** "sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 21:** "Then falls thy shadow, Cynara!"
- **Line 22:** "sick of an old passion"

REFRAIN

A circling refrain provides a huge part of this poem's haunted, passionate, melancholy mood. But it also subtly undercuts that mood with dry wit.

No matter what happens in the speaker's life—parties, sex, drinking, dancing—his heart (and his stanzas) come right back to the same place. The fourth line of every stanza always reminds the reader that the speaker is "desolate and sick of an old passion." And the last line of every stanza is always the same tortured cry: "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."

These haunting repetitions mirror the speaker's emotional predicament. He can't get away from his misery about Cynara any more than the poem can tear itself from those repeated words. The refrain is therefore a representation of the speaker's obsession.

But there's also something tricky going on here. Take another look at the repeating final line:

> "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

There is a caveat at the end of this declaration, as the speaker tacks on "in my fashion." In a way, the speaker is actually being truthful here—his obsessive thoughts about Cynara *do* keep him faithful. Of course, he hasn't been faithful to her in any traditional sense, since the poem implies he's had plenty of other lovers. But by constantly thinking about her, he *has* been faithful to her in his own "fashion."

And there's a certain dry humor to the speaker's tone here. If he were totally swept up in his tortured feelings, perhaps he'd say something like "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my deepest heart," or "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in spite of all my failings!" But "in my fashion" has a cool, precise tone—especially after that passionate exclamation point. It sounds like something he's adding under his breath in an attempt to stay out of trouble.

The fact that the speaker repeats this particular refrain so many times also suggests that he's very eager to convince Cynara (or perhaps himself) that it's actually true—he wants to prove that he has been faithful in his own "fashion." This tiny touch of humorous contradiction in a poem that's otherwise swept up in obsession marks the speaker as a true Decadent, an artist made of equal parts swoony passion and jaded wit.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 6:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 10:** "But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 12:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 16:** "But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 18:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 22:** "And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 24:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."

REPETITION

The poem's structure is built around the speaker's use of repetition. The most obvious example of this is the repetition of the poem's two refrains, which appear in the fourth and sixth lines of each stanza. There are, however, other kinds of repetition, and they call attention to the fact that the speaker is trapped in a whirlpool of emotion, revisiting the same painful thoughts (and the same useless distractions) over and over.

For instance, the speaker uses polyptoton and diacope by repeating various iterations of the word "night":

- Line 1: "Last night, ah, yesternight [...]"
- Line 7: "All night upon mine heart [...]"
- Line 8: "Night-long within mine arms [...]"

These insistent repetitions suggest that the night before the poem begins was itself something of a whirlwind. Caught up in the throes of passion with a new lover, the speaker seems to have had a night that went on and on—only to be interrupted by ghostly thoughts of Cynara. After, all, as the speaker tells Cynara in line 21, "the night is thine," and new lovers will never rid him of her presence.

Similarly, his use of epizeuxis in line 14 suggests how tired he is of trying to distract himself:

> I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
> Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,

That immediate repetition suggests a huge pile-up of roses—one that seems only to have left the speaker world-weary and jaded. No matter how hard he parties, Cynara's "shadow" will always fall over him sooner or later—a point he emphasizes by repeating it at the beginning and end of the poem. Remembering his recent night of passion in the first stanza, he recalls:

> Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
> There fell thy shadow, Cynara!

Then, in the last stanza, he returns to those same words—with a twist:

> But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
> Then falls thy shadow, Cynara!

This modified repetition only stresses what the reader already knows: thoughts of Cynara fill the speaker's days, and will always fill his days. The shadow that "fell" always "falls," and will continue to do so forever.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Last night, ah, yesternight,"
- **Line 2:** "There fell thy shadow, Cynara!"
- **Line 4:** "And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 5:** "Yea, I was desolate"
- **Line 6:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 7:** "All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat,"
- **Line 8:** "Night-long within mine arms"
- **Line 10:** "But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 12:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 14:** "Flung roses, roses riotously"

- **Line 16:** "But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 18:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."
- **Line 21:** "Then falls thy shadow, Cynara!," "the night is thine;"
- **Line 22:** "And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,"
- **Line 24:** "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion."

VOCABULARY

Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae () - This Latin phrase is a quotation from the ancient Roman poet Horace, and means "I am not as I was in the reign of good Cynara." "Cynara" is thus the name of an ancient queen—but it also means "artichoke" in Greek!

Yesternight (Line 1) - Another way of saying "last night"—along the same lines as "yesterday."

Betwixt (Line 1) - Between.

Thy, Thee, Thine (Line 2, Line 6, Line 12, Line 15, Line 18, Line 21, Line 24) - "Thee" is an old-fashioned, poetic way of saying "you." "Thy" means "your" and "thine" means "yours"—and is also used before words that start with a vowel, the same way one would say "an elephant" rather than "a elephant."

Shed (Line 2) - Dropped or fallen.

Desolate (Line 4, Line 5, Line 10, Line 16, Line 22) - Miserable or devastated—with the connotation of isolation or abandonment.

Sick Of (Line 4, Line 10, Line 16, Line 22) - Here, the speaker doesn't mean he's tired of his passion, but that he's caught it again, like a sickness he's had before.

Yea (Line 5, Line 17, Line 23) - Yes.

Bowed (Line 5) - Bent down.

In my fashion (Line 6, Line 12, Line 18, Line 24) - In my own way.

Her Bought Red Mouth (Line 9) - Here, the speaker's use of the word "bought" hints that his current bedfellow is a sex worker.

Flung (Line 14) - Thrown with strength and reckless abandon.

Riotously (Line 14) - Wildly, festively.

Throng (Line 14) - Crowd.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" doesn't use a conventional form like the sonnet or the sestina. Instead, it invents its own winding shape. Having said that, there *is* some regularity to the poem, which consists of 24 lines that are divided into four stanzas. Each of these stanzas creates a six-line sestet, and the fifth line of every stanza is slightly shorter than the rest. This regularity pairs nicely with the speaker's use of repetition, demonstrating the circular and predictable way that memories of Cynara continue to haunt him. The consistency of the form also makes up for the fact that the poem's pace and rhythm changes from line to line.

METER

The meter in "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" is deceptively strange. At first glance, it appears to be iambic hexameter—that is, lines of six feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like in line 1:

> Last night, | ah, yes- | ternight, | betwixt | her lips | and mine

But that steady first line doesn't prepare readers for the strange rhythms that follow. Take a look at how the stresses and metrical feet fall in the rest of the first stanza:

> There fell | thy sha- | dow, Cyna- | ra! thy breath | was shed
> Upon | my soul | between | the kiss- | es and | the wine;
> And I | was des- | olate | and sick | of an old | passion,
> Yea, I | was des- | olate | and bowed | my head:
> I have been | faithful | to thee, | Cynara! | in my | fashion

The speaker loses the iambic rhythm (da-DUM da-DUM) in this section, instead using many kinds of metrical feet. For instance, line 4 ends with an anapest (unstressed-unstressed-stressed) followed by a trochee (stressed-unstressed): "of an old | passion." This creates an unsteady, complicated rhythm.

For our purposes, it's enough simply to recognize that the poem uses very *loose* meter. It doesn't perfectly conform to iambic hexameter, but it's also not in free verse. Despite its irregularities, though, one thing remains the same throughout the entire poem: the fifth line of every stanza is always in pentameter instead of hexameter, meaning that it has five feet instead of six. This adds consistency to a poem that is otherwise very rhythmically diverse. And yet, these lines of pentameter only add a small amount of consistency without fully establishing a true feeling of regularity. Just like Cynara's ghostly visitations, then, the poem's meter is both unpredictable and inevitable.

RHYME SCHEME

"Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" uses a

consistent rhyme scheme. Each stanza looks like this:

ABACBC

The C rhymes here are always the same words: "passion" and "fashion" repeat in every stanza, driving home the speaker's perpetual faith to his agonized "passion"—if only in his own "fashion" (his own idiosyncratic way).

This is a fairly unusual rhyme scheme in English poetry, and its strange shape mirrors the speaker's emotional predicament. The ABA lead-in makes it seem like the rhyme scheme is going to follow a predictable ABAB pattern—a common one in rhyming poetry. But then the C rhyme (which appears in the fourth and sixth lines of each stanza) appears where readers would expect to find the second B rhyme. Sandwiched between C rhymes, that second B is separated from its partner.

There's an obvious connection here to the poem's narrative, in which the speaker and Cynara are at once forever separated and forever connected. But perhaps that intrusive C rhyme also mirrors the way that thoughts of Cynara intrude on the speaker's fun!

A touch of slant rhyme between "wind" and "mind" in lines 13 and 15, which subtly strays from the rhyme scheme without fully leaving it, only intensifies this mood of simultaneous separation and connection.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" is a lovestruck, heartbroken young man who lives a life of hedonistic pleasure—and equally hedonistic sorrow. While the poem doesn't directly state his gender, his similarity to the poem's author, the Decadent poet Ernest Dowson, suggests that he's a man.

This speaker is a bohemian gentleman, with the time and money to enjoy a life of dancing, roses, wine, and sex. The poem's Latin title, a quotation from the Roman poet Horace, hints that he's well-educated: he's had the chance to study the classics.

He's also deep in passionate but hopeless love—and in his own funny way, he seems to enjoy his suffering even more than the pleasures in which he claims he's trying to drown his sorrows. In the midst of wild parties, he lingers over his lost Cynara's lily-like beauty and her ghostly image, even though it makes him feel "desolate." While he protests that he's a faithful, lovesick sufferer, he's also perhaps a bit of a masochist!

There are hints that he's rather enjoying his pain in his romantic refrain: "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion." This is an anguished cry, but also the tiniest bit tongue-in-cheek: after all, the speaker certainly has not been "faithful" to Cynara in any traditional "fashion," what with all his rolling around with new lovers. It seems possible that this speaker is clinging to his idealized lost love for the sheer romantic pleasure of being lovelorn.

This speaker's balance between sensual indulgence and jaded wit makes him the very picture of a Decadent poet—and thus all the more likely to be Dowson's self-portrait. (See the Context section for more on Dowson and the Decadents.)

SETTING

"Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" takes place in a lavish and indulgent world of nighttime parties. These parties are wild and exciting—candles burn, wine flows, dancers frolic, and roses fly "riotously" through the air. But this world also has a chilly underside: it's haunted by the metaphorical ghost of the speaker's former lover, Cynara.

This means that these high-energy parties aren't as carefree as one might think: they're shot through with a chilly darkness as Cynara flits across the speaker's mind like a cold breath or an icy shadow. This suggests that even the most uplifting and indulgent circumstances can't always keep people from dwelling on their own sorrow. No matter how many new lovers the speaker takes or how many glasses of wine he drinks, his memories of Cynara will always put an end to his fun.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ernest Dowson, a 19th-century English writer, lived what one might call a stereotypical poet's life—that is, a short life full of romance and unhappiness. Born in 1867, he died in poverty at 32 after a brief but influential career as a poet of unrequited love. This was a subject he knew all too well: his disastrous love for a girl half his age tormented him all through his last years.

Dowson was a member of the Decadent movement, a poetic school that emerged in Europe at the end of the 19th century. Decadent poetry was marked by its aestheticism—the belief in art for art's sake—and its excessive romanticization of both nostalgia and decay. "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" captures the very essence of Decadence by embodying this outlook, as the speaker laments (and even savors) his own misery while leading a lavish, indulgent life. Many notable writers were Decadents or connected to the Decadents, including William Butler Yeats (who credited Dowson for helping develop his style) and Oscar Wilde.

Dowson was also deeply influenced by the swoony beauty of the earlier Pre-Raphaelite movement, in which poets like Christina Rossetti wrote of love, legend, and tragedy. The lily-like maidens of Pre-Raphaelite paintings most likely influenced Dowson's image of the ethereal Cynara.

Dowson's influence lingers to this day: he coined memorable

phrases like "gone with the wind" and "the days of wine and roses," both of which the reader might recognize as the titles of famous movies.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Victorian England of Dowson's short life was prosperous, worldly, confident, and conservative—but also rapidly changing. Over the course of the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution rushed a formerly rural population into the cities. By 1900, the year that Dowson died in London, that city was crowded and dirty, but also wealthy and gorgeous, with a deep split between the poor and the rich who shared its streets.

The turn of the century also marked a major turning point in world history, since 1900 was the last year of Queen Victoria's reign. Under Victoria, Britain had become an empire with a serious belief in its own moral rightness and its role as teacher and ruler of the world. But toward the end of the Victorian era, many Britons began to feel disillusioned with all this pomp and power, and people felt nostalgic for simpler times. This time period was also defined both by a growing political and artistic cynicism and an interest in romanticized childhood innocence—especially among the wealthy upper classes. Dowson's poem thus belongs to a whole world of jaded longing for a purer (and idealized) golden age.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem and Decadence — Listen to a four-minute "micro-lecture" on the poem by Professor Michael Blackburn, who discusses the way the poem fits into the Decadent movement. (https://youtu.be/POztAkVzCec)
- An Essay About the Poem — Read a short reflection on the poem from The Guardian. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/mar/14/non-sum-qualis-cynarae-dowson)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Dowson's life from the Encyclopedia Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ernest-Dowson)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the great Shakespearean actor Richard Burton read the poem. (https://youtu.be/jNRte7wTaxA?t=19)
- Background on Dawson's Language — Learn some entertaining background on Ernest Dawson's influence on the English language—including the fact that he's the first person on record to have called football "soccer"! (https://interestingliterature.com/2013/11/five-reasons-everyone-should-know-ernest-dowson/)

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