A Song of Faith Forsworn

POEM TEXT

Take back your suit.
It came when I was weary and distraught
With hunger. Could I guess the fruit you brought?
I ate in mere desire of any food,
Nibbled its edge, and nowhere found it good.
Take back your suit.

Take back your love.
It is a bird poach'd from my neighbor's wood:
Its wings are wet with tears, its beak with blood.
'Tis a strange fowl with feathers like a crow:
Death's raven, it may be, for all we know.
Take back your love.

Take back your gifts.
False is the hand that gave them; and the mind
That plann'd them, as a hawk spread in the wind
To poise and snatch the trembling mouse below,
To ruin where it dares—and then to go.
Take back your gifts.

Take back your vows.
Elsewhere you trimm'd and taught these lamps to burn;
You bring them stale and dim to serve my turn.
You lit those candles in another shrine,
Gutter'd and cold you offer them on mine.
Take back your vows.

Take back your words.
What is your love? Leaves on a woodland plain,
Where some are running and where some remain.
What is your faith? Straws on a mountain height,
Dancing like demons on Walpurgis night.
Take back your words.

Take back your lies.
Have them again: they wore a rainbow face,
Hollow with sin and leprous with disgrace:
Their tongue was like a mellow turret bell
To toll hearts burning into wide-lipp'd hell.
Take back your lies.

Take back your kiss.
Shall I be meek, and lend my lips again
To let this adder daub them with his stain?
Shall I turn cheek to answer, when I hate?
You kiss like Judas in the garden gate!
Take back your kiss.

Take back delight,
A paper boat launch'd on a heaving pool
To please a child, and folded by a fool;
The wild elms roar'd: it sail'd—a yard or more.
Out went our ship, but never came to shore.
Take back delight.

Take back your wreath.
Has it done service on a fairer brow?
Fresh, was it folded round her bosom snow?
Her cast-off weed my breast will never wear:
Your word is "love me." My reply, "despair!"
Take back your wreath.

SUMMARY

Take back the courtship you offered me. You offered it when I was tired and distressed by my hunger for love. How could I know what kind of "fruit," or love, you were bringing me? I accepted it only because I was starving for any love at all. I took just a brief taste and found it completely awful. Take back the courtship you offered me.

Take back the love you gave me. It belongs to someone else, like a bird you hunted on a neighbor's land. It's full of suffering, as if its wings and beak were streaked with tears and blood. It's like a peculiar bird with feathers black as a crow's—for all we know, it might represent death, like a raven. Take back the love you gave me.

Take back the gifts you gave me. The person who chose and gave them was as treacherous as a hawk preparing to swoop and snatch a mouse—to attack its prey when it can, then leave. Take back the gifts you gave me.

Take back the vows you swore to me. The romantic fire you've brought me—like a worshiper bringing lamps to a goddess's altar—has some other source, and it's almost burned out by now. You felt that fire for someone else, and now you're just offering me the cold remains of your passion. Take back the

vows you swore to me.

Take back the loving words you said to me. Your love is as temporary as leaves in a country field, where some leaves are blowing away and only some are left behind. Your fidelity is as worthless as bits of tinder in the mountains, swirling like demons in a ritual bonfire lit to ward off evil spirits. Take back the loving words you said to me.

Take back the lies you told me. Keep them: their beauty was a false front. They were sinfully empty and shamefully ugly. The tongue that told them was like a bell solemnly ringing in a tower, announcing the entry of damned souls into the mouth of hell. Take back the lies you told me.

Take back the kiss you gave me. Am I supposed to meekly let you stain my lips again, you snake? Am I supposed to piously "turn the other cheek" to you, when I hate you? Your kiss is like the one that Judas betrayed Jesus with! Take back the kiss you gave me.

Take back the happiness you shared with me. It was fragile as a paper boat made by a fool and placed on a turbulent pond to amuse a child. As the wind roared through the elm trees, the boat sailed only a yard or so. It went out but never came back (it's wrecked). Take back the happiness you shared with me.

Take back the wreath of flowers you gave me. Did you give it to a more beautiful woman first, to wear as a crown? Did she wear it on her pale breast when it was fresh? I'll never wear the weeds she threw away. You keep saying "Love me," and my answer is, "Despair!" Take back the wreath of flowers you gave me.

THEMES

SEDUCTION AND BETRAYAL

"A Song of Faith Forsworn" is a monologue delivered by a woman to an unfaithful lover: a man whose "faith" (fidelity) is "forsworn" (false). Outraged, she breaks up with him, telling him to take back everything he's given her. In a string of harsh comparisons, she links his treachery with sin, sickness, disgrace, and death. Through her powerful moral judgments, the poem illustrates the pain and righteous anger that romantic betrayal can cause, while implying that such betrayal reveals just how false such a romance was in the first place.

At first, the speaker depicts herself as her lover's defenseless victim. She says that she accepted his advances only because she was "distraught / with hunger" for love. (In other words, he took advantage of her loneliness and desperation.) She compares their love to a bird streaked with tears and blood: an image that conveys her own vulnerability and suffering. She also compares him to a "hawk" preying on a "mouse," implying that he's a predatory womanizer rather than the devoted suitor he claimed to be. Overall, she views herself as deceived and abused, and her demands that he "Take back" his false gifts express wounded frustration.

But as the speaker keeps rejecting him, her righteous fury starts to sound like divine wrath. She condemns her lover's cruelty and exposes his hypocrisy. She accuses him of bringing her "candles from another shrine," implying that he's spent his real passions on other women—but also subtly comparing herself to a goddess. From there, her language takes a religious turn; she compares his worthless "faith" to tinder whirling "like demons" in a bonfire and accuses him of "sin" and "disgrace." Her accusations become downright biblical when she compares him to an "adder" (like the serpent in Eden) and "Judas" (whose kiss betrayed Jesus). This last comparison casts her as a martyr, but also as a god!

Her final reproaches illustrate their shared unhappiness, while also suggesting that she's gained the upper hand over the man who's betrayed her. Using an image that's more sad than angry, she compares their "delight" to a doomed paper boat. In other words, he's made them both miserable. But the closing lines imply that he's desperately trying to win her back and getting rejected, because the speaker sees through his lies. The poem ends with one last command, driving home the way commands have shaped the speaker's whole monologue. She's not helpless; she's telling him what to do—and telling him off.

The poem doesn't portray the speaker's rejection of her lover as a triumph; it realistically shows how much this bad romance has cost her. It's also the product of an age when women typically had far less power than men in romantic situations. Still, by the end, the power dynamic seems to have flipped in her favor. Like an angry deity, she condemns her lover to suffer for his lack of "faith."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-54

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Take back your suit.
It came when I was weary and distraught
With hunger. Could I guess the fruit you brought?
I ate in mere desire of any food,
Nibbled its edge, and nowhere found it good.
Take back your suit.

The poem is a dramatic monologue, meaning it's written in the voice of a character who's not the poet. In this case, the speaker is a woman whose male partner—a suitor or husband—has been unfaithful to her. ("A Song of Faith Forsworn" means, roughly, "A Song of Falsely Promised Fidelity.")

The exact nature of their relationship, and his betrayal, is somewhat unclear. Has she learned of his infidelity before marriage or after? Has he been sexually unfaithful, emotionally unfaithful, or both? Whatever the exact situation, there's no evidence in the poem to suggest that she's *wrong* about her partner. The poem is framed as a righteous reproach, in which she tells him to "Take back" everything he gave her, then rejects him for good.

In this first stanza, she specifically commands him to "Take back [his] suit." Here, "suit" means a formal appeal to begin courting a woman—a standard part of the courtship process in the Victorian era, when this poem was written. (Typically, a "suitor" made the appeal to the woman's father.) The speaker explains that she accepted her suitor's courtship only because she was "weary and distraught / With hunger" for the "food" of love. She suggests that, in her desperation, she would have accepted "any food" at all. Extending the metaphor, she protests that she had no way of "guess[ing]" what kind of "fruit" his love represented and that when she so much as "Nibbled" it, she found it awful.

From the start, then, the speaker heaps scorn on a man she considers a villain. She never *really* loved him, she implies; he just tricked her into thinking she did, because he preyed on her when she was weak. She never *completely* fell for him; she just "Nibbled [the] edge" of the love he brought, as if tasting a new "fruit," and even that small taste was disgusting.

- The speaker may be alluding, here, to the Adam and Eve story, in which Eve—tempted by a wicked serpent—eats the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. If so, the implication is that her male partner is as wicked as the serpent and has taken advantage of her innocence. (The phrase "nowhere found it good," in line 5, may imply that his "love" is actually evil!)

Structurally, this first stanza also establishes a pattern that will continue throughout the rest of the poem:

- The opening line is a terse instruction to "Take back [something]," which is then repeated in the final line of this stanza.
- The four middle lines, meanwhile, expand on the instruction, providing context or explanation, before it's repeated.
- The first and sixth lines are set in iambic dimeter (meaning they consist of two iambs, or metrical feet that follow a da-DUM rhythm), while the middle four lines are set in iambic pentameter (which simply means they consist of five iambs).
- Finally, the rhyme scheme of the stanza as a whole is ABBCCA. This symmetrical structure sounds emphatic and authoritative, as the speaker commands, explains, then commands again.

LINES 7-12

Take back your love.
It is a bird poach'd from my neighbor's wood:
Its wings are wet with tears, its beak with blood.
'Tis a strange fowl with feathers like a crow:
Death's raven, it may be, for all we know.
Take back your love.

In the second stanza, the speaker demands that her unfaithful partner "Take back [his] love," then presents a complex metaphor for that love.

"It is a bird poach'd from my neighbor's wood," the speaker says, implying that the love her partner gave her really belongs to someone else. (To "poach" is to hunt animals on someone else's land, such as in a "neighbor's wood.") Not only does that love belong to someone else, but it's in very bad condition; it might be dead on arrival, or might even *foreshadow* death. It's like a bird stained with "tears" and "blood"; it's a "strange fowl"—with "strange" here implying both "bizarre" and "stranger-like, unfamiliar" (as opposed to intimate and familiar). Its feathers are ominous black, "like a crow"; it might even be "Death's raven [...] for all we know." These lines allude to old myths and superstitions that portray ravens—dark scavenger birds—as omens of death and misfortune.

Putting all these clues together, it seems that the speaker believes that her partner loves someone else. The love he's given *her* doesn't feel like love at all: it feels like cruelty and misery. It may even foreshadow, or represent, a kind of death, whether figurative or literal. (Perhaps it's so cruel that it makes her "die inside," or perhaps she fears that it will actually lead to violence, suicide, or something of that kind.)

Notice the strong alliteration running through these lines: "**w**ood"/"**w**ings"/"**w**et"; "**b**eak"/"**b**lood"; "**f**owl"/"**f**eathers." Some assonance crops up, too: "f**ea**thers"/"D**ea**th"; "r**a**ven"/"m**a**y."

Combined with the steady meter and rhyme scheme, these sound effects heighten the musicality of the poet's "Song," as well as the intensity of the speaker's surging emotions.

LINES 13-18

Take back your gifts.
False is the hand that gave them; and the mind
That plann'd them, as a hawk spread in the wind
To poise and snatch the trembling mouse below,
To ruin where it dares—and then to go.
Take back your gifts.

In the third stanza, the speaker tells her unfaithful partner to "Take back [the] gifts" he's given her, because he gave them with deceitful intent.

Building on the bird imagery of the previous stanza, the speaker presents an extended simile (lines 14-17) comparing her partner to a "hawk" and herself to a "mouse." All along, she suggests, the man who planned and gave her romantic gifts was

setting a trap for her. Like a hawk "spread in the wind / To poise and snatch the trembling mouse below," he was waiting for his opportunity to prey on her. Just as the hawk intends "To ruin where it dares—and then to go," he was planning to seduce her, then leave her.

In the Victorian era, when this poem was written, the verb "ruin" could have harsh connotations. It could mean seducing (or sexually assaulting) a woman outside of marriage, thereby "ruining" her perceived respectability and marriage prospects. Again, this word raises questions about the central couple's backstory. Did Mr. Unfaithful seduce the speaker outside of marriage? Deceive her *into* a bad marriage? The references to his "suit," "gifts," "vows," etc. imply that, at the very least, he was courting her (or pretending to be courting her) seriously. Perhaps he informally promised marriage or formally proposed to her. Whether the relationship progressed beyond that is hard to say.

The poet may be building in some ambiguity for artistic reasons—dramatic monologues often allow room for interpreting character, motive, and situation—or else leaving any sexual references carefully implied so as not to shock his Victorian audience. In any case, the speaker feels taken advantage of, and she effectively accuses her partner of being a predator. As in all the other stanzas, she repeats her "Take back ___" command as a refrain in the final line.

LINES 19-24

Take back your vows.
Elsewhere you trimm'd and taught these lamps to burn;
You bring them stale and dim to serve my turn.
You lit those candles in another shrine,
Gutter'd and cold you offer them on mine.
Take back your vows.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker tells her partner, twice, to "Take back [his] vows." Are these marriage vows? Promises made prior to marriage? It's hard to say; the poet leaves the couple's backstory slightly ambiguous. ("Marriage vows" might seem like the obvious interpretation, but this seems to be a breakup poem, and women of the Victorian era couldn't easily escape bad marriages. Divorces were hard to obtain and often socially devastating; even abused wives were expected to suffer "till death do us part.")

Readers do get some further clues about the partner's betrayal. Using a pair of linked metaphors, the speaker compares the partner's love to "lamps" and "candles," burning with the flame of romance. Unfortunately, her partner lit those lamps and candles for someone else; they were "stale and dim," "Gutter'd and cold," by the time he brought them to her. In other words, he spent his real passion on someone else, and it had pretty much burnt out (like a *guttered* candle) by the time he settled for her. Whether or not he's been sexually unfaithful to her, she certainly believes he's been emotionally unfaithful: his true romantic interests lie elsewhere.

The verb "trimm'd" here refers to trimming an old-fashioned lamp (such as an oil lamp)—cutting its wick so that the flame would burn as desired. The accusation that her partner "trimm'd and taught [his] lamps to burn" elsewhere suggests that he's had romantic experiences with at least one other woman. The alliteration between "**t**rimm'd" and "**t**aught," plus the imperfect internal rhyme between "tr**i**mm'd" and "d**i**m," adds emphasis to already stressed syllables, making these angry lines more forceful.

Notice that the "shrine" metaphor casts the speaker as a goddess at whose altar men worship. Although she's accusing her man of worshiping at another woman's altar, so to speak, this is still a more empowering metaphor than the ones in the previous stanzas. Rather than imagining herself as a "trembling mouse," she's imagining herself as a kind of deity. This detail hints that, even though she feels hurt and vulnerable, she does hold *some* power in this situation (even if it's only the power to tell him off). After all, she's been issuing commands in each stanza.

LINES 25-27

Take back your words.
What is your love? Leaves on a woodland plain,
Where some are running and where some remain.

Between the identical lines that bookend it ("Take back your words"), the fifth stanza is divided into two parallel metaphors. Each is set up by a rhetorical question, which the speaker immediately answers herself.

The tone of the questions is contemptuous. "What is your love? [...] What is your faith?" Evidently, "love" and "faith" are among the "words" that Mr. Unfaithful has used with her, and that she's now throwing back in his face. Or, rather, she's *redefining* his love and faith through her metaphors.

She compares his love to "Leaves on a woodland plain, / Where some are running and where some remain." In other words, his love is only partial and fleeting. Like windblown leaves in a field, some of his feelings for her have lingered, but some are already gone. (Notice that "some remain" is one of the poem's few indications that he might have *any* real feelings for her at all!)

The /l/ alliteration and /v/ consonance in "l**o**v**e**"/"L**ea**v**e**s" reinforce the connection between the subject of the metaphor and thing it's being compared to. In line 27, parallel phrasing ("Where some" [...] "where some"), /r/ alliteration ("**r**unning"/"**r**emain"), and /uh/ assonance ("s**o**me"/"r**u**nning"/"s**o**me") add emphasis and emotional force. The way "remain" alliterates with "running," but breaks the /uh/ vowel pattern ("s**o**me [...] r**u**nning [...] s**o**me remain"), helps highlight the contrast the speaker is drawing. His love may be love no matter what, but some of it is present in the relationship, and some is not.

LINES 28-30

What is your faith? Straws on a mountain height,
Dancing like demons on Walpurgis night.
Take back your words.

Lines 28-30 present a second rhetorical question (and answer) in parallel with lines 26-27, before repeating the command that opens the stanza: "Take back your words."

This time, the "word" that the speaker mocks is "faith" (that is, his fidelity to the speaker). Remember, this is a "Song of *Faith* Forsworn"; it's already well established that the speaker's partner has broken his promises. Now the speaker uses a metaphor to illustrate just how worthless his "faith" is:

> What is your faith? Straws on a mountain height,
> Dancing like demons on Walpurgis night.

"Straws" could refer to stalks of grain, bits of wood, or other trivial objects that would seem especially puny compared to a "mountain." "Walpurgis night" is a traditional Christian holiday (the eve of the feast day of Saint Walpurga), which some European cultures celebrate by lighting bonfires to drive off "demons" and other evil spirits. The syntax here could allow for two different readings: either the straws are "Dancing" in the mountain wind, much as demons supposedly swirl around on Walpurgis night; or the straws are themselves "Dancing" (whirling) in the bonfire, as burnt-up kindling.

Either way, the general sense is clear. Coming from Mr. Unfaithful, the word "faith" is as worthless as little bits of straw blowing around. It's no better than his "love," which is like "Leaves" blowing away. It's not sacred at all—it's unholy, even demonic.

LINES 31-36

Take back your lies.
Have them again: they wore a rainbow face,
Hollow with sin and leprous with disgrace:
Their tongue was like a mellow turret bell
To toll hearts burning into wide-lipp'd hell.
Take back your lies.

Having told her partner to take back all his words, the speaker now tells him, more specifically, to take back his "lies." From the title onward, the reader knows that his promises of fidelity were "Forsworn"—perjured, deceitful. This stanza is yet another reminder that he can't be trusted.

Again, in her fury, the speaker piles metaphor on top of metaphor. She says that his lies "wore a rainbow face": in other words, they put up a beautiful but illusory exterior. (Rainbows are both beautiful and intangible, associated with dreams and fairy tales.) Inside, they were rotten and worthless—"Hollow with sin." They were also "leprous with disgrace"—that is, their illusory beauty hid their true moral ugliness. Basically, he told her a bunch of pretty lies that turned out to be pure evil.

But there's more! Next, she compares the tongue that *told* those lies to:

> [...] a mellow turret bell
> To toll hearts burning into wide-lipp'd hell.

In other words, his lying tongue was like a solemn (*mellow*) bell in a tower (*turret*), announcing the entry of damned souls into hell. Combined with the references to his "sin" and "disgrace," this metaphor suggests that *he's* damned. But it also implies that he condemned the *women* he seduced—including the speaker—either to eternal torment (because they sinned with him) or to a more earthly kind of hell (because he made them miserable).

Notice how the internal rhymes in "rainbow"/"Hollow"/"mellow" and "mellow"/"bell" evoke the bell's repeated tolling. The alliteration in "tongue"/"turret"/"toll," "bell"/"burning," and "hearts"/"hell" has the same effect, making the words chime emphatically in the reader's ear—or on the reader's own tongue!

LINES 37-42

Take back your kiss.
Shall I be meek, and lend my lips again
To let this adder daub them with his stain?
Shall I turn cheek to answer, when I hate?
You kiss like Judas in the garden gate!
Take back your kiss.

In the seventh stanza, the speaker commands her partner to "Take back your kiss"—likely meaning *all* the kisses he's given her, and by extension, all the physical affection he's shown her.

Throughout this stanza, the speaker's metaphors are entwined with biblical allusions. In the rhetorical question of lines 38-39, the speaker sarcastically asks whether she should let this "adder" (venomous snake) stain her lips again. This could simply be a way of calling her cheating partner a snake, but it also brings to mind the serpent who tempts Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The stanza also alludes to Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, including "Blessed are the meek" (from the Beatitudes) and the instruction to "Turn the other cheek" toward those who strike you. The speaker asks if she's supposed to be meek and submissive toward a man whom she "hate[s]" and who has hurt her badly. In context, "turn cheek" also evokes the image of turning one's cheek to be *kissed*, so the speaker is again sarcastically asking whether she's supposed to let this man keep making out with her.

In line 41, the speaker accuses her partner of kissing "like Judas in the garden gate." In the Gospels, Judas identifies Jesus to the mob that's come to arrest him by kissing his cheek in the

Garden of Gethsemane. Proverbially, a "Judas kiss" is an act of betrayal. The speaker means, in other words, that her partner's kiss is false-hearted, hypocritical (he really desires someone else), and a kind of betrayal in its own right.

Notice the many sibilant /s/ and /sh/ sounds in this stanza: "kiss," "Shall," "lips," "this," "stain," and so on. These evoke not only the hissing of the deceitful "adder" but also, perhaps, the speaker's own angry hissing or cursing. The words "kiss," "this," "his," and "Judas" even rhyme, perfectly or approximately, with the word "hiss."

LINES 43-48

Take back delight,
A paper boat launch'd on a heaving pool
To please a child, and folded by a fool;
The wild elms roar'd: it sail'd—a yard or more.
Out went our ship, but never came to shore.
Take back delight.

In the next-to-last stanza, the refrain line varies a bit more than usual. Rather than some version of "Take back your ___," it says, "Take back delight." The lack of "your" might subtly imply that, unlike the other things the speaker wants her partner to take back, this "delight" truly belonged to both of them.

However, it never amounted to much. In another extended metaphor, the speaker compares their delight, or happiness, to a "paper boat" that sank in a "heaving pool" (turbulent pond) soon after it was "launch'd." Moreover, this boat of happiness was "folded by a fool" and launched "To please a child." This line burns *both* of them, implying that he was foolish in trying to make their romance work and she was naive in trusting him. Even though "The wild elms roar'd" with wind—perhaps implying that the romance was stormy—the boat only sailed "a yard" or two; that is, their happiness didn't last long. "Out went our ship, but never came to shore" indicates that the boat sank; their happiness ended for good. (It also echoes the expression "My ship's come in," meaning that one has had a stroke of good fortune. This couple certainly didn't!)

Once again, alliteration helps convey the emotions of this stanza. Plosive /p/ and fricative /f/ sounds in lines 44-45 ("paper"/"pool"/"please"; "folded"/"fool") practically pop and hiss with anger, while /sh/ alliteration ("ship"/"shore") bridges the two nouns in line 47. The assonance in "heaving" and "please" (lines 44-45) also adds emphasis, as if mimicking the heaving waters of the pool.

LINES 49-54

Take back your wreath.
Has it done service on a fairer brow?
Fresh, was it folded round her bosom snow?
Her cast-off weed my breast will never wear:
Your word is "love me." My reply, "despair!"
Take back your wreath.

In the final stanza, the speaker tells her partner to take back one last thing: "your wreath." This likely refers to a floral garland given as a token of affection. In Victorian England, where the poem was written, flower arrangements were popular gifts between lovers, as they are today. (Unlike today, these flowers sometimes carried an elaborate symbolism, called the language of flowers.)

It's unclear, however, whether the speaker is literally telling Mr. Unfaithful to take back his flowers or just metaphorically rejecting his affections. Pointedly, she asks if his "wreath" has already "done service on a fairer brow"—whether he's already given his flowers to a more beautiful woman. She wonders if the other woman "folded [the flowers] round her bosom snow" (wore them on her pale chest) when they were "fresh." With wounded pride, she adds that she "will never wear" the other woman's "cast-off weed": accept his flowers secondhand. In other words, all this flower talk might just be a figurative way of suggesting that he loved someone else and that he settled for the speaker only after the other romance ended. (Or, perhaps, that he tried to juggle both romances at once!)

One final plot element emerges in line 53: it seems this cad is still trying to win the speaker back! According to the speaker, he's still pleading, "[L]ove me," but her answer is, "[D]espair!" The balance of power seems to have shifted since the opening stanzas, in which the speaker imagined herself as his "distraught" and "trembling" victim. She's still angry, hurt, and disappointed, but now she has the upper hand. In fact, she's breaking up with him—calling off the courtship, or perhaps the marriage, and telling him to get lost. *He's* the one who's left to "despair," not her.

Once again, alliteration supports the emotion of these lines: all the /f/, /b/, and /w/ words ("fairer"/"Fresh"/"folded"; "bosom"/"breast"; "weed"/"wear"/"word") sound deliciously vehement, as if the speaker is practically spitting with contempt. The last line is, of course, one last repetition of the "Take back" refrain, and it closes this "Song" on a note of disdainful finality.

SYMBOLS

THE ADDER

The poem uses many metaphors, but the speaker's comparison of her partner to an "adder" (lines 38-39) serves as a broader symbol. An adder is a type of venomous snake, and snakes are symbolically associated with craftiness, deceit, and danger. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, they're especially associated with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, which tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The juxtaposition of the "adder" lines with allusions to the

Gospels in lines 40-41 (i.e., to Jesus's instruction to "turn the other cheek" when someone harms you, and to the "Judas kiss" that betrayed Jesus) suggests that the poet has the Bible in mind. By invoking this snake symbolism, the speaker implies that her partner is a wily deceiver who has stolen her innocence and happiness.

Although the first stanza doesn't mention snakes, its "fruit" metaphor might also call back to the Eden story. Here, too, the unfaithful lover is cast as a dangerous tempter, tricking the speaker with false love.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 38-39:** "Shall I be meek, and lend my lips again / To let this adder daub them with his stain?"

THE RAVEN

Ravens are black carrion birds. In many cultures and mythological traditions, they're seen as bad omens or symbols of death. (Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven" famously plays on this symbolism.)

In lines 10-11, the speaker compares the love the speaker has given her to a dark-feathered, wounded bird—which may be "Death's raven [...] for all we know." In other words, his love has brought her great pain and misfortune. By mentioning a raven specifically, the speaker may even be foreshadowing some kind of death, whether the metaphorical kind (a feeling of having "died inside") or the literal (i.e., this betrayal might lead to violence or suicidal despair).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "'Tis a strange fowl with feathers like a crow: / Death's raven, it may be, for all we know."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears in nearly every stanza of the poem. It adds to the musicality of the "Song" while adding emphasis to key moments of the speaker's impassioned monologue.

For example, the bird metaphor in the second stanza is full of alliteration:

> Its wings are wet with tears, its beak with blood.
> 'Tis a strange fowl with feathers like a crow:

The repeated /w/, /b/, and /f/ sounds draw out the speaker's heightened emotion, almost as if she's sputtering with hurt and indignation. Elsewhere, alliteration adds vehemence to especially scornful phrases and passages, such as "Dancing like demons" (line 29), "folded by a fool" (line 45), and "fairer [...] Fresh [...] folded" (lines 50-51).)

The device serves other purposes, too, as in the leaf metaphor of lines 26-27, where it highlights the contrast between the leaves that are "running" and those that "remain." (In other words, between the love that the unfaithful partner no longer feels for the speaker and the love he *does* feel.) And in lines 34-35, heavy alliteration mimics the sound of a "bell":

> Their tongue was like a mellow turret bell
> To toll hearts burning into wide-lipp'd hell.

Thanks to those emphatic /t/, /b/, and /h/ sounds, readers can almost hear that tolling!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "when," "was weary"
- **Line 5:** "Nibbled," "nowhere"
- **Line 9:** "wings," "wet," "beak," "blood"
- **Line 10:** "fowl," "feathers"
- **Line 20:** "trimm'd," "taught"
- **Line 21:** "stale," "serve," "turn"
- **Line 26:** "love," "Leaves"
- **Line 27:** "running," "remain"
- **Line 29:** "Dancing," "demons"
- **Line 34:** "turret," "bell"
- **Line 35:** "To toll," "hearts," "burning," "hell"
- **Line 38:** "lend," "lips"
- **Line 39:** "let"
- **Line 41:** "garden gate"
- **Line 45:** "folded," "fool"
- **Line 47:** "ship," "shore"
- **Line 50:** "fairer"
- **Line 51:** "Fresh," "folded"
- **Line 52:** "my," "will," "wear"

SIBILANCE

At certain key moments, the verse uses prominent /s/, /sh/, and /z/ sounds—a.k.a. sibilance. Look at line 33, for example:

> Hollow with sin and leprous with disgrace:

Notice how all those /s/ sounds seem to hiss with fury and scorn! This effect pops up again in the seventh stanza:

> Take back your kiss.
> Shall I be meek, and lend my lips again
> To let this adder daub them with his stain?
> Shall I turn cheek to answer, when I hate?
> You kiss like Judas in the garden gate!
> Take back your kiss.

This stanza compares the unfaithful lover to an "adder," or venomous snake, alluding to the treacherous serpent in the Garden of Eden (as well as Judas, another treacherous biblical character). As if to drive home the comparison, the verse bristles with hissing, sibilant sounds. The repeated word "kiss" might even call to mind the rhyming word "hiss"!

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 32:** "face"
- **Line 33:** "sin," "leprous," "disgrace"
- **Line 37:** "kiss"
- **Line 38:** "Shall," "lips"
- **Line 39:** "this," "stain"
- **Line 40:** "Shall," "answer"
- **Line 41:** "kiss," "Judas"
- **Line 42:** "kiss"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is a less prominent effect in the poem than alliteration. Still, at a few key moments, assonance (and/or internal rhyme) highlights subtle relationships between words, reinforces meaning through sound, or simply adds musicality to this "Song."

Let's look at a few examples. In line 27, repeated /uh/ sounds subtly reinforce the contrast the speaker is drawing:

> Where some are running and where some remain.

The word "remain" sounds more emphatic, and contrasts more sharply with "running," because it breaks from the pattern of stressed /uh/ vowels. (Until "remain," all the stressed syllables in this line contain the /uh/ vowel, except for "and," which is barely stressed.) In this line, the speaker is contrasting the feelings her partner *no longer has* for her with the feelings he *still* has. That strongly stressed "remain" implies that he does still have some love for her, even if she's not his only love interest.

Elsewhere, shared vowel sounds reinforce meaning more directly, through an effect almost like onomatopoeia. In line 34, the internal rhyme between "mellow" and "bell" evokes the bell's repeated tolling. (Similarly, "mellow" echoes "rainbow" and "Hollow" in lines 32-33.) In line 41, the faint internal rhyme between "kiss" and "Judas" creates a hissing sound—appropriately enough, since the speaker has been comparing her partner to a snake. In lines 44-45, the shared vowel in "heaving" and "please" adds further emphasis to these stressed syllables, evoking the heaving waves of the "pool."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "fruit you"
- **Line 10:** "strange," "feathers"
- **Line 11:** "Death's," "raven," "may"
- **Line 20:** "trimm'd"
- **Line 21:** "bring," "dim"
- **Line 27:** "some," "running," "some"
- **Line 28:** "height"
- **Line 29:** "like," "night"
- **Line 32:** "rainbow face"
- **Line 34:** "mellow," "bell"
- **Line 38:** "be meek," "lend"
- **Line 39:** "let"
- **Line 44:** "heaving"
- **Line 45:** "please"
- **Line 46:** "roar'd," "more"
- **Line 47:** "shore"
- **Line 52:** "breast," "never"
- **Line 53:** "My reply"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is a major structural feature of this poem. Most notably, the first (and last) line of every stanza begins with some variation on the phrase "Take back ___." (In all but the eighth stanza, the phrase is "Take back your ___.") Notice that anaphora overlaps in this case with the device called refrain.

Other, less obvious examples of anaphora occur throughout the poem. For example, both lines 16 and 17 begin with the word "To," both lines 21 and 22 begin with "You," and so on.

These relentless repetitions give the poem a logical, easy-to-follow structure, while illustrating the vehemence of the speaker's anger. The repeated "Take back" phrases are commands, but the speaker repeats questions in this way, too. (Notice the "What is your" questions in lines 26-29 and the "Shall I" questions in lines 38-40.) Overall, then, the anaphora creates a piling-on effect: the speaker layers one angry instruction or sarcastic question on top of another, giving her partner no chance to respond.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Take back your"
- **Line 6:** "Take back your"
- **Line 7:** "Take back your"
- **Line 8:** "It is a"
- **Line 9:** "Its"
- **Line 10:** "'Tis a"
- **Line 12:** "Take back your"
- **Line 13:** "Take back your"
- **Line 16:** "To"
- **Line 17:** "To"
- **Line 18:** "Take back your"
- **Line 19:** "Take back your"

- **Line 21:** "You"
- **Line 22:** "You"
- **Line 24:** "Take back your"
- **Line 25:** "Take back your"
- **Line 26:** "What is your"
- **Line 28:** "What is your"
- **Line 30:** "Take back your"
- **Line 31:** "Take back your"
- **Line 36:** "Take back your"
- **Line 37:** "Take back your"
- **Line 38:** "Shall I"
- **Line 40:** "Shall I"
- **Line 42:** "Take back your"
- **Line 43:** "Take back"
- **Line 48:** "Take back"
- **Line 49:** "Take back your"
- **Line 54:** "Take back your"

METAPHOR

The poem is full of figurative language; nearly every stanza is built on metaphors and similes. The speaker constantly reaches for dramatic comparisons as a way of voicing her fury and indignation.

Often the speaker's metaphors stretch over the course of a stanza (sandwiched between the two refrain lines). Such extended metaphors can be found in the first, second, and eighth stanzas:

- In the first stanza, for example, the speaker compares her partner's romantic overtures (his "suit") to an awful piece of fruit that she ate because she was desperate for the "food" of love.
- In the second stanza, she compares the love he gave her to a dark, battered, tear-streaked bird: an omen of suffering or even death.
- And in the eighth stanza, she compares their "delight" to a paper boat that sank almost immediately.

In each of these examples, vivid verbs (e.g., "Nibbled" in line 5 and "poach'd" in line 8) and adjectives (e.g., "heaving," line 44) add layers of meaning to the metaphor, presenting a complex picture of the speaker's emotions and experience.

Even the images in the final stanza *could* be metaphorical. Here, the speaker tells her partner to take back the floral "wreath" he gave her, pointedly asking him whether he gave it to a more beautiful woman first. But this might just be a figurative way of saying that his heart isn't in their relationship—it's unclear whether he actually recycled a courtship gift!

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-5:** "It came when I was weary and distraught / With hunger. Could I guess the fruit you brought? / I ate in mere desire of any food, / Nibbled its edge, and nowhere found it good."
- **Lines 9-11:** "Its wings are wet with tears, its beak with blood. / 'Tis a strange fowl with feathers like a crow: / Death's raven, it may be, for all we know."
- **Lines 20-23:** "Elsewhere you trimm'd and taught these lamps to burn; / You bring them stale and dim to serve my turn. / You lit those candles in another shrine, / Gutter'd and cold you offer them on mine."
- **Lines 26-29:** "What is your love? Leaves on a woodland plain, / Where some are running and where some remain. / What is your faith? Straws on a mountain height, / Dancing like demons on Walpurgis night."
- **Lines 32-33:** "they wore a rainbow face, / Hollow with sin and leprous with disgrace:"
- **Lines 38-39:** "lend my lips again / To let this adder daub them with his stain?"
- **Lines 44-47:** "A paper boat launch'd on a heaving pool / To please a child, and folded by a fool; / The wild elms roar'd: it sail'd—a yard or more. / Out went our ship, but never came to shore."
- **Lines 50-52:** "Has it done service on a fairer brow? / Fresh, was it folded round her bosom snow? / Her cast-off weed my breast will never wear:"

SIMILE

The poem makes consistent use of figurative language, including similes as well as metaphors.

Line 10, for example, embeds a simile *within* an extended metaphor. The stanza compares the unfaithful partner's "love" to a poached, tear-stained, bleeding bird—"a strange fowl with feathers like a crow." In other words, its feathers are as black as a crow's. Partly because of their dark feathers and partly because they're carrion birds, crows and ravens are considered bad luck in some folklore traditions; in fact, as line 11 suggests, they're associated with death. Putting all this together, then, the speaker means that the "love" her partner has given her is more like misery and cruelty; it's strange, sinister, and possibly even deadly.

Another bird simile appear in the next stanza, as the speaker compares her partner to a "hawk" preying on a "trembling mouse" (herself). Again, the point is that her partner is predatory and deceitful ("False"). He planned only to "ruin" her, then "go"—in other words, love her and leave her as quickly as a hawk eats and flies off. (In Victorian times, "ruin" could imply seduction of a woman outside of marriage.)

Religion-themed similes crop up later in the poem. In lines 34-35, the speaker compares her partner's lying "tongue" to a bell announcing the entry of damned souls into "hell." (This implies that the man himself is damned—and possibly the

women he's seduced, too.) Notice how this simile makes sense on several levels: the *tongue* inside a mouth is like the *clapper* inside a bell; both can be loud, make announcements, and so on.

Line 41 delivers a last, punchy simile, which is also a biblical allusion: "You kiss like Judas in the garden gate!" In other words, the partner's kiss is as false as the kiss with which Judas betrayed Jesus to the mob, ensuring Jesus's death. Once again, the point is that the male partner's love is deceitful and dangerous.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "'Tis a strange fowl with feathers like a crow:"
- **Lines 14-17:** "and the mind / That plann'd them, as a hawk spread in the wind / To poise and snatch the trembling mouse below, / To ruin where it dares—and then to go."
- **Lines 34-35:** "Their tongue was like a mellow turret bell / To toll hearts burning into wide-lipp'd hell."
- **Line 41:** "You kiss like Judas in the garden gate!"

PARALLELISM

The poem is built on repetition and parallelism, most notably the repeated phrases at the beginning and end of each stanza. Since all of these are variations on the same phrase ("Take back ____"), they serve as the kind of refrain often found in ballads and songs. (This is, after all, "A *Song* of Faith Forsworn"!)

The poem also contains other forms of repetition, including the anaphora discussed elsewhere in this guide. Many of its phrases also follow the same grammatical structure, creating insistent parallelism throughout the poem:

- "wings [...] with tears"; "beak with blood" (line 9)
- "the hand that gave them"; "the mind / That plann'd them" (lines 14-15)
- "Leaves on a woodland plain"; "Straws on a mountain height" (lines 26, 28)
- "Where some are running"; "where some remain" (line 27)
- "Hollow with sin"; "leprous with disgrace" (line 33)

The overall effect of all this parallelism and repetition says something about character and tone. The speaker of this monologue piles up insult after insult, accusation after accusation—but does so in a logical, methodical way. Readers get the sense that she knew exactly what she wanted to say before she started speaking! It's as if she's systematically undoing the relationship—going over each of her partner's sins, point by point, as she tells him off.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Take back your suit."
- **Line 6:** "Take back your suit."
- **Line 7:** "Take back your love."
- **Line 8:** "It is a bird"
- **Line 9:** "Its wings are wet with tears, its beak with blood."
- **Line 10:** "'Tis a strange fowl"
- **Line 13:** "Take back your gifts."
- **Line 14:** "the hand that gave them"
- **Lines 14-15:** "the mind / That plann'd them"
- **Line 16:** "To"
- **Line 17:** "To"
- **Lines 18-19:** "Take back your gifts. / Take back your vows."
- **Line 21:** "You"
- **Line 22:** "You"
- **Lines 24-25:** "Take back your vows. / Take back your words."
- **Line 26:** "What is your love?," "Leaves on a woodland plain,"
- **Line 27:** "Where some are running and where some remain."
- **Line 28:** "What is your faith?," "Straws on a mountain height,"
- **Lines 30-31:** "Take back your words. / Take back your lies."
- **Lines 36-37:** "Take back your lies. / Take back your kiss."
- **Line 38:** "Shall I be meek"
- **Line 40:** "Shall I turn cheek"
- **Lines 42-43:** "Take back your kiss. / Take back delight,"
- **Lines 48-49:** "Take back delight. / Take back your wreath."
- **Line 54:** "Take back your wreath."

ASYNDETON

Line 9 uses asyndeton, omitting coordinating conjunctions such as "and" for the sake of concision:

> Its wings are wet with tears, its beak with blood.

Notice how this sounds more concise and powerful than "Its wings are wet with tears and its beak with blood." (And *much* more concise than "Its wings are wet with tears, and its beak was wet with blood.") Condensing the syntax adds urgency to a line that expresses the speaker's disgust and horror.

Similar compression occurs in line 53, where the speaker rejects her unfaithful lover once and for all:

> Your word is "love me." My reply, "despair!"

This is a bit pithier than "Your word is 'love me,' and my reply is, 'despair!'"—and a sharp, pithy remark is exactly what the speaker's going for.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Its wings are wet with tears, its beak with blood."
- **Line 46:** "The wild elms roar'd: it sail'd—a yard or more."
- **Line 53:** "Your word is "love me." My reply, "despair!""

ALLUSION

The poem includes a number of allusions to literature, religion, and folklore.

The "fruit" in the first stanza, for example, probably alludes to the forbidden fruit that Eve eats in the Bible. This would place the speaker in the role of Eve and her partner in the role of serpent or tempter, who persuades Eve to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. (Later, the speaker explicitly compares her partner to an "adder"—a venomous snake.)

The general sense of lines 2-5 is that the speaker was hungry for any kind of love at all, and the partner took advantage of her desperation by giving her the terrible "food" of his love. (The speaker "nowhere found it good"—perhaps implying that she found it evil!) This first allusion, then, establishes the basic moral structure of the poem: the speaker (the seduced) may have given in to weakness, but her partner (the seducer) was downright wicked to prey on her weakness.

The second stanza mentions "Death's raven," which could allude to any of a number of myths and legends. Because ravens (and crows, mentioned in the previous line) are carrion birds with gloomy black feathers, some folklore associates them with bad luck and death. A famous literary work that plays on this myth is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (1845), which was published several decades before "A Song of Faith Forsworn" and likely would have been familiar to the poet.

Lines 28-29 allude to "Walpurgis night," celebrated in some European cultures on April 30, the eve of the feast day of Saint Walpurga. The traditional celebration features a ritual bonfire lit to ward off evil spirits, such as witches and the "demons" mentioned here. And later, lines 34-35 contain a generalized allusion to the Christian concept of hell: a place where souls (here, "hearts") are condemned to burn for eternity as punishment for their sins.

Finally, lines 38-41 contain more specific biblical allusions, combining elements from the Book of Genesis and the Gospels:

- Again, the speaker appears to imagine herself as Eve tempted by a serpent (here, an "adder"), whose evil "kiss" she refuses to accept anymore.
- At the same time, she alludes to Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, particularly the line "Blessed are the meek" and the instruction to "Turn the other cheek" when someone strikes you (i.e., remain peaceful rather than striking back). With bitter sarcasm, she asks if she's supposed to remain meek and peaceful when her partner has wronged her so badly.
- She then compares herself to Jesus and her partner to Judas, who betrayed Jesus by kissing him on the cheek in the Garden of Gethsemane, thereby identifying him to the mob who had come to arrest him. According to the speaker, her partner's kiss is just as deceitful!

As in the first stanza, the gist of these allusions is clear: the male partner, who is as wicked as the Bible's worst villains, has betrayed the virtuous speaker.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-5:** "It came when I was weary and distraught / With hunger. Could I guess the fruit you brought? / I ate in mere desire of any food, / Nibbled its edge, and nowhere found it good."
- **Lines 10-11:** "'Tis a strange fowl with feathers like a crow: / Death's raven, it may be, for all we know."
- **Line 29:** "Dancing like demons on Walpurgis night."
- **Lines 34-35:** "Their tongue was like a mellow turret bell / To toll hearts burning into wide-lipp'd hell."
- **Lines 38-41:** "Shall I be meek, and lend my lips again / To let this adder daub them with his stain? / Shall I turn cheek to answer, when I hate? / You kiss like Judas in the garden gate!"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker uses a number of rhetorical questions in "A Song of Faith Forsworn," starting with "Could I guess the fruit you brought?" in line 3. Though the speaker is addressing a particular audience—her unfaithful partner—she's not expecting an answer from him. Instead, she's making a point: that she had no way of knowing what kind of love (metaphorically, "fruit") he was offering.

In lines 26 and 28, the speaker answers her own rhetorical questions, because they're intended to set up the points she wants to make. "What is your love?" she asks, and then, "What is your faith?" She answers by comparing her partner's love and fidelity to fleeting, worthless things ("leaves," "straws"). Again, she's not soliciting information or even expecting a response.

The two rhetorical questions in lines 38-40 have a strongly *implied* answer. When the speaker asks if she "Shall [...] be meek" and let her faithless lover kiss her "lips" or "cheek" again, she's not actually wondering—she's *saying* she won't! There's a heavy element of sarcasm (verbal irony) here; she's effectively asking, "What, you think I'll keep loving you after what you've done?"

Her final questions (lines 50-51) are the only ones that introduce a hint of ambiguity. She *might* actually be wondering about the details of her partner's betrayal: did he seduce

someone more beautiful before her, using the same overtures? Still, the questions are still basically rhetorical: she has no doubt that he's betrayed her in *some* way, and she continues telling him off without waiting for an answer.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Could I guess the fruit you brought?"
- **Lines 38-40:** "Shall I be meek, and lend my lips again / To let this adder daub them with his stain? / Shall I turn cheek to answer, when I hate?"
- **Lines 50-51:** "Has it done service on a fairer brow? / Fresh, was it folded round her bosom snow?"

VOCABULARY

Forsworn () - False, marked by deceit (as in violation of a "sworn" oath).

Suit (Line 1, Line 6) - Courtship; the advances of a suitor.

Distraught (Line 2) - Distressed and desperate.

Poach'd (Line 8) - A contraction of "poached," meaning "hunted illegally" (i.e., hunted on land belonging to someone else).

Poise (Line 16) - Here, a verb meaning "hover" or "brace oneself" (in preparation for something).

Trimm'd (Line 20) - A contraction of "trimmed," here meaning "cut the wick of an oil lamp" (so that it burns properly).

Stale (Line 21) - Lacking in freshness or vitality (here describing oil lamps that have spent most of their fuel).

Gutter'd (Line 23) - A contraction of "guttered," which (with regard to candles) means melted, hollowed, and nearly burnt out.

Running (Line 27) - Blowing away in the wind.

Faith (Line 28) - Both in the title and line 28, "Faith" implies fidelity (as in romantic faithfulness) and honorable intent (as in the phrase "good faith").

Straws (Line 28) - Dry stems, bits of wood, or similar plant debris.

Walpurgis night (Line 29) - The night before the Christian feast day of Saint Walpurga. Also called Saint Walpurga's Eve or *Walpurgisnacht* (German), it's traditionally celebrated by lighting bonfires to ward off witches and other evil spirits.

Rainbow (Line 32) - Here used as an adjective meaning beautiful and/or illusory.

Leprous (Line 33) - Disfigured by leprosy, an infectious disease that damages the skin. Sometimes used to mean ugly or repellent in general.

Turret (Line 34) - A small tower (usually part of a larger structure).

Adder (Line 39) - A type of poisonous snake.

Daub (Line 39) - Dab or smear, as with paint.

Wreath (Line 49, Line 54) - Here meaning, specifically, a wreath of flowers (given as a romantic gift).

Fairer (Line 50) - More beautiful.

Weed (Line 52) - An undesirable plant. Also, an archaic word meaning "garment."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is a dramatic monologue that consists of nine six-line stanzas. The first and sixth lines of each stanza are identical, which the middle lines (the second through fifth) are longer in length and form a pair of rhyming couplets.

Although the wording varies each time, "Take back ___" functions as the poem's refrain, opening and concluding all nine stanzas. Refrains are common features of songs and ballads, and in fact, the title presents this poem as a "Song." As well as being memorable, the refrain provides a strong sense of emotional and thematic continuity. Although the poem contains some emotional development (e.g., the speaker sounds less vulnerable at the end than the beginning), it also hits some of the same notes repeatedly, with artful variations. Over the course of 18 repetitions, the refrain helps convey the speaker's anger and insistence as she spurns her faithless lover.

METER

The poem uses iambic meter throughout, meaning that its lines tend to follow an unstressed-stressed (da-DUM) syllable pattern. Lines 1 and 6 of each stanza use iambic dimeter (meaning they consist of two iambic feet: da-DUM da-DUM), while lines 2-5 of each stanza use iambic pentameter (meaning they consist of five iambic feet).

Look at how this pattern works in the first stanza:

> Take back your suit.
> It came when I was weary and distraught
> With hunger. Could I guess the fruit you brought?
> I ate in mere desire of any food,
> Nibbled its edge, and nowhere found it good.
> Take back your suit.

The iambic rhythm remains very regular throughout. The only clear variation comes in line 5 ("Nibbled [...]"), which begins with a trochee (a foot with a stressed-unstressed rhythm) rather than an iamb. It's also possible to read lines 1 and 6—and all the refrain lines in the poem—as beginning with *either* an iamb ("Take back") *or* a spondee ("Take back"). But in general, the poem sticks to a clear iambic pattern with relatively few

variations.

Occasionally, however, the poet introduces variations for the purpose of emphasis. An especially noticeable example occurs in line 35:

> To toll hearts burning into wide-lipp'd hell.

Here, the extra stressed syllables mimic the tolling of hell's bells: *clang, clang, clang!*

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's six-line stanzas (*sestets*) follow an ABBCCA rhyme scheme.

Lines 1 and 6 of each stanza are identical, meaning that they include identical rhymes. Between these rhymes are two couplets.

The poet may have chosen this symmetrical scheme to suggest a kind of undoing or cancellation: the speaker's partner gave her false love, gifts, vows, etc., and now she wants him to "Take [them] back." Of course, the repeated lines and rhymes also add emphasis to the speaker's reproaches.

Most of the rhymes in the poem are exact, but slant rhymes also pop up here and there: "food"/"good," "wood"/"blood," "mind"/"wind," "brow"/"snow." (Depending on the speaker's accent, "again"/"stain" can also be a slant rhyme.) The repeated use of this device, which creates a slight sonic "mismatch," might be meant to reflect the romantic mismatch between the speaker and her partner.

SPEAKER

The poem is a dramatic monologue, meaning that it's written in the voice of a character who isn't the poet. The speaker is a woman reproaching an unfaithful romantic partner.

Given the strict romantic conventions of the Victorian era, when the poem was written, it's reasonable to assume that the speaker is female and her partner male. For example, he seems to have courted her formally, as a suitor presenting a "suit"—a role then reserved for men wooing women. It's not entirely clear, however, whether the two were still courting or already married when she discovered his betrayal, and the details of the betrayal are hinted at rather than spelled out. She doesn't mention any direct evidence of his infidelity, but she seems certain that he's told her "lies" and sworn empty "vows." (These could either be marriage vows or promises made prior to marriage.)

That said, the poem contains no evidence that she's *mistaken* about her partner; there's no dramatic irony to suggest that the poet's view contradicts the speaker's. The title specifies the poem's subject as "Faith Forsworn": basically, false fidelity or broken vows.

Several times, the speaker suggests that her partner has spent his *real* passion on another woman (or other women). She calls his love "a bird poach'd from my neighbor's wood," implying that it belongs to someone else. She compares his romantic vows to "lamps" or "candles" that he lit for someone else, and which were "cold" by the time he offered them to her. In the final stanza, she pointedly asks if another, better-looking woman originally wore his courtship "wreath."

At the very least, then, the speaker believes that her partner doesn't really love her, and courted her after—or during—a more passionate romance with someone else. The loaded word "ruin"—which, in Victorian times, could refer to a woman losing her virginity outside of marriage—raises the possibility that this man also seduced the speaker under false pretenses and hurt her social standing. Whatever the exact circumstances, the speaker feels betrayed by a man she considers a cheater and a cad.

The poem consists of her angry, sarcastic, accusatory farewell to the man who's deceived her. She claims that she accepted his advances when she was lonely and desperate (lines 2-5), possibly implying that she never really loved *him*, either. The next-to-last line indicates that he's still trying to win her back—perhaps still trying to marry her, or salvage their marriage—and that she's having none of it.

SETTING

The poem doesn't specify a setting. It's a dramatic monologue addressed to an unfaithful lover, so the two partners are most likely meeting in private, but the speaker doesn't say where. All the references to places, landscape features, etc.—"my neighbor's wood" in line 8, "woodland plain" in line 26, etc.—are figurative; that is, they're elements of metaphors, not descriptions of the speaker's literal surroundings.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Lord de Tabley was a 19th-century English writer, scholar, and aristocrat. Born John Byrne Leicester Warren, he became the third Baron de Tabley in 1877, when he succeeded to the title of baron upon his father's death. He achieved only moderate literary success for most of his career but won acclaim for *Poems, Dramatic and Lyrical* (featuring "A Song of Faith Forsworn"), published in 1893. He published a successful follow-up volume in 1895, but died later the same year.

Though not well known to the public for most of his lifetime, Tabley enjoyed the friendship and respect of fellow writers, including the more famous poets Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. He published his early poetry under a series of

pseudonyms, one of which—"M. A."—caused confusion when readers assumed it referred to the distinguished poet and critic Matthew Arnold. From 1870 onward, he published under his own name.

How "A Song of Faith Forsworn" might relate to Tabley's personal life is unclear. He lived semi-reclusively for many years and never married. As a student at Oxford, he was close with a young poet named George Fortescue, whose premature death sent him into a prolonged depression. However, it's difficult to know for sure whether their friendship was romantic or platonic, or what other romances Tabley may have had in his adult life. Romances outside of courtship and marriage, including queer romances, were typically well-guarded secrets in Victorian England, with its buttoned-up public morality and strictly defined gender roles.

Whether or not the poem indirectly channels the poet's private experience, it reflects those strict social conventions, as well as some conventions of Victorian literature. It's a dramatic monologue, meaning that its speaker is supposed to be a character or persona, not a version of the poet himself. Dramatic monologues were popular in Victorian poetry, thanks in part to Browning and Tennyson, who wrote many famous examples. In many respects, the poem's speaker reflects Victorian notions of ideal womanhood: she's pious, virtuous, and faithful to her partner (until she's betrayed). After a traditional courtship, she calls the relationship off because her partner's been unfaithful—emotionally, sexually, or both. The vehemence of her anger, however, is somewhat unusual for heroines portrayed by Victorian men.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lord de Tabley was born in 1835, two years before the start of Queen Victoria's reign, and died in 1895, a little over five years before Victoria's death. Virtually his entire life, then, took place in what is now called the Victorian era (1837-1901). This was an era of rapid social and technological change in the UK, coupled with a moral code that limited gender roles, sexual behavior, and more.

Victorian courtship rituals varied somewhat based on social class, but followed a fairly strict dynamic. Typically, male "suitors" would begin courting a woman by obtaining permission from her father to do so. The first stanza of the poem makes reference to this kind of formal appeal, or "suit."

That said, the poem's romantic conventions—including that "suit" and the "wreath" mentioned in the final stanza—were already a bit old-fashioned in the late Victorian era (when the poem was written), and they now read as distinctly pre-modern. From the early 1900s onward, giving wreaths of flowers as courtship gifts became a lot less common!

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More on the Poet — A brief biography of Lord de Tabley, along with two of his other poems, via the University of Toronto. (https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poets/warren-john-byrne-leicester)
- Criticism of the Poet — In this (slightly harsh) critical introduction, a writer assesses Lord de Tabley's work a generation after the poet's death. (https://www.bartleby.com/337/1469.html)
- A Full-Length Biography — Check out a book-length biography of Lord de Tabley from 1903. (https://archive.org/details/johnbleicesterw00walkgoog/page/n4/mode/2up)
- Courtship in Victorian England — For context on romance and courtship in the age the poem is set in, watch this Weird History video on "What Dating Was Like In the Victorian Era." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=booTTAIvKf8)
- More on Victorian Love — Watch an Absolute History video on love in Victorian times. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4Kh5XEA1XA)

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