

A Complaint

Overview:

This poem deals with the change in a loving relationship (not necessarily a romantic relationship) and the pain that change has caused the speaker. Note that there **is** still love on both sides between the speaker of the poem and the addressee – what is lamented is the **change** in that love.

Context:

- Wordsworth and his friend Coleridge were the first Romantic poets. Their first collection *The Lyrical Ballads* (published in 1802, five years before ‘A Complaint’), explored the idea that poetry was ‘the spontaneous overflow’ of emotion, and sought to make everyday language and people the subjects of poetry.
- In 1806, Coleridge returned from three years in Malta and everyone observed that the relationship between him and Wordsworth, once extremely close, had changed. It is possible that the change in the intensity of their friendship inspired Wordsworth to write this poem in 1807.

Structure:

- The poem consists of three sestets with the rhyme-scheme ABABCC, broadly in iambic tetrameter. Most of the rhymes are full (perfect) rhymes, with the exception of “dry” and “obscurity” in lines 14 and 16, which may or may not be significant.
- The poem returns on itself (cyclically), with much of the first two lines repeated with only minor changes in the final two lines. This perhaps emphasises the constancy of the speaker’s grieved reaction to the change in the addressee’s love, in contrast with the change itself.

Key Images:

- This poem employs two central and contrasting extended metaphors – the love whose loss the speaker laments was a “fountain” (connotations of beauty, liveliness and also, at the time, a mark of status – an exuberant, happy love); the love which remains is a “well” (deep and long-lasting, perhaps, but not demonstrative, attractive and bountiful).
- Note the use of language from the semantic field of religion to describe the love which has gone (“blessed”, “bliss” and “consecrated”).



Possible Comparisons:

Change in a Relationship: ‘One Flesh’



Use of extended metaphor to explore love:
‘Valentine’

The pain of love: ‘Neutral Tones’