One Perfect Rose

POEM TEXT

A single flow'r he sent me, since we met.
All tenderly his messenger he chose;
Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet—
One perfect rose.

I knew the language of the floweret;
"My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."
Love long has taken for his amulet
One perfect rose.

Why is it no one ever sent me yet
One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
Ah no, it's always just my luck to get
One perfect rose.

SUMMARY

He sent me just one flower after we last saw each other. He chose this flower with great care; it seemed heartfelt and innocent, still fresh with dew. It was a flawless rose.

I understand the intended message of this little flower: its delicate petals are supposed to represent its sender's heart. A flawless rose has long been love's favorite symbol.

But why do you think it is that no one's ever sent me something else—like, just for instance, a flawless limousine? Unfortunately, I always have to make do with nothing but a single—albeit flawless—rose.

THEMES

ROMANCE AND CLICHÉ

"One Perfect Rose" implies that old-fashioned romantic gestures like giving women roses aren't nearly as moving or touching as they're cracked up to be. The speaker is thoroughly unimpressed by such mushy, unimaginative gifts, implying that she'd much rather receive "one perfect limousine" than a "perfect," yet ultimately useless, rose. Beyond simply poking fun at romantic clichés, the poem also suggests that these trite ways of showing affection rely on the outdated idea that women are delicate and sentimental. The poem, then, subtly challenges tired stereotypes surrounding romance and femininity, suggesting that many romantic traditions don't fit the context of modern love.

When the speaker's lover (or a man hoping to become the speaker's lover!) sends her a rose, the speaker knows that this is *supposed* to be a tender, sweet, and (almost sickeningly) romantic gesture. She understands full well "the language" of the flower, which has become a symbol of ideal romance and is meant to convey how "Deep-hearted" this man is.

All the while, the speaker's purposefully over-the-top diction—complete with old-fashioned spellings like "flow'r," clichéd poetic references to "scented dew," and emphasis on the fact that this rose is "perfect"—suggests that the speaker isn't buying it! Her tone mocks the sappy idea that a mere flower represents anything more than a flower, let alone the perfection and "purity" of true romance.

There's also an implied gender dynamic at play here, as the poem mocks the outdated assumption that the way to a woman's heart is through sentimental gestures. The speaker makes fun of this naïve belief, sarcastically suggesting that a rose and its "fragile leaves" "enclose" a man's heart. This is a corny (not to mention unrealistic) idea, yet society still seems to think roses will sweep women off their feet—a pretty condescending outlook, since it treats women as if they're impressionable, excitable children.

The speaker, for her part, challenges this by making it clear that she'd much rather receive "one perfect limousine" than "one perfect rose." A limo, at least, would be legitimately exciting! Roses are clichéd and unimaginative—a relic of the past—while limousines are dazzling and modern. This contrast highlights the fact that stereotypical romantic gestures are not only meaningless and even a little sexist, but also tedious and boring.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

A single flow'r he sent me, since we met.
All tenderly his messenger he chose;
Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet—
One perfect rose.

"One Perfect Rose" sounds like a classic love poem—at first. The speaker begins by telling readers of a lover who sent her a "single flow'r," a blossom he selected with great care, "tenderly" choosing it to show the speaker his affection.

The antiquated spelling of "flow'r" gives the beginning of the poem a fancy, old-timey feel: this is the kind of spelling one would find in a classic love poem. But "One Perfect Rose" was published in 1926, long after poetry had moved past archaic spellings—and long after it had become a cliché to uses roses as symbols of love. The language choices here make it clear the speaker isn't being totally sincere as she describes her lover's romantic gesture.

That hint of sarcasm only grows as the speaker describes the rose her lover sent her:

> Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet—
> One perfect rose.

The words "deep-hearted" and "pure" imply that this lover thinks the rose is full of profound romantic meaning—and highlight his over-earnest, over-sincere, and actually pretty dull view of romance. In other words, the lover has romanticized romance itself, clearly thinking that giving the speaker a flower is some grand and deeply significant gesture. But the very idea of "one perfect rose" is a shallow cliché, and suggests that this guy's "love" might be similarly shallow.

The speaker's meter makes her cynical point even clearer. The first three lines are in iambic pentameter and the last line is in iambic dimeter. This means that lines 1 through 3 ("A single [...] still wet—") each contain five iambs, or metrical feet consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Line 4, on the other hand, only contains two iambs (two da-DUMs). This isolates the phrase "one perfect rose," calling attention to it and spotlighting the speaker's point: it's kind of ridiculous to hang so much meaning on so dull and obvious a gift.

LINES 5-6

I knew the language of the floweret;
"My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."

Still using parodic, self-consciously "poetic" language, the speaker says she understands the message that the "floweret" (or little flower) is supposed to send. In other words, the speaker is well aware of the clichéd ideas that come along with a rose. Line 6 clarifies what, exactly, this rose communicates to the speaker:

> "My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."

This personification of the rose makes it seem like the flower is a stand-in for the lover himself. And the message it's delivering is painfully corny: those "fragile leaves" that "enclose" the giver's "heart" make him sound like a sentimental sap.

Perhaps the speaker finds this sappiness a little insulting, too: it suggests that her lover thinks of her as pretty easy to impress. All the swoony, clichéd imagery around this "fragile" rose implies that romantic tradition often treats women as if they're delicate and innocent—and maybe a little simple. This is, of course, extremely condescending, which is why the speaker's tone is so sarcastic here. By personifying the rose as a patronizing "messenger," the speaker mocks the sexist assumption that women are easily swept off their feet by outdated and unimaginative romantic gestures.

These lines are even sarcastic in their sounds. Check out the consonance here:

> I knew the language of the floweret;
> My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."

This musical /l/ sound parodies traditional love poetry, which just loves to use the languorous, liquid /l/ in poems about roses and love. (See Robert Burns for just one example among many.)

LINES 7-8

Love long has taken for his amulet
One perfect rose.

Here, the speaker personifies not just the rose, but love itself, suggesting that it has always seen a "perfect rose" as its "amulet"—that is, a symbolic talisman, a representation of itself.

Once again, the speaker is being sarcastic here. By personifying Love and implying that it, too, thinks roses are full of meaning, the speaker notes that the romantic clichés surrounding roses are incredibly widespread—so widespread that Love itself has gotten wrapped up in the notion that roses are deeply romantic.

Perhaps the speaker is even displaying a deeper cynicism here, seeing Love as just one more self-important guy full of clichéd ideas of romance. This cynicism fits right in with the period when this poem was composed. Dorothy Parker was writing in the 1920s, a time when women were starting to reject old-fashioned gender norms. This speaker's boredom with roses and with Love itself might mark her out as a whole new kind of woman—one who's not so easily won over by generic, traditional romance.

When the phrase "one perfect rose" reappears in the stanza's last line, it becomes clear that this is the poem's refrain, since the speaker also used these words to end of the first stanza. This repetition works a lot like the speaker's use of words like "floweret," parodying old-fashioned, traditional forms of love poetry (which often followed strict forms and used refrains). But it also prepares the reader for a punchline that's on its way in the last stanza, where that "one perfect rose" will appear for a final time.

LINES 9-12

Why is it no one ever sent me yet
One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
Ah no, it's always just my luck to get

One perfect rose.

In the final stanza, the speaker's tone changes sharply. She's been writing in a mocking, high-flown poetic voice. Now, she comes right back down to earth: in straightforward, colloquial language, she asks why no one has ever seen fit to send her "one perfect limousine" as a love token.

With this playful rhetorical question, which parallels with the poem's refrain, the speaker jokingly suggests that it would be much more meaningful for a lover to give her a limousine instead of a rose. A limousine has all kinds of advantages a rose doesn't: it's useful, it's fun, and it doesn't come cheap. A lover who'd buy her a limousine, the speaker seems to say, is a lover who'd know what she really wants: freedom, pleasure, independence, and a sense that she's genuinely valued.

And why *hasn't* anyone offered her a limousine? Well, perhaps because it's a lot easier to reach for a rose, which is both traditional and cheap. This moment is funny, but it also touches on stereotypes about romance and femininity. Assuming that a single rose will sweep the speaker off her feet, the speaker's lovers seem to see her as a swoony, easy-to-please damsel, rather than a modern woman who'd rather go for a drive than gaze at a "floweret." The clichéd offer of a rose thus suggests that the speaker's lovers aren't just unoriginal, they're also a little sexist. And perhaps their "deep-hearted" feelings aren't really all that deep.

This poem isn't a solemn social criticism, though, but a witty, acidic joke. Take a look at the way the speaker uses enjambments to sweep the reader toward the final punchline:

> Why is it no one ever sent me yet
> One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
> Ah no, it's always just my luck to get
> One perfect rose.

These continuous lines create momentum—but also a brief moment of suspension at the end of the second-to-last line, when a break comes after the phrase "it's just my luck to get." This creates anticipation just before the speaker delivers the poem's final line, which is—of course—the refrain: "One perfect rose." Transformed from a grand romantic gesture to a punchline, this final "perfect rose" shows just what the speaker thinks of worn-out ideas about romance.

SYMBOLS

THE ROSE

The rose that the speaker receives from her lover plays on the *traditional* symbolism of roses—that is, beauty and love—to build a *new* symbol: here, the rose represents not love, but clichéd, outdated *ideas* about love. The speaker uses a sarcastic, mocking tone to suggest that flowers represent society's stereotypical and old-fashioned ideas about romance and femininity. The men in this poem believe that women will go weak at the knees over the trite gift of a flower—a sexist assumption that treats women as if they're impressionable children. The rose thus symbolizes a worn-out, laughable view of love—and of women.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "single flow'r"
- **Line 3:** "Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet"
- **Line 4:** "One perfect rose"
- **Line 5:** "floweret"
- **Line 6:** ""My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."'"
- **Line 8:** "One perfect rose"
- **Line 12:** "One perfect rose"

THE LIMOUSINE

The "perfect limousine" the speaker imagines receiving in lieu of a trite rose symbolizes freedom, luxury, fun, and independence.

This poem was written in the 1920s, a period when women enjoyed newfound and unprecedented independence and power. Wishing for "one perfect limousine" instead of a mere rose, the speaker imagines being offered, not romance, but *options*: limousines suggest both wealth and the ability to get around on your own. In other words, the speaker doesn't want her lovers to see her as a swooning damsel, but as a modern woman—a person with her own interests, and with places to be!

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "Why is it no one ever sent me yet / One perfect limousine, do you suppose?"

POETIC DEVICES

CLICHÉ

The poem plays with cliché to call attention to the absurdity of outdated romantic gestures. Using over-the-top, self-consciously "poetic" language like "scented dew" and "floweret"—and building the poem around the well-worn idea of the rose as a symbol of love—the speaker pokes fun at uninspired cultural ideas about romance and women.

The repeated phrase "one perfect rose" plays on the cliché of a "perfect" or "pure" kind of love being something as fresh and lovely as a rose. This image is so old and worn-out that it even appears in the most clichéd of all Valentine's rhymes: "Roses are red, / Violets are blue, / Sugar is sweet, / And so are you." It

makes sense that the speaker of "One Perfect Rose" would make fun of her lover for using a similarly trite rose to impress her.

The speaker even mocks the message that roses supposedly send, saying:

> I knew the language of the floweret;
> "My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."

The word "fragile" highlights the clichéd notion that romance is a delicate blossom—a perspective that comes along with the sexist assumption that women *themselves* are fragile and sentimental.

In the final stanza of the poem ("Why is it [...] perfect rose"), though, the speaker blatantly challenges the cliché surrounding roses and romance by suggesting that she'd rather receive "one perfect limousine" than "one perfect rose." This illustrates how useless a rose really is. It'd be much more exciting, the speaker implies, to receive something modern and unexpected—something like a limousine, that she could really have *fun* with. Instead of rehashing old clichés, the poem suggests, lovers would be better off leaving behind unimaginative traditions and expressing their affection in more authentic, genuinely interesting ways.

Where Cliché appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Line 12

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses personification in "One Perfect Rose" to sarcastically give the rose she receives from her lover a sense of agency, as if it's a conscious—and ridiculous—"messenger." By personifying the rose, she suggests that not just the gift, but the *giver* might be more than a little silly.

The speaker describes this personified rose as "deep-hearted" and "pure"—but she does so with her tongue firmly in her cheek. These descriptions highlight the cliché here. Yes, yes, the speaker seems to say, a rose "speaks" of all the deepest, purest romantic feelings—but isn't that idea a little tired? And by extension, isn't the person who counts on a boring old rose to be his "messenger" a bit dull? Maybe the heart of a person who counts on obvious gifts to communicate his feelings isn't all that "deep" after all.

This is also the case in line 6, when the speaker jokingly suggests that the rose is capable of speaking:

> "My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."

Those corny "fragile leaves" hint that the speaker thinks that both this "messenger" and the man whose "heart" is "enclose[d]" here are being pretty cutesy and trite about this whole love business.

The speaker also personifies Love itself, characterizing it as a romantic man who has "long has taken for his amulet / One perfect rose." This implies that not just romantic young suitors, but the whole idea of swoony "Love" feels a little boring and clichéd to this world-weary speaker: Love, to her, is just another dull, self-important guy.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "All tenderly his messenger he chose;"
- **Line 3:** "Deep-hearted, pure,"
- **Line 6:** ""My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose.""
- **Lines 7-8:** "Love long has taken for his amulet / One perfect rose."

REFRAIN

The speaker repeats a refrain at the end of each stanza: "One perfect rose." This repetition helps to set the speaker's sarcastic tone—and sets up the poem's final joke.

The first two stanzas of the poem parody old-fashioned love poetry, using archaic words like "floweret" and images of "deep-hearted" purity. Each of these mocking stanzas ends with the same refrain, "one perfect rose": a hoary old cliché if ever there was one. The speaker thus sets readers up not to take that "rose" too seriously—and to expect it to appear at the end of every stanza.

Then, in the final stanza, the speaker's tone changes. In straightforward, colloquial language, she comes right out and wonders why no one has ever offered her a "perfect limousine." By the time the refrain arrives again, that "one perfect rose" has become a punchline, the disappointing gift it's "just [the speaker's] luck to get" rather than some precious "messenger" of love.

The refrain also stands out because it's much shorter than the rest of the lines. Whereas the first three lines of each stanza consist of five iambs (metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable), the refrain only contains *two* iambs: "One per- | fect rose." This switch from iambic pentameter to iambic dimeter adds extra emphasis to the refrain, giving readers a moment to reflect on the self-serious silliness of that rose before moving on.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "One perfect rose."
- **Line 8:** "One perfect rose."
- **Line 12:** "One perfect rose."

PARALLELISM

The speaker uses parallelism when she wonders why nobody

has ever sent her "one perfect limousine." This phrase mirrors the poem's refrain, "One perfect rose." These parallel sentence constructions encourage readers to compare roses and limousines, suggesting that the speaker sees flowers as useless gifts but thinks a limousine would actually be a pretty exciting present to receive from a lover.

A rose, after all, is both a clichéd choice and a *cheap* one: it takes neither thoughtfulness nor expense to present someone with a traditionally symbolic flower. A limousine, on the other hand, would be a serious purchase—and one that shows not only that the giver sees the receiver as a modern woman, but suggests he wants her to have a good time! Parallelism makes the contrast between these two flavors of gifts both clear and funny.

This parallelism also introduces a change in the poem's tone. By the third stanza ("Why is it [...] perfect rose"), readers have become accustomed to reading the refrain "one perfect rose." That's why it's funny and a little surprising when the speaker says the word "limousine" instead of "rose." This slight alteration brings the speaker's sarcastic wit—always there beneath the surface—right out into the open.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "One perfect rose."
- **Line 8:** "One perfect rose."
- **Line 10:** "One perfect limousine,"
- **Line 12:** "One perfect rose."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker uses a subtly sarcastic tone throughout the poem. But her insincerity becomes crystal-clear in the final stanza, when she poses a humorous rhetorical question:

> Why is it no one ever sent me yet
> One perfect limousine, do you suppose?

Until this point, it seems just possible that the speaker might appreciate the rose her lover sends. Once she asks why nobody has ever sent her "one perfect limousine," though, it becomes clear that the point of the poem is to mock the idea that a single rose is an exciting and meaningful romantic gift.

Of course, the speaker doesn't expect an answer when she asks why she's never received a limousine, since it's obvious why this is the case: limousines *aren't* traditional tokens of love, and they *are* expensive! This rhetorical suggestion hints at the speaker's wit, but also her cynicism. Roses are cheap, she seems to say—and so, all too often, is the love they represent.

Asking this rhetorical question not only reveals the speaker's sense of humor, but also hints that what she'd really like from her lover is something a little more in touch with the times. Roses, after all, are clichéd gifts based on old-fashioned ideas of romance. A limousine, on the other hand, would be much better suited to a modern woman.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "Why is it no one ever sent me yet / One perfect limousine, do you suppose?"

CONSONANCE

The consonance in "One Perfect Rose" gives the language a musical sound and highlights important words.

For example, consider the way that the /l/ and /r/ sounds run through stanza 2:

> I knew the language of the floweret;
> "My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."
> Love long has taken for his amulet
> One perfect rose.

The /l/ sound in "language" and "floweret" connects the two words, and makes "floweret"—an over-the-top "poetic" word that the speaker uses with her tongue firmly in her cheek—stand out. That /l/ sound just keeps popping up, and helps the poem to imitate the luxurious sounds of the *sincere* love poetry it mocks. (See Alliteration for more on that.) Elsewhere, the repetition of the /r/ sound stands out in "perfect rose," spotlighting the clichéd idea that roses symbolize romantic purity and flawlessness.

In the last two lines, a consonant /c/ sound makes the poem's conclusion sound a little edgy:

> Ah no, it's always just my luck to get
> One perfect rose.

Because the words "luck" and "perfect" aren't in the same line, the /c/ sound isn't especially prominent. And yet, the brisk click of the /c/ sound subtly changes the final two lines, adding a touch of snappy sarcasm to the speaker's closing words.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "single," "flow'r," "sent," "me," "since," "met"
- **Line 2:** "tenderly," "his," "messenger," "chose"
- **Line 3:** "Deep," "hearted," "pure," "scented," "dew," "still"
- **Line 4:** "perfect rose"
- **Line 5:** "language," "floweret"
- **Line 6:** "fragile," "leaves," "his heart"
- **Line 7:** "Love long," "for," "amulet"
- **Line 8:** "perfect rose"
- **Line 9:** "no one"
- **Line 10:** "perfect," "suppose"
- **Line 11:** "luck"

- **Line 12:** "perfect rose"

SIBILANCE

The sibilance in "One Perfect Rose" works a lot like its consonance, making the language sound pleasing and musical. This is especially the case in the first three lines, in which the /s/ sound appears multiple times:

> A single flow'r he sent me, since we met.
> All tenderly his messenger he chose;
> Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet—

The repetition of the sibilant /s/ adds a hissing effect to these opening lines, making the speaker's language sound smooth and satisfying. This musicality helps the speaker imitate traditional love poems, giving the language a luxurious feel that seems reminiscent of older poetry—poetry that "One Perfect Rose" ultimately parodies.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "single," "sent," "since"
- **Line 2:** "messenger"
- **Line 3:** "scented," "still"

ALLITERATION

Like consonance and sibilance, alliteration make the speaker's language sound pleasing—and helps the speaker to mock the conventions of love poetry.

The second stanza, for instance, features alliterative /f/, /h/, and /l/ sounds:

> I knew the language of the floweret;
> "My fragile leaves," it said, "his heart enclose."
> Love long has taken for his amulet

The alliterative /f/ connects the words "floweret" and "fragile," both of which poke fun at the traditional idea that love is a dainty little flower (a view the speaker will later undermine further with her longing, not for a "floweret," but for a powerful limousine). The alliterative /l/, on the other hand, mocks the language of love poetry by imitating it: languid, liquid /l/ sounds turn up in a lot of *sincere* poems about love and roses (like this famous poem by Robert Burns, for instance).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "single," "sent," "since"
- **Line 3:** "scented," "still"
- **Line 5:** "floweret"
- **Line 6:** "fragile," "his heart"
- **Line 7:** "Love long"

END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the lines in "One Perfect Rose" are end-stopped. This gives the poem a controlled, measured feeling that reflects just how unmoved the speaker is by clichéd declarations of love. Take, for example, the first stanza, in which all four lines are end-stopped:

> A single flow'r he sent me, since we met.
> All tenderly his messenger he chose;
> Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet—
> One perfect rose.

By coming to a full stop at the end of each line, the speaker gives her lines a touch of sarcasm right from the start. She's not getting carried away with passion as she thinks about this rose, but recounting her lover's big romantic idea flatly, line by line.

Because most of the lines are end-stopped, the few instances of enjambment are especially noticeable. Perhaps the strongest example comes at the very end of the poem, when the speaker enjambs lines 11-12:

> Ah no, it's always just my luck to get
> One perfect rose.

This continuous sentence breaks in the middle to create a brief moment of anticipation, as readers wait for the speaker to deliver the last part of the sentence: "One perfect rose." The reader already knows these words are coming: they're the poem's refrain, and turn up at the end of every stanza. By breaking away from the use of end-stopped lines here, the speaker highlights her final joke: that "perfect rose" comes across, not as an enchanting token of true love, but as a disappointing cliché.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "met."
- **Line 2:** "chose;"
- **Line 3:** "wet—"
- **Line 4:** "rose."
- **Line 5:** "floweret;"
- **Line 6:** "enclose.""
- **Line 8:** "rose."
- **Line 10:** "suppose?"
- **Line 12:** "rose."

VOCABULARY

Flow'r (Line 1) - An old-fashioned spelling of "flower."

Tenderly (Line 2) - Gently and thoughtfully.

Deep-Hearted (Line 3) - Full of love and affection.

Dew (Line 3) - Droplets of water that often collect on plants and flowers overnight.

Floweret (Line 5) - A small flower.

Enclose (Line 6) - For something to be "enclosed" means that it is held inside something else.

Amulet (Line 7) - A charm imbued with special significance or even magic.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"One Perfect Rose" is a 12-line poem broken into three quatrains (or four-line stanzas). This neatly organized structure gives the poem an antiquated, old-timey feel, helping the speaker to parody traditional forms of sentimental love poetry. The shape of this poem, like its language, makes fun of hoary old poetic and romantic clichés.

Each stanza uses a refrain: the last line is always "One perfect rose." This over-the-top repetition gives the speaker yet another opportunity to poke fun at the way poetry idealizes roses and—by symbolic extension—love. The first time the speaker brings up this "perfect rose," readers might think she's serious; by the third mention, though, it's clear that her tongue is firmly in her cheek.

METER

Most of this poem is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that each line uses five iambs, or metrical feet made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). Take a look at line 1, for example:

A sin- | gle flow'r | he sent | me, since | we met.

This line's regular meter fits right in with what readers might expect from a traditional love poem. After all, iambic pentameter has been a go-to meter for love poetry since before Shakespeare wrote his sonnets.

However, the refrain—which appears in the last line of each stanza—doesn't follow this metrical pattern. Instead, it's in iambic dimeter, meaning that it contains only two iambs instead of five (two da-DUMs):

One per- | fect rose.

This change in meter is noticeable, since the refrain is so much shorter than any of the other lines. As a result, readers have a moment to think about the phrase "one perfect rose"—and a chance to really consider the clichéd obsession people have with roses and all that they supposedly symbolize.

These sudden shorter lines might also sound almost incomplete—an effect that suggests that a single rose as a romantic gift might leave one feeling less than satisfied.

RHYME SCHEME

"One Perfect Rose" follows an ABAB rhyme scheme—and even uses exactly the same rhymes every time. Across the whole poem, then, the pattern of rhymes looks like this:

ABAB ABAB ABAB

This rhyme scheme gives the poem an uncomplicated, musical quality, as if it were a nursery rhyme or a childish song. This simplicity fits in with the poem's overall tongue-in-cheek, parodic tone: a simplistic rhyme scheme helps the speaker to mock a simplistic view of romance.

The rhyme scheme here also helps to set up the poem's punchline. Every stanza ends with a refrain, and thus rhymes on the same word: "rose." And every time that "rose" appears, the speaker's tone has changed a little. The first time, she sounds almost as if she might be genuinely moved; but by the end, she's transparently fed up with the endless succession of "perfect rose[s]" her lovers always seem to deliver.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "One Perfect Rose" is somebody who has recently received a single rose from a lover. Although it's possible to read the poem without making assumptions about the speaker's gender, there's more than a hint here that the speaker is female: the idea of presenting a lady-love with a rose (or comparing her to one) and waiting for her to swoon is about as old as poetry itself.

Many readers see the speaker as Dorothy Parker herself, especially because the poem uses dry humor to playfully mock old romantic traditions—something Parker was well-known for.

Whether one reads the speaker as Parker or not, what's clear is that she's pretty cynical about the idea that a rose is a special symbol of love, seeing this as nothing more than a cliché. And yet, the speaker only ever receives single roses from her lovers, suggesting that she lives in a society that is hopelessly hung up on its own outdated traditions.

SETTING

There's no specific setting in "One Perfect Rose." However, there are a few hints here that the poem takes place in the 1920s, when it was written.

One such hint comes when the speaker wonders why no one ever sent her "One perfect limousine." The limousine, with its connotations of luxury, excess, and fun, feels right out of the

"Roaring '20s," a post-war period marked by decadence and partying—and by newfound freedoms for women. Wishing for a limousine rather than a rose, the speaker seems very much a woman of her times, more interested in up-to-date wealth and independence than in soppy, clichéd romantic gestures. In a time when many women began to discard traditional ideas about love, romance, and femininity, the old-fashioned "language of the floweret" just wouldn't cut it any more.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"One Perfect Rose" appeared in Dorothy Parker's first collection, *Enough Rope*, which was published in 1926. The poems in this book helped establish Parker as a new voice in the world of poetry in the 1920s, placing her alongside writers like e.e. cummings, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Ogden Nash—all of whom, like Parker, wrote light verse as well as more serious works.

While Modernist poets like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Butler Yeats wrote densely intellectual poems, Parker (and her fellow American writers mentioned above) often wrote funny, colloquial verse that offered sly observations about everyday life. (And even Eliot dabbled in light verse in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats:* the '20s were a golden era for comic poetry.)

"One Perfect Rose" is one perfect example of Parker's style: here, she wittily pokes fun at the way modern men think they can still rely on outdated romantic traditions. She also mocks the clichéd fascination many poets have with roses as a symbol of love. Obliquely parodying classic poems like Robert Burns's "A Red, Red Rose," "One Perfect Rose" suggests that old ideas of romance have become boring and corny—and perhaps were never all that sincere in the first place.

Parker wasn't only known as a poet, but as a respected critic. After working as Vanity Fair's theater reviewer for several years, she was named to an editorial board for *The New Yorker* when the magazine launched in 1925. She went on to publish many of her poems there, and became a well-known wit and cultural commentator.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dorothy Parker's career gained momentum in the 1920s, a decade of relative peace and prosperity in the United States. World War I ended in November 1918, and the celebrations and relief that followed led to what's now known as the "Roaring Twenties"—a period of high spirits and relative economic stability.

During this era, Dorothy Parker became an important cultural figure in the literary world of New York City. Some of the country's most respected magazines flourished in the '20s, including *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*. As a critic and poet for both these magazines, Parker was a big presence in New York's literary scene, and a founding member of the famous "Algonquin Round Table"—a group of writers, critics, and actors who lunched together at the Algonquin Hotel.

"One Perfect Rose" was published in 1926 in Parker's first book, *Enough Rope*. The book was very popular, maybe owing to the fact that Parker's name was by then recognizable from her frequent appearances in the country's most widely-read magazines. But this popularity was also due to the wit and humor of her poetry, which aligned nicely with the Roaring Twenties and the exciting sense that popular culture was beginning to shift away from boring old clichés and traditions.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to Dorothy Parker herself reading "One Perfect Rose." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMnv1XNpuwM)
- A Video Biography — Watch a short documentary about Parker's life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMnv1XNpuwM)
- The Paris Review Interview — Read the Paris Review's "Art of Poetry" interview with Dorothy Parker, which showcases her classic wit and sheds light on her approach to poetry. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4933/the-art-of-fiction-no-13-dorothy-parker)
- The Dorothy Parker Society — Learn more about Parker's enduring influence at the website of the Dorothy Parker Society. (https://dorothyparker.com/)
- The Algonquin Round Table — Read about the Algonquin Round Table, the influential artistic circle with which Parker worked and schmoozed. (https://algonquinroundtable.org/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER DOROTHY PARKER POEMS

- Resumé

HOW TO CITE

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