Refusal

SUMMARY

The speaker addresses their lover, asking them: in what other life and what other place did I first get to know your lips, your hands, and your courageous, cheeky laugh? I love all of these larger-than-life qualities in you. How can I be certain that we'll meet again, in another world, at some unknown time in the future? I rebel against my body's mortality. Unless the universe makes me a promise that we'll meet again, I simply won't agree to die.

THEMES

DEATH-DEFYING LOVE

"Refusal" tells a story of love's power over death. The poem's speaker is so deeply in love that they feel sure they must have known their beloved before, in "other lives or lands." The pair of them, the speaker is sure, must go way, *way* back; perhaps they knew each other in past lives. Their delight in their beloved's "lips," "hands," and "laughter" feels so profound that it's too much for one lifetime.

However, though the speaker is confident that they've known their beloved for more than a lifetime, they can't be totally sure that they will "meet again" in some "future time undated" and some "other world[]." There's no guarantee, in other words, that they'll go on being lovers eternally.

The speaker thus decides to take matters into their own hands. Until they're offered the "Promise / Of one more sweet encounter" with their beloved, they say, they "will not deign to die." They will simply refuse to leave this world and this body until they're sure they will meet their beloved again in whatever life comes next. (It's not clear precisely whom they want to get this grand, capitalized "Promise" from—the universe, God?—but they're certainly standing up to a massive force here!)

This bold declaration is a statement of serious faith in the power of love. It's because the speaker feels so very deeply about their beloved that they feel able to confront to the most powerful forces in the universe: they simply won't put up with any nonsense from death. Their belief that they knew their beloved in past lives likewise suggests that, to them, love is a force that transcends the boundaries of any one lifetime.

While the speaker sounds pretty bold and confident here, the poem might also be read a little more wistfully or ruefully. No human being has so far successfully evaded death forever, *or* gotten a matter-of-fact "Promise" from the universe about anything that will happen beyond death. The speaker's cheeky defiance could thus also be interpreted as passionate but wishful thinking, a picture of how love makes a person *feel* they can defy death—or wish desperately that they could.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Beloved, ...
... Irreverent.

The first line of "Refusal" is just one emphatic word: "Beloved." This poem, then, is the speaker's address to someone they adore. They love this person so much, in fact, that they feel certain they've known them in another life. "In what other lives or lands," they ask their beloved, might they have met before? Because there's something deeply familiar about:

> [....] your lips
> Your hands
> Your laughter brave
> Irreverent.

This lover doesn't seem sparkly and new to the speaker, these lines suggest, but deeply "known." The speaker feels as if they've known this lover across time and space. In this short poem, the speaker will proclaim that love has the power to cross even what seem like the most impenetrable boundaries.

Readers can hear the speaker's passion in the shape of their language. Their anaphora on the word "your" stresses the idea that it's this one person's delicious "lips," "hands," and "laughter" that speak to them, not anyone else's. And the drawn-out /l/ alliteration of "life," "lands," "lips," and "laughter" makes it sound as if the speaker is positively luxuriating in every word they say about this beloved soul.

While this poem is written in free verse, without a regular rhyme scheme or meter, these first lines do use one little flicker of rhyme. The harmonious rhyme between "lands" and "hands" in lines 2 and 4 makes the poem's introduction feel musical, emphasizing the speaker's pleasure in describing their beloved.

The speaker relishes the thought of their beloved's physical beauty (and their sexuality: "lips" and "hands" feel like particularly intimate body parts to single out, suggesting that the speaker has their beloved's kisses and embraces in mind). They're also moved by their beloved's humor and courage.

The beloved's laughter gets described in more detail than anything else about them. Their laugh, the speaker says, is both "brave" and "irreverent." The word "irreverent" even gets a line to itself, suggesting that irreverence—a willingness to laugh at even the most solemn things—is one of the things about the beloved that delights the speaker the most. That irreverence, as readers will see, is a quality the beloved and the speaker share.

LINES 7-8

Those sweet excesses ...
... I do adore.

The beloved's beauty, bravery, and irreverent humor, the speaker says, all feel larger than life. Perhaps the beloved feels like a larger-than-life kind of person in general. All their good qualities are "sweet excesses"—that is, delicious extravagances.

And those excesses are markedly "sweet": the speaker absolutely can't get enough of everything that's big and bold and overflowing about their beloved. Listen to the way that an enjambment here emphasizes their intense delight:

> Those sweet excesses that
> I do adore.

The mid-sentence line break here leaves the words "I do adore" on a line of their own, thus highlighting the dramatic phrasing. Grammatically speaking, there's no need for the word "do" here: the speaker could just as easily have said "Those sweet excesses that / I adore." But by adding the "do," the speaker creates a couple of effects:

- First, there's the insistence of the word "do"—an old-fashioned, almost Shakespearean-sounding addition that stresses that the speaker *really means* what they're saying.
- And speaking of Shakespeare, that "do" does something interesting to the rhythm of these two lines. When read together, the lines take on a Shakespearean rhythm: iambic pentameter. A line of iambic pentameter uses five iambs—metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm.
- While this isn't technically a line of iambic pentameter (since it's broken into two separate lines), the rhythm sounds the same to the ear: "Those sweet | exces- | ses that | I do | adore."

Subtly calling up this traditional rhythm in the middle of a modern free verse poem, Angelou supports the speaker's ideas about a timeless, transcendent love by reaching back to centuries-old love poetry.

LINES 9-12

What surety is ...
... Future time undated.

The speaker feels sure that they and their beloved have somehow always known and adored each other, perhaps even in other lives. The depth of their love is past question. However, in these lines, a note of doubt enters the poem. There's no "surety," no certainty, that the loving couple will "meet again" after *this* life. When they end up in "other worlds," in "some / Future time undated," the speaker says, who's to say that they'll end up in each other's arms again? The past is no indicator of the future.

Even the poem's rhythms feel a little destabilized here. The speaker uses a pair of awkward enjambments, breaking lines in places where one would normally never pause in everyday speech. The enjambment between lines 11 and 12 is particularly jarring:

> On other worlds some
> Future time undated.

The line break here feels ragged and anxious. But though the speaker is suffering a moment of worry, their language remains grand. The inverted phrasing of "some / Future time undated," for instance—as opposed to a more standard phrasing like "some undated future time" or "some undated time in the future"—sounds formal, making their question feel grave and serious.

And perhaps "grave" is really the right word there. The speaker is wondering about what will happen to their love after this life. Whether they're imagining an afterlife or a reincarnation isn't clear, and on some level, it doesn't matter. All that matters to them is that they never be parted from their lover, even after they die.

LINES 13-16

I defy my ...
... deign to die.

The speaker sounded worried for a moment, wondering whether they and their lover will be reunited after this particular life ends. Now, their tone changes dramatically. In a decisive single line—one sentence long, firmly end-stopped—they say: "I defy my body's haste." In other words, the speaker stands up to their own body here. In particular, they stand up to their body's "haste," its hurry to get through life and die.

This line presents the body as something fleeting, something that "haste[s]" through life all too quickly. Plenty of passionate love poems have made this point! But other love poets have traditionally used mortality as a way to convince their beloveds that they had probably better have as much fun as they can while they've got bodies to have fun with. This lover, by contrast, "def[ies]" the body altogether, refusing to play by its rules.

If the speaker can't get a "Promise" that they and their beloved will share "one more sweet encounter," they declare, they simply "will not deign to die." In other words, they refuse to die unless something or someone—the universe, God?—offers them a dramatically capitalized "Promise" to reunite them with their beloved in whatever comes after death.

This is a big demand! The speaker doesn't make it clear exactly whom they expect might make this big "Promise" to them. But they also don't stand in any awe of whatever mighty force that might be. Perhaps the beloved's "brave," "irreverent" qualities also reflects something in the speaker. Even the word "deign" feels cheeky here: it's a word typically used to describe doing something that's a little beneath you.

The speaker's love, in this poem, is so big that it makes them feel they can defy death itself. They're certain that they and their beloved have feelings for each other that have already crossed borders of time and space—and they're willing to stand up to the unstoppable force of death itself to make sure it *stays* that way.

While this all feels very bold and brave, perhaps there's also something a little wistful going on here. On the one hand, this speaker's irreverent courage might suggest that love really *can* face down death. On the other hand, this poem might suggest that it's too painful to face the idea that love's intense "sweet[ness]" *might* come to an end with death. Intense love feels eternal, this poem suggests—but it also makes lovers fear its loss.

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem's steady end-stopped lines help to create the speaker's calm, confident tone. Lines 3-6, for instance, roll along slowly, one clause at a time, as if the speaker is relishing every word they say about their lover:

> [...] your lips
> Your hands
> Your laughter brave
> Irreverent.

While each of these lines is a small part of a longer sentence, the lines break where a sentence naturally might, at places where one might normally introduce a comma. This means that each of the lover's features gets its own line and its own space, as if the speaker is lingering over the thought of "lips," "hands," and "laughter" for a few delicious seconds apiece. The lone word "irreverent" also gets a little space of its own this way, a choice that highlights a quality the lover and the speaker share. The speaker, like their lover, will be irreverent in this poem, laughing in the face of death.

End-stopped lines also help to mark out the poem's shape. The poem is divided into five sentences, each concluded with an end-stopped line; there aren't any mid-line caesurae here. Instead, ideas come to a close where lines do. Take lines 7-8, for example:

> Those sweet excesses that
> I do adore.

That firm period after "adore" helps to make the speaker's voice sound steady and sure. There's no doubt about their adoration.

Perhaps the most dramatic end-stopped line in the poem appears in line 13:

> I defy my body's haste.

This is the only complete one-line sentence in the poem, and it marks a powerful moment of decision. The speaker here declares that they simply won't play by the body's rules and hurry on toward death. Their firm sentence structure here makes it clear that they're not fooling around: the sheer force of their love will allow them to rebel even against their own mortality.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Beloved,"
- **Line 3:** "your lips"
- **Line 4:** "Your hands"
- **Line 5:** "laughter brave"
- **Line 6:** "Irreverent."
- **Line 8:** "adore."
- **Line 10:** "again,"
- **Line 12:** "undated."
- **Line 13:** "haste."
- **Line 16:** "die."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambments create variety and movement in the poem's rhythm, playing against firmer end-stopped lines. When the speaker sums up everything that delights them about their lover, for instance, an enjambment lends extra power to their conclusion:

> Those sweet excesses that
> I do adore.

Breaking the sentence here, Angelou leaves the words "I do adore" on a line of their own, giving the speaker's adoration just that little bit more weight. (The phrasing helps, too: "I adore" on its own apparently wouldn't be enough! The speaker must solemnly and insistently say that they "do adore" their lover.)

For most of the poem, the speaker sounds quite sure and calm in their love. But there's just the tiniest flicker of doubt in lines 9-12, and enjambments help to mark the moment:

> What surety is there
> That we will meet again,
> On other worlds some
> Future time undated.

While much of the poem uses stately, steady rhythms, these line breaks fall in slightly more awkward places—especially lines 11-12, which break at a spot where one would never pause in ordinary speech. The slightly awkward rhythm here matches the speaker's worry that, while they believe they've met their lover in many lifetimes before this one, there's no guarantee they'll meet again in the next life.

The poem's final enjambment, however, returns to a tone of bold faith:

> Without the Promise
> Of one more sweet encounter

This line break leans hard on the word "Promise," already dramatically capitalized. While it's not clear exactly whom the speaker expects to extract this promise from, it's clear it's a great and powerful force—God, the universe? The rhythm of these lines also slows the poem's closing words right down, creating a grand build-up to the speaker's final declaration: "I will not deign to die."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "lands / Have"
- **Lines 7-8:** "that / I"
- **Lines 9-10:** "there / That"
- **Lines 11-12:** "some / Future"
- **Lines 14-15:** "Promise / Of"
- **Lines 15-16:** "encounter / I"

REPETITION

Repetitions make the speaker's voice sound luxuriant and full of relish as they describe their beloved. In lines 3-5, for example, anaphora makes it sound as if the speaker is enjoying talking about their beloved almost as much as they enjoy being with them:

> In what other lives or lands
> Have I known your lips
> Your hands
> Your laughter brave

The repeated "your" here creates a pulsing rhythm—and stresses how important the "you" is here. This one "you," and no one else, is the person the speaker adores.

The speaker's pleasure in their lover's company turns up in another, more subtle repetition: the reappearance of the word "sweet." In line 7, the speaker describes the lover's "sweet excesses"—that is, all their deliciously over-the-top, larger-than-life qualities, like their "irreverent" laughter. The word returns in line 15, where the speaker demands that the universe promise them "one more sweet encounter" with their beloved in the next life. The return of this word stresses the importance of *pleasure* in the speaker's love. It's not simply that the speaker feels they have a grand, noble, eternal bond with their lover: it's that they find their company absolutely, addictively delicious.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "your lips"
- **Line 4:** "Your hands"
- **Line 5:** "Your laughter"
- **Line 7:** "sweet"
- **Line 15:** "sweet"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps the reader to hear the love-struck bliss in the speaker's voice. The music begins with a series of /l/ sounds in lines 2-5:

> In what other lives or lands
> Have I known your lips
> Your hands
> Your laughter brave

The long, luxurious /l/ sound feels romantic and sensual. The speaker is clearly savoring the thought of all their beloved's beauties. (This alliteration also picks up on the /l/ consonance in the poem's first word: "Beloved." The poem's whole long first sentence is threaded through with delicious /l/ sounds.)

By contrast, listen to the harder sounds that the speaker uses at the end of the poem:

> I defy my body's haste.
> Without the Promise
> Of one more sweet encounter
> I will not deign to die.

Here, an echoing /d/ sound underscores the speaker's firm resolution to boycott death itself until they get some assurance that they'll meet their lover again in the next world or their next life.

The contrast between these two different flavors of alliteration helps to highlight the contrast between the poem's two tones: sensuous relish on the one hand, irreverent determination to

hang onto love on the other.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "lives," "lands"
- **Line 3:** "lips"
- **Line 5:** "laughter"
- **Line 16:** "deign," "die"

VOCABULARY

Irreverent (Lines 5-6) - Disrespectful of serious things—often in a pleasantly cheeky or witty way.

Excesses (Lines 7-8) - Over-the-top or larger than life qualities. The speaker's beloved, in other words, is just bursting with beauty and energy.

Surety (Lines 9-10) - Certainty, assurance.

Defy (Line 13) - Rebelliously resist.

Haste (Line 13) - Hurry, excessive speed. Here, the body's "haste" is its mortality, its speedy movement toward death.

Deign (Line 16) - To do something condescendingly; to do something that you feel is beneath you.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Refusal" is written in free verse. That means it doesn't use a regular meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, Angelou leaves herself free to shape the lines organically.

In this particular poem, Angelou keeps her lines short and sweet. Some lines are only one word long, and none is longer than six words. These short, firm lines give the speaker's voice a confident tone, whether they're savoring a memory of their lover or refusing to be parted from them.

The poem is built from five leisurely sentences of varying lengths. The first, in which the speaker celebrates their lover, runs over six celebratory lines, while later passages are shorter and more emphatic. Only at one place in the poem is a sentence delivered in just one firm end-stopped line: line 13, where the speaker audaciously declares, "I defy my body's haste." This rhythmic difference marks a tonal turning point. The speaker here moves from dreaming about their lover and fretting that death might separate them to point-blank refusing to die until they know they'll see their beloved on the other side.

METER

Since this poem uses free verse, it doesn't have a regular meter. But it does have a distinct pace. Its short lines often make the speaker sound calm, unhurried, and dreamy as they think about their lover—or bold and firm, like when they declare their intention to stay alive until someone offers them a "Promise" that they can be with their beloved after death. Because the lines stay pretty even throughout, mostly ranging between three and six words long, the speaker's delight in their lover and determination to be with their lover forever feel equally confident and sure.

In a couple of places, the speaker introduces a one-word line: "Beloved" in line 1 and "Irreverent" in line 6. Both of those words, standing alone, get a little extra weight:

- The reasons the speaker might want to single out their "beloved" on a line of their own feel clear enough: the beloved is at the heart of this poem.
- By framing the word "irreverent" in a line of its own, meanwhile, Angelou hints that irreverence might be a particularly important idea here. The speaker uses the word as they delight in their beloved's cheeky laugh. Perhaps they especially enjoy their lover's irreverence because they themselves are not exactly reverent. After all, they feel quite confident demanding a "Promise" from whoever runs the universe that they'll meet their lover again after death—and refusing to die until their conditions are met!

RHYME SCHEME

This poem doesn't have a regular rhyme scheme. However, Angelou does use a single touch of rhyme in lines 1-4:

Beloved,
In what other lives or lands
Have I known your lips
Your hands

This lone rhyme gives the poem a hint of music at a moment when the speaker is clearly relishing their thoughts of their lover. The rhyme highlights the simple word "hands," inviting readers to consider all the things the beloved's hands might mean to the speaker: how beautiful the beloved's hands are in themselves, perhaps, but also what the beloved might *do* with those hands.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is someone who's at once romantic and "irreverent," to use their own word. They're passionately in love with someone whose every gesture and laugh they adore. They're so deeply in love, in fact, that they believe they must have known this person in past lives. They're also insistent that they're going to keep on knowing this beloved in whatever comes *after* this life.

It's here that their irreverence enters the picture. Rather than simply hoping that they'll be bound to their lover forever, they decide to take matters into their own hands. If they can't get a "Promise" that they can meet their lover again, whether in the afterlife or their next life, they'll simply refuse to die. One way or the other, then, their love will be eternal.

This demand for a big, capital-P Promise—and the cocky refusal to die if that demand isn't met—challenges some pretty awe-inspiring forces. The speaker here stands up not just to death, but to the universe, or God, or whatever else might be in charge of death, reincarnation, and/or the afterlife. Like their lover, then, they're "irreverent," unafraid to confront even the most mysterious and sacred powers. Clearly, the only things they feel true reverence for are love and their lover.

SETTING

There's no clear setting in this poem; this love story could take place in any era and any place. That makes a lot of sense, considering the speaker's sense that love might be able to transcend time and space. The speaker tells their beloved that they're sure they first met them in "other lives or lands"—in other times, places, *existences* than the one they're in now. They're certain that the love they feel for this person is soul-deep, something that can travel with them across the borders of time and death.

Or, at least, they really *want* to believe that, so much so that they demand a grand "Promise" from the universe, an assurance that they'll never be separated from their lover. Even if they end up in "other worlds" entirely, they'll want to explore those worlds with this same beloved soul.

The lack of a specific setting here not only suggests that the speaker and their beloved share an immortal love, but that this particular speaker's *experience* might be a timeless one. Lots of lovestruck people across the centuries might similarly have felt that their love isn't limited by time, space, or death.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was one of the most beloved American writers of the 20th century. She first became famous for her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in which she describes her troubled childhood with an honesty and openness that many of her early critics found shocking—and many of her early readers found moving and inspiring. Over the course of her long career, she would write a whole series of memoirs, as well as many books of poetry. "Refusal" first appeared in her acclaimed 1978 collection *And Still I Rise*.

Angelou was a member of the Black Arts Movement, a cultural movement that sprang up in Harlem in the 1960s and '70s. In response to oppression, violence, and racism, Black writers and artists including Angelou, Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Etheridge Knight sought to foster a Black artistic community free from the dominance of white society. Their work centered Black experiences and articulated visions of justice and social change. This poem's description of passionate love shows the joyous, celebratory face of the movement.

As a Black American poet and memoirist, Angelou also saw herself as a member of a literary tradition that included writers like Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. She was also good friends with the essayist and novelist James Baldwin; the two were both major voices in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and '70s. In turn, Angelou has influenced countless people, from the cartoonist Keith Knight to the former U.S. President Barack Obama.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Refusal" is one of a series of love poems that Angelou wrote around the time she got together with Paul du Feu, a man she would be married to for about a decade. Their marriage drew a lot of public attention, in part because du Feu had already been in the spotlight for a connection to a powerful woman: he was previously (briefly) married to the major feminist writer Germaine Greer. What's more, du Feu was White and Angelou was Black. The couple got married in 1974, only seven short years after the Supreme Court ruled (in the landmark case Loving v. Virginia) that state laws against interracial marriage were unconstitutional.

The defiant celebration of love in this poem thus carries political as well as personal weight. Angelou often made a bold, joyful stand for the value and beauty of Black female pleasure and sexual freedom. (In one of her most famous poems, the rallying cry "Still I Rise," she likewise lays defiant claim to her sexuality as a right, a delight, and a source of pride.) This poem doesn't need to be explicitly political to make a defiant statement.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Angelou's life. (https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/maya-angelou)
- An Interview with Angelou — Watch a segment of a 1987 interview with Angelou. (https://youtu.be/uZQJo0v_tII?si=nM5EBfw_NyhKA998)
- Angelou's Website — Visit Angelou's official website, now a memorial to her life and work. (https://www.mayaangelou.com/)

- A Portrait of Angelou — Admire a portrait of Angelou in DC's National Portrait Gallery. (https://npg.si.edu/blog/memoriam-maya-angelou)
- Angelou's Legacy — Read a New Yorker piece celebrating Angelou. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/08/05/songbird)
- The Black Arts Movement — Learn more about the Black Arts Movement, the important literary movement of which Angelou was one of the most important writers. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/148936/an-introduction-to-the-black-arts-movement)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MAYA ANGELOU POEMS

- Caged Bird
- Country Lover
- Harlem Hopscotch
- Life Doesn't Frighten Me
- On Aging
- On the Pulse of Morning
- Phenomenal Woman
- Remembrance
- Still I Rise
- When Great Trees Fall
- Woman Work

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