They Flee From Me

POEM TEXT

They flee from me that sometime did me seek
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek,
That now are wild and do not remember
That sometime they put themself in danger
To take bread at my hand; and now they range,
Busily seeking with a continual change.

Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise
Twenty times better; but once in special,
In thin array after a pleasant guise,
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,
And she me caught in her arms long and small;
Therewithall sweetly did me kiss
And softly said, "Dear heart, how like you this?"

It was no dream: I lay broad waking.
But all is turned thorough my gentleness
Into a strange fashion of forsaking;
And I have leave to go of her goodness,
And she also, to use newfangleness.
But since that I so kindly am served
I would fain know what she hath deserved.

SUMMARY

These days, my ex-lovers avoid me—the same people who used to sneak barefooted into my quarters. I remember them as shy, gentle creatures. Now they're wild, and don't even remember how they used put themselves at risk just to come and take a piece of bread from my hand. Nowadays they roam about, constantly seeking something new.

I'm glad that things used to be better—*much* better, in fact. I remember one particularly special occasion when a lover came to see, scantily dressed after an enjoyable show. Her gown easily slipped off of her shoulders, and she held me in her long, small arms and gently kissed me, asking me in a whisper how I liked it.

That wasn't a dream: I was wide awake. But everything has changed because I was too gentle and nice, and now she totally ignores me. She lets me do my thing while she focuses on her own fickle needs. Since she's never blatantly mistreated me it's hard to know how to feel about her.

THEMES

LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

"They Flee From Me" expresses an idea that most modern readers can relate to: love and relationships are complicated! In the poem, the speaker tries to make sense of the fact that while women use to "seek" him, now they actively avoid him. The speaker puzzles over how drastically the relationship between two people can change; how what was once an intense, exciting intimacy can so quickly become a cold kind of distance. Ultimately the poem presents love, on the one hand, as a deep and beautiful mystery, and, on the other as a rather cynical power game between people (which, in the England's royal court during the 16th century, could literally be a matter of life and death!).

In the past, the speaker enjoyed receiving female visitors to his "chamber"—some of whom put themselves at risk "to take bread at [his] hand," perhaps suggesting that the excitement of an illicit affair was in the atmosphere. The poem thus initially presents love as something thrilling, the key to a door of a special kind of intimate beauty. It also presents the speaker as squarely in control of these actions.

The speaker then recalls how a specific lover, wearing only a thin gown, kissed him "sweetly" and held him tight. The speaker cherishes this memory, marking it out as a particularly "special" time in his life. This is the simple side of love, in which life makes sense in the arms of another.

But the poem stresses that this kind of simplicity is fleeting (or, perhaps, "flee-ing"!). Love is not just sweetness and intimacy, then, but also a kind of power struggle. To emphasize this, the poem makes use of one Wyatt's common metaphors: that love is a kind of hunt, an issue of predator vs. prey.

Wyatt's speaker was once top of the food chain, so to speak, visited by "gentle, tame, and meek" creatures. But soon enough these roles are subverted—the hunted becomes the hunter, and the hunter (the speaker) becomes an irrelevance, "forsak[en]" by his lover. Nothing can be taken for granted when it comes to love, the poem implies, and yesterday's prey could be tomorrow's predator. The speaker's lover is free to pursue other love interests—"to use newfangleness," to sow her wild outs—leaving the speaker to wonder what happened.

With this in mind, the poem can be read as an expression of the confusion—and, perhaps, bitterness—caused by love. The speaker knows his love affair was "no dream," but he doesn't

know how to feel about the new dynamic between himself and his lover now that she's moved on. He's not even sure if she "deserve[s]" his kindness or his anger. He wonders if her was too "gentle," and should have asserted himself more strongly on his lover's "wild[ness]." The poem, then, manages to highlight the way that love can seem so intense and real—as if it will last forever—while, on the other hand, feelings between two lovers can change beyond recognition almost in an instant.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

They flee from me that sometime did me seek
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.

The first line sets up the speaker's problem: while an unnamed "they" used to "seek" him, now they "flee" (or run away) from him. Soon enough it will be clear that the speaker is talking about his lovers, but for now things remain vague. A clue as to who this "they" refers to does appear in line 2, however, with the phrase "naked foot." This means barefoot but also suggests sexual intimacy, that the air was charged with excitement whenever "they" sought the speaker out.

The opening lines also set up the poem's extended metaphor/conceit, which portrays love and sex as a kind of hunt. Take the word "stalking," which creates an image of these barefoot creatures prowling around the speaker's chamber as a predator prowls around its prey. The speaker thus uses animalistic language to paint relationships between people as something primal, instinctual, and even dangerous. On that note, it's worth noting that Wyatt was a courtier in Henry VIII's court, which meant that sleeping with the wrong person—or, similarly, being accused of some sexual wrongdoing—really could result in death!

Now, the speaker has apparently fallen out of favor with this "they." He doesn't specify why this has happened, but the context of the poem might again offer some clues: the fragility of personal loyalties and the suspicion that came with this was one of the defining features the English court during the Tudor period (1485-1603).

The sounds of these lines are also notable. Take the assonance between "flee," "me," and "seek," which draws readers' attention to the contrast between the speaker's two states—being fled from and being sought out. Meanwhile, the hissing sibilance throughout these lines ("sometime," "seek," "stalking") conveys a quiet world of whispers and intrigue.

These lines also establish the poem's meter, which is iambic pentameter. This means that each line has five iambs, poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm:

They flee | from me | that some- | time did | me seek

LINES 3-7

I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek,
That now are wild and do not remember
That sometime they put themself in danger
To take bread at my hand; and now they range,
Busily seeking with a continual change.

The speaker tries to make sense of the major change that has happened in his life and the behavior of those around him. They "they" from line 1 (again, the speaker's lovers—though this hasn't been revealed yet) used to be "gentle, tame, and meek" in his presence, but now they have learned to be "wild." They don't remember that they used to "put themself in danger" just to "take bread at my hand."

Taking a bite of bread is something a bird or other small creature may do. The speaker thus continues to use motifs of animals and hunting as he describes his situation; he used to be the one in control and with power over these docile creatures that visited him.

While "gentle, tame, and meek" might seem repetitive, in that these three adjectives mean something similar, "gentle" also specifically relates to social etiquette and status (e.g., being a "gentleman"). In Henry VIII's court, social mores and manners were almost like a kind of currency. The three adjectives—in their similarity—also suggest gentleness, the speaker here willing to linger on a sentiment in a way that suggests the lovers' prior willingness to spend time in the speaker's chamber.

The mention of "danger," meanwhile, suggests that there was something illicit about the relationship between the speaker and these women (fun fact: it's thought that Wyatt had an affair with Anne Boleyn, one of Henry's many wives over the years).

Lines 6 and 7 continue the comparison between two different times—*now* and *then*—with the speaker describing how these once-tame lovers now "range." Like big cats hunting for prey, the ex-lovers traverse the terrain—in this case the upper heights of royal society—searching for their next conquest. Though the speaker was perhaps once at the top of the metaphorical food chain, now women are on the prowl.

The enjambment of many of these lines speeds things up and grants the poem a gently embittered tone, as if the speaker has just started talking passionately about a bugbear that is close to his heart. The speaker laments the fact that these women have forgotten how well he treated them—how he, within the extended metaphor of love and sex as a kind of hunt, was once the predator, not the prey. Now, everything has changed.

LINES 8-11

Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise
Twenty times better; but once in special,
In thin array after a pleasant guise,
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,

The speaker expresses gratitude that things used to be "better." That is, life wasn't *always* so bad. He thanks "fortune" that "it"—life—was "Twenty times better," in fact. This could mean either that he is thinking of multiple occasions in which things were better, or that he recalls one particular time when "it" was so good that it was "twenty times" superior to life in the poem's present.

Either way, he's using hyperbole—a statement that isn't meant altogether literally but shows the strength of his feelings. Indeed, the phrase heightens the sense of disbelief that his romantic situation could be so drastically different in one point in time compared to another.

After "better," the poem takes a significant shift in direction. The speaker ceases talking in broad, general terms about *then* and *now* and focuses on a *specific* memory. This shift is signalled by the caesura in line 9, which is represented by a semi-colon. (Of course, it's important to note that punctuation marks for poems dating from this time are often the work of editors and compilers, added to the poem to help modern readers follow them more easily; see the Resources section of the guide for examples of Wyatt's original writing.)

The turn in direction is clear: the speaker is sustained by one "special" memory, albeit a bittersweet one. He recalls being visited by his lover, who was wearing a "thin array" (in other words, not much!) and "a pleasant guise." This line sounds confusing, but "guise" simply means an outfit or dress; it can also connote deception or a disguise, and may refer to a show or performance of some sort. Essentially, the speaker is saying that there was some pleasant show—perhaps a performance, or perhaps this lover herself was dressed or acting in a way the speaker found pleasing, putting on a kind of show—and then swiftly revealed a "thin array," or skimpy getup.

The poem varies the meter here to bring to life the image of someone expecting and anticipating nakedness:

> In thin | array | after | a pleas- | ant guise,
> When her | loose gown | from her shoul- | ders did
> fall,

While the line 10—the first of the two quote above—fits neatly into the poem's general iambic pentameter pattern (albeit with a trochee variation in the third foot), it's difficult to read the following line as anything approaching the same meter. As the lover's "gown" falls in the memory of the speaker's mind, so too does the iambic fabric of the poem's rhythm. This also suggests excitement, the thrill and electricity of two people in an intimate embrace. The feet in the line above are scanned here as pyrrhic (two unstressed syllables), spondee (two stressed syllables), and two anapaests, but there is no single authoritative way to notate the meter. However the line is scanned, its unusual meter demonstrates the power that this "special" memory still holds over the speaker.

LINES 12-14

And she me caught in her arms long and small;
Therewithall sweetly did me kiss
And softly said, "Dear heart, how like you this?"

The speaker pines after the intimacy he once shared with his lover. Back in this particularly "special" time, she "caught" the speaker in her arms and kissed him. The fact that it is the woman rather than the man doing the metaphorical "catching" deliberately reverses the usual gender expectations. Though the speaker presented himself as powerful in the first stanza—the dangerous predator holding out "bread" for "gentle, tame, and meek" women to take from his hand—here he implies that his *lover* was actually the one in control.

The end-stop after "small" creates a brief pause, capturing the charged silence of the moment being described. The last two lines of the stanza use sibilance, consonance, and alliteration to convey a gentleness as the lovers embrace:

> Therewithall sweetly did me kiss
> And softly said, "Dear heart, how like you this?"

The soft sounds are meant to capture the tenderness of this embrace. At the same time, though the lover's arms are "small" and her kisses sweet, it's clear that the speaker doesn't really have the upper hand here since *his lover* is the one "catching," essentially seducing, *him*.

The poem also subtly refers back to its extended hunting metaphor again in the use of "heart." Of course, heart is the lover's term of endearment for the speaker. But a "hart" is also an old word for a deer—and, specifically and appropriately enough, for a male deer. The speaker seems to have gone from predator to prey.

LINES 15-21

It was no dream: I lay broad waking.
But all is turned thorough my gentleness
Into a strange fashion of forsaking;
And I have leave to go of her goodness,
And she also, to use newfangleness.
But since that I so kindly am served
I would fain know what she hath deserved.

For the speaker, the difference between how things are now (in the poem's present) and how they used to be is so stark as to resemble the difference between real life and dreams. He adamantly denies that the memory described in the second

stanza was a dream, the caesura after "dream" adding emphasis to his insistence that he "lay broad waking." The mention of being awake also hints at another reason for lack of sleep, of course: the intimacy between himself and his lover!

With the above in mind, the fact that the speaker needs to affirm that the memory is true shows just how much things have changed. Now, "all is turned" into something else and the speaker in truth isn't sure how to feel. He senses that his earlier "gentleness" has resulted in his "forsaking"—that is, that he failed to assert himself and has since fallen out of his lover's favor. Perhaps he was too eager to please.

Now, he perceives in his ex-lover/lovers a new "fashion of forsaking," as though the latest trend is to avoid him and seek other partners. The two alliterating /f/ sounds function like ornaments here, marking out "forsaking" as the latest must-have accessory (or in this case, social behavior).

Now, the speaker has implicit permission from his ex-lover to do as he pleases. She, for her part, appears to have given herself the liberty to "use newfangleness"—basically, to be fickle without remorse. She is like the lovers described in the first stanza—"[b]usily seeking with a continual change," constantly looking for something new and exciting. Perhaps her interest in the speaker was not as sincere as it appeared, or perhaps she really did care about the speaker but is able to move on quickly. Either way, the speed with which people change their minds and discard lovers clearly unnerves the speaker.

The poem's closing couplet ends in uncertainty. Essentially, the speaker doesn't know how to feel. His lover hasn't really done anything obviously wrong to him, other than to avoid him. She seems to have "kindly [...] served" him by not being explicit about a break-up, but the fact that she "flee[s]" from him seems ruthless too. In the end, the speaker simply has no idea how he should respond, or what the ex-lover "deserve[s]" from him now that they've parted.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used throughout "They Flee From Me." In the first two lines, for example, soft /f/ sounds combine with sibilance to create a hushed atmosphere:

> They flee from me that sometime did me seek
> With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.

The /s/ sound has a particularly whispery quality to it, suggesting that there was something dangerous or illicit about the romantic meetings the speaker here recalls. That quietness fits with the idea of a predator "stalking" its prey, patiently waiting for the right moment to strike.

In the second stanza, the speaker remembers a cherished night that he spent with his ex-lover. Life was "Twenty times better" than it is now, the speaker says, the alliteration working to intensify this sentiment (which can be read as a kind of exaggeration or hyperbole); that double /t/ sounds makes the phrase stand out all the more strongly for the reader.

Later in the same stanza, the poem returns to the sibilant /s/ sound to suggest passion and intimacy:

> And she me caught in her arms long and small;
> Therewithall sweetly did me kiss
> And softly said, "Dear heart, how like you this?"

The breathy /h/ sounds and additional consonance of /s/ sounds contributes to the effect here, evoking a hushed—but erotically charged—atmosphere.

Another example of alliteration appears in line 17:

> Into a strange fashion of forsaking;

Here, the speaker is wondering if his lover's change of heart is part of a new "fashion of forsaking." That is, he suspects that there is a new trend in town, one which involves no longer remaining loyal to him in order to pursue other love interests. He sees it as a kind of artifice or pretension, which he struggles to reconcile in his mind with the emotional and physical intimacy of the moment described in the second stanza. Alliteration is one way in which the poem can perform this kind of artifice, reminding the reader that the poem is something *constructed* and *deliberate*. The /f/ is sound is strikingly visible, like a new style of hat that everyone suddenly seems to be wearing around town.

The poem's penultimate line turns the earlier /s/ alliteration on its head:

> But since that I so kindly am served

These /s/ sounds have an embittered quality, as though the speaker is talking through gritted teeth.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "flee from," "sometime," "seek"
- **Line 2:** "foot," "stalking"
- **Line 5:** "That," "they," "themself"
- **Line 6:** "To take"
- **Line 9:** "Twenty times," "better; but"
- **Line 12:** "small"
- **Line 13:** "sweetly"
- **Line 14:** "softly," "heart, how"
- **Line 17:** "fashion," "forsaking"
- **Line 18:** "go," "goodness"

- **Line 20:** “since,” “so,” “served”

ASSONANCE

The speaker uses assonance to bring the poem's images to life. Take the first three lines, for example:

> They flee from me that sometime did me seek
> With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.
> I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek,

The assonance here brings the lines to life, filling them with a sense of delicate melody. The long /ee/ sounds of "flee," "me," and "seek" also helps these words stand out clearly for the reader. That "flee" and "seek" mean entirely different things yet sound similar serves to highlight the way that romantic entanglements can swing in one direction or another at the drop of a hat—from seeking someone to fleeing from them.

Lines 12 and 13 return to this /ee/ sound:

> And she me caught in her arms long and small;
> Therewithall sweetly did me kiss

This sound has already been associated with both intimate tenderness and the excitement of these romantic meet-ups, and so it makes sense that the poem returns to them here as the speaker recalls his lover's embrace. Notice how the two consecutive /e/ sounds in "she me" create a kind of tension that is relieved in the following vowel sound of "caught," reflecting the comfort that the speaker felt within his lover's arms.

In the final stanza, line 15 uses bright /a/ vowels to affirm that what was described in the previous stanza was not a dream—it was real life. The speaker "lay broad waking," the two long /a/ sounds making him sound doubly insistent that he didn't make it up.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “flee,” “me,” “me,” “seek”
- **Line 2:** “naked,” “stalking in,” “chamber”
- **Line 3:** “seen,” “them gentle,” “meek”
- **Line 5:** “danger”
- **Line 6:** “take,” “hand; and,” “they range”
- **Line 7:** “change”
- **Line 9:** “Twenty,” “better”
- **Line 10:** “In thin,” “array after a”
- **Line 11:** “her shoulders”
- **Line 12:** “she me,” “small”
- **Line 13:** “Therewithall,” “sweetly,” “me”
- **Line 15:** “lay,” “waking”
- **Line 17:** “strange,” “forsaking”
- **Line 19:** “to ,” “use newfangleness”

- **Line 20:** “I,” “kindly”

CAESURA

The poem's punctuation has been modernized in the centuries since it was written (to see it in Wyatt's original writing, check out the Resources section of this guide). The caesurae in the poem are, however, still clear enough by looking at the poem's syntax (its general arrangment of words) and grammar.

Take the subtle pause in line 2 after "foot," suggesting the tentative stalking motion of the speaker's lovers. An even clearer caesura appears in line 6, helping to separate the poem into two moments in time: *then* and *now*. Having established the way that his lovers used to behave, the caesura introduces the speaker's assessment of how things are now—"now [his lovers] range" for new lovers and ignore him.

Another caesura appears in line 9 and signals an important shift in direction for the poem. Here, the speaker goes from talking generally about his situation to focusing on a specific memory. The caesura following "better" marks a clear beat in which the speaker begins to recall better times.

Finally, line 15's caesura helps the speaker express strongly that he didn't imagine the events described in the second stanza. He affirms that he really did share that moment of closeness and intimacy with his ex-lover:

> It was no dream: I lay broad waking.

The strong caesura here reflects the speaker's insistence, as though he's telling the reader, *"I didn't dream it. I swear!"*

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “foot, stalking”
- **Line 6:** “hand; and”
- **Line 9:** “better; but”
- **Line 14:** “said, “Dear heart, how”
- **Line 15:** “dream: I”
- **Line 19:** “also, to”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is a subtle but constant presence in the poem. Overall, this helps the poem simply *sound* better—making it feel lyrical and unified. Consonance may also draw readers' attention to specific words and phrases.

The first three lines use consonance primarily to evoke the prior "gentle[ness]"of those who used to "seek" the speaker—the same lovers who now "flee" from him. Notice the gentle /f/, humming /m/, and sibilant /s/ sounds here, which weave throughout louder /k/ sounds:

They flee from me that sometime did me seek
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek,

The softer sounds give this section hushed atmosphere, but there is something about the spikiness of the /k/ sounds that suggests an element of danger. Perhaps the poem's main metaphor, love as a kind of hunt, plays out in these sounds, with peace and quiet suddenly disrupted by a loud noise.

Later, in line 9, consonance is used to strengthen the speaker's hyperbole when he claims that life used to be "Twenty times better" (which could mean twenty different memorable occasions or just one that was twenty time as good!). These /t/ sounds are loud and clear, mirroring the way that this particular memory evokes such strong feeling in the speaker.

Lines 10 and 11 use consonance (and sibilance) to portray the speaker's ex-lover as small and delicate through /n/, /z/, and /l/ sounds:

In thin array after a pleasant guise,
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,

These gentle sounds suggest a delicate intimacy, both physical and emotional.

In another moment of consonance, the /f/ in "newfangleness" (line 19) picks up on the alliterating /f/ sounds in line 17 ("a strange fashion of forsaking"). The speaker here expresses his disbelief at the behavior of this ex-lover—it baffles him, and he possibly views her as contrived and pretentious. The oddness of "newfangleness," and the way its consonance chimes with the earlier phrase, relays the confusion and contradiction of his feelings towards his old lover.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "flee from me," "sometime," "me ," "seek"
- **Line 2:** "naked," " foot, ," "stalking," "my chamber"
- **Line 3:** "seen them," " gentle," "tame," "meek"
- **Line 4:** "remember"
- **Line 5:** "That sometime they," "themself," "danger"
- **Line 6:** "To take," "range"
- **Line 7:** "Busily seeking," "continual change"
- **Line 8:** "Thanked," " fortune," "been," " ," "otherwise"
- **Line 9:** "Twenty times better; but," " once," "special"
- **Line 10:** "In thin," "pleasant guise"
- **Line 11:** "loose," " gown," "fall"
- **Line 12:** "long," "small"
- **Line 13:** "Therewithall," " ," "sweetly," "kiss"
- **Line 14:** "softly said," "heart, how," "this"
- **Line 16:** "gentleness"
- **Line 17:** "Into," "strange fashion," "forsaking"
- **Line 18:** "have leave," "go," "goodness"
- **Line 19:** "also," "use newfangleness"
- **Line 20:** "since," "so," " ," "kindly," "served"
- **Line 21:** "fain know"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopping is used in a few key moments in "They Flee From Me." It usually helps create an intimate, charged atmosphere, but also sometimes signals a shift in direction. Again, remember that later editors modernized the punctuation and spelling of this poem—but the end-stops are clear enough to spot without relying on punctuation, thanks to the poem's syntax and the presence of implied pauses at the ends of many lines.

The first end-stop occurs at the end of line 2. It creates a sudden sense of quiet that is almost eerie. The pause reflects the charged atmosphere of sexual excitement, the times when the speaker's lovers would sneak into his "chamber."

The full stop at the end of the first stanza creates a similar pause, but this time it's one of reflection. The speaker notes that those who used to "seek" him are now busy with "continual change," change that doesn't involve him. The end-stop emphasizes his loneliness.

At the start of the third stanza, the speaker states adamantly that the memory described in the second stanza is real—he didn't dream it up. The end-stop after "waking" makes this affirmation all the more insistent, though it's also telling that the speaker feels like he *has* to state this so clearly. That's because there is such a contrast between the memory—how things were—and how things are now.

Also note that there is generally more enjambment at the beginning of the poem than there is at the end. The poem's pace slows as the speaker's lovers "flee" and he is left to question what went wrong.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "chamber."
- **Line 6:** "range,"
- **Line 7:** "change."
- **Line 9:** "special,"
- **Line 10:** "guise,"
- **Line 11:** "fall,"
- **Line 12:** "small;"
- **Line 13:** "kiss"
- **Line 14:** "this?""
- **Line 15:** "waking."
- **Line 17:** "forsaking;"
- **Line 18:** "goodness,"
- **Line 19:** "newfangleness."
- **Line 21:** "deserved."

ENJAMBMENT

It's worth noting that this version of the poem features modernized punctuation, so it's easier to think of enjambments as points in the poem in which the *grammatical* sense of what's being said runs on between two or more lines (as opposed to the absence of punctuation).

The first example of enjambment is between lines 1 and 2:

> They flee from me that sometime did me seek
> With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.

The way that the first line runs to the second here gives the poem's opening a kind of hurried feel, which matches the way that the man's ex-lovers now seem to "flee" from him—those same people that used to "seek" him out. This same sense of being hurried—and excited—occurs in lines 4-6 too, in which the speaker describes how those women would "put themselves in danger" to be with him.

In the second stanza, the enjambment between lines 8 and 9 adds extra emphasis to "Twenty times better," demonstrating how dear this memory is to the speaker. Later, in lines 16 and 17, enjambment helps create a contrast between two moments in time:

> But all is turned thorough my gentleness
> Into a strange fashion of forsaking;

The speaker remembers when "all" used to be different, but is now "turned" into something else—the way in which he is excluded from his lover's life (or multiple lovers' lives).

Finally, the enjambment in the poem's closing couplet helps give the reader a sense of the speaker's confused state of mind. In short, he doesn't know how to feel—and this confusion is rendered by the slightly awkward rhyme of "served" and "deserved," brought closer together by the enjambment between the lines.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "seek / With"
- **Lines 3-4:** "meek, / That"
- **Lines 4-5:** "remember / That"
- **Lines 5-6:** "danger / To"
- **Lines 8-9:** "otherwise / Twenty"
- **Lines 16-17:** "gentleness / Into"
- **Lines 20-21:** "served / I"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"They Flee From Me" uses an extended metaphor that characterizes love, sex, and romantic relationships as a kind of hunt. The metaphor also borrows from other aspects of animal behavior. This idea appears elsewhere in Wyatt's poetry, most notably in "Whoso List to Hunt, I Know where is an Hind," as well as in the work of the 14th-century Italian poet Petrarch (who was a major influence on Wyatt).

The metaphor is most prominent in the first stanza. The speaker's lovers used to come see him and were "gentle, tame, and meek"—in other words, they were subservient to him, almost like pets that have come to depend on the person who feeds them. Now, these women have discovered—or rediscovered—their "wild[ness]" and don't need the speaker anymore.

Here, the poem intentionally blurs the lines between hunter and hunted. The women now "flee" like scared animals, but they are also "wild" like predators. The metaphor helps heighten the sense of danger around these romantic encounters. And in the 16th-century royal court of England, that danger was real!

The metaphor also helps the speaker explore whether he has been too "gentle" himself. In the second stanza's description of intimacy, it is *the speaker*—and not his female lover—who is caught in the other's arms. She also calls him her "dear heart," playing on the old meaning of "hart"—a male deer. Part of the speaker's thrill (as described in this memory) seems to have come from the fact that, on this "special" occasion, he was the somehow the vulnerable one.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-7:** "They flee from me that sometime did me seek / With naked foot, stalking in my chamber. / I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek, / That now are wild and do not remember / That sometime they put themself in danger / To take bread at my hand; and now they range, / Busily seeking with a continual change."
- **Line 12:** "she me caught"
- **Line 14:** "Dear heart"

HYPERBOLE

Hyperbole appears in lines 8-9:

> Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise
> Twenty times better; [...]

The speaker is comparing two moments in time: *then* (when lovers didn't flee from him) and *now* (the poem's present). That earlier time was "Twenty times better," the speaker says, which is an exaggeration that can be interpreted in a few ways.

The speaker might be saying that the *pleasure* of the past was 20 times as great as anything he could feel now, or he could also being referencing 20 separate encounters with his lover(s). Either way, he exaggerates for effect, to emphasize just how great things once were—and thus how stark they seem by comparison in the present. The speaker clearly holds this memory of the past dear to his heart, and the passion and

emotion that he feels towards his exes come across loud and clear.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise / Twenty times better;"

SIBILANCE

"They Flee From Me" uses sibilance throughout. In the first stanza, the poem uses this sibilance to conjure the charged silence of the night in which the speaker's lovers would come to visit him. The /s/ sounds in "sometime," "seek," and "stalking" give the reader a sense of the excitement and anticipation that used to be part of the speaker's life. The gentle /s/ sound also plays into the poem's extended metaphor that treats love as a kind of hunt. The way the /s/ suggests quietness speaks to the interaction between predator and prey, with both needing to sneak around in turn.

The poem's sibilance takes on a different character in the second stanza. Here, it's all about sensuality as the speaker describes one "special" occasion when his lover held him in her arms. Lines 13 and 14 are particularly sibilant, the /s/ sounds here (along with the gentle /l/, /th/, and breathy /h/ sounds) suggesting the tenderness of this encounter:

> Therewithall sweetly did me kiss
> And softly said, "Dear heart, how like you this?"

This sibilance creates the sound of a whisper, giving the reader a sense of the physical and emotional intimacy between the two lovers.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sometime," "seek"
- **Line 2:** "stalkin," "g"
- **Line 3:** "seen"
- **Line 9:** "once," "special"
- **Line 11:** "loose," "shoulders"
- **Line 12:** "she," "arms," "small"
- **Line 13:** "sweetly," "kiss"
- **Line 14:** "softly said," "this"
- **Line 16:** "gentleness"
- **Line 17:** "strange fashion," "forsaking"
- **Line 20:** "since," "so," "served"
- **Line 21:** "she," "deserved"

VOCABULARY

Flee (Line 1) - To run away in a hurry, as though from danger.

Sometime (Line 1) - Archaic form of "sometimes."

Seek (Line 1) - To search for.

Naked Foot (Line 2) - Barefoot.

Chamber (Line 2) - Bedroom or quarters.

Meek (Line 3) - Submissive and quiet.

Themself (Line 5) - Themselves.

Range (Line 6) - To travel around widely.

Hath (Line 8) - Archaic form of has.

Thin Array (Line 10) - Scantily clad (wearing just a thin covering).

Guise (Line 10) - A disguise or outfit.

Therewithal (Line 13) - Additionally.

Thorough (Line 16) - Archaic form of "through."

Have Leave (Line 18) - To have permission, also with the sense of having been relieved of particular duties.

Newfangleness (Line 19) - New fashions or social behaviors.

Fain (Line 21) - In this instance this means "would like to." It expresses the speaker's confusion about how to feel.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"They Flee From Me" consists of three septets (seven-line stanzas). The poem uses rhyme royal, a form introduced to English by the 14th-century author of *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer. The poem is steady in its form, perhaps reflecting the speaker's desire to control and understand his lovers. Of course, these lovers break free from the speaker's control, "rang[ing]" or wandering in search of new lovers and experiences. The poem's steady form, then, contrasts with the confusing reality of the speaker's experiences.

It's also interesting to consider that "stanza" means "room" in Italian, which is the language from which the word originates. The poem, then, consists of three rooms, or "chamber[s]," giving the reader a subtle visual representation of the different living quarters of the royal court. Each stanza, or room, has a distinct function in the poem. Overall, the speaker compares *then* with *now*—how much better life used to be compared to his present situation.

The first stanza declares that the same people who used to "seek" the speaker now "flee" from him, and that these lovers who were once tame and now are wild. The second stanza goes deeper into the speaker's psychology, dealing with one particularly cherished—"special"—memory. The poem here is intensely intimate, with the reader becoming almost an unwelcome guest. In the final stanza, the speaker then feels the need to affirm that the memory was real and not a dream. But such is the change in circumstances that the past might as well

have been his imagination, leaving the speaker in a state of total confusion.

METER

"They Flee From Me" is written in iambic pentameter, with some variations. This means that most lines consist of five feet, each of which has an unstressed-stressed (da-DUM) beat pattern. The first line is a good example of this meter at work:

> They flee | from me | that some- | time did | me seek

This starts the poem on stable footing, and perhaps hints at the deliberate steps taken by a hunter as they stalk their prey. Iambic pentameter was often used in poetry composed at court—and for royal occasions—so the meter also helps establish the setting.

The poem has numerous examples of variation in the meter. A number of lines end with an unstressed syllable, something called a "feminine ending." For example, both "chamber" and "remember" both end with a soft final beat. These unstressed endings help the poem build a sense of tension between strength and gentleness, and, in the context of the poem's main metaphor, between predator (strong stresses) and prey (weak stresses).

There is another major variation worthy of close attention in lines 11-12:

> In thin | array | after | a pleas- | ant guise,
> When her | loose gown | from her shoul- | ders did
> fall,

While the line 10—the first of the two quoted above—fits relatively well into the poem's general iambic pentameter pattern (albeit with a trochee variation in the third foot: "after"), the following line is all over the place. As the lover's "gown" falls in the memory of the speaker's mind, so too does the iambic fabric of the poem's rhythm. This also suggests the heightened atmosphere of sexual excitement and anticipation, as though the poem is getting carried away with itself. The feet in the line above are scanned here as a pyrrhic (two unstressed syllables), spondee (two stressed syllables), and two anapaests, but there is no single authoritative way to notate the meter.

RHYME SCHEME

"They Flee From Me" follows a rhyme scheme known as rhyme royal. A stanza of rhyme royal consists of seven lines (a septet) which follows the pattern:

> ABABBCC

The pattern is relatively intricate, and its complexity seems to provide an effective vehicle for the speaker's conflicting feelings about his lovers/exes. The rhymes in general give the poem a slow but steady forward motion, perhaps helping the poem evoke the deliberate (but small) movements of a hunter.

Sometimes, the rhyme words are linked together conceptually as well. In lines 6 and 7, for example, "range" and "change" describe the new world that the speaker finds himself in—one in which is lovers appear to go everywhere *except* for his chambers, looking for anything and everything *except* for him.

The second stanza uses a number of delicate, single-syllable words to help heighten the atmosphere of physical and emotional intimacy. The speaker cherishes the memory of being in his lover's "long and small" arms, "fall[ing]" into them. "Kiss" and "this" in the stanza's ending couplet are so simple and gentle that they seem to evoke the way that love—and the expression of love in physical form—can momentarily shut out the noise of the outside world.

The most notable rhyme in the final stanza is also its closing couplet:

> But since that I so kindly am served
> I would fain know what she hath deserved.

The similarity of "served" and "deserved" is somewhat clunky, and seems to end the poem in a state of confusion or disorientation that fits with the speaker's state of mind.

SPEAKER

"They Flee From Me" is written from the first-person perspective, allowing the speaker to examine his own complicated feelings about love and relationships. The poem is often interpreted autobiographically in light of Wyatt's own colorful love life (indeed, this is why this guide uses male pronouns for the speaker, which make the most sense given the poem's context; it is possible to read it differently, however). Wyatt was rumored to have had an affair with Anne Boleyn, one of Henry VIII's many wives over the years. That said, knowing this biographical information is not necessary to reading, understanding, and enjoying the poem.

What's clear is that the speaker is conflicted and embittered about how his life has changed. He used to be desired, and those who desired him (which may be one or multiple lovers) would put themselves at risk to spend time in his presence. Now, however, those used to "seek" him actively "flee" from him, and the speaker doesn't really understand why.

Thinking about his situation leads the speaker to remember one "special" time when he was "caught" in his lover's arms, an occasion he affirms was "no dream." It's fair to say that there remains a lingering sense of affection and desire for this lover on the speaker's part, even if she now follows a new "fashion of forsaking" (that is, avoiding him). By the end of the poem, the speaker is none the wiser—he remains confused, unsure what his ex-lover "deserve[s]."

SETTING

"They Flee From Me" takes place mostly in the speaker's "chamber," or bedroom/living quarters, where various lovers used to visit him. The poem also moves in time from the speaker's present, when women avoid the speaker, to the past. The poem is a comparison between *then*—the "seeking" era—and *now*—the "fleeing" era. The poem can also be thought of as set in the speaker's mind as he tries to puzzle out why those lovers that used to "seek" him now actively avoid being in his company.

Wyatt was a court poet during the reign of Henry VIII, and this was a time when saying or doing the wrong thing could get you killed. That atmosphere of paranoia and intrigue creeps into the first stanza with words like "stalking" and "danger." The gentle sounds in the first stanza also give the poem a hushed quiet, representing both the time when lovers would sneak to the speaker's chambers *and* the more disappointing isolation he feels now. The second stanza is then set entirely in the speaker's memory, while the third brings it back to the harsh realities of the present. Nowadays, he sees his ex-lover going about the court, but she always manages to avoid him.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) was an important poet in English literary history and is credited with numerous innovations, including being one of the writers to introduce the sonnet to the English language. The sonnet form originated in Italy and was often used by 14th-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarch (hence the term "Petrarchan sonnet").

Wyatt produced a number of translations of Petrarch, whose influence is on display in "They Flee From Me." For an interesting comparison, readers should look to Wyatt's sonnet "Whoso List to Hunt, I Know where is an Hind" and the inspiration behind it: Petrarch's "Una candida cerva sopra l'erba." Both poems feature hunting as a central metaphor for love and sex, which is carried over into this poem.

Another of Wyatt's main influences was Geoffrey Chaucer, a 14th-century poet often dubbed the "father of English poetry." Like Wyatt, Chaucer often took forms from mainland Europe and innovated them for the English language. The rhyme royal scheme, which is on display here, was used extensively by Chaucer and may have been adapted from French or Italian forms. Rhyme royal was later used by William Shakespeare in "The Rape of Lucrece."

"They Flee From Me" deals with a subject that is as old as poetry itself: love. The poem is remarkably modern in the way that it doesn't try to reduce the complexities of the speaker's feelings—he doesn't know how to act, but expresses this state of doubt in clear and certain language. Wyatt was writing during the Renaissance period in English literature, which later featured one of the finest love poets of all time: John Donne. Both Wyatt and Donne were relatively bold for the time in the eroticism of their work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"They Flee From Me" offers contemporary readers a glimpse into the tense atmosphere of the royal court of Henry VIII, a Tudor King. The Tudor period ran from 1485 to 1603. Particularly during Henry's reign, this was a time of societal turmoil. For example, Henry VIII famously pitted himself against the Catholic Church, angry that they would not sanctify his desire to trade in his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, for the younger Anne Boleyn.

Thomas Wyatt, an important part of Henry VIII's court, was often embroiled in Henry's political wranglings, even for a time serving as ambassador to Rome. The suspicion and paranoia surrounding England's position in Europe played out in miniature in Henry's court, where a number of his key staff and associates would live. Wyatt, for example, was nearly executed for allegedly having an affair with Anne Boleyn. He may even have witnessed her own execution from his window in the Tower of London.

While Wyatt's poems are often interpreted along biographical lines, they endure because they go beyond the specifics of his situation. Modern readers are perhaps just as likely to relate to the conflicted feelings contained in this poem as Wyatt's contemporaries.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Hear the poem read by actor Andrew Scott. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKO8EsedXhY)
- Wyatt's Life and Work — Learn more about Wyatt at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-wyatt)
- Love Poetry During the Renaissance — An article from the British Library that looks at the work of poets like Wyatt and John Donne. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/love-poetry-in-renaissance-england)
- The Egerton Manuscript — A compilation of poems made during Henry VIII's reign, including some poems written in Wyatt's own hand. (https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=egerton_ms_2711_fs001r)
- "Whoso List to Hunt" — An interesting article about another of Wyatt's poems, offering insight into the

relationship between his poetry and Petrarch's. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/aug/10/poem-of-the-week-thomas-wyatt)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SIR THOMAS WYATT POEMS

- Whoso List to Hunt, I Know where is an Hind

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