

# **AQA English GCSE**

## Poetry: Love and Relationships Love's Philosophy - *Percy Bysshe Shelley*

# LOVE'S PHILOSOPHY

Percy Bysshe Shelley

## Brief Summary

Love's philosophy takes the form of a speaker putting forwards an argument to a prospective lover, trying to persuade them to kiss him. He personifies the natural world and compares himself to it passionately.

## Synopsis

- Initially, Shelley declares 'facts' about examples of couples in nature and then asks why he is not in a relationship.
- In the second stanza, Shelley fixates on examples of physical intimacy in nature and then asks why he doesn't have the same experience.

### Summary

**Context** – Shelley is a key Romantic poet // Youthful passion associated with the Romantics.  
**Structure** - Each stanza ends with a rhetorical question // two stanzas = two separate people  
**Language** – Natural imagery // Rhetorical questions // Philosophical debate  
**Key Points** – Trying to persuade lover // Nature is linked to physical intimacy.

## Context

### Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

Born into a very wealthy family, which attained a small noble rank in 1806 (when he was a boy) Shelley attended Eton and Oxford. However he was expelled from Oxford as he contributed to a pamphlet about Atheism, a very controversial concept in the 1800s. Due to both Shelley and Byron dying early, Romantic poetry is usually associated with intense, **youthful passion**. This is evident in "Love's philosophy".

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## Love's Philosophy

Shelley's establishes the theme of nature from the outset which is common for Romantic poetry. The idea of fountains mingling with rivers evokes passive images implying that is only natural for them to be together.

The connotations of "sweet" imply that the speaker experiences tender affection.

Here, the reader learns for the first time that the speaker is experiencing unrequited love, and the **monosyllabic** nature of this line adds to its impact, making the stanza more persuasive. This is the first time the pronoun "I" is referenced, which suggests the speaker is relying on the impact of natural imagery to convince the woman he wants to be in a relationship in that she should be with him.

"clasp" has highly sensual connotations and the soft **sibilance** in it denote a loving, intimate connection, as well as continuing the semantic field of embrace.

"sunlight" and "moonbeams" form **antithesis** which shows the overwhelming nature of the speaker's desire, he is passionate both night and day.

The poem culminates with a question so the listener is provided no **catharsis**. Shelley's use of questions is also indicative of the **persuasive style** of the poem.

**Monosyllables** are also used here to reinforce the speaker's argument. "kiss" is repeated throughout the poem to emphasise the speaker's desire.

The fountains mingle with the river

And the rivers with the Ocean,

The winds of Heaven mix for ever

With a sweet emotion;

Nothing in the world is single;

All things by a law divine

In one another's being mingle

— Why not I with thine?

See the mountains kiss high Heaven,

And the waves clasp one another;

No sister-flower would be forgiven

If it disdain'd its brother:

And the sunlight clasps the earth,

And the moonbeams kiss the sea —

What is all this sweet work worth,

If thou kiss not me?

The ocean is a typically feminised motif in poetry, so by including this image, the speakers awe at the woman he loves could be inferred.

This links back to the title in which Shelley compares his lack of love with a philosophical argument, and is paradoxically reducing the massive, illogical concept of love to a straightforward step-by-step plea

The use of **pathetic fallacy** and **assonance** suggest how natural and simple it would be for them to be together

These are innocent images so may imply the young nature of the relationship, or perhaps Shelley is suggesting the relationship is natural and shouldn't be forced - they are destined / born to be together.

"sweet work worth" is difficult to say, implying that the speaker is beginning to feel despondent about the lack of reciprocity of his love.

## Perspective

Love's philosophy is written in the **first person** as Shelley is able to speak from his own experience. This narrative perspective also adds to the intimacy of the sentiment expressed by the speaker.

## Structure

### Philosophical argument

In each stanza, Shelley builds up evidence as if **he is constructing a philosophical argument** and ends with a **rhetorical question**. In the first stanza he shifts from the **declarative** "*The fountains mingle with the river*" to the **rhetorical** "*Why not I with thine?*". The question is in contrast with the rest of the poem and acts to highlight the difference between what Shelley has just described and his actual situation.

### Repetition

Shelley repeatedly uses the **anaphora** of "**And the**" (rivers, waves, sunlight, moonbeams) which could be used to constantly imply the importance of nature in a romantic and sexual relationship.

Throughout the poem, Shelley employs **lexis** from the **semantic field of embrace**. For example "**mingle**", "**mix**", "**kiss**", "**clasp**" are repeated throughout different stanzas which emphasises the fact that the speaker wishes he had an intensely intimate and physical relationship with the woman he is addressing in the poem and stresses the importance of physical togetherness.

## Form and meter

### Trochaic meter

It is structured in a **trochaic metre**. This is where there are four beats in the first three lines and three beats in the fourth, with this repeated throughout the rest of the stanzas. This is connected to the usual **ballad metre** employed by lots of the romantic poets where each beat is comprised of a stressed then an unstressed syllable.

### Couples

**There are only two stanzas which represents the ideas of couples expressed in the poem. Rhyming couplets** are also used to the same effect, and the rhyming pattern is **ABABCD** in each stanza. This consistency in form may suggest the intensity and unchanging nature of his desire for the person the poem is directed at.

## Language

### Natural imagery

Shelley compares his life to things he observes in the natural world. He **personifies** the wind in the **metaphor** "*The winds of Heaven mix for ever // With a sweet emotion*". This shows how Shelley feels loving emotions so intensely that he begins to see them everywhere.

The expression of intense emotion in the context of nature is characteristic of Romantic poetry, and Shelley’s work. Further **personification** of nature is present in **“No sister-flower would be forgiven // If it disdain’d its brother”**. This **metaphor** adds depth to the speaker’s character by suggesting that his intentions are not sexual but romantic. Shelley blurs the boundaries between humanity and nature throughout the poem to imply that their relationship is inevitable as a law of nature.

Physical intimacy

Whilst the first stanza is detached and questioning a **“law divine”**, the second stanza is more emotionally intense. Shelley emphasises his use of **natural imagery** in relation to physical intimacy with the **sibilance** in **“mountains kiss high heaven”** and **“waves clasp one another”**. This shows how the speaker has moved from thinking about the idea of being in a relationship to fixating on being physically close with their lover.

Philosophy

Shelley’s choice to entitle the poem **“Love’s philosophy”** is indicative of the poem’s content. He includes lexis from the semantic field of philosophy to show how he is seriously questioning the nature of love.

Each stanza begins with a ‘fact’ in the **declaratives** **“The fountains mingle with the river”** and **“See the mountains kiss high heaven”**. The stanzas then end with the **rhetorical questions** **“Why not I with thine?”** and **“If thou kiss not me?”**. This contrast in line form highlights the philosophical content of the poem.

This theme is perpetuated by Shelley’s use of **religious allusion** in **“winds of Heaven”**, **“law divine”** and **“kiss high Heaven”**. These references to religion give Shelley’s argument gravitas and allude to the questioning of the nature of religion at the time caused by the theories of Charles Darwin.

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**Comparisons**

When We Two Parted

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both speakers are unsuccessful in romance</li> <li>• Written by Romantic poets</li> <li>• Intense emotions are expressed in both poems</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In “When we two parted” the speaker is looking backwards on a relationship whereas in “Love’s philosophy” the speaker is looking forwards to a prospective relationship</li> <li>• The language in “when we two parted” is centred on the two characters whilst “love’s philosophy” is predominantly <b>metaphorical</b></li> </ul>

Sonnet 29- 'I think of thee!'

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shelley and Barrett Browning both use <b>natural imagery</b> as a <b>metaphor</b> for romantic love. Shelley states that <b><i>“The winds of heaven mix for ever”</i></b> and that <b><i>“the waves clasp one another”</i></b>. <b>Barrett Browning similarly attributes physical intimacy to nature</b> in her comparison of her thoughts to <b><i>“wild vines, about a tree”</i></b> and <b><i>“bands of greenery”</i></b>.</li> <li>Both poems are short and concise, showing the speaker’s emotions to be highly intense. The two stanzas used in both could represent two people as a couple.</li> </ul>
<p>Differences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In sonnet 29, it appears that she realises the error of her ways however, in Love’s philosophy the poem has no turning point and is a continuation of the speaker’s lust.</li> </ul>

The Farmer’s Bride

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both speakers express frustration at their desire remaining unrealised. Shelley creates this impression through his use of <b>sibilance</b> in <b><i>“single”, “kiss”, “clasp”, “sea”</i></b> and <b><i>“disdained”</i></b>. Mew’s speaker is shown to be similarly dejected in <b><i>“Tis but a stair // Betwixt us”</i></b> and <b><i>“What’s Christmas time without there be // Some other in the house than we!”</i></b>.</li> </ul>
<p>Differences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In “the farmer’s bride”, nature becomes a symbol for the girl’s oppression through the use of <b>violent fricatives</b> in <b><i>“frightened fay”</i></b> and the prey-like connotations of <b><i>“flying like a hare”</i></b> and <b><i>“shy as a leveret”</i></b>. Opposingly, Shelley references nature to create beautiful images in the listeners mind through the <b>personification</b> in <b><i>“fountains mingle with the river”</i></b> and <b><i>“the sunlight clasps the earth”</i></b>.</li> </ul>