

talk
to
me!

LET'S TALK EMPOWERMENT. LET'S TALK ENGLISH

First Flight

For Anne Gregory

This poem is a conversation between a young man and a young woman. What are they arguing about?

“Never shall a young man,
Thrown into despair
By those great honey-coloured
Ramparts at your ear,
Love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.”

“But I can get a hair-dye
And set such colour there,
Brown, or black, or carrot,
That young men in despair
May love me for myself alone
And not my yellow hair.”

“I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.”

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was an Irish nationalist. He was educated in London and Dublin, and was interested in folklore and mythology. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.

Glossary

ramparts: the high, wide walls around a castle or fort, for example, *the ramparts of the Red Fort*

1. Watch and listen to the story

Click on the link below to watch a video of the story being read. Note the pronunciations of the words and read along using the subtitles.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NziEcirdfEc&list=PLhSPJ2EPWbV5Suli1QZt8wtMRXEJEI_T&index=10

2. Background

“For Anne Gregory” by W. B. Yeats was published in 1933 as part of his collection of poetry entitled ‘The Winding Stair and Other Poems’.

Anne Gregory was the grand-daughter of Lady Augusta Gregory, an aristocrat and poet, who became a close friend of the poet. She shared his passion for old Irish folktales and legends, and they established ‘The Abbey Theatre’ together. From 1898 onwards, Yeats spent many summers at Lady Gregory’s home, Coole Park and often met young Anne there. It is not clear whether the poem is a record of an actual conversation that might have taken place between the poet and Anne, or is simply an imagined conversation.

3. Summary and explanation

The poem of 18 lines is in the form of a dialogue across three stanzas, the first being the voice of the poet, the second stanza a rejoinder to the poet’s words, and the third stanza a concluding response of the poet to Anne’s statement. The title, ‘For Anne Gregory’ makes it clear that the poet is conveying a message to Anne through the poem.

The poem begins with a strong statement in the negative, with an emphasis on ‘Never’. The speaker strongly asserts that no young man will ever love Anne for herself alone or her true nature; rather, they will love her more for her outward appearance, symbolized by her beautiful golden yellow hair. He uses the unusual metaphor of the ramparts of a fort to describe her hair. Just as the outer walls of a fort beautify and protect its interiors, similarly, Anne’s hair that falls in honey-coloured locks around her ears adds great charm to her face and captivates young men who fall for her beautiful appearance, never looking beyond to her actual inner self. These young

men despair because Anne does not accept their declarations of love and admiration for her physical beauty.

The second stanza is Anne's response to the speaker's statement. She indirectly refutes or opposes his words by saying that she can easily dye her hair another colour—brown, black or even carrot red and prove that men will love her for herself and not the colour of her hair, that is, her physical appearance. Blonde or honey-coloured hair is generally perceived as the most beautiful in Western culture, while black, brown and carrot (red) are considered to be far less appealing. She wants to tell the speaker that men must love her for her inner nature, the actual person behind the physical features. Physical appearance is changeable and therefore superficial, just like the hair that can be dyed any colour. She is ready to dye her hair and not look beautiful, to show that men must love her for her true self alone.

The third stanza is a reiteration of the speaker's opinion. He adds the weight of religion and tradition to his argument, saying that he had met an elderly religious man who said he had found an old text in which it was written that only God could love a person for their inner nature alone and not their outward appearance. In other words, no human being has the capacity to ignore physical appearance and look beyond outward features to a person's inner self. Human beings do not have that depth of understanding to look only at the soul of a person; for them, the physical appearance always comes first. In other words, men will always be attracted by physical appearance rather than a person's true nature.

4. Vocabulary

1. **Despair** – the state of having lost all hope
As night came we began to **despair** of finding a hotel.
2. **Honey-coloured** – of a yellowish brown or golden colour
She always ties **her honey- coloured** hair in a pony-tail.
3. **Ramparts** – the high, wide walls around a castle or fort
The **ramparts** of the Gwalior fort are built around the edge of a hill.
4. **Yesternight** – the previous night
She said she had left a message for me **yesternight**, but I have not received it so far.

5. Questions

Thinking about the Poem

- a. What does the young man mean by “great honey-coloured /Ramparts at your ear?” Why does he say that young men are “thrown into despair” by them?
 - b. What colour is the young woman’s hair? What does she say she can change it to? Why would she want to do so?
 - c. Objects have qualities which make them desirable to others. Can you think of some objects (a car, a phone, a dress...) and say what qualities make one object more desirable than another? Imagine you were trying to sell an object: what qualities would you emphasise?
 - d. What about people? Do we love others because we like their qualities, whether physical or mental? Or is it possible to love someone “for themselves alone”? Are some people ‘more lovable’ than others? Discuss this question in pairs or in groups, considering points like the following.
 - (i) a parent or caregiver’s love for a newborn baby, for a mentally or physically challenged child, for a clever child or a prodigy
 - (ii) the public’s love for a film star, a sportsperson, a politician, or a social worker
 - (iii) your love for a friend, or brother or sister
 - (iv) your love for a pet, and the pet’s love for you.
6. You have perhaps concluded that people are not objects to be valued for their qualities or riches rather than for themselves. But elsewhere Yeats asks the question: How can we separate the dancer from the dance? Is it possible to separate ‘the person himself or herself’ from how the person looks, sounds, walks, and so on? Think of how you or a friend or member of your family has changed over the years. Has your relationship also changed? In what way?

5. Literary Devices

- a. **Rhyme Scheme:** The rhyme scheme of the poem is **abcbdb**.
“But I can get a hair-dye **a**
And set such colour there, **b**
Brown, or black, or carrot, **c**
That young men in despair **b**
May love me for myself alone **d**
And not my yellow hair.” **b**
- b. **Metaphor:** In the poem, the phrase ‘honey-coloured ramparts’ is an example of metaphor. Yeats, through the metaphor, compares Anne Gregory’s hair to the walls of a fort. Just like the walls of a fort hide and protect the city, the hair hides the true self of Anne Gregory.
- c. **Alliteration:** The phrases ‘you for yourself’, ‘your yellow hair’, ‘set such colour there’ and ‘that he had’ are examples of alliteration. Yeats uses alliteration to enhance the musical quality of his poem.
- d. **Repetition:** In the poem, the phrase ‘yellow hair’ has been repeated many times. By repeating this phrase, the poet is reinforcing the notion of external beauty. The word ‘despair’ is also repeated in the poem. It reflects the young men’s feelings for Anne Gregory.
- e. **Anaphora:** This is the repeated use of a word at the beginning of two consecutive lines.

That he had found a text to prove
That only God, my dear,