Love's Philosophy

POEM TEXT

1   The fountains mingle with the river
2   And the rivers with the ocean,
3   The winds of heaven mix for ever
4   With a sweet emotion;
5   Nothing in the world is single;
6   All things by a law divine
7   In one spirit meet and mingle.
8   Why not I with thine?—

9   See the mountains kiss high heaven
10   And the waves clasp one another;
11   No sister-flower would be forgiven
12   If it disdained its brother;
13   And the sunlight clasps the earth
14   And the moonbeams kiss the sea:
15   What is all this sweet work worth
16   If thou kiss not me?

SUMMARY

Water from fountains run into rivers, which in turn join together in the oceans. Likewise, the winds of heaven are always and forever mixing with each other and with deep and beautiful feelings. Nothing in the world is a single entity—everything is connected according to a divine law which dictates that all things connect through their spirit. And if that is the case, why shouldn't I mingle and connect with you?

Look at the way that mountains kiss the heavens, and how the waves embrace one another. A female flower that ignored the love of its male equivalent would never be forgiven. Sunlight embraces the earth, and moonlight kisses the sea. But what does it all mean—what is all this connection *worth*—if you will not kiss me?

THEMES

NATURE, CONNECTEDNESS, LOVE, AND SEX

"Love's Philosophy" is a playful seduction poem in which the speaker (who has traditionally been thought of as a man but who's gender is in fact unspecified) tries to woo their prospective lover by pointing out the way that nature in general seems to follow a "divine law" that dictates universal mingling and connectedness. Put more concretely: the speaker uses the tendency of nature to come together—rivers flowing into the ocean, the mixing of the winds in the sky—to argue that physical intimacy between people is simply following the laws of nature. As such, the speaker and the addressee should form their own physical union (that is, have sex, or at least kiss).

The poem uses a deliberate logical structure to make its argument. Each stanza points out evidence from the natural world of two beautiful natural elements coming together. These examples are designed to make the coming together of the speaker and their lover therefore seem like the only logical thing to do as well as beautiful and natural. In the first stanza, for instance, the speaker points out the way that fountains become rivers, which in turn join up with oceans. These different bodies of water "mingle," meaning they all mix together. This is the first example of the key idea of the poem's philosophy of love: "nothing in the world is single." And, accordingly, the speaker asks: why shouldn't they and their prospective lover similarly mingle?

The poem is littered with other examples of this intermingling between natural elements. In line 9, mountains "kiss" (a suggestive word choice!) the sky; in line 10, waves "clasp" onto one another. The speaker uses flowers as another example in lines 11 and 12, specifically looking at the way flowers pollinate (literally, a form of reproduction!). The speaker then further asserts that the above examples illustrate not just the way things are in nature but that nature is just one part of a world governed by a "law divine" that decrees that everything in the natural, spiritual and emotional worlds must "meet and mingle." In other words, the speaker suggests that togetherness is a kind of godliness—not just a *natural* law but *divine* one too. The speaker uses language that in ways both subtle and not supports this idea: referring not to the "sky" but always to the "heavens," while the sunlight and moonlight described as "clasping" and "kissing" the earth and sea can be seen as representing the union between things of nature and things of heaven (the light of the sun and moon).

So, asks the speaker, given that this coming together is not just the way the world works but the way in which it expresses its divinity, how could the two of them (the speaker and the addressee) not follow suit? The speaker even presents the above as a kind of duty. If the world is full of divine togetherness, it does the world a disservice not to join in their own natural and divine union: "What is all this sweet work"—that is, the beautiful unity of the world—"worth / If thou kiss not me?"

Shelley's poem fits into a long line of seduction poems in which the speaker follows a conceit, playfully presenting evidence of their argument in an attempt to make getting together the only logical response. Meanwhile, to what degree the speaker actually believes the argument being made — to what extent the speaker wants actually believes in a divine law decreeing sex as a beautiful natural act or, rather, just wants to seduce an object of desire — is never made entirely clear.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> - Lines 1-16

🔬 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

> *The fountains mingle with the river*
> *And the rivers with the ocean,*

"Love's Philosophy" jumps right in by establishing its main conceit, which is essentially that nature is full of examples of togetherness and union. Lines 1 and 2 present the first example of this conceit, discussing the way that the flow of water represents both separate elements and an ultimate togetherness. That is, while "fountains," "river[s]," and "ocean[s]" are separate bodies of water, they all "mingle" and become one.

The poem's use of the example of water flowing together is the first step in an effort to argue that *all* things in nature and the world are connected. This argument is also reflected and supported in the structure of these (and other) lines in the poem. Line 1 is enjambed, connecting it smoothly to line 2. Like the water, these two lines are both separate entities and, at the same time, connected. They are a pair. Meanwhile, the anadiplosis in these two lines—through the use of "river" at the end of line 1 and the beginning of line 2—underscores this sense of flow and togetherness.

Though the speaker hasn't yet explained *why* these points about the connectedness of things are important, these two lines are laying the metaphorical groundwork for the speaker's coming argument that it is a divine law reflected in nature for all things to be connected, including for human beings to be physically and emotionally intimate with one another. The assonant /I/ sounds in this line also help to build this sense of unity and togetherness:

> The fount**ai**ns m**i**ngle w**i**th the r**i**ver
> And the r**i**vers w**i**th the ocean,

In just two short lines, then, the poem has already started subtly making its (seductive) case that all things both *are* and *should be* connected.

LINES 3-4

> *The winds of heaven mix for ever*
> *With a sweet emotion;*

Lines 3 and 4 further develop the conceit of interconnectedness introduced by lines 1 and 2. In fact, through careful word choice and the use of personification, the speaker actually extends that conceit. In the first two lines, it pertains just to water, a natural thing. In lines 3 and 4, it is still a natural thing—wind—that is mixing together. But the speaker does not just say "winds," or "winds of the sky." Rather the speaker describes them as "the winds of heaven." And, in addition, the speaker personifies the winds by saying that they mix "with a sweet emotion." In this way, the speaker extends the realms subject to this ever present mixing beyond just nature to include both the spiritual ("heaven") and "emotion." The use of "for ever" also suggests that what is being discussed is a kind of eternal law of the universe.

As of these two lines, the speaker has still not revealed why this "mingling" and "mixing" in nature are meaningful or important. But the poem is continuing to set the foundation for that eventual reveal in a variety of ways. First, as with line 1, line 3 is enjambed, which results in lines 3 and four being "mixed" or pushed together to form a pair. Second, the words "winds," "mix," and "sweet," give these lines a hint of sibilance. The sibilance is suggestive of the whooshing sounds of the mixing winds, but it also connects to the much more prevalent sibilance in the second stanza, and, in particular, connects to the strongest sibilant, and sexually suggestive, words in that second stanza: "kiss" and "clasp." So while the speaker has not made clear where the poem is going, hints abound.

LINES 5-8

> *Nothing in the world is single;*
> *All things by a law divine*
> *In one spirit meet and mingle.*
> *Why not I with thine?*

In the second half of the first stanza, the poem makes its intentions clear, clarifying what "Love's Philosophy" actually is. Having listed examples of the way that nature, the "heavens," and "emotions" tend toward connection and mingling, the speaker now reveals that ideas behind those observations.

In making clear the primary theme of the poem, the speaker uses the techniques of building a logical argument. First, the speaker takes the observations made in the first four lines, and derives from them a conclusion:

> Nothing in the world is single.

That is, all things are connected. The speaker then extends this conclusion to propose that, since "nothing in the world is single," then it must be a "divine law" which stipulates that all

things must "meet and mingle" and form "one spirit." And *then* the speaker extends this logic further, to the speaker's ultimate point: if all the world obeys a "divine law" that says all things should "meet and mingle," then shouldn't the speaker and the person whom the speaker is addressing also follow that divine law? In the first stanza, the speaker has used observations of nature, extended those observations to make what feels like a credible conclusion about the way that both the world and heaven works, and then used that conclusion to convince the addressee to "mingle."

The structure and poetic devices in these four lines continue to support, and even to embody, this idea of the speaker and the addressee "connecting." While line 5, which states the conclusion that follows the evidence of lines 1 to 4, exists as a solitary line, lines 6 and 7 return to poem's pattern of enjambing every two lines. So as the speaker prepares to spring the "surprise" of line 8's proposal that the addressee agree to "pair up," the speaker's lines are themselves paired up.

Further, line 7 uses alliteration in "meet" and "mingle"—another pairing—and, of course, the latter word has already been used once earlier in the poem (in line 1), forming yet another pair. The first stanza also concludes with a rhetorical question, with the speaker asking the addressee how they could possibly *not* be together, given that the world itself seems to argue that they should. And this question is itself paired with the rhetorical question that ends the second stanza. The poem itself is filled with pairs, as if the sheer weight of pairs will convince the addressee to form a pair with the speaker.

Finally, it's worth noting that this argument-as-seduction technique is a long-standing tradition in English poetry, with many of the 17th century poet John Donne's poems being particularly fine examples of how to do it.

LINES 9-12

> *See the mountains kiss high heaven*
>   *And the waves clasp one another;*
> *No sister-flower would be forgiven*
>   *If it disdained its brother;*

The second stanza of the poem is in many ways very similar to the first. Like the first, it lists examples of togetherness before turning this evidence into a rhetorical question. But this isn't sloppiness or laziness on Shelley's part—it's another way of representing pairs in the poem. The two stanzas are themselves pairs.

Lines 9 to 12 list two such examples, but also use personification to make them seem even more relevant to the situation that the speaker and the addressee find themselves in. It's also worth noting the subtle change in tone at the start of line 9, which uses an imperative verb ("See"). The use of this comment makes the speaker's argument to the addressee even more urgent, and also embeds the relationship between the speaker and the addressee into everything that comes after. All

the description exists as something described by one to the other. The first stanza is calmer, and does not mention any relationship between the poet and the addressee until it's final line. A reader looking at the first 7 lines of the first stanza might not even realize that the speaker is addressing anyone other than the reader at all. In the second stanza, in contrast, the reader knows all along that the speaker is talking to a beloved, and the reader is just listening in.

In lines 9 and 10, both mountains and waves are personified, and in both instances the personification relates specifically to sex. The mountains "kiss high heaven" (more reinforcement of the idea of spiritual union) while the "waves clasp one another." The alliteration of "high heaven" is yet another pair, backing up the argument that the speaker and the addressee should be a pair too. This "high heaven" suggests not just the spiritual heights of heaven but also seems to imply the physical climaxes of sex too—it's a kind of metaphor for sex, in other words. The clasping waves can also be seen as a particularly graphic metaphor for sex, as well.

Continuing the trend of personification, lines 11 and 12 argue that "sister" and "brother" flowers have a kind of divine duty to be connected to one another—and, by extension, that the speaker and the addressee do, too. (While most flowers don't actually reproduce through the union of separate male and female flowers, some actually do; though it isn't clear that the speaker cares here about scientific accuracy.)

LINES 13-16

> *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 second stanza also differs from the first because its midpoint does not mark the restatement of "love's philosophy," but instead provides yet another example of the connection that is rampant in nature. As though reaching its rhetorical peak, the poem is even more full of pairings here (and, in essence, this poem is an argument in favor of pairing together). Lines 13 and 14 both begin with "And the," and both have a callback word to an earlier moment in the poem ("clasps" and "kiss"). And the words that are being repeated are, of course, highly suggestive of sex.

In the figures of the earth and moon, too, there is another example of interdependence. The moon and sun are often thought of as a pair, and they are both heavenly bodies—thus once again reinforcing the poem's idea of union as a way of expressing a divine law. And these heavenly bodies are also rather suggestively joining with the earth as well, which again implies that the coming together of all sorts of bodies is both natural and divinely sanctioned.

Also running through these lines all the way to the end is a gentle sibilance, which carries with it the seductive suggestion

of the sound of lips kissing:

> And the sunlight clasps the earth
> And the moonbeams kiss the sea:
> What is all this sweet work worth
> If thou kiss not me?

Lines 15 and 16 are like the closing argument of an attorney in court. Having laid out the evidence—which is intended to be practically irrefutable—the speaker makes their intentions as clear as day. In fact, the speaker raises the stakes by essentially saying two things at once:

1. That all of the "work" of the world, all the "mingling" of the natural and spiritual worlds and the "divine law" that governs that mingling, would be made worthless if the addressee does not recognize and abide by that law (and kiss the speaker). Kissing the speaker, in other words, is the addressee's duty.
2. That all of the speaker's "work" in writing this entire poem, and making this whole argument, is made worthless if the addressee does not agree to a kiss. Here the speaker is saying, playfully, that the effort of creating something as great as this poem is itself reason enough for the addressee to give in to the seduction.

As with the first stanza's conclusion, the rhetorical question that ends the poem is not one that needs answering with words—it's intended response is a kiss.

⚒ POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Love's Philosophy" uses alliteration to clever and deliberate effect. The first instance appears in line 7: "In one spirit meet and mingle." In this line the poem first describes the content of the "law divine," that all things should unify and come together, and the poem augments that argument by using a shared sound—the /m/—to connect the two key words. Also important is the fact that the line contains *two* /m/ sounds—the "meet[ing] and ming[ling]" that the poem describes are all pairs, which also relates to the "pairing" that the speaker desires with the prospective lover.

Th /m/ sounds in line 7 are the first alliterative pairs in the poem, but not the last. A second pair is found in line 9: "See the mountains kiss high heaven." These shared /h/ sounds have the added effect of creating the sound of breathlessness, which fits perfectly with the line's thinly veiled reference to sexual passion.

The other example of alliteration in the poem occurs in the poem's penultimate line: "What is all this sweet work worth." In

this line, the pair of shared sounds is joined by a preceding third instance of the sound, which is a further distance away. The alliteration in this line therefore recalls the pairings of the earlier lines (and continues to highlight the idea of the pairing that the speaker wants to create with the addressee), but the extra /w/ also emphasizes the "what" that begins the line and emphasizes the that the poem, and all of the examples the speaker has cited, are all connected to the speaker's ultimate question about whether the addressee will give in to a kiss.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "m," "m"
- **Line 9:** "h," "h"
- **Line 15:** "W," "w," "w"

ASSONANCE

There is a subtle assonance at play throughout the first stanza. In this section, the speaker describes the interconnectedness between different parts of nature (starting with fountains, rivers, and oceans). The use of assonance in this section means that there is a shared sound running throughout the lines., such that the words themselves are interconnected too:

> The fountains mingle with the river
> And the rivers with the ocean,

This /i/ is then subtly weaved throughout the rest of the stanza, meaning that all eight lines are subtly intertwined. The stanza, then, manages to represent the very process of connection it describes through assonance.

The other main example of assonance occurs in the poem's concluding rhetorical question with the repeated /o/ sound:

> What is all this sweet work worth
> If thou not kiss me?

Firstly, this assonance comes as a pair, one of a number of pairs throughout the poem. These pairs help reinforce the speaker's seductive argument, subtly reinforcing the idea that the union between two people is natural and divine. At the same time, the obvious pattern of the repeated /o/ sounds also highlight the artifice of the poem—the fact that it is *made*. Part of the poem's logic is that *all* things are made, and made specifically in accordance with a divine law about interconnectedness. The assonance, then, reinforces the question, showing the effort behind the "work"—which in the poem refers to the work of the divine law upon nature—and thereby doubling down on the idea that it is *worth* something—in this case, a kiss.

At the same time, the artificiality of the poem can also be read in a different way. While the poem explicitly connects the idea of "work" to the "work" of the divine law as it operates to

connect all things in the world, it's also possible to read the "work" as referring to the speaker's effort in coming up with this whole argument, to write this poem, in order to seduce the addressee. The poem's ending in this reading refers also to what the speaker feels that they deserve after writing the poem, and the poetic techniques like assonance that the speaker uses to augment the argument can be taken also as signals of the speaker's "work" in trying to seduce the addressee.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 2:** "i"
- **Line 3:** "i," "i"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 6:** "i"
- **Line 7:** "I," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 8:** "i"
- **Line 15:** "o," "o"

ANADIPLOSIS

Anadiplosis occurs once in "Love's Philosophy," in the repeat of "river" in lines 1 and 2. In these first two lines, the poem is establishing evidence of unity and interconnectedness in the world by relating how fountains turn to rivers, which then turn to oceans. Part of the point here is to question where one ends and another begins—what is the precise point that a river turns into an ocean, for example? The interconnectedness of the world's water is part of the speaker's proofs about the "divine law" of togetherness, which is key to the seductive argument that the speaker is making in the poem. Repeating "river" in the first two lines conveys this sense of flow, as the word itself flows like water from one line to another.

Another effect of the anadiplosis is the way that it creates a pair of "river[s]." The poem is packed full of pairs—and it's the desire to pair off with the addressee that drives the speaker's words in the first place.

Where Anadiplosis appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "river"
- **Line 2:** "rivers"

CONCEIT

The entire poem depends on the use of conceit. Essentially, the speaker has two stages to their seductive argument. First, that nature and the world more generally are full of examples of union, togetherness, and interconnectedness. The speaker argues, in fact, that "interconnectedness" is a kind of divine law which governs all things. This is a holistic worldview—a philosophical idea that champions the unity between different elements—and is at the core of the poem's conceit.

The second part of the argument is that, given that the world *is* so interconnected, it would be doing a kind of divine disservice if the addressee were not to "connect" with the speaker and become the speaker's lover. Similar to the way that an earlier English poet, John Donne, would construct seduction poems through surprising logical argument (for instance in "The Flea"), Shelley's poem depends entirely on accepting the idea that different parts of the world are joined together. To back up the idea that nature is full of examples of union (particularly pairs), the poem is littered with linguistic and stylistic pairs—whether through the two-stanza form, the alliteration in lines like line 9, or the repetition of certain specific words (e.g. clasp/clasps).

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used subtly throughout "Love's Philosophy." As with most of the other poetic devices used in the poem, it is mostly employed to build a sense of interconnectedness—exactly the thing that the speaker wants to achieve with the addressee of the poem! The most obvious example of this sound-as-connection idea is through the numerous /n/ sounds that run throughout the first stanza. These combine with the /i/ assonance to create lines that feel like they belong together in a kind of sonic harmony:

> The fountains mingle with the river
> And the river 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 spirit meet and mingle.
> Why not I with thine?—

These sounds help make it seem as if even the poem itself is subject to the divine law that it states between lines 5 and 7: that "all things" are connected.

In stanza 2, the poem uses alliterative consonance: "high heaven." These two /h/ sounds form a pair—again, such a "pairing" is exactly what the speaker wants to do with the addressee of the poem! The rest of the stanza uses a lot of sibilant consonance throughout (/s/ sounds), which evoke the sound and sensation of kissing (this is discussed further in the sibilance section). Finally, the penultimate line presents another instance of alliterative consonance—"work worth." These form another pair, but are also suggestive of effort and physical exertion: a not-so-subtle hint around sex.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 2:** "n," "n"
- **Line 3:** "n," "n"
- **Line 4:** "n"
- **Line 5:** "N," "n," "n"
- **Line 6:** "n," "n"
- **Line 7:** "n," "n"
- **Line 8:** "n," "n"
- **Line 9:** "S," "ss," "h," "h"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "ss," "s"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s," "s," "w," "w"
- **Line 16:** "ss"

- **Line 12:** " If"
- **Line 13:** "earth "
- **Line 14:** " And"
- **Line 15:** "worth "
- **Line 16:** " If"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used to deliberate and interesting effect in "Love's Philosophy." It's fair to say that the poem has one main goal: to seduce the addressee by proving that the world is full of interconnectedness, particularly in the form of pairs (creating a "pair" being what the speaker desires). Enjambment works within this overall project to help make the poem jampacked with its own examples of pairings.

First of all, it's worth noting that enjambment only ever occurs between two lines at a time, as opposed to more. With the exception of lines 5 and 8, almost every single line in the poem is in a kind of partnership with another line that is made possible by the enjambment. Enjambment, then, reinforces the speaker's seductive argument that, if the world is full of union—and indeed, that this is a divine and beautiful law—why shouldn't the speaker and the addressee form their own union too.

Another function of enjambment in the poem is to create a sense of flow (another aspect of the general idea of interconnectedness). In lines 1 and 2, for example, the "fountains" and "river" are allowed to meet seamlessly with the "river" and "ocean," unhindered by any obstructive punctuation.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "river "
- **Line 2:** " And"
- **Line 3:** "ever "
- **Line 4:** " With"
- **Line 6:** "divine "
- **Line 7:** "In"
- **Line 9:** "heaven "
- **Line 10:** " And"
- **Line 11:** "forgiven "

PERSONIFICATION

Generally speaking in "Love's Philosophy," the entire world is personified. That's because "all things" meet in a "spirit" of interconnectedness. Indeed, this is presented as a "divine" law that governs the world.

By using the word "mingle" to refer to the way that fountains and rivers and oceans come together, the connotation does not just mean "to mix"—it also means "to socialize," adding a human element to this section of the poem. Shortly after that, when the speaker does use the word "mix" to describe the joining of the "winds of heaven," this mixing is described as occurring "with a sweet emotion," again presenting the natural (and spiritual) world as somehow aligned with the world of human feelings.

The personification really ramps up in the second stanza. Here, mountains "kiss" heaven; waves "clasp one another;" flowers are capable of disdain and forgiveness; sunlight and moonlight also "kiss" and "clasp." Practically the entire world is shown as engaging in interactions that take their cues from human behavior (and primarily human love and sex), reinforcing the speaker's attempt to seduce the poem's addressee. Essentially, the speaker is personifying the natural and spiritual world in order to point out examples of the almost sexual union in the world, and relating these to the speaker and addressee's particular situation.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 1
- Line 3
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 9-14

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Love's Philosophy" is a poem in a long-standing tradition: seduction as a kind of logical argument. The speaker of the poem builds an argument through evidence, and then, as if gesturing towards all this evidence with a wave of the arm, asks the addressee to agree that the argument is irrefutable (and that, therefore, they should be lovers together!). Rhetorical questions are common features of logical argumentation, and in this poem the speaker twice relies on rhetorical questions to make the argument that the addressee should agree to become the speaker's lover.

First of all, it's worth noting that the rhetorical questions in and of themselves form a pair—and the poem is full of pairings that help reinforce the seduction argument. Likewise, both come in similar places, at the end of each stanza. This is suggestive of harmony and beauty, also part of the speaker's argument that the "pairings" of nature fit into a divinely sanctioned order (and, by extension, that "pairing off" with the speaker would be a part of that divine order).

Though the two questions are similar, there are important differences. The first question comes after the speaker has stated the central law of "love's philosophy," which is that "all things" are interconnected, so the speaker and their prospective lover should be too. The speaker poses the question with disarming, charming simplicity: "Why not I with thine?" In other words, why shouldn't their two spirits be brought into union together through passionate love.

The second question intensifies this sentiment, suggesting that, as the world is governed by this "divine law" of interconnectedness, it would be a disservice to that law if the two of them—the speaker and the addressee—don't become physically intimate. At the same time, it's possible to read the second rhetorical question as containing a bit of both showing off and a sense of entitlement on the part of the speaker. While the second question seems most clearly to say that the "sweet work" of the world would be "worth" nothing if this rhetorical question is answered by anything other than a kiss, it also can be read as saying that the lack of a kiss would also make the speaker's own "work" in creating this beautiful argument and poem would be made worthless if the addressee doesn't give in to this seduction.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** " Why not I with thine?— "
- **Lines 15-16:** "What is all this sweet work worth /   If thou kiss not me?"

SIBILANCE

While there are some sibilant sounds in the first stanza, it's in the second stanza that sibilance starts to play a significant role in the poem. The speaker's focus turns specifically to kissing—indeed, the poem ends with a request for a kiss—and sibilance is used to convey the sounds of kissing. Sibilance has a whispery quality too, suggestive of physical intimacy.

The development of this /s/ sound throughout the second stanza makes it seem as though the speaker is almost leaning in and whispering into the addressee's ear—the sound suggests a movement and relation of seduction.

And because of the prominent and repeated use of the words "clasp" and "kiss" in the second stanza—and the intense sibilance of those words—all the other sibilance seems to echo those words, and thus intensifies the connection between the

sibilance in this stanza and the speaker's efforts to achieve physical intimacy with the addressee.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "S," "s," "ss"
- **Line 10:** "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "s"
- **Line 12:** "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "ss," "s"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "ss"

📄 VOCABULARY

Mingle (Line 1) - To mingle means to mix, but also has connotations of socializing too.

Law divine (Line 6) - The "law divine" in the poem refers to a kind of natural law created by God.

Thine (Line 8) - Thine is an archaic form of "yours."

Clasp (Line 10) - "Clasp" means to hold or hug tightly.

Sister-flower (Line 11) - Sister-flower here refers to female flowers, which form a sexual union with "brother" flowers. In reality, most flowers/plants have both sexual organs on them, though there are some species with separate male/female flowers too.

Disdained (Line 12) - To disdain something or someone is to treat it as if it is unworthy of attention.

Thou (Line 16) - Thou is an archaic form of "you."

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Shelley's "Love's Philosophy" follows a regular form. It consists of two stanzas, each of which is an eight-line octave. The poem is an argument of seduction—an effort to get the addressee to become physically intimate with the speaker—based on the idea that the world is full of an interconnectedness proscribed by a "divine law." The structure of the poem supports the speaker's efforts, as the poem itself is full of structural "pairs": it has two structurally harmonious stanzas, it has many lines paired together through enjambment, it has two rhetorical questions that end each stanza, and so on. The speaker, of course, wants to be part of a pair with the addressee—and filling the poem with pairs helps reinforce this attempt at seduction.

In terms of the construction of the poem's seductive argument, both stanzas are very similar. Essentially, they present evidence

of the interconnectedness of the world, and conclude with a rhetorical question that makes clear the *reason* for the speaker's words in the first place. There is a key difference, though. The first stanza explicitly states the "divine law" which governs the speaker's argument—that all things are in union with one another. Having stated this, the second stanza personifies its subject more intensely, with more sexually suggestive imagery and language.

METER

While "Love's Philosophy" has a disarming simplicity to the sound of its meter, technically speaking it is quite complex. Most lines are written in lines of four-syllable tetrameter, with a few notable exceptions, and the governing metrical foot of the poem follows the **stressed**-unstressed pattern of the trochee.

However, the poem also contains a good bit of variation, often through the use of inserting an extra syllable at the start—known as catalexis. This pattern can be seen in the opening two lines of the poem:

> The | **foun**tains | **min**gle | **with** the | **riv**er
> And the | **riv**er | **with** the | **o**-cean,

The first line has nine syllables, with catalexis inserting an initial unstressed syllable. From there, **stressed**-unstressed trochees continue through the rest of both lines. As a result, these lines gain an interesting metrical symmetry in which the two lines function as mirror images. The first line begins with an unstressed syllable then alternates between stresses until it ends on an unstressed syllable, while the second starts with a stressed syllable and then alternates until it ends on an unstressed syllable. Accordingly, these lines have a flowing sound befitting the subject—water—that it describes. Lines 3 and 4 then does exactly the same thing.

In both stanzas, the lines that mark the midway and end points have less than four stresses (lines 4, 8, 12, and 16). This provides a kind of gentle relief from the ongoing argument of seduction, but also allows for the speaker to make the case that their argument is, ultimately, very simple.

> **Why** not I with **thine?**—
>
> If thou **kiss** not **me?**

These two rhetorical questions, for example, are made to seem all-the-more obvious precisely because of how simply they are posed (the full four stresses in the line are not even necessary):

RHYME SCHEME

"Love's Philosophy" has a highly regular rhyme scheme. Each stanza runs ABABCDCD. In other words, each line is paired with another line through rhyme: The A rhyme in line 1 to the A

rhyme in line 3, the B rhyme in line 2 to the B rhyme in line 4, and so forth.

As with many other of the techniques used in this poem in which a speaker seeks to "pair off" physically with an addressee, the rhyme scheme also creates pairs. In this way, the rhyme scheme subtly reinforces and exemplifies the "divine law" that the speaker is saying exists and is the basis for why the addressee should go along with this attempted seduction.

Note that not all of the rhymes in the poem are full rhymes—river/ever for example, or heaven/forgiven. But even these occasional slant rhymes serve to emphasize the other perfect rhymes. One especially important full rhyme is the final one, in which "sea" is rhymed with "me." The purity of this rhyme gives the last line a sense of conclusion and completion, as though the speaker's argument is now done and that all is left to do, inevitably, is kiss.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Love's Philosophy" is unspecified. While it might be tempting to think of the speaker as being Shelley himself, or as being a man because the poem was written by a man, it is worth noting that nothing in terms of sex or gender is revealed about either the speaker or the addressee.

While all personal details have been left out, there's little doubt that the speaker has one goal in mind: the seduction of the addressee! The speaker attempts this seduction through a kind of logical argument, the type employed by earlier English poets such as Andrew Marvell and John Donne. The speaker keeps relatively detached from their seduction argument, except for at the two crucial rhetorical questions. The bulk of the poem is about building a case, almost like an attorney in a courtroom, through different stages of proofs. These examples are meant to provide evidence of the world's interconnectedness, both with regard to natural elements and the spiritual realm. The speaker presents all these examples as proving the existence of a "divine law," which allows the speaker to cheekily suggest that it would somehow be wrong if they and the addressee were not to follow the same "law" too by creating their own physical and emotional union.

While it is possible to interpret the speaker as believing the argument being made, it is just as possible to argue that the speaker is making the argument solely for the purpose of seducing the addressee.

SETTING

In the sense that this poem has one main goal—the seduction of its addressee by the speaker—the truest way of describing the setting is that it takes place in the space between two people. This is a space, moreover, that the speaker wants to close down,

to make more intimate.

As part of this effort, though, there is also the setting of what the speaker describes in the poem. This description takes place in what might best be called a "generic natural setting," with reference to rivers, oceans, seas, mountains, winds, sunlight and so on. The generality of this aspect of the setting—as opposed to naming a specific place—makes the speaker's argument seem universally applicable. Essentially, the speaker is saying that all of nature is governed by a divine law of togetherness—and that so too should they be (the speaker and the addressee).

ⓘ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Percy Bysshe Shelley was one of the foremost members of the British Romantic poets of the 18th century (a loose group that often includes Lord Byron, John Keats, William Wordsworth and William Blake). He was also married to Mary Shelley, who wrote *Frankenstein.*

This poem does show some of the common characteristics of Romantic poetry. In particular, it showcases a love for and admiration of nature. The Romantic poets, who wrote as the world was being transformed by the Industrial Revolution, tended to believe that nature was more important to the human spirit than the built-up urban or industrial spaces of the world.

Interestingly though, "Love's Philosophy" probably has more in common with the work of the 17th century English Metaphysical poets such as John Donne and Andrew Marvell than with other Romantic poetry, Shelley's or otherwise. John Donne in particular was a master of the seduction poem, constructing fanciful but convincing arguments about why the proposed lover should be with the speaker. Excellent examples include "The Flea" and "The Good-Morrow." Shelley's poem follows a similar approach, establishing a central conceit—that all the world is interconnected—and turning this into an irrefutable argument in favor of physical passion.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shelley has a notorious life story and was in many ways a true radical for his day and age. Coming of age in the early 19th century, Shelley was a vegetarian before it was common, politically active, and sexually liberal. Like his friend Lord Byron, he is famous for his passionate and chaotic love affairs.

Shelley's political engagement started early, but became very strong when he met the political philosopher, William Godwin, whose daughter Mary he would later marry. Godwin didn't actually approve of the match, but Shelley and Mary proceeded nonetheless. As with a number of the Romantic poets, they travelled widely around Europe, taking in the majestic landscape and working on their craft.

Shelley wrote widely about his political views, though he often struggled to find publication due to their radical nature. His views on economics and morality are said to have influenced Karl Marx's work, and his belief in non-violent resistance was taken into account by later resistances like the one led by Mahatma Ghandi in India against British colonial rule.

Shelley drowned shortly before his thirtieth birthday off the coast of Italy. While this was presumed to be an accident, other theories exist too—suicide, conspiracy, a lack of boating skills, and so on. Famously, Shelley's body was cremated on the nearby coast. His heart, though, did not burn, and was eventually returned to Mary Shelley.

📖 MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- **Other Poems and Info** — A number of Shelley's most popular poems, plus more background information. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/percy-bysshe-shelley)

- **A Reading of the Poem** — Iain Batchelor performs the poem in a way that makes its argument-based structure easy to comprehend. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVvaxLvZkB0)

- **Get to Know the Romantics** — A BBC documentary about the Romantic poets. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6mefXs5h9o)

- **Shelley's Death** — An interesting article that looks at the myths surrounding Shelley's death. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jan/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview1)

- **John Donne's "The Flea"** — A wonderful poem written almost two hundred years before Shelley's which uses a similar technique of seduction through argument and conceit. (https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/john-donne/the-flea)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY POEMS

- Ode to the West Wind
- Ozymandias

💬 HOW TO CITE

MLA

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