

Poem 1: A Complaint beginning ‘Alone Walkyng’

	Alone walkyng	Such is my ure,	
	In thought pleynyng	I yow ensure;	
	And sore syghyng	What creature	
	All desolate,	May have more payn?	
5	Me remembryng,		
	Of my lyvyng,	My trowth so pleyn	25
	My deth wysshyng	Ys take in veyn,	
	Both erly and late.	And gret disdeyn	
		In remembraunce.	
	Infortunate	Yet I full feyne	
10	Ys soo my fate	Wold me compleyne	30
	That, wote ye whate,	Me to absteyne	
	Oute of mesure	From thys penaunce.	
	My lyfe I hate.		
	Thus desperate	But in substaunce	
15	In suche pore estate	Noon allegeaunce	
	Do I endure.	Of my grevaunce	40
		Can I nat fynde.	
	Of other cure	Ryght so my chaunce	
	Am I nat sure;	With displesaunce	
	Thus to endure	Doth me avaunce —	
20	Ys hard, certain.	And thus an ende.	45

(Walking alone, complaining inwardly, and painfully sighing, all desolate, remembering about my way of life, wishing for my death, both early and late. My fate is so unlucky that — do you know what? — I hate my life immeasurably. Thus in desperation and in such a wretched condition do I remain. I am not sure about the possibility of any other remedy; certainly it is hard to remain like this. Such is my fate, I assure you; what living thing could have more pain? My sincerity so truthful is taken in vain and with great disdain when it is considered [by the speaker’s lady]. Yet I very eagerly wish to complain in order to keep me from this penaunce. But for the most part I cannot find any forgiveness for my offence. In the same way my situation encourages me only with displeasure — and thus the end.)

Context: This poem by an anonymous poet is found in a manuscript copied in London in the 1460s or 1470s, by a scribe who also copied works by Chaucer and Lydgate. You can see a picture of the manuscript here: <http://sites.trin.cam.ac.uk/james/show.php?index=1370> (choose page f.159v–f.160r, poem on the right hand page).

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Falling in love in the late Middle Ages was a painful business. A young man whose love remained unrequited might feel that he was in danger of dying from his lovesickness and the strength of his emotions. Love was not only seen as a joyful experience, but also as a cause of great sorrow and pain. In the courtly love tradition, a lover was expected to make his ‘complaint’ to the women with whom he had fallen in love, describing his pain eloquently and persuasively. This might lead her to take pity on him and agree to become his lady. Many poets wrote short lyrics called ‘complaints’ which provide fictional versions of such laments.

Points to think about:

- The poem is spoken in the voice of a lover who is in love with a woman who will not accept his professions of love. How does he respond to this?
- Why is the speaker wishing for death? Why does he feel his situation is unbearable? How is love affecting him? What kind of love is this?
- In lines 29–30, the speaker says that despite the fact that the woman does not respond favourably to his declarations of love, he is nonetheless eager to complain, i.e. to give expression to his sorrow? Why is he eager to complain? What is the point of complaining?
- How would you describe the speaker’s tone in this poem? Does the tone change as the poem goes on?
- Apart from the conventional, somewhat clichéd situation, we find out very little about the speaker’s identity. We find out even less about the woman he loves. Does this matter? Why write such an anonymous poem?

Form, Structure and Language:

- The poem is written in very short lines. What is the effect of these short lines? Can you relate the poet’s choice to write in very short lines to his choice of subject matter?
- Look at the rhyme scheme of the poem. Each stanza has only two rhymes. The secondary rhyme in the first stanza becomes the main rhyme of the next and so on. What effect of this? Does it make the poem seem varied or monotonous?
- Each line usually has only four syllables. If you read the poem aloud, would you read each line slowly or quickly? How would you describe the rhythm of the poem?
- What happens to the rhyme scheme in the last line of the poem? How does this relate to the meaning of the last stanza?