

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*

Thinking about the Poem

1. 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?
2. What colour is the young woman’s hair? What does she say she can change it to? Why would she want to do so?
3. 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?
4. 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.
5. 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?