

The Rise of Women Writers



READING 3 Evaluate the changes in sound and form in poetry across literary time periods.

On Her Loving Two Equally

Poem by Aphra Behn

Written at the Close of Spring

Poem by Charlotte Smith

Meet the Authors

Aphra Behn 1640–1689



“All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn . . . for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.” So wrote Virginia Woolf in “A Room of One’s Own” (1929) in tribute to England’s first professional woman writer. Adventurous and talented, Aphra Behn turned to writing to support herself after a brief stint in prison for debt. She first became famous for her plays—comedies, mostly—rivaling John Dryden as the most prolific playwright of the Restoration. Modern critics have focused more on her poetry and innovative fiction.

Woman of Mystery Not much is known about Behn. She apparently achieved some renown in the court of Charles II, because after her husband’s death the king sent her to the Netherlands to spy on his Dutch enemies. Agent 160, as Behn was called, returned about a year later, in debt and out of a job.

A Scandalous Freedom For the next 19 years, Behn enjoyed an extraordinary life as the only woman writer in theatrical and literary circles. Her lively personality won her many friends, even as her unusual independence and liberty created quite a scandal at the time.

Charlotte Smith 1749–1806



When Charlotte Smith attended a political dinner in Paris in 1792, 50 supporters of the French Revolution raised their glasses to honor her. It was a shining moment for the popular English writer, whose latest novel, *Desmond* (1792), brimmed with radical fervor. But soon the ideals of the revolution collapsed, bringing down the sales of Smith’s novels along with them. Smith, who supported herself and her nine children by writing, was back at the brink of destitution.

From Riches to Rags Born into a wealthy family, Smith left home at age 16 for an arranged marriage. Her husband, besides

being cruel and abusive, squandered their money until they both landed in debtor’s prison. Smith used the time to write her first book of poems, *Elegiac Sonnets and Other Essays* (1784), and then paid their way out of prison with the profits.

From Poet to Novelist Although Smith’s sonnets were highly respected at the time, fiction paid better. In 1788, she began writing the first of her 11 novels. Yet as her novels became increasingly radical, readers began to turn away. At the end of her life, Smith barely made ends meet by writing educational books.

Authors Online

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LITERARY ANALYSIS: SPEAKER

As you probably recall, the **speaker** in a poem is the voice that “talks” to the reader, like a narrator in a short story or novel. The two works you are about to read are **lyrics**, or short poems in which a single speaker conveys personal thoughts and feelings on a particular subject. Among England’s first professional woman writers, Aphra Behn and Charlotte Smith helped change the nature of English lyric poetry. Unlike more conventional poems of the period, their works feature strong female speakers with complex emotions. In “On Her Loving Two Equally,” for example, the speaker wonders

*How strongly does my passion flow,
Divided equally ’twixt two?*

As you read the poems, pay attention to the speakers and the feelings they convey.

READING SKILL: ANALYZE POETIC STRUCTURE

Written a century apart, the works of Behn and Smith reflect the beginning and the end of the neoclassical era. Although both poems celebrate similar values, they differ considerably in the way they are structured. In poetry, **structure** is the way words, images, and lines are arranged. Generally, a poem’s structure and its content reinforce each other. The structure of “On Her Loving Two Equally” comprises three six-line stanzas. On the other hand, “Written at the Close of Spring” is a Shakespearean sonnet, with a fixed structure of three quatrains and a final, rhyming couplet. To help you understand how structure supports content in each poem, use the following strategies:

- Summarize each section to clarify the content. Identify the major events and emotions in the poem.
- Note where a **turn**, or shift in thought, occurs.
- Consider the overall effect this structure creates and how it might relate to the major events and emotions in the poem.

As you read each poem, use a chart like the one shown to record your observations.

Sections	Summaries	Turn



Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

Why do we often WANT what we can't HAVE?

Because the majority of English writers during the 17th and 18th centuries were male, most poems expressed a man’s point of view. In the works that follow, you will see desire expressed from another perspective—a woman’s.

QUICKWRITE People often have yearnings that are difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill. Think of a character in a book, movie, or television show who suffers from a thwarted desire. Describe the character’s predicament, and explain what advice you would offer him or her.



On Her Loving Two Equally

Aphra Behn

I

How strongly does my passion flow,
Divided equally 'twixt two?
Damon had ne'er subdued my heart
Had not Alexis took his part;
5 Nor could Alexis powerful prove,
Without my Damon's aid, to gain my love.

2 'twixt: between.

5 powerful prove: have shown himself to be powerful.

II

When my Alexis present is,
Then I for Damon sigh and mourn;
But when Alexis I do miss,
10 Damon gains nothing but my scorn.
But if it chance they both are by,
For both alike I languish, sigh, and die.

11 by: near.

III

Cure then, thou mighty wingéd god,
This restless fever in my blood;
15 One golden-pointed dart take back:
But which, O Cupid, wilt thou take?
If Damon's, all my hopes are crossed;
Or that of my Alexis, I am lost. **A**

13 wingéd god: Cupid, Roman god of love.

A POETIC STRUCTURE

Describe the **turn** that occurs in lines 13–18. Why might you expect this shift in thought to take place at the end of the poem?





Spring Flowers, Arthur Hacker. Fine Art of Oakham, Leicestershire, Great Britain. © Fine Art Photographic Library, London/Art Resource, New York.

Written at the Close of Spring

Charlotte Smith

The garlands fade that Spring so lately wove,
 Each simple flower, which she had nursed in dew,
 Anemonies, that spangled every grove,
 The primrose wan, and hare-bell mildly blue.
 5 No more shall violets linger in the dell,
 Or purple orchis variegate the plain,
 Till Spring again shall call forth every bell,
 And dress with humid hands her wreaths again.—
 Ah! poor humanity! so frail, so fair,
 10 Are the fond visions of thy early day,
 Till tyrant passion, and corrosive care,
 Bid all thy fairy colors fade away!
 Another May new buds and flowers shall bring;
 Ah! why has happiness—no second Spring? **B**

3 anemonies (ə-nēm'ə-nēz): small woodland flowers that resemble poppies and bloom in early spring.

4 primrose: an early-blooming flower; **wan** (wŏn): pale.

5 dell: a small valley.

6 orchis (ôr'kĭs): the orchid, called here by its Latin name; **variegate** (vâr'ê-ĭ-gât'): to make varied in color.

7 bell: bell-shaped flower, such as a harebell or a bluebell.

B SPEAKER

Reread lines 9–14. What emotions do “tyrant passion” and “corrosive care” help convey?

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What dilemma does the speaker face in Behn's poem?
2. **Clarify** What does the speaker ask of Cupid in lines 13–15?
3. **Recall** What transition is described in lines 1–8 of Smith's poem?
4. **Clarify** Why does the speaker feel that happiness is not possible for adults?



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Literary Analysis

- 5. **Make Inferences About Speaker** In lines 1–8 of “Written at the Close of Spring,” the speaker refers to specific types of flowers and landscapes. What can you infer about the speaker's interests and personality based on these references?
- 6. **Draw Conclusions About Speaker** In “On Her Loving Two Equally,” is the speaker really torn between two lovers, or does she simply enjoy the attention being paid to her?
- 7. **Analyze Poetic Structure** Review the notes you recorded in your charts. Identify the main idea of each section of the two poems. In what ways does the structure of each poem reinforce its meaning?
8. **Recognize Characteristics of Neoclassicism** The neoclassical writers of the 18th century developed a style that reflected these attributes:
 - order • logic • symmetry • wit

Examine each selection to identify characteristics of the neoclassical style. Which poem is more clearly neoclassical? Support your answer with details.

9. **Compare Sonnets** Although the English sonnet flourished during the Renaissance in the hands of William Shakespeare, the poetic form had fallen out of favor by the late 18th century, when Charlotte Smith published her sonnet collection. Compare and contrast Smith's “Written at the Close of Spring” with Shakespeare's “Sonnet 29” on page 328. In what way is the subject matter of Smith's sonnet different from that of Shakespeare's traditional love sonnet?

Literary Criticism

10. **Critical Interpretations** William Wordsworth, a pioneer of English romantic poetry, once made the following observation about Smith's sonnets: “[They] appear to me the most exquisite, in which moral sentiments, affections, or feelings are deduced from, and associated with, the scenery of nature.” In what way might this interpretation apply to “Written at the Close of Spring”?

*Why do we often **WANT** what we can't **HAVE**?*

Why do you think we hold on to some desires even when we know they cannot be fulfilled? Have you or someone you know ever done so? Why?