

# One flesh - elizabeth jennings [1926-2001]

[Life](#), [Death](#)



One Flesh - Elizabeth Jennings [1926-2001] Relevant Background \* Elizabeth Jennings was a well-educated English woman who worked in publishing and as a librarian. \* She devoted much of her poetry to spiritual and emotional topics of a personal nature. \* She explored suffering, relationships, loneliness and religious faith. \* In this poem, Elizabeth explores the nature of a marriage relationship in old age. It is very personal as she is dealing with her parents. \* The title of the poem comes from the description in the bible of two people becoming one flesh in marriage. The word 'one' stands for their physical unity and the poet's link to her parents as she observes and thinks about them. \* Elizabeth Jennings ponders how her mother and father's traditional marriage has ended in silence and physical separation: 'silence between them'. Summary In three stanzas, Elizabeth Jennings wonders about the relationship and separateness of her aged parents, now that the passion between them has ended. Though no longer one flesh, they are still bonded together. In the first stanza, Elizabeth Jennings explores the physical separation of her parents in two single beds. Her father intends to read, but doesn't concentrate. He keeps the light on, as if busy. Her mother dreams of childhood and ponders on men in general. Their daughter, the poet, imagines that they are in suspense: awaiting some event or excitement to stir their lives into action. Both are just staring emptily: he at the book, she at the shadows. They seem physically, mentally and emotionally worlds apart. In the second stanza, the poet remarks on how their old bodies are like the waste or leftovers ['flotsam'] from their years of passion. Now that their passion is dead, they have grown physically apart, without visible affection or physical contact. Any slight touching they do is a reminder of

how unemotional they are. Perhaps this thought is accompanied by private pain over what they both have lost. They face a sexless future [chastity]. It is an irony or reversal that their sex-lives have ended in sexlessness. It is as if their passionate years were a preparation for their sexless isolation. 'Chastity' is a religious state of purity. In the third stanza, it is a surprise for their daughter, Elizabeth Jennings, to see them thus apart. She sees a contradiction between their distant companionship and the passionate lives they once lived. Yet, though apart, they have something that makes them 'strangely together': their shared memories, experience, relationship and mutual isolation. Their unspeaking silence unites them. They have their isolation in common. They are linked in a slender way, as if by a thread. But they will not use this thread of a relationship to wind each other in. Elizabeth Jennings realises that time has gently altered her parents, like the almost unnoticed touch of a feather. She wonders whether they have noticed the gradual change taking place. Are they aware that they are old? Elizabeth Jennings seems to think they are not aware of the fire they have lost as their lives have cooled into side-by-side isolation.

Themes \* Separateness in elderly marriage Elizabeth Jennings observes the physical and emotional separation of her aged parents. Their married life has ended with them weak, unemotional and not needing each other as before. Yet, the old people don't suffer loneliness. They have fulfilled their needs for each other and simply fade into isolation. Words like 'separate', 'cool' and 'cold' show the poet's view of their faded relationship. Yet, the image of the thread shows that there is a bond between them. Perhaps it is the bond of shared experience.

\* Old age The poet explores how old age weakens human

emotion. Her parents have less need of each other, as they grow very old. Jennings' two elderly parents don't seem to have noticed the aging process. In their reduced state, their daughter compares them to flotsam. Her parents seem weary and without focus to her. \* The nature of relationships Human intimacy fades away. The poem shows the final phase of a traditional marriage. The poet observes that human passion weakens and grows cold. Once aging people have got over their passion for each other, they lose intimacy. They live sexless or chaste [pure in a religious sense] lives. Their bond one time made them 'one flesh'. Now all that holds them together is a thread. They hardly ever touch. Their flesh fades separately. \* Time gently wears away human lives and leads to death. Elizabeth Jennings notices the gradual way time has worn down her parent's once passionate relationship. Like a feather, time has touched them in an unnoticed way. They await some event, which may be death. The poet's mother gazes at shadows, her father stares at a book. They are like 'flotsam', a word that stands for decay. The poet suggests passionate life is only a preparation for cold death. \* The slow decline of a family unit due to time This is a poem about coming to terms with losing one's parents. Elizabeth Jennings feels she has nearly lost her parents before they die. She feels the 'fire' that made her, as her parents made love, has faded. As she observes her parents slide gently towards death, she seems helpless. She only observes. It is noticeable that she doesn't speak to either of her parents. Yet, she shows her love in the second last line when she proclaims them as her parents. Style Comparison: Jennings compares two very different stages in human life. She compares a passionate marriage in youth, full of fire and 'one flesh', to a cold separate

state in old age. Contrast [difference]: The image of fire is contrasted to coldness. Thus, the poem compares love in youth to separateness in old age. Metaphor: The gradual unnoticed effects of time are compared to the touch of a ' feather'. Her parents' love and lust when younger is compared to a ' fire'. Simile: The poet compares their decaying bodies to ' flotsam', floating wreckage. Jennings compares their weak emotional connection to a ' thread'. Diction: Most of the words are simple. More unusual or complex words express a religious context: ' chastity' and ' destination'. Yet, some of the phrases and sentences are hard to figure out—a bit like the poet's parents. Humour: Jennings mocks her parents as ' tossed up like flotsam' or wreckage. Tone: Jennings seems to speak with a sense of despair at times. Yet, she finds some comfort in their spiritual bond in the final stanza, even if it is as weak as a thread. She feels great tenderness for the parents who once passionately loved each other and her. The feather and thread images are tender and kind. Atmosphere: There is a sad and empty atmosphere or mood created through the poem. The sense of coming death and fading passion creates a chilling mood. Repetition: There is a steady rhyme throughout. This may represent the bond that existed all their lives between her parents. They had a traditional marriage. Sibilance [repetition of ' s' sound]: Note how the ' s' sounds in the third stanza emphasises the silence in a house where the elderly inhabitants don't converse anymore. Sibilance adds to the tenderness of the poet's imagery and tone here.