

Presenting a reversal
of fortune in 'they flee
from me'



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In Wyatt's "They Flee from Me," the speaker considers all his previous sexual conquests (with a particular emphasis on one "special" partner), and then wonders why these women are no longer interested in him. Usually in love poetry, the man plays the role of the dominant partner whereas the woman is painted as the vulnerable or subordinate partner. However in Wyatt's poem, there is an inversion in the relationship and the speaker is left at the mercy of the "special" woman. Although the punishment of having sex outside of marriage was far worse for women at that time, in this poem, the speaker attempts to identify himself as the victim. His emotions can possibly be linked to his position of sexual vulnerability, which would have been strange and unfathomable to a man of his era. It is clear that a reversal of fortunes has been presented in this poem; therefore, the question we ought to be asking ourselves is: How exactly has the concept been presented by the author in this poem?

In the first stanza, the phrase 'that sometime did me seek,' suggests that the women were once initiators of the relationship, yet the word 'flee' creates a sense of desperation in the departure of the speaker's sexual partners. Besides that, the speaker depicted these women as "gentle, tame, and meek", or as all having relatively subordinate qualities. However, now that these women no longer frequent his chambers, the speaker considers them to be "wild". Through this, the speaker promotes the unfair suggestion that a woman abandoning a man is the equivalent of being uncivilized: instead, she should be a "tame," functioning member of society. The speaker proceeds by comparing women to animals and comparing bread to sexual activities. Essentially, the speaker is trying to say that women used to

endanger themselves in order to have sexual relations with him but now they “ range” elsewhere. This sustains the theme of abandonment that was obtained from the first line of the stanza. It seems that when women do not want or obey the speaker, they then become unfavourable and lose the function that they serve in his life. Thus, it can be argued that the speaker sees women as merely sexual objects and not as human beings. This is ironic due to the fact that in the third stanza, the speaker complains of being a victim of sexual objectification.

Furthermore, this poem suggests that sex is never equal. There is always a controlling party who is seducing his or her submissive partner. In this case, the reversal of fortune is presented through the reversal of sexual dominance. A sexually dominant woman is introduced in this stanza, which provides a stark contrast to the subordinate meek temperament of his previous sexual partners. This is inferred from the portrayal of her gown as “ loose”, which can be seen as a symbol of her sexual promiscuity. It is also worth noting that his fixation seems to be on the woman’s outfit instead of her physicality or personality, as the positive descriptions of this woman are all centered around her garments, through phrases such as “ thin array” and “ pleasant guise”.

The word “ guise” implies that the narrator knows that this woman may be deceiving him, yet the phrase “ she me caught” gives the audience the notion that he cannot help but be entrapped by her manipulative and seductive advances. “ Caught” can relate to hunting as well, which perpetuates the idea that the female is now the aggressive hunter who is seeking out her male prey. It can also be said that the hunting metaphor is <https://assignbuster.com/presenting-a-reversal-of-fortune-in-they-flee-from-me/>

continued by the usage of the word "heart" in the last line. This is because "heart" sounds similar to the word "hart", which bears the meaning of an adult male deer. This clearly illustrates the reversal of fortunes experienced by the speaker in terms of sexual dominance.

In the third and final stanza, the reversal of fortune is presented through a reversal in emotional attachment. The opening line comments on the dreamlike sequence of events in the previous stanzas, yet the reader will notice a shift in tone when the speaker begins to relentlessly criticize the woman's indulgence in "newfangledness" and her "strange fashion of forsaking"; that is, her faithlessness and promiscuity, even though the speaker seems to pride himself on those very qualities in the previous two stanzas. One detects the speaker's bitterness most strongly in his suggestion that she has rejected him because of his gentleness. The word "gentleness" implies that the speaker had romantic feelings for the woman. However, the speaker had been so used to stereotypically submissive women in the past that he does not know how to treat this bold, dominant woman. Naturally, this would make him frustrated and confused, which is why the manifestation of these feelings can be found in the concluding couplet. In the sarcasm of the final lines, he asks rhetorically how she may deserve to be treated since she has treated him "so kindly", and wonders if she got her comeuppance in the end. This vitriolic bitterness directly contrasts the first line of the second stanza, in which the speaker states that he is actually grateful that for the departure of his previous sexual partners. Hence, it is obvious that the speaker has experienced a reversal of fortune in terms of emotional attachment.