

Ilona Lay: Love Poems



Ilona Lay's love poems explore the essence of love from different perspectives. This is also reflected in the different forms of poetic expression. The poems are complemented by short accompanying texts that serve to provide a broader context and to stimulate further reflection.

About the author:

As the title of her first poetry collection (Versunken/Immersed), published in 2008, suggests, Ilona Lay lives a secluded life.

After orienting herself towards classical forms in the early phase of her work, she has switched more to free-rhythm poetry forms in her recent works.

This was already evident in her "Meditations on Happiness" (published in 2020 under the title *October in the Mountains*). The texts of her "Meditations on the Dark Side of Life" (*Faces of Death*), published in 2022, are also characterised by this.

Cover picture: Valentin Valkov: Swans (Fotolia)

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The Ancient Garden

The Enchanted Garden of Love

The poem *In the Ancient Garden* evokes a romance in an enchanted garden. At the same time, however, it also appears as an image for the age-old power of love that outlasts all time.



Franz von Stuck (1863 – 1928): The Evening Star (1912)
Wikimedia Commons (detail)

In the Ancient Garden

The dusk approaching like a timid horse
and birches whispering serenely,
hyacinths that on a bridge
of scents stretch out into the night
in the garden, in the ancient garden,
when the voices of the feast fell silent.

The moonlight opening a hidden gate
and brooks embarking on a secret journey,
crickets that in wistful singing
join the dances of the misty clouds
in the garden, in the ancient garden,
when the party masks fell off.

The night descending like a soothing veil
of stars and dawning memories,
ways that in the ocean of her arms
recover from the daylight's wounds
in the garden, in the ancient garden,
when I found my way into your heart.



The Garden of Lovers and the Garden of Love

A garden with ancient trees, through whose gnarled branches the moon twinkles, here and there a weathered statue, the scent of jasmine, accompanied by the chirping chorus of crickets – of course this is an ideal ambience for romantic love.

On the other hand, love itself is also a bit like an ancient garden. In the age of cyber-relationships, dates arranged online and affairs ended by electronic text messages, the very term "love" seems strangely old-fashioned.

A Sorceress in the Industrial Age

In spite of all this, love has survived throughout the centuries. Even today, in our purpose-driven, computerised world, we still long for it. Contradictory as we are, we stage ourselves as a unique, distinctive personality that is different from any other self – and at the same time dream of nothing more than transcending the boundaries of our self in loving union with another self.

In this way, love is a bit like a primeval sorceress who has strayed into the industrial age. This is precisely how the French chanson singer Fredda portrays it in her song *L'amour antique* (Ancient Love). Through allusions to the world of dreams and fairy tales, the character of love as a power fallen out of time is evoked here.

The World Alienated from Love

Yet love is only seemingly a stranger in our technocratic times. After all, the very fact that it is still sung about and conjured up in poems today testifies to its unbroken power.

So we might just as well turn the perspective around: Seen through the eyes of the goddess of love, it is not she who is the stranger. Rather, from her point of view, it is the world that has become estranged from her – and that must return to her as its haven, the primordial garden in which all life is at home, if it is to recover from its inner divisiveness.

A link to the song by Fredda mentioned above can be found together with an English translation in: A Summer Full of Love. A musical mental journey through the land of love, p. 13; rotherbaron.com, August 2022 (PDF).



Pictures: 1. Van3ssa: Venetian Mask (Pixabay); 2. Willgard Krause: Fairy forest (Pixabay; detail)

Song of Lovers

Seeing the World through the Eyes of Love

The *Song of Lovers* revolves around the changed perception of the world arising from love. Those who love live in a different world – and thus gain a new perspective on the world of everyday life.



Benja Alejo: The God Amor (Cupid; Pixabay)

Song of Lovers

You are like an all-pervading song.
Through your mouth
the whole earth speaks to me
in meaningful tunes.
So when in the morning the meadow weeps,
still covered by the shroud of the night,
but already shivering
in the frenzy of awakening,
and when the leaf dances dreamily
to the sound of the wind harp
or the swallows soar up at noon
exultantly to the realm of heaven,
all things flow together in one song.
For everything is tuned to you.

You are like the light.
Through your eyes
all things, bathed in moonlight,
reveal their deepest roots to me.
So when the fire of autumn breaks the fruit
to make it endure as a future tree's mother,
pearls of blossom shine consolingly on me from the sparks.
And when the dance of the candles fills my room,
I sense the secret forces
that release the wave of my soul from my body's house
to heaven, so that it can flow to you.
For everything rhymes with you.

You are like a divine being.
Through your heart
everything is filled with response.
No day ever shatters
to ashes on the scaffold of doubts.
So when the storm of winter
grimly sweeps through the land,
freezing everything in its insatiable fury,
even this gives me a glimpse
of the greatness of God.
And like the dance by which life begets itself
in the playing of a bee or the life
that a cloud flower fleetingly acquires,
I lay down all the splendour of life
at the feet of the deity who taught me to live.
For everything is rooted in you.



The Magic Wand of Love

Those who love see the world with different eyes. Things open up and turn their deeper, more soulful faces towards them. Little things they previously passed by carelessly are suddenly filled with meaning. Life can be experienced in all its abundance and beauty.

Those who love no longer know loneliness. On the loneliest island and in the most remote mountain hut, the heart of lovers is always filled with the feeling of being at one with another life. Every blossom tells of a butterfly that will drink its nectar and help it branch out with the world. And each fruit tells of the spring, when it will awaken as a tree from its deep sleep in the womb of the earth.

Those who love develop a special sensitivity for the secret hopes and fears of others. Love endows us with the gift of a smile that soothes the suffering of others like an invisible plaster. It gives us the strength to encourage others in what they are longing for in their innermost being and to warn them of what stands in the way of the fulfilment of their desires.

A Bridge to the Cosmos

Those who love feel the secret roots that connect everything that exists with every other being. For them, the cosmos is no longer a collection of matter shooting chaotically through space, but a mosaic of ciphers that all at once reveal their meaning. Every cloud formation turns into a picture that tells a story all of its

own. And every river tells of the seafarers who will one day, when it has widened into a sea, ride on its back to faraway lands.

Thus, those who love recognise love as the primordial ground of being, as that which holds life together and drives it forward, that which creates and transforms it. The concrete being that has kindled love becomes a bridge to that other being from which everything arises: the world soul, God, Brahman ...



Pictures:

- 1. David Mark: Sunrise in the Nepalese mountains (Pixabay)*
- 2. Gerd Altmann: A gate in the clouds (Pixabay)*

Evening of a Lonesome Lover

The Magic of Imagined Closeness

Today, lovers can overcome the pain of separation via Skype. Sometimes, however, imagined closeness, as evoked in the poem *Evening of a Lonesome Lover*, is still superior to cyber closeness even today.



Leandro de Carvalho: Woman in candlelight (Pixabay)

Evening of a Lonesome Lover

The candle that silently fades in the dark,
uniting the shadows' contours with the night,
blurring in languorous dance with the fog,
reminds me of us.

The willow, intertwining with the twilight,
bending, caressed by the wind, in the top,
yet firmly protecting its growth with its roots,
reminds me of us.

The swans and the seagulls that sway on the waves,
their wings lulled by spirits that dress them with dreams,
their plumage enwrapped in a garment of moonlight,
remind me of us.

The roses that blossom along the horizon,
which brilliantly wither, yet never decay,
descending to other horizons at night,
preserve you in me.



Bridging Separations – Today and in Former Times

Lovers who are separated from each other nowadays will probably have their eyes reddened from hours of skyping. Not so long ago, separation times rather led to reddened ears, caused by endless phone calls. Before that, fingers and wrists were the ones who had to pay for the separation, bridged by endless letters.

And when even mails were not yet a self-evident part of everyday life? In those times, lovers had no choice but to trust in the power of illusions. For children, such a form of imagined closeness is quite normal during separations. They are still much closer to that magical thinking that finds the missing persons in objects of all kinds that are connected to the distant parents, siblings or friends.

These can be personal things of all types, but also the moon, that travelling companion that accompanies us wherever we go, creating a secret connection with those who look upon it from another part of the planet. In addition, a magical aura naturally surrounds the places of shared experiences and the paths we walked hand in hand.

The Magic of Love in the Age of Cyber Dating

In a time when everyone can connect with each other everywhere at any time, such forms of imagined closeness seem obsolete. However, even after the most perfect meeting in the cyber world, a feeling of unease often remains.

After all, the virtual illusion of closeness cannot yet replace the smell of the other person, that feeling of togetherness that lasts

even when we are in different rooms – and certainly not the exhilaration of a heartfelt embrace.

Thus, the feeling of closeness is sometimes more likely to arise when we close our eyes and immerse ourselves in an imaginary dialogue with the distant person – when we dream of that shared silence that reality denies us.



Pictures:

- 1. Lars Nissen: Flock of birds at sunset (Pixabay)***
- 2. Johannes Plenio: Reflections (Pixabay)***

A Winter's Day

Nostalgic View of a Bygone Castle in the Air

The poem *A Winter's Day* revolves around an unfulfilled love. But it also raises the question of how mourning for past or missed happiness can obscure the view of present happiness.



Albert Bierstadt (1830 – 1902): Winter in Yosemite (Wikimedia commons)

Picture on the next page: *Caspar David Friedrich (1774 – 1840): Winter (Monk in the Snow, 1808; Wikimedia commons; painting burnt in 1931)*

A Winter's Day

Sleepwalking, the snow dances down
from its bed of cloudy manes,
dabbing the earth fairy's strands
on the icy grave slab of the lake.

Silently the flakes release a dream
in which two eyes glow indistinctly,
dark hair is wrapped in a white fluff
falling from the sallow winter sky.

The winter wind howls like a boozier,
drunk with undrunk wine,
around two hearts that never poured
their longing into melodies.

Now their dream floats in the vale of shadows,
in the gorge of unsung songs,
and the clouds weave their lament
around the never-emptied jug.



The Labyrinth of What-If Questions

When looking back on the life lived so far, the what-if question is certainly one of the most frequently posed: What if I had chosen a different job back then? What if I hadn't gone out with the others on that Saturday when I was actually much too tired? If I had not gone to that bar where I met the love of my life?

The latter question, however, also exists in reverse: What if back then I had approached the person in whom I saw the love of my life? What prevented me from reaching out to that person? Why did I lack the courage to do so?

Dizziness before the Bridge to the Castle in the Air

The answer to this question could be that we were reluctant to take the decisive step precisely because we saw in the other person the fulfilment of our innermost desires. If we had associated her with nothing more than the hope of a non-committal adventure, we might not have been so hesitant.

So did the thought of changing our whole life by the twitch of a finger discourage us? Or were we afraid of the collapse of the castle in the air into which we already saw ourselves moving with the person we adored? Were we afraid that the person we loved would not even let us cross the bridge to the castle in the air – or of reality not living up to our expectations?

When Nostalgia Obscures the View of Happiness

Later, we sit on the mountain of the life behind us and look down into the plain of the past, where the fata morgana of our castle in the air still shines as purely as it did when we didn't dare approach it.

However, we should always be aware that a castle in the air remains a mirage, even when looking back. Whether it was really what we saw in it, we cannot know.

If we do not realise this, we run the risk of falling into the trap of nostalgic thinking, all too familiar from Romanticism: Looking back, we glorify the life we did not live. "Where you are not, there is happiness" – this was a core sentiment of Romanticism. For Romantic art, this "Weltschmerz" (world-weariness) may have been fruitful. But those who live by this maxim are in danger of obscuring their view of happiness.

Thus, what-if questions may be appealing as mind games – but for a fulfilled life, it is more helpful to seek happiness where it is within our reach.

Quotation taken from:

Georg Philipp Schmidt von Lübeck: Des Fremdlings Abendlied (The Stranger's Evening Song, 1808); set to music by Franz Schubert (under the title *Der Wanderer*). The various versions of the poem and song text can be found with information on the genesis and publishing history as well as a song version by Peter Schöne (voice) and Boris Cepeda (piano) in: Schöne, Peter: [Der Wanderer](#) – Dritte Fassung (Third Version). D 489 - Opus 4 / 1; schubertlied.de. An English translation of the poem with annotations is available on *The LiederNet*, here with reference to the first verse: [Ich komme vom Gebirge her](#) (I come down from the mountains).

Tristan's Dream

The Utopia of a Realm of Love

The poem *Tristan's Dream* alludes to mankind's age-old dream of a realm of love that is stronger than death and acts as a counterbalance to a world ruled by hatred.



Rogelio de Egusquiza (1845 – 1915): Tristán e Isolda (La vida; 1912)
Museo de Arte Moderno y Contemporáneo de Santander y Cantabria
(Wikimedia Commons)

Tristan's Dream

The evening led me along a secret path,
past leafless trees and the withered fields,
past empty woods and the fading song
of the blackbird, the fruit
of early dreaming and late renunciation,
on and on across the twilight's ridge.

My foot, frozen, did not feel the ground.
But my heart, throbbing in flames
that never before had entwined it,
guided my steps to a distant light
that, emerging from the midst of the night,
raised its pale face from the hills.

In its very heart I saw you bloom,
you, gliding on the wings of the moon
in peaceful flight
over the smooth carpet
of rivers and fields and meadows.
My heart, a leaf, riding in the evening wind,
floated into your arms,
forever escaping the beat of the clocks.

The night, a robe of sparkling velvet,
nestled around us.
But when, as if in motionless dance,
we sank into each other's arms,
it was as if roots gently stretched out

from one to the other – so that we,
growing together to One plant,
slipped away from the cave of the earth
and meandered towards the universe.

And when we touched the sky,
a bright flower flame sprang from us,
which, dedicated to the god of twilight,
protected the fragile dream birds of the night
forever from the hatchet of the day
and loosened the evening's clammy hand
from the shivering shell of the soul,
comforting it with its glow and opening it up
to the whisper of the cosmos.



Rogelio de Egusquiza (1845 – 1915): Tristán e Isolda (La muerte, 1910)
Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao (Wikimedia commons)

The Dream of Perpetuating Love

Eternal love or, more precisely: the perpetuation of love – this is an age-old dream of humanity.

The dream is based on the feeling that God, even if he does not grant endless duration to individual life, could at least bestow eternity on that which arises from the intertwining of two existences.

After all, love is more than the mere physical union of two people. Isn't it in essence something immaterial that should therefore be exempt from the process of decay that applies to matter?

Perpetuation of Love in Myth: Philemon and Baucis

The dream of the perpetuation of love is taken up in countless myths and fairy tales. Among these, the story of Philemon and Baucis told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* is particularly touching.

The tale is about an old couple who, because of their hospitality, are granted the wish by the gods to die at the same time, i.e. not to have to experience the death of the other. After passing away, they transform into a lime tree and an oak tree and, branching out with each other in the roots and twigs, can preserve their love beyond the grave.

Eternal Love in the Starry Sky: A Chinese Saga

The images that people at all times have seen in the stars also often tell of the hope for a special protection of love by the gods. In Chinese astrology, for example, the stars Vega and Altair sym-

bolise a shepherd boy and a weaver's daughter who are placed on different banks of an uncrossable river by their parents to prevent their relationship.

In the sky, this corresponds to the "silver river" of the Milky Way that separates Altair and Vega. Once a year, however, the two stars approach each other so that the lovers can come together by crossing the Milky Way, turning it into a bridge of stars. This corresponds to the bridge formed by magpies that allows the lovers in the saga to meet once a year. In China as well as in Japan and Korea, a special festival is dedicated to this event.

Healing Death through Love: Isis and Osiris

Other myths even evoke the dream of healing the wound of death through the power of love. The best known of these is probably the ancient Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris.

The story tells how the limbs of Osiris, the husband of Isis, are scattered across the land after he has been killed by his brother. Thereupon Isis gathers up the limbs and reassembles them. In this way she can at least be with her beloved one more time and beget a child with him. After that, Osiris becomes the lord of the underworld, Isis the goddess of birth and magic. When the cult was adopted by the Greco-Roman culture, Isis likewise became the goddess of the underworld.

Death as a Refuge for Lovers

Sometimes, however, lovers deliberately seek death in order to save their love in a paradoxical escape from life. Prevented by social conventions from fulfilling their love, they renounce life so as to be at least united in death.

In Japan, there is even a special word for this form of joint suicide of two lovers (Shinjū). It describes the irrevocable rootedness of a person in the heart of another person and at the same time the willingness to protect this close connection through joint death if necessary.

The Tragic Death of Lovers: Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet

In other cases, the death of lovers is not the result of a conscious decision, but the result of unfortunate circumstances that stand in the way of the fulfilment of love. In this case, however, the seemingly accidental incidents that cause the death of the lovers are often only reflections of the insurmountable social barriers that prevent their love from being fulfilled.

This applies to the love story of Tristan and Isolde as well as to that of Romeo and Juliet. In both cases, death appears as the logical consequence of social norms that clip the wings of love. Thus, the death of the lovers is indeed tragic here, i.e. the inevitable consequence of an unsolvable conflict. On the other hand, on the symbolic level, it also stands for the absolute freedom of love, which, if necessary, saves itself by escaping to the other side of life if it is denied fulfilment in this world.

The Counterworld of Love

All stories of the perpetuation of love ultimately refer to the utopia of a realm of love in which the realm of death is overcome through unconditional devotion to another human being. On the one hand, this can refer quite concretely to the utopia of a world of perfect harmony, a world in which the wound of divisiveness, smouldering since the expulsion from paradise, is healed.

On the other hand, the idea of a realm of love also refers – in a figurative sense – to the vision of a counterworld in which precisely those mechanisms are suspended that cause lovers to fail in the real world: greed and hatred, jealousy and lust for power, all rooted in the claim of individuals or of society as a whole to undermine the self-determination of human beings and to subjugate them to external ends instead.



Akuadewe: Silhouette of a plant in moonlight (Pixabay)

Love Poison

The Revolt of Love

What seems normal to us in everyday life – the unloving nature of the world – is a thorn in the hearts of lovers. That is why love – as suggested in the poem *Love Poison* – has a natural tendency to revolt.



Edvard Munch (1863 – 1944): The Kiss (1897)
Oslo/Norway, Munch Museum (Wikimedia commons)

Love Poison

My love
is a tiger. Relentlessly
he grabs me by the neck and shakes me,
until my eyes awaken
to the relentlessness of the world.

My love
is a grizzly bear. Insidiously
he stuns me with his cave eyes,
until my ears awaken
to the insidiousness of the world.

My love
is an eagle. Painfully
he lifts me up with his claws,
until my senses awaken
to the pain of the world.

My love
is a cobra. Silently
her poisonous kiss pierces my heart,
until my lips awaken
to break the silence of the world.

Breakout from the Ego Prison

When we speak of "love poems", we automatically think of poems in which love – even if often only implicitly – has an erotic background. This is surprising insofar as there are numerous other forms of love – the love between parents and their children, for example, the love of nature or the love of the region in which we grew up.

Nevertheless, our instinctive association of poetic evocation of love with that special form of closeness that arises from erotic love makes sense. In a way, it touches the essence of love.

Nothing else allows us to overcome the walls of our ego prison as completely as love for a person who was just a moment ago a complete stranger to us. In such cases, love can become a drawbridge that leads us out of the castle of our ego into another ego. Those who are touched by its magic wand suddenly no longer revolve only around themselves. For them, another life counts more than their own.

Love as a Natural Rebel

Such an experience also changes our view of the world. Seen with the eyes of love, the barbed wire of lovelessness that runs through the world can no longer be overlooked. Those who move into the realm of love feel this barbed wire like a wreath of thorns around their soul. So they will do anything to free themselves and others from it.

Thus, there is always a seed of revolt in love. Looking at life according to her own laws, the goddess of love inspires those who find a new home in her arms to change the world in such a way that the laws of love apply everywhere and to everyone.

Love as the Sister of Art

This makes love at the same time a sister of art. Both make it possible to see the world through different eyes and thus unmask the inhumanity, which so often presents itself as expedient and without alternative. Consequently, there can hardly be a more powerful alliance than that between love and art.



*Wsjewolod Maximowitsch (1894 – 1914): Der Kuss (1913)
Kiew, Nationales Kunstmuseum der Ukraine (Wikimedia commons)*