

ABU BEN ADHEIN

Abou Ben Adhem: About the poem

‘*Abou Ben Adhem*‘ by James Henry Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) is a literary gem based on the spirit of Fraternity. **First published** in *The Amulet* (1834) by S.C Hall, the poem is Hunt’s rendering of a divine encounter between an angel and the Sufi mystic, Ibrahim Bin Adham.

This is a **narrative poem**, where Hunt uses the storytelling technique to convey a profound reflection — **Loving one’s fellowmen is perhaps more virtuous, if not at par, with loving the Almighty Himself.**

Incidentally, the poem draws from Arabian lore, where in the Islamic month of Nour Sha’aban, God takes the golden book of mankind and chooses those dear to Him who He will call in the coming year. Thus indirectly, this is also a poem about a ‘blessed death’. It is a fitting tribute then, that the verse “Write me as one who loves his fellow men” came to be used in Hunt’s epitaph.

The legend of ‘Abou Ben Adhem’, was picked up by Hunt from a French book, the *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1697). Hunt’s choice of subject and setting — an Arabian tale with idealistic and supernatural overtones

– is an example of Romantic Orientalism. Against this backdrop, the otherworldly quality of the poem is enhanced.

Hunt added more flavor to context by employing an **archaic style** of writing here. The speech style of the characters – “What writest thou?”; “Nay, not so.” – lends to the ‘old world’ feel of the poem. Another aspect is Hunt’s practice of using an apostrophe to omit a vowel that does not have a sound – rais’d; answer’d; vanish’d. This is an early English practice that hails from the 16th century. As a reader, you can feel that this is a tale from yore.

‘Abou Ben Adhem’ is structured into two stanzas of nine couplets. **Couplets** are two consecutive lines that rhyme. Here, the couplets are ‘**closed**’ – i.e. they end with punctuation. While the poem is metrically flexible, it essentially displays an **iambic pentameter style**. Here, each line comprises of five iambic feet where an **iamb** refers to an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

**And SAW |with IN | the MOON | light IN |
his ROOM (Line 3)**

Apart from the end rhyme scheme, Hunt uses alliteration to enrich the cadence of the poem. **Alliteration** is the repetition of initial consonant sounds. Some examples are:

Abou Ben Adhem (Line 1)

Deep dream of peace (Line 2)

Nay, **not** so (Line 11)

I pray **thee then** (Line 13)

Another tool we find is **assonance**– the repetition of similar vowel sounds.

Making **it rich** (Line 4)

Abou spoke more low (Line 12)

All of these poetic elements contribute to the pleasure of reading the poem.

Abou Ben Adhem: Line by line analysis

First Stanza:

| Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)

The poem opens with the name of the protagonist and a blessing upon him. The use of the parenthesis in (May his tribe increase!) indicates that this portion is not directly linked to the poem itself. Yet this is a gesture by the poet to declare that here is a man worth remembering for generations to come.

| Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
| And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
| Making it rich, & like a lily in bloom,
| An angel, writing in a book of gold.

These lines are full of visual imagery and Metaphors; they describe an Awakening. ‘A deep dream of peace’ refers to a meditative, restful state that Abou Ben Adhem was in. Abou awakens to the presence of the angel which has already effected a transformation of the room, gilding it, making it look like a ‘lily in bloom’. The angel is writing something in a golden book.

The **simile** ‘like a lily in bloom’ conveys the potential of this encounter to bloom into something pure and noble. The fabled ‘book of gold’ symbolizes its richness and the great value placed on its contents.

Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
And to the Presence in the room he said,
“What writest thou?”—The Vision rais’d its head,
And, in a tone made of all sweet accord,
Answer’d “The names of those who love the Lord.

It is not every day that one has a divine visitor calmly writing away in one’s room. Imagine Abou Ben Adhem’s astonishment. Then again, feel the tranquil awareness that still comes through. The angel’s nonchalant actions could have emboldened him to satisfy his curiosity.

Without any preamble, he asks the angel – “What writest thou?” – an old-fashioned way of asking “What are you writing?”. The angel replies in a ‘tone of sweet accord’ –

a voice full of patience and kindness- that it is writing the names of those who have been honored by heaven for their love of God.

Another feature to consider in this portion are the ways by which the poet refers to the angel – viz. as a ‘Presence’ and as a ‘Vision’.

“And is mine one?” said Abou. “Nay, not so;”
Replied the angel. – Abou spoke more low,
But cheerily still, and said “I pray thee then,
Write me, as one that loves his fellow men.”

Eagerly, Abou asks if his love for God has been worthy enough to earn him a place in the angel’s heavenly book. The angel’s negative answer comes in a kind but matter-of-fact way. But he still perseveres and humbly but cheerfully makes his iconic request — to write his name as ‘one who loves his fellow men’. Contemplate on the fact that Abou Ben Adhem is unsure about his love for God, in contrast to the confidence he has of his love for mankind. “Write me as one that loves his fellow men.” These are the words that hold **the poem’s essence** and render this poem immortal.

Second Stanza:

The angel wrote, & vanish’d. The next night
It came again, with a great wakening light,

Our angelic host complies and leaves only to return in the next night. Our poet now speaks of a second awakening. Here, we see a ‘great wakening light’– so bright that it rouses Abou Ben Adhem awake. On a metamorphic level, this speaks of an enlightenment. Contrast this with the earlier waking scenario, which is inherently more gentle and subtle. Our heavenly messenger apparently comes with some important news.

And showed the names whom love of God had bless'd,
And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

This is the moment of truth, the point where most readers either smile or scoff. Whatever your reaction, this is where the poem bares the priorities of God. The angel now reveals the names whom God has blessed. To Abou Ben Adhem's astonishment, it is his name that leads everyone else's. His love for mankind proved to be valued greater than the others' love of God.

Hunt brings charm and idealism to his interpretation of Religion that finds more virtue in acts of Compassion rather than just Faith. This is what makes this poem memorable.