ONE FLESH

Lying apart now, each in a separate bed,
He with a book, keeping the light on late,
She like a girl dreaming of childhood,
All men elsewhere - it is as if they wait
Some new event: the book he holds unread,
Her eyes fixed on the shadows overhead.

Tossed up like flotsam from a former passion,
How cool they lie. They hardly ever touch,
Or if they do, it is like a confession
Of having little feeling - or too much.
Chastity faces them, a destination
For which their whole lives were a preparation.

Strangely apart, yet strangely close together,
Silence between them like a thread to hold
And not wind in. And time itself's a feather
Touching them gently. Do they know they're old,
These two who are my father and my mother
Whose fire from which I came, has now grown cold?

*Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001)*
WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE POEM?

The poet contemplates the relationship and separateness of her parents, now that the passion between them has ended. Though no longer one flesh, they are still bonded together.

In the first stanza, she explores the physical separation of her parents in two single beds. Her father intends to read, but does not 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 from their years of passion. Now that their passion is dead, the have grown physically apart, without visible affection or physical contact. Any slight touching they do is a reminder of how unemotional they have become. Perhaps this thought is accompanied by private pain over what they both have lost. They face a passionless future. It is as if their passionate years were a preparation for their isolation. ‘Chastity’ is a religious state of purity.

In the third stanza, it is a surprise for their daughter to see them 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. The poet 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? She seems to think they are not aware of the fire they have lost as their lives have cooled into side-by-side isolation.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN IDEAS AND THEMES?

-Separateness in marriage after many years - fading passion which has transformed into comfortable distance and separateness.
-Older age - no urgent need for affection or passion. Content with just being together yet at the same time apart.

-The nature of relationships - Human intimacy fades away with age. The poem shows the final phase of a traditional marriage.

-The slow decline of a family unit due to time - This is a poem about coming to terms with losing one’s parents. The poet feels she has nearly lost her parents before they die. She feels the ‘fire’ that made her, as her parents made love, has faded.

WHAT ARE THE ASPECTS OF STYLE WHICH MAKE IT EFFECTIVE?

- The tone is accepting, resigned, perhaps regretful.

- The lines are balanced and contrasted with each other like the couple but apart and separated.

- The rhyming couplets in each stanza reflect the couple.

- ‘Chastity’ is contrasted with ‘fire’ but this latter word is in the past ‘from which I came’.

- The title of the poem ‘One Flesh’ is a reminder of their religious vows. Adam recognized that Eve was part of him—they were in fact “one flesh.” The term “one flesh” means that just as our bodies are one whole entity and cannot be divided into pieces and still be a whole, so God intended it to be with the marriage relationship.