They Flee From Me is a poem that was written by Sir Thomas Wyatt in the 16th century. It is a poem in which Sir Thomas Wyatt creates a narrator who is talking and bitterly reminiscing about his past with certain women. There is a dream-like feel to certain parts of the poem, which are jolted by reality that is present in other parts of the poem. It is unclear throughout the poem who the narrator is referring to when he addresses “them” or “she”, but it is clear that the poem is using imagery of animals as metaphors to address lost lover(s). The poem is a transformation of the Petrarchan love convention because it addresses the typical topics of a Petrarchan poem but with Wyatt’s own personal twist. As opposed to the traditional Petrarchan love poem, the women in Wyatt’s poem not only give themselves away to the man, but they also seem to be controlling him as opposed to being pure and gentle creatures. It is also different from the Petrarchan love convention in that in the poem, the man decides to let go of the woman as opposed to continuously chasing her.

The Petrarchan love convention was a traditional way of writing poetry that was established through the writings of Petrarch. This love convention has an erotic hierarchy, which places the woman at the top and the man at the bottom. The woman is perfect for her beauty (moral and physical) and the man is imperfect because of his desire for the woman. The Petrarchan love convention also describes the woman using a blazon, which are traditional physical characteristics of a woman that make her beautiful; these beauties are described by using analogies of beautiful things in nature and things that transcend nature. The last characteristic of the Petrarchan love convention is that it uses psychology
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to psychoanalyze characters and topics within a poem. Sir Thomas Wyatt’s poem, *They Flee From Me*, is a transformation of the Petrarchan love convention.

In the first stanza of the poem, the “them” that the narrator is addressing are described by using natural imagery. The imagery of animals is apparent in reading the first few lines of the poem. The narrator first describes “them” as “gentle, tame and meek” where he is remembering the past and then he brings the reader back to reality or the present by saying that “they” are now “wild”. The poem is using animal analogies to describe that the “them” which the narrator is addressing have either changed or he did not see their “wild” side earlier. Although the narrator does not reveal the identity of “them” it is apparent (in a reading that employs the Petrarchan love convention) that “them” are women that the narrator has had relationships with. This can further be established by the fact that the second stanza is about a specific woman. Also, the narrator uses the words “naked foot” which are hinting at the fact that he is actually not talking about animals because it’s strange to envision animals with naked feet.

The relationship between the women and the narrator in the first stanza is difficult to grasp. He says about them, “with naked foot, stalking in my chamber”. Here the word stalking is interesting because it can be seen in two different ways; it can either mean that these women are walking softly and cautiously as if they are hunted or the word can imply that they are the hunter which is going after something in order to capture or kill it (OED). Yet it is apparent from the last few lines of the first stanza that these women have now left the narrator and have gone elsewhere. The narrator also says of the women, “now they range, /busily seeking with a continual change”; here the narrator is again implying that the women have changed. These last few lines also seem to be enforcing
that it is the woman that is doing the “stalking” or hunting in this poem as opposed to the traditional Petrarchan poems where the man is hunting the woman.

The second stanza of the poem talks about a specific woman. In this stanza, the narrator is talking about the past, which was a time before the “them” of the first stanza stopped trusting him. The narrator is not only implying that this woman is special by talking about her specifically but he explicitly states in line nine that she is “special”. The narrator talks of a time when he was with this woman, but again there is uncertainty about what they did when they were together or what their relationship was. There are underlying sexual undertones in the stanza in lines eleven through thirteen: “her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,” “she caught me in her arms,” “did me kiss”. The word “caught” in line twelve is interesting because it can either mean that the woman is simply holding him or that she has captured him in the sense that he is entrapped by her (OED). The word “guise” in line ten is also interesting because the narrator says “after a pleasant guise” and here the word can either mean manner (implying the woman had pleasant manner) or it can mean disguise (implying that the woman wore a pleasant disguise that the narrator believed). The first stanza of the poem and the changing nature of the women that the narrator knew imply that here the latter meaning of both words (caught and guise) is being used in reference to the woman.

The third and last stanza of the poem brings the reader back to the current time and reality by telling the reader that his encounter with the woman in stanza two was not a dream. This stanza is also implying that the woman from stanza two has now left the narrator and the bitterness of the narrator is apparent in this stanza. The narrator uses words like “gentleness,” “goodness,” and “kindly” in an ironic sense to truly portray his
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bitterness. The word “newfangledness” in line nineteen means “easily carried away by whatever is new”; here the narrator seems to be addressing the fickleness of the woman in stanza two (OED). In the last two lines of stanza three, the narrator says “but since I so kindly am served:/ I would fain know what she hath deserved”; there is a bitter and mocking tone in these last two lines. The narrator doesn’t actually mean he was served kindly and he wants the woman to also be “served” but he doesn’t know how to do that or what he needs to do.

In comparison to the Petrarchan love convention, the man in Wyatt’s poem is still in a sense at the bottom of the erotic hierarchy; he constantly desires for the woman and thinks about her. The poem breaks lose of the constraints of the Petrarchan love convention in that man did not have this woman in his dreams as is often seen in Petrarchan poems, but he had her in reality. Here, the woman is not seen as something beautiful and unattainable; in this poem the woman is seen as something that the narrator does obtain. The woman is identified as being someone who moves on quickly and only stays with the narrator as long as she wants or until she finds something/ someone better. The woman’s image and her purity are no longer in tact- she comes to the narrator; she “catches” and “kisses” him. Also, in traditional Petrarchan poems, the animal used as a metaphor for the woman is often wearing jewels like diamonds and topaz to show her faithfulness and chastity, but both of these things are missing from the description of the women Wyatt talks about. In contrast, Wyatt uses for the woman he is talking about words like “guise” and “newfangledness” which have negative implications. It would seem that this woman is wearing a disguise and when she is done with the narrator, she simply moves on to someone/ something else. Wyatt clearly goes against the notion of the
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woman’s perfection by showing that the woman is attainable in his poem as opposed to the woman of the traditional Petrarchan love convention. The woman is not the only thing that is different in this poem from the traditional Petrarchan poem, but the man is also different. In a traditional Petrarchan love poem, the man desires for the woman and constantly chases after her, but in this poem the narrator lets go of the woman (line 18).

This poem can be seen as a transformation of the Petrarchan love convention in that it addresses many of the concepts that are seen in a traditional Petrarchan poem but Wyatt changes the Petrarchan love convention by the way that he displays his authorship. As in a Petrarchan poem, Wyatt uses psychology to psychoanalyze the women that the narrator talks about as well as the state these women have left the narrator in. He goes against the traditional woman of the Petrarchan love convention by making the women in his poem fickle, wild, hunters and impure. As opposed to this, the man in the poem is seen as the man of the Petrarchan love convention in that he still desires for the woman; yet, he is also different from the man in the Petrarchan love convention because he has chosen to let go of the woman and also wishes to “serve” her or punish her (although he is unsure of how he can do this).