A Valediction: Of Weeping

POEM TEXT

Let me pour forth
My tears before thy face whilst I stay here,
For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,
And by this mintage they are something worth,
For thus they be
Pregnant of thee;
Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more,
When a tear falls, that thou falls which it bore,
So thou and I are nothing then, when on a diverse shore.

On a round ball
A workman that hath copies by can lay
An Europe, Afric, and an Asia,
And quickly make that, which was nothing, all;
So doth each tear
Which thee doth wear,
A globe, yea world, by that impression grow,
Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow
This world; by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolvèd so.

O more than moon,
Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere;
Weep me not dead in thine arms, but forbear
To teach the sea what it may do too soon.
Let not the wind
Example find,
To do me more harm than it purposeth;
Since thou and I sigh one another's breath,
Whoe'er sighs most is cruellest, and hastes the other's death.

SUMMARY

Let me weep while I'm here in your arms. As long as I'm here, your face reflects in my teardrops, so they're stamped with your image like coins stamped with the faces of kings and queens—and that makes them valuable. You see, with your reflection in them, my tears become pregnant with images of you. These tears are the fruit of terrible mourning, and the symbols of much more pain to come. Whenever one of my tears drops, the little image of you in it falls and vanishes, too. In just that way, when you and I are far away in different countries, we might as well be nothing.

On a plain sphere, a craftsman who has a map to work from can inscribe a Europe, an Africa, and an Asia, and thus make what was just a blank into the whole world. In the same way, every tear of mine that reflects your face becomes a globe—no, a whole world. Soon, though, your tears, mixing with mine, flood that little world: your tears wash away your own heavenly reflection in *my* tears.

O my beloved, more than the moon to me, don't use your tidal pull to flood me in oceans of tears. Don't cry for me as if I'm already dead while I stand here in your arms; don't teach the ocean to drown me, as it very well may all too soon. Don't give the wind a good example of how it can blow more dangerously than it intends to now. Since you and I share our life's breath, whoever sighs more deeply is the most unkind: wasting breath means hurrying along the other's death.

THEMES

THE PAINS OF PARTING

The speaker of "A Valediction: Of Weeping," about to depart on a long sea voyage, bids his beloved farewell with a final, tearful embrace. His words reflect his anxiety over whether the pair will ever meet again: he cautions his beloved not to drown him in tears, in case she gives the ocean any ideas! The last moments before a parting, this poem suggests, are particularly painful, reminding lovers both of how close they are and how uncertain the future is.

As the speaker and his beloved weep in each other's arms, the speaker relishes the fact that each of his tears reflects his beloved's face. Because they have her image in them, his teardrops become as valuable to him as if they were coins "stamp[ed]" with her portrait, or even wombs "pregnant" with her child (as if she were the father and the speaker the mother). In fact, these reflective tears, holding the beloved's image, become a whole "world" to the speaker, just as a plain sphere decorated with the images of the continents becomes a "globe."

Alas, the speaker goes on, all this is only true for as long as the pair are together. As soon as the couple are separated and those tears can't reflect the beloved's face anymore, then "thou and I are nothing." Since the couple are each other's whole world, their separation will feel like the *end* of the world.

The terrible pain of this parting is only strengthened by the fact that the speaker will be in genuine danger on his long sea

journey. As the speaker cautions his beloved not to cry *too* hard in case her tears and sighs "teach the sea" to kick up a storm and drown him, the poem suggests that what's so sad and hard about leaving the people you love isn't just that you feel like "nothing" without them: it's not knowing for certain whether you'll ever see them again.

The couple's tears thus reflect (literally!) the idea that love and pain go hand in hand. To love someone is to suffer terribly when they can't be near you.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

LOVE AND CONNECTION

As the poem's speaker embraces his beloved before leaving on a journey, he feels that he and she are so close that they might as well share the same "breath." Their love is so deep that their separation, however painful, can never quite be complete. A great love, this poem suggests, can make two people into one, connecting them body and soul.

Weeping as they part, the poem's speaker tells his beloved that every one of his tears, in reflecting her face, has become "pregnant" with her image. There's a role reversal in this metaphor: the speaker's female beloved is the father, and the male speaker the mother of these little reflection-babies. The two lovers, this image suggests, are so close that they can practically inhabit each other's bodies.

In fact, the speaker goes so far as to say that he and his beloved "sigh one another's breath"—an image that hints they share not just a body, but a spirit. (Breath is a traditional symbol not just for physical life, but for the soul.) Sharing one life, they also share responsibility for each other; as the speaker tries to console his beloved and dry her tears, he reminds her that whoever "sighs most" uses up their shared allotment of breath and thus "hastes the other's death"!

Such an intense connection, the poem suggests, is both consoling and painful. While the couple will remain interwoven no matter how far apart they travel, their parting also feels like being ripped in two.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-9
- Lines 26-27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Let me pour forth
My tears before thy face whilst I stay here,
For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,
And by this mintage they are something worth,

A "valediction" is a farewell, and this poem's farewell is a tearful one. As the poem begins, the speaker and his beloved share a final embrace before he departs on a long sea voyage.

Take a look at the enjambment in the first lines:

Let me pour forth
My tears before thy face whilst I stay here,

The broken line here suggests a catch in the speaker's voice, and it also opens up the idea that the speaker will "pour forth" more than tears. This passionate poem will reflect "on weeping," considering what lovers' tears might mean and reveal.

So long as they "stay here" in each other's arms, the speaker tells his beloved, his tears are precious. Every one of his teardrops reflects his beloved's face; it's "stamp[ed]" with her image the way a coin is stamped with the face of a monarch. "And by this mintage" (in other words, through this coin-making process), what would otherwise have been plain old tears become valuable.

This conceit—the first of many elaborate extended metaphors the speaker will explore—makes the claim that the speaker's tears are worth something because they're born of his deep feelings for his beloved. It also suggests that his beloved is a queen in his eyes, her mere image capable of making unremarkable matter into wealth.

Even beyond these ideas, this image paints a picture of infinity. If the speaker's beloved is standing where her face can reflect in all of his teardrops (already a dizzying vision: imagine all those tiny faces!), then perhaps his face is reflecting in all of her teardrops, too—and those faces are crying and reflecting, and *those* faces are crying and reflecting. Just as lovers' eyes endlessly mirror each other in "The Canonization," another of Donne's great love poems, the reflective, coin-like tears here create an endless shower of gold.

This tearful embrace, in other words, shows that these lovers are *everything* to each other: their "worth" in each other's eyes (literally!) is endless. No wonder they're crying, then. When they're apart, they feel as if they've *lost* everything.

The poem's shape reflects both their love and their grief. Mostly written in iambs (metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "my tears"), the poem's lines dance between:

- Dimeter—lines with two feet, as in "For thus | they be"
- Pentameter—lines with five feet, as in "And by | this mint- | age they | are some- | thing worth"
- And closing lines of hexameter—lines with six feet,

as in "So thou | and I | are no- | thing then, | when on | a di- | verse shore." (Note that the word "diverse," in Donne's 17th-century English, means "different" and is pronounced DYE-verse rather than di-VERSE.)

The short, choked-up lines of dimeter suggest the difficulty of speaking through tears; the longer lines, outpourings of thought and feeling.

LINES 5-9

For thus they be
Pregnant of thee;
Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more,
When a tear falls, that thou falls which it bore,
So thou and I are nothing then, when on a diverse shore.

The tears that reflect his beloved's face, the speaker goes on, aren't only coins. They're also wombs. Holding his beloved's reflection, they're "pregnant of thee": a line that simultaneously suggests that the reflection is the beloved's child and that the reflection is a miniature version of the beloved.

Either way, there's a role reversal here. The male speaker has become a pregnant mother, his tears holding little reflection-babies; the female beloved is the father, depositing a double of herself in the speaker's body. This new metaphor suggests that the couple are so close that they're interwoven, in more ways than one:

- The speaker carries his beloved in his tears.
- He's also so close to her that he can stand in her shoes, and vice versa. The couple takes on each other's positions.
- Perhaps this image suggests some wistfulness, too: a longing for a child that the speaker and his beloved can't have while they're apart.

If these tears are pregnant, then they're fertile, fruitful—a metaphor the speaker swiftly picks up in the next line:

> Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more,

Besides expanding on the idea of fertility, this image suggests that there's something bittersweet about these tears. As "fruits" of grief, they might be nourishing and consoling as well as painful; after all, they emerge from a deep love.

These "fruits" are also "emblems"—a word that can just mean "symbols," but that in Donne's time might also have suggested an allegorical image in an emblem book:

- Emblem books were collections of symbolic pictures; for instance, a woman holding scales and a sword might represent Justice.
- The speaker is saying here that his tears might as well make him into the picture of Grief: no one has ever looked more grief-stricken than he.

The speaker's tears, then, are rich, full, meaningful ones, signs of just how much he adores his beloved. Through his tears, he stands in her shoes, carries her with him, and shows her what she means to him.

There's some anxiety here, too. These tears are also "emblems of more" grief to come:

- Remember, all along the speaker has made the point that his tears are precious to him "whilst I stay here," while he's still embracing his beloved and she's still reflected in his tears.
- But "when a tear falls, that thou falls which it bore": in other words, the tiny version of the beloved reflected in the tear falls and vanishes as soon as the tear does.
- If that's true, then the speaker and his beloved are "nothing" when they're "on a diverse shore," separated from each other.

These words suggest that the pair of them are everything to each other. Since they can't carry each other's reflections with them, their tears (and hearts) will be empty and blank when they're apart.

LINES 10-16

On a round ball
A workman that hath copies by can lay
An Europe, Afric, and an Asia,
And quickly make that, which was nothing, all;
So doth each tear
Which thee doth wear,
A globe, yea world, by that impression grow,

The speaker has just finished declaring that he and his beloved will be "nothing" when they're apart—that their whole beings depend on each other's presence. After these passionate, heartbroken words, readers might be a little surprised when the speaker seems to change the subject entirely at the beginning of the next stanza.

Now, the poem looks to an imagined craftsman's workshop. Starting from a plain "round ball," the speaker says, a "workman" can create a world. All he needs are "copies"—maps of the continents—to know how to inscribe that blank ball with "an Europe, Afric, and an Asia," making it into a globe. Thus, what was once "nothing" becomes "all." A bare sphere, a big zero, turns into an image of the whole world.

By now, readers might smell another conceit—especially considering the repetition of the word "nothing," which the speaker also used to describe what he and his beloved will become "when on a diverse shore." Just as a ball decorated with

the continents becomes a globe, the speaker goes on:

> So doth each tear
> Which thee doth wear,
> A globe, yea world, by that impression grow,

Every tear that "wear[s]" his beloved's reflection is not just a coin, not just a womb, but an image of the whole world. So long as those tears, "nothing" on their own, carry the beloved's reflection, they become a picture of "all" that there is.

That mere reflection even *becomes* a world, not just the image of a world: it's "a globe, yea world" (that is, *a globe—in fact, a world*). Here, the beloved's reflection takes on a godlike power of creation. She's the whole world, and even an image of her is itself a world!

This new extended metaphor thus reiterates what the speaker has already said in even stronger terms: his beloved is everything to him. But it also alludes to the couple's predicament. The imagined globe reminds readers not only that the two lovers are each other's world, but that they'll soon be *separated* by a large stretch of the globe.

LINES 17-18

> *Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow*
> *This world; by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolvèd so.*

The conceit of the speaker's reflective tears as globes, images of the "world" that is his lover's face, is already dizzyingly complex. Besides the implication that the lovers' faces are mirrored infinitely in each other's teardrops, there's now the sense that every one of the speaker's reflective tears itself *becomes* a world when his beloved's face appears in it.

Now, the teardrops take on a different form. So far, the speaker has imagined tears as individual spheres. But as the speaker's beloved presses her cheek to his, their tears "mix[]" and "overflow" all those tiny worlds. An enjambment mimics that flood:

> Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow
> This world; by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolvèd so.

The sentence overflows its line even as the beloved's tears overflow the speaker's.

Take a closer look at the end of line 18:

> [...] by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolvèd so.

There's more than one way to read these words:

- The speaker's "heaven" is the beloved's reflected face in his teardrops, and the "waters" of her tears wash that heaven away: in other words, *the waters of your tears thus dissolve my heaven.*
- The speaker's "heaven" is the beloved herself as she "dissolv[es]" in tears: in other words, *these waters come from you, my poor weeping heavenly beloved.*
- In fact, both of these meanings can—and must—be present at once! Remember, those teardrops are only worlds because the beloved's reflection is in them; otherwise, they're "nothing."

This flood of weeping, then, suggests that the beloved is both a creator and a destroyer: loving her is creative, leaving her is catastrophic. The image of a world-destroying flood (suggesting a subtle allusion to God drowning the world in the biblical story of Noah) makes that point especially clear.

Once again, too, images of globes and floods suggest what's going to happen at any moment: the speaker will have to leave for his voyage. The couple can't embrace each other forever; the ocean beckons.

LINES 19-22

> *O more than moon,*
> *Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere;*
> *Weep me not dead in thine arms, but forbear*
> *To teach the sea what it may do too soon.*

The beloved's floods of tears inspire a conceit that's at once beautiful and anxiety-ridden. As the third and final stanza begins, the speaker calls his beloved the "moon"—in fact, she's "more than moon," lovelier even than the moon. More dangerous than the moon, too:

> O more than moon,
> Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere;

Here, the speaker alludes to the fact that the moon controls the tides. Remember, the beloved's tears have just "overflow[ed]" the speaker's own tear-globes; the tear-tide is running high! The speaker's words here suggest that he's gently trying to console his weeping lover, but also feeling a touch of worry about what all these stormy floods might portend. After all, he's about to go to sea.

That worry shows up more explicitly when the speaker begs his beloved:

> Weep me not dead in thine arms, but forbear
> To teach the sea what it may do too soon.

These words invite multiple readings:

- On a surface level, the speaker is saying, "Don't cry for me like I'm dead while I'm still here in your arms."

- But he's also asking his beloved not to weep him to death—not to "teach the sea" to drown him, just as her tears drowned his!

Parting, these lines suggest, is painful enough; parting with the fear that you might never be reunited is almost unendurable. And a 17th-century sea voyage was a dangerous proposition.

But the speaker tempers his anxiety and pain with tender compassion. Listen to the weaving sounds he uses as he gently asks his beloved not to cry him to death:

> Weep me not dead in thine arms, but forbear
> To teach the sea what it may do too soon.

The mingled /ee/ and /oo/ assonance here is just plain euphonious, musical and sweet on the ear as a love song. (That chain of /oo/ sounds, however, might also hint at the ominous wind-sounds of a coming storm.)

LINES 23-27

Let not the wind
Example find,
To do me more harm than it purposeth;
Since thou and I sigh one another's breath,
Whoe'er sighs most is cruellest, and hastes the other's death.

If the beloved's tears are dangerous high tides that can "teach the sea" to flood, her grief-stricken sighs might also warn of future peril—or even create it. The speaker begs her:

> Let not the wind
> Example find,
> To do me more harm than it purposeth;

In other words: *Don't let your sighs teach the wind how to blow up a storm and hurt me more than it plans to already!*

Once more, many complex emotions mingle here. The speaker is trying, in his elaborate metaphorical way, to soothe his beloved; at the same time, he's overcome by the power she has over him, feeling as if she's more a heavenly "moon" than a mortal woman. Since leaving her feels like the end of the world to him, his concern and his overwhelming love for her also get all tangled up in his normal anxieties about his journey. Perhaps this moon-like goddess really *could* summon a dangerous storm if she cried too hard.

But really, he concludes, the best reason to dry one's tears and quiet one's sighs is because of the idea he raised back in the first stanza when he imagined his tears pregnant with his beloved's child. The speaker and his beloved share one life, in some sense, and crying and sighing can only shorten it, wasting their limited allotment of breaths:

> Since thou and I sigh one another's breath,
> Whoe'er sighs most is cruellest, and hastes the other's death.

These closing lines mingle passionate intimacy and tragic limitation.

Any parting, this poem suggests, is a kind of death, and a premonition of mortality. Every separation reminds lovers that, while they might see eternity reflected in each other's eyes, they can't stay in each other's arms forever. No matter how long this parting embrace feels, no matter how many conceits upon conceits the speaker piles up to describe (and prolong) this moment, the couple will have to part—and eventually, they'll have to part forever, whether or not the speaker returns from this particular voyage.

At the same time, the lovers *can't* really be separated. They "sigh one another's breath"; they're interwoven. The mention of "breath" in particular here—traditionally associated with the spirit, as the clergyman Donne knew well—suggests that the two are one, body and soul.

Their love is overpowering, their parting devastating; their pain and their bliss are part of one whole, the two-sided coin of love.

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

Like most of John Donne's poems, "A Valediction: Of Weeping" rests on rich conceits, or elaborate extended metaphors. Here, all of those conceits revolve around teardrops, transformed by the power of metaphor into everything from coins to wombs to worlds.

Since there are so very many conceits in this poem, we'll take a look at them stanza by stanza here.

Stanza 1:

- While the speaker and his beloved are still together and still embracing, the speaker observes, every one of his tears is dear to him: they're all "stamp[ed]" with the tiny reflection of his beloved's face, and "by this mintage" (that is, through this coin-making process), they become valuable. This conceit suggests that the beloved's image has a transformative power. Just as the stamp of a monarch's face turns plain metal into legal tender, the beloved's face turns a plain teardrop into something precious.
- The speaker doesn't stop there. In the very next lines, he remarks that each of these stamped tears is also "pregnant of thee": that is, the beloved's reflected image turns each teardrop into a tiny pregnant womb hosting a reflection-baby. This striking image suggests that the speaker and his

beloved are so close that they practically inhabit each other's bodies. The male speaker becomes the mother, impregnated by the sight of his beloved!

Stanza 2:

- The speaker has already declared that the reflection of his beloved makes his tears fertile and valuable. His next conceit goes a step further. In the first lines of the second stanza, he introduces the idea that a blank sphere, an image of "nothing," becomes an image of "all" when it's decorated with the continents: in other words, it becomes a globe, a picture of the whole world. Just the same thing happens when his beloved is reflected in his tears, the speaker insists. Her image makes every tear that falls from his eyes into a world—an elegant way of saying that she's everything to him.

Stanza 3:

- For all that the speaker feels his own tears are made precious by his beloved's presence, he's also eager to dry *her* tears, to console her. In the final stanza, then, he imagines her as a "moon," capable of drawing up the tides. Since he's about to leave on a sea voyage, he tells her, she must not cry so hard, in case her tide of tears rises up and drowns him, or her heartbroken sighs encourage the wind to blow up a storm.
- This closing image suggests that the speaker feels the bittersweet pain *and* the responsibility of love. The couple's love beautifies their grief at parting—and makes the speaker wish his beloved didn't have to hurt so badly.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 10-16
- Lines 19-25

METAPHOR

Alongside the complex conceits that make up the bulk of this poem, smaller metaphors pop up like grace notes.

In the first stanza, the speaker unpacks the complex idea that his beloved's reflection transforms his tears into valuable coins or pregnant wombs. On top of those rich ideas, he piles two more little metaphors in a row: his tears are also the "fruits" of grief and the "emblems" of more grief to come.

The idea of tears as grief's "fruits" is bittersweet. If tears are fruit, then they might be nourishing! Intense grief, after all, is born of intense love, and the speaker's tears tell of something beautiful, not just something painful.

When the speaker casts his tears as "emblems" of grief still to come, meanwhile, he's leaving his lover with a souvenir. An "emblem," in Donne's time, wasn't just a symbol. The word could also suggest an image in an emblem book, a kind of symbolic picture-book that was fashionable all through the 16th and 17th centuries:

- An emblem book might, for example, contain an image of Hope in which that virtue is depicted as a woman holding a green branch and standing next to an anchor: a picture that tells you something about what hope feels like.

Telling his beloved that his tears are "emblems" of his future grief, then, the speaker is also assuring her that he's going to keep on missing her. He'll look like the very picture of heartbreak even when he's far away and she can't see him anymore.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more,"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's enjambments make the speaker's sorrow audible. Many of the poem's middle-of-a-sentence line breaks make it feel as if the speaker's *voice* is breaking with tears, too.

Listen to what happens in the first lines, for instance:

> Let me pour forth
> My tears before thy face whilst I stay here,

The enjambment here introduces the speaker's tears with a tearful-sounding hiccup. It does something else clever, too. By leaving the words "let me pour forth" alone on a line by themselves, the enjambment leaves the reader wondering, for a split second, exactly *what* the speaker is going to pour forth. Not just an outpouring of tears, but an outpouring of love, grief, and poetry follows.

Another meaningful enjambment appears when the speaker describes his beloved's tears as a mighty flood:

> Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow
> This world; by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolvèd so.

Just as the beloved's tears "overflow" the speaker's, washing away the little teardrop "world" in which the beloved's face was reflected, these words overflow the line that contains them. The rush of language here imitates the rush of the beloved's

tears.

The last enjambments in the poem, by contrast, suggest a hesitation, a reserve:

> Weep me not dead in thine arms, but forbear
> To teach the sea what it may do too soon.
> Let not the wind
> Example find,
> To do me more harm than it purposeth;

Here, the speaker asks his beloved to dry her tears, and thus to "forbear" (or refrain from) giving the sea any ideas about drowning him. The enjambment, breaking the line, mimics that holding-back. The same effect happens again as he asks her not to sigh too hard: the wind must not find any "example" for storms in her sighs. Unlike those that came before, these enjambments suggest not a pouring-forth of feeling, but an attempt to get through the storms of grief and into calmer, more comforting waters.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "forth / My"
- **Lines 5-6:** "be / Pregnant"
- **Lines 11-12:** "lay / An"
- **Lines 14-15:** "tear / Which"
- **Lines 17-18:** "overflow / This"
- **Lines 21-22:** "forbear / To"
- **Lines 23-24:** "wind / Example"

ALLUSION

The speaker's conceit of his reflective tears as a globe and his images of world-ending floods unite historical and biblical allusion, placing this poem in Donne's own cultural moment.

In the second stanza, the speaker develops the idea that a plain, blank ball becomes a globe when "a workman that hath copies by"—that is, a craftsman with a map to work from—decorates it with "an Europe, Afric, and an Asia." Similarly, he says, his tears become a whole world when they're decorated with the reflection of his beloved's face. This image of tears as a globe, and of the workman who makes that globe, suggests both the explorations and the fashions of Donne's own lifetime in the late 16th and early 17th centuries:

- Donne lived toward the later end of the Age of Exploration, the centuries in which European voyages criss-crossed the seas. A right-up-to-date map of "Europe, Afric, and [...] Asia" would have spoken to Donne's audience of adventure and discovery.
- For that reason, highly ornamented globes were fashionable decorations in Donne's time. The speaker's tears aren't just made into a world by his beloved's reflection, but into a valuable work of art and an image of discovery.

This contemporary-to-Donne allusion falls right next to a timeless one. When the speaker describes his beloved's tears washing his away as a flood that "overflow[s] / This world," readers might well think of the biblical story of the Flood, in which God drowns the whole world to start afresh. The floods of tears here suggest that this couple's grief at parting feels outright catastrophic, world-ending. Perhaps, though, it also hints that some new life will have to begin for both of them while they're apart.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-12:** "On a round ball / A workman that hath copies by can lay / An Europe, Afric, and an Asia,"
- **Lines 17-18:** "Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow / This world; by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolvèd so."

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives this farewell poem its melancholy music. For instance, listen to the sounds in the poem's first lines:

> Let me pour forth
> My tears before thy face whilst I stay here,

Melodious /or/ and /ear/ assonance makes these lines ring. Alongside those vowels, the consonant /r/ sound creates an internal rhyme between "tears" and "here," an internal slant rhyme between "pour" and "forth," and a general sense of harmony between *all* these words. The tight weave of sounds here suggests the tight embrace in which the speaker and his beloved stand as the poem begins.

As the poem comes to its climax, the assonance intensifies:

> O more than moon,
> Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere;
> Weep me not dead in thine arms, but forbear
> To teach the sea what it may do too soon.

That long stretch of echoing /ee/ sounds culminates in a dramatic sequence of three /oo/ sounds in a row, which might eerily suggest the howling wind of a storm at sea.

A last moment of assonance suggests that, come high seas or storm, the speaker and his beloved will remain connected:

> Since thou and I sigh one another's breath,

The paired long /i/ sounds of "I" and "sigh" and muted /uh/ sounds of "one another's" mimic in sound what the speaker's

words describe: a relationship so intimate that the two lovers seem to share the same breath and the same soul.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "pour forth"
- **Line 2:** "tears," "here"
- **Line 9:** "I," "diverse"
- **Line 17:** "thy," "mine"
- **Line 20:** "seas," "sphere"
- **Line 21:** "Weep"
- **Line 22:** "teach," "sea," "do too soon"
- **Line 26:** "I sigh," "one another's"

VOCABULARY

Pour forth (Line 1) - Pour out.

Thy, Thine, Thee, Thou (Line 2, Line 3, Line 6, Line 8, Line 9, Line 15, Line 17, Line 18, Line 20, Line 21, Line 26) - Old-fashioned ways of saying "your" (thy, thine) or "you" (thee, thou). This is an intimate, informal way to address someone, like the Spanish "tu."

Coins (Line 3) - Makes into a coin.

Stamp (Line 3) - Impression, visage. The speaker is here suggesting that his beloved's face, reflected in his tears, stamps those tears with her face the way a coin is stamped with a monarch's face.

Mintage (Line 4) - The process of coin-making.

Emblems (Line 7) - Symbols, signs.

"When a tear falls, that thou falls which it bore" (Line 8) - In other words: "When one of my tears falls, the little image of you that was in it falls, too."

Diverse (Line 9) - Different.

Hath (Line 11) - Has.

Afric (Line 12) - An old-fashioned way of saying "Africa."

Doth (Line 14, Line 15) - Does.

Yea (Line 16) - Yea means "yes," but it's used here to mean something like "indeed"—as in, "a globe—indeed, a world!"

"Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere" (Line 20) - Here, the speaker is asking his beloved not to cry so much that she drowns him, alluding to the moon's power to create high tides.

"Weep me not dead" (Line 21) - In other words, "Don't cry for me as if I were dead."

Forbear (Line 21) - Refrain from; resist.

Purposeth (Line 25) - Intends, plans.

Whoe'er (Line 27) - Whoever (pronounced who-AIR).

Hastes (Line 27) - Hurries along, speeds up.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Valediction: Of Weeping" uses a form of Donne's own invention. The poem is divided into three stanzas of nine lines apiece. While the meter is mostly iambic (that is, it's written in feet that go da-DUM, as in "O more | than moon"), line length varies a lot, creating a surprising and dramatic rhythm.

All these stylistic choices suit the speaker's purpose. As a valediction (one of a few that Donne wrote), this is a poem of farewell, the speaker's attempt to console his beloved as he takes off for a long sea journey. He does so with Donne's characteristic blend of intellectual brilliance and intense emotion:

- The long, evolving stanzas make plenty of room for the speaker to explore elaborate conceits: every tear he sheds, he tells his beloved, is full of her, whether it becomes a coin stamped with her reflected face or a womb swollen with her child.
- In the midst of all this heady philosophy, short lines intrude like a catch in the speaker's voice. The speaker himself says that he's crying; those broken lines suggest he's out-and-out sobbing.

METER

"A Valediction: Of Weeping" is written primarily in iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm (as in "My tears"). But it doesn't stick to one type of iambic meter throughout. Instead, each stanza uses an evolving rhythm: the speaker interweaves longer, more reflective lines with short, punchy ones.

For example, the first line of each stanza is written in dimeter (only two feet), as in line 19 here:

> O more | than moon,

Then, the second through fourth lines are written in pentameter (five feet), as in line 4:

> And by | this mint- | age they | are some- | thing worth,

The couplet in the middle of the stanzas returns to dimeter, the seventh and eight lines return to pentameter, and the last lines are in hexameter (six feet), as in line 9:

> So thou | and I | are no- | thing then, | when on | a di- | verse shore.

(Note that "diverse," in Donne's 17th-century English, isn't pronounced dy-VERSE, but DY-verse.)

The alternation of short sharp lines and drawn-out, thoughtful ones reflects the speaker's state of mind as he veers between stabs of pain and meditations on the nature of love and grief. Each of those long concluding hexameter lines describes the couple's shared sorrow.

The poem doesn't stick to iambic feet all the way through, but throws in some variations that help the speaker's voice to sound natural. For instance, the first line of the second stanza pushes all its stresses into its second foot, creating a spondee (a foot with a DUM-DUM rhythm):

> On a | round ball

Those two strong stresses invite readers to draw the sounds of the words out. The long vowel of "round"—itself a big round sound—evokes the globe these words describe.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "A Valediction: Of Weeping" runs like this:

> ABBA CC DDD

This complex pattern divides each stanza into three movements. In the ABBA sections, the speaker introduces conceits:

- the idea of tears as coins in the first stanza,
- the vision of a plain ball turned into a globe in the second,
- and the image of the beloved as a moon in the third.

The CC sections build on those introductory ideas (for instance, when the speaker says that a tear that reflects his beloved's face is like a globe in the second stanza). Finally, the DDD sections describe the speaker's and his beloved's predicament in the light of these complex metaphors.

Besides tracing the development of the speaker's ideas, these rhymes reflect tides of feeling. Starting from that leisurely, reflective ABBA pattern, the speaker builds to an intense CC couplet and an even more heated DDD triplet, a movement that evokes waves of love and pain.

SPEAKER

The poem's passionate speaker has a lot in common with Donne himself. Donne, like this speaker, took to sea and was parted from his wife for long, painful stretches of time. The speaker's vivid wit, too, is Donne's own. His capacity to see coins, children, and worlds entire reflected in a single tear mark him out as a visionary, a man of imagination.

This is only one of Donne's many love poems, and like the others is riddled with Donne's favorite elaborate conceits (and filthy puns). It also forms a companion piece to another tender valediction (or farewell poem).

SETTING

The speaker's imminent dangerous sea voyage suggests that this poem is set in Donne's own time and place: 17th-century England. Donne lived in the last stages of what we now call the Age of Exploration, a period of the Renaissance during which European expeditions sailed across the globe. A journey by ship in that era might be both a lucrative and a terrifying proposition: wrecks were common, and plenty of sailors didn't ever come home. The speaker's tearful farewell to his beloved shows that he's all too well aware that this embrace may be their last.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne (1572-1631) is remembered as one of the foremost of the "metaphysical poets"—though he never called himself one. The later writer Samuel Johnson coined the term, using it to describe a set of 17th-century English writers who wrote witty, passionate, intricate, cerebral poetry about love and God; George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Thomas Traherne were some others.

Donne was the prototypical metaphysical poet: a master of elaborate conceits and complex sentences and a great writer of love poems (like this one) that mingle images of holiness with filthy puns. But during his lifetime, he was mostly a poet in private. In public life, he was an important clergyman, rising to become Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Like the vast majority of his poetry, "A Valediction: Of Weeping" didn't appear in print until several years after his death in 1633, when his collection *Poems* was posthumously published.

Donne's mixture of cynicism, passion, and mysticism fell out of literary favor after his 17th-century heyday; Johnson, for instance, a leading figure of the 18th-century Enlightenment, did not mean "metaphysical poet" as a compliment, seeing Donne and his contemporaries as obscure and irrational. But 19th-century Romantic poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge were stirred by Donne's mixture of philosophy and emotion, and their enthusiasm slowly resurrected Donne's reputation. Donne is now remembered as one of the most powerful and influential of poets, and he's inspired later writers from T.S. Eliot to Yeats to A.S. Byatt.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John Donne lived and wrote during a time of intense change.

He was born at the end of an era, growing up during the last years of Elizabeth I's reign.

After a rocky start, Elizabeth stabilized an England still thrown into turmoil by religious schism. Her father Henry VIII's decision to split from the Pope and found his own national Church of England led to generations of conflict and bloodshed between English Protestants and Catholic loyalists. Elizabeth's political skill, her dramatic military victories against the Spanish, and her canny decision to present herself as an almost supernatural, Artemis-like "Virgin Queen" all helped to create a new sense of English national identity in the midst of chaos.

The ambitious Donne first gained a political foothold as a courtier in Elizabeth's service, but he was ignominiously thrown into prison when he eloped with Anne More, the daughter of an important official. By the time he was released, reconciled with his father-in-law, and returned to polite society, he had to work his way into the favor of a whole new monarch: James I, who took the throne in 1603.

The new king's court was worldly, intellectual, and superstitious all at once: James was a great patron of the arts and sciences, but also pious in a rather paranoid way, anxious about demons and witches.

Luckily for Donne, James was a good enough judge of talent to be impressed with his poetry. But James was also a good enough judge of talent to spot that Donne would make an outstanding clergyman, and he refused to accept the poet as a run-of-the-mill courtier. The reluctant Donne eventually had to accept the king's will, and he was appointed Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London in 1621. Just as James had predicted, Donne became a passionate and influential Anglican priest. Today Donne lies buried in the very cathedral where he once preached.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Metaphysical Poets — Learn more about the witty, brilliant 17th-century literary movement for which Donne is the poster boy. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/john-donne-and-metaphysical-poetry)
- Donne's Portrait — Admire a rather dashing portrait of Donne as a young lover. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw111844/John-Donne)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Donne's life and work via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-donne)
- Poems (1633) — Take a look at images from Donne's posthumous collection Poems (in which this poem was first printed). (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-john-donnes-poems-1633)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Hymn to God the Father
- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God (Holy Sonnet 14)
- Death, be not proud
- Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness
- No Man Is an Island
- Song: Go and catch a falling star
- The Canonization
- The Flea
- The Good-Morrow
- The Sun Rising
- The Triple Fool
- To His Mistress Going to Bed

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