Easter Wings

POEM TEXT

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel thy victorie:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

SUMMARY

God, you created human beings and gave them everything they needed, though the first person, Adam, foolishly lost it all by sinning and being expelled from the Garden of Eden, growing more and more sinful until he was poor in spirit. God, let me rise from my own sin with you, as songbirds rise in harmony with each other. And let me sing of all of your triumphs. Then the fall of Adam and Eve will have simply allowed me to rise even higher.

My own youth started out in sadness. And you punished my sins by making me sick and ashamed, until I grew thin (that is, spiritually impoverished). Let me join with you and experience your triumph. Because, if I attach my own wing to yours, my suffering will only make me more able to fly and transcend this sorrow.

THEMES

SUFFERING AND REDEMPTION

In "Easter Wings," the speaker meditates on how one's relationship to God offers relief from pain—and how that pain is what allows for spiritual redemption in the first place. The speaker suggests that through devotion to God, one can overcome suffering and find spiritual freedom and redemption. In fact, the poem suggests that the speaker's suffering is what actually makes this redemption possible, and that the speaker's spiritual freedom will be all the more powerful *because of* the pain the speaker has endured.

The speaker begins the poem with an allusion to the biblical "fall" of man to illustrate how distance from God leads to pain and disgrace: Adam, the first man created in the Bible, "foolishly" squandered the comfort and "wealth" God provided, the speaker says, and in doing so introduced sin into the world. And just as Adam fell from grace and got kicked out of the idyllic Garden of Eden, the speaker has fallen on hard times filled with "sorrow," "sicknesses," and "shame" as punishment for being sinful. Yet without falling so low, the poem implies, the speaker wouldn't be able to "rise" up so high upon God's metaphorical wings.

Adding to this idea, the poem links the speaker's pain to Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. The title "Easter Wings" specifically connects the poem to Easter Sunday, when, according to the Bible, Christ rose from the dead. According to Christian theology, Christ redeemed humanity's inherent sinfulness through his suffering on the cross. Again, then, suffering goes hand in hand with salvation. And just as Christ rose from the dead, those who *follow* Christ will find their own spiritual resurrection or rebirth in Heaven. The speaker thus suggests that Christ's resurrection offers the speaker the metaphorical "wings" that will allow the speaker to transcend, to fly above, sin-caused suffering.

Indeed, the speaker repeatedly emphasizes that one is only able to transcend suffering through religious devotion—that is, by being close to God. Addressing God directly, the speaker says, "With thee / O let me rise," and "With thee / Let me combine." This suggests that the speaker can only "rise" out of pain by joining, or "combining," with God. Specifically, the speaker envisions attaching a "wing" to God's own "wing." This would allow the speaker to fly "harmoniously" with God. And this "flight"—this spiritual redemption and transcendence, will be all the more powerful for having experienced suffering. Hardship will only "advance the flight in [the speaker]," or allow the speaker more soar even further towards salvation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,

The poem opens with a moment of apostrophe as the speaker addresses God directly. God created humanity and gave the first "man" everything he needed, the speaker says: not only "wealth," but "store," or an abundance of what he needed to survive. Yet this first "man" was "foolish[]" and "lost" everything that God had so generously given him.

The speaker is alluding to the story of Adam and Eve, the first human beings God created in the Bible and who lived in the idyllic Garden of Eden until "the fall." According to the Bible, Adam and Eve ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, introducing sin into the world and getting kicked out of Eden in the process.

In traditional Christian thought, this story describes humanity's fundamentally sinful nature. Even though Adam and Even had "wealth and store" in Eden—everything they needed to be happy— they "lost the same" through their own foolishness. Humanity's suffering is thus rooted in sin, something that only devotion to God can redeem.

These opening lines set up a metaphor that will be important throughout the poem. The "wealth," that God gives humanity refers to the abundance of the natural world and also to *spiritual* wealth, or the state of being close to god. "Wealth" represents spiritual happiness, which can be achieved through religious devotion.

LINES 3-5

Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:

The speaker is still talking about the biblical story of Adam and Eve, now declaring that the first man (Adam) began "decaying more and more" after being expelled from Eden. The speaker metaphorically compares Adam's increasing sinfulness to physical decay, which just got worse and worse over time. Finally, the speaker says, Adam (and, the poem implies, humanity as a whole) became "Most poore." This description contrasts the "wealth" and happiness of Eden with humankind's current spiritual poverty—humanity's current suffering and distance from God.

These lines establish the opening ABABA rhyme scheme of the poem: "store" rhymes with "more" and "poore," while "same" rhymes with "became." The enjambment of the lines, however (as in "Till he became / Most poore") pushes readers swiftly across the line breaks before they can linger on the end rhymes for too long. The firm end-stop after "poore" then creates space for readers to catch their breath as the poem transitions to a new point.

Also note how the visual shape of the poem changes over the course of these lines. As the speaker describes humanity's fall from paradise, and "man's" increasingly sinful nature, the lines themselves become shorter and shorter—or, perhaps poorer and poorer. The poem thus visually depicts what the speaker describes.

LINES 6-8

With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,

In the center of the stanza, the poem shifts gears. Having established that Adam sinned and fell far from grace, the speaker now asks God to let the speaker "rise" out of this state of suffering and sinfulness. The speaker goes to imagine flying like a "lark," a type of songbird, "harmoniously" with God.

The speaker uses "rising" and "flying" as a metaphor for redemption: in "rising" up out of the sinfulness of humanity, the speaker becomes closer to God and closer to heaven. Crucially, the *speaker's* rising hinges on *God's* rising; the speaker doesn't just want to rise, but to rise "with thee," or with God.

The mention of "larks" in particular is also important here:

- Larks are known for their beautiful songs and often represent daybreak, new beginnings, and spiritual transcendence.
- The mention of the birds here thus suggests that flying "harmoniously" with God will lead to spiritual rebirth or renewal.

All this language related to larks and rising also brings to mind Christ's crucifixion and resurrection:

- Recall that the poem is called "Easter Wings," a title that situates the speaker's own experience within the context of Easter—when, according to the Bible, Christ rose from the dead.
- The speaker's desire to "rise" above sinfulness and suffering with God echoes Christ's rising from the dead: Christ suffered cross on the and rose up, and the speaker hopes to follow the same path.
- According to Christian theology, Christ also specifically *redeemed* humanity through own suffering and sacrifice, essentially erasing their sinful debt from the world. People may find salvation through faith in Christ, which is why the speaker wants to rise "with" God: only through

devotion to God can the speaker transcend human suffering and sin.

As the speaker envisions this joyful "flight," the shape of the stanza changes again. Now, the lines become gradually longer, enacting the speaker's increasing spiritual "wealth" upon becoming closer to God. This looks like an unfurling of the "wings" the speaker evokes in the title: as the speaker appeals directly to God, the poem itself seems to open its wings and begin to fly.

LINES 9-10

And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker imagines "sing[ing] this day" of God's "victories"—in other words, praising God for having helped the speaker "rise" out of suffering. In referring to God's "victories," the speaker also builds on the poem's allusion to Christ's resurrection: this resurrection is seen, in Christian theology, as a kind of triumph of eternal life over death and earthly sin.

The speaker then alludes again to humanity's "fall" (Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden). The speaker says that this original fall from God's grace will only make the speaker's spiritual redemption all the more powerful and joyful when it comes. That's because that original "fall" will allow the speaker to fly higher and more joyfully toward heaven.

The speaker thus links humanity's sinfulness and suffering with flight and transcendence, just as the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection links suffering with redemption (in that Christ's *suffering* on the cross led to his own *resurrection* and to the *redemption* of humanity). The speaker implies that without sin, there could be no redemption; the speaker's suffering is what allows for redemption through devotion to God. The speaker adds emphasis to this idea through alliteration, with /f/ sounds connecting "fall," "further," and "flight."

The rhyme scheme in these lines echoes that of the beginning of the stanza. Again, there's an alternating pattern in lines 6-10 that readers can think of as running CDCDC: "thee" rhymes with "harmoniously" and "me," while "rise" rhymes with "victories." (In archaic forms of English poetry, some similar vowel sounds—like the long /i/ sound in "rise" and the long /e/ sound in "victories," would have been considered full rhymes).

LINES 11-13

My tender age in sorrow did beginne
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,

The poem's first stanza alluded to broad human history (according to Christianity, that is), charting Adam's fall from grace. In the second stanza, the speaker's lines follows the same trajectory but take a more personal approach. This parallelism draws a connection between Adam's suffering and the speaker's own—both of which, the speaker says, are rooted in sin.

Instead of talking about humanity's sinful nature at large, the speaker focuses on "My tender age" (youth), which the speaker says began "in sorrow." In other words, the speaker's early experiences were full of suffering and difficulty. And just as God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, God "punish[ed]" the speaker's own sinfulness with "sicknesses" and "shame."

The sibilance of these lines evokes the sinister hiss of a snake (not incidentally, the creature that caused humanity's downfall in the Garden of Eden):

> My tender age in sorrow did beginne
> And still with sicknesses and shame
> Thou didst so punish sinne,

Sibilance also links "sorrow," "sicknesses," and "shame" to "punishment" and "sin" (or "sinne" as the poet spell it here). Even at the level of its sounds, then, the poem implies that the speaker's suffering was caused by the speaker's sinful nature (a nature that, remember, was originally created by Adam, when he and Eve introduced sin into the world!).

The idea of "sicknesses" can also be read as a metaphor for sin. The poem suggests that being close to God is spiritually "healthy"; someone who has fallen far from God would thus be spiritually "sick" or unwell. The speaker's suffering in life is the result of being distant from God.

Just as in the first stanza, the opening lines here get smaller as they move down the page. The rhyme scheme is the same as the first stanza's as well. In fact, the speaker even repeats exact rhyme words from that first stanza here, again rhyming "same" with "became. The speaker's own "shame," then, musically echoes the "shame" and fall of Adam, suggesting that the two are alike: both are caused by sin and distance from God.

LINES 14-15

That I became
Most thinne.

God punished the speaker's "sinne" (or "sin") so much that the speaker "became / Most thinne." Again, the speaker's own experience parallels the first stanza's description of Adam's fall: where Adam "became / Most poore" in spirit because of his sinfulness, the speaker became "Most thinne."

Here, the idea of being "thinne" (or "thin") can be read as a metaphor for spiritual "sickness" or weakness. The parallelism of "Most poore" and "Most thinne," meanwhile, links the speaker's suffering to the "original" suffering and sin of humanity. Also notice how the lines of the poem become shorter again here, visually evoking that thinness.

Several poetic devices in these lines emphasize their meaning. First, the speaker repeats the word "became" from the first stanza: where Adam "became" poor in spirit, the speaker too "became" spiritually "thin" or weak. This repetition reinforces the idea that God made human beings with everything they needed, and that humanity's suffering came about because people fell away from God: they "became" sinful, and spiritually "sick."

As in the first stanza, the clear end-stop after "thinne" signals a break, a turning point in the poem. Having hit rock bottom, the speaker is about to rise up with God.

LINES 16-18

With thee
Let me combine,
And feel thy victorie:

At the beginning of line 16, the poem's "wings" begin again to open and unfurl. "With thee," the speaker says, repeating yet another phrase from the first stanza and again addressing God directly (more apostrophe). Again, this direct address to God signals the beginning of the speaker's "rise" from own suffering and difficulty.

These lines continue the parallelism between the second stanza and the first. While in the first stanza the speaker wanted to "rise" with God, here, the speaker says, "With thee / Let me combine." Despite the shift in language, in both instances the speaker wants to be *closer* to God. In fact, the speaker here asks to merge completely with God—and, in doing so, to relinquish any will separate from God's. That's because it's precisely this closeness to God, the poem suggests, that allows the speaker to transcend all the shame and sorrow described in the previous lines.

In joining with God, the speaker will "feel thy victorie." The poem repeats the word "victorie" from the first stanza, reiterating the idea that people may triumph over their suffering by being close to God. As with the use of the word in the first stanza, "victorie" here also alludes to Christ's resurrection, which is viewed as a kind of "victory" over earthly sin and death. The speaker's own "victory," then—the speaker's triumph over sin and sorrow—is inextricably linked to Christ's suffering and resurrection.

The lines of the poem begin to lengthen again here, like a pair of wings opening.

LINES 19-20

For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

The speaker wants to "imp," or attach, a "wing" to God's own "wing," because in doing so the speaker will be able to fly even further toward heaven. In its archaic meaning, the word "imp" meant to overlay or "graft," as one might graft the shoot of a plant onto another plant. The word is also used to describe the process of repairing a bird's damaged feather by grafting it onto another feather, to help the bird to fly. The speaker perhaps envisions growing a spiritual "wing" through constant devotion to God.

In the first stanza the speaker argued that the original "fall" of humanity served to "further" the speaker's own "flight." Here, it's the speaker's *own* sorrow and pain, the speaker's *personal* fall, that will "advance" that same "flight"—that will make the speaker's redemption more powerful and joyful. Again, then, the poem argues that suffering can *enable* redemption and grace, if only one joins with, flies with, God.

The assonance of these lines evoke the images at hand. Note how the short /i/ sounds connect "imp" and "wing," just as the speaker wants to connect with God. Additionally, these short /i/ sounds echo the short /i/ sounds in "beginne," "sinne," and "thinne." These short vowel sounds also contrast with the long /i/ sounds in "thine" and "flight," both of which connect God ("thine") with the idea of spiritual "flight," or approaching heaven. God, this sonic connection emphasizes, makes this "flight" possible.

Finally, short /a/ sounds connect "[a]ffliction" and "advance." Just as, in the first stanza, alliterative /f/ sounds linked "fall," "further," and "flight," here the poem's sound pattern emphasizes that the speaker's suffering will only make the relief from suffering that more powerful.

These lines conclude the poem, and also complete the poem's second set of "wings." Viewed sideways in its entirety, then, the poem creates an image of two sets of wings: God's, and the speaker's. In an alternate way of looking at the poem, each stanza can be viewed as a *single* wing, which the speaker has completely unfurled by the poem's ending.

SYMBOLS

LARKS

Larks typically symbolize dawn, renewal, and rebirth in literature. That's certainly the case in this poem, as the speaker imagines being able to fly like a lark, away from suffering and sin, and rising "harmoniously" with God. The speaker experiences redemption—a new beginning, and perhaps even a rebirth in heaven—by staying close to God.

Importantly, larks are also songbirds. Perhaps this poem itself, then, is akin to a lark's song, with the speaker a kind of songbird. Through singing God's praises in this poem, the speaker is able to find redemption.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "larks"

WINGS AND FLIGHT

The speaker evokes wings and flight throughout the poem—including in the visual shape of the poem itself! Wings and flight symbolize freedom from, or the transcendence of, earthly suffering.

Sin and suffering are a lowly state, the poem implies, with idea of the "fall" itself suggesting that, in sinning, human beings fell away from God on high. Flying thus represents *rising above* that sin and suffering, and the speaker insists that the only way to do so is via devotion to God. More specifically, the speaker wants to graft a "wing" onto that of God (which might mean to live by God's example, or to devote one's life entirely to the service of God). Again, wings and flight represent a means to soar sin, suffering, and pain.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The speaker of "Easter Wings" makes several allusions to the Bible. First, the poem's title references Easter Sunday, when, according to the biblical story, Jesus Christ rose from the dead after his crucifixion. This allusion sets up an important framework for the poem: just as Christ's suffering on the cross eventually led to his resurrection and the absolution of humanity's sins, the poem suggests that the speaker's own suffering will, through devotion to God, eventually lead to spiritual redemption.

The speaker also alludes to the story of Adam and Eve. The Bible's Book of Genesis describes how God created the first human beings, Adam and Eve, and gave them the Garden of Eden, a kind of paradise. Adam and Eve disobeyed God by taking fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and were then expelled from Eden.

The speaker references this story by saying that God invented "man in wealth and store," or gave humanity everything that it needed, but that this first man "foolishly [...] lost" it all. This original "fall" from God's grace will only "further the flight in" the speaker, however; falling so low, in other words, is part of what allows the speaker to rise so high through religious devotion.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "who createdst man in wealth and store"
- **Line 2:** "Though foolishly he lost the same"
- **Line 10:** "the fall"

APOSTROPHE

At several points in the poem, the speaker addresses God directly, and these moments of apostrophe reveal the speaker's s desire to be close to God.

The speaker praises God for his "victories," or triumphs, and in doing so demonstrates religious faith and devotion. Additionally, by beginning the poem with "Lord," the poem as a whole takes the form of a prayer. As in a prayer, the speaker talks to God, celebrates God, and also appeals to God for help escaping suffering and sin.

The speaker's use of apostrophe also suggests that through the poem—and through the prayer and religious dedication it represents—the speaker actually *can* be close to God. The speaker's address to God as "thee" sounds intimate, even personal, and the poem heightens this sense of intimacy even more when the speaker imagines "imp[ing]" or attaching a "wing" onto God's own "wing." The poem's use of apostrophe, then, implies that through faith, the speaker can "combine" with God and find the spiritual closeness and redemption.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Lord"
- **Lines 6-7:** " With thee / O let me rise"
- **Line 9:** " And sing this day thy victories:"
- **Line 13:** " Thou didst so punish sinne,"
- **Lines 16-17:** " With thee / Let me combine,"
- **Line 18:** " And feel thy victorie:"
- **Line 19:** " For, if I imp my wing on thine,"

METAPHOR

"Easter Wings" is filled with metaphors that help to illustrate the relationship between suffering, sin, and redemption.

For example, the speaker describes the first man (Adam) as having been created in "wealth and store." Here, the speaker alludes to the Garden of Eden, which was a kind of plentiful, abundant paradise. The speaker is using the idea of "wealth" as a metaphor for *spiritual* wealth, or the state of being close to God.

When Adam sinned, and was expelled from the Garden of Eden, the speaker describes him as "[d]ecaying" and becoming "poore." The speaker uses the idea of physical decay—in which something rots or breaks down—to metaphorically depict humanity's descent into sin. Humanity's current state, the speaker suggests, is "poore," or spiritually impoverished.

Similarly, the speaker's own early life is metaphorically described as full of "sicknesses and shame." The idea of "sickness," usually associated with one's physical health, becomes a metaphor for a lack of spiritual wellbeing. When the speaker became "[m]ost thinne," then, this implies that the

speaker became *spiritually* weak and impoverished.

It is only through God, the poem suggests, that the speaker can *overcome* this state of spiritual impoverishment, finding happiness, relief, and true spiritual "wealth." And that process of redemption and salvation is metaphorically depicted as flight. The speaker doesn't *literally* want to grow wings; instead, the speaker uses the image of wings and flight to metaphorically depict the soul's ability to transcend suffering through faith. The speaker also uses the metaphor of "imp[ing]," or attaching, the speaker's own "wing" to God's "wing," illustrating the idea that staying spiritually close to God is what makes such "flight" possible.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "wealth and store"
- **Line 3:** "Decaying"
- **Lines 4-5:** " Till he became / Most poore:"
- **Line 10:** "flight"
- **Line 12:** "sicknesses"
- **Lines 14-15:** " That I became / Most thinne."
- **Line 19:** "if I imp my wing on thine"
- **Line 20:** "flight"

SIMILE

In addition to the metaphors that appear throughout, the poem also uses one simile that helps readers envision the speaker's spiritual "flight." In lines 6-8, the speaker appeals to God, saying, "With thee / O let me rise / As larks." The speaker, imagines rising with God in the way that larks fly through the sky (larks are a kind of small songbird).

This simile makes the speaker's imagined flight seem even more vivid and joyful. Larks are traditionally associated with daybreak and new beginnings, and the reader can picture them lifting into the sky at dawn. This comparison helps convey speaker's sense of hope; flying alongside God will be like soaring through the air on a new morning, filling the sky with music.

Larks and their lovely songs also sometimes symbolize poetry itself in literature. This simile, then, subtly suggests that the speaker is like a lark by writing this very poem that sings God's praises.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "As larks"

PARADOX

The speaker's argument is a kind of ironic paradox: the speaker insists that without sin and suffering there can be no redemption; people can't rise up unless they've fallen down. This is both ironic and paradoxical because it suggests that the things Christians most want to avoid are exactly what allow for salvation.

The speaker makes this irony clear in the final lines of each stanza. In line 15, the speaker says that "the fall"—an allusion to the fall of man in the biblical Book of Genesis—is what will "further the flight" in the speaker. In other words, human beings falling so low, so far from God, actually allows the speaker *to fly even further in redemption*. The speaker has more time and space to "sing this day [God's] victories."

In line 20, the speaker repeats the same idea, saying that "[a]ffliction" is exactly what will "advance"—or move forward—the speaker's "flight." Again, then, sin and suffering are the very things that give the speaker the chance to fly towards God. Without them, the speaker wouldn't have anything to "rise" above.

This all relates to something called *felix culpa*, which means "fortunate fall." This is an old idea in religious philosophy arguing that the fall of man actually had fortunate consequences in that it allowed for the death and resurrection of Christ.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Then shall the fall further the flight in me."
- **Line 20:** "Affliction shall advance the flight in me."

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is very important to "Easter Wings," as both stanzas follow the same structure. At the beginning of each stanza, the speaker describes a state sinfulness and suffering. While doing so, the poem's lines get shorter and shorter, illustrating humanity's spiritual impoverishment. The second half of each stanza then focuses on redemption through religious devotion. The poem's lines get longer and longer as the speaker envisions rising above earthly suffering and becoming closer to God.

The broader parallel form of each stanza makes sense, because they're both focused on the same idea: that human beings' sinful nature causes them pain, and that such pain is overcome through faith in God. This parallelism also connects the biblical "fall" (which the speaker describes in the first stanza) with the speaker's own *personal* experience (which gets described in the second). In other words, the parallel structure of the stanzas links the speaker's suffering with the suffering and sinfulness of humanity as a whole. Both the speaker and people in general, the poem implies, need God to help them out of this sinful condition and find a state of spiritual grace.

The speaker also uses parallelism on a grammatical level throughout the poem, echoing syntax and phrasing between each stanza. For example, in the first stanza the speaker

describes Adam falling from grace and getting expelled from the Garden of Eden as punishment. Adam then became "[m]ost poore." The second stanza describes the same process for the speaker, whose sinfulness God punishes with "sicknesses and shame." And as a consequence, the speaker became "[m]ost thinne." These parallel phrases emphasize that the speaker's own suffering is intricately connected to humanity's suffering as a whole.

Likewise, the *answer* to humanity's suffering is also the answer to the speaker's personal difficulties. The speaker uses the parallel phrases "With thee / O let me rise" and "With thee / Let me combine" to illustrate that people can find spiritual redemption from the original "fall" and from their own hardships, through devotion to God.

In the same vein, the parallelism of lines 10 and 20 emphasize the idea that sin and suffering are, ironically, the very things that make redemption possible. In line 10 the speaker says that "the fall" (i.e., of man) will allow the speaker to fly even "further"; in line 20, "Affliction" (i.e., the speaker's personal suffering) will "advance" the speaker's flight. Both lines argue that falling so low is what allows people to rise so high—that is, to devote themselves so thoroughly to God.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem uses a mixture of enjambment and end-stopped lines throughout, varying the poem's pacing depending on the image at hand. While some moments are ambiguous when it comes to whether they're best categorized as end-stopped or enjambed (given changing punctuation norms in the centuries since this poem was written, for one thing), there's a clear difference in pacing between the *middles* of each stanza and the *starts/ends* of each stanza.

Both stanzas open with an end-stopped line and then close with three end-stops in a row. This lends a sense of firmness and authority to the poem's beginning and end; the speaker is steady, confident, and self-assured in these moments.

The end-stops in lines 5 and 15 (after "Most poore" and "Most thinne"), meanwhile, clearly split each stanza in half. The pause after each of these lines grants space for reflection, for readers to take in all the sin and suffering the speaker has just described, before the speaker starts to describe redemption from that sin and suffering.

Apart from lines 5 and 15, all the lines in the middle of each stanza feature enjambment that quickens the poem's pace. In lines 3-5 and 13-15, this sudden boost in speed suggests the downward tug of sin and suffering:

> Decaying more and **more,**
> **Till** he **became**
> **Most** poore:
> [...]
> Thou didst so punish **sinne,**
> **That** I **became**
> **Most** thinne.

Enjambment pulls readers through the lines, perhaps evoking the downward momentum created by sin—that is, the idea that sin and suffering just lead to more sin and suffering. (And again, note that, especially with older poems like this, the presence of commas doesn't always preclude enjambment.) The poem flows downward until it slams into the harsh end-stops after "Most poore"/"Most thinne," which evoke hitting rock bottom.

The speaker doesn't wallow in suffering or self-pity, however. After these two end-stops, the poem turns back to enjambment—this time creating an intense *forward* momentum:

> With **thee**
> O let me **rise**
> As larks, [...]

The speaker's "rise" can't be stopped or contained.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "more, / Till"
- **Lines 4-5:** "became / Most"
- **Lines 6-7:** "thee / O"
- **Lines 7-8:** "rise / As"
- **Lines 12-13:** "shame / Thou"
- **Lines 13-14:** "sinne, / That"
- **Lines 14-15:** "became / Most"
- **Lines 16-17:** "thee / Let"
- **Lines 17-18:** "combine, / And"

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration throughout, drawing readers' attention to certain words and also emphasizing their meanings. For example, in the first stanza, alliterative /m/ sounds link "**m**ore" and "[**m**]ost." In returning to the same sound again and again, the poem's language mirrors humanity's seeming insistence on sinning; the sounds multiply just as huamnity's sins multiply.

Alliteration also appears when the speaker describes overcoming suffering. Note how gentle /l/ sounds connect "**l**et" and "**l**arks," conveying the idea that God can "let," or allow, the speaker to fly like a beautiful songbird. And at the end of the first stanza, /f/ sounds link "**f**all," "**f**urther," and "**f**light," reinforcing the idea that suffering (humanity's "fall") can transform into redemption, or "flight," if one stays close to God.

Note that much of the poem's alliteration is more specifically sibilance, discussed in its own entry in this guide.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "more," "more"
- **Line 5:** "Most"
- **Line 7:** "let"
- **Line 8:** "larks"
- **Line 10:** "fall," "further," "flight"
- **Line 11:** "sorrow"
- **Line 12:** "still," "sicknesses"
- **Line 13:** "Thou," "sinne"
- **Line 14:** "That"
- **Line 15:** "thinne"
- **Line 16:** "thee"
- **Line 18:** "feel"
- **Line 19:** "For"
- **Line 20:** "Affliction," "advance," "flight"

SIBILANCE

The poem uses sibilance when the speaker talks about humanity's sinfulness and suffering. Take all the insistent /s/ and /sh/ sounds in the poems opening two lines:

> Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
> Though foolishly he lost the same,

The sibilance here combines with sharp /t/ sounds ("createdst," "store," "lost") to suggests a kind of spitting disapproval, a tsk-tsking, at Adam's "foolish" loss of God's gifts. The /s/ sounds can also be read as subtly evoking the hissing of a snake—like the snake that, according to the Bible, tempted Adam and Eve into sin in the Garden of Eden.

Given this association between sibilance and slippery deception, it's probably not surprising that more of the device pops up as the poem turns to the speaker's own sinful past:

> My tender age in sorrow did beginne
> And still with sicknesses and shame
> Thou didst so punish sinne,

Thanks to sibilance, readers can hear an echo of that hissing serpent—of Adam's foolish loss and the original fall of man—in the speaker's suffering. The sibilance thus again connects suffering to sin; God punishes that sin with "sicknesses and shame."

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "createdst," "store"
- **Line 2:** "foolishly," "same"
- **Line 11:** "sorrow"
- **Line 12:** "still," "sicknesses," "shame"
- **Line 13:** "didst so punish sinne"

ASSONANCE

The speaker uses assonance much like alliteration and sibilance, adding pleasant music to the poem and evoking its ideas through sound. For example, in the first stanza, note how long /ee/ sounds connect "thee," and "me," /a/ sounds connect "larks" and "harmoniously," and short /ih/ sounds link "sing" and "victories." All these repeated sounds make the poem feel richly musical, which makes sense if the speaker is hoping to "sing" a song of praise to God!

The start of the next stanza is filled with assonance too, especially the short /ih/ sound that insistently weaves its way through lines 11-15:

> My tender age in sorrow did beginne
> And still with sicknesses and shame
> Thou didst so punish sinne,
> That I became
> Most thinne.

Repeating the same vowel sound over and over again creates a sensation of overwhelming momentum, subtly evoking the intensity and seeming incapability of the speaker's spiritual impoverishment and suffering.

In another striking moment, the speaker alternates between short /ih/ and long /i/ sounds in line 19:

> For, if I imp my wing on thine,

The back and forth between these two sounds mimics the way the speaker hopes to *combine* with God, to pair their two different wings.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "same"
- **Line 3:** "Decaying"
- **Line 4:** "became"
- **Line 6:** "thee"
- **Line 7:** "me"
- **Line 8:** "larks," "harmoniously"
- **Line 9:** "sing," " this," "victories"
- **Line 11:** "in," "did beginne"
- **Line 12:** "still with sicknesses"
- **Line 13:** "didst," "punish sinne"
- **Line 15:** "thinne"
- **Line 16:** "thee"
- **Line 17:** "me"
- **Line 19:** "if I imp my wing," "thine"

- **Line 20:** "Affliction," "advance "

VOCABULARY

Createdst (Line 1) - An archaic spelling of "created."

Store (Line 1) - "Store" means abundance or plenty: the speaker is saying that God created the first people (Adam and Eve) and gave them everything they needed.

Decaying (Line 3) - To "decay" means to break down or rot. Here, the speaker uses the word to metaphorically describe humanity's descent into sinfulness.

Poore (Line 5) - An archaic spelling of "poor."

Larks (Line 8) - Larks are a type of songbirds, traditionally associated with daybreak and new beginnings.

Victories (Line 9, Line 18) - "Victories" are triumphs; "victorie" is an archaic spelling of the singular "victory."

The Fall (Line 10) - The "fall" alludes to the biblical "fall of man," the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

Tender (Line 11) - Within the context of the poem, "tender" means young or vulnerable.

Sinne (Line 13) - An archaic spelling of "sin."

Thinne (Line 15) - An archaic spelling of "thin."

Imp (Line 19) - In its archaic meaning, to "imp" means to graft something, as someone might graft one plant onto another to help the plant grow. To "imp" also means to repair a bird's feather by grafting it onto another feather, helping the bird fly.

Affliction (Line 20) - Intense suffering and pain.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Easter Wings" is an example of concrete or shaped poetry: it takes the visual form of what it describes. The poem was originally printed sideways, with one stanza on each page. Viewed this way, the stanzas look like open wings. The poem can either be viewed as *one* set of wings (with each stanza a single wing) or *two* sets of wings, each stanza resembling an open pair.

The poem's form also evokes its meaning. In the first half of each stanza, the lines of the poem get shorter and shorter, visually representing the spiritual "poverty" and "thinness" that comes from sinning and falling further away from God. In the second half of each stanza, the lines begin to steadily increase in length as the speaker "rise[s]" with God and overcomes sin, sorrow, and suffering through devotion to God.

METER

The lines of "Easter Wings" vary in length, but the rhythm of each is still quite steady. Most lines are made up of iambs, a type of metrical foot in which one unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable (making a da-DUM beat pattern). There are some variations throughout, but in general this iambic pattern creates an even, steady rhythm in the poem. Consider, for example, lines 1-5:

> Lord, who | crea- | tedst man | in wealth | and store,
> Though fool- | ishly | he lost | the same,
> Decay- | ing more | and more,
> Till he | became
> Most poore:

While the da-DUM rhythm is consistent, the dramatically changing line lengths—and, as such, the shifting *number* of iambs per line—allows for variation within this pattern. This allows for a sense of fluidity and change, much like the internal changes the speaker describes upon moving from spiritual impoverishment to redemption.

As readers can see, the poem's very first line actually breaks with this iambic pattern as well: the first foot of the poem is a trochee, a poetic foot with a stressed-unstressed beat pattern ("Lord, who"). This stress at the poem's beginning sets the word "Lord" apart, emphasizing that for the speaker, it is *God* who makes the poem as a whole—and the spiritual redemption it depicts—possible.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a consistent rhyme scheme throughout. Each stanza can be broken in half, with the first and second set of five lines following the same ABABA pattern. Mapped to account for the changing rhyme sounds, the poem's full rhyme scheme looks like this:

ABABACDCDC EBEBECFCFC

Note here how, again, the actual rhyme *sounds* change every five lines (that is, at the start of and then halfway through each stanza), but the actual *pattern of those sounds* stays the same within each five-line chunk. In the first five lines, for example, "store" rhymes with "more" and "poore," while "same" rhymes with "became."

What makes this rhyming pattern a bit surprising is that it leaves out a final B/D/F rhyme ending, which would bring a sense of resolution. In lines 1-5, for instance, there are three A rhymes but only two B rhymes—and the same is true each time the rhyme pattern repeats throughout the poem.

Thus, at the very moment when the speaker first describes rising with God (line 6), the poem shifts into a second set of rhyme sounds (again following the same alternating pattern): "thee" rhymes with "harmoniously" and "me," while "rise"

rhymes with "victories." (According to rhyming standards in some archaic English poetry, the different vowel sounds of "rise" and "victories" would still be considered full rhymes.) And again, the poem leaves out the final rhyme ending (in this case, a D ending) that the reader might expect. In doing so, the poem subtly creates a sense of openness and possibility.

The second stanza follows the same structure. The first five lines stick to an alternating rhyme pattern, and actually repeat the exact same B line endings from the first stanza ("shame" and "became"). The second half of this stanza echoes stanza 1 too: the words "thee," "victorie," and "me" rhyme use the same C rhyme sound found in lines 6, 7, and 9, and "thee" and "victorie" are, of course, again exact repetitions from stanza 1.

All this repetition drives home the poem's message: that sin leads to shame, but trust in God (in "thee") leads to personal triumph.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Easter Wings" is never named in the poem, but a few things suggest that the speaker is a representation of the poet, George Herbert, himself. Most obviously, Herbert was a very religious man—an Anglican priest, in fact! The speaker also describes life in ways that feel intensely personal, noting, for example, the "sorrow" and "sicknesses" of youth.

Of course, the poem also leaves out any details that would definitively mark the speaker out as Herbert—or even as a man, for that matter. And whoever the speaker is, this person frames their suffering within the larger experience of humanity as a whole. The speaker, then, can be read as Herbert but not *only* Herbert, and the poem aims to capture universal feelings of sorrow, hardship, and faith.

SETTING

The speaker's desire to praise and rise up with God isn't tied to any *specific* setting. One thing that does seem clear, however, is that the poem takes place on earth—in the realm of the living, at least. If the poem took place in heaven, the speaker wouldn't be asking to "rise" up with God! The speaker longs to be above this material realm, which is a place of sin and suffering. The speaker thus envisions flying with God like a songbird through the air.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Easter Wings" was first printed in George Herbert's posthumous collection *The Temple* in 1633, the year after Herbert had died. The collection was made out of three sections: "The Church Porch," "The Church," and "The Church Militant." This poem appears in the middle and longest section, "The Church," which included the same number of poems as there are psalms in the Church of England's liturgical calendar. Herbert was an Anglican Priest, and the collection in its entirety deals with questions of faith, suffering, doubt, and redemption.

Religious poetry was not at all uncommon in the 17th century, but it also wasn't necessarily the norm. (For context, Shakespeare's often erotically-charged sonnets were first published in 1609.) Herbert was one of a group of poets who sought to redirect poetry away from the idea of the feminine "muse" and back to God.

Herbert is also considered a metaphysical poet, a term used to describe a group of 17th-century writers whose work often used paradox and complex imagery to discuss love, morality, and religion. Herbert's contemporaries and fellow Metaphysical Poets include his close friend John Donne as well as Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan.

As a concrete or shaped poem, "Easter Wings" also draws on a tradition dating back to ancient Greece. During the Renaissance, revitalized interest in ancient art led to the discovery of several ancient Greek shaped poems, including one by the poet Simias of Rhodes, that took the shape of wings. Stephen Hawes, an English poet of the Tudor period, had also written a poem in this shape.

Herbert was a widely influential poet in his own time, his work also influenced later poets ranging from Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ralph Waldo Emerson to Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and T.S. Eliot.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To contemporary readers, "Easter Wings" might seem like a traditional, and even simple, religious poem, written in the context of a religious era. Yet the poem was actually written in a time of intense religious and political turmoil. In 1534, King Henry VIII had founded the Church of England, splitting from the Vatican and the Catholic Church; this split predicated years of religious and political conflict and civil war, as monarchs battled for power and both Protestants and Catholics relentlessly persecuted each other.

By the time Herbert wrote *The Temple*, the Church of England was firmly in control of the country. Years of civil conflict and violence would still follow, however, often stemming from ongoing issues related to religious freedom.

Herbert's life intersected with the years of this conflict, and it seems he made a deliberate choice to disengage from it altogether. Although, as the son of a wealthy family, he was set on a path to go into politics and the royal court, he instead joined the Anglican priesthood. Herbert then served in a small, poor, rural parish, seeking a life where he could more directly

connect to God and to his faith.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Ancient Greek Shaped Poetry — "Easter Wings" draws on a tradition of concrete, or shaped, poetry, that dates back to ancient Greece. Read more about this tradition and see examples of ancient shaped poetry—including "The Wings" by Simias of Rhodes. (https://www.theoi.com/Text/PatternPoems.html)
- Video of Andrew Motion Discussing George Herbert — Listen to Andrew Motion, the former Poet Laureate of the UK, discuss the influence of George Herbert's poetry on his own work in this clip recorded at the George Herbert Festival in 2014. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSpydZl4Z8Q)
- Biography of George Herbert — Read more about George Herbert's life and poetry. (https://poets.org/poet/george-herbert)
- Metaphysical Poetry — Learn more about the school of poetry to which George Herbert belonged. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/metaphysical-poets)
- 1633 Facsimile of "Easter Wings" — View a facsimile of the poem as it was originally published in 1633. The poem is printed sideways, making the shape of wings clear. (https://www.ccel.org/h/herbert/temple/Easterwings.html)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Little, Margaree. "*Easter Wings.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Oct 2020. Web. 19 Feb 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Little, Margaree. "*Easter Wings.*" LitCharts LLC, October 8, 2020. Retrieved February 19, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/george-herbert/easter-wings.