Holy Sonnet 6: This is my play's last scene

POEM TEXT

This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint
My pilgrimage's last mile; and my race,
Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,
My span's last inch, my minute's latest point;
And gluttonous death will instantly unjoint
My body and my soul, and I shall sleep a space;
But my'ever-waking part shall see that face
Whose fear already shakes my every joint.
Then, as my soul to'heaven, her first seat, takes flight,
And earth-born body in the earth shall dwell,
So fall my sins, that all may have their right,
To where they'are bred, and would press me, to hell.
Impute me righteous, thus purg'd of evil,
For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devil.

SUMMARY

My death is the last scene in the metaphorical "play" of my life. God has decided that my life's journey has reached its last mile. My life is like a meandering race that nevertheless sped by and now enters its final stretch, the final inch, the final few seconds. Soon, ravenous death will abruptly separate my body from my soul, and I will sleep for a while. But my soul, the part of me that's always awake, will soon see the face of God—a prospect that makes my whole body tremble with fear. As my soul soars upwards to heaven, where she first came from, my physical body will stay behind, buried in the ground. Likewise, my sins will fall back to where they came from and would like to force me to go—that is, hell. Make me virtuous and holy, ridding me of evil, and I'll leave behind the material world, my body, and Satan.

THEMES

THE SEPARATION OF THE BODY AND SOUL IN DEATH

The speaker of "This is my play's last scene," the sixth poem in John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* sequence, imagines what it's like to die and envisions the soul's "flight" to heaven. Though the speaker is also a little frightened by the prospect of meeting God face to face, the poem ultimately presents death as a liberating release from earthly life. Death divides the soul from the body, the speaker argues, which, in turn, means that death frees people from their bodily sins.

The speaker personifies death as a greedy glutton who waits in the wings to devour the body while the soul flies free. Death "will instantly unjoint / My body and my soul," the speaker says. The body and soul are not the same thing, in the speaker's mind, and death marks a sudden break between the two. (This speaker might be on their deathbed, but more likely, they're anticipating what death will be like when the time comes).

The speaker believes that this separation of their body and soul will *also* mark a clean break from their sins, as both body and soul take their rightful places in the afterlife. The speaker's "earth-born body" will "dwell" in the earth (perhaps awaiting reunion with the soul at some later date). The soul (personified as female) will return to heaven, where she will resume "her first seat"—that is, her original, pre-life position. And the speaker's sins (they hope!) will "fall" back "to where they're bred"—that is, down to hell.

The speaker believes (or, at least, wants to believe) that dying purifies the soul, cleansing it of its associations not just with the body, but with sin itself. After all, those sins can only thrive through the bodily *desires* of earthly life. Once the speaker is separated from earthly life, it follows, they will leave those sins behind.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

FEAR OF DEATH AND GOD'S JUDGMENT

The speaker of "Holy Sonnet 6" argues that the soul is separate from the body and soars up to heaven when one dies. Death is thus a purification of sorts, as the body—and all its bodily sins—remains far below. The speaker might *believe* all of the above, of course, but they won't *know* it's true until they die. Like some of Donne's other *Holy Sonnets*, then, the poem also expresses a fear of death (and of the speaker's earthly sins coming back to haunt them). God is almighty and omniscient, the poem implies, and it's beyond the speaker's powers to know how God will judge them.

The speaker accepts that death is natural and inescapable. They begin the poem by depicting earthly life as a play, a pilgrimage, and a race. These are all finite, time-based events that have definitive endpoints (e.g., a play's closing scene). Just as a play has a finale and a race has a finish line, life as a soul in a body has an inevitable conclusion.

Yet though the speaker seems excited to reunite with God, the "fear" of God "already shakes [their] every joint." The speaker ends the poem with what sounds like a confident order but is, in truth, a prayer or petition to God: "Impute me righteous, thus purged of evil." The speaker longs to be judged favorably and made entirely holy and virtuous in the model of Jesus Christ.

Through such a transformation, the speaker hopes to leave "the [material] world, the flesh, the devil" behind. Yet it's only in death that they'll find out their fate once and for all. In other words, as the speaker nears their "play's last scene" (the end of their life), they're waiting to find out whether the ending will be happy or tragic. They anticipate that it'll be the first—but they're also praying it won't be the second.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-8
- Lines 11-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint
My pilgrimage's last mile;

The speaker dramatically describes (or imagines) the final moments of their life using a series of metaphors. First, they call this time "my play's last scene." This metaphor might make readers think of Shakespeare's famous lines from *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players." In any case, the idea is simple enough: life is a brief drama in which everyone, including the speaker, plays their part. But life is also fleeting, the ending (death) already written into the script.

The speaker then switches gears, treating life as a journey rather than a play:

> [...] here heavens appoint
> My pilgrimage's last mile;

The word "pilgrimage" presents life as a journey undertaken in order to reunite with God in heaven—and God has decided that the speaker's life's journey is almost done.

Notice how both of the opening lines feature caesura and repetition. Each line is divided in half, creating a choppy rhythm that adds to the poem's anxious tone. The speaker will use the phrase "my + [metaphor]" over and over again, and this parallelism suggests that the speaker is obsessing over their fate. The way the speaker jumps from one metaphorical idea to another also might signal a kind of spiritual restlessness. It sounds, perhaps, like the speaker wants a comforting, reassuring way of thinking about the end of their life—but it doesn't come all that easily.

LINES 2-4

and my race,
Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,
My span's last inch, my minute's latest point;

After the caesura in line 2, the speaker turns to another metaphor to describe the end of their life. Life is a "race," and the speaker is in the final stretch. Calling life a "race" is pretty similar to calling it a "pilgrimage" in that it's a journey from point A (birth) to point B (death), only the word "race" has a greater sense of urgency.

The speaker describes their race as "idly, yet quickly, run." This is a classic John Donne paradox: surely a race can't be run both lazily *and* speedily? The idleness here seems to relate to the speaker's *approach* to life (and, perhaps, aligns with the sin of "sloth"). The speaker might feel they didn't make enough effort, particularly in a spiritual sense, to live a worthy life. That is, they didn't strain every muscle and sinew to perform their best in the race. Nevertheless, it's a short life, and it's "quickly" over whether one puts in this effort or not. It's as if the speaker's race is nearly run before they've even realized they were a participant.

The caesurae here slow the line down, mirroring the speaker's own self-confessed laziness:

> Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,

The speaker then drags the metaphor out, as though squeezing every last moment out of their final "minute" of life:

> My span's last inch, my minute's latest point;

In other words, these are the last few steps, the final few inches, and the last few seconds of the metaphorical race. "Point" could also refer to the pointing hands of a clock, the second hand coming to the end of the minute as it to say, "Look buddy, your time's up."

These lines continue the parallelism that began the poem, with the anaphora of "My" and the diacope of "last." The repetitive language evokes the relentless march of time.

By now, readers also have a clear sense of the poem's form. As the title makes clear, this is a sonnet—and more specifically a Petrarchan one. These four lines create a quatrain with an ABBA rhyme scheme: lines 1 and 4 rhyme ("appoint"/"point") as do lines 2 and 3 ("race"/"pace"). The meter is iambic pentameter: lines of five poetic feet, each with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM). Take line 4:

> My span's | last inch, | my min- | ute's la- | test point;

Donne was infamously loose with his meters, and this poem is no exception. For example, it's possible to scan a spondee in the second foot, as we have here ("last inch"). Still, readers can hear this iambic rhythm pulsing throughout the poem.

LINES 5-8

And gluttonous death will instantly unjoint
My body and my soul, and I shall sleep a space;
But my'ever-waking part shall see that face
Whose fear already shakes my every joint.

Lines 5-8 comprise the sonnet's second quatrain, in which the speaker imagines what will happen after death: the body and soul, which are joined together during earthly life, will separate, and the latter will be reunited with God. The speaker, then, believes that the body and soul are two different entities, brought together only for a brief while on earth.

Death, here personified as a greedy glutton, waits in the wings to "instantly unjoint" (pretty gory!) the body from the soul; death wants to make a meal of the speaker's body.

In dying, the speaker "shall sleep a space"—rest for a bit. The sibilance of "shall sleep a space" has a whispy quality that evokes sleepiness. This sleep, though, is the *body's* alone. The eternal, "ever-waking part" of the speaker—the soul—has business to attend to immediately: the soul flies straight to heaven to "see that face," the face of God.

Here, the speaker reveals the emotion that seems to lurk under the poem's surface: fear. They admit that the thought of meeting God "already shakes [their] every joint." That is, they feel terror at the idea of meeting God, even if it's supposed to be a heavenly moment. That's because they won't actually *know* their fate until they die; up till that point, there's a whole bunch of guesswork involved.

Line 8 is a rare line of perfect iambic pentameter:

Whose fear | al**read**- | y shakes | my ever- | y joint.

This steady meter gives the line an air of authority, capturing the speaker's fear of meeting God (the *ultimate* authority).

LINES 9-12

Then, as my soul to'heaven, her first seat, takes flight,
And earth-born body in the earth shall dwell,
So fall my sins, that all may have their right,
To where they'are bred, and would press me, to hell.

In line 9, the poem reaches its *volta*: the traditional turning point in the sonnet form, marking the transition from the poem's opening octave to its closing sestet.

The word "Then" signals this shift, as the speaker begins describing what happens to the soul, the body, and one's sins after death. The soul goes up to heaven, while the earth stays grounded—literally in the ground—on earth:

Then, as my soul to'heaven, her first seat, takes flight,
And earth-born body in the earth shall dwell,

The numerous caesurae in line 9 create a halting, stop-and-start rhythm, perhaps conveying the speaker's fear of meeting God: the line, like the soul's "flight" to heaven, is a bumpy ride.

The speaker also personifies the soul as female; if readers take the speaker here to be Donne himself, then this personification emphasizes the *separation* between the body, which is masculine, and the soul. This personification also sets the soul apart from the roughness and violence of earthly life by implying that it exhibits stereotypically feminine attributes like grace, gentleness, etc.

The soul travels to heaven to take up her "first seat"—that is, the place she came from. The body itself, meanwhile, is an "earth-born" thing that must remain in the mortal, material world: the body "in the earth shall dwell," the speaker says. The diacope of "earth" in this line links the body with its destiny:

And **earth**-born body in the **earth** shall dwell,

The soul came from and will return to heaven, while the body came from and must return to the earth.

The soul sheds not just the mortal body, the speaker continues, but also bodily *sins*. The sins the speaker committed during earthly life "fall" away as the soul rises up, tumbling back down "To where they'are bred"—that is, to where sin is created: hell. These sins would like to "press" the speaker to hell, too—to prevent the speaker from soaring up to heaven.

Though seemingly confident in the soul's ability to meet God in heaven, these lines also hint that the speaker is worried that their sins on earth might catch up with them. Perhaps this is why the thought of meeting God frightens the speaker so. It's as though the speaker *affirms* that sin separates from the soul in order to reassure themselves about what's waiting for them after they die.

LINES 13-14

Impute me righteous, thus purg'd of evil,
For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devil.

The last two lines form a couplet, which is more typical of a Shakespearean sonnet than a Petrarchan (Donne's *Holy Sonnets* borrow elements from both sonnet forms; more on that in the Form section of this guide).

The speaker issues what sounds like a command: "**Impute** me righteous." This isn't really an order, however, so much as a *prayer*, a petitioning of God. The speaker wants to be made righteous: right, holy, and virtuous in the eyes of God. This phrase touches on the theological debate around *imputed righteousness*: the idea that Christ's sacrifice saved humankind, thereby lessening the importance of one's *individual* behavior

on earth. Either way, the speaker sure hopes that any earthly sins they may have committed in the past won't come back to haunt them when they die.

Through being made righteous (whether through Christ or the separation of the soul from the body), the speaker believes they will be "thus purged of evil." That is, they'll leave sin behind and ascend to heaven. And, indeed, that's what the last line expresses:

> For thus I leave the world, the flesh, the devil.

"Thus" here can mean both "in this way" and "because of this." That is, the speaker will be cleansed of evil *and*, because of this purification, be granted access to the afterlife, returned to a state of innocence no matter (they hope) what took place on earth. The last line creates a kind of *un*holy trinity between the material world, the body (which does all that naughty sinning), and Satan himself. All three, the speaker believes (or, maybe, *hopes*), will fade into insignificance when the speaker dies.

The rhyming couplet adds some extra punch to the poem's final moments, as does the repetition of "thus." The asyndeton of "the world, the flesh, the devil" adds yet more drama and urgency.

POETIC DEVICES

ANTITHESIS

The speaker uses antithesis in lines 9-12, emphasizing the contrasting fates of the soul and the body (and all the body's sins).

The speaker believes that when they die their soul will "take[] flight" and go back to heaven. The body, by contrast, "shall dwell" in the earth, buried in the ground. And the speaker's *sins* will "fall" down to hell. This, the speaker suggests, is where sins belong: it's where they're "bred," and it's also where the sins try to force human beings to go. Everything, then, will be in its right place.

Notice how the grammatical structure of the sentence creates a sense of balance and harmony: "as" the soul does this and goes here, "so" the sins do *this* and go there. The juxtaposition of "flight" and "fall" makes this separation seem all the more powerful and permanent. Death offers a kind of purification for the soul, the speaker implies, which is allowed to leave the body—with all its earthly desires—behind. The spirit is something light, eternal; the body is stuck in the earth, and heavy sin plummets to hell. Through this anthesis, the speaker illustrates how death helps the soul get as far away from those sins as possible.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-12:** "Then, as my soul to'heaven, her first seat, takes flight, / And earth-born body in the earth shall dwell, / So fall my sins, that all may have their right, / To where they'are bred, and would press me, to hell."

CAESURA

John Donne has a reputation for using choppy rhythms, and on that front, "Holy Sonnet 6" doesn't disappoint. Only four out of the sonnet's 14 lines *don't* feature caesura!

The poem uses these caesurae to create an anxious, restless tone. Though the speaker expresses their beliefs about the afterlife with apparent certainty, caesurae subtly introduce doubt by imbuing many lines with a halting, stop-and-start rhythm. Just listen to how *fidgety* the first quatrain sounds, thanks to all those semi-colons and commas:

> This is my play's last scene; here heavens appoint
> My pilgrimage's last mile; and my race,
> Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,
> My span's last inch, my minute's latest point;

All these caesurae have more specific effects as well:

- The speaker sounds like they're dragging these metaphors out, eking out every last bit of life.
- The caesurae also mark the shift from one metaphorical idea to another, as though the speaker is frantically searching for the right comparison.
- Together with the enjambment between lines 1 and 2, caesurae make it sound like the words are trying to resist the poem's formal constraints, perhaps like a soul longing to wrestle free of its bodily container.
- Finally, notice how the *two* commas in line 3 slow that line right down to an *idle* pace, mirroring the speaker's confession that they didn't run the race of life with as much effort as they could have.

In line 9, caesurae again slow the poem down:

> Then, as my soul to'heaven, her first seat, takes flight,

Here, it's almost like the soul has buckled up for a bumpy ride, hitting ethereal turbulence on "her" flight up to heaven.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "scene; here"
- **Line 2:** "mile; and"
- **Line 3:** "run, hath"
- **Line 4:** "inch, my"
- **Line 6:** "soul, and"
- **Line 9:** "to'heaven, her"

- **Line 11:** "sins, that"
- **Line 12:** "bred, and," "me, to"
- **Line 13:** "righteous, thus"
- **Line 14:** "world, the," "flesh, the"

METAPHOR

Metaphor is a vital part of "Holy Sonnet 6" (and the other *Holy Sonnets*, for that matter; John Donne was known for his metaphors and elaborate conceits). Just take the first quatrain, in which the speaker presents no less than five metaphors in a row. The speaker compares the final moments of their life to:

- The "last scene" in a play;
- The "last mile" in a pilgrimage (or journey to a holy destination—here being heaven);
- The "last pace" (step) of a race;
- The "last inch" of the speaker's stride (perhaps in the aforementioned race);
- The last few seconds of the speaker's final "minute."

A play, a pilgrimage, a race—these are all things that have definite end points, like life itself. This rapid switching between metaphors might suggest that the speaker is feeling restless; they struggle to find the right metaphor for death because they're not actually entirely sure what death will mean for them.

Each metaphor itself is rich with meaning:

- The idea of life as a "play" implies that life on earth is a touch artificial, even insignificant, in comparison with the eternal afterlife of the soul when it returns to heaven.
- Pilgrimages are long, difficult journeys undertaken on foot to reach a holy destination. Life, then, is something arduous—and it's lived for the purpose of reuniting with God in heaven.
- Treating life as a race builds on the pilgrimage metaphor, with some added urgency. Races are brief; though the speaker has run lazily (perhaps suggesting they haven't grabbed life by the horns, so to speak), it's over "quickly." The "last pace," "last inch," and "latest point" fold into this race metaphor: the last few steps, the last little distance, the last few seconds.

Outside of this flurry of metaphor in the opening quatrain, the poem also uses personification. Line 5 depicts death as a "gluttonous" figure, waiting in the wings to "unjoint" the speaker's body from their soul. In other words, death wants to *consume* the speaker's physical being.

The speaker also personifies their own soul as *female*. This builds on femininity's stereotypical connotations of gentleness and grace. The soul is something purer, more delicate, and lovelier than the earthly body, this personification implies, which is implicitly brutish, violent, and coarse.

The speaker even personifies "sins," treating them like mischievous little living creatures that are "bred" in hell and tasked with dragging human beings down. All this figurative language emphasizes the *separation* between the speaker's body, soul, and sins.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-6
- Line 9
- Lines 11-12

REPETITION

Repetition appears in numerous forms throughout this sonnet. Most of it takes place in the first four lines:

> This is **my play's last scene**; here heavens appoint
> **My pilgrimage's last mile**; and **my race**,
> Idly, yet quickly run, hath this **last pace**,
> **My span's last inch, my minute's latest point**;

These lines repeat the formula "my + [metaphor relating to the end of the speaker's life]." This creates parallelism, which gives the quatrain an anxious, fretful tone—as if the speaker can't stop worrying about what's going to happen when they die.

The repeated "my" (which, when it occurs at the start of a phrase, is also an example of anaphora) emphasizes that the speaker is specifically worrying about their own fate (perhaps, as with Donne, there has been a fair share of sinning in the speaker's earthly life!). The poem also uses diacope through its repetition of "last," conveying the speaker's obsession with the final stretch of their life. The repetition here overlaps with asyndeton: there aren't any coordinating conjunctions between the clauses in line 5, which adds to the poem's urgency: the speaker's time is quickly running out.

Elsewhere, repetition evokes the dualist idea that the body and the soul are separate entities: "**My** body and **my** soul" (line 6). There is a neat division going on here, the body and the soul equal parts on either side of "and." This suggests the harmony of the body and soul during life and earth, but also emphasizes the separateness that comes with death.

The poem also uses repetition to build rhetorical power in its closing couplet. The diacope of "thus" and the parallelism/anaphora of "the world, the flesh, the devil" ensure the ending packs an extra punch. Note that there's more asyndeton here as well. The quickens the poem's final moments, suggesting the intensity of the speaker's wish to be free from earth and all its temptations.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "my play's last scene"
- **Line 2:** "My pilgrimage's last mile," "my race"
- **Line 3:** "last"
- **Line 4:** "My span's last inch," "my minute's latest point"
- **Line 6:** "My body," "my soul"
- **Line 13:** "thus"
- **Line 14:** "thus," "the world, the flesh, the devil"

VOCABULARY

Appoint (Line 1) - Decide/dictate.

Pilgrimage (Line 2) - A long journey on foot undertaken for a religious purpose.

Idly (Line 3) - Lazily.

Hath (Line 3) - Has.

Pace (Line 3) - Few steps.

Span (Line 4) - Distance or step.

Latest Point (Line 4) - Final moment in time.

Gluttonous (Line 5) - Possessing a greedy appetite.

Unjoint (Line 5) - Split apart.

A Space (Line 6) - A period of time/a void.

Ever-waking Part (Line 7) - The soul (the part of the speaker that will never die).

My Every Joint (Line 8) - Every part of my body.

Seat (Line 9) - Place.

Right (Line 11) - Rightful place.

Press Me (Line 12) - Force me to go.

Impute Me Righteous (Line 13) - Make me holy, virtuous, and worthy of God.

Purg'd (Line 13) - Cleansed.

The World (Line 14) - The physical, material realm.

The flesh (Line 14) - The physical body.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Holy Sonnet 6" is a Petrarchan sonnet, though it borrows elements from the English sonnet form too. Named after the Italian poet that popularized it, Petrarchan sonnets consist of two main sections: an opening octave and a closing sestet. The octave itself comprises two quatrains that each rhyme ABBA.

A Petrarchan sonnet features a shift in line 9, marking the transition between octave and sestet. This is called the sonnet's *volta*. Here, that change in direction is more of an acceleration of thought, the speaker picturing the "flight" of their soul up to heaven. There's a definite shift though, emphasized by the turn to a new rhyme scheme (from ABBA to CDCD). The division between octave and sestet might also echo the split between the body and the soul.

The sestet of Petrarchan sonnets is divided into two tercets, or three-line stanzas. But Donne actually breaks *this* sestet into a third quatrain (again, rhyming CDCD) and a concluding couplet (which makes it resemble an English sonnet). This couplet gives the poem a final dramatic push, the speaker pleading with God to be made pure, and praying to gain entry into the heavenly afterlife.

METER

"Holy Sonnet 6" uses the typical sonnet meter: iambic pentameter. Each line consists of five iambs, poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed (da-DUM) syllable pattern. In line 8, that meter rings out clear and true:

> Whose fear | al**read**-| y shakes | my ever-| y joint.

John Donne is known for playing a bit fast and loose with meter, however, and this poem is no exception. (Ben Jonson, a contemporary of Donne's, famously said that "Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging"—a tad extreme, perhaps!)

There are many variations on iambic pentameter throughout "Holy Sonnet 6." Even line 1 isn't metrically perfect: that first foot can be scanned as a trochee (the opposite of an iamb: DUM-da; "This is") or even a spondee (two stressed beats, "This is"); either way, this begins the poem with a burst of drama and intensity. There's another trochee at the top of line 3: "Idly."

And the poem's final two lines both close on unstressed beats:

> Impute | me right- | eous, thus | purg'd of | evil,
> For thus | I leave | the world, | the flesh, | the devil.

There are other variations here as well (line 15 has an extra syllable, for example). Tweaks like this prevent the poem from feeling overly stiff or predictable; they keep the rhythm fresh and exciting throughout.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "Holy Sonnet 6" runs:

> ABBAABBA CDCDEE

The rhyme scheme in the octave matches that of a Petrarchan sonnet perfectly. The sestet shakes things up: usually, a Petrarchan sonnet would end CDCDCD OR CDECDE; here, the speaker inserts a third quatrain, now with an alternating pattern (CDCD), and then ends with a succinct couplet. This makes the second half of the poem resemble an English or

Shakespearean sonnet.

This couplet adds a little extra rhetorical power to the sonnet's ending. It also links the "devil" directly with "evil"—two terrors the speaker hopes that death will help them escape.

Note, too, that a couple of the rhyming pairs are quite unusual: "appoint"/"point" (line 1 and 4) and "unjoint"/"joint" (lines 5 and 8). In each pair, the first word loses its first syllable; a division takes place. This subtly mirrors the separation of the soul from the body in death.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Holy Sonnet 6" is someone grappling with their imminent death, hoping it will bring about their soul's release from the pains of earthly life and grant them space in heaven. While it's not necessary to think of the speaker as Donne himself, the speaker certainly shares a lot of common ground with the poet. Donne had many religious worries throughout his life (and plenty of sinful behavior in his past that might, in his mind, have prevented his entry into heaven).

Note, too, that the speaker depicts their own soul as female. This is probably a Renaissance-era way to portray God as an all-powerful male figure, and the speaker as submissive and obedient (Donne does this more explicitly in "Holy Sonnet 14").

SETTING

"Holy Sonnet 6" takes place in the final moments of the speaker's life, though it's not clear if the speaker is literally on their deathbed or simply *imagining* what this moment will one day be like. Either way, the speaker envisions the "last mile" of the metaphorical "pilgrimage" of life. Their "race" is almost over, and too soon. Life on earth is brief, the poem implies, especially in comparison with the eternal, "ever-waking" life of the soul in heaven.

After death, the speaker imagines their soul flying up to meet God while their body remains buried in the earth and their sins plummet down to hell—where, the speaker says, those sins belong. These descriptions emphasize the separation between the speaker's soul, body, and transgressions. In death, the poem argues, everything, eventually, takes up its "right[ful]" place.

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 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.

This poem is one of the "Holy Sonnets," a sonnet sequence in which the speaker grapples with the pains and rewards of his faith (sometimes in strangely erotic terms). Though the speaker here confronts their own mortality, it was written well before Donne himself died.

Donne's mixture of wit, 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 A.S. Byatt.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John Donne was born during an era in which Protestantism had become the official state religion of Britain. English Catholics were often persecuted and killed. Donne himself was born into a Catholic family; his own brother went to prison for hiding a priest in his home. (The priest, not so fortunate, was tortured and executed.)

All this violence emerged from the schism between English Catholics and Protestants that began during the reign of Henry VIII, who died about 30 years before Donne was born. Wishing to divorce his first wife and marry a second—unacceptable under Catholicism—Henry split from the Pope and founded his own national Church of England (also known as the Anglican church). This break led to generations of conflict and bloodshed between Anglican Protestants and Catholic loyalists.

Donne himself would eventually renounce Catholicism in order to become an important Anglican clergyman under the patronage of King James I. While his surviving sermons suggest he had a sincere change of heart about his religion, his frequent use of Catholic language (for instance, in his love poem "The Canonization") hints that he didn't altogether abandon the beliefs of his youth.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Holy Sonnets — Check out "Holy Sonnet 6" alongside the other poems in the sequence. (http://triggs.djvu.org/djvu-editions.com/DONNE/SONNETS/Donne.HolySonnets.pdf)
- An Early Manuscript of Donne's Work — Take a look at an early handwritten manuscript of Donne's poems (including Holy Sonnet 6). (https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6568bda0-2f87-6a81-e040-e00a18064442#/?uuid=6568bda0-2f80-6a81-e040-e00a18064442)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Donne's life and work via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-donne)
- Donne and the Metaphysical Poets — Learn more about the 17th-century literary movement for which Donne is the poster boy. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/john-donne-and-metaphysical-poetry)
- Donne's Legacy — Watch a celebration of Donne filmed at St. Paul's Cathedral, the iconic London church of which he was the Dean. (https://youtu.be/TaPkcphHzmw)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Hymn to God the Father
- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- A Valediction: Of Weeping
- Holy Sonnet 10: Death, be not proud
- Holy Sonnet 14: Batter my heart, three-person'd God
- Holy Sonnet 7: At the round earth's imagined corners
- 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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