At the round earth's imagined corners (Holy

POEM TEXT

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
Your trumpets, angels; and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go:
All whom the flood did, and fire shall, o'erthrow,
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you whose eyes
Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe.
But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,
For, if above all these, my sins abound,
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace
When we are there. Here on this lowly ground,
Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
As if thou hadst sealed my pardon with thy blood.

SUMMARY

Angels, sound your trumpets at the four imaginary corners of the globe. Get up out of your graves, you countless dead souls, and return to your far-flung bodies. Everyone must get up: those who drowned in Noah's flood and those who will die in the fire at the end of the world; those who died from war, starvation, old age, illness, political persecution, heartbreak, execution, or plain old bad luck; and those who will be alive at the Last Judgment and meet God without having to die first. But wait: please let all these souls go on sleeping for a while, God, and give me time to grieve. If I'm a bigger sinner than all of these dead souls, then it'll be a little too late for me to ask for your forgiveness when Judgment Day rolls around! Right here, on this humble spot, please teach me how to be sorry and atone for my sins: for my repentance will be just as effective as if you'd signed my official pardon in your own blood.

THEMES

GOD'S JUDGMENT AND MERCY

"At the round earth's imagined corners" is one of Donne's Holy Sonnets, a sequence of poems in which Donne grappled with the mysteries of his Christian faith. In this poem, a speaker envisions the Day of Judgment: the day upon which all the dead will rise up again and be judged by God. The speaker himself, whose sins "abound," feels worried: he knows he had better get right with God before that day comes! If God can "teach [the speaker] how to repent," though, the speaker trusts that he'll be "pardon[ed]"—and in fact, his allusions to Christ's sacrificial "blood" suggest he knows that God will go to great lengths to forgive sinners. God's power and wrath are great, this poem suggests, but God's *mercy* is even greater.

The Day of Judgment, the speaker imagines, will be an awe-inspiring spectacle: everyone who has ever died, whether from "war, death, age, agues, tyrannies," or any number of calamities, will rise from the grave and be judged, making their way to Heaven or Hell. This judgment, the speaker solemnly observes, will be universal. Everyone who has ever lived and who will ever live will have to face God's justice.

With this fate in mind, the speaker asks God to hold off on the Last Judgment for a while: he's sinned so much that he needs time to repent properly. If Judgment Day were to roll around today, he feels, it would be a little "late to ask abundance of thy grace"—that is, to sincerely apologize for his sins and ask for mercy. He'd rather beg God to "teach [him] how to repent" now, while there's still plenty of time to atone for everything he's done wrong.

That all might sound rather grim, but the speaker finds comfort in the thought that, if he prays to God for help repenting, God will offer that help and "pardon" him. Indeed, he's certain that God will "seal [his] pardon with [God's] blood"—an allusion to the Crucifixion intended to remind readers that, in a Christian worldview, Christ has *already* sealed *everyone's* pardon in blood, dying to redeem humanity's sins.

God's judgment might be terrifying, the poem thus suggests, but God is also infinitely merciful, eager to help people to "repent" if they'll only ask. Christ's self-sacrifice offers the speaker consolation and courage, reminding him that God is ready to offer deep love and forgiveness to even the worst of sinners.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
Your trumpets, angels; and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go:

As the poem begins, the speaker appears to be stepping into God's shoes, taking charge of one of the most important events in the Christian imagination: the Last Judgment, the day when the dead will rise from their graves and face God's justice. In an apostrophe to the "angels," the speaker kicks off the big event, also known as Judgment Day or the Apocalypse:

> At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
> Your trumpets, angels; [...]

The speaker is alluding to lines in the biblical Book of Revelation, a description of the Apocalypse in which angels are said to stand at the four corners of the earth. He's also making a clever point about how and where these events are taking place.

The speaker knows the earth is "round," a globe. Still, he beckons the angels to stand at its "imagined corners," corners it doesn't have. This mixture of the real and the "imagined" suggests that, in some sense, he's trying to reach beyond the limits of the known, everyday world—to imagine an event that will take place in this world, but also transform it in incomprehensible ways.

Perhaps that explains why he's putting himself in God's shoes here, too: issuing decrees, commanding the trumpets to sound. Imagining the coming Apocalypse, he's in a sense *creating* it, playing out his own end-of-the-world scenario.

However, the language he uses suggests he feels boggled by the sheer scale of the task. Even in the role of a commanding God, he can't fathom *just how many* souls will return from the dead on the fateful day. God proverbially sees the fall of every sparrow and can enumerate every single hair on every person's head. The speaker, by contrast, can only speak of "numberless infinities / Of souls," more souls than he can fit into his imagination. The pluralization of those "infinities" drives the point home: not just an infinity of souls, but *infinite* infinities.

Still, the speaker does his best within his limits, calling those "infinities" to "arise, arise" (with an insistent diacope rather like the blare of those angelic trumpets) and return to their "scattered bodies."

This poem is one of Donne's "Holy Sonnets," a 19-poem sequence in which he examined the mysteries and struggles of his Christian faith. The sonnet shape is compact and fairly strict:

- It uses 14 lines of iambic pentameter (that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "Your trum- | pets, an- | gels, and | arise, | arise").
- It also uses a set rhyme scheme. Here, the speaker uses the scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet, which divides into an eight-line introductory octave rhymed ABBA ABBA and a six-line closing sestet, here rhymed CDCDEE (though Petrarchan sestets can use any pattern of C, D, and E rhymes).

The rigorous demands of this form suits the speaker's task: to face the terror, grandeur, and hope of Judgment Day, trying to imagine what this final cosmic holiday will really mean.

LINES 5-8

> *All whom the flood did, and fire shall, o'erthrow,*
> *All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,*
> *Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you whose eyes*
> *Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe.*

Imagining the Last Judgment, putting himself in the role of God, the speaker has made an apostrophe to the "numberless infinities" of dead souls, commanding them to return to their "scattered bodies." Listen to his intense, repetitive language as he calls on the dead:

> All whom the flood did, and fire shall, o'erthrow,
> All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
> Despair, law, chance hath slain, [...]

The anaphora on "all whom" here stresses that "all"—and so does the parallelism of "All whom the flood did, and fire shall, o'erthrow." Here, the speaker alludes to two biblical stories:

- The Flood (of Noah's Ark fame), which was said to have wiped the vast majority of sinful humanity off the face of the earth in the book of Genesis;
- And the "fire" in which later prophets (for instance, the Apostle Peter) preached the world would burn when God got around to ending things for good.

The repeated phrasings here, in other words, help the speaker to encompass *everyone*, from the first to the last human beings who will ever live.

Just as emphatic is the speaker's list of all the ways ordinary folks have died and will die between the Flood and the fires. Note the asyndeton here:

> All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
> Despair, law, chance hath slain,

Even this pretty comprehensive list of calamities, the lack of a neat conclusive "and" suggests, is just a sampler; there's no end of ways to die in this world. And *whatever* a person has died of, they're going to need to stand up again when the Apocalypse rolls around.

Take a moment to consider the specific causes of death the speaker lists here, too:

- The first four—"war, dearth, age, agues"—might allude to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,

figures from the book of Revelation.
- While they're not named directly in the source text, Christian tradition assigned these ominous riders the names War, Famine, Pestilence (or disease), and Death.
- When you know that "dearth" means starvation and "agues" (pronounced AY-gyews) means fevers—and consider that "age" evokes the plain old inevitability of death pretty neatly—these four causes of death feel especially apocalyptic.

The rest of the deaths the speaker names reach out into the political and the personal:

- Deaths by "tyrannies" and "law" suggest either being persecuted by unjust leaders (a major anxiety in Donne's 17th-century Europe) or executed for one's crimes (whether fairly or unfairly).
- "Despair," meanwhile, suggests a death caused by emotional pain: suicide, heartbreak.
- And good old "chance" is just bad luck: being in the wrong place at the wrong time, whacked by a falling log or mauled by a disgruntled bear.

With all this in mind, consider why the speaker might choose to summon up the dead by listing the *ways* they died, rather than who they were (men, women, children) or what they did (farmed, tinkered, ruled), as a medieval Danse Macabre might:

- This long list of deaths suggests a world full of pain and danger.
- By evoking all these varied ways to die, the speaker suggests that, when Judgment Day rolls around, an era of many troubles is about to end. In God's kingdom, all this death will be done for.

Of course, some people will never have to go through all the trouble of dying. The speaker also summons those who will get to skip to the good bit, meeting God face to face without ever having to "taste death's woe"—in other words, those who will still be alive on Judgment Day. This puts him in rather a thoughtful mood as he concludes the poem's octave.

LINES 9-12

But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,
For, if above all these, my sins abound,
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace
When we are there.

In a Petrarchan sonnet like this one, the movement between the opening octave and the closing sestet often introduces a *volta*—that is, a change in the speaker's thoughts or attitude. That's just what happens as the speaker begins a new apostrophe here at the beginning of the sestet:

But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,

No longer playing God, the speaker now turns to God in prayer, begging that God will hold off on the Apocalypse for just a little while longer. *Let the dead stay dead for now*, the speaker asks, *so that I have time to grieve over my sinfulness*.

There's an odd mixture of humility and grandiosity in both the speaker's tone and his request here:

- On the one hand: the speaker is putting in a genuinely contrite request: he wants to have time to humbly regret and atone for all the bad things he's done before Judgment Day rolls around, fearing he wouldn't have time to properly repent if today were the big day.
- On the other: begging God to put off the Apocalypse itself for just a while longer so he has time to repent for his sins, the speaker is asking for a serious cosmic favor!
- He also seems to see himself as a real paragon of sin, feeling that his sins might "abound" above those of *any* of the dead—that is, that he might be the biggest sinner *of all time*. That's a pretty hyperbolic idea.

Of course, the speaker isn't alone in claiming the most sinful sinfulness for himself. There's a grand old Christian tradition of doing just that, going all the way back to the Apostle Paul, who famously called himself the "chief" of all sinners.

To make such a claim is one way to observe that grand cosmic dramas play out inside people as well as outside them:

- Remember, the whole scene of the Apocalypse that began this poem was very much "imagined," inside the speaker's own mind! All those "infinities" of souls he summoned are also, in some way, part of him.
- To say that he is the worst sinner in the world might thus be a way of saying that he is the worst sinner in *his own* world. Trying to picture all the world's souls flying to be judged means he's also picturing the doomed Judases and Brutuses in his own personality, the worst and most sinful parts of himself.

The movement between the cosmic and the intimate here suggests that, in some way, every human being contains a little universe. And the speaker's sincere, direct apostrophe to God suggests that God takes each of these individual universes seriously. Remember, as those "numberless infinities" of souls suggested, God has an infinite capacity in this speaker's view: an infinite capacity to listen, and—as the poem's closing lines will suggest—an infinite capacity to forgive.

Even the sounds the speaker uses here reflect this idea:

> For, if above all these, my sins abound,
> 'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace

That alliterative /ab/ draws a direct line between words that describe maximal sin and maximal, bounteous forgiveness.

LINES 12-14

> *Here on this lowly ground,*
> *Teach me how to repent; for that's as good*
> *As if thou hadst sealed my pardon with thy blood.*

In the first few lines of the poem's sestet, the speaker reflected that he might not be prepared if Judgment Day rolled around tomorrow: he has an awful lot of sins to atone for. He therefore closes the poem with a fervent prayer. Here and now, on the "lowly ground" where he stands, he begs God:

> Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
> As if thou hadst sealed my pardon with thy blood.

The comforting irony here is that, in this speaker's Christian worldview, God already *has* "sealed [his] pardon with [God's] blood." This is an allusion to the Crucifixion, in which Christ's death on the cross atones for all humanity's sins and opens the gates to Heaven.

To "repent," in this framework, thus means to learn that God has *already* forgiven one's sins with that "blood"—that this forgiveness was present before the speaker even thought to ask for it.

Repentance, the speaker suggests, isn't just about "mourn[ing]" one's sinfulness, but accepting the almost incomprehensible idea that God's forgiveness simply doesn't work like humanity's. Just as God can meet every one of "numberless infinities" of souls with direct, one-to-one love and attention, God can forgive even the most sinful of sinners the instant those sinners understand there's something they need to be forgiven for.

In other words: it's not just the speaker's *repentance* "that's as good" as being pardoned; it's the speaker's request to be *taught* repentance that's "as good" as a pardon. Learning to repent, this awestruck poem suggests, means learning that God's goodness is far, far beyond humanity's. God doesn't need weeping and wailing and self-flagellation before God will offer forgiveness: God only needs to hear the prayer, "Teach me how to repent."

Judgment Day, this speaker thus suggests, won't simply be the day that people's good and bad deeds are tallied against each other and a stern, judge-like God sentences sinners to Hell. God's judgment is about whether people can both accept that they have a lot to repent for and trust that God will offer forgiveness the second they ask for it.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

This "Holy Sonnet" is built on a foundation of religious allusion; this is a poem about what it means to live with Christian faith.

The poem opens with a vision of Judgment Day: the end of the world as foretold in the surreal, prophetic Book of Revelation, which forms the last chapter of the Bible. On this day, Christian tradition holds, the souls of the dead will return to their "scattered bodies," everyone who's ever lived will rise from the grave, and God will judge them.

Besides alluding to Revelation's image of four angels—one for each "corner of the earth"—kicking off the festivities, the speaker evokes the sheer overwhelming *scale* of this day with a list of all the ways the dead have died: "All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies, / Despair, law, chance hath slain," he says, will get right back up again.

For that matter, everyone who the "flood did, and fire shall, o'erthrow" will be there—an allusion to traditional biblical stories about world-ending divine judgment:

- The "flood" here refers to Noah's flood, in which God drowns nearly everyone on earth in order to start afresh.
- Afterwards, God assures Noah (who, along with his family, is one of the few righteous survivors of the flood) that God will never destroy the world by water again, a pact known as the "covenant of the rainbow."
- Later Christian tradition holds that God's promise not to *drown* the world doesn't mean he won't *destroy* it again: next time, the Apostle Peter warns, he'll just use fire!
- These lines again stress the universality of the Last Judgment. Everyone who died in the ancient Flood will be there; so will everyone who's going to die in the coming apocalyptic fire.

The living—those who will "never taste death's woe"—will be there too, of course! That thought makes the speaker feel rather uneasy. If Judgment Day were to come today, he worries, he'd be among the crowd of the living, waiting to be judged, and he's not so sure he'd come off well. He feels his "sins abound"—that is, that he's got a big heap of sin to atone for. This is why, in his closing lines, he begs God to "teach [him] how to repent" for his bad behavior.

Really, though, he's only half worried about this: his faith assures him that God *wants* to forgive him. That comes through in his last allusion. When, speaking to God, he declares that learning to repent would be "as good / As if thou hadst sealed my pardon with thy blood," he's reminding readers that

Christianity claims God has already done exactly that. The reference here is to the Crucifixion, in which Christ—God in human form—sacrifices himself to atone for humanity's sins.

This act, the speaker believes, shows that God absolutely *longs* to forgive sinners, and is willing to go to great and terrifying lengths to do so! In merely asking for God's help with repentance, the speaker can trust that God forgives him already.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 5
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 13-14

APOSTROPHE

Nearly all of this poem is an apostrophe to one remote figure or another, suggesting the speaker feels a personal, passionate, and imaginative involvement in the cosmic drama he describes.

First, the speaker addresses the "angels" whose trumpet blasts will herald the end of the world, the Day of Judgment. In fact, he urges them on:

> At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
> Your trumpets, angels; [...]

In this moment the speaker steps into God's shoes, commanding that the ceremonies begin. Not only does he instruct the angels, he tells the "numberless infinities / Of souls" to "arise, arise / From death" and return to their "scattered bodies." He warns the living, too, to prepare to "behold God."

All these apostrophes suggest that the speaker is playing out an imagined Last Judgment in his own mind, rehearsing how it will be when that day arrives, putting himself through it step by step. In stage-directing this vision, he's also bracing himself; after all, he'll certainly be either one of the dead or one of the living on the big day.

In the apostrophes in the second stage of the poem, however, the speaker is no longer directing, but humbly begging. Here, he turns to God and asks: "let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space." In other words, he asks for God to do the opposite of what he just imagined, holding off on the Last Judgment for a while so that he has time to atone for his sins. In his final apostrophe, he reaches out for God's help: "Teach me how to repent," he prays, trusting that this prayer will land on merciful ears.

If the poem's first apostrophes were, in a sense, the speaker's way of directing his own imagination, these closing apostrophes are a genuine attempt to communicate with a God the speaker trusts.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-14

REPETITION

Repetitions help the speaker to paint a grand picture of the Last Judgement—and to humbly reach out to God.

In this sonnet's octave (that is, its first eight-line section), the speaker lays out a vision of the Apocalypse in thunderous, biblical-sounding language. As if stepping into God's shoes, he bids the dead to "arise"—or, actually, to "**arise, arise**," a moment of diacope that sounds like the echoing angelic trumpets he describes in line 2.

Nor does he stop there. As he commands the souls of the dead to return to their "scattered bodies" and clamber out of their graves, his anaphora emphasizes that he does mean *everyone*:

> **All whom** the flood did, and fire shall, o'erthrow,
> **All whom** war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
> Despair, law, chance hath slain, [...]

Notice that there's a little parallelism lurking in those lines, too:

> All whom the **flood did**, and **fire shall**, o'erthrow,

That mirrored grammar links God's past judgment to his future judgment:

- The "flood" here alludes to Noah's flood, in which, according to the Bible, God drowned the unrighteous (alarmingly, most of the world population).
- The "fire" is the prophetic warning that the next such destructive judgment will be hot, not wet!

The speaker uses a similar parallel construction when he prays that God will hold off on the Last Judgment for just a little while longer:

> But let **them sleep**, Lord, and **me mourn** a space,

Here, by grammatically linking his "mourn[ing]" to the dead's metaphorical "sleep," the speaker simultaneously makes a huge and a humble request. At the same time he humbly admits that he needs to "mourn" his own sins for a while before Judgment Day rolls around, he asks that God adjust the divine plan to accommodate him!

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "arise, arise"
- **Line 5:** "All whom," "flood did," "fire shall"
- **Line 6:** "All whom"
- **Line 9:** "them sleep," "me mourn"

ASYNDETON

In a long passage of asyndeton, the speaker evokes the overwhelming scale of Judgment Day, stressing that every soul that's ever lived will be there.

Taking the long view, the speaker seems to find it more suitable to address the world's dead by describing what they died of, not who they were. Rather than summoning, say, priests and farmers, lords and ladies, or even men, women, and children, the speaker calls up:

> All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
> Despair, law, chance hath slain, [...]

Presenting this list without a single conjoining "and," the speaker emphasizes just how *long* a list it is. There are an awful lot of ways to die, and even this fairly comprehensive list is just the tip of the deadly iceberg. (The language of this passage also does some neat scene-setting: "Agues," or fevers, and "tyrannies," the cruelty of rulers abusing their political power, feel like distinctly 17th-century anxieties—though of course people still die of both all the time.)

The drama of the uninterrupted list here also suggests God's awesome power to create and destroy. All the victims of these various calamities lived at God's will; all of them died at God's will; all of them will return at God's will.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies, / Despair, law, chance hath slain,"

VOCABULARY

Numberless (Line 3) - Countless.

O'erthrow (Line 5) - A contraction of "overthrow," meaning to conquer or defeat.

Dearth (Line 6) - Famine, starvation. ("Dearth" literally means "lack" or "scarcity.")

Agues (Line 6) - Fevers, diseases. (Pronounced AY-gyews.)

Hath, hadst (Line 7, Line 14) - Old-fashioned ways of saying "have" and "had," respectively.

Slain (Line 7) - Killed.

Mourn a space (Line 9) - That is, grieve for a little while.

Abound (Line 10) - That is, "my sins pile up abundantly."

'Tis late (Line 11) - That is, "it's too late."

Lowly (Line 12) - Humble, unworthy.

Repent (Line 13) - To feel remorse for one's sins and apologize for them.

Thou, thy (Line 14) - Old-fashioned ways of saying "you" and "your," respectively.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem is a sonnet—a "Holy Sonnet," in fact, one of a sequence of 19 poems on Christian faith that Donne wrote on his way to becoming a clergyman. Here's what that means formally:

- Like any typical sonnet, this one is built from 14 lines of iambic pentameter (lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in: "'Tis late | to ask | a bun- | dance of | thy grace").
- More specifically, this is a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet, which means it divides into two sections: an eight-line opening octave, rhymed ABBA ABBA, and a six-line closing sestet, rhymed CDCDEE in this case (some Petrarchan sonnets use a different pattern).

Poets often use this elegant form to distill a single intense theme or question, introducing a new twist at the turning point between the octave and sestet (also known as the *volta*, Italian for "turn"). This poem does precisely that:

- The octave is dedicated to a prophetic vision of the Christian Judgment Day.
- The sestet zooms in on the spot of "lowly ground" where the speaker stands now, begging God to "teach [him] how to repent" before that great and terrible day rolls around.

METER

Like the vast majority of sonnets, this one is written in iambic pentameter. That means each of its lines uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 11:

> 'Tis late | to ask | a bun- | dance of | thy grace

While this meter forms the poem's backbone, the speaker hardly ever uses a purely iambic line! Instead, all sorts of variations help his voice to sound urgent and passionate, even a little wild. For instance, listen to the rhythm of the first line:

At the | round earth's | ima- | gined cor- | ners, blow

Here, the speaker pushes the first two stresses into the poem's second foot, creating a spondee (an emphatic foot with a DUM-DUM rhythm)—and thus unrolls this vision of the whole "round earth" with a little extra metrical drama.

RHYME SCHEME

As a Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet, this poem uses a traditional rhyme scheme with a little flexibility built in. Here's how it goes:

ABBA ABBA CDCDEE

All Petrarchan sonnets start with that ABBA ABBA pattern (which marks off the octave, the first eight lines). The remaining six lines (or sestet) can use various mixtures of C, D, and E rhymes. Here, the speaker closes with a firm EE couplet, sealing the poem off as he imagines God "seal[ing his] pardon" in blood.

Note that, while a lot of the rhymes here sound slant to modern ears ("good" and "blood," for instance), they were likely perfect or close to it in Donne's 17th-century London accent.

The strict-yet-flexible shape of a Petrarchan sonnet is a good fit for one of Donne's "Holy Sonnets," in which a speaker both grapples with God's demands (and his own sense of sinfulness) and falls back on God's endless mercy.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker, like the speaker in all of Donne's "Holy Sonnets," can be interpreted as Donne himself. Always a passionately religious man, Donne wrote this sequence of poems about a decade after he made the momentous decision to convert from Catholicism to Protestantism, a big deal in 17th-century England. (More on that in the Context section.) Not long after, he would become a clergyman, devoting himself fully to his faith.

Here as in many of the Holy Sonnets, the speaker addresses God directly, begging to be taught, led, improved, or even destroyed and rebuilt from the ground up. Certain he must be one of the world's greatest sinners, he's also got a rock-solid faith that God can and will redeem him if he only asks.

SETTING

Picturing the Day of Judgment, this poem sweeps over the whole world from imagined corner to imagined corner, visiting every spot where a body lies waiting for the Resurrection. The last days of the world, the speaker imagines, will be grand, awe-inspiring, and terrifying: no soul will be able to evade God's justice.

But that day is yet to come—and after that prophetic vision of the future, the poem lands on the "lowly ground" where the speaker stands. The poem's movement from a universal to an everyday setting suggests that repentance is a matter of grand importance, but also the humble daily work of each individual soul.

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.

Like the vast majority of Donne's poetry, "At the round earth's imagined corners" didn't appear in print until several years after his death in 1633, when his collection *Poems* was posthumously published. 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).

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

The passionate faith Donne expresses in this poem emerges from an era of turmoil in European Christianity.

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

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Donne's life and work from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-donne)
- Donne and the Metaphysicals — 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)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the actor Richard Burton performing the poem. (https://youtu.be/e6DhDiPal_I)
- The Poem as a Song — Listen to a musical setting of the poem by composer Willametta Spencer. (https://youtu.be/zW_78FFZL2I)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Hymn to God the Father
- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- A Valediction: Of Weeping
- 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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