Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness

POEM TEXT

1 Since I am coming to that holy room,
2 Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
3 I shall be made thy music; as I come
4 I tune the instrument here at the door,
5 And what I must do then, think now before.

6 Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
7 Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
8 Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
9 That this is my south-west discovery,
10 *Per fretum febris*, by these straits to die,

11 I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;
12 For, though their currents yield return to none,
13 What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
14 In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
15 So death doth touch the resurrection.

16 Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are
17 The Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem?
18 Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar,
19 All straits, and none but straits, are ways to them,
20 Whether where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Shem.

21 We think that Paradise and Calvary,
22 Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place;
23 Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;
24 As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
25 May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.

26 So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord;
27 By these his thorns give me his other crown;
28 And, as to others' souls I preach'd thy word,
29 Be this my text, my sermon to mine own:
30 Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down.

SUMMARY

Since, God, I'm on my way to that sacred place where, alongside your choir of holy souls, I'll become part of your eternal song; since I'm definitely on my way, I'll start preparing myself to be one of your musical instruments, and get ready on earth for what's to come in heaven.

My doctors, through their love of their art, have become scholars of the earth and skies—and I, lying flat on my back in bed, become their map. On me, they point out the route I'm taking, south-west: by the pains of fever, I'll travel through the "straits" (that is, both the agonies and the water passages) of death.

But I'm overjoyed that, through these "straits," I can see the sunset of my life coming. Even if no one who goes through this journey ever comes back, what harm can death do me? Just as the furthest points west and east, on a flat map of the globe (which is what I am), turn out to be exactly the same spot, death turns out to be exactly the same thing as new life.

Is my home in the Pacific Ocean (on the map of my body)? Or in China? Or in Jerusalem? The Strait of Anyan, the Strait of Magellan, the Strait of Gibraltar—all straits, and nothing *but* straits, are passages from one place to another, whether they lead to Europe, Africa, or Asia, where Noah's sons Japhet, Cham, and Shem (respectively) set up home.

Traditionally, we say that the Garden of Eden and the spot where Christ died—the cross and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—were in exactly the same place. So look down on me, God, and see that I'm going through what both Adam and Christ went through. As I sweat in pain like Adam did, allow Christ's sacrificial blood to wrap around my very soul.

So please, God, admit me into heaven draped in Christ's royal purple blood. Since I suffer like he did under a crown of thorns, please give me his crown of victory and resurrection, too. And since I preached your truths to other people, let me preach to myself now, saying: in order to raise people up, God first has to knock them down.

THEMES

DEATH AS A JOURNEY TOWARD HEAVEN

In "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness," a dying man sees his own approaching death as a new beginning rather than a horrible end. Leaning on his Christian faith, the speaker imagines his feverish body as a map to a new world and trusts that his illness is just a difficult journey toward God. Death is not a horror, to this speaker, but an adventure and even something to look forward to; the path might be rough, but the destination is heaven itself.

Lying in his sickbed, the poem's speaker knows he's doomed: a whole host of "physicians" (or doctors) tell him that he's going to die "*per fretum febris*"—in other words, in the pains and

struggles of an agonizing fever. But rather than feeling frightened, sad, or angry, the speaker is calm and even excited: he describes himself "tun[ing] the instrument" of his own soul outside the "door" of heaven, like a performer getting ready to go onstage. Since he believes he'll become part of God's "eternal music" when he dies, he feels more as if he's preparing to begin a new life than to say goodbye to the one he's known.

Because the speaker sees death as merely stepping through a "door" into a new and better place, he can treat even his terrible illness itself as a journey toward that door. The feverish "straits" (or sufferings, as in "dire straits") he's going through now, he declares, are also the "straits" (or water passages, as in "the strait of Gibraltar") through which he'll sail to heaven. He may have to suffer, but since he believes he'll join a loving God when he dies, he can treat his pain as a noble (and even rather exciting) adventure, a voyage of discovery.

The speaker's sick body thus becomes, in his imagination, a "map" of the globe: just as the furthest points "West" and "East" on a map of the world turn out to be the same spot, "death doth touch the resurrection." In other words, the speaker's Christianity means he can treat life's exit door as heaven's entrance: he believes he'll follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who died and was resurrected. To this speaker, then, death and rebirth into eternal life are exactly the same thing, and mortal illness is only a journey to the gates of heaven.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

SUFFERING AND THE CONSOLATIONS OF FAITH

Christian faith, this poem argues, means learning to trust that pain and suffering aren't inexplicable cruelties, but tools God uses to create glory and beauty. As the poem's speaker lies on his deathbed, he consoles himself with the thought that, in the Christian tradition, death and loss have always been the prelude to rebirth and glory. God, this poem says, always transforms pain and death into beauty and new life—and faith in God can thus give people the strength to endure agonies.

Suffering through the last stages of a fatal fever, the speaker is in terrible pain. Lying "flat on this bed," he can't even sit up—and his doctors assure him that it's "by these straits" (that is, through these sufferings) that he's going to "die." Everything seems pretty bleak: there's no earthly hope that the speaker will survive, and as he waits to die he's going to have an awful time of it.

But even under these conditions, the speaker is able to take comfort in his faith. In the Christian story, the poem reflects, the journey through pain to glory is an eternal and universal one, part of God's mysterious but loving plan for the world. When the speaker observes that "Christ's cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one place," he both draws on a longstanding Christian tradition that Jerusalem was built where the Garden of Eden once stood and argues that God has *always* worked by transforming suffering into glory. Adam's exile from Eden paves the way for Christ to come and redeem the world; Christ's crucifixion paves the way for Christ's resurrection, and for the resurrection of his followers.

The speaker thus concludes that, mysterious though this might seem, people *have* to suffer and die in order to experience the glory of rebirth and the joy of heaven. By enduring his suffering, the speaker follows in Christ's footsteps, wearing his god's "thorns" (an allusion to the Crown of Thorns, the painful, mocking crown Christ was forced to wear on the day of his execution) so that he can one day wear his "other crown" of eternal life.

The Christian faithful, this poem thus argues, must learn to believe that "Therefore that he may raise, the lord throws down": in other words, suffering and death are God's path toward miraculous beauty and eternal bliss. That idea is itself transformative, helping the speaker turn his illness from an awful prison into a sacred journey.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Since I am coming to that holy room,
Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy music;

"Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness" starts off, appropriately enough for a hymn, with images of music. As the poem's speaker lies on his deathbed, he prepares himself to join the choirs of heaven—but not in quite the way that readers might imagine.

First off, the heaven this speaker imagines isn't spectacular: it's not a palace, a temple, or a kingdom in the clouds. Rather, it's a "holy room" he's making his way toward—a simple chapel, maybe. It's what happens inside that chapel that matters.

Listen to the way the speaker unveils his idea of heaven in lines 2-3:

> Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
> I shall be made thy music; [...]

Line 2 here might encourage first-time readers to get ready for

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an image of singing *with* a heavenly choir: think harps, wings, haloes, all the clichés about what heaven might be like. Instead, the speaker casually slides into the idea that he "shall be made thy music."

In this speaker's vision of heaven, then, the souls of the dead are transformed into song. Each person becomes an interwoven part of something vast: many individual notes form one eternal symphony. If that's so, God is the composer and the conductor of this divine music.

Looking back, readers will observe that this whole first stanza is an apostrophe to God—a God whom the speaker refers to not with a formal "My God" or "Dear Lord," but as a simple "thee," as if God were a friend sitting quietly at the speaker's bedside. (This quiet stands out next to the poem's title, with its intense cry to "God My God"—the kind of cry one might make from the depths of terrible pain.)

Everything in these first lines thus helps to create a mood of mingled intimacy and awe. God is right there next to the speaker—and God is the great composer of the music of heaven. Heaven is a simple "holy room"—and heaven is a place of miraculous, mysterious, beautiful transformation.

This first surprising image of a heavenly metamorphosis will be the first of many in a poem that's all about transformation. Endings will transform into beginnings, pain into glory, and a sickbed into a sailing boat.

LINES 3-5

as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I must do then, think now before.

In the poem's first lines, the speaker imagined what will happen after his death: he won't merely sing with the other souls, but be transformed into God's own music.

Such transformations, though, are not effortless. The speaker may be looking forward to heaven, but as the poem's title reminds readers, he's still in the grips of a fatal "sickness" now. That means he has time to prepare for what's to come. Listen to his metaphor:

> [...] as I come
> I tune the instrument here at the door,
> And what I must do then, think now before.

The "instrument" here is the speaker himself: his body and soul. Like a nervous performer about to go onstage, he sits just outside the door of heaven, preparing his whole being to take its place in God's symphony. The rest of this "hymn" can thus be read as a rehearsal, an attempt at holy music in the midst of earthly pain.

The form the speaker uses for his hymn, like his image of being made into music, mingles simplicity and surprise:

- The poem's stanzas—five-line cinquains—are written in unobtrusive, conversational iambic pentameter—that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm ("And **what** | I **must** | do **then,** | think **now** | be**fore**").
- The rhyme scheme, meanwhile, has a twist in its tail. The first four lines run ABAB (*room* / *evermore* / *come* / *door*, in the first stanza). But rather than sticking to this alternating pattern and closing out with another A rhyme, the stanzas close with a B rhyme, forming a couplet (*door* / *before*).

This mixture of the deceptively simple and the unpredictable fits right in with this speaker's surprising, immediate vision of heaven.

LINES 6-10

Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
That this is my south-west discovery,

Per fretum febris
, by these straits to die,

The poem's first stanza followed the speaker to the gates of heaven. But as the speaker's earthly "hymn"—his rehearsal for his heavenly performance—begins in earnest, he comes back to earth with a bump. His imagination might carry him toward a "holy room," but his body is "flat on this bed" in a sickroom, suffering from a deathly fever.

Ill the speaker might be, but he still has enough of his wits about him to develop a conceit, an elaborate extended metaphor. His "physicians," he says, have become "cosmographers," scholars of the earth and the heavens—and he, flat on his back, unable to sit up, is "their map."

That body-map, the worried physicians point out, shows a one-way route for the speaker, a "south-west discovery" that bodes ill:

- "South," the direction traditionally associated with heat, suggests the speaker's fever.
- "West," the direction where the sun sets, symbolizes death.

In other words, reading the speaker's bodily "map," the doctors can only see a passage to the end for him. He will die "*per fretum febris*": "in the pains of fever," an agonizing way to go.

But notice how the speaker's language here suggests this isn't so grim a fate as one might imagine. To describe one's coming feverish death as a "south-west discovery" makes an ending sound a lot like a beginning: a passage to a new world, like the great exploratory voyages of Donne's own era.

The speaker makes that point even clearer with a pun:

> [...] this is my south-west discovery,
> *Per fretum febris*, by these straits to die,

"Straits" can mean "pains and difficulties." But it can also mean "narrow ocean passages"—like the Strait of Gibraltar. To discover a "strait," in this sense, is to find a new gateway that might open up undreamed landscapes.

Through this pun, the speaker translates his pain into a passageway. His suffering becomes, not a gruesome ending, but a journey.

Take a moment here to think about this speaker's tone. From what he describes, he's "flat on this bed," too ill even to sit up. Somehow, he's still able to find this predicament funny (just imagine all those solemn "cosmographers" bustling around the bed); like Mercutio, he's punning his way right into the grave.

Puns, though, might be more than jokes to this speaker. A pun, after all, is a kind of metamorphosis: it's through a pun that the speaker can find *hope* in his coming death, transforming an experience that lays him out "flat" and helpless into a voyage of discovery. For that matter, the speaker himself hopes to make like a pun and turn from one thing (a suffering mortal body) into another (an "instrument" in God's glorious music).

LINES 11-15

I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;
For, though their currents yield return to none,
What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the resurrection.

Rather enjoying his own pun, the speaker develops it further as the third stanza begins—and with it, his linked conceits of maps and voyages. In the previous stanza, his body was a map; now, he seems to have become an explorer in the landscape that map represents, sailing through the punny "straits" of his illness.

His "cosmographer" doctors have warned him that he's sailing "West," toward the sunset of his life. But that doesn't seem to bother him one bit. In fact, he takes "joy" in the sight of the West through his straits. Listen to his rhetorical question here:

> For, though their currents yield return to none,
> What shall my West hurt me? [...]

The question answers itself: the symbolic West of death can only do him good, the speaker declares. He bases his reasoning on yet another image of strange transformation—and on the elegant logic of his conceit.

On any flat map of the globe, he points out, the furthest points "West and East" represent exactly the same spot. If he's a map, his "West"—his death—must therefore be exactly the same thing as his "East"—the direction of sunrise, the symbolic compass point of new life and rebirth. Or, to put it as neatly as he does, "death doth touch the resurrection." (Note that, in Donne's time, "resurrection" would have been pronounced with five whole syllables: res-sur-RECK-see-awn.)

In this speaker's view, the "door" to heaven he was sitting outside in line 4 swings in two directions: life's exit door is exactly the same thing as heaven's entrance. The speaker's Christian faith, in other words, allows him to believe that leaving earthly life behind is just stepping into another room, and into a better room for that matter.

Once again, wordplay helps the poem's language to mirror the speaker's faith. Consider this repetition in the speaker's image of himself as a map:

> [...] As West and East
> In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,

The word "one," oddly enough, means two things here. The first "one" means "one of": the speaker is one map among many, an individual. The second "one" means "united with": "West and East" are the same thing.

The word "one," then, means both something separate and something unified. In other words, it works a whole lot like the divine "music" of the first stanza, in which each soul is at once itself and part of a greater whole.

When the speaker said he intended to "tune the instrument" of his body and soul through this hymn, he seems to have meant it seriously. This stanza reflects the paradoxical transformations of heaven—death into life, endings into beginnings, one into many, many into one—in every cranny of its language.

LINES 16-20

Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are
The Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem?
Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar,
All straits, and none but straits, are ways to them,
Whether where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Shem.

Having declared his faith that "death doth touch the resurrection," the speaker begins his next stanza with a series of reflective rhetorical questions:

> Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are
> The Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem?

These questions imply more than one answer:

- On the one hand, the speaker might be suggesting that these wild, rich, strange, and holy places stand for the unknown joys of heaven. (Remember, in Donne's time the "Pacific Sea" and the "Eastern riches" of Asia were relatively new to Europeans.)

- On the other, perhaps the point is that none of these places, however splendid, is the speaker's true heavenly "home." If his body is a map to death, then it doesn't point to any of these spots: he's going off the edge of the known world.

If the speaker is to find his true home, he reiterates, he'll have to pass through "straits." Listen to the way he uses repetition to nudge readers in the ribs here:

> Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar,
> All **straits**, and none but **straits**, are ways to them,

This moment of diacope reinforces the old pun on "straits," making an explicit connection between the water straits of "Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar" and the painful journey to the world beyond. But it also makes a sad, sober point: "straits" are the *only* way that one can voyage from place to place.

In other words, the passageways of pain and illness are somehow necessary, in this speaker's view. There's no getting to heaven without them; suffering is all part of the divine journey.

By mapping his illness onto the known world, then, the speaker doesn't merely console himself with hopeful images of exploration. He also suggests that his predicament is global. "Straits" are part of getting from one place to another for everyone, everywhere.

He makes that point even clearer with a biblical allusion. When he declares that pain is the necessary prelude to transformation, he says that this is true "whether where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Shem." The three sons of Noah (of Ark fame), Japhet, Cham, and Shem were said to have repopulated the globe after the Great Flood: Japhet went to Europe, Cham to Africa, and Shem to Asia.

This line thus suggests that the speaker's predicament is a human predicament, one that every person in every land will one day face. What's more, it suggests that this has *always* been the same, since the beginning of history.

LINES 21-22

We think that Paradise and Calvary,
Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place;

The speaker begins the fifth stanza philosophically, alluding to a bit of general knowledge from medieval and Renaissance theology:

> We think that Paradise and Calvary,
> Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place;

Christians indeed once believed that the Garden of Eden and the hill where Christ died stood in roughly the same spot. Whether or not one treats these locations as real geographical ones, they're certainly parallel in the Christian imagination.

When the speaker observes that "Christ's cross and Adam's tree" stood in exactly the same place, he's referring not just to their coordinates on a map, but to the place they hold in Christian thought:

- "Adam's tree" is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: the tree in Eden upon which the forbidden fruit grew. In disobeying God and eating the fruit of this tree, Adam and Eve brought sin—that is, all the evils that come from turning away from God and God's will—into the world.
- "Christ's cross," on the other hand, was the "tree" through which that sin was *erased*. As the Christian story has it, Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross atoned for all of humanity's sins and opened the gates to heaven.

In this image, then, "Christ's cross" is "Adam's tree" in reverse, a second "tree" that undoes all the trouble the first caused.

Once again, the speaker's language reflects his philosophy. Take another look at the phrasing of these lines:

> We think that **Paradise and Calvary**,
> **Christ's cross and Adam's tree**, stood in one place;

The parallelism here underscores the theological parallel between the first man and the Son of Man. Yet again, the poem points readers toward ideas of *transformation* and *redemption*: this stanza will look at the ways in which sin can pave the way for the sacred, evil for good.

LINES 23-25

Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;
As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.

Having alluded to the idea that "Christ's cross and Adam's tree" mirror each other (and that the former redeems the latter), the speaker introduces yet another parallel, praying: "Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me." Compared to the gentleness of the apostrophe of the first stanza, the tone of this prayer feels solemn and formal; the speaker seems to feel a special urgency as he reflects on how he fits into the Christian story.

Once more, formal parallelism helps him to draw out a *thematic* parallel between himself, Adam, and Christ:

> **As the first Adam's sweat** surrounds my face,
> **May the last Adam's blood** my soul embrace.

The speaker is talking about more than his own predicament:

- The "first Adam's sweat" here evokes the sweat of

his fever—but also the "sweat" of guilt breaking out on the apple-eater's brow, the shamefaced awareness of sin.
- The "last Adam's blood," meanwhile, is Christ's—the sacrificial blood that washes that sin away.
- In both cases, the speaker refers to ideas he feels are universal: everyone shares in Adam's sin, and everyone can be redeemed by Christ's blood.

Tuning his soul for heaven, then, the speaker sees himself as part of a cosmic story. Everyone who suffers, suffers like Adam. Everyone who's redeemed is redeemed through Christ.

Once more, there's an idea of transformation at play here. As Adam's sweat meets its match in Christ's blood, Adam's sin prepares the way for Christ's redemption. Perhaps, in line with the earlier idea that "none but straits" lead to glory, the poem even suggests that Adam's transgression was ultimately a good thing, a *felix culpa* (or "fortunate fall"): it was the "illness" that meant Christ came to the world!

LINES 26-27

So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord;
By these his thorns give me his other crown;

The final stanza, like the last movement of a symphony, brings all the speaker's themes together in one place. Looking back over the poem, readers can trace a few developing threads of thought: death and rebirth are one and the same, pain and struggle lead to glory and discovery, many things can become one, one thing can be many. For this speaker, the knot that ties all these strands together is Christ, who embodies every one of these truths through his birth, death, and resurrection.

The speaker thus reaches out to God in a final passage of prayer. Listen to his metaphors:

So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord;
By these his thorns give me his other crown;

That "purple" is a synecdoche for the "last Adam's blood" from the previous stanza (Renaissance blood was often said to be purple). But purple is also the color of royalty: Christ's sacrificial blood becomes a kingly robe here. Similarly, the "thorns" the speaker alludes to in line 27 are the mocking Crown of Thorns Christ was forced to wear at his crucifixion—and his metaphorical "other crown" is his resurrection, his triumphant coronation as the King of Heaven.

All of these images suggest that the speaker has found meaning in his suffering through the meaning of Christ's suffering. God himself, the poem reflects, had to go through agony in order to open heaven for humanity. Following that pattern, the speaker can treat his "straits" as a holy journey, not a meaningless torment.

LINES 28-30

And, as to others' souls I preach'd thy word,
Be this my text, my sermon to mine own:
Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down.

As the speaker closes his final prayer, he reveals something about himself: before his illness, he was a preacher. Perhaps that won't come as such a surprise to readers who know anything about John Donne, who served as the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London and was famous for his eloquent sermons.

Even without that biographical context, readers might now see the rest of this poem, with its illuminating conceits and its slow build toward a Christian reading of pain and transformation, in a new light. This "hymn," as the speaker says, has become very like a "sermon" he's preaching to himself—or, as he puts it, to his own "soul," the "instrument" he's tuning up for heaven.

Finally, then, the speaker distills the journey of the whole poem into a one-line "text":

Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down.

On its own, stated flat out like that, this idea might seem almost nonsensical: why would God *bother* to go through throwing people down only to "raise" them again? But this poem's images of globes and journeys suggest that there's something more mystical going on here. In this poem of transformations, to go "West" is to reach the "East": being thrown down by pain and death, mysteriously, is the *exact same thing* as being raised to the glory of heaven.

God, this poem suggests, doesn't work in straight lines, but in eternal circles—and the human body, the heavens, and the globe of the world itself are all maps leading back toward their creator, if one knows how to read them.

SYMBOLS

CARDINAL DIRECTIONS

The poem's references to cardinal directions carry all sorts of symbolic meanings:

- When the speaker's doctors warn him he's sailing "south-west," they allude to the south's symbolic association with heat (a reference to the speaker's fatal fever) and to the west's association with death (since west is the direction where the sun sets).
- But the speaker isn't disturbed by either of these thoughts: west, to him, might as well be east (the direction of the sunrise, symbolically associated with new life and rebirth), since the furthest points west and east on any "flat map" of the globe are

actually the same spot!

Direction symbolism thus helps the speaker to explore the idea that death and rebirth are one and the same.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "this is my south-west discovery"
- **Lines 11-15:** "I joy, that in these straits, I see my West; / For, though their currents yield return to none, / What shall my West hurt me? As West and East / In all flat maps (and I am one) are one, / So death doth touch the resurrection."

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

Donne often built his poems like cathedrals, using conceits (or elaborate extended metaphors) as solid pillars to support a soaring philosophy. Here, three linked conceits—death as a journey, pain as a passageway, and the body as a map—help the speaker to express his faith in a God who transforms suffering into glory.

As the speaker lies on his deathbed with "physicians" bustling around him, he feels as if he's become a "map"—and that map provides directions only to the afterlife. Like "cosmographers" (that is, people who study and map the earth and sky), the speaker's doctors point out his "south-west discovery" on his failing body:

- "South" is a direction traditionally associated with heat: the speaker has a terrible fever.
- "West" is the symbolic direction of death: to go west is to travel toward the sunset, the end of life.

In other words, the speaker's symptoms mark out a one-way street to the undiscovered country of death. It won't be an easy death, either. The speaker's doctors warn him he'll die "*per fretum febris*"—"through the pains of fever," an agonizing way to go. But through a pun, the speaker transforms these dire "straits" (difficulties and sufferings) into the "straits" (narrow sea passages) through which he'll journey to a new world. Traveling through pain, he'll make a new discovery on his body-map:

- His physicians may only see that his journey points "West" to death. But the speaker knows that, on a "flat map" of a "globe," the furthest points "West" and "East" are actually exactly the same spot.
- When he dies, then, he'll also be reborn into his eternal life in heaven: just as west and east touch on a a map, "death doth touch the resurrection."

To pull all the speaker's conceits together into the outline of his argument, then:

- The body is a map that points the way toward everyone's inevitable death.
- The pain and suffering of dying (and of life in general, for that matter!) are the "straits" through which people must travel to *reach* that death.
- Consolingly, though, death turns out to be only the doorway to eternal life.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-20:** "Whilst my physicians by their love are grown / Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie / Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown / That this is my south-west discovery, / / Per fretum febris / , by these straits to die, / I joy, that in these straits, I see my West; / For, though their currents yield return to none, / What shall my West hurt me? As West and East / In all flat maps (and I am one) are one, / So death doth touch the resurrection. / Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are / The Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem? / Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar, / All straits, and none but straits, are ways to them, / Whether where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Shem."

PUN

A pun becomes an important part of this poem's argument. In the second stanza, the speaker's doctors tell him the grim facts. He's:

> *Per fretum febris*, by these **straits** to die,

In other words, he's going to die in the "straits" (or sufferings) of fever.

The speaker treats this diagnosis as peculiarly good news—and a pun helps him to do so. He chooses to treat the feverish "straits" of an illness as a different kind of "straits": the word can also mean "narrow sea passages," channels that connect one bigger body of water to another. Such passages might be difficult to navigate, but they also suggest adventure, discovery, and new worlds.

When the speaker rejoices that "in these straits, I see my West," he's thus suggesting that his westerly journey (a common symbol of death, since the sun sets in the west) won't just carry him out of this life, but into a new one in heaven. "All straits, and none but straits," he points out, take people to new places: in other words, every pain comes with change, and no change comes without pain.

This significant pun thus helps the speaker to imagine suffering as a journey, not a prison. It also suggests that wit can offer

genuine consolation and wisdom: this speaker's way with words also helps him to carve a way through his illness.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "Per fretum febris / , by these straits to die, / I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;"
- **Line 19:** "All straits, and none but straits, are ways to them,"

METAPHOR

Smaller metaphors enrich the poem's conceits of death as a journey and the body as a map, helping to build a complex and beautiful picture of the speaker's faith.

Some of the poem's most surprising metaphors appear in the first stanza. Here, the speaker begins by calling heaven itself "that holy room"—an image that might seem strangely modest! Heaven, here, isn't a palace or a kingdom; it's more intimate than that.

Something even more surprising happens in the next lines. Here, the speaker *seems* to be building up to a relatively conventional image of singing with a "choir of saints" after he dies—the same idea that gave birth to endless cartoons of angels with haloes and harps. But listen to what he does with this image instead:

> Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
> I shall be made thy music [...]

The "saints," in other words, don't just sing: they *become* music. This mysterious metaphor suggests that, in death, the speaker will be transformed, made into part of something vast, beautiful, purposeful, and—importantly—harmonious. The speaker's illness might look purely punishing on earth, this metaphor suggests, but in heaven, all that ugliness will be transformed: death will fit even the speaker's pain into a joyful divine composition.

When the speaker "tune[s] his instrument" at death's "door," then, he's preparing himself, body and soul, to become a harmony line in this awe-inspiring music. To do so, he'll have to reflect on the ways in which God might transform the discords of earthly life—pain, illness, and general suffering—into beauty.

Luckily for him, his religion gives him a clear example: Christ's suffering and death on the cross, which pave the way for a miraculous resurrection. Praying to follow in Christ's footsteps, the speaker uses another set of vivid metaphors:

> So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord;
> By these his thorns give me his other crown;

Both of these images refer to Christian beliefs about Jesus's suffering and death.

In line 26:

- The "purple" the speaker asks to be "wrapp'd" in here is a synecdoche for Christ's sacrificial blood, which Christians believe washes away sin. It also suggests both Christ's pain and his ultimate victory: purple was the traditional color of royalty, reflecting Christ's role as the "king" of heaven.
- If the speaker wants to be "wrapp'd" in Christ's "purple," then, he wants his pain to be transformed into glorious new life—and for his sins to be forgiven along the way.

And in line 27:

- The "thorns" are an allusion to the Crown of Thorns, the mocking crown Christ was forced to wear at the Crucifixion. They're also a metaphor for the speaker's feverish pain.
- And the "other crown" is again an image of victory over death and ascent into heaven: it represents Christ's resurrection and role as King of Heaven.
- These metaphors thus double down on the message of the previous line: the speaker wants God to transform his suffering into meaning, beauty, and immortality, just as Christ's suffering was transformed.

Taken all together, these metaphors work like grace notes, deepening the speaker's central conceit of illness and death as nothing but a journey toward heaven. Stepping into heaven here might be as ordinary as stepping into another "room"—but it's also transformative and miraculous, turning horror into glory.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "that holy room"
- **Line 3:** "I shall be made thy music"
- **Line 4:** " I tune the instrument here at the door,"
- **Line 26:** "in his purple wrapp'd"
- **Line 27:** "his other crown"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker's apostrophes to God help the poem build up to a final, fervent prayer.

In the first stanza, the speaker addresses God in a voice that's at once reverent and casual. Listen to how easily he reaches out in these lines:

> Since I am coming to that holy room,
> Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
> I shall be made thy music; [...]

Notice how the speaker begins these lines: not with a formal "O Lord" or "Dear God," but with a discussion of plans, as if "coming to that holy room" (that is, heaven itself) and mysteriously transforming into God's "music" were just an upcoming holiday. God is only a "thee" here, never explicitly named. It seems that this speaker doesn't feel as if he has to make a big deal about speaking to God, or even try to get God's attention: he can launch straight into a conversation as if God had been listening to him all along. This first apostrophe thus feels at once intimate and grand.

Later in the poem, though, the speaker's prayer gets more passionate and more formal. Listen to the difference in his voice when he asks God to see him as both the first Adam (of Garden of Eden fame) and the second Adam (Jesus, who was often spoken of as a second Adam who came along to fix what the first Adam broke):

> Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;

Asking God to "Look" here, the speaker makes a more traditional prayer, asking that his suffering should be recognized. Perhaps this request suggests it's not easy to hang onto one of the ideas that animate this poem: that God always mysteriously transforms suffering into glory. Asking God to "Look," the speaker also reminds himself that, in his faith, an all-seeing God is always looking.

There's a similar mood in the final stanza, when the speaker fervently prays:

> So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord;
> By these his thorns give me his other crown;

Once again, the speaker is asking God to do what he believes God always does: to make suffering into a path toward beauty, as in the story of Jesus's death and resurrection (which the speaker alludes to here in the image of exchanging a crown of thorns for the crown of heavenly life).

The poem's apostrophes thus evoke the speaker's deep faith in a loving, ever-present God—and suggest that such faith can also involve asking for help when it's hard to trust that things will work out okay.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "I shall be made thy music"
- **Lines 23-25:** "Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me; / As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face, / May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace."
- **Lines 26-30:** "So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord; / By these his thorns give me his other crown; / And, as to others' souls I preach'd thy word, / Be this my text, my sermon to mine own: / Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down."

ALLUSION

The speaker's allusions ground this poem in his faith and mark him out as a man of his time.

Consider these words, for instance:

> We think that Paradise and Calvary,
> Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place;

Here, the speaker refers to a common medieval and Renaissance belief: that the Garden of Eden and the hill where Christ was crucified not only stood in the same spot, but mirrored each other spiritually. Adam's choice to eat the forbidden fruit introduces sin into the world; Christ's choice to die on the cross washes that sin away.

For that reason, as the speaker points out a moment later, Christ was sometimes referred to as a second Adam, a new "first man" who came to start the world afresh. When the speaker asks God to see "both Adams met" in him, he's asking for mercy and forgiveness. The two Adams embody his predicament and his hopes:

- The "first Adam's sweat" that breaks out on the speaker's face suggests the pain, suffering, and illness that Adam's first disobedience brought into the world: there was no such thing as the speaker's fever (or any disease at all) in the Garden of Eden!
- That sweat might also evoke the speaker's guilt over his own sins.
- The "last Adam's blood," meanwhile, is the blood of Christ's self-sacrifice, which the speaker hopes will wash him clean.

Thinking of Christ's sacrifice also allows the speaker to find meaning in his suffering. Take a look at what he says in lines 26-27:

> So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord;
> By these his thorns give me his other crown;

Imagining being "wrapp'd" in the "purple" of Christ's blood, the speaker also paints a picture of that blood as a royal robe. Similarly, the idea of "thorns" turning to an "other crown" alludes to the Christian belief that Christ's tormenting "crown of thorns" (and his other sufferings on the cross) are just a prelude to his resurrection and his coronation as the King of Heaven.

In other words, the speaker hopes to follow in Christ's footsteps: enduring earthly pain and death, he trusts that glory and resurrection will follow. "Death," as he puts it, "doth touch

the resurrection": the end of earthly life and its sufferings is the beginning of heavenly life and its joys.

He also expresses that belief through his metaphors of exploration—metaphors that allude to the real-life voyages of Donne's time:

- Donne lived toward the end of a period sometimes known as the Age of Exploration, an era during which European seafarers voyaged to (and colonized) the Americas, Africa, and Asia. The discovery of new "straits" like the ones the speaker so often alludes to here—sea passages that allowed for faster ocean travel—meant that European adventurers could discover what they saw as whole new worlds.
- The punny "straits" (or sufferings) of fever the speaker goes through thus become the straits through which he can sail to the "new world" of heaven.

Note, too, that the speaker's geographical and biblical worlds overlap! When he mentions the lands "where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Shem," he's alluding to the belief that Noah's three sons each repopulated their own part of the world after the great Flood: Japhet was associated with Europe, Cham Africa, and Shem Asia.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "That this is my south-west discovery, / / Per fretum febris / , by these straits to die,"
- **Lines 13-15:** "As West and East / In all flat maps (and I am one) are one, / So death doth touch the resurrection."
- **Lines 16-20:** "Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are / The Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem? / Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar, / All straits, and none but straits, are ways to them, / Whether where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Shem."
- **Lines 21-25:** "We think that Paradise and Calvary, / Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place; / Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me; / As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face, / May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace."
- **Lines 26-27:** "So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord; / By these his thorns give me his other crown;"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker's rhetorical questions underscore his conviction that death will not be the end for him.

When the speaker punnily transforms the "straits" (or pains) of his illness into the "straits" (or narrow water passages) of an ocean journey, he turns his suffering into a journey. He also knows he's sailing "West"—the symbolic direction of death, since that's where the sun sets. But, as he rhetorically asks:

> For, though their currents yield return to none,
> What shall my West hurt me?

This question answers itself: death *can't* hurt him, he believes, because it's only a passage into a new (and eternal) life in heaven. He expands on this point through the metaphor of his body as a map, spread out "flat on this bed" for his doctors to read. On any map of the globe, he points out, the furthest points west and east are actually the same; death and rebirth, he concludes, are also the same thing, and by sailing "West" he's also sailing "East" into the dawn of a new life.

His body-as-map metaphor doesn't stop there. Listen to the sequence of rhetorical questions that follows his idea that "death doth touch the resurrection":

> Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are
> The Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem?

Here, the speaker uses rhetorical questions to argue that his "home" isn't anywhere you could point to on the "map" that is his body. Sick and dying he may be, but all the metaphorical territories of his flesh aren't really where he lives in any case! His agonizing "straits" might be marked on the map of his body, but they'll also carry him away toward his real home in heaven.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** " For, though their currents yield return to none, / What shall my West hurt me?"
- **Lines 16-17:** "Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are / The Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem?"

REPETITION

Repetitions help the speaker to develop his argument (and to show off his crackling wit).

His diacope on the word "straits" in lines 10-11 and 19 is a perfect example of both these purposes:

- When the word first appears in line 10, it describes the "straits" (or pains) of the speaker's fatal fever.
- When it returns in line 11, those straits have been punnily transformed into the "straits" (or water passages) of a sea journey.
- Thus, when the speaker insists that "all straits, and none but straits" are passages to new places in line 19, his diacope works like a nudge in the ribs, underlining both his ingenuity—*see what I did there?*—and his metaphor of suffering and death as a journey.

Another spell of diacope in the third stanza shows the speaker working toward the conclusion that death and resurrection are one and the same. In lines 11-13, the speaker's repeated references to his "West"—symbolically speaking, his death, the place where his life's sun will set—set a course through a developing idea:

- First, he introduces the idea that his "West" is his death: "I joy, that in these straits, I see my West."
- Then, he scoffs at the idea he should be worried about that destination: "What shall my West hurt me?"
- Finally, he broadens out into a *general* point about death: "[...] West and East [...] are one."

These repetitions, in other words, help the speaker to move from a specific description of his predicament to a general statement of faith that the end of earthly life is the beginning of heavenly life.

And listen to this ingenious moment of polyptoton in lines 13-14:

> [...] As West and East
> In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,

The first "one" here means "something separate": the speaker is a single "flat map" among many. The second, though, means "united": the furthest points "West and East" are exactly the same place on a flat map of the round globe.

This repetition elegantly reflects the speaker's beliefs. Death, the speaker repeatedly insists, is not an ending, but a transformation. Just as a separate "one" merges into a collective "one" here, the speaker believes his individual soul will merge into God's collective "music" when he dies.

A final spell of repetition similarly merges separate people and separate experiences into one:

- In the fifth stanza, the speaker reflects on the idea that Christ was a kind of second Adam, offering humanity a new beginning. He also feels that he's going through what both of those "Adams" endured.
- By returning and returning to the name "Adam," which appears four times in this stanza's five lines, the speaker both stresses the connection between himself, Adam, and Christ and insists that *every* human being has something of both the "first" and "last" Adam in them.
- This repetition helps the speaker to suggest that everyone sins, everyone suffers, and everyone can be forgiven.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "straits"
- **Line 11:** "straits," "West"
- **Line 13:** "West," "West"
- **Line 14:** "one," "one"
- **Line 19:** "straits," "straits"
- **Line 22:** "Adam's"
- **Line 23:** "Adams"
- **Line 24:** "Adam's"
- **Line 25:** "Adam's"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps to give this hymn its music. In fact, the first moment of alliteration here is even *about* music:

> [...] with thy choir of saints for evermore,
> I shall be made thy music; [...]

Those gentle /m/ sounds draw attention to a striking and important metaphor. Here, the speaker isn't just imagining singing with a heavenly choir after his death, but *becoming* part of God's sacred and eternal music himself. The echoing sounds here help to suggest that this transformation is both gentle as a murmur and utterly miraculous.

Before the speaker gets to be part of that joyful song, however, he'll have to travel through a lot of pain and suffering. In line 10, alliteration stresses the agony of illness:

> *Per fretum febris*, by these straits to die,

The harsh repeated /f/ here connects the speaker's fatal fever to the pain it will put him through: *per fretum febris* roughly translates to "through the pains of fever."

With such an ordeal to confront, the speaker turns to his Christian faith for consolation. Listen to the dense repeated sounds in this passage of prayer:

> We think that Paradise and Calvary,
> Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place;
> Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;

Here, a hard /c/ links "Christ" to his suffering on the "cross" at "Calvary" (the hill where Jesus was said to have been crucified); the /cr/ sounds of "Christ" and "cross" stress that connection further. In the depths of his suffering, the speaker asks that God recognize he's sharing in both Jesus's suffering and Adam's and hopes to follow in their footsteps by reaching renewal and rebirth through his pain. The alliteration of "Look, Lord" and "met in me" makes his prayer sound that much more fervent.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “made,” “music”
- **Line 10:** “fretum febris”
- **Line 11:** “straits,” “see”
- **Line 15:** “death doth”
- **Line 20:** “Whether where”
- **Line 21:** “Calvary”
- **Line 22:** “Christ's cross”
- **Line 23:** “Look, Lord,” “met,” “me”
- **Line 24:** “sweat surrounds”
- **Line 26:** “wrapp'd, receive”

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, gives the poem music, drama, and meaning.

Listen to what happens when the speaker lays out his belief that death is only the beginning of a new life, for instance:

> [...] As West and East
> In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
> So death doth touch the resurrection.

The elegantly paired /ah/ and /uh/ sounds here (with "doth" pronounced, as it was in Donne's time, "duth," not "dawth") mirror the speaker's quiet conviction that in the end, death and "resurrection" are one and the same. The alliteration and consonance of "death doth" gives the moment even more power.

Later on, in lines 24-25, assonance heightens a moment of fervent prayer:

> As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
> May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.

The movement between /ah/ sounds ("As," "last," "Adam") and /ay/ sounds ("may," "face") creates musical intensity here, strengthening the connection between the first Adam (from the Garden of Eden), the last Adam (Jesus), and the speaker himself.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “for evermore”
- **Line 7:** “I,” “lie”
- **Line 10:** “by,” “die”
- **Line 14:** “flat maps”
- **Line 15:** “doth touch”
- **Line 16:** “Sea”
- **Line 17:** “Eastern”
- **Line 19:** “straits,” “ways”
- **Line 21:** “Calvary”
- **Line 22:** “tree”
- **Line 25:** “last Adam's”
- **Line 30:** “may raise”

PARALLELISM

Parallelism both reflects the speaker's developing train of thought and gives the poem some grand music. For example, consider the parallelism of these important lines:

> We think that Paradise and Calvary,
> Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place;
> Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;
> As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
> May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.

Here, parallel *phrasings* describe parallel *people* and *experiences:*

- First, the speaker lines up "Paradise and Calvary" (that is, the Garden of Eden and the hill where Christ was crucified) with "Christ's cross and Adam's tree." The similar sentence structure here underscores the point that Christ is like a second Adam: not only do both men go through a moment of truth on exactly the same spot, the second Adam's self-sacrificing "cross" replaces the first Adam's selfish "tree."
- Then, the speaker uses parallel phrasings in his prayer that God will recognize that he's going through what both the "first" and "last" Adams did. Not only are they parallel to each other, he's parallel to them!

The speaker's language thus embodies his ideas.

Back at the beginning of the poem, quieter moments of parallelism help the speaker to prepare himself for his journey to the afterlife:

> Since I am coming to that holy room,
> Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
> I shall be made thy music; as I come
> I tune the instrument here at the door,
> And what I must do then, think now before.

"Since I am coming" and "as I come" here mean essentially the same thing, and use the same sentence structure. But the speaker's simpler phrasing the second time around suggests he's reconciling himself to death. "As I come," besides meaning "since I'm certainly coming," could also mean "while I am on my way": in other words, he knows the unstoppable journey to death has already begun.

There's a similar sense of preparation in the parallelism of

"what I must do then, think now before." To "tune the instrument" of his body and soul, this phrasing suggests, the speaker must imagine his death and his passage into heaven. This whole poem thus becomes a rehearsal for the afterlife.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Since I am coming"
- **Line 3:** "as I come"
- **Line 5:** "do then," "think now"
- **Lines 16-17:** "Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are / The Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem?"
- **Line 20:** "where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Shem"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Paradise and Calvary, / Christ's cross and Adam's tree,"
- **Lines 24-25:** " As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face, / May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace."
- **Line 29:** "my text, my sermon"

VOCABULARY

Thy (Line 2, Line 3, Line 28) - An old-fashioned word for "your." "Thy" might sound fancy now, but in Donne's time it was an intimate word you'd use to address a loved one—think "tu" in modern French or Spanish.

Physicians (Line 6) - Doctors.

Cosmographers (Line 7) - People who study the earth and sky.

South-west discovery (Line 9) - In other words, a newly discovered passage to the southwest. Donne chooses the southwest here because the south was associated with heat (and the speaker has a fever) and the west was associated with the sunset (and the speaker is dying, coming to the end of his life's "day").

Per fretum febris (Line 10) - This Latin phrase means "through the sufferings of fever."

Straits (Line 10, Line 11, Line 19) - Donne puns on two meanings of this word all through the poem:

- "Straits" can mean "difficulties" or "sufferings," as in "dire straits."
- But it can also mean "water passages," like the Strait of Gibraltar.

The Eastern riches (Line 17) - In other words, China and the "far East."

Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar (Line 18) - These are all straits—narrow channels linking one larger body of water to another.

Japhet, Cham, and Shem (Line 20) - These were the three sons of the biblical Noah (of Ark fame), traditionally said to have settled in and populated different regions of the earth. Japhet was associated with Europe, Cham Africa, and Shem Asia.

Paradise and Calvary (Line 21) - That is, the Garden of Eden and the hill outside Jerusalem where Christ was crucified.

Adam's tree (Line 22) - That is, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, on which the forbidden fruit grows in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden.

Both Adams (Line 23) - In medieval and Renaissance Christian theology, Christ was said to be a "second Adam"—a new kind of "first man," replacing the old.

In his purple wrapp'd (Line 26) - These words have more than one meaning:

- In Donne's time, "purple" was said to be the color of blood (see the "purple fountains issuing from your veins" in the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example). The "purple" here thus suggests Christ's sacrificial blood (which the speaker also alludes to in the previous line).
- But purple was also the traditional color of royalty—a fitting color for the King of Heaven to wear.
- Asking to be "wrapp'd" in Christ's "purple," the speaker thus asks both to be redeemed by Christ's blood and granted his heavenly triumph.

By these his thorns (Line 27) - Here, the speaker alludes to the "crown of thorns," the painful, mocking crown that Christ was forced to wear at his crucifixion. By "wearing" his own suffering like Christ's crown of thorns, the speaker hopes he'll also be rewarded with resurrection and eternal life.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As he often did, Donne invents his own form here. This reflective poem is built from six five-line stanzas (also known as cinquains). They're written in iambic pentameter: lines of five da-DUM feet in a row: "Therefore | that he | may raise, | the Lord | throws down." And they use an ABABB rhyme scheme that caps an alternating pattern of sounds with a gently surprising couplet.

These choices reflect the speaker's philosophy that "death doth touch the resurrection"—in other words, that the end of earthly life is just the beginning of heavenly life:

- Cinquains are relatively unusual in English poetry; they're far outnumbered by quatrains, couplets, and other even-numbered stanza forms.
- These particular cinquains even seem to build on a familiar form: quatrains rhymed ABAB. That ubiquitous rhyme scheme turns up everywhere from nursery rhymes to ballads.
- Instead of ending there, though, the stanzas lift off into a final unexpected line, creating a couplet that suggests something new emerging from what could

have just been an ending.

These overflowing stanzas thus fit the poem's interest in the Great Beyond.

METER

"Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness" is written in iambic pentameter. That means that each line is built from five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here are lines 11-12 for an example of how that sounds:

> I joy, | that in | these straits, | I see | my West;
> For, though | their cur- | rents yield | return | to none,

Since a lot of spoken English falls naturally into this rhythm, iambic pentameter is one of the most common meters in English-language poetry. It also has a wonderfully wide range: iambic meters can feel humble or soaring, depending on how the poet uses them! Here, iambic pentameter helps the speaker's voice to sound ruefully funny and fervent in turn.

Little variations in the meter also create moments of drama. For instance, listen to how the rhythm changes when the speaker prays that he'll follow in the footsteps of both Adam and Christ:

> As the | first Ad- | am's sweat | surrounds | my face,
> May the | last Ad- | am's blood | my soul | embrace.

Both of these lines push two stresses into the second foot, creating intense spondees, feet with a DUM-DUM rhythm. Those dense stresses help to give the speaker's prayer its fervor.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's inventive rhyme scheme runs like this:

> ABABB

Here, the speaker plays a trick with readers' expectations. An ABAB pattern is an old and familiar one in English poetry, natural as a nursery rhyme. By capping that alternating rhyme pattern with an extra B rhyme, the speaker mirrors his ideas in his poem's sounds. "Death doth touch the resurrection," as the speaker says; the echoing B couplets here reflect that idea of a seeming ending that isn't an ending at all.

Readers should note that a lot of the rhymes that feel slant here, like "Lord" and "word" or "room" and "come," would likely have been perfect in Donne's 17th-century English accent.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness" is a dying priest. Lying on his deathbed, enduring all the agonies of a powerful fever, this man takes comfort from his religious faith. For Christians, he reflects, suffering is always the prelude to new life and beauty; to die is only to follow in Christ's footsteps, and to follow in Christ's footsteps also means to look forward to "resurrection."

In both his profession and his witty, passionate voice, this speaker seems likely to be a version of John Donne himself. While this poem was probably written a few years before Donne died, it reflects his own deep faith and his fascination with death and rebirth. It also touches on his role as the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London: he indeed "preach'd" to many "souls" as a clergyman in that famous church.

SETTING

The poem moves from a tight, limited spot—the room where the speaker, deathly ill, lies "flat on this bed"—to the furthest, freest reaches of the universe. The speaker isn't going anywhere now: he's so sick he can't even sit up. But in his imagination, his sickness itself is a journey. Its "straits" (or pains) transform into the "straits" (or water passages) through which he'll voyage to heaven.

While the speaker himself never leaves his room, then, his mind ventures from the "Pacific Sea" to "Paradise" (the Garden of Eden) to "Calvary" (the hill where Christ was crucified) to the "holy room" of heaven itself.

The poem's metaphor of death as a voyage also fits right into John Donne's 17th-century world. Written only a hundred-odd years after European eyes first saw the "Pacific Sea," this poem uses the language of exploration to depict every soul's final great journey into the unknown.

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 a master of elaborate conceits, complex sentences, and love poems that mingle divinity with filthy puns. But during his lifetime, he was mostly a poet in private. In public life, he was an important clergyman, rising to become Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Like the vast majority of his poetry, "Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness" didn't appear in print until several years after his death. This poem was first published in the posthumous 1635 collection *Poems by J.D.*

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

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John Donne lived and wrote during a time of intense change. He was born at the end of an era, growing up during the last years of Elizabeth I's reign.

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

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

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

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

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about John Donne via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-donne)
- The Metaphysical Poets — Read about the Metaphysical Poets, the loosely linked group of writers of which Donne was one of the most notable members. (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/john-donne-and-metaphysical-poetry)
- Donne's Portrait — Admire a famous, rather piratical portrait of Donne. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw111844/John-Donne)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/SJCRtLusLBo)
- A Lost Donne Manuscript — Read an article about a recently rediscovered volume of Donne's poetry. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/dec/06/the-book-of-love-400-year-old-tome-of-john-donnes-poems-is-unveiled)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God (Holy Sonnet 14)
- Death, be not proud
- 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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