On My First Daughter

POEM TEXT

Here lies, to each her parents' ruth,
Mary, the daughter of their youth
Yet all heaven's gifts being heaven's due,
It makes the father less to rue.
At six months' end she parted hence
With safety of her innocence;
Whose soul heaven's queen, whose name she bears,
In comfort of her mother's tears,
Hath placed amongst her virgin-train:
Where, while that severed doth remain,
This grave partakes the fleshly birth;
Which cover lightly, gentle earth!

SUMMARY

Here lies, much to the sorrow of her parents, Mary, whom her parents had when they were young. However, the knowledge that Mary's birth was a gift from heaven and that heaven's gifts must eventually be returned *to* heaven makes Mary's father feel a little less sad. She died when she was only six months old after having been baptized, so now she is safe in heaven. Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus and the Queen of Heaven, has helped to comfort the baby Mary's mother by carefully placing the child among her protected collection of souls in heaven. Up in heaven, while the baby Mary's body remains buried below, her soul is born anew from her earthly grave. Dirt of her grave, please cover the infant's body gently!

THEMES

RELIGION AS COMFORT

In "On My First Daughter," the speaker laments the loss of his infant daughter. Throughout the poem, the speaker's religious beliefs about a heavenly afterlife act as a form of consolation. The poem, then, ultimately suggests the power of religion to comfort people in times of great loss.

The poem contains many references to Christianity in order to help its speaker focus on the idea of his child's soul being in heaven. The speaker notes that his daughter, originally one of "heaven's gifts," has been recalled to heaven as "heaven's due." He then goes on to note that knowing that his daughter's soul is at peace "makes the father less to rue." In other words, he feels "less" grief with the knowledge that his daughter's soul is in heaven. Though he certainly still feels pain, religion has softened its edges.

The speaker further insists that his daughter died "with safety of her innocence," meaning that she had been baptized at the time of her death and therefore could go to heaven instead of being trapped in purgatory. The idea of "safety" is again meant to set the speaker's mind at ease. He also repeatedly references the virgin Mary, not only by recalling his daughter's namesake ("whose name she bears") but also by claiming that the infant Mary's soul has been "placed amongst her virgin-train" by the virgin Mary herself. The word "placed" implies that the speaker's daughter was personally chosen and carefully set among the other devout servants of the mother of God. His daughter's soul lives with other innocent souls under the watchful gaze of a loving heavenly mother, even though the baby Mary may be out of sight of her earthly mother and father.

The speaker of "On My First Daughter" thus makes a strong argument that the heavenly grace surrounding his deceased daughter's soul should lift the spirits of her parents back on earth. In fact, this turn toward religious teachings might even suggest that he should not only stop grieving, but in fact be *grateful* that his daughter is in a better place. However, it's unclear how successful the speaker actually is at convincing himself of this comfort.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 7-9

THE PERSISTENCE OF GRIEF

The poem illustrates the overwhelming nature of grief, and suggests that the pain caused by a child's death can seem impossible to overcome. Some grief, the poem implies, is simply too great even for religious beliefs about heaven and the afterlife to fully relieve.

The beginning of the poem establishes the persistent grief of the speaker and his wife. The opening words, "Here lies," remind readers of an inscription on a tombstone, and the speaker goes on to explain that his daughter Mary has died at just six months old. Naturally, the death of a child will always be tragic, but in this case it is even more so because of the speaker's focus on how early her death was. The idea of "ruth," which is an archaic word to describe grief or sorrow, is also repeated twice in the first four lines, underscoring the intensity

of the speaker's sorrow.

Even after presenting certain religious beliefs as a form of comfort, the speaker retains an emotional and almost bitter tone as he is reminded that no matter where his daughter's soul may be, her corpse is still on earth. The third line of the poem hints at his bitterness when the speaker reminds himself that with "all heaven's gifts being heaven's due," his daughter would have been called back to heaven at some point, no matter her age. His use of the word "due" brings to mind financial transactions—rent, bills, debt. Using this sort of emotionless comparison, the speaker seems to relate heaven to a bank that treated his daughter like a monetary transaction rather than a human being. He seems to hold some (understandable) resentment towards God for his daughter's death, even though he proclaims he knows that he should owe God thanks for her birth in the first place.

He also states that while his daughter's soul may be up in heaven, "that severed doth remain." This is a reference to his daughter's body, which has been "severed" from her soul and remains stuck on earth. "Severed" has a harsh connotation, perhaps even conjuring up the image of a head being violently severed from a body. The speaker imagines his daughter's soul being likewise violently yanked from her body, again suggesting the persistence of his grief. The notion of his infant in heaven does nothing to change the fact that the speaker is in front of her earthly grave. Indeed, he begins his last couplet with "This grave," suggesting that he's currently standing at her burial site. He asks the dirt of the earth to "cover lightly" his daughter's body, emphasizing that he still feels the pain of her physical loss even if her non-physical soul is in a better place.

The speaker of "On My First Daughter" makes a strong argument that the heavenly grace surrounding his deceased daughter's soul should lift the spirits of her parents back on earth, but his remarks showcase his grief anyway. Throughout the poem, the speaker indicates that even though religious beliefs can be a source of comfort, when a parent experiences something as tragic as the loss of a child, it is difficult to see beyond moment-to-moment sorrow.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Lines 3-4
- Line 3
- Lines 10-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Here lies, to each her parents' ruth,
Mary, the daughter of their youth
Yet all heaven's gifts being heaven's due,
It makes the father less to rue.

The first two lines of "On My First Daughter" introduce the setting and subject of the poem. In saying "Here lies," the speaker evokes the image of someone standing at the head of a grave, where a body might be buried. He follows this up by noting that whoever lies in the grave is there to "each her parents' ruth," with "ruth" being an older word for "sorrow." In other words, the poem opens with an image of parents grieving for their dead daughter.

In the second line of the poem, the readers learn who the grave belongs to: Mary, the child alluded to in the previous line. Readers can also assume that the speaker himself is one of these parents, and in fact it is widely understood that this poem was written after the death of Jonson's real-life daughter Mary in her infancy.

However, the "father" in line 4, who readers now know is the speaker of the poem, notes that there's something making him feel *less* sorrowful ("less to rue"). Why? Because, as stated in line 3, he knows that the gift of his daughter's life was granted by heaven, and he was lucky to have her on earth for as long as he did. Now, her life has been called "due"—a rather cold comparison, like a bank loan being due—and therefore her soul had to return to heaven. The repetition of the word "heaven" in line 3—technically an example of diacope—underscores the father's thinking: heaven granted life, and as such heaven can take it away. In this instance, the speaker's faith is a source of comfort (his daughter's soul is now in heaven) while also a source of bitterness (she was called back far earlier than he would have liked). Ultimately, though, his belief in heaven helps to relieve his sorrow, if only slightly.

In terms of form, these four lines consist of two sets of rhyming couplets, a pattern that will continue throughout the poem (and indeed is common for elegies like this). The rhymes are perfect end rhymes—"ruth"/"youth" and "due"/"rue"—allowing the poem to flow smoothly and the reader to focus on the sorrow being expressed. These lines are also end-stopped, their grammatical phrases each aligning with the end of lines themselves (note that, especially for older poems like this, punctuation is not always a clear indicator of end-stop or enjambment). This adds to the poem's sense of quiet grief, of the speaker trying to contain his own sorrow via methodical reasoning about death and the afterlife.

The poem's meter is generally iambic tetrameter, meaning there are four iambs—poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern—per line. Already though, it's clear that this meter isn't perfect. The first line can be scanned as opening with a spondee, meaning it has two stresses in a row:

Here lies, to each her parents' ruth,

This draws emphasis to the poem's opening phrase, underscoring the finality of Mary's time on earth. The next line then opens with a trochee (stressed-unstressed), before falling back into steady iambs:

> Mary, the daughter of their youth

The child herself thus again interrupts the metrical regularity of the poem. Subtly, then, the hiccups in the meter—which notably appear when the speaker refers to his daughter's name and gravesite—reflects the weight of the speaker's grief, the way it imposes itself on his attempts to comfort himself with logical reasoning about religion and the afterlife.

LINES 5-9

> *At six months' end she parted hence*
> *With safety of her innocence;*
> *Whose soul heaven's queen, whose name she bears,*
> *In comfort of her mother's tears,*
> *Hath placed amongst her virgin-train:*

In line 5, readers realize exactly why Mary's passing was so overwhelmingly tragic for her parents: she was only six months old when she died. In saying she "parted hence," the speaker depicts the image of his daughter moving "away from here," which is the typical meaning of "hence." While the baby Mary's body may lie in the grave beneath his feet, her soul is no longer present, again implying that her soul has returned to heaven.

One of the reasons the speaker can be hopeful that her soul is in heaven is because her life ended while she still had the "safety of her innocence" (line 6). This means that she had been baptized by her parents before her death, so that, according to Christian tradition, her soul would not be sent to hell or purgatory. The speaker believes that by being baptized, and without having had the opportunity to sin, Mary's soul will be allowed entrance into heaven. The sibilance of these lines lends them a soft, hushed quality reflective of their comforting content:

> At six months' end she parted hence
> With safety of her innocence;

Lines 7-9 then paint a more vivid picture of exactly *what* Mary's soul might be doing in heaven. The allusion in line 7 to "heaven's queen, whose name she bears" relates to the Virgin Mary, whom Christians believe to be the mother of Jesus. Specifically, in the Catholic tradition, the Virgin Mary is often viewed as the "Queen of Heaven." The speaker's daughter has the same name as the Virgin Mary (thus, "whose name she bears") and here the speaker imagines that Mary, Queen of Heaven, has placed the baby Mary's soul "amongst her virgin-train" (line 9). This would mean that the daughter's soul would serve the Virgin Mary alongside other virgins, which would be a high place of honor for the speaker's deceased child. Line 8 notes that his wife, Mary's mother, would find comfort in this idea—another example of religious beliefs helping to ease grief.

LINES 10-12

> *Where, while that severed doth remain,*
> *This grave partakes the fleshly birth;*
> *Which cover lightly, gentle earth!*

The middle of the poem, lines 5-9, focus on imagined images of the baby Mary's soul in heaven. In line 10, the speaker returns to earth and to Mary's physical body, which she has left behind. The soft alliteration of the /w/ at the start of line 10 ("Where, while") causes a soft exhale of breath. This makes it feel as though the speaker is overcome with grief and must whisper at the graveside of his daughter now that his attention has been brought back to her buried body, which does "remain" in the ground even if her soul is in heaven.

The speaker's use of "severed" in line 10 also has a violent connotation; Mary's soul did not simply leave her body peacefully but was *severed*, a very active verb that relates to chopping and slashing. The violence of this word echoes the speaker's earlier sorrow and bitterness that his daughter was taken from him at such a young age (see line 5).

Line 11 then contains the juxtaposition of two opposing ideas: a grave, signifying death, as well as "fleshly birth." This line relates to the Christian idea of being born anew in heaven, of the birth of little Mary's soul *from* her flesh. But again, because there are two opposing ideas here of birth *and* death, readers of the poem can fully understand that the speaker can feel hopeful about the status of his daughter's soul in heaven while also being mournful about the earthly life he'll never get to share with his daughter.

Finally, the speaker uses apostrophe to ask the dirt to cover his daughter's body "lightly," hoping that the earth will be "gentle." Even though his daughter's soul is no longer present, the speaker still wants her body to be treated kindly by nature. This is a natural wish for a grieving parent, especially one who now faces the tragic knowledge that his infant will remain buried forever. The return to the earth in the final moments of the poem also again hints that religion has not been as comforting as the speaker had hoped; he still focuses on the immediate reality before him of his daughter's death.

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The speaker uses repetition in his poem in two major instances. The first is with his repetition of "ruth" and "rue," which are both from the same root word meaning "sorrow" (technically, this is an example of polyptoton). The repetition of this particular word underscores the tragic tone of the poem and emphasizes

the speaker's emotional state. He keeps returning to this idea of sorrow and grief even as he tries to comfort himself with the thought of his daughter in heaven.

On that note, the other word the speaker repeats in the poem is in fat "heaven," which appears twice in line 3 (as diacope) and then again in line 7. This repetition emphasizes the speaker's major hope: that his infant daughter's soul resides in heaven. Fittingly, then, repetition underscores the speaker's two competing emotions in the poem: his grief as his daughter's death, and his comfort in the thought that she is now in heaven.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ruth,"
- **Line 3:** "heaven's," "heaven's"
- **Line 4:** "rue."
- **Line 7:** "heaven's"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses a subtle metaphor in line 3 when he references "heaven's due." This can be read, at least in part, as a sort of financial comparison. For a loan to be "due" means that the borrower owes that money back to the bank, or whatever institution, that originally gave out the loan; in this comparison, the baby Mary would be the loan that heaven is calling back as being due. She was gifted to the speaker at her birth, but she must now return to heaven, where she originated.

Because this is a finance-based metaphor, it alludes to the idea that heaven (and therefore, God) is as cold as a banker who only cares about their investments returning. This hints at the speaker's bitterness towards God in the face of his daughter's death, even as he notes that he was lucky to have been "gifted" his daughter in the first place.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "all heaven's gifts being heaven's due,"

ALLITERATION

The poem is sparing in its use of devices like consonance and alliteration; it feels distinctly plain and unadorned, perhaps out of respect for the seriousness of its subject matter. That said, there are a few interesting moments of either device. In the opening two lines, for instance, the /r/ sound appears in quick succession in "parent's ruth / Mary." The consonance here connects these three words—sonically linking Mary to her parents' sorrow.

Later, in line 10, the speaker includes two back-to-back words that begin with the same sound, "where" and "while." The gentle /wh/ sound mimics the whispering that one might make while standing at a cemetery, over a grave, and so the alliteration here may serve as a reminder of the setting of the poem. The same could be said of the sibilance (which is a specific type of consonance) that appears in lines 5-6:

> At six months' end she parted hence
> With safety of her innocence;

The soft /s/ (and /sh/) sounds here make the lines feel hushed, quiet; as if the speaker is speaking particularly gently over his daughter's grave.

Finally, the poem's last two lines make repeated use of the /l/ sound—another soft, gentle consonant:

> ... fleshly birth;
> Which cover lightly, gentle earth!

The /l/ sound here, as well as the /t/ sound in "lightly, gentle," adds a lilting lightness to the poem's final moments; the speaker's plea to the earth to be gentle is *itself* gentle.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "r," "r"
- **Line 2:** "r," "y"
- **Line 3:** "Y"
- **Line 5:** "s," "c"
- **Line 6:** "s," "c," "c"
- **Line 9:** "r," "r," "n," "r," "n"
- **Line 10:** "Wh," "wh"
- **Line 11:** "l," "l"
- **Line 12:** "l," "l," "l"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker directly addresses the earth at the end of the poem, speaking to the dirt that covers his daughter's grave. This example of apostrophe acts as a request for the earth to cover his daughter's body "gently" and treat her kindly, now that her body is forever in the earth's care. Of course, the speaker knows that the earth cannot literally hear him (nor can it literally treat anyone gently; this is also an example of personification); this plea is the only optimistic wish that the speaker can have, since he has no control over decay and death.

This allusion also subtly reinforces the notion that religion isn't necessarily as comforting as the speaker wants it to be. The poem notably returns in its final moments to the earthly reality of death, to the fact that, even if baby Mary's *soul* is now in heaven, her *body* remains before the speaker in the ground.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Which cover lightly, gentle earth!"

ALLUSION

In line 7, the speaker alludes to "heaven's queen" who shares a name with the baby Mary. This, of course, is a reference to the Virgin Mary, who is often referred to as the "Queen of Heaven" in the Catholic faith (this also explains the poem's later reference in line 9 to "her virgin-train"). Ben Jonson was most well-known as a Protestant, but converted to Catholicism and back throughout his life and was interested in the teachings and beliefs of the Catholic church.

This allusion is important in the poem because through it, the speaker expresses his optimistic hope that his daughter's soul is not only residing in heaven, but that she is actually serving the Virgin Mary—which would be the highest status a parent could imagine for their child's soul. The allusion, then, is yet another part of the speaker's attempt to use religious teachings to comfort himself in the face of his daughter's death.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Whose soul heaven's queen, whose name she bears"
- **Line 9:** "her virgin-train"

END-STOPPED LINE

Arguably, the poem is end-stopped throughout. (Recall that, especially for very old poems like this, punctuation is not a good indicator of whether something is enjambed or end-stopped—in no small part because punctuation was often tweaked by editors over the centuries!)

Overall, this lends the poem a sort of controlled, self-contained feeling; every grammatical phrase/idea pretty much ends where a line break appears. This might suggest the speaker's attempts to keep himself together as he elegizes his daughter, despite the fact that her death has shaken him deeply. The end-stops slow the poem down, allowing for a pause, a breath, at the end of each line—perhaps a moment to stifle tears and swallow any bitterness before proceeding. The reader gets the sense that the speaker is considering his words carefully, trying very hard to convince himself of the comfort of what he's saying.

The only moment that might be thought of as enjambment (though weak enjambment at that) appears between lines 5 and 6. This reflects the lines' content: line 5 is about Mary departing the earth, and line 6 is about her taking something ("the safety of her innocence") with her. Fittingly, then, line 5 itself crosses over the line break; through enjambment, the line itself is "part[ing] hence / with" the next line.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ruth,"
- **Line 2:** "youth"
- **Line 3:** "due,"
- **Line 4:** "rue."
- **Line 7:** "bears,"
- **Line 8:** "tears,"
- **Line 9:** "virgin-train:"
- **Line 10:** "remain,"
- **Line 11:** "birth;"
- **Line 12:** "earth!"

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker includes juxtaposition in line 11, where he mentions two opposing ideas in close proximity to each other. In this case, he connects a grave, which is of course associated with death, to "fleshly birth," which is the opposite of death. He is painting an analogy of Mary's grave being a mother of sorts, which gives birth to her soul from her flesh body. Essentially, death leads to a rebirth—to new life—for the sole in heaven.

Her soul, now born from her corpse, will ascend to heaven and become involved in activities like those explained in lines 7-9. Because the speaker uses these two opposite ideas of birth and death in one line, he emphasizes his conflicting emotions; he's hopeful that his daughter's soul will be treated well in heaven, but he is also still sorrowful over her loss here on earth.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "grave partakes the fleshly birth"

VOCABULARY

Ruth (Line 1) - An archaic word meaning "sorrow" or "regret." Here, it refers to the parents' sorrow at their daughter's death.

Due (Line 3) - A "due" is a debt, or an obligatory payment to an authority, like the government or the church. Heaven's "due" contrasts with "gifts" earlier in the line, implying that gifts given (in this case, the daughter's life) were always meant to be returned to the giver (in this case, heaven).

Rue (Line 4) - "Rue" is another form of "ruth," seen in line 1. Here, it still means the same thing: to feel sorrow.

Hence (Line 5) - "Hence," when used to describe a verb like "parted" in this line, simply means "away from here." In other words, when Mary was six months old, she left her parents—an indirect way of referring to her death.

Hath (Line 9) - "Hath" is an archaic form of "has."

Virgin-train (Line 9) - "Virgin" is a reference to the virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus in Christianity. A "virgin-train," then, would be the train or line of souls led by the virgin Mary in heaven.

Severed (Line 10) - To "sever" means to divide something or part something suddenly or forcefully. In this line the word refers to the body of the speaker's infant daughter. In this case,

the infant's body was both suddenly *and* forcefully divided from her soul at the moment of her death. But it is the "severed" part, or Mary's body, that remains buried on earth.

Doth (Line 10) - "Doth" is an archaic form of "does." In modern English, the line would read "while that severed *does* remain."

Partakes (Line 11) - "Partakes" means "shares in" or "participates in." The daughter's grave participates in her soul's "birth" from her flesh body as she ascends to heaven.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem is short, made of only a single, 12-line stanza. This stanza is broken up into six rhyming couplets. The use of couplets makes sense: because the poem expresses sorrow over someone's death, it can also be considered an elegy, and elegies were traditionally written in couplets. The *number* of couplets is important here too: perhaps not coincidentally, Mary died when she was just six months old. The poem's form, then, could symbolize Mary herself—and how brief the baby Mary's life was before her time on earth was cut short.

METER

The poem's overarching meter is iambic tetrameter, which means that there are four poetic feet per line and that each foot follows a pattern of unstressed-stressed syllables. For example, see line 4:

> It makes | the fa- | ther less | to rue.

Iambic tetrameter was a fairly typical meter in the 16th and 17th centuries because it was easy to read aloud, due to the simple alternating stresses. The poem is pretty steady in its meter. Combined with the regular rhyme scheme and end-stops, this makes the poem feel tightly controlled and methodical, reflecting the speaker's attempts to reason through his grief. That said, there are three strong moments of metrical variation. The first appears in the very first line of the poem:

> Here lies, | to each | her pa- | rents' ruth

While it's *possible* to read the first foot here as an iamb (Here lies), it reads more naturally as a spondee (a foot with two stresses in a row). This double stress on this phrase at the start of the poem draws extra attention to the fact that Mary is in her grave, emphasizing the material reality of her death. Line 2 also does not fit the iambic stress pattern, and instead begins with a trochee (stressed-unstressed):

> Mary, | the daugh- | ter of | their youth

In this situation, the word "Mary" does not fit the unstressed-stressed iambic pattern. The irregularity of the meter here draws attention to the speaker's daughter's name, which again interrupts the otherwise steady meter of the poem. These two metrical hiccups notably occur at moments when the speaker first declares that his infant daughter lies dead in her grave; as such, they suggest an initial lack of control as the speaker confronts the reality of the situation. The speaker's immense grief leads him to stumble as he starts the poem, before righting himself with the comforting knowledge that Mary is in heaven—at which point the poem returns to its steady iambic pattern.

The only other variation comes in line 7:

> Whose soul | heaven's queen, | whose name | she bears,

The second foot could also be scanned as "heaven's queen"; either way, the mention of the Virgin Mary interrupts the speaker's steady rhythm. This seems fitting given her importance to the speaker's idea of heaven.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is made up of six pairs of rhyming couplets, making its rhyme scheme as follows:

AABBCCDDEEFF

The rhymes are full and perfect throughout, for the most part. For example, "ruth"/"youth" and "due"/"rue." This continues throughout the poem for each pair of lines. This steady rhyme scheme, in combination with the poem's very regular meter and use of end-stopped lines, reflects the speaker's sense of control; he is keeping a very tight leash on the poem in an effort to contain his own grief.

The only instance of slant rhyme is seen with "bears" and "tears" in lines 7 and 8, where the vowel sound of the /e/ in each word differs slightly. This could be an example of grief altering the speaker's ability to rhyme; writing about his wife's tears and the image of his daughter in heaven might affect his emotions so severely that he loses the poetic strain of his rhyming momentarily. Then again, "tears" and "bears" likely sounded more like perfect rhymes at the time of Jonson's writing centuries ago.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a father whose daughter, Mary, died when she was only six months old. The speaker must also be relatively young himself, because his daughter was born to parents in their "youth."

Throughout the poem, the speaker expresses his grief over his daughter's death while also attempting to find peace and hope

in the idea that his daughter's soul is now in heaven. He begins by mentioning the circumstances of her tragic death at six months old before he goes on to imagine what her soul might be doing in heaven. However, he cannot distract himself from the reality that his daughter's body lies in her grave, and he returns to the grave at the end of the poem to reflect on her lifeless presence on earth.

"On My First Daughter" is usually taken to be a biographical poem, and in this case, it makes sense to read the speaker as Ben Jonson the poet, whose real-life infant daughter Mary really *did* die when she was around six months old.

SETTING

The poem is set at the gravesite of the speaker's daughter, Mary. This is clear from the poem's references to the epitaph of a tombstone and the visual imagery of the dirt atop a grave. It is unclear whether this is a gravesite on private land or a grave in the larger setting of a cemetery; it's also unclear whether Mary has recently died and this is a funeral of sorts, or if her still-grieving parents are visiting her grave years later.

Due to the biographical nature of this poem, it can be reasonably assumed to take place in England in the 1590s, when the poet Ben Jonson lost his real-life daughter, Mary.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ben Jonson is considered one of the most famous Elizabethan Era poets and playwrights. He was, of course, also a contemporary of William Shakespeare, and thought highly of Shakespeare's plays. Jonson's own dramatic work tended to be satirical of English society at the time, and some of his most famous plays include *Volpone* and *Every Man in His Humour*. Later in his career, Jonson was also employed by James I (who took the English throne after Elizabeth I's death) and his wife, Queen Anne, to write what were called "masques," or short moral plays with elaborate costuming and dance choreography, meant to entertain the royal court.

"On My First Daughter," written about a child's untimely death, would have fit into the style of poems typical of the 17th century: during this time, "occasional" poetry became popular, where poets would write poems based on specific "occasions" or public events (including "occasions" in their personal lives). Jonson also wrote a later personal elegy, "On My First Son," following the death of his son at the age of seven. It includes similar religious themes.

Elegies, which were laments or serious reflections on the dead, were popular as a way of expressing grief in a socially acceptable manner. Especially for men, being overly emotional was seen as a weakness; however, through poetic elegies like this one, men could express their sorrow in the form of a concise piece of art. Elegies were typically written about people the poets cared deeply about—family, friends, or even celebrities of the era. Another example of a longer elegy would be Edmund Spenser's poem on the death of fellow poet Sir Philip Sidney, titled "Astrophel: A Pastoral Elegie upon the Death of the most noble and valorous Knight, Sir Philip Sidney."

Jonson, too, wrote elegies for his fellow poets, including one he wrote after Shakespeare's death, titled "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare." This poem follows the same rhyme scheme as "On My First Daughter," but the meter is iambic pentameter—most likely in tribute to Shakespeare's favored meter.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

England was a very Christian country in the 1500s-1600s, a fact clearly reflected by this poem's religious themes and imagery. Also during this time period was an ongoing conflict between Protestant and Catholic beliefs in England. In "On My First Daughter," Jonson seems to align with specifically Catholic beliefs and references, particularly through his focus on the Virgin Mary. Jonson had indeed converted to Catholicism around this time period.

It is also worth noting that infant mortality rates during the Renaissance were incredibly high. Some estimate that between a quarter to a third of all children born during this time period died before the age of five, with most of those deaths occurring during infancy. This high mortality rate was a result of poor sanitary conditions, rampant disease, and other health issues that modern medicine has luckily been able to reduce. Therefore, the death of Jonson's daughter would not have been particularly out of the ordinary; however, each child's death would have still been a deeply tragic loss for parents.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Ben Jonson: Renaissance Man — An article about Jonson's career as a playwright and dramatist. (http://writersinspire.org/content/ben-jonson-renaissance-playwright-renaissance-man)
- Other Work by Jonson — Explore more of Jonson's writing. (https://poets.org/poet/ben-jonson)
- Jonson's Connection to Shakespeare — Read more about the poet's friendship with and criticism of William Shakespeare. (http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/benjonson.html)
- About Ben Jonson — Information about the poet from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/ben-jonson)

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of this poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ellLRLjiSMI)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER BEN JONSON POEMS

- On My First Son

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Olivero, Tara. "*On My First Daughter.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 2 Aug 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Olivero, Tara. "*On My First Daughter.*" LitCharts LLC, August 2, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/ben-jonson/on-my-first-daughter.