The Apparition

POEM TEXT

When by thy scorn, O murd'ress, I am dead
And that thou think'st thee free
From all solicitation from me,
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,
And thee, feign'd vestal, in worse arms shall see;
Then thy sick taper will begin to wink,
And he, whose thou art then, being tir'd before,
Will, if thou stir, or pinch to wake him, think
Thou call'st for more,
And in false sleep will from thee shrink;
And then, poor aspen wretch, neglected thou
Bath'd in a cold quicksilver sweat wilt lie
A verier ghost than I.
What I will say, I will not tell thee now,
Lest that preserve thee; and since my love is spent,
I'had rather thou shouldst painfully repent,
Than by my threat'nings rest still innocent.

SUMMARY

When I've died of heartbreak from your rejection, you female murderer, and you think I'm never going to bother you again: that's when I'll visit your bed as a ghost, where I'll see you, you false virgin, in the arms of a worse man than I. Your weak candle will begin to flicker, and your new lover, who'll already be tired out from sex, will (if you try to wake him up) think you want *more* sex from him. He'll pretend to be asleep and move away from you. Then, shaking like a slender tree, you'll lie there all alone, drenched in freezing sweat, looking even more like a ghost than I do. I won't tell you the awful words I'll say to you, just in case they scare you so much that you change your mind about me now. Since I don't love you one bit anymore, I'd rather you suffer pain and regret later on than take me back because you're scared of my threats.

THEMES

REJECTION AND REVENGE

Furious that he's been rejected, the speaker of "The Apparition" warns his beloved that he'll get his revenge: after he dies of heartbreak (as he's certain he will), he'll haunt her even as she lies in another man's bed. Rejected love, this poem suggests, can sour into the bitterest hatred.

The poem's speaker feels deeply wronged by his beloved: by rejecting him, she's become a "murd'ress" (that is, a female murderer) in his eyes. His love for her was so strong that he feels as if he's going to die now that she's turned him down. Rather than pining away sorrowfully or bravely hoping that his beloved will be happier without him, however, this speaker plots revenge. When he inevitably dies of a broken heart, he warns, he'll come back and haunt his beloved while she's lying in bed with another man.

In a detailed and nasty fantasy, the speaker describes the scene: his ghostly form will appear, his beloved will try to wake her new lover up, her lover will pretend not to notice her, and she'll be left alone in a terrified "cold quicksilver sweat." Worst of all, the speaker says, he'll whisper awful words to her—words so dreadful that he won't tell her what they are now, in case she's so frightened she tries to take him back now to save herself from her terrible fate. Rejection has clearly transformed the speaker's intense love into equally intense hatred.

Of course, the speaker's hyperbolic and melodramatic fantasy is just that: a fantasy. When he claims that his love is "spent" and gone and he wouldn't take his lover back even if she begged him, readers get a distinct whiff of sour grapes. The pain of heartbreak leaves the speaker with nothing to do but retreat into his tormented imagination, darkly plotting a revenge he can (probably) never enact. Ironically enough, the *speaker* is the one who's haunted by the dreadful visions he conjures up.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17

WOMEN'S HYPOCRISY AND MALE JEALOUSY

This poem's speaker, a rejected lover, is outraged that his beloved has turned him down on the basis that she's a "vestal," a virgin. In the speaker's mind, she most certainly isn't (or at least won't be for long): she'll turn right around and sleep with someone else, mark his words. Drawing on 17th-century stereotypes about women's lust and deceitfulness, this poem's speaker suggests that women are often untrustworthy and hypocritical in love. Of course, the speaker's diatribe might say more about *himself* than it does his beloved; what he calls hypocrisy is just as likely his own jealous insecurity about her sleeping with another man.

According to this poem's speaker, his beloved is only a "feign'd vestal": that is, she's pretending to be a virgin, falsely claiming

that she cares too much about her chastity to sleep with him. The angry speaker is certain this can't be so and imagines that she'll soon fall into bed with some other, "worse" guy. Such two-faced cruelty, the speaker declares, make his one-time beloved a "murd'ress": he'll die of love for her while she blithely goes off with someone else.

Of course, the speaker has no apparent evidence for this fear besides his own fevered imagination. In making these accusations, he's playing on 17th-century stereotyping: women were once considered to be the more insatiably and dangerously lustful of the sexes. Furious and hurt, he falls back on angry generalization. In this poem's world, the speaker's beloved could easily be lying about her chastity simply because she's a woman—and women are invariably sexual hypocrites. Readers, meanwhile, probably get the sense that the issue might just boil down to the speaker's jealousy and bruised male ego.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 5
- Lines 7-10

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

When by thy scorn, O murd'ress, I am dead
And that thou think'st thee free
From all solicitation from me,

"The Apparition" begins with a bang. The speaker, a scorned lover, confronts the woman who rejected him, abruptly telling her she's nothing better than a "murd'ress," a female murderer. Any moment now, the speaker assures her, he'll die of a broken heart.

That idea might feel more than a little hyperbolic. No matter how much heartbroken lovers *claim* they're about to keel right over, it doesn't happen all that often. As a wise woman once said, "Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love." Rather than suggesting that this speaker is at death's door, this declaration merely shows that he's in a real state, all worked up about being rejected.

His bitterness and fury come through in the next lines, too. When he's dead, he says, his beloved will believe that she's "free / From all solicitation from me." In other words, she'll feel safe from any more of the speaker's advances. The speaker's petulant tone implies that he's thinking something along the lines of: *And you'll LIKE that, won't you?*

However, there's a key word here: if the beloved dares "think'st" (that is, think) she'll be free of the speaker after he's dead, she thinks wrong. The beloved will only *think* the speaker is out of her hair. He, however, has other posthumous plans—plans which he'll unfold at length over the course of this vengeful poem.

A number of clues here suggest the speaker himself isn't thinking totally clearly. Notice the jolting meter, for instance:

- The poem starts out in iambic pentameter. That means this is a line of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm: "When by | thy scorn, | O murd'- | ress, I | am dead." So far, so familiar.
- The second line, though, gets abruptly shorter, shrinking down to just three iambs (iambic trimeter, that is): "And that | thou think'st | thee free."
- The fourth line swings right back to pentameter again—or does if you read it as the 17th-century John Donne would have pronounced it, with six (!) full syllables in the word "solicitation": "From all | soli- | cita- | tion | from me"

Similar unpredictable metrical lurches will appear all through the poem. The rhyme scheme isn't any more reliable: there's plenty of rhyme here, but it never resolves into a single steady pattern.

All these strange sounds suggest that the speaker is losing it a little in the wake of romantic rejection. The next lines will reveal just how frantic he's become.

LINES 4-5

Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,
And thee, feign'd vestal, in worse arms shall see;

The speaker has just set the scene for a revenge fantasy. He'll be dead of heartbreak; the woman who rejected him will be relieved he's gone and think she's free of him for good.

Au contraire, the speaker goes on. Dying will only give him *more* opportunities to pester her. Dead, he'll be able to turn up at her bedside as a ghost—the "apparition" of the title. There, he says, he'll find his beloved in "worse arms" than his. That is, she'll be lying in bed with a new boyfriend, and that boyfriend will be *terrible*, just a real loser, a *far* worse man than the speaker himself.

These lines let readers in on a little backstory about the speaker's relationship with this woman. When he calls her a "feign'd vestal," he's alluding to the Vestal Virgins, a cult of ancient Roman priestesses who swore to remain perpetually unwed in order to serve Vesta, the goddess of the hearth and home. The word "vestal" came to mean "virgin" (as a noun) or "virginal" (as an adjective).

If the beloved is, in the speaker's eyes, a "feign'd vestal," she's *pretending* either:

- That she's a virgin now;
- Or that she intends to remain a virgin for some

higher purpose: perhaps for spiritual reasons, perhaps just to obey the 17th-century strictures that insisted women should only have sex after they were married.
- In other words, she's turned the speaker down because she claims that, for one reason or another, she wants to preserve her virginity.

The speaker doesn't believe that for one second. The moment she gets a chance, he's sure, his beloved will fall into some other guy's arms. It's purely his petty spite that makes him declare those will be "worse arms" than his—and that his beloved is lying to him, for that matter.

His accusations draw on an unpleasant 17th-century stereotype. Perhaps surprisingly for the modern reader, *women* were once said to be the more insatiably lustful of the sexes (and thus the more deceitful and prone to cheating). The enraged speaker here plays on this sexist idea to call his one-time beloved a hypocrite based on no evidence the reader can see.

Then, he turns to thoughts of exactly how he'll torment her, having made his ghostly way to her bedside.

LINES 6-10

Then thy sick taper will begin to wink,
And he, whose thou art then, being tir'd before,
Will, if thou stir, or pinch to wake him, think
Thou call'st for more,
And in false sleep will from thee shrink;

Describing what he'll do when he's a ghost and comes to haunt his one-time beloved, the speaker starts to really get into his revenge fantasy, picturing the scene in detail.

When he appears, he says, the first thing that will happen is that the "sick taper" (that is, the weak and failing candle) at the beloved's bedside "will begin to wink": her candle will uneasily sputter, making the room dark and sinister, full of leaping shadows. The personification of the candle here hints that the beloved, too, might feel more than a little "sick," and that she might "wink" (or blink) fast in disbelief as she realizes who's come to visit.

Terrified, she'll reach out for her new boyfriend, the "worse" man the speaker imagined earlier. Here, the speaker's imagination gets downright prurient. This boyfriend, he imagines, will be "tir'd before"—words that imply the hypocritically lustful beloved will have already worn him out with her sexual demands.

Already exhausted, this boyfriend won't want to wake up. When the beloved "stir[s]" (that is, moves around) or "pinch[es]" him to try to wake him, he'll only think she's "call[ing] for more" sex, and "shrink" (or pull away) from her in a "false sleep." (Perhaps there's a not-so-subtle suggestive pun implied in that physical "shrink[ing]," too.)

Notice the jolting meter here:

Will, if | thou stir, | or pinch | to wake | him, think
Thou call'st | for more,

That extra-short line of iambic dimeter (two iambs in a row) draws a lot of attention to the idea that the beloved "call'st for more" so often that her new boyfriend just *assumes* she wants more sex.

In this spiteful vision, the beloved's lust proves her downfall. It's because this "feign'd vestal" actually wants sex *so very much*, the speaker imagines, that her future boyfriend will leave her to face the speaker's ghastly visitation all alone.

In short, the speaker's picture of this scene condemns and punishes his rejector for her sexual hypocrisy. Really, though, he's revealing more about himself than he is about his beloved. It's *he* who's tormented by the vision of her having lots of sex with another (and "worse") man.

LINES 11-13

And then, poor aspen wretch, neglected thou
Bath'd in a cold quicksilver sweat wilt lie
A verier ghost than I.

The speaker isn't done with his spiteful story yet. Now, he pictures his beloved's terror as her new boyfriend leaves her to face the speaker's ghost all alone.

Vivid metaphors here help him to imagine his way right into his beloved's skin:

- She'll be left a "poor aspen wretch"—that is, she'll shake like the famously fluttery, shivery leaves of an aspen tree.
- Her whole body will be "bath'd in a cold quicksilver sweat"—covered in sweat as chilly and metallic as beads of quicksilver (or mercury).
- In short, she'll look like "a verier ghost than I"—that is, more like a ghost than the speaker's dreadful apparition itself.

These intensely physical descriptions paint a gloating picture of the beloved having the absolute worst night of her life. However, they're also oddly sympathetic! The speaker's imagination seems to inhabit *her* body here, not his own ghostly form. He may be reveling in her misery (and picturing what his ghost will see as it looms over her), but he's also imagining clearly what she'll feel like from the inside.

This strange, backwards sympathy points to the great irony of this whole poem. For the past 10 lines, the speaker has been plotting his dreadful ghostly revenge on the woman who rejected him. Readers must remember, however, that none of what he's describing is actually happening. This revenge fantasy is just that: a fantasy, and not an especially practicable one.

When the speaker says that his beloved will be "a verier ghost than I," the reader might note that the woman sweating in the bed *is* more of a ghost than the speaker: she's just a specter in the speaker's jealous, tormented brain. For all readers know, the *real* woman actually *does* intend never to sleep with anyone! It's the speaker who's putting her into this situation, and the speaker who's suffering from it. Ironically, he's far more haunted by the vision of his beloved in bed with another man than she'll ever be haunted by the speaker.

Maybe the speaker can describe shaking, sweating, and ghostly, fearful paleness so vividly because he knows them well. These might just be the symptoms of heartbreak, rage, and jealousy.

LINES 14-17

> *What I will say, I will not tell thee now,*
> *Lest that preserve thee; and since my love is spent,*
> *I'had rather thou shouldst painfully repent,*
> *Than by my threat'nings rest still innocent.*

Lost in feverish fantasy, the speaker prepares his *coup de grace*, putting the final cruel touches on his vision of revenge. His ghost, he tells his beloved, will at last speak to her. But he "will not tell thee now" what he plans to say.

That's because his words will be so awful, so unendurably horrific, that they might "preserve" his beloved, rescuing her from the fate he describes. In other words, if he told her what his ghost was going to say, she'd be so frightened that she might change her mind about him *now*, begging him to become her lover after all so she can avoid this hideous fate.

And the speaker doesn't want that at all: no sir, that's the last thing in the world he wants. His one-time love for her, he says, is "spent" and gone, vanished so completely that now he'd much prefer she "painfully repent" for rejecting him than get frightened into accepting him.

He's so very serious that his rhyme scheme introduces an emphatic triplet, the first in the poem: rhyming on "spent," "repent," and "innocent," these last three lines hit hard.

Readers might smell just a hint of desperation here, or taste the slightest note of sour grapes. Besides the speaker's sputtering insistence that he won't reveal what his ghost's words will be because they're *just too terrible* (and not at all because he can't think of them), it's pretty hard to believe that his "love is spent." At the beginning of the poem, after all, he was insisting he was about to drop dead from heartbreak.

This detailed, spiteful, queasy poem, in other words, is more an expression of the rejected speaker's powerlessness and misery than it is a tale of pure hatred.

Read a certain way, the closing lines might almost be poignant. This eloquent speaker imagines using *language* to exert power over the woman who rejected him. In the end, though, words can't get him what he wants. He, not she, is the one who's left all alone, helpless before the terrible apparitions of his imagination.

POETIC DEVICES

HYPERBOLE

This whole poem rests on a foundation of wounded, indignant hyperbole. Rejected by his beloved, the speaker tells her that she's no better than a "murd'ress," a female murderer: he'll *die* of his heartbreak, no doubt about it, and won't she be sorry then?

As Shakespeare's Rosalind once put it: "Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love." The speaker might feel wretched, but suggesting he's going to actually keel over from his misery is putting things a bit strongly.

His whole revenge plot, however, rests on his faith that he'll die and return as a sinister ghost to haunt his beloved while she lies in bed with another (and "worse") man. The most dreadful part of his visit, he imagines, will be when he says terrible words to his one-time beloved—words so terrible, in fact, that he won't even warn her what they are now, in case she's scared into changing her mind and accepting him. He wouldn't want her now even if she begged him to take her back, he claims.

Again, readers might detect just a sniff of hyperbole here. The speaker clearly still has *some* feelings for this woman, even if they've taken the form of hatred. His equally hyperbolic claims that he'll die of love and that he doesn't love her anymore at all add up to one darkly funny picture of crazed heartbreak.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When by thy scorn, O murd'ress, I am dead"
- **Lines 14-17:** "What I will say, I will not tell thee now, / Lest that preserve thee; and since my love is spent, / I'had rather thou shouldst painfully repent, / Than by my threat'nings rest still innocent."

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors bring the speaker's tortured imagination to life, showing just how often he's worked over the details of his revenge.

When he comes back as a ghost to torment his rejecting beloved, the speaker suggests, he can see just how it'll be. As he appears, his beloved's "sick taper will begin to wink"—a moment of personification that connects the uneasy flicker of a candle to the beloved's own queasy, unbelieving "wink" (or blinking).

Terrified, the beloved will reach out for solace and find that her new boyfriend is no help: he'll pretend to be asleep, the speaker spitefully imagines. Alone, the beloved will be nothing more than a "poor aspen wretch"—that is, she'll be shaking like an

aspen, a tree known for its shivery, fluttery leaves. And her whole body will be "bath'd in a cold quicksilver sweat," covered in sweat that stands out in freezing beads like drops of quicksilver (now known as mercury). Pale and cold, she'll look more like a ghost than the speaker himself.

Notice how *intimate* these metaphors are. In this picture, the speaker puts himself in his former beloved's place, feeling her trembling, blinking, and sweat as if they were his own. And perhaps they are. He might feel just as haunted as she—by visions of her in bed with another man!

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "thy sick taper will begin to wink"
- **Line 11:** "poor aspen wretch"
- **Line 12:** "a cold quicksilver sweat"
- **Line 13:** "A verier ghost than I"

ALLUSION

In calling his beloved a "feign'd vestal," the speaker makes an allusion to the religion of ancient Rome. "Vestals" were originally virgin priestesses who served in the temples of the goddess Vesta (who protected hearths—and, by extension, the wellbeing and comfort of homes). Such priestesses tended a perpetual flame, a job so demanding and so sacred that they renounced marriage and sex in order to fully devote themselves to it.

The word "vestal" later came to mean, simply, "virgin." If the speaker's beloved is a "feign'd vestal," then, she's either pretending to *be* a virgin or pretending that she intends to *stay* a virgin—a claim the speaker looks on with a cynical eye.

The use of the word "vestal" in particular, though, also carries all sorts of other, more solemn connotations. The speaker's beloved has clearly told the speaker that she doesn't want him because she doesn't want *anyone*. If she's behaving like a vestal virgin, she might not just be preserving her virginity because she's trying to follow 17th-century sexual codes (in which women were supposed to be virgins until marriage, though of course many were not). She might also be planning to direct her energy elsewhere—perhaps to a spiritual life, perhaps just to her eventual home.

The speaker's bitter allusion suggests he doesn't believe a word of it.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "feign'd vestal"

IRONY

This poem's speaker has a nasty, gloating, vivid mental picture of what it'll be like when his ghost comes back to haunt the woman who rejected him. *Just you wait*, he warns her: *it'll be awful. As I appear, your candle will sputter, your terrible new lover will pretend he doesn't feel you trying to wake him up, and you'll just have to lie there alone, sweating in terror, while I say the worst and most terrifying possible things to you.*

That's all very upsetting, of course. However, readers might reflect that there's more than a little irony here. In obsessively picturing a scene in which his own beloved lies in bed with another man—no matter how much "worse" a man than the speaker feels himself to be—the speaker seems more like the haunted one than the haunter. His present, living self is the one who's hovering over this imagined scene obsessing about it!

The poem's title thus takes on a double meaning. The obvious "apparition" (or ghost, so named because ghosts unexpectedly *appear*) is the speaker's imagined spirit looming at the foot of the bed. But perhaps the more dangerous apparition is what the speaker sees in his mind's eye here and now.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Line 4
- Lines 5-13

VOCABULARY

Apparition () - A ghost—so named because ghosts *appear* unexpectedly.

Thee, Thou, Thy (Line 1, Line 2, Line 4, Line 5, Line 6, Line 7, Line 8, Line 9, Line 10, Line 11, Line 14, Line 15, Line 16) - "Thee," "thou," and "thy" are old-fashioned ways of saying "you" and "your":

- "Thee" is the object form of you (as in "I saw you")
- "Thou" is the subject form of you (as in "You killed me")
- And "thy" just means "your."

While these words sound formal to a modern ear, in Donne's time they were more intimate ways to address someone, like "tu" in French or Spanish. Calling his former beloved "thou," the speaker is making it clear that they had a close relationship—once.

Murd'ress (Line 1) - A contraction of "murderess"—that is, a female murderer.

Think'st (Line 2) - A contraction of "thinkest," which just means "think."

Solicitation (Line 3) - Romantic overtures, flirtations, or pleadings. Note that, in Donne's English, the word would be pronounced with six whole syllables: so-LISS-ih-TAY-see-on.

Feign'd vestal (Line 5) - To "feign" is to fake; a "vestal" is a virgin (so called because of the ancient Roman virgin priestesses who served the goddess Vesta). If the speaker's beloved is a "feign'd vestal," then, she's been pretending to be chaste!

Taper (Line 6) - A candle.

Tir'd (Line 7) - A contraction of "tired."

Call'st (Line 9) - A contraction of "callest," meaning "call."

Shrink (Line 10) - Shy away, pull back.

Poor aspen wretch (Line 11) - An "aspen" is a kind of tree noted for its fluttering, shimmering leaves. If the beloved is a "poor aspen wretch," she's a miserable, unfortunate soul who's quivering like an aspen tree.

Bath'd (Line 12) - A contraction of "bathed."

Quicksilver (Line 12) - Mercury. If the beloved is "bath'd in a cold quicksilver sweat," then her freezing sweat is standing out all over her body like drops of mercury.

Verier (Line 13) - Truer.

Lest (Line 15) - In case.

Preserve (Line 15) - Rescue, save.

Spent (Line 15) - Gone, all used up. There's a possible naughty pun here: "spent" could also mean "ejaculated."

I'had (Line 16) - The contraction here invites readers to pronounce these words somewhat like a modern "I'd," running the "I" and the "had" together into one quick syllable.

Shouldst (Line 16) - Should.

Repent (Line 16) - Feel remorse and regret.

Threat'nings (Line 17) - A contraction of "threatenings."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like many of John Donne's intricate, witty poems, "The Apparition" uses a form of Donne's own invention. Written as one 17-line stanza, the poem darts unpredictably back and forth between longer and shorter lines, suggesting the feverish, lurching movements of the speaker's imagination.

"The Apparition" is *unlike* many of Donne's poems in one important way: it doesn't use a particularly elaborate conceit, an overarching extended metaphor (like the suggestive compasses in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," for instance; he compares rejection to murder, sure, but this more hyperbole than conceit). Perhaps that's because this speaker's thoughts, unlike the thoughts of many of Donne's speakers, aren't particularly complex, elegant, or high-flown. His feelings, on the contrary, are pretty straightforward: rejected by his beloved, he's one squirming mass of helpless rage, pain, and vengefulness.

METER

"The Apparition" is written in an iambic meter. That means that each line is built from iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm (as in "my ghost"). However, the number of meters in a line here often changes without warning. The poem starts out in good old iambic pentameter—that is, five iambs in a row. This is one of the most common meters in English-language poetry, and it sounds like this:

When by | thy scorn, | O murd'- | ress, I | am dead

The next line, however, is written in iambic trimeter—a mere three iambs in a row, like this:

And that | thou think'st | thee free

Such sudden changes give the poem a lurching, crazed rhythm that reflects the speaker's fits of pain, jealousy, and rage. Variations in the meter also help to bring the speaker's voice to life on the page. Listen to line 4, for instance:

Then shall | my ghost | come to | thy bed,

The first foot in this line of four-beat tetrameter isn't an iamb, but its opposite: a trochee, a foot with a DUM-da rhythm. That choice gives a little extra spiteful force to the speaker's fantasy: *Then I'll haunt you, cruel lady!*

RHYME SCHEME

This poem's tortured rhyme scheme runs like this:

ABBABCDCDCEFFEGGG

Like the speaker's stricken, raging mind, this pattern lurches around irregularly. The rhymes never resolve into a clear pattern for long; new rhymes spring up unexpectedly as poisonous mushrooms. All these unpredictable rhymes suggest that, though the speaker has only one thing on his mind—getting revenge on the woman who rejected him—he's not exactly thinking clearly.

The most focused series of rhymes appears right at the end of that poem, when, in an intense triplet, the speaker insists that he wouldn't take his former lover back even if she changed her mind. (He might, readers imagine, protest a little too much to be believed.)

SPEAKER

This poem's speaker is a man who's been rejected by the woman he was in love with. He's not taking it well. Miserable and melodramatic, he's certain he's going to die of heartbreak. If he does, he reflects, at least it'll give him a chance for revenge: he can haunt his one-time beloved and whatever awful guy she ends up with, appearing at their bedside to whisper words so dreadful he can't even say what they'll be now.

The speaker's revenge fantasy also has a distinct note of self-torture. In his vision, his beloved's next boyfriend—while he might be a "worse" man than the speaker (and apparently not that into the beloved)—is still definitely in bed with her. Though the speaker presents himself as a vengeful ghost, *he's* really the haunted one, tormented by ghastly imaginings.

SETTING

There's no clear setting in this poem—unless readers count the speaker's imagination. Envisioning how he'll haunt his one-time beloved after he dies of heartbreak, the speaker pictures his beloved's bedroom in grim detail, from the flickering bedside candle to the "cold quicksilver sweat" that will stand out on her forehead when his ghost turns up to say *boo*.

Some of the speaker's reflections on lyin', cheatin' women come straight out of Donne's 17th-century English world. Donne wrote more than once on the theme of female infidelity; so did plenty of his contemporaries. Perhaps surprisingly for modern readers, the 17th-century stereotype was that *women*, not men, were unquenchably lustful—and thus often deceitful.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne (1572-1631) is remembered as one of the foremost of the "metaphysical poets"—though he never called himself one. The later writer Samuel Johnson coined the term, using it to describe a set of 17th-century English writers who wrote witty, passionate, intricate, cerebral poetry about love and God; George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Thomas Traherne were some others.

Donne was the prototypical metaphysical poet: a master of elaborate conceits and complex sentences, a great writer of love poems that mingle images of holiness with filthy puns. But during his lifetime, he was mostly a poet in private. In public life, he was an important clergyman, rising to become Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Like the vast majority of his poetry, "The Apparition" didn't appear in print until several years after his death in 1633, when his collection *Poems* was posthumously published.

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 their enthusiasm slowly resurrected Donne's reputation. Donne is now remembered as one of the most powerful and influential of poets, and he's inspired later writers from T.S. Eliot to Yeats to A.S. Byatt.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In his youth, John Donne was a notorious ladies' man with plenty of experience both breaking hearts and having his heart broken. His sometimes foolhardy decision-making around women came to a head in an oddly touching way: when he fell deeply in love with Anne More, an important official's daughter, he eloped with her without getting her family's permission. This romantic leap of faith backfired on him when his wife's angry father had him thrown in prison.

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 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 pious in a rather paranoid way, anxious about demons and witches. Luckily for Donne, James was also a good judge of talent and a great patron of the arts and sciences; he respected Donne's poetry and valued his general brilliance.

However, he refused to accept Donne as a run-of-the-mill courtier: he was canny enough to see that Donne would make an outstanding clergyman. The reluctant Donne eventually had to bow to 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

- Donne in Print — See images of the first published collection of Donne's works, Poems (1633). (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-john-donnes-poems-1633)
- A Brief Biography — Learn all about Donne's life and work at the British Library's website. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-donne)
- Donne's Tomb — Donne didn't die of love—but he did leave behind a striking and eerie tomb in St. Paul's Cathedral. Learn more about this tomb and its history from the Church Monuments Society. (https://churchmonumentssociety.org/monument-of-the-month/the-john-donne-monument-d-1631-by-nicholas-stone-st-pauls-cathedral-london)
- More Donne Resources — Visit the Poetry Foundation to read more of Donne's poetry and learn more about his life. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne)
- Donne's Legacy — Learn more about Donne's lasting

influence in this article by Katherine Rundell. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/apr/15/plague-poems-defiant-wit-and-penis-puns-why-john-donne-is-a-poet-for-our-times)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Hymn to God the Father
- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- A Valediction: Of Weeping
- Holy Sonnet 10: Death, be not proud
- Holy Sonnet 14: Batter my heart, three-person'd God
- Holy Sonnet 6: This is my play's last scene
- Holy Sonnet 7: At the round earth's imagined corners
- Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness
- No Man Is an Island
- Song: Go and catch a falling star
- The Canonization
- The Flea
- The Good-Morrow
- The Sun Rising
- The Triple Fool
- To His Mistress Going to Bed

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