The Flower

POEM TEXT

How fresh, oh Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! even as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
Grief melts away
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

Who would have thought my shriveled heart
Could have recovered greenness? It was gone
Quite underground; as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown,
Where they together
All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

These are thy wonders, Lord of power,
Killing and quickening, bringing down to hell
And up to heaven in an hour;
Making a chiming of a passing-bell.
We say amiss
This or that is:
Thy word is all, if we could spell.

Oh that I once past changing were,
Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!
Many a spring I shoot up fair,
Offering at heaven, growing and groaning thither;
Nor doth my flower
Want a spring shower,
My sins and I joining together.

But while I grow in a straight line,
Still upwards bent, as if heaven were mine own,
Thy anger comes, and I decline:
What frost to that? what pole is not the zone
Where all things burn,
When thou dost turn,
And the least frown of thine is shown?

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing. Oh, my only light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
To make us see we are but flowers that glide;
Which when we once can find and prove,
Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;
Who would be more,
Swelling through store,
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

SUMMARY

Oh God, the times when you return to me are so refreshing and lovely! They're just like when the spring flowers appear, not only bringing delight to their own season, but retroactively making winter seem less painful. Sorrow melts just like snow in May, as if it had never even existed.

Who could have believed that my withered heart could have sprung up alive again? It had disappeared far beneath the earth, like flowers withdrawing into their bulbs after they've grown in spring. Underground, they hide out through all the chill of winter, appearing to be dead, but still secretly alive.

These, mighty God, are your miraculous powers: you can kill and create life, flinging people down to hell or up to heaven in the space of a mere hour, turning the ring of a funeral bell to sweet music. We little humans think wrong when we believe we understand what's happening: your word is the only law, if only we knew how to read it.

Oh, how I wish I were away from all this change, safe with you in the eternal springtime of Heaven. In my metaphorical springtimes here on earth, I often feel like I'm a flower reaching eagerly toward paradise, grunting with sheer effort to reach it. And this flower of mine never lacks for water: I cry with remorse for my sins, and my tears fall like rain.

When I stretch upward like this, trying to reach heaven as if I already felt sure I'd make it, you get angry with me, and I fall to the ground again. No frost is as chilling as your anger; no part of the globe is anything less than Hell when you have the slightest frown on your face.

But now that I'm old, I'm in bloom once more. I've fallen time after time, but now I'm alive and writing. I can smell the fresh dew and rainfall again, and take pleasure in writing poetry. Oh, God, my only illumination, it's hard to believe that I'm the same person who suffered through your storms all the long "night" of my earlier life.

These, loving God, are your miracles: you teach us that we're nothing more than flowers that come and go. Once we know this and truly believe it, you prepare a garden for us to live in. Those of us who want to be bigger and better and more powerful than we are end up sacrificing their place in Heaven to their own ambitious pride.

THEMES

FAITH, MERCY, AND RENEWAL

The devout speaker of "The Flower" feels as if he's going through a miraculous, spring-like rebirth in his final years. Having endured terrible times of sorrow and grief, in his "age" he feels that he's blooming again, given a whole new breath of life by God's overflowing mercy. Having faith, to this speaker, means learning to trust that God's love can (and will) create new life and joy even from the darkest despair.

The poem's aging speaker reflects that, against all the odds, he feels like a spring "flower," blooming anew after a hard winter. His happiness now makes the chilly "snow" of his past "grief" seem never to have existed at all: it's "as if there were no such cold thing." God, he feels, has restored him to life in just the way that spring restores new life to the earth every year.

This isn't just a miraculous renewal on its own; it's particularly astonishing because of just how deep in despair the speaker has been. Once, he felt that his "pride"—his efforts to be self-righteously pious and "good"—had brought God's "anger" down upon him, laying him low. In those times, the whole world might as well have been the place "where all things burn" (that is, Hell itself). Part of what's amazing about his late-in-life contentment, the speaker thus suggests, is that it forms such a sharp contrast with the hard times he suffered before. Back then, he never could have imagined returning to the happiness and harmony he enjoys now—never believed that his "shriveled heart / Could have recovered greenness."

But his suffering, the speaker now realizes, was all part of God's plan, too. It's just another of God's "wonders" to bring people both sorrow and joy, teaching them to be humble, simple, and content—and preparing them to feel exactly the gratitude and astonishment the speaker feels now when they return to joy *after* sorrow. Being a person of faith, the poem suggests, means understanding that God will always ultimately be merciful and generous, bringing fresh new life from even the wildest "tempests" of misery.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-49

SPIRITUAL PRIDE AND HUMILITY

A lifetime of hard-earned experience has taught the speaker of "The Flower" that spiritual pride—a belief that one can weasel one's way into God's good books with enough piety—leads only to failure and sorrow. Striving to reach Heaven by being self-importantly *holy*, the speaker observes, has brought him nothing but grief; it's only by humbly trusting in God's plan for him (and accepting his own smallness and weakness) that he's found true contentment and renewed joy. Piety, the poem suggests, is sometimes just a disguise for pride, a way that people try to be better than they really are. Real faith, meanwhile, means knowing that one is nothing more than one humble "flower" in God's garden.

Sometimes, the poem's speaker reflects, he tries to reach Heaven completely under his own steam—and it never goes well. Striving "upwards," behaving as if Paradise were already "his own," he always meets with a nasty shock: God's "anger comes," and he finds himself lost in misery, ashamed of his own "sins" and unable to enjoy life in the slightest. In this speaker's experience, trying too hard to be a good and pious person always backfires: it's a kind of spiritual arrogance to believe that one knows the best way to please God, or can please God by dint of sheer effort.

The speaker thus suggests that people have to learn not to try to be "more" than they are. Being a devout person doesn't mean trying to be a big shot in the eyes of God; it means growing as simply as a "flower," not fighting against one's own circumstances, one's own nature—or the fact that one's own life will be brief and relatively unimportant. Only by relinquishing one's arrogant "pride," the poem suggests, can one hope to find either contentment on earth or a place in God's eternal "garden."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 24-35
- Lines 43-49

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

How fresh, oh Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! even as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.

"The Flower" begins in the middle of an inner springtime—that

is, a time of rebirth and renewal. The poem's speaker, astonished to find himself happy again after a time of deep sorrow, makes a grateful apostrophe to God, marveling at just how "sweet and clean" God's "returns" are.

The word "returns" here has multiple meanings. On the one hand, those "returns" might be gifts—answers to the speaker's prayers. On the other, they might be God's literal *returns*, times when God seems to come back after an absence. And perhaps *both* of these are true at once: God's return is an answer to the speaker's prayer.

Such "returns" feel, to the speaker, as joyful as early spring—and as restorative. Listen to the speaker's simile here:

> [...] even as the flowers in spring;
> To which, besides their own demean,
> The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.

In other words, God's presence is as much a delight to the speaker as the sight of new flowers. When flowers come out in spring, the speaker observes, they don't just beautify their own season (their "demean," or domain). They make even the recent "frosts" of winter look better in retrospect. Those frosts can't have been so bad if they led to these flowers.

These images of changing seasons thus evoke the speaker's sheer *relief*. If God's "returns" are like early spring, then the speaker must recently have been suffering through a long cold metaphorical winter—a time of emotional "frosts" when God seemed either not to be there, or not to be listening. Now that God is back, even that icy time seems warmed by "tributes of pleasure."

LINES 5-7

> *Grief melts away*
> *Like snow in May,*
> *As if there were no such cold thing.*

When God makes a spring-like return, grief disappears. It "melts away," the speaker concludes (with another vivid simile):

> Like snow in May,
> As if there were no such cold thing.

His language here suggests just how miraculous this transformation feels to him. When he calls snow a "cold thing," it's as if he's trying to describe something he's never seen before, something almost incomprehensible.

And if that metaphorical snow is like his past "grief," then that *grief* must seem almost incomprehensible, too. God's "returns" don't merely make the present moment seem lovely as spring. They also make past suffering seem unimportant, or even nonsensical. The speaker's wonder here isn't just about how blissful God's presence feels, but at how *transformative* it is. Through God, the speaker suggests, past pain takes on a new shape and a new meaning—and perhaps even stops hurting.

Metaphorically connecting feelings to the seasons and the landscape, the speaker helps readers to imagine this experience with their whole bodies. Readers who have endured a long cold winter will know that the first days of spring really can seem miraculous; even when you know they're coming, they feel like magic. That, the speaker suggests, is exactly what it feels like in his own heart right now.

The speaker's changing meter asks readers to pay special attention to these closing lines. The stanza's first four lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic pentameter—that is, lines of four iambs (metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) and lines of five iambs. Those longer lines feel thoughtful, reflective, and conversational.

But in the stanza's last three lines, the speaker introduces two short, punchy lines of dimeter (just two feet) before returning to tetrameter again:

> Grief melts away
> Like snow in May,

(It's also possible to read that first foot of line 5 as a spondee (two stressed beats in a row: "Grief melts"), but the beat is still generally iambic.) These surprising moments evoke the speaker's own amazement—and the sheer force of God's power to transform icy grief into budding joy.

LINES 8-10

> *Who would have thought my shriveled heart*
> *Could have recovered greenness? It was gone*
> *Quite underground;*

The next stanza begins with the speaker's marveling rhetorical question:

> Who would have thought my shriveled heart
> Could have recovered greenness? [...]

And with that question, the poem launches into its central conceit: the speaker envisions himself as a flower, like the springtime blossoms of the first stanza. Keep an eye out for the way this extended metaphor changes and deepens as it travels through the poem; the speaker will gradually explore everything that being a flower might mean.

Here, the speaker presents his "heart" as a withered plant—to all appearances, dead. Take a look at the enjambment of line 10:

> Could have recovered greenness? It was gone
> Quite underground; [...]

For a moment, the word "gone" is left hanging there alone at

the end of the line, making it sound as if the speaker's "heart" were "gone" altogether. Perhaps it's as much a surprise to the speaker as to the reader that his heart has only gone "quite underground," hiding away to await the spring.

Again, there's a sense here that the speaker's transformation is both miraculous and perfectly natural. It's just part of a perennial flower's life cycle to disappear underground from time to time. The human heart, this conceit suggests, goes through similar cycles, sometimes appearing as if it's "shriveled" for good, only to spring up into new life. In this image, flowers become a symbol of perpetual hope and renewal.

But the speaker's marvel over his heart's restored "greenness" makes it clear that, to the person who's enduring a "shriveled" period, it sure doesn't *feel* as if one's soul will ever blossom again. In his soul's winter, this speaker clearly felt as if his life might be over—as if he'd be miserable forever.

LINES 10-14

as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown,
Where they together
All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

Here, the speaker develops his conceit of the soul as a flower through a simile that echoes the first stanza. There, God's "returns" were like flowers; here, the flowers are the speaker's own "heart."

The use of the same simile to describe both God's works and the speaker's heart suggests the speaker's *intimacy* with God—his sense that God's presence shapes all the little movements of his soul.

Now, the speaker explores this simile even more deeply through personification. When flowers disappear under the ground, he says, they're not dying, but going on a family visit. Beneath the earth, they "see their mother-root" and "keep house" together through the long, cold winter.

The same is true of his heart. It might have looked "dead to the world" during his time of sorrow: but it was never truly dead, only in hiding. Perhaps it was even being sheltered and cared for—though he, apparently looking on at his own "shriveled" heart in dismay, wouldn't have known it.

There's a sense here that the speaker has been standing a little apart from his own heart, learning about its workings. He's certainly felt the sorrow of being "shriveled." But perhaps he's only realizing now that those bleak, withered winters of the soul are never final. Nor are they some kind of terrible damnation: the tender image of the "mother-root" suggests that there's something *loving* going on here, even in the times when God seems far away.

And by personifying the flowers, the speaker quietly hints that he's talking not just about his own heart, but about everyone's heart. His own amazing experience of emotional death and rebirth, he's discovering, is part of being human.

LINES 15-18

These are thy wonders, Lord of power,
Killing and quickening, bringing down to hell
And up to heaven in an hour;
Making a chiming of a passing-bell.

In the second stanza, the speaker looked inward, imagining his own heart as a flower wintering deep beneath the earth—and now reborn into springy "greenness" again. As the third stanza begins, the speaker's tone changes: looking outward (and upward), he makes an awestruck apostrophe to God, declaring, "These are thy wonders, Lord of power."

And listen to the way he describes God's "wonders":

Killing and quickening, bringing down to hell
And up to heaven in an hour;
Making a chiming of a passing-bell.

The parallelism here (all those "ing" verbs) emphasizes action: those strong verbs suggest God's "power" to alter the world in an instant.

Again, the speaker seems particularly fascinated by God's ability not just to *change* the world, but to *transfigure* it—that is, to turn one thing into another. God doesn't only work in opposites, dealing out death and life ("killing and quickening"), or flinging people from "hell" to "heaven." God also "make[s] a chiming of a passing-bell," *transforming* the solemn tolling of a funeral bell into light, lovely music.

In other words, God isn't some kind of cosmic wheel of fortune, giving people good and bad luck in turn. Instead, God works by making beauty *out of* misery—in much the way the speaker described in the first stanza, when he imagined spring flowers bringing "tributes of pleasure" to winter frosts (that is, making the frosts themselves seem more pleasant).

God's "wonders," then, aren't only the sheer power to alter people's destinies. They're God's ability to bring life and beauty out of death, and even to transmute death *into* life and beauty.

LINES 19-21

We say amiss
This or that is:
Thy word is all, if we could spell.

This stanza's closing lines feel particularly emphatic. When people think they know how the world works, the speaker flatly declares, they think "amiss" (that is, they're wrong): only God's "word" determines how the world works. And no mere human can "spell" that divine word.

This metaphor suggests that it's only foolish arrogance that

makes people believe that they can accurately "read" their own circumstances. God's "word" is both all-powerful and unknowable. And even events that seem utterly awful are spoken in God's mysterious language.

To this speaker, that's not as frightening a proposition as it might sound at first. Given new "greenness" after sorrow, he now deeply believes that God's "word" is ultimately restorative.

Take a look back at the "wonders" the speaker described a few lines ago:

- God has the power of "killing and quickening."
- And God has the power to carry people "down to hell / And up to heaven in an hour."

Notice, in each of those instances, that God *begins* by "killing" and *ends* by "quickening" (or bringing to life). There's no catastrophe, in other words, that doesn't move toward redemption and new life. God might sometimes ring the "passing-bell" of sorrow and loss, but God always transforms it into the "chiming" of joyful music in the end.

This sentiment fits right into George Herbert's Christian faith—a faith that infuses most of his poetry. In this framework of "killing and quickening," the Crucifixion becomes a hopeful template for all human suffering: even Christ, an aspect of God, himself gets killed, only to be resurrected. To this devout speaker, the worst misery is only a movement toward new life.

And take a look at the way the rhyme scheme echoes this idea:

- Each stanza begins with a reflective ABAB pattern.
- Then, the two shorter lines break in with a startling CC couplet—
- Only to be brought back into harmony with a final B rhyme.

This pattern reflects the speaker's belief that nothing is ever really out of step with an overarching, harmonious pattern.

LINES 22-25

Oh that I once past changing were,
Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!
Many a spring I shoot up fair,
Offering at heaven, growing and groaning thither;

The poem's speaker has developed a hard-earned faith that sorrow and suffering are all part of God's redemptive plan. But that doesn't mean he exactly looks forward to the next time he's enduring a dark emotional winter, feeling that God is far away.

At the beginning of the fourth stanza, he cries out to God in an apostrophe that takes a new tone. Now, he sounds less solemnly worshipful and more *longing*:

Oh that I once past changing were,
Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!

These lines might come straight out of a love poem. Writers from Ben Jonson to John Keats have imagined erotic love as a preserver, a power that might make even transient flowers immortal. This speaker's vision of "Paradise" makes God seem more like his lover than like his stern taskmaster.

But this passionate longing to be with God in heaven, "past changing" in an eternal spring, is precisely what gets the speaker into trouble. In the metaphorical springtimes of his life on earth—times when he's happy and things seem to be going well—he gets ahead of himself and tries to reach heaven on his own steam and his own schedule. Perhaps, for example, he tries to be especially pious in the hopes of earning God's permanent favor. But, as the end of the previous stanza suggested, he's learned it's folly to imagine that he can suss out God's "word" this way.

He returns to his conceit here, imagining himself as a flower straining to grow as tall as it can—an obviously ludicrous idea. Listen to the sounds he uses here:

Many a spring I shoot up fair,
Offering at heaven, growing and groaning thither;

There's something pretty funny about the idea of a flower "groaning" as it grows. The grinding /gr/ alliteration and moaning /o/ assonance here bring to life the image of a little spring violet, stretching for the sky as hard as it can, beads of sweat breaking out on its petals.

The speaker, in other words, *knows* how ridiculous he looks when he tries his hardest to reach "heaven" himself—and how much it goes against the order of things to do so. Even a veiled Biblical allusion here makes that point: the "lilies of the field," after all, famously don't "toil."

But the speaker's longing to be closer to God—and to escape all the unpredictable ups and downs of life on earth—is so strong that it's hard for him to stop himself from striving.

LINES 26-28

Nor doth my flower
Want a spring shower,
My sins and I joining together.

All the speaker's efforts to evade suffering through sheer force of will quickly come to nothing. As the speaker ruefully remarks, the harder he tries to be good, the more he finds himself weeping remorsefully over the "sins" he just can't seem to stop committing.

Once more, he fits this idea into his flower conceit:

Nor doth my flower

Want a spring shower,
My sins and I joining together.

The shape of these lines cleverly reflects the speaker's predicament. Those "spring showers" are the speaker's tears; he's both the weather and the flower in this metaphor. The image suggests exactly the problem: in trying to find his way to heaven through his own efforts, the speaker has gotten too wrapped up in *himself*. In this system, he's the whole world, from earth to sky.

And that's exactly what he *doesn't* want. Remember, all this striving is part of his effort to make it to *God's* "Paradise." But his arrogant efforts to reach that Paradise can only tangle him up, keeping him obsessively focused on the state of his own soul and his own feelings.

Notice, too, that this "spring shower" of tears comes from "My sins and I joining together." There's more than one way to read those words:

- Perhaps the shower comes from the combination of the speaker and his sins: in other words, when he sins, he cries.
- But perhaps that shower also *melds* the speaker with his sins, "joining" the two of them "together."

In other words, the speaker's efforts to scrupulously avoid sin might only create a different *kind* of sin: spiritual pride.

LINES 29-35

But while I grow in a straight line,
Still upwards bent, as if heaven were mine own,
Thy anger comes, and I decline:
What frost to that? what pole is not the zone
Where all things burn,
When thou dost turn,
And the least frown of thine is shown?

As the past stanzas have warned, the speaker's spiritual pride—his belief that he can behave well enough, by his own standards, to scramble right up to heaven and escape all of life's sufferings—is about to ironically backfire. It's just when the speaker tries to grow his flowery self "in a straight line," behaving as if he knows exactly what it takes to join God in paradise, that God's "anger comes."

To unpack the conceit a little: in the midst of all his striving, the speaker is forced to acknowledge that what happens to him *isn't totally up to him*. He can't evade suffering by being good—and it's prideful even to think that he can.

Also notice the way the speaker points out how he's trying to grow in a "straight line"—to take a direct route to heaven, bypassing what God might have in mind for him. It turns out this attempt at a shortcut is only a diversion.

For when the speaker strives too hard, God's "anger" arrives, in the form of just the kind of winter of sorrow the speaker felt himself awakening from in the first stanza. In fact, it's a winter worse than winter: "What frost to that?" the speaker asks. These are times of abject misery.

God's "anger" is so complete that it feels like freezing and burning at once. Without God, the speaker rhetorically asks:

[...] what pole is not the zone
Where all things burn,
When thou dost turn,
And the least frown of thine is shown?

In other words, the whole world becomes nothing less than hell at God's slightest "frown."

All of this might not seem to fit into the speaker's picture of a loving God's perpetual kindly renewal. But, as the previous stanzas pointed out, "killing" comes before "quickening." Watch how the speaker develops this idea further in the next stanzas.

LINES 36-42

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing. Oh, my only light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

In the past two stanzas, the speaker has explored an old spiritual habit of his: trying to dodge life's sufferings by being pridefully good, and thus bringing God's "anger"—and even more suffering—down on his own head. Here, in the second-to-last stanza, he turns from memories of futile striving back to that miraculous inner "spring" he described back at the beginning of the poem.

Listen to the unadorned language of these lines:

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing. [...]

The conceit of the speaker as a flower is still present: he "bud[s] again." But this is also a glimpse of a human being's real life. In his inner spring, the speaker can again relish the simple joys of getting up in the morning, smelling the air, and sitting down to do some "versing," writing poems like this one.

That the speaker mentions writing twice shows just how important his creativity is to his happiness, and hints that, in his soul's winters, he can no more "verse" than a flower can bloom through ice.

And that he points out the distinct smells of the "dew and rain"—two different kinds of sweet moisture, so different from his "showers" of sinners' tears—suggests that he's no longer obsessively focused on his inner life, but looking out, paying attention, relishing the changing world around him. Perhaps this moment even gives readers a glimpse of the speaker's surroundings: his inner spring might be taking place in an *outer* spring, when sweet showers make the world come to life again and the morning dew shines on the grass.

The simple ability to take in the world and live his life strikes him as no less than a miracle. Listen again to his phrasing here:

> And now in age I bud again,
> After so many deaths I live and write;
> I once more smell the dew and rain,
> And relish versing. [...]

All that anaphora makes it sound as if the speaker is tallying up his new pleasures in astonishment, one by one.

These are hard-won joys. The speaker has had to endure many "deaths," and to reach his old "age," to get here. But perhaps that only makes the experience feel more miraculous: who, after all, expects to "bud" with new life in "age"?

It's no wonder, then, that the stanza ends with another overflow of feeling, an apostrophe to God that once again sounds a lot like something one might say to a lover:

> [...] Oh, my only light,
> It cannot be
> That I am he
> On whom thy tempests fell all night.

The drawn-out /o/ assonance of "Oh, my only" gives this cry an especially passionate ring.

These lines might take readers back to the beginning of the poem, when the speaker reflected that, when spring comes, winter hardly seems to have existed. Here, he imagines God's anger as a metaphorical "tempest," a storm—one, perhaps, that has washed him clean and made him flower anew, even if it felt like the end of the world at the time.

LINES 43-46

> *These are thy wonders, Lord of love,*
> *To make us see we are but flowers that glide;*
> *Which when we once can find and prove,*
> *Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;*

The poem's final stanza echoes its third. Back in line 15, the speaker declared, "These are thy wonders, Lord of power." Now, he repeats himself, with a difference:

> These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
> To make us see we are but flowers that glide;

In other words: the dark metaphorical "nights" of the soul the speaker has sometimes suffered, lashed by the "tempests" of God's anger, were only ever meant to guide him, to bring him to a new kind of life. If God is trying to teach him that he's only a "flower," God is showing him that one thing flowers *don't* do is strain and struggle to be beautiful, or good, or righteous.

What flowers *do* do is grow, simply and gently, in their own time. They grow not because they *try* to grow, but because that's the way nature—in the speaker's view, just another letter of God's "word"—works. They "glide," easily and simply. And as they "glide," they also glide *past*, like boats on a river; a flower's life, after all, is not long.

All these ideas make the speaker's simple "relish" of life in stanza 6 feel even more meaningful. Rather than rushing around battering his head against a wall of righteousness, the speaker is just quietly *enjoying* what God has given him. And it's through that enjoyment that he comes to the kind of spiritual understanding that allows him to write this very poem.

In the speaker's eyes, it's not by striving to be self-righteously good that one makes it into God's "garden." But making that mistake—pridefully believing that one knows all the right boxes to tick to get into heaven—is part of how one *learns* it's a mistake. People have to "find and prove" the fact that they're just humble flowers, growing and fading according to God's will, before they can find the ease and peace of that divine garden.

This would fit right in with the idea of God "making a chiming of a passing-bell": perhaps times of grief, loss, and error are actually what allow that transformation to take place.

LINES 47-49

> *Who would be more,*
> *Swelling through store,*
> *Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.*

In the end, the speaker's rich conceit of the soul as a flower is not only about the usual things spring flowers symbolize: hope, renewal, and (paradoxically) both mortality and immortality. In this poem, all of those different ideas about what flowers mean feed an even deeper idea: being a flower, to this speaker, is about being *humble*.

To be humble means to give up "offering at heaven" and to instead trust God to shape his life and growth. In particular, it means trusting that not only will frightening "tempests" and "frosts" of sorrow and pain somehow lead to renewal, but also that this renewal will transform or even erase the hard times, making it seem "as if there were no such cold thing" as grief.

But, as the speaker pointed out in stanza 6, this is a lesson he has had to learn through countless "deaths" over the years. It's taken him until his "age" to understand that trying to be self-

righteously good (and thus to stay safe from all pain) only ever backfires.

So there's a hard-earned lesson in these final lines. Listen to the intensity of the sounds here:

> Who would be more,
> Swelling through store,
> Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

That forceful /s/ and /p/ alliteration and weaving /or/ and /i/ assonance command the reader's attention, as if the speaker is saying: *Listen up; learn from me*; *I know, I've been there*. Trying to be "more" than the humble flower you are, the speaker warns, trying to "store" up righteousness like a squirrel stores nuts, is a common human error—and perhaps one from which he can help to rescue others.

These last lines might seem like a rather stern ending to a poem that's ultimately about love, mercy, and miracles. But then, God's "wonders" are works of both "power" and "love"—and as the repetitions of lines 15 and 43 suggest, perhaps God's power and God's love are ultimately the same thing. Even pain, in this speaker's view, is only there to carry people toward joy.

And take another look at the speaker's language here. The prideful, he suggests, forfeit, not Paradise, but "their Paradise." This might call to mind the speaker's own quiet little earthly paradise in stanza 6: the simple experience of being able to enjoy daily life. The speaker isn't saying that God casts the prideful into hell—but that the proud create their own private hell, while the humble accept their own private heaven. This is a point as much to do with life as with the afterlife.

The poem's structure provides a quiet final word on the matter. Here at the end, readers might notice that the poem is built from seven stanzas. They might further notice that each of those stanzas is a septet—a stanza of seven lines. Smaller units of seven making up a larger unit of seven: each stanza here becomes a microcosm of the poem as a whole.

And that, to this poem's speaker, is the nature of the world itself. There's nothing so small—no flower, no rainy morning, no movement of the human heart—that it doesn't form an integral part of God's "word."

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

Like a lot of metaphysical poetry, "The Flower" is built around a central conceit, a complex extended metaphor that shapes and inspires the speaker's thoughts. Here, the conceit is clear from the title: the speaker imagines himself (and every living person) as a flower in God's garden.

Plenty of other writers have used flowers to symbolize the beauty and fragility of human life. Flowers, after all, live only briefly. They're lovely while they're around, but—in the words of another English poet—no sooner do they blossom than they "fall that very hour." Thinking of himself as a flower, the poem's speaker confronts the fact that life is as short as it's sweet. It doesn't do to get too puffed up with self-importance if one's a flower, the poem suggests; no matter how beautifully one blooms, one will soon "wither."

Similarly, the idea of flowers as a symbol of new life is a familiar one. As he imagines himself miraculously recovering his "greenness" in his old age—the traditional "winter" of life—the speaker suggests that God has revived him the way that spring revives the earth, melting all the frosts of "grief." Here, the flower conceit offers an image of eternal renewal and hope.

But down in the poem's roots, there's a rich and novel idea of what *else* flowers might mean. If the speaker's life has taught him his life is as brief, fragile, and humble as one flower's among many, it has also taught him how such flowers behave. Flowers, he observes, don't strain toward the sun, "groaning" with effort. Rather, they just *grow*, guided not by their own efforts, but by the order of nature—and thus, in this speaker's view, by the will of God.

In other words: being a flower doesn't just mean being chastened by the thought that life is short and you're not that special—or made hopeful by the thought that, with the help of a merciful God, joy always returns after sorrow. It means learning to humbly accept God's plan, and discovering in that plan the permanent joy of the "garden" of Paradise.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "How fresh, oh Lord, how sweet and clean / Are thy returns! even as the flowers in spring; / To which, besides their own demean, / The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring."
- **Lines 8-9:** " Who would have thought my shriveled heart / Could have recovered greenness?"
- **Line 23:** "Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!"
- **Lines 24-28:** "Many a spring I shoot up fair, / Offering at heaven, growing and groaning thither; / Nor doth my flower / Want a spring shower, / My sins and I joining together."
- **Lines 29-31:** "But while I grow in a straight line, / Still upwards bent, as if heaven were mine own, / Thy anger comes, and I decline:"
- **Line 36:** " And now in age I bud again,"
- **Lines 43-46:** " These are thy wonders, Lord of love, / To make us see we are but flowers that glide; / Which when we once can find and prove, / Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;"

METAPHOR

Around its central conceit of the speaker—and people in general—as flowers in God's garden, "The Flower" weaves an elegant tapestry of supportive metaphors. All this figurative language helps the speaker to express complex spiritual insights in tangible, graspable terms.

Many of these metaphors enrich and deepen the conceit of soul-as-flower. For instance, take a look at the vivid image that begins the second stanza:

> Who would have thought my shriveled heart
> Could have recovered greenness? It was gone
> Quite underground;

In this image, the speaker's heart isn't just any flower, but a *perennial* flower: a blossom that grows from a bulb, then shrivels and retreats underground, only to "bud again" the next spring. The speaker's amazement at his heart's recovery here draws on a recognizable human experience: even when you *know* that spring will come and the flowers will grow again, there's something miraculous about it every time. The same, in the speaker's eyes, is true of joy after sorrow.

The speaker also uses seasonal metaphors to point out how ridiculous his past "pride" looks to him now. Imagining himself as a flower pointlessly "offering at heaven," struggling to grow faster and taller than God means it to, he also sees himself as the weather:

> Nor doth my flower
> Want a spring shower,
> My sins and I joining together.

In other words, even as the speaker tries to be good in order to earn a place in heaven, he weeps stormily over his sins, which he just can't seem to eradicate. This rueful image also makes it clear that part of the speaker's error was seeing *himself* as the whole world: both the flower and the rain that makes it grow.

Now, knowing better, the speaker can see that it's God's will (and God's weather) that moves the flowers:

> [...] Oh, my only light,
> It cannot be
> That I am he
> On whom thy tempests fell all night.

This pair of metaphors subtly points out that God's warm "light" and God's terrible "tempests" (or storms) are *both* part of what develops the soul's flower. God's anger, the speaker discovers, might feel awful, but it's also a necessary kind of education.

But "Paradise," the speaker declares, is the place where all these changes of weather come to an end. Paradoxically, it's only when people understand that they're nothing more than "flowers that glide"—changing, mortal, and humble—that they can at last reach the metaphorical "garden" of heaven, an Eden of eternal spring.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-10:** " Who would have thought my shriveled heart / Could have recovered greenness? It was gone / Quite underground;"
- **Line 21:** " Thy word is all, if we could spell."
- **Lines 26-28:** " Nor doth my flower / Want a spring shower, / My sins and I joining together."
- **Line 36:** " And now in age I bud again,"
- **Lines 39-42:** "Oh, my only light, / It cannot be / That I am he / On whom thy tempests fell all night."
- **Line 44:** "To make us see we are but flowers that glide;"
- **Line 46:** "Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker's apostrophes to God make this poem feel both worshipful and intimate.

Talking to God directly, this poem's speaker often uses the voice of an awestruck disciple. When he declares, for instance, that "These are thy wonders, Lord of power," he sounds almost as if he's quoting a psalm: his voice is not just respectful, but elevated, formal, and solemn. In apostrophes like these, he emphasizes just how mighty God is, and by extension just how small and humble he himself is.

But in other moments, the speaker reaches out to God with endearments, calling God "my only light" or delighting in "how sweet and clean" God's "returns" are (a word that might suggest either God's gifts or God's literal *returns*, the times when God seems to come back after an absence). Language like this might almost come from a love poem:

> Oh that I once past changing were,
> Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!

In fact, the poet Ben Jonson used a similar image of deathless flowers in his famous (and plainly erotic) "Song to Celia," a love song composed only a few years before Herbert wrote "The Flower."

Apostrophes like these make it clear that the speaker's feelings for God aren't just distant, awestruck respect: God isn't only the speaker's master, but his lover.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "How fresh, oh Lord, how sweet and clean / Are thy returns!"
- **Line 15:** " These are thy wonders, Lord of power,"
- **Lines 22-23:** " Oh that I once past changing were, / Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!"
- **Line 31:** " Thy anger comes, and I decline:"
- **Lines 32-35:** "what pole is not the zone / Where all things burn, / When thou dost turn, / And the least frown of thine is shown?"
- **Lines 39-42:** "Oh, my only light, / It cannot be / That I am he / On whom thy tempests fell all night."
- **Lines 43-46:** " These are thy wonders, Lord of love, / To make us see we are but flowers that glide; / Which when we once can find and prove, / Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;"

ALLUSION

Read in a certain light, this whole poem might be treated as an allusion to the famous biblical parable of the lilies. In this story from the Gospels (quoted here in the King James translation, which Herbert would have been familiar with), Christ tells his disciples:

> Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.
>
> If then God so clothe the grass, which is to day in the field, and to morrow is cast into the oven; how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith?

In other words: people shouldn't worry about whether God will care for them, but think like the lilies. Lilies don't struggle and strive, they just grow. They're beautiful because God cares for them and *makes* them beautiful, not because they *try* to be.

George Herbert was a devout Anglican clergyman, and he would certainly have had this story in mind as he worked out his poem's central conceit of the soul as a flower. "The Flower" is thus not just a grateful apostrophe to God, but a dialogue between the speaker and the Bible, showing how the speaker's personal understanding of his faith has developed as he's grown into his "age."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "even as the flowers in spring; / To which, besides their own demean, / The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring."
- **Lines 43-46:** " These are thy wonders, Lord of love, / To make us see we are but flowers that glide; / Which when we once can find and prove, / Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;"

PARALLELISM

Emphatic parallelism helps the speaker to express his awe and gratitude to God.

For instance, listen to the speaker as he describes God's powers, using the same verb form over and over again:

> Killing and quickening, bringing down to hell
> And up to heaven in an hour;
> Making a chiming of a passing-bell.

All those strong verbs in a row suggest God's strength—and, by extension, humanity's comparative puniness. Now, take a look at the way the speaker uses the same technique to describe his *own* efforts:

> Offering at heaven, growing and groaning thither;

The similar sentence structure here invites readers to compare the speaker's half-baked efforts to climb to heaven with the ease and simplicity with which God performs mighty works.

A few lines later, the speaker's anaphora (which is a specific kind of parallelism) stresses that God's power can be frightening, too. When God's "anger comes":

> What frost to that? what pole is not the zone
> Where all things burn,
> When thou dost turn,
> And the least frown of thine is shown?

That repetition emphasizes the speaker's sheer terror at God's wrath, linking "frost" to the "burn[ing]" fires of Hell; when God is angry with him, the speaker suggests, it feels as if he's being frozen and scorched at exactly the same time.

But parallelism also evokes the speaker's simple marvel at the way his life has changed in his "age":

> And now in age I bud again,
> After so many deaths I live and write;
> I once more smell the dew and rain,
> And relish versing. [...]

All lined up, these declarations make it seem as if the speaker is awakening from a terrible dream, only to rediscover the pleasures he believed he'd lost forever, one by one. There's wonder and delight in the repetitions here.

And speaking of wonder: perhaps the most striking moment of anaphora in the poem is a phrase the speaker uses twice, once in line 15 and once in line 43. "These are thy wonders, Lord," he declares; the only difference is that in line 15, God is a "Lord of power," and in line 43, a "Lord of love." Perhaps, the poem suggests, God's "power" and "love" are really the same thing.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "How," "how"
- **Line 15:** " These are thy wonders, Lord of power,"
- **Line 16:** "Killing," "bringing"
- **Line 18:** "Making"
- **Line 25:** "Offering at heaven, growing and groaning thither;"
- **Line 32:** "What," "what"
- **Line 35:** "And"
- **Line 36:** "And," "I bud again"
- **Line 37:** "I live and write"
- **Line 38:** " I once more smell the dew and rain"
- **Line 43:** " These are thy wonders, Lord of love,"

SIMILE

The poem's similes all appear in the first two stanzas and introduce the central conceit of the speaker's soul as a flower.

The speaker begins with a joyful cry:

> How fresh, oh Lord, how sweet and clean
> Are thy returns! even as the flowers in spring;
> To which, besides their own demean,
> The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.

The simile here describes God's "returns"—a word that might suggest both God's gifts to the speaker and God's literal *returns*, the times when God seems to come back after an absence. These returns, the speaker observes, work just the way that flowers do when they first come out in spring:

- When the flowers come out, they're lovely in themselves, but they also transform people's *memories*. When one gazes at new flowers, the speaker suggests, the "frosts" that held the earth in their grip just a little while ago simply don't seem so bad.
- By comparison, then, when God smiles on the speaker again after a time of sorrow, it makes that time of sorrow feel less painful—or even pleasurable—in retrospect.

The speaker develops this simile even more clearly in the second part of the stanza:

> Grief melts away
> Like snow in May,
> As if there were no such cold thing.

In other words, God's favor makes the speaker's past sorrow seem never to have existed.

These similes prepare readers for the poem's whole argument. Trusting in God, the speaker discovers, means learning that even times of frosty misery are part of God's plans. But it also means believing that God's goodness can transform and beautify the most miserable experiences; one day, the metaphorical flowers will make the metaphorical snow irrelevant.

Next, in a particularly clever simile, the speaker doesn't just describe his "shriveled heart" as a plant miraculously regaining its "greenness," but layers a further flower simile on *top* of that image. Take a look at the way he uses personification here to describe how he felt his heart:

> [..] was gone
> Quite underground; as flowers depart
> To see their mother-root, when they have blown,
> Where they together
> All the hard weather,
> Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

There's something sweet about this image of spring flowers returning to their "mother-root" (that is, the bulb they grow from) to "keep house" together in winter—and that sweetness prepares readers for the idea that even the most painful times end up being all to the good.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "How fresh, oh Lord, how sweet and clean / Are thy returns! even as the flowers in spring; / To which, besides their own demean, / The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring."
- **Lines 5-7:** " Grief melts away / Like snow in May, / As if there were no such cold thing."
- **Lines 10-14:** "as flowers depart / To see their mother-root, when they have blown, / Where they together / All the hard weather, / Dead to the world, keep house unknown."

ALLITERATION

Moments of alliteration give the poem rhythm, music, and emphasis.

For instance, take a look at the speaker's description of his futile efforts to clamber up to heaven by sheer force of will:

> Many a spring I shoot up fair,
> Offering at heaven, growing and groaning thither;

The /gr/ alliteration of "growing and groaning" (underlined by long /o/ assonance) evokes the speaker's exhausting daily grind as he tries to make himself better than he really is—and even adds a little self-effacing comedy to this moment. It's as if the speaker can imagine all too well just how ridiculous his efforts must look.

Later in the poem, alliteration evokes a quite different kind of effort:

> These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
> To make us see we are but flowers that glide;
> Which when we once can find and prove,
> Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;

The balanced alliteration of "these are thy" and "Lord of love" feels musical, suggesting God's harmonious plan for the universe. The quick succession of /w/ sounds in "which when we once," meanwhile, evokes the speaker's long struggle for humility: all these similar sounds in a row feel focused and intense, suggesting it's a life's work to give up one's "pride" and become a humble "flower" in God's garden.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "melts"
- **Line 6:** "May"
- **Line 9:** "greenness," "gone"
- **Line 15:** "These," "thy"
- **Line 16:** "hell"
- **Line 17:** "heaven"
- **Line 20:** "This," "that"
- **Line 21:** "Thy"
- **Line 23:** "Fast," "flower"
- **Line 25:** "growing," "groaning"
- **Line 27:** "spring shower"
- **Line 28:** "sins"
- **Line 29:** "straight"
- **Line 30:** "Still"
- **Line 38:** "rain"
- **Line 39:** "relish"
- **Line 43:** "These," "thy," "Lord," "love"
- **Line 45:** "Which when we once"
- **Line 48:** "Swelling," "store"
- **Line 49:** "Paradise," "pride"

ASSONANCE

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

For instance, listen to the echoing vowel sounds in the poem's last lines:

> Who would be more,
> Swelling through store,
> Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

The interplay of round /oo/ and drawn-out /or/ here is just plain harmonious. And the three long /i/ sounds in a row insistently direct the reader's attention to the poem's final message: "Paradise" can't be reached through prideful effort.

And listen to the flickers of assonance in this passionate cry:

> I once more smell the dew and rain,
> And relish versing. Oh, my only light,

That long /o/ in "Oh, my only" sounds like a moan of pleasure, making these worshipful lines sound almost erotic.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sweet," "clean"
- **Line 2:** "even"
- **Line 15:** "power"
- **Line 16:** "down"
- **Line 17:** "hour"
- **Line 25:** "growing," "groaning"
- **Line 29:** "line"
- **Line 30:** "mine"
- **Line 31:** "I decline"
- **Line 32:** "pole," "zone"
- **Line 39:** "Oh," "only"
- **Line 42:** "tempests fell"
- **Line 43:** "wonders," "love"
- **Line 44:** "see we"
- **Line 47:** "Who," "more"
- **Line 48:** "through," "store"
- **Line 49:** "Forfeit," "Paradise," "pride"

CONSONANCE

The poem's rich consonance works alongside alliteration and assonance to transform the speaker's thoughts into melody.

For instance, listen to the way /l/ sounds make their way through these musical lines:

> These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
> To make us see we are but flowers that glide;

That long /l/ itself has a gliding quality, a drawn-out sound that might encourage readers to think about the role *time* plays in this poem. If those "flowers" indeed "glide," then their lives are a kind of smooth, swift *progress;* they move through time like a boat over the water, on a journey that might feel all too short. But that gliding sound also links them to the "Lord of love" who guides that journey.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "thought," "heart"
- **Line 9:** "greenness," "gone"
- **Line 10:** "depart"
- **Line 11:** "root"
- **Line 13:** "hard"
- **Line 14:** "Dead," "world"
- **Line 15:** "These," "thy"
- **Line 16:** "hell"

- **Line 17:** “heaven”
- **Line 21:** “all,” “spell”
- **Line 23:** “Fast,” “flower”
- **Line 25:** “growing,” “groaning”
- **Line 27:** “spring shower”
- **Line 28:** “sins”
- **Line 29:** “straight”
- **Line 30:** “Still,” “heaven,” “mine own”
- **Line 35:** “frown,” “thine,” “shown”
- **Line 38:** “rain”
- **Line 39:** “relish versing,” “light”
- **Line 40:** “cannot”
- **Line 42:** “tempests,” “fell all,” “night”
- **Line 43:** “These,” “thy,” “Lord,” “love”
- **Line 44:** “flowers,” “glide”
- **Line 45:** “Which when we once”
- **Line 46:** “garden,” “bide”
- **Line 48:** “Swelling,” “store”
- **Line 49:** “Paradise,” “pride”

VOCABULARY

Returns (Line 2) - Here, this word might mean both "times when you come back" and "gifts, blessings."

Demean (Line 3) - Territory, domain.

Late-past (Line 4) - Recently ended.

Tributes (Line 4) - Honorary gifts.

Mother-root (Line 11) - In other words, the bulbs from which perennial spring flowers like lilies and tulips grow.

Blown (Line 11) - Bloomed.

Quickening (Line 16) - Bringing to life.

Passing-bell (Line 18) - Funeral bell.

Amiss (Line 19) - Wrongly, incorrectly.

Fast (Line 23) - Secure, safe, firmly rooted.

Offering (Line 25) - Striving, aiming.

Want (Line 27) - Lack.

Bent (Line 30) - Directed, aimed.

Least (Line 35) - Smallest.

Versing (Line 39) - Writing poetry.

Tempests (Line 42) - Storms.

Where to bide (Line 46) - To live in, to stay in.

Swelling through store (Line 48) - That is, puffing themselves up through their own efforts to be holy.

Forfeit (Line 49) - Lose, give up.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Flower" doesn't use any standard form, such as the sonnet or the villanelle. Instead, it invents its own shape, one that perfectly fits its philosophy.

The poem is broken into seven septets, stanzas of seven lines apiece. In other words:

- Each stanza is built from seven lines;
- And the poem itself is built from seven stanzas.

This form cleverly reflects the speaker's faith that God's overarching plan shapes everything, from the coming of the spring to the workings of the human heart. Each seven-part stanza is a kind of microcosm of the whole seven-part poem!

It's a characteristic George Herbert move to precisely match a poem's form to its subject matter; see his famous concrete poem "Easter Wings" for one particularly clear example.

METER

Like many of the 17th-century British writers known as the metaphysical poets, Herbert liked to play innovative games with his meter. Instead of choosing one sturdy rhythm and sticking to it, this poem uses varied, flowing metrical patterns to create music and drama.

Most of the meter here is iambic. That means that lines are built from iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 1:

How fresh, | oh Lord, | how sweet | and clean

A lot of spoken English falls naturally into an iambic rhythm, so it's a good choice for a speaker who wants to strike a natural, thoughtful, humble tone.

But in this poem, the *number* of iambs in a line varies. Readers might divide each seven-line stanza into two parts:

- A four-line passage that alternates between iambic tetrameter (four iambs in a row) and iambic pentameter (five iambs in a row);
- And a three-line passage that uses two lines of iambic dimeter (two iambs) followed by another line of iambic tetrameter (again, four iambs).

That sounds like a mouthful. But all it really means is that each stanza begins with a longer, slower, more reflective passage, and ends with a short, punchy capper, as in lines 40-42:

It can- | not be
That I | am he

On whom | thy temp- | ests fell | all night.

These closing passages always deliver a powerful declaration or a dramatic question—and the change in meter makes them striking both to the eye and to the ear. By playing around with the number of feet in a line, the speaker asks the reader to sit up and pay special attention.

That effect gets even stronger when the speaker introduces a variation in the steady iambic rhythm, as in lines 19-20:

We say | amiss
This or | that is:

Line 20 here starts with a trochee (the opposite foot of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm) and ends with a whipcrack of a spondee (a foot with a DUM-DUM rhythm). All those strong, up-front stresses conjure the speaker's impatience: he's well and truly fed up with the way that humanity (himself very much included!) puffs itself up.

RHYME SCHEME

The intricate rhyme scheme of "The Flower" runs like this:

ABABCCB

This musical pattern perfectly reflects the speaker's thoughts on the nature of God. The first four lines of each stanza set up what feels like a regular, predictable alternating pattern. But then, a surprise comes along: the C rhymes, in a punchy couplet that breaks right through that pattern's walls. In the end, though, the B rhyme returns, making the C rhymes feel like part of the pattern after all.

This movement from harmony to surprise to harmony again feels a lot like the speaker's emotional experience of God. Sometimes, he feels he's climbing up to "Heaven" when he feels suddenly struck down by God's anger; sometimes, he's in the depths of despair and then finds himself "bud[ding] again," full of new life and joy.

Either way, in the end, he feels that all of his experiences form a mysterious part of God's plan: they all help to bring him into the harmony of God's heavenly "garden." The rhyme scheme here thus turns the speaker's complex emotional life to music, helping readers to *hear* what it feels like to be the speaker.

SPEAKER

The poem's passionate, witty speaker—like the speaker in most of Herbert's poetry—might well be imagined as Herbert himself. A devout English clergyman, Herbert often wrote first-person poetry about his relationship with God.

Herbert or not, the speaker is a person of deep feeling and deep faith. A lifetime of hard-earned wisdom has taught this speaker that it's no good to try to control one's own fate too much. Rather, the speaker has learned to trust in a merciful God who will always revive him, even when he's been in the darkest "winter" of despair and grief. In "age," the speaker has discovered a kind of joyful humility.

SETTING

There's no clear setting in this poem—but there is a vivid metaphorical landscape. Depicting sorrow and joy as winter and spring, the poem's speaker helps readers to imagine those emotions with their whole bodies, feeling the awful "frost" of God's anger and smelling the "sweet" air of simple happiness.

But the poem also gives readers a tiny, charming taste of the speaker's literal surroundings. As the speaker describes the "dew and rain" that he "once more smell[s]" in his newfound contentment, the reader gets the sense that this is a person who has learned to find delight just by sticking his nose out his own humble front door. Perhaps, too, the reader imagines that the speaker's metaphorical spring has arrived in the literal spring, when mild showers make the whole world smell fresh.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

George Herbert (1593-1633) was one of a group of 17th-century British writers later known as the "Metaphysical Poets"; John Donne and Andrew Marvell were some of his notable contemporaries. These writers shared a few distinctive qualities: an elegant wit, a fondness for intricate metaphorical conceits, and a passionate religious devotion. The human intellect, to the metaphysical poets, was a stepladder to the divine (or should be, if put to good use).

Herbert, like Donne, worked as an Anglican clergyman, and much of his poetry deals with his relationship to God—a relationship marked both by struggle and by enormous beauty. *The Temple* (1633), his lone poetry collection, was published posthumously; Herbert left the manuscript to his friend Nicholas Farrar, instructing him only to share it if he felt it would do some "dejected poor soul" some good. Farrar (correctly) thought it would, and it became a widely read and beloved book, influencing later poets from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to T.S. Eliot.

In *The Temple*, Herbert imagines God as a master, a bridegroom, and a friend, and builds concrete poems in the shape of altars and wings. The subtle shape of "The Flower," which uses its seven stanzas of seven lines to suggest the way God's plan attends to both the great sweep of the cosmos and the tiniest intricacies of the human heart, is just one example of the way Herbert married technical brilliance to deep thought and feeling.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

George Herbert lived and wrote during an unsettled period of British history. During Herbert's childhood, Britain was enjoying a golden age. The powerful Elizabeth I was on the throne, and Britain was both a formidable military power and a literary treasure house, boasting writers like Shakespeare, Spenser, and Marlowe. But the great "Virgin Queen" died without children in 1603, and her successor, James VI and I of Scotland and England, was not quite such a unifying figure. Many of his people were either skeptical of him or downright hostile to his rule. (The infamous Guy Fawkes, who was executed for trying to blow up James's Parliament, is one vivid example.)

The anti-monarchist plots James grappled with would eventually feed into an unprecedented uprising. By the time that George Herbert died in 1633, James's son Charles I was on the throne—but he wouldn't stay there for long. In 1649, a rebellion led by Oliver Cromwell would depose Charles and publicly behead him, a world-shaking event that upended old certainties about monarchy, hierarchy, and even God's will.

Though Herbert didn't live to see Charles's fall, he was still one of a generation of writers grappling with dramatic change and loss, reaching out to God for strength and consolation.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation to learn more about Herbert's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/george-herbert)
- An Appreciation — Read contemporary poet Wendy Cope's essay on what George Herbert's work means to her. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/dec/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview31)
- Herbert's "Temple" — Learn more about "The Temple," the posthumous collection in which "The Flower" first appeared. (https://special-collections.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2015/05/06/reading-the-collections-week-14-george-herbert-the-temple-cambridge-thomas-buck-and-roger-daniel-1633/)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Professor Iain McGilchrist reading the poem aloud and discussing what it means to him. (https://youtu.be/b-XK2Ia8sxc)
- The Herbert Museum — Visit a website dedicated to Herbert and the church where he lived and worked. (https://www.georgeherbert.org.uk/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GEORGE HERBERT POEMS

- Easter Wings

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Flower.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Aug 2021. Web. 29 Oct 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Flower.*" LitCharts LLC, August 30, 2021. Retrieved October 29, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/george-herbert/the-flower.