The Pulley

POEM TEXT

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can:
Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
Contract into a span."

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

"For if I should," said he,
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

"Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast."

SUMMARY

When God created humanity, he happened to have a cup of blessings to hand, and said to himself: "Why don't I give humanity every gift I can think of? I'll gather up all the world's far-flung wealth and shrink it down into one little human lifetime."

First, he gave humanity strength, which made a path for the rest of the virtues. Then he poured out beauty; then, wisdom, noble morality, and delight. But when he'd almost finished emptying the blessings-cup, God held back, seeing that only peace was left in the bottom.

He said, "If I also gave this last precious gift to my creation, people would love the things I gave them and forget all about me; they'd be so peacefully contented with their lives on earth that they wouldn't think to love the God who created all this goodness. Both humanity and I would lose out on something if that happened!

"So let's do things this way: humanity can keep all the other gifts I've given them, but they'll also feel a constant, regretful, distracting longing. Humanity shall be greatly blessed, but also tired out by life's travails, and by a nagging desire to come home to me. That way, if pure moral goodness doesn't draw them back to me, then exhaustion will!"

THEMES

HUMANITY'S RESTLESSNESS AND GOD'S GOODNESS

Being a person, "The Pulley" suggests, means being "rich" in blessings but also full of "repining restlessness"—that is, a sorrowful, fidgety, distracted longing for a kind of peace and satisfaction that one simply can't find on earth. The poem suggests that God gave people all sorts of precious gifts when creating human beings, but held back the final blessing of "rest." That lack of "rest" means that earthly life is marked by an unquenchable dissatisfaction and longing. But this, the speaker argues, is all part of God's benevolent plan: the "weariness" of such longings will eventually draw people back to "rest" in God's embrace.

God bestows all kinds of wonderful gifts on "man," the speaker observes, from "strength" to "beauty" to "pleasure." Pouring out a bountiful "glass of blessings" on the work-in-progress that is humankind, God seems abundantly generous. But God also reserves one final blessing: "rest," or peace.

If God were to give humanity this final crown "jewel," the poem reflects, people would be *too* happy on earth, "and rest in Nature, not the God of Nature." In other words, if people were too contented during their lifetimes, they wouldn't long to be reunited with God, whose embrace offers a deep peace and fulfillment that's beyond anything on earth. And if that were so, they'd "lose[]" out on a blissful reunion with their loving creator. *Without* this rest, on the other hand, they'll delight in life, but still pine for the peace that only God can give.

A longing for a peace beyond what the earth can offer thus becomes a "pulley" that gradually winches humanity back toward God. This conceit presents restless longings (and perhaps even a longing for permanent relief from *suffering*), not as a flaw in an otherwise lovely existence, but as part of a wise and loving divine plan. By holding back "rest," this poem suggests, God slowly draws humanity toward the peace of heaven.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can:
Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
Contract into a span."

The first stanza of "The Pulley" depicts God as a generous, inspired tinkerer improvising the creation of humankind.

"When God at first made man," the speaker tells readers, God just so happened to have "a glass of blessings standing by" to pour out on this creation. It sounds rather as if God made a cup of tea, forgot about it, and then rediscovered it—what a stroke of luck!

This gently funny moment establishes the poem's attitude toward God: this is a God whose "blessings" are so abundant that the greatest of them can be poured out without a second thought. Glasses of blessings might be cooling on bookshelves and countertops all over God's studio.

The poem even lets readers listen in on God's thought process in the moment of creation. Listen to the anaphora here:

> "Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can:
> Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
> Contract into a span."

That echoing "Let" might feel familiar to readers who are familiar with the biblical creation story in Genesis, in which God declares "Let there be light" to bring light into the world. This subtle allusion marries biblical grandeur to the touching image of God as a hobbyist talking to himself over his workbench.

But the project God proposes is a spectacular one. In planning to collect all the world's "dispersèd" (or far-flung) "riches" and shrink them down into a "span," God is preparing to condense every possible blessing into the short "span" of one human life, a miracle of generosity. This poem's God clearly delights in humanity.

Here at the outset of the poem, take a moment to look at the way the stanzas use meter:

- Each five-line stanza (or quintain) starts with a short line of iambic trimeter—that is, a line of three iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm:
  - "When God | at first | made man."
- Then, it expands to three lines of iambic pentameter (*five* iambs in a row); then, it closes on another line of trimeter.
- In other words, there's a short-long-short pattern happening here.

Now compare that to what happens in the rhyme scheme:

- Each stanza is rhymed ABABA—for instance, in the first stanza, *man* / *by* / *can* / *lie* / *span*.
- The stanza's rhymes thus always end back on an A rhyme, returning to where they began.

In both its meter and its rhymes, then, this poem makes a there-and-back-again journey. These patterns will turn out to reflect the poem's philosophy.

Perhaps it would not be too big a hint to observe that the poem's title is "The Pulley"—and so far, there are no simple machines in sight. The metaphor of a pulley will become the poem's central conceit: this poem will ask what it is that draws people back to their origins in God.

LINES 6-7

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.

Pouring out a "glass of blessings" might have seemed like God's spontaneous bright idea back in the first stanza, but as the second stanza begins, it seems there's some logic in the way these blessings flow.

As God upends the glass over humanity, the first thing to emerge is "strength." Or, as the poem puts it, strength "first made a way"—a phrasing that might suggest not just that strength makes its way out of the glass first, but that it carves a path, a "way" for the other blessings to follow.

And listen to the way those next blessings come along (note the asyndeton here as well):

> Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, || honour, || pleasure.

"Strength" and "beauty" get a little more space to themselves; "wisdom," "honor," and "pleasure" follow in a rush, with only commas to separate them and not even an "and" to slow them down.

Perhaps that reflects the different nature of these blessings:

- "Strength" and "beauty" are physical virtues: the basic, foundational goods of having a healthy, lovely body to enjoy the world with.
- "Wisdom," "honour," and "pleasure," meanwhile, are a little more abstract: these are virtues that come from reflection, thought, and experience.

The blessings of the body, these lines suggest, are the ground

for the blessings of the mind and the soul.

God, in other words, is blessing this human form from the ground up. Perhaps readers familiar with the book of Genesis will remember one of its two stories about the creation of humanity here. In one verse, God simply declares that humanity should be, and it is: another creation by decree. A little down the line, however, there's another tale, in which God gets down in the dust and forms Adam from the earth. But Adam's human form doesn't come to life until God blows breath into its nostrils. This poem's blessings follow that same journey from the earthly to the airy.

LINES 8-10

When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

God has upended nearly an entire "glass of blessings" over the human form as it lies (one imagines) on the divine workbench. But when "almost all" the blessings have poured out, God stops. Take a look at the way the poem repeats a phrasing here:

> So strength first made a way;
> Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
> When almost all was out, God made a stay,

That parallelism on the words "made a"—underscored by the rhyme between *way* and *stay*—bookends the outpouring, drawing special attention to this surprising pause.

God stops, the poem goes on, because every "treasure" in the glass has poured out but one: "rest." There's a hint of a pun here: if one stops pouring before the glass is empty, then of course what's left is the "rest"! But the primary meaning here is "rest" in the sense of "peace."

God, in other words, is delighted to offer humanity every blessing going—yet something about the gift of peace makes God hesitate.

Readers will find out why in a moment. But for now, consider the portrait of God this poem is building. This God doesn't seem to have made a plan ahead of time; this God is figuring out what's best for humanity as creation goes along. There's a sense here of God as a creator the way a poet (just for example) is a creator, a person figuring out what to do with the material as it emerges rather than knowing all along how things should go.

LINES 11-15

"For if I should," said he,
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

The third stanza begins in a literal moment of suspense. With the "glass of blessings" still suspended over the human form, God pauses to speak aloud again, considering why it might not be such a good idea to pour out the final drop of "rest." If God were to give humanity "rest" (or peace) on top of all those other blessings, God says, humanity would "adore my gifts instead of me."

In other words, if human beings had peace, they'd have nothing more to wish for from their lives on earth—and thus nothing to desire from an afterlife:

- Sure, they'd live in utter contentment, relishing all the blessings that God had poured on them. But if that were so, they'd also be "losers" (in the sense of "people who have lost something"—this isn't an insult).
- If people lived perfectly peaceful lives, God worries, they would "rest in Nature, not the God of Nature"—a moment of diacope that points out the difference between these two entities!

Total contentment on earth, the poem suggests, would keep people from recognizing that there's a kind of peace *beyond* life on earth: the blissful peace of a reunion with God. And God, too, would be a "loser" if humanity didn't care about returning to God's embrace. God *loves* humanity, after all.

The metaphor God uses for "rest" here is telling. Earlier, blessings "flowed" like water or wine, things one can drink up and feel refreshed by. Rest, on the other hand, is imagined as a "jewel": a treasure that one holds onto, something permanent—even something eternal. If the jewel of rest remains with God in heaven, then heaven promises an endless delight.

This version of the creation story works a little like a reverse Pandora's box. In the classical myth of Pandora, the gods give the world's first woman every possible gift—and among them, a dangerous box that she's told never to open. Of course, she does; all the evils in the world fly out. When she finally manages to close the box, only one thing is left inside: hope, the quality that makes life in an evil-filled world endurable. This is one of many myths that are meant to explain the presence of evil in the world.

Here, by contrast, God pours out blessings, but reserves one *final* blessing—and it's a way to remind humanity that there's even *more* to hope for than all the good things about life on earth.

LINES 16-17

"Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;

God concludes that long passage of reasoning with a pun and some polyptoton:

"Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness;

Here, punnily, the "rest" is no longer that last "jewel" of peace, but all the other blessings—the "rest" of the stuff God poured out. But humanity can only keep them alongside a fretful "restlessness": they can have the "rest" of the blessings, but not a peaceful "rest"!

In other words, God decrees that human beings will spend their whole lives greatly blessed with everything from physical "strength" to moral "honour" to pure "pleasure." But they'll also long for something they just can't seem to find in this world. So long as people never feel perfectly at ease, God reasons, they'll never forget that an even greater pleasure than those found on earth awaits them in God's embrace. To "rest" in the "God of Nature" will thus become the ultimate prize, with all the joys of plain old "Nature" just a foretaste of that bliss.

The poem's subtle allusion to Pandora's box comes into focus here. This poem, like that story, has become a way of explaining why life is the way it is. In Pandora's box, the question is: *why is there evil in the world?* In "The Pulley," on the other hand, the question is something more like: *why do people feel so restless and irritable and longing all the time, considering how lovely it is to be alive?*

LINES 18-20

Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast."

"The Pulley" has wound through God's thought process, showing why God would both bless humanity so abundantly and hold back any lasting "rest," or peace. In these closing lines, the poem finally resolves the conceit of its title. A longing for rest, it turns out, has been the "pulley" all along, the rope and wheel slowly tugging people away from the pleasures of earth and toward the ultimate pleasure of God's embrace.

Here at the end of the poem, artful language reflects God's artful design for humankind. For starters, God returns to a couple of phrasings the poem has used before:

Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast."

That "Let him" echoes the "Let us" of the first stanza: another divine pronouncement that brings a new reality into being. And the polyptoton of *weary / weariness* musically echoes the polyptoton of *rest / restlessness* from just a moment ago.

And listen to the assonance of these lines:

Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast."

The interplay of short /eh/ and long /ee/ sounds here makes these final lines sound as musical as a gentle hymn.

The language here is working to support a grand finale: an image of humanity finally being flung back into God's arms after a restless lifelong quest for peace. Earthly discontent, in the other words, becomes the "pulley" that draws people back to the God they came from.

That image of people being "toss[ed]" into God's loving embrace at last is both funny and poignant. It presents people as a kind of heavy load, being gently tugged back toward God bit by bit; here, it takes one final, comical heave to launch them those last few inches. And, as God realistically points out, this "pulley" is necessary because one can't count on human "goodness" to do the trick on its own. People aren't just restless and weary on earth (despite their "riches"), they can't be counted on to stay 100 percent virtuous, either. Goodness might turn people toward God on its own—but God's going to build in a failsafe, *just* in case.

Through both its beauty and its humor, this poem presents an image of God as a loving, forgiving, and wise creator: an artist trying to bring out the best in a lovely creation.

SYMBOLS

THE GLASS

The "glass of blessings" that God pours over humanity symbolizes God's generosity, bounty, and love.

There's something amusingly off-hand about this poem's image of God giving his gifts to humanity: God just happens to have "a glass of blessings standing by," like a forgotten, half-drunk glass of water on his drafting table. But that comical casualness suggests that God's generosity is so abundant that he can give overflowing "beauty," "wisdom," and "strength" to his creation without thinking twice.

This moment of symbolism might also subtly allude to Psalm 23, in which, famously, the speaker's "cup runneth over" with God's joy—or, for that matter, to the ritual cup of wine shared between worshipers at a Christian religious service.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Having a glass of blessings standing by,"

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

Like a lot of metaphysical poems, "The Pulley" is built around the type of elaborate extended metaphor known as a conceit: the speaker envisions the human longing for "rest," or peace, as a "pulley" that gradually draws people back to God's embrace.

George Herbert often used such conceits subtly, introducing them in his poem's titles rather than unpacking them point by point across the whole poem (as his friend John Donne liked to). That's just what happens here. The idea of a desire for rest as a pulley doesn't really show up in the poem until the final lines of the final stanza:

> Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
> If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
> May toss him to my breast."

Here, the poem pictures the very last moments of humanity's quest for peace: the final tug on the "pulley" that flings people into God's arms again (possibly making this sound).

But since the image of the "pulley" appears in the poem's title, readers will have it in mind throughout. The last lines thus end up working a lot like the metaphorical pulley itself does, flinging readers to a satisfying resolution just as it flings weary souls back to God's "breast."

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-20:** ""Yet let him keep the rest, / But keep them with repining restlessness; / Let him be rich and weary, that at least, / If goodness lead him not, yet weariness / May toss him to my breast.""

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors transform abstract blessings into tangible treasures.

When God discovers that there happens to be a symbolic "glass of blessings" conveniently "standing by" during the creation of humankind, God gets a bright idea: might as well pour them all out on this project! In this image, "strength," "beauty," "wisdom," "honour," and "pleasure" metaphorically become a beautiful liquid: they "flow[]" out over the human form that, one imagines, lies supine on God's worktable. This image makes these blessings feel, not just beautiful, but quenching and satisfying, like a long drink of water or a gulp of cool wine.

But God holds back one last blessing: "rest." If God were to give humanity "this jewel," God reasons, people would "adore my gifts instead of me." Presenting rest as a "jewel" here, the poem moves from a metaphor of flow and quenching to a metaphor of solid *possession*: you can gulp down "beauty" and "wisdom," but "rest" seems to be a treasure you hold on to.

This switch in metaphors fits right in with what the poem has to say about "rest." In some sense, the poem suggests, a peaceful "rest" with God is the ultimate good, the thing that people "restless[ly]" search for their whole lives. And it's also the most *permanent* good: a "jewel" that you get to treasure eternally in the afterlife.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure."
- **Line 12:** "this jewel"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism gives the poem a grand, stately tone—a good backdrop for its gentle wit.

For instance, take a look at the way God uses anaphora when laying out the first part of his big plan for humankind in lines 3-5:

> "Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can:
> Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
> Contract into a span."

Those repeated phrasings echo the beginning of the book of Genesis, in which God creates through language: "Let there be light" might be the most famous of these commands, but many more follow.

Notice, though, that the poem does something clever here. These lines might start like the great words of creation, but they *finish* rather more casually. As God talks to Godself (that "Let us" has to be the royal we, there's no one else there!), God sounds a little like a hobbyist tinkering in a workshop, making big plans for his next project. That effect is only emphasized by the poem's suggestion that God just happens to have "a glass of blessings standing by" to pour over this latest work: this is a bright idea, not a grand plan. The parallelism here thus emphasizes God's power even as it introduces a note of gentle sweetness.

A similar parallel phrasing appears again at the end of the poem:

> "Yet let him keep the rest,
> But keep them with repining restlessness;
> Let him be rich and weary, [...]

Again, this echo of the language of Genesis adds a little rueful humor to this tale of creation. These fiats (or decrees) lay out a basic human difficulty: no one is ever permanently contented! But this predicament, the phrasing here suggests, is all part of a divine plan, exhausting though it may feel for humanity while they're kicking around on earth.

And another flavor of parallelism creates a moment of drama:

> So strength first made a way;
> Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
> When almost all was out, God made a stay,

The echoing phrasing here, underlined by the rhyme between "way" and "stay," bookends God's outpouring of blessings, suggesting that that outpouring comes to an abrupt halt.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Let"
- **Line 4:** "Let"
- **Line 16:** "let him"
- **Line 18:** "Let him"

REPETITION

Different flavors of repetition subtly shape this poem's ideas and its moments of drama.

When God stops pouring out a "glass of blessings" because only "rest" remains in the bottom, the poem introduces a central word: "rest" will repeat three times across the poem, stressing the idea that a longing for peace is the "pulley" that slowly draws humankind back to God's embrace.

That repetition also sets up a pun—and an elegant string of polyptoton—in the final stanza:

> "Yet let him keep the rest,
> But keep them with repining restlessness;
> Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
> If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
> May toss him to my breast."

"Rest," in the first line here, no longer means "peace," but "everything else"—that is, all the other "blessings" God poured out on humanity back in the second stanza. But the poem stresses the pun by returning to "rest" in the sense of "peace" in line 17: people can have the "rest" of the world's blessings, God says, but only alongside a "restlessness" that will draw them back to God's side. The polyptoton there underscores both the pun and the sense that people are always longing for a peace they can't find on earth.

The poem then repeats that pattern of polyptoton when God declares that humanity should be "rich and weary" so that "weariness" will move them toward rest with God in the afterlife. This repeated, weaving pattern makes this final stanza feel like an elegant tapestry; that elegance reflects the speaker's belief that even the world's struggles are part of God's benevolent plan.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "made a way"
- **Line 8:** "made a stay"
- **Line 10:** "Rest"
- **Line 14:** "rest," "Nature," "Nature"
- **Line 16:** "rest"
- **Line 17:** "restlessness"
- **Line 18:** "weary"
- **Line 19:** "weariness"

ALLUSION

The poem's allusions ground it in biblical and classical tradition, wittily playing with the foundational stories of Herbert's 17th-century world.

A Renaissance clergyman like Herbert would have been thoroughly educated, not just in Christian literature, but also in the classics: every scholar of the period learned Greek and Latin and studied Greek and Roman texts. It makes sense, then, that an important moment in this poem feels like an inverted version of a famous myth:

- In the story of Pandora's Box (which appears in the Roman writer Ovid and the Greek writer Hesiod, among others), the gods bestow a strange gift upon the world's first woman, Pandora: a box that they tell her not to open at any cost. Of course, she can't help but take a peek.
- Sadly for her (and everyone else), this box contains all the world's evils; they fly out before she can get the box shut again. But one last thing remains at the bottom: hope, the gift that allows people to deal with a world full of malice, sickness, and sorrow.

This story might sound distantly familiar to anyone familiar with the first chapters of the biblical Book of Genesis, in which Eve's curiosity is similarly blamed for humanity getting thrown out of paradise!

But this poem takes a gentler view of things. In Herbert's vision:

- It's God who's releasing something into the world, not humanity—and the things getting poured out here are "the world's riches," an abundance of blessings.
- And it's also God who keeps one thing back: in this case, "rest," peace.

In this inside-out Pandora's Box story, the treasure God *reserves* causes problems for humanity, making them eternally "restless[]" so long as they live on earth. But this problem is also a blessing: a longing for "rest," the poem suggests, is what eventually leads people back to God in spite of how many

delights they enjoy on earth.

This vision of a wise, benevolent God also fits right in with the poem's other major allusion. The "glass of blessings" that God just happens to find on the workbench while creating humanity sounds a lot like a number of other biblical cups:

- In Psalm 23, for instance, the psalmist, reflecting on God's abundant blessings, cries: "my cup runneth over." God's goodness, this cup suggests, is too much for any one person to contain.
- There's also a significant cup in the Gospels: Jesus offers wine to his companions at the Last Supper, telling them that it's his blood. A shared cup of wine thus became a central part of Christian ritual, representing God's self-sacrificing love for humanity.

The "glass of blessings" here thus suggests God's overwhelming generosity and kindness. Even the idea that God just happens to have a cup of all the things that make life beautiful standing around suggests that there's far, far more goodness where that came from.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Having a glass of blessings standing by,"
- **Line 3:** ""Let us," said he,"
- **Lines 8-10:** "When almost all was out, God made a stay, / Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure, / Rest in the bottom lay."

PUN

A pun on one of the poem's most important words—"rest"—wittily underlines the poem's point about the "restlessness" and longing of life on earth.

The word "rest" first appears in lines 9-10, after God has stopped pouring out a "glass of blessings" on humankind:

> Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
> Rest in the bottom lay.

Here, "rest" means peace. The same is true in lines 13-14, where God explains the reasoning behind holding this one gift back. If God were to give humankind "rest" on earth:

> He would adore my gifts instead of me,
> And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;

But look what happens only a few lines later, at the beginning of the last stanza:

> "Yet let him keep the rest,
> But keep them with repining restlessness;

Here, "rest" means "everything else": humanity can have all the "rest" of God's blessings *except* for "rest."

This pun suggests that "rest" in the sense of peace is the final "jewel" without which all the "rest" of the world's delights wear thin. Cleverly, then, the poem suggests that God both gives and holds back these different kinds of "rest"—and that perhaps these different flavors of "rest" will turn into one in the afterlife, when "beauty," "wisdom," "honour," "strength," and "pleasure" will at last be reunited with peace.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Rest"
- **Line 14:** "rest"
- **Line 16:** "rest"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives a few important moments of the poem both their punch and their music.

For instance, listen to the emphatic echoes in lines 8-10:

> When almost all was out, God made a stay,
> Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
> Rest in the bottom lay.

The repeated /al/ sounds here (also examples of assonance and consonance) stress the idea that God pours ***al****most* everything out of this cup of blessings, and it thus invites readers to pay special attention to what God *doesn't* pour out. (Note that the word "alone" in line 9, which uses a different /ul/ sound but *looks* the same, also helps with this attention-grabbing process!)

Strong alliteration also helps to give the poem's climax its drama:

> "Yet let him keep the rest,
> But keep them with repining restlessness;
> Let him be rich and weary,

These emphatic /r/ sounds unfurl like scrolls; readers might even imagine God rolling these /r/s a little for effect. The repeated /r/ here also draws a subtle connection between rest, repining, restlessness, and riches, underlining the poem's idea that being "rich" in blessings on earth is all part of what makes people pine for God. In revealing God's goodness, these blessings only make people "restless" to be at God's side once more.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "made man"
- **Line 2:** "blessings," "by"

- **Line 6:** "So strength"
- **Line 8:** "almost all"
- **Line 9:** "all"
- **Line 13:** "my," "me"
- **Line 15:** "both," "be"
- **Line 16:** "rest"
- **Line 17:** "repining restlessness"
- **Line 18:** "rich"

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives the poem moments of music.

Listen to the echoing vowel sounds in lines 6-8, for instance:

> So strength first made a way;
> Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
> When almost all was out, God made a stay,

The interplay between long /ay/ sounds and short /ah/ sounds here is just plain euphonious, reflecting the "beauty" of the work God's doing in these moments. And more than that, the rhymed echo of "made a way" and "made a stay" draws attention to the important moment when God *stops* pouring out blessings.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "riches, which dispersèd"
- **Line 6:** "made," "way"
- **Line 8:** "almost all," "made," "stay"
- **Line 12:** "also on"
- **Line 14:** "not," "God"
- **Line 15:** "So both"
- **Line 18:** "weary," "least"

VOCABULARY

Pulley () - A simple machine made from a rope hung on a turning wheel, used to pull heavy loads.

Dispersèd (Line 4) - Scattered, lying here and there.

Contract (Line 5) - Shrink down.

Span (Line 5) - Here, this word might suggest either "a small space" or "a human lifetime."

Made a stay (Line 8) - Held back, stopped.

Bestow (Line 12) - Give, make a gift of—with connotations of a great honor.

Repining (Line 17) - Regretful, sorrowful.

Breast (Line 20) - Chest—with connotations of a loving embrace.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Herbert invents his own form for this witty poem—a form that reflects the conceit of a pulley. Each of the poem's four stanzas is a five-line quintain. And consider how those quintains are structured:

- They each use predominantly iambic meter—that is, they're built out of iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm ("When God | at first | made man").
- And they each start with a short line of trimeter (three iambs), then expand to three longer lines of pentameter (five iambs), then end on another trimeter line.
- They also use an alternating rhyme scheme (ABABA), so each quintain ends on the same rhyme it began with.

Both in its meter and its rhyme, then, the poem has a there-and-back-again shape, returning to where it began—much like the relationship between humanity and God the speaker describes! Like these stanzas, the poem suggests, people must leave their origin in God only to be drawn back to God's side by the "pulley" of longing.

METER

This poem is written in iambs—metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 6, which is written in iambic trimeter (meaning it has three iambs in a row):

> So strength | first made | a way;

Da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM: this rhythm pulses like a heartbeat.

But the poem doesn't stick to trimeter all the way through. Instead, each five-line quintain follows the same changing pattern:

- The first and last lines of each quintain are always in iambic trimeter.
- And the middle three lines are always in iambic pentameter (they have five iambs in a row), as in line 13: "He would | adore | my gifts | instead | of me."

Each stanza's meter thus takes a journey that resembles the human soul's, ending where it began.

Of course, as in a lot of poetry written in iambic meter, there are plenty of variations here to keep things interesting. For instance, take a look at the rhythm of line 10:

> Rest in | the bot- | tom lay.

The first foot here isn't an iamb, but its opposite: a trochee, a foot with a DUM-da rhythm. That up-front stress emphasizes the first appearance of the important word "rest," the metaphorical "pulley" upon which this poem turns.

RHYME SCHEME

Each of the poem's four stanzas uses the same alternating rhyme scheme:

ABABA

That means that every stanza ends where it began, mirroring both the meter (which moves from shorter to longer lines and back again) and the poem's philosophy: humanity leaves God's side, the poem suggests, only to be drawn back again by a longing for God's peaceful embrace.

Some of the rhymes here sound slant to a modern reader: "creature" / "Nature" and "least" / "breast", for instance. However, they might well have rhymed close to perfectly in Herbert's 17th-century accent.

SPEAKER

There's no clear speaker in this poem. Rather, the poem omnisciently tells the tale of an event that no one was there to see: God's creation of humanity. Readers listen in on God's own words, observing the divine thought process that led to the creation of a world without "rest," in which people are always longing for a kind of peace they can never find.

God, in this poem, is both loving and wise, knowing that perfect contentment on earth would only rob people of the ultimate joy of heaven. A little suffering on the ground, God reflects, will only draw people back to the blissful peace of eternal life.

While there's no identified speaker here, readers might well interpret the *storyteller* as George Herbert himself. A passionately devoted clergyman, Herbert often wrote autobiographically of his struggles with faith. Here, he seems to share his own hard-earned understanding of why a loving God might have chosen to make life on earth at once so beautiful and so "restless."

SETTING

This poem is set at the very beginning of the beginning: it charts the creation of humankind, when God decided to give people every possible gift and blessing except for "rest." Readers might thus imagine the poem's setting as the whole world. The struggles and joys the speaker depicts here are universal experiences. And in this speaker's view, life's difficulties have a universal solution, too: in this poem, God is both the creator of people's longings and the final fulfiller of those longings, slowly, patiently drawing humanity back into a loving, divine embrace.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

A passionate, poetic soul, George Herbert (1593-1633) lived a humble life as a country priest, serving a small English parish that bore the exuberant name of Fuggleston-cum-Bemerton. Herbert, born a nobleman and raised a scholar, often struggled with the limitations his calling imposed on his life; he could easily have made a splash in a royal court, but he felt inexorably drawn to the priesthood.

While he never found public poetic success during his short lifetime, Herbert is now remembered as one of the foremost of the "Metaphysical Poets." This group of 17th-century writers, which included poets like John Donne and Andrew Marvell, shared a combination of brilliant intellect, passionate feeling, and religious fervor. Herbert was not the only one of these poets to work as a clergyman, or to explore his relationship with God in poems that sometimes sound more like love songs than hymns.

The Temple (1633), in which "The Pulley" first appeared, was Herbert's only poetry collection, and it might never have seen the light of day. Dying at the age of only 39, Herbert left the book's manuscript to his friend Nicholas Farrar, telling him to publish it if he felt it would do some "dejected poor soul" some good. Farrar, suspecting it would, brought to press what would become one of the world's best-known and best-loved books of poetry. *The Temple* would become a major influence on later poets from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to T.S. Eliot to Wendy Cope.

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. This poem's reflections on why, exactly, a loving God would have created a "restless" world might have given Herbert and his contemporaries some consolation.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Herbert's Legacy — Read an appreciation of Herbert by contemporary poet Wendy Cope. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/dec/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview31)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/eSlXlGwRs4k)
- A Brief Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation's website to learn more about Herbert's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/george-herbert)
- The Temple — Learn more about The Temple, the great posthumous collection in which this poem 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 George Herbert Group — Learn more about Herbert's continuing influence at the website of a society dedicated to his life and work. (https://www.georgeherbert.org.uk/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GEORGE HERBERT POEMS

- Easter Wings
- The Collar
- The Flower

HOW TO CITE

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