To Althea, from Prison

POEM TEXT

When Love with unconfinèd wings
Hovers within my gates,
And my divine Althea brings
To whisper at the grates;
When I lie tangled in her hair
And fettered to her eye,
The birds that wanton in the air
Know no such liberty.

When flowing cups run swiftly round,
With no allaying Thames,
Our careless heads with roses bound,
Our hearts with loyal flames;
When thirsty grief in wine we steep,
When healths and draughts go free,
Fishes, that tipple in the deep,
Know no such liberty.

When, like committed linnets, I
With shriller throat shall sing
The sweetness, mercy, majesty,
And glories of my King;
When I shall voice aloud how good
He is, how great should be,
Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood,
Know no such liberty.

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage.
If I have freedom in my love,
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.

SUMMARY

When Love, with its unbound wings, flies into my jail cell, and brings my beloved Althea to whisper to me through the bars; when I lie down with her, all tangled up in her hair, and we gaze into each other's eyes as if we were chained together—then even the playful birds in flight aren't as free as I am.

When my friends and I pass overflowing glasses of wine around (without even diluting it with water), wearing crowns of roses on our carefree heads and feeling burning loyalty to the King in our hearts; when we drown our sorrows in wine, toasting and gulping freely—then even the fish who constantly drink the waters of the ocean aren't as free as I am.

When, like a songbird in a cage, I only sing more passionately of King Charles I's goodness, kindness, and glory; when I proclaim what an excellent king he is, and how much he *ought* to be venerated and respected—then even the roaming winds that whip the ocean into waves aren't as free as I am.

It takes more than stony walls and metal bars to build a jail. People who are at peace with themselves and their ethics experience prison merely as a hermitage (a place where holy men pray in isolation). If I'm free to love my sweetheart and my king, and if my soul is free to feel and believe what it likes—then I'm as free as only the angels themselves can be.

THEMES

THE FREEDOM OF THE MIND, HEART, AND SOUL

The speaker of "To Althea, from Prison" might, from the outside, seem to be trapped: he's in prison, locked behind "stone walls" and "iron bars." But it takes more than physical confinement to make a prison, this speaker insists. So long as he has the "liberty" to love who he loves and believe what he believes, then he's as free as a bird in the sky, a fish in the sea, or an angel in the heavens. Freedom, in this speaker's eyes, can't be taken away: it's an inner state of the mind and the heart.

The speaker has two central passions: one for a woman he calls Althea, and one for his King (in this instance, Charles I, the beleaguered—and eventually beheaded—17th-century King of England during the English Civil War). And prison can't rob him of either of these; prison might stop the speaker from physically going where he wants, but it can't stop him from feeling what he feels. Thinking both of Althea's visits to his cell and his memories of gathering with friends to joyfully (and drunkenly) swear loyalty to the king, the speaker insists that even birds aren't as free as he is: his body is in prison, but his soul is at "liberty" to feel the utmost love and loyalty.

In fact, the speaker insists, to the person who keeps their mind "innocent and quiet," prison might as well be a "hermitage"—a secluded holy place for prayer and reflection. Far from crushing

his spirit, then, this speaker's physical imprisonment has only deepened his feelings for his beloved and his king and has even enriched his "soul." He's discovered that no one can control or extinguish his inner life because, by their very nature, the mind, heart, and soul are "free."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When Love with unconfinèd wings
Hovers within my gates,
And my divine Althea brings
To whisper at the grates;

"To Althea, from Prison" begins with a strange visit. Love itself, personified as a god with "unconfinèd wings" outstretched, has brought a lady by the name of Althea to the jail where the speaker is currently imprisoned.

There's a sense of both power and calm in these first images. This winged love-god doesn't swoop in with a blare of trumpets: it just "hovers" quietly. Perhaps it doesn't need to make a big fuss to reveal its strength. Similarly, the speaker's beloved Althea doesn't fling herself at the speaker's "grates" (the bars of his cell) with a heartrending cry. She "whispers"—and that's all she needs to do.

Right away, then, the reader gets the feeling that this will be a poem about quiet strength. This speaker, readers will soon learn, is a political prisoner, jailed for his loyalty to his "King." But while his enemies can lock his body up in prison, they can't control his heart, his mind, or his soul—especially not when he's near his "divine Althea."

It's worth noting that the name "Althea" sounds a lot like the Greek word for "truth," *aletheia*. In 17th-century poems like this one, it wasn't unusual for a male speaker to give his female beloved a stylized pseudonym like "Chloris" or "Lucasta." But this name feels especially pointed. This poem's imprisoned speaker will find comfort not just in love and loyalty, but in his own "unconfinèd" beliefs: his sense of what's really true.

And that feeling gets even more pronounced when the reader knows a little bit about the poet. Richard Lovelace was indeed in jail when he wrote this poem, imprisoned for presenting a Royalist bill to a hostile Parliament during the English Civil War. Everything the speaker in this poem will go on to say is born from Lovelace's own intense personal convictions—and his real-life experience.

LINES 5-8

When I lie tangled in her hair
And fettered to her eye,
The birds that wanton in the air
Know no such liberty.

The second half of the first stanza sets up a pattern that will repeat through most of the poem—and introduces a paradoxical moment of imagery.

In these lines, Althea seems to have gotten past the "grates" of the speaker's cell. Now, the two of them lie in an embrace:

When I lie tangled in her hair
And fettered to her eye,

This is a passionate, intimate description of what it's like to hold a lover: the speaker and Althea are all wrapped up in each other, gazing into each other's eyes. But the language here also evokes *imprisonment*. The speaker is "tangled" in Althea's hair like a fish in a net, and even "fettered" (or chained) to her "eye": the pair's loving gaze is so intense that it's as if their eyes are chained together.

Something about this kind of imprisonment feels like freedom to the speaker, though. Bound to his Althea through the sheer force of their love, he has all the "liberty" of a bird darting playfully through the sky. It's precisely because he loves Althea so intensely that prison makes no difference to him: love makes his heart free.

That idea is one he'll return to over and over in a refrain. Because he's free to feel and think what he likes, the speaker says, no jail can truly hold him—and even the wildest, freest creatures "know no such liberty" as that of a person with a free heart, a free mind, and a free soul.

LINES 9-12

When flowing cups run swiftly round,
With no allaying Thames,
Our careless heads with roses bound,
Our hearts with loyal flames;

After his moment of intense intimacy with his beloved Althea, the speaker turns to his memories of the times before he was in prison. Now, he's recalling drinking deeply with his buddies, from "flowing cups" undiluted with the "allaying Thames"—that is, they're drinking wine that hasn't been watered down!

But that "allaying Thames" also places the speaker in a particular place: London, through which the Thames flows. This speaker was once, it seems, at large in that great city, partying with his buddies, wearing crowns of roses and feeling "loyal flames" burning in their hearts. Those metaphorical flames suggest that these friends were united not just by friendship, but by a shared and belief. And their undiluted "flowing cups" also suggest a kind of shared, pure passion; running "swiftly

round," shared each to each, those cups are a symbol of deep fellowship.

This speaker's friendships, then, aren't just about flamboyant, rose-covered partying (although there also seems to be plenty of that on offer). They're also about shared belief, shared conviction—a shared sense of truth. The imprisoned speaker takes comfort not just in romantic love, and not just in friendship, but in sharing fierce, fiery convictions with the people he loves.

By now, readers might have started to notice a pattern developing. This stanza, just like the one before it, will repeatedly start new lines with the word "When"—a bit of anaphora that creates a mood of anticipation. All those "whens" feel like a drumroll, making everything the speaker's saying here seem to be leading up to a payoff.

LINES 13-16

When thirsty grief in wine we steep,
When healths and draughts go free,
Fishes, that tipple in the deep,
Know no such liberty.

The first four lines of this stanza evoked the speaker's memories of vibrant, comradely, and pleasure-loving friendship. These lines add a bittersweet tinge to those memories. The speaker's memories of getting drunk with his friends aren't all wine and roses: there's also "thirsty grief" to "steep" (or soak) in those "flowing cups."

But this grief seems only to bind the speaker and his friends closer together. Even the sounds of these lines reflect their intimacy. Listen to the assonance here:

When thirsty grief in wine we steep,
When healths and draughts go free,

All those long /ee/ sounds both tie these lines together and connect them to the idea of "free[dom]." Again, there's the sense that being passionately *bound* to something—friendship and belief here, romantic love in the first stanza—actually creates "liberty," setting the heart free. Suffering doesn't get in the way here: "grief" is all part of the shared experience of life, and "steep[ed]" in wine, it might even become a strange pleasure.

And as the speaker reaches his refrain again, he makes that point even more clearly. In the previous stanza, he declared that his love for Althea could make him even freer than the birds. Here, it's the "fishes, that tipple in the deep" who "know no such liberty" as he knows. That whimsical image—of a tipsy fish, drunk on the sea as if its waters were wine—suggests that the liberating power of remembered friendship and belief doesn't just set the speaker free. It sets him *intoxicatingly* free: he's drunk on the very thought of the conviction and love he shares with his friends.

LINES 17-20

When, like committed linnets, I
With shriller throat shall sing
The sweetness, mercy, majesty,
And glories of my King;

In the third stanza, the speaker spells out a reality that has been underneath this poem's surface all along. Here, like a songbird in a cage, the imprisoned speaker begins to sing the praises of his glorious "King." Readers can guess that this is Charles I, the beleaguered King of England whom Lovelace was jailed for supporting.

The speaker imagines himself as a "committed linnet," a telling turn of phrase. "Committed" here means "imprisoned"—but the word also has connotations of *commitment*, of intense loyalty. This sheds new light on the "loyal flames" of the previous stanza. Perhaps what united the speaker and his rosy-crowned, wine-bibbing friends wasn't just mutual affection, but royalism: perhaps all these life-loving buddies were Cavaliers, supporters of Charles I.

This "committed" poet vows to behave just as caged songbirds were said to: imprisoned, he's only going to sing the king's praises louder and "shriller." And of course, that's exactly what he's doing: this poem, with its steady anaphora and its echoing refrain, sounds just like a song.

It even uses common meter, meaning that the lines alternate between iambic tetrameter (four iambs, da-DUMs) per line) and iambic trimeter (three iambs per line). This is an easy, back-and-forth rhythm that often turns up in hymns and nursery rhymes:

When, like committed linnets, I
With shriller throat shall sing

This speaker is just like a "committed linnet," singing away in his cage—and it's his passionate faith in his king that gives him the courage to do so.

LINES 21-24

When I shall voice aloud how good
He is, how great should be,
Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood,
Know no such liberty.

These lines might remind readers of the "thirsty grief" from the second stanza. Here, the speaker indignantly declares not just "how good" his king is, but "how great" he "should be." That single word, "should," gestures to just how appalling Lovelace found the political world around him.

Lovelace was writing this poem in 1642, right in the midst of the English Civil War—a war that would come to a shocking climax only a few short years later in 1649, when the rebellious parliamentarian Oliver Cromwell would convict Charles I for

treason and behead him. It's hard to overstate just how earthshaking this felt to the people of England. The monarchy was once seen as divine, and monarchs were said to be appointed by God. And one just doesn't behead a divinely anointed king. When Charles was executed, the whole "world turned upside down," in the words of a popular 17th-century ballad.

In 1642, Lovelace would already have felt as if everything he believed in was threatened. The sorrow of the speaker's "should" here evokes the grief that he and his fellow Cavaliers would have felt over the rumbling threats to the king they loved and the order they believed in.

Here, the speaker even seems to get swept up in his indignation and grief:

> When I shall voice aloud how good
> He is, how great should be,

This striking enjambment makes it feel as if the speaker is carried away by the momentum of his own sorrow.

And the refrain here takes on a new scale, too. Defiantly singing the praises of his king makes the speaker even freer than the elements themselves:

> Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood,
> Know no such liberty.

Here, the speaker's "liberty" outpaces even that of the "enlargèd winds" that whip up the ocean's "flood." In contrast with the playful birds and drunken fishes of the previous stanzas, this image evokes wrath and strength, not just freedom.

And once again, the refrain suggests that it's through *bonds*—of love, of friendship, of loyalty—that this speaker truly becomes free.

LINES 25-28

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage.

The last stanza of the poem begins with some of the most famous lines in English poetry:

> Stone walls do not a prison make,
> Nor iron bars a cage;

These words have been quoted so often that they're almost proverbial. And, as the past three stanzas have shown, the speaker really, really means it. Just because his body is enclosed in the "stone walls" of a prison doesn't mean that he isn't utterly and wildly free, in ways his jailers can never change.

In fact, to the person who knows what they love and what they believe, prison is only a "hermitage," a secluded holy place for prayer and reflection. Again, there's a sense not just that imprisonment has made the speaker stronger, but that his new strength is understated, devoted, and even holy: it comes from an "innocent and quiet" mind, one that "hovers" as calmly as Love did back in the first stanza.

Perhaps this speaker has gone through something rather like what Boethius experienced when he wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*, or what John Bunyan felt when he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*. All of these writers were locked up in prison; all came to a profound understanding of what they really believed while they were there; all translated their faith into art.

The speaker's language changes shape in this last stanza. Here, he drops his anaphora on the word "When": he's no longer giving examples, but directly stating the belief he's hinted at in all the stanzas leading up to this one. This changed shape gives his closing words special force.

LINES 29-32

If I have freedom in my love,
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.

In the last lines of "To Althea, from Prison," the speaker returns to the refrain he's used all through the poem—with a difference. He's no longer giving examples of the love, friendship, and loyalty that free his soul, but naming those qualities head-on:

> If I have freedom in my love,
> And in my soul am free,

Notice the way he uses chiasmus and polyptoton here: these lines start with "freedom" and end up "free." His love and his soul start with freedom and return to freedom. He's free to love what he loves—and loving, in turn, frees his soul.

Since that's true, the speaker is able to reach even beyond the bounds of this world. So far, he's been *freer* than the birds, the fishes, and even the stormwinds. Now, he's *exactly as free* as the angels:

> Angels alone, that soar above,
> Enjoy such liberty.

In other words, through his "commit[ment]" to his beloved Althea, his friends, and his king, this speaker has achieved a divine, heavenly "liberty": profound eternal freedom. And perhaps that angel-winged freedom might remind readers of "Love" itself, "hover[ing]" calmly inside those prison gates.

There's more than one paradox here. A prison, to this speaker, is not a prison: it's a mere collection of "stone walls" and "iron bars," unable to cage his soul. In fact, it's become a "hermitage," a quiet, enclosed, holy space in which the speaker can learn to be even freer.

But his soul is free because it's *bound*. "Fettered" to his beloved Althea's eye, linked to his friends with wreaths of "roses" and "flames," and singing his king's praises in the narrow confines of a metered song, this speaker finds limitless "liberty" in the act of freely choosing what he's tied to.

SYMBOLS

BIRDS, FLIGHT, AND THE SKY

The poem's birds (and the heavens they soar through) symbolize freedom, delight, and spirituality.

Able to soar across the wide-open spaces of the sky, birds have long been taken as a symbol of the "liberty" this poem delights in. Perhaps that's part of the reason that people (including the speaker in lines 31-32 here) have traditionally imagined spiritual figures like gods and angels in the heavens, too. Because the sky seems to stretch on forever, it invites earthbound people to imagine infinity—and things associated with infinity, like an eternal afterlife among angels.

The reader can imagine the imprisoned speaker of this poem peeking out his "grates" to see a corner of sky with birds flying across it—and seeing in them an image of his soul's own eternal freedom.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "When Love with unconfinèd wings / Hovers within my gates,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "The birds that wanton in the air / Know no such liberty."
- **Line 17:** "like committed linnets,"
- **Lines 31-32:** "Angels alone, that soar above, / Enjoy such liberty."

FISH, WATER, AND THE OCEAN

This poem's wild oceans (and the fish that live in them), like its skies and birds, symbolize freedom—but freedom of a slightly different nature.

Like the sky, the ocean is a common image of the infinite: just as people can't see the limits of the sky, they can't see the depths of the ocean. But because the ocean is *deep*, it's also often used as an image of the *inner* world. When the speaker connects his image of "fishes" in "the deep" to his memories of sharing passionate loyalty (and a healthy quantity of wine) with his friends, he evokes the boundless freedom of his emotional life. His body might be imprisoned, but his heart is like a little fish in the freedom of the ocean.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "Fishes, that tipple in the deep, / Know no such liberty."
- **Lines 23-24:** "Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood, / Know no such liberty."

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker's personification helps to evoke the power and freedom of his heart, mind, and soul.

The poem kicks off with a vivid (and familiar) personification: Love appears as a winged god, bringing the speaker's "divine Althea" to the prison for a visit. This image might allude to Eros or Cupid (the Greek and Roman love-gods), usually depicted as beautiful youths with angelic wings. Through that allusion, the speaker suggests that his feelings are infinitely more powerful than the jail that holds him. "Stone walls" can't keep the god of love out any more than they can keep the speaker's heart in.

The speaker also subtly personifies the symbolic creatures he brings up at the end of every stanza. The birds "wanton" in the air, playing around like little children; the fishes "tipple" in the deep, like giddy drunks in a whole sea of wine; and the winds are "enlargèd," or released to roam free. Imagining these creatures with human-like feelings and behaviors, the speaker evokes the joy and freedom that people *read into* those creatures. In other words, he makes it clear that the birds, the fishes, and the winds all embody a very human feeling: the sheer delight of "liberty."

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "When Love with unconfinèd wings / Hovers within my gates, / And my divine Althea brings / To whisper at the grates;"
- **Line 7:** "birds that wanton in the air"
- **Line 15:** "Fishes, that tipple in the deep,"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood, / Know no such liberty."

ALLUSION

There are two flavors of allusion in this poem: the mythological and the political.

The speaker kicks the poem off with an allusion to Love as a personified god, a winged spirit like the Greek Eros. That allusion suggests that the power from which the speaker draws his inner strength—the archetypal force of Love itself—is older

and stronger than any of the mere mortals who imprison him. With a love-god on one's side, prison can't hold too many terrors.

Later on, the speaker alludes to a more earthly power: a "good" and "great" king whom readers can infer is Charles I. Lovelace was an ardent Cavalier (that is, a royalist supporter of Charles I during the English Civil War), and he wrote this poem while he was imprisoned for presenting a royalist bill in Parliament. The passion with which the speaker here praises the "sweetness, mercy, majesty / And glories" of his beloved "King" suggests that he doesn't regret being imprisoned in this king's name one bit.

In fact, the praise here is so intense that the speaker might even be alluding to a greater king still: God himself. And for that matter, this speaker might see his earthly king as *appointed* by his heavenly king. The idea that kings were chosen by God—"the divine right of kings," in the word of Charles' predecessor James I—was still floating around in Lovelace's time, though it was about to hit a pretty severe bump in the road when the rebellious Oliver Cromwell beheaded Charles I. (See the Context section for background on this pivotal moment in English history.)

There's one more little allusion here, too: when the speaker imagines drinking deeply from cups with "no allaying Thames," he's referring to the river that runs through London—and imagining drinking pure wine, not wine diluted with river-water! This allusion suggests the sheer purity and strength of the speaker's commitment to his friends and his king.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Love with unconfinèd wings"
- **Line 10:** "no allaying Thames,"
- **Lines 19-22:** "The sweetness, mercy, majesty, / And glories of my King; / When I shall voice aloud how good / He is, how great should be,"

IMAGERY

The speaker's imagery helps to give this poem its passion and poignancy. For instance, take a look at lines 1-6, when the speaker imagines a visit from his beloved Althea:

> When Love with unconfinèd wings
> Hovers within my gates,
> And my divine Althea brings
> To whisper at the grates;
> When I lie tangled in her hair
> And fettered to her eye,

Here, one vivid image follows another. The speaker begins by imagining "Love" as having widespread, "unconfinèd" wings and "hover[ing]" in his prison cell—an image that suggests a calm, benevolent power. Love doesn't have to flap around or make a big to-do: it just "hovers," gently.

Then, Althea herself "whisper[s]" through the "grates" of the speaker's cell—another image that's only more powerful because it's so understated. Althea's softest "whisper" seems to cut right through those bars.

Finally, the speaker uses a famous (and paradoxical) image of the joyful imprisonment of love, when Althea apparently manages to get through the gates for a more intimate visit. Strangely enough, being "tangled" in Althea's hair like a fish in a net, or "fettered" (chained up) by her loving gaze, gives the speaker a feeling of glorious "liberty." This is a kind of imprisonment he'd never want to escape from. And, strangely, it makes him free, allowing his heart to roam far beyond the "iron bars" of his cell.

The poem's imagery thus helps the reader really feel the speaker's passionate emotions—and his calm assurance in the power and freedom of his love.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "When Love with unconfinèd wings / Hovers within my gates,"
- **Line 4:** "To whisper at the grates;"
- **Lines 5-6:** "When I lie tangled in her hair / And fettered to her eye,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "When flowing cups run swiftly round, / With no allaying Thames,"
- **Lines 17-18:** "When, like committed linnets, I / With shriller throat shall sing"
- **Line 23:** "Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood,"

REFRAIN

The poem's refrain keeps bringing the reader back to one central idea: prison walls can't hold this speaker's mind, heart, nor soul. Because he's always free to believe and feel whatever he wants, he insists, neither the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, nor the winds that sweep the ocean "know no such liberty" as he.

Note the grammatical parallelism of the phrases that precede each refrain, each of which begins follows the same general format: the speaker introduces some earthly entity and then places that entity in its physical context:

> The birds that wanton in the air
> [...]
> Fishes, that tipple in the deep,
> [...]
> Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood,

The imagery here covers a huge range, as the speaker moves from the sky down to the depths of the ocean. The parallel

grammar of these phrases emphasizes the idea that the speaker's liberty surpasses *all* earthly boundaries.

Now take a look at the way the refrain changes in the last stanza:

> Angels alone, that soar above,
> Enjoy such liberty.

As the poem comes to its climax, the speaker introduces a new idea, and a new frame of reference. Where before he's claimed that he's even freer than the birds, the fish, and the winds, here he reaches even higher. Not only is he freer than anything on earth, he's as free as the angels themselves. His inner "liberty" is downright divine.

The poem's refrain—and the way it changes—thus both insists on the speaker's inner freedom and claims that that freedom has a mighty and beautiful spiritual power.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "The birds that wanton in the air / Know no such liberty."
- **Lines 15-16:** "Fishes, that tipple in the deep, / Know no such liberty."
- **Lines 23-24:** "Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood, / Know no such liberty."
- **Lines 31-32:** "Angels alone, that soar above, / Enjoy such liberty."

ANAPHORA

The speaker uses anaphora to create a feeling of building logic and momentum. The poem's first three stanzas are all constructed around sentences that start with the word "when": "When Love with unconfinèd wings," "When I lie tangled in her hair," "When thirsty grief in wine we steep, / When healths and draughts go free," and so on.

All those "when" sentences create a sense of anticipation—one that always pays off in the same way. "When" each of these experiences happen, the speaker says—when he embraces Althea, when he gets drunk by toasting his beloved king, when he sings that king's praises—they always give him a "liberty" beyond that of any creature alive.

All this emphatic anaphora also allows the final stanza to hit with a little extra force. In the last eight lines of the poem, the speaker drops the anaphoric pattern he's led readers to expect, and instead out-and-out declares the philosophy he's been proving by example:

> If I have freedom in my love,
> And in my soul am free,
> Angels alone, that soar above,
> Enjoy such liberty.

By first setting up a strong pattern of anaphora, then breaking it, the poem thus creates an emotional momentum that breaks like a wave in the final stanza.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When"
- **Line 5:** "When"
- **Line 9:** "When"
- **Line 11:** "Our"
- **Line 12:** "Our"
- **Line 13:** "When"
- **Line 14:** "When"
- **Line 17:** "When"
- **Line 21:** "When"

ASSONANCE

Musical assonance helps to give this poem its evocative beauty, and even reflects the speaker's meaning in sound.

For instance, listen to the way that long /i/ sounds work in the first stanza:

> And my divine Althea brings
> To whisper at the grates;
> When I lie tangled in her hair
> And fettered to her eye,

The /i/ sound here literally connects the "divine" Althea to the speaker who "lie[s] tangled in her hair" and "fettered to her eye"—mirroring the intimate embrace these words describe.

Also take a look at the assonance in lines 13-16:

> When thirsty grief in wine we steep,
> When healths and draughts go free,
> Fishes, that tipple in the deep,
> Know no such liberty.

Here, strong /ee/ assonance threads all through lines 13 and 14 and even creates a slant rhyme between "steep" and "free"—an effect that evokes the joyful harmony of the friendships the speaker remembers here. The speaker and his friends are all in agreement—and so are the vowel sounds!

Then, the delicate /ih/ sound of "fishes" and "tipple" quietly emphasizes the whimsical image of fish drunk in an ocean of wine. Last but not least, the repeated /oh/ of "know no"—assonant words that appear as part of the refrain in three of the poem's four stanzas—helps to underline the speaker's insistence that he's freer than any fish, any bird, or anything living.

Assonance thus gives the poem both music and meaning.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Love," "unconfinèd"
- **Line 2:** "Hovers"
- **Line 3:** "my," "divine"
- **Line 5:** "I," "lie"
- **Line 6:** "eye"
- **Line 8:** "Know," "no"
- **Line 9:** "flowing"
- **Line 10:** "no"
- **Line 13:** "grief," "we," "steep"
- **Line 14:** "free"
- **Line 15:** "Fishes," "tipple"
- **Line 16:** "Know," "no"
- **Line 17:** "like," "committed," "linnets," "I"
- **Line 18:** "shriller," "sing"
- **Line 21:** "aloud," "how"
- **Line 24:** "Know," "no"
- **Line 25:** "make"
- **Line 26:** "cage"

ALLITERATION

Like assonance, alliteration gives the poem both harmony and meaning.

For instance, take a look at the way alliteration of the breathy /w/ sound in the poem's opening lines evokes the gentle whoosh of air created bythe "wings" of "Love" as it "[h]overs":

> When Love with unconfinèd wings
> Hovers within my gates,

Alliteration can also simply add emphasis and intensity to the speaker's language, as in "mercy" and "majesty" in line 19. This moment in the poem is actually filled with broader consonance and sibilance as well, making the speaker's "song" for the king all the more musical and powerful:

> With shriller throat shall sing
> The sweetness, mercy, majesty,

Finally, listen to the sounds of the poem's refrain:

> Know no such liberty.

This is the kind of alliteration that appears to the ear, not the eye! But the words "know" and "no" aren't just alliterative, they're full homophones, words that sound exactly the same. The strong repeated sounds here lean hard on the speaker's central point: as long as he has the freedom to love and believe what he likes, not even the farthest-roaming creature on earth has the "liberty" that he does.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When," "with," "wings"
- **Line 2:** "within"
- **Line 5:** "her," "hair"
- **Line 8:** "Know," "no"
- **Line 11:** "heads"
- **Line 12:** "hearts," "loyal," "flames"
- **Line 13:** "wine," "we"
- **Line 14:** "free"
- **Line 15:** "Fishes"
- **Line 16:** "Know," "no"
- **Line 17:** "like," "linnets"
- **Line 18:** "shriller," "shall," "sing"
- **Line 19:** "sweetness," "mercy," "majesty"
- **Line 21:** "good"
- **Line 22:** "great"
- **Line 24:** "Know," "no"
- **Line 31:** "Angels," "alone," "above"

VOCABULARY

Unconfinèd (Line 1) - Free, unrestrained, not imprisoned.

Althea (Line 3) - "Althea" is an elegant pseudonym for the speaker's beloved—but it's worth noting that it derives from a Greek word meaning "truth."

Grates (Line 4) - The bars of a prison.

Fettered (Line 6) - Chained up (used in a metaphorical sense here).

Wanton (Line 7) - Frolic, dart around playfully.

No allaying Thames (Line 10) - To "allay" something is to diminish or mute it. The Thames is the great river that flows through London. Here, the speaker is imagining drinking wine that isn't diluted with water!

Steep (Line 13) - Soak.

Healths and draughts (Line 14) - Toasts and gulps of wine.

Tipple (Line 15) - Drink alcohol.

Committed linnets (Line 17) - Caged songbirds.

Shriller throat (Line 18) - A louder, higher-pitched voice.

Enlargèd (Line 23) - Freed, released.

Curl the flood (Line 23) - Whip the ocean up into high, curling waves.

Hermitage (Line 28) - A secluded place where a hermit (or solitary holy man) lives alone and prays.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"To Althea, from Prison" is built from four octets, or eight-line stanzas. Each of these octets also breaks down into two four-line quatrains:

- In every stanza, the opening quatrain introduces an activity, an idea, or a memory;
- The closing quatrain then reveals how that thing allows the speaker to feel free even when he's imprisoned.

This repeated structure helps the poem to create its slow build. The reader comes to expect each stanza to close with a refrain about "liberty"—and that "liberty" only gets more and more powerful as the poem goes on. At the beginning, the speaker is free as a bird; by the end, he's as free as the "angels" themselves.

METER

"To Althea, from Prison" uses common meter. That means its lines alternate between iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) and iambic trimeter (lines of three iambs).

Here's how that looks in lines 3-4:

> And my | di-vine | Alth-e- | a brings
> To whis- | per at | the grates;

Common meter is, as its name suggests, pretty common, and this steady, familiar, musical meter lets the poem's imagery and philosophy take center stage.

But Lovelace also plays with this meter. Take a look at the way the rhythm changes in line 15, for instance:

> Fish-es, | that tip- | ple in | the deep,

Here, line 15 starts not with an iamb, but with a trochee—the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm. That little alteration draws some extra attention to the speaker's vivid, charming image of fish that "tipple" in the deep, as if swimming in wine.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "To Althea, from Prison" is the same in each stanza, and it runs like this:

ABABCDCD

Each quatrain follows an alternating pattern, wherein the first and third lines rhyme with each other, as do the second and fourth lines. This is a pretty simple, gentle pattern, and it stays constant all through the poem. And in fact, the D rhyme is always the same: since every stanza of this poem ends with the word "liberty," that long /ee/ rhyme repeats throughout.

The rhyme scheme thus helps the poem to stress its exuberant, defiant point: imprisonment can't destroy the true "liberty" of the heart and mind. The poem's unobtrusive, familiar rhymes make a revolutionary message feel as sweetly musical as a nursery rhyme, evoking the comfort the speaker takes in his own inner freedom.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "To Althea from Prison" is almost certainly Richard Lovelace himself. Lovelace wrote this poem while he was imprisoned during the English Civil War, and this speaker's circumstances and views—both political and spiritual—match Lovelace's own.

This speaker is a passionate man, motivated by two kinds of love: love for his darling Althea, and love for his wronged king, Charles I. There's a sense that these loves aren't just personal, but spiritual: the name "Althea" derives from a Greek word meaning "truth," and the "King" the speaker praises could at once be Charles I and God himself.

The speaker's big point here thus feels like it relates both to his own immediate circumstances and to a greater truth. So long as he has the inner freedom to feel what he feels, believe what he believes, and love who he loves, this speaker declares, no prison can truly hold him: his soul can't be imprisoned by mere "iron bars."

SETTING

"To Althea, from Prison" gives away its setting in its title. The speaker of this poem is trapped behind "stone walls" and "iron bars," imprisoned for his political beliefs.

But most of his imagery conjures up a different setting: a world of birds in the air, fish in the sea, wild waves on the ocean—and the angels themselves cavorting in the heavens. The speaker certainly *mentions* the limiting "grates" of his jail cell, but his *inner* "setting" is a landscape of pure (and sometimes joyfully drunken) freedom.

And that makes sense: the speaker's whole point is that the physical confines of the prison have no power over the "liberty" of his mind, his heart, and his soul.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Richard Lovelace (1617-1657) was the very picture of a

Cavalier poet: a soulful, flamboyant soldier with a deathless loyalty to his king. And "To Althea, from Prison," with its song-like shape and its declarations of passionate devotion, is the very picture of a Cavalier *poem*. "To Althea, from Prison" first appeared in Lovelace's 1649 collection *Lucasta*—a book that came out in the very year that Lovelace's beloved King Charles I was executed.

Like his contemporaries Robert Herrick and Sir John Suckling, Lovelace wrote musical poems of love and loss (both romantic and political). But Lovelace's work is often more sincere and heartfelt than that of his contemporaries: while Herrick, for instance, was busy writing *carpe diem* poems encouraging women to sleep with him while the sleeping was good, Lovelace wrote earnestly about both love and battlefield honor in poems like "To Lucasta, Going to the Wars." (He wasn't above writing about promiscuity, though: see "The Scrutiny" for one example.)

Lovelace died in poverty and ignominy, but his poetry lives on: the lines "Stone walls do not a prison make / Nor iron bars a cage" have become so famous that they're almost proverbial. References to "To Althea, from Prison" appear everywhere from Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* to Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting;* the English folk-rock band Fairport Convention even set the poem to music.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a soldier and a Cavalier—that is, a royalist supporter of King Charles I—Lovelace was right at the heart of the English Civil War. In this earthshaking conflict, the Roundheads, led by Oliver Cromwell, rose up against King Charles I and against the monarchy in general, arguing for increased Parliamentary power as a curb on kingly tyranny. (That argument would start to look ironic when a temporarily victorious Cromwell began to exercise dictatorial power in his role as "Lord Protector.")

This bloody conflict tore the British Isles apart for a decade and uprooted ancient certainties. The war came to a dramatic climax in 1649—the year that Lovelace's *Lucasta* was published—when Cromwell's forces tried, convicted, and beheaded Charles I for treason. This execution was a huge shock to a country whose recent monarchs had proclaimed the "divine right of kings," the idea that kings and queens were appointed by God himself.

Lovelace, as "To Althea, from Prison" makes clear, was passionately committed to Charles and to the royalist cause. In fact, when he wrote this poem in 1642, he was in prison for presenting a Royalist bill to a hostile Parliament. He was imprisoned again in 1648-1649, and emerged to find his beloved king dead and his world utterly changed. (One popular story, probably apocryphal, even says that he came out of prison to find that his beloved model for "Althea" and "Lucasta" had married someone else, believing that he was dead.) He died in poverty not long afterward, and was buried in an unmarked grave.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://youtu.be/Gd3xHaV20lE)
- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to a musical version of this poem by the legendary fiddler Dave Swarbrick. (https://youtu.be/B-FY6pAqRvI)
- Roundheads and Cavaliers — Learn more about the political and artistic context in which Lovelace wrote this poem. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/sep/09/poem-week-althea-from-prison-lovelace)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Lovelace's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/richard-lovelace)
- Lovelace's Legacy — See the elegant, engraved title page of a posthumous edition of Lucasta, the book in which this poem first appeared. (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1865-0311-44)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER RICHARD LOVELACE POEMS

- The Scrutiny

HOW TO CITE

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