To Daffodils

POEM TEXT

Fair Daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon;
As yet the early-rising sun
Has not attain'd his noon.
Stay, stay,
Until the hasting day
Has run
But to the even-song;
And, having pray'd together, we
Will go with you along.

We have short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a spring;
As quick a growth to meet decay,
As you, or anything.
We die
As your hours do, and dry
Away,
Like to the summer's rain;
Or as the pearls of morning's dew,
Ne'er to be found again.

SUMMARY

Beautiful daffodils, it makes us cry to watch you hurrying away already. It's still morning—the sun hasn't even reached its full height in the sky! Don't go, at least not until the day, which fades so quickly, has bled into the evening church service. Once we've said our prayers together, we'll go with you.

Our human lives are just as brief as yours. Our spring is just as fleeting. We grow just as certainly towards death as anything else on this planet. Our hours dwindle just like yours, drying up just as the summer's rain eventually does; or like morning's beads of condensation, which disappear and are never seen again.

THEMES

UNFULFILLED POTENTIAL AND THE BREVITY OF LIFE

In "To Daffodils," the speaker mourns how quickly life fades. Addressing the titular "daffodils," the speaker begs the delicate flowers to "stay" until evening before withering away. Read as a metaphor, this plea conveys the speaker's own anxiety about dying before they've had the chance to fully experience life. The speaker then compares the fleeting beauty of the daffodils to the "short" lives of human beings, acknowledging that this is simply the way things are in nature. Time flies; beauty fades. Overall, the poem laments, yet accepts the fact that all life, no matter how lovely, is temporary.

The speaker's dismay at how quickly the daffodils are fading suggests their own fear of dying prematurely. Daffodils are among the first flowers to blossom in spring and also the first to fade. In saying that these early bloomers "haste away too soon" (or disappear too quickly), the speaker is metaphorically expressing their own fear of dying early.

The speaker seems incredulous that the daffodils are withering before the "sun" has even "attain'd his noon." In other words, the speaker marvels that the daffodils have barely begun to bloom and yet are already "dry[ing]" up. As a metaphor, this suggests that the speaker is afraid they, too, will die before achieving their full potential.

The speaker pleads with the daffodils to "stay, / Until the hasting day / Has run / But to the even-song" (an evening church service). They say that they will go "along" with the daffodils once they've "pray'd" with other people, suggesting their desire to reach the end of a long, full life before departing this world.

Distressed as the speaker is at the thought of not fulfilling their earthly potential, they also seem to find acceptance in comparing brief human lives to fleeting daffodils. The speaker says that human beings "have short time to stay," just like the daffodils, and that their "spring" is just as ephemeral. Moreover, humans have "As quick a growth to meet decay" as the daffodils do.

In other words, the speaker realizes that there is never going to be a great time to die—life will always feel too "quick." The speaker compares the fleeting nature of human life to "summer's rain" that "dr[ies] / Away," and to "pearls of morning's dew" that simply disappear, "Ne'er to be found again." In this way, the speaker accepts that humans aren't special: like everything else in nature, human life is temporary.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Fair Daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon;
As yet the early-rising sun
Has not attain'd his noon.

The poem begins with the speaker directly addressing spring's "Fair" (or beautiful) "Daffodils," an example of apostrophe:

> Fair Daffodils, we weep to see
> You haste away so soon;

The speaker laments the fact that the flowers wilt so quickly. In referring to themselves as part of a collective "we" rather than as an individual ("I weep"), the speaker conveys that they're talking about a general human experience. That is, the speaker's "weep[ing]" over the dying daffodils seems to represent some deeper, more *collective* grief.

The speaker then says that the "early-rising sun / Has not [yet] attain'd his noon." In other words, the speaker is upset about the daffodils dying *before* the sun has even reached its zenith in the sky. This reflects the fact that daffodils are some of the earliest flowers to blossom in spring and *also* some of the first to depart. In "hasting away" before the sun has reached its full height, they're missing out on the brightest part of the day.

The personification of the "sun" in line 3 suggests that the speaker's sorrow about the daffodils' "early[]" death really reflects their *own* anxiety about not reaching their "noon," or peak. The speaker, perhaps, fears not living up to their own potential or missing out on something great; they worry they will die before they achieve whatever it is they hope to achieve in life.

The first four lines of the poem are written in common meter. This means that lines alternate between iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs) and iambic trimeter (lines of three iambs). An iamb is a foot made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, and this pattern results in a pleasing and predictable rhythm. Scanned, the first two lines look like this:

> Fair Daf- | fo**dils**, | we **weep** | to **see**
> You **haste** | a**way** | so **soon**;

Note that the first foot is not iambic, or at least not *strongly* so. We'd argue it reads most naturally as a spondee (two stressed syllables in a row), drawing attention to the speaker's beautiful but fleeting subject. Otherwise, the iambic rhythm is familiar and musical. These lines use the ABCB rhyme scheme typically associated with common meter as well (meaning that the even-numbered lines end in a rhyme—in this case, "soon" and "noon").

These opening lines also contain /wee/ alliteration and /ee/ and /ay/ assonance ("we weep to see," "haste away," "attain'd"), /f/ consonance ("Fair Daffodils"), and /s/ alliteration/sibilance ("so soon," "see," "haste," etc.). All of this strong musicality right off the bat suggests the intensity of the speaker's feelings.

LINES 5-10

Stay, stay,
Until the hasting day
Has run
But to the even-song;
And, having pray'd together, we
Will go with you along.

The speaker continues to address the "Daffodils" directly, beseeching them to "stay" until the "hasting," or quickly-ending, "day / Has run" its course and it's time for "even-song."

"Even-song" (or vespers) is a nightly church service that takes place at sundown. The speaker is simply asking the daffodils to stick around until the end of the day. Epizeuxis (the repetition of "Stay" in line 5) adds urgency to the speaker's request, again hinting that the speaker is thinking about their *own* limited time on earth. The long /ay/ assonance and /st/ consonance ("Stay, stay," "hasting day") also contributes to the intensity of these lines.

Notice the abrupt change in meter here. Where lines 1-4 were written in common meter (alternating between iambic tetrameter and trimeter), lines 5 and 7 disrupt the pattern: they're both written in monometer, meaning they are made up of only a single foot. This sudden shift evokes the suddenness with which the day and the daffodils "haste away." The spondee (two stressed syllables in a row) in line 5 further emphasizes the speaker's desire for the daffodils to stick around: "Stay, stay."

The rhyme scheme also shifts in lines 5-6, moving from the ABCB pattern of common meter to a DD rhyme:

> Stay, **stay**,
> Until the hasting **day**

This more immediate rhyme again highlights the intensity and urgency of the speaker's wish. The rhyme scheme then returns to normal in lines 7-10, and the meter also shifts back into place in lines 9-10.

At the end of the stanza, the speaker says to the daffodils:

> And, having pray'd together, we
> Will go with you along.

This passage is somewhat ambiguous: it isn't clear whether the speaker is saying that they and some other *people* will "pray[] together" at "the even-song" before joining the daffodils in

death, or whether these people will "pray[] together" *with* the daffodils. In other words, one might interpret this passage as personifying the daffodils, suggesting that they are drooping their heads in "pray[er]." Either way, the speaker's desire for the daffodils to "stay" until the end of the day suggests that they themselves want to live until old age. Only then will they be content to "go [...] along" with the daffodils.

LINES 11-14

We have short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a spring;
As quick a growth to meet decay,
As you, or anything.

The speaker explicitly compares the brevity of human life to that of the short-lived daffodil. Addressing the flowers directly once more, the speaker declares:

> We have short time to stay, as you,
> We have as short a spring;

The speaker "weep[s] to see" the daffodils withering because they remind the speaker that human beings, too, have only a "short time to stay" on this earth. It's not just death itself that the speaker is afraid of, either. Spring is associated with youth, vitality, hope, new beginnings, etc., and the speaker is thus implying that the best years of people's lives all too quickly pass them by.

Diacope (the repetition of the word "short" in lines 11 and 12) emphasizes the speaker's fear that there simply isn't enough time, that life is over in a flash. And anaphora (the repetition of "We have") draws attention to the speaker's change in subject: their real concern is the brevity of *human* life—which of course includes their own. (Note that the speaker is still referring to themselves in the plural, though; the poem is aware that anxieties around death are shared by everyone who has ever lived).

Human beings, the speaker continues, have "As quick a growth to meet decay." Both daffodils and people, the speaker says here, grow towards their own decay; all life leads in the direction of death.

Like the first four lines of the first stanza, lines 11-14 are written in common meter. Here are lines 13-14 scanned, for example:

> As quick | a growth | to meet | decay,
> As you, | or an- | ything.

The predictable rhythm seems to underscore that this is just the way things are; no amount of "weep[ing]" can change the fact that human beings and nature alike must eventually "decay."

LINES 15-20

We die
As your hours do, and dry
Away,
Like to the summer's rain;
Or as the pearls of morning's dew,
Ne'er to be found again.

The speaker says that human beings "die" just as the daffodils' "hours do." Hours, of course, don't literally die, but this comparison emphasizes the idea that life is made up of moments that quickly pass people by. People's lives "dry / Away, / Like to the summer's rain," the speaker continues. This simile suggests that human life lasts about as long as "rain" on parched earth.

As in the first stanza, the use of common meter gets interrupted by monometer in lines 15 and 17. Each of these lines has just two beats ("We die" and "Away"), and this linguistic brevity again evokes the brevity of life itself.

The speaker concludes the poem with one last simile, saying that human beings die

> [...] as the pearls of morning's dew,
> Ne'er to be found again.

This comparison similarly suggests that people's lives "dry" up quickly and quietly. Condensation collects into drops of "dew" overnight, but no sooner have these "pearls" coalesced than the morning sun rises and makes them evaporate. Once these pearls have disappeared, they're gone for good—never "to be found again."

The speaker, it seems, fears dying too soon *and* being forgotten or not leaving any trace of their brief time on earth behind. Yet there's a sense of acceptance in these lines as well; the speaker makes these comparisons matter-of-factly, as if there is nothing to do but acknowledge life's transience and live accordingly.

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The speaker directly addresses the dying daffodils throughout. The flowers can't respond to the speaker, of course, making this an example of apostrophe.

The speaker is really using the daffodils to make a point about the brevity of *human* life, projecting their own fears about dying and obscurity onto the flowers. The apostrophe emphasizes that their sorrow surrounding the flowers' quick passing reflects their *own* anxiety about dying too soon.

Rather than beginning the poem with an immediate comparison between people and daffodils, however, the speaker simply calls out to the "Fair," or lovely, flowers, allowing

this meditation on the fleeting nature of life to unfold more naturally.

The speaker also seems to find *acceptance* through speaking to the daffodils. Rather than focusing on the unfairness of how short life is, the speaker implicitly acknowledges that human life is no different from the rest of nature and that there is therefore no sense in fighting the inevitable. By observing the daffodils, who aren't sentient and therefore aren't filled with anxiety around their own mortality, the speaker comes to accept the fact that everything living must eventually "meet decay." That doesn't mean the speaker isn't sad about the fact that they must someday die, but the daffodils offer them a model of how to "grow[]" towards death more gracefully.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-10
- Lines 11-16

SIMILE

The poem ends with a string of similes comparing the brevity of human life to the way that other things in nature quickly fade away. In addition to illustrating the speaker's point, these similes connect the speaker to the natural world. In turn, they emphasize that human lives aren't unique in their brevity; all living things must die, and too soon.

In lines 15-18, the speaker says that human beings "dry / Away / Like to the summer's rain." So far the speaker has only compared people to daffodils; now, they bring rain into the mix. Both humans and daffodils—and every other living thing, for that matter—disappear as swiftly as rain on a hot summer day. This simile evokes how utterly fleeting life in all its forms is; in the heat of "summer," rain no sooner hits the ground than it dries back up.

The speaker uses another simile in lines 19-20 to again convey how quickly life vanishes:

> Or as the pearls of morning's dew,
> Ne'er to be found again.

This simile harkens back to the poem's opening; just as the "Daffodils" die before "noon," so too does "morning's dew" evaporate (or "dry / Away") as the sun rises.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "We die / As your hours do, "
- **Lines 16-20:** "and dry / Away, / Like to the summer's rain; / Or as the pearls of morning's dew, / Ne'er to be found again."

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies the "sun" in lines 3 and 4:

> As yet the early-rising sun
> Has not attain'd his noon.

The speaker is simply saying that the sun hasn't reached its full height in the sky yet. It's still only morning, and already the "Daffodils" are starting to wilt. But the personification of the sun hints at the speaker's anxieties around their own wasted potential. That is, the poem seems to imply that the speaker is afraid of dying before they themselves "attain[]" (or reach) their metaphorical "noon"—that is, before they accomplish whatever it is they hope to accomplish in life.

Of course, the sun isn't the only thing the speaker is projecting their anxieties onto; they also see themselves (or human beings in general) in the dying daffodils they are addressing. One could argue that the speaker is personifying the daffodils as well by addressing them directly, as if they were capable of heeding the speaker's request to "stay" until the day is over. In fact, the speaker says that they "Will go with" the daffodils once they've "pray'd together," implying that the dying daffodils with their drooping heads look like people nodding in prayer. In this way, the speaker emphasizes that human life and the lives of these flowers are not so different: both are brief and destined "Ne'er to be found again."

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "As yet the early-rising sun / Has not attain'd his noon."
- **Lines 5-10:** "Stay, stay, / Until the hasting day / Has run / But to the even-song; / And, having pray'd together, we / Will go with you along."

REPETITION

The poem uses a few different kinds of repetition to create rhythm, musicality, and emphasis.

In the first stanza, for instance, the speaker uses polyptoton in lines 2 ("You haste away so soon") and 6 ("Until the hasting day"). The repetition of the root word "haste" draws attention to the poem's central theme of life's impermanence: everything living "haste[s]" (or hurries) too quickly "away."

There's also epizeuxis in line 5, with the speaker beseeching the daffodils to "Stay, stay." The emphatic repetition suggests the intensity of the speaker's feelings. The dying daffodils remind them of their own mortality, and by imploring the daffodils to stick around a little longer, the speaker is really pleading for a little more life for *themselves*.

Lines 11-12 feature anaphora and diacope:

We have short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a spring;

Anaphora (the repetition of "We have") creates rhythm and momentum while also drawing attention to the poem's change in subject: the speaker is no longer describing daffodils, but rather human beings. Meanwhile, diacope (the repetition of the word "short") again emphasizes the poem's core concern: life's brevity.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "haste"
- **Line 5:** "Stay, stay,"
- **Line 6:** "hasting"
- **Line 11:** "We," " have," "short"
- **Line 12:** "We," " have," "short"
- **Line 13:** "As"
- **Line 14:** "As"
- **Line 15:** "We"
- **Line 16:** "As"

ASSONANCE

"To Daffodils" contains lots of assonance, as well as the related sonic devices consonance, alliteration, and sibilance. Together, these devices make the poem sound more musical and memorable. Listen to the first two lines, for instance:

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon;

The long /ee/ sounds convey the speaker's pleading desperation, while the long /ay/ in the next line adds emphasis to the fact that the flower wilts much too soon for the speaker's taste. The sibilance of "haste [...] so soon" and muffled /f/ consonance of "Fair daffodils" adds softness to the line, as though the speaker is gently whispering this plea.

The long /ay/ sound reappears in lines 4-6 as well:

Has not attain'd his noon.
Stay, stay,
Until the hasting day

This assonance heightens the speaker's language, adding a sense of urgency and insistence to their plea that the flowers stick around.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "weep," "see"
- **Line 2:** "haste," "away"
- **Line 4:** "attain'd"
- **Line 5:** "Stay," "stay"
- **Line 6:** "hasting," "day"
- **Line 9:** "pray'd"
- **Line 17:** "Away"
- **Line 18:** "rain"

VOCABULARY

Fair (Line 1) - Beautiful or lovely.

Haste away (Line 2) - Hurry away.

Attain'd (Line 4) - Reached or accomplished. The poet is using a contraction to signal that the word "attained" should be read as containing two syllables as opposed to three (at-tain-ed, as it could have been poetically pronounced in Herrick's day).

The hasting day (Line 6) - The quickly departing day.

But to (Line 8) - Until or into.

Even-song (Line 8) - An evening church service, also known as "vespers."

Pray'd (Line 9) - Contraction of "prayed."

Quick (Line 13) - *Quick* has a dual meaning here: it can mean both "rapid" and "imbued with life."

Like to (Line 18) - Similar to.

Ne'er (Line 20) - This is a contraction of "never."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"To Daffodils" contains 20 lines divided into two stanzas. The first stanza deals primarily with the titular "Daffodils," whom the speaker addresses directly. In the second stanza, the speaker explicitly compares those "Fair" but fleeting flowers to human life.

The poem doesn't follow a recognizable form such as a sonnet or villanelle, but each stanza does use a consistent meter and rhyme scheme. The fifth and seventh lines of each stanza consist of just two syllables apiece, making them significantly shorter than the rest and subtly calling attention to the brevity of life. The "noon," or center, of each stanza, seems to contract, perhaps reflecting the speaker's fears about dying before reaching their potential.

METER

"To Daffodils" plays with meter in interesting ways. The first four lines of both stanzas use common meter: they alternate between lines with four iambs (a.k.a. iambic tetrameter) and lines with three iambs (iambic trimeter). An iamb is a metrical foot made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

This pattern is pretty steady. Here's how it looks in lines 1-4:

Fair Daf- | fodils, | we weep | to see
You haste | away | so soon;
As yet | the ear- | ly ri- | sing sun
Has not | attain'd | his noon.

Notice that the first foot is most naturally read as a spondee (two stressed syllables in a row), adding oomph to the speaker's direct address to the flowers.

The fifth and seventh lines of each stanza mess with this metrical pattern, however. These are all lines of monometer, meaning each contains just a single foot. Here are lines 5-8:

Stay, stay,
Until | the hast- | ing day
Has run
But to | the ev- | en-song;

Line 5 is made up of a single spondee, emphasizing the speaker's insistent plea that the flowers linger a little longer. More broadly, the truncated meter seems to bring the speaker's argument to life. Readers *expect* another line of tetrameter yet find just two short syllables. This, in turn, evokes the brevity of life—something that the speaker believes can feel like ends before it gets a chance to take off.

RHYME SCHEME

"To Daffodils" follows a somewhat tricky rhyme scheme, which looks like this in each stanza:

ABCBDDCEAE

Things seem simple enough in the first four lines, which follow the ABCB rhyme scheme typical of common meter. However, with the shift in meter that happens in lines 5 and 7 (the use of monometer instead of tetrameter), the rhyme scheme also changes. The immediate rhyme between "stay" and "day" stands out from the other rhymes, effectively emphasizing the speaker's desire for life to last longer. The ABCB pattern of common meter is, well, common, and the sudden divergence from it in line 5 thus comes as a surprise. This, in turn, evokes the suddenness with which life can pass one by.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is anonymous. They don't reveal anything specific about themselves apart from the fact that they "pray[]" during "the even-song" (an evening church service), indicating that they're a Christian. They don't even refer to themselves as a singular "I," instead counting themselves as part of a collective "we." This highlights the poem's broad appeal: the speaker is expressing a general, human anxiety around death and wasted potential.

This poem was published during the English Civil War, and it's likely the poet himself, surrounded by death and uncertainty, was grappling with the very anxieties that the speaker expresses here. Furthermore, the poem's reference to "the even-song" reflects Herrick's position as a cleric in the Christian church.

SETTING

The poem is set in the morning during spring, when blossoming "Daffodils" have already begun to wither. While poets often use "spring" to symbolize rebirth, new life, youth, etc., this poem suggests that no sooner do things blossom and "grow[]" than they begin to die. In this way, life and death go hand-in-hand; in order to live, one needs to accept the inevitability of "decay."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Robert Herrick (1591-1694) first published "To Daffodils" in his 1648 book *Hesperides: Or, The Works Both Humane & Divine*.

Along with his fellow Cavalier poets Richard Lovelace and Andrew Marvell, Herrick wrote poems of exuberant, life-affirming pleasure, often focused on the joys of sex and romance. Herrick considered himself one of the "Sons of Ben," disciples of elder poet and playwright Ben Jonson (a friend and rival of Shakespeare). Jonson's wry perspective on human nature shows up all through Herrick's witty, energetic work.

Because of its sexual frankness, much of Herrick's verse fell out of favor in the 18th and 19th centuries, but today he's considered one of the most important and influential of the Cavalier poets. Some of his poems(such as "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time") have never gone out of style, and are often quoted even now.

Herrick, of course, wasn't the first, nor the last, to write about making the most of life's fleeting moments. In fact, Herrick's work can be seen within the broader tradition of poets writing "carpe diem" (a.k.a. "seize the day") poetry. Some other notable examples of "carpe diem" poetry include "Archaic Torso of Apollo" by Rainier Marie Rilke, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" by James Wright, and "Be Drunk" by Charles Baudelaire.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Robert Herrick lived and wrote in the midst of unprecedented English political turmoil: the chaos and carnage of the English Civil War, which ran from 1642 to 1651. In this long and bloody conflict, English anti-monarchist Parliamentarians (also known

as Roundheads) clashed with monarchist Royalists (a.k.a. Cavaliers) over the governance of the kingdom. Herrick remained an ardent Royalist all through his life, and composed verse in praise of the deposed Charles I and the restored Charles II.

Only a year after "To Daffodils" was first published, the Roundhead forces, led by Oliver Cromwell, deposed, tried, and beheaded King Charles I. This was an earthshaking shock to a country that had long believed in the divine right of kings (and a serious personal blow to Herrick, a Royalist to his core).

The government that Cromwell established in the aftermath of the king's execution was unstable. England remained war-torn until the Restoration—that is, the return of the monarchy with the 1660 coronation of King Charles II, Charles I's son. But the nature of English governance had changed for good, and the monarchy's power had begun its slow decline.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Learn More About Robert Herrick — A Poetry Foundation biography of the poet. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-herrick)
- Listen to a Reading of the Poem — An audio performance of "To Daffodils." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPkFLYVNJOs)
- What Do People Do at Even-Song? — A professor from Notre Dame University offers an explanation of vespers (a.k.a. "even-song"). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMdmQmpqmXs)
- Poems for Making the Most of Time: An Introduction to Carpe Diem Poetry — A Poets.org article on work that falls into the general category of "carpe diem" poetry. (https://poets.org/text/carpe-diem-poems-making-most-time)
- An Introduction to the Cavalier Poets — A definition and examples of Cavalier poetry, the literary movement with which Herrick is associated. (https://study.com/academy/lesson/cavalier-poetry-definition-characteristics-examples.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT HERRICK POEMS

- Delight in Disorder
- To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*To Daffodils.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Jun 2022. Web. 14 Jul 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*To Daffodils.*" LitCharts LLC, June 29, 2022. Retrieved July 14, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/robert-herrick/to-daffodils.