Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God (Holy

POEM TEXT

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

SUMMARY

Slam into my heart, God of the Holy Trinity. So far you've just politely knocked, gently breathed, shone your light, and tried to fix me. The only way for me to get up on my own two feet again is for you to knock me over. Use all your power to break me, to blow me down, to burn me up—and in that way remake me as a new person. I'm like a town that has been taken over by a conquering army and is trying to let you back in, but I can't. Logical thinking, which is supposed to rule my mind when you are away, is also supposed to defend me against attacks on my religious faith. Instead, my logical thinking is held captive by enemy forces and turns out to be feeble, or even unfaithful to you. However, I do love you so much, and greatly desire to be loved by you. But I'm married to your enemy. As such, you'll have to break up that marriage. If marriage is *tying the knot*, you'll have to untie or cut that knot. You'll have to kidnap me and put me in your prison. That's because, unless you make me love you so much that it enslaves me, I'll never be free. And I'll never be pure unless you have your way with me.

THEMES

THE AGONY OF RELIGIOUS DOUBT

John Donne wrote the series of poems called the *Holy Sonnets* during a period of religious conversion from Catholicism to Anglicanism. In this particular poem, the speaker has lost touch with God altogether and prays desperately for God to return. Furthermore, the speaker believes that faith can only return through forceful means: God has to force his way back into the speaker's heart. The poem, then, is at once a witty and an achingly open portrait of a soul desperate to overcome the torment of religious doubt.

A few lines in, the speaker states the poem's central problem most clearly: "I [...] labor to admit you, but oh, to no end." In other words, the speaker is *trying* to believe in God, to allow God into the soul, but keeps failing. This is the crux of the poem: it's not so much that the speaker doesn't *believe* in God but rather that the speaker cannot *feel* God in heart and soul, as the speaker once did.

The word "admit" here, then, is a pun. It literally means to "let in," as if God can be let in to the speaker's soul. But it also puns on the sense of admitting something is true—the speaker is having a hard time *admitting* that God is real. "Reason," the speaker's ability to think logically, has been no help in this matter, pushing the speaker to further desperation rather than comfort; trying to proves God's existence using logic isn't necessarily convincing to one's emotions.

Furthermore, the speaker introduces this problem as a metaphor: "I, like an usurp'd town to another due, / Labor to admit you." The speaker's soul is like a "usurp'd town," a town that has been conquered by an enemy. The identity of this enemy is unspecified, but it can be interpreted as the devil, or atheism, or any other force that leads people away from God. The implied solution, then, is that God must "break" into the "town" of the speaker's soul, and set the speaker free. Doubt, then, is cast as a kind of painful imprisonment.

In fact, the speaker seems to feel that faith is beyond the speaker's control. Although the speaker keeps trying to let God in, that won't work. Instead, the speaker begs God to force his way into the speaker's soul. That's why the poem begins, "Batter my heart." It's as if the speaker's heart is a fortress, and God must invade that fortress. Through divine force, God can "make" the speaker "new," transforming the speaker back into a devout Christian. The speaker's crisis of faith, then, is so extreme that only extreme measures on the part of God can overcome it. The speaker sincerely wishes to return to God, but doesn't have the strength to do it alone.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

FAITH AS EROTIC LOVE

The speaker makes a bold comparison between faith in God and erotic love. In fact, the erotic desire expressed here is not simply metaphorical. Rather, it can be thought of as a heightened form of sexuality, a desire for ecstasy on a *spiritual*, rather than simply physical, plane. The speaker begs for a rough—and consensual—seduction, one that fills the speaker with such passion that it eradicates all doubt in God. It is only through such passion, rather than logic or reason, that the speaker can truly overcome this crisis of faith.

The speaker begins the poem by emphasizing the importance of the heart, which represents passion and love: "Batter my heart, three person'd God." By beginning with this line, the speaker suggests that passion is central to faith. The speaker needs to feel passionate love for God in order to believe in him. This description also emphasizes the "force" of divine love. The speaker doesn't ask God to gently slip into the speaker's heart, but rather to break in. This isn't a gentle seduction, but a rough one.

In the middle of the poem, the speaker's state is like that of someone who's been separated from the person they love and forced to marry someone else: "Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain, / But am betroth'd unto your enemy." The speaker wants to be with God, but is "betroth'd," or married, to God's "enemy." This enemy can be interpreted as the devil, atheism, or anything else that causes one to lose faith. Whatever the case, the gist is clear. The speaker is comparing the situation to something like *Romeo and Juliet*, or any number of stories about ill-fated lovers.

The speaker believes faith can only be recovered through "my heart"—through passion—rather than "Reason," which is too easily led astray by powerful arguments. In lines 7-8, the speaker says, "Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend, / But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue." Here, "Reason" means one's ability to think logically about things. The speaker is saying that Reason *should* be providing arguments for faith in God. Instead, though, Reason falls for other arguments, "is captiv'd" by them. These arguments make it harder to let God into the speaker's heart. That's why God instead has to use passionate force to reach the speaker.

At the end of the poem, the speaker begs not only to be rescued, but in turn imprisoned and "ravish[ed]" by God. More specifically, the speaker has a series of demands, including "Divorce me," "break that knot again," "imprison me," and "ravish me." Here, "Divorce me" means that the speaker wants God to divorce the speaker *from* the "enemy" the speaker has been "betroth'd" to. Then, the speaker will be able to be married to God—a benevolent "imprison[ment]" that is actually "free[dom]," because the speaker's soul will now be at ease, free from spiritual distress.

"Ravish" here means intense sexual pleasure, but it can also have forceful undertones. While the speaker isn't necessarily referring to sexual assault, the word is nevertheless startling, especially in a religious poem. It captures the desire for a rough, forceful, spiritual seduction that guides the poem. The arc of this poem, then, follows an increasingly passionate plea for God to spiritually and forcefully return to the speaker.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Batter my heart, three-person'd God,

"Holy Sonnet 14" is (surprise!) a sonnet. It is the 14th in a series of sonnets John Donne wrote from 1609-1611. These poems are all religious in nature, and deal with themes like death, divine love, and faith.

Coming near the end of this sequence, "Holy Sonnet 14" depicts a speaker's desperate plea to God to return to the speaker's soul. What makes the poem unique and forceful is the way that the speaker frames this plea. The speaker boldly commands God to *force* his way into the speaker's soul, roughly seducing the speaker in what is an explicit comparison to sexual love.

"Batter my heart, three person'd God," begins the speaker. The phrase "three person'd God" is an allusion to the Holy Trinity—Christianity's depiction of God as composed of three different entities: the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. Here, the speaker's referring to the whole Trinity, begging the Trinity to attack the speaker's heart.

More precisely, the speaker *orders* the Trinity to attack the heart. The order immediately puts the poem in a Christian context. This is going to be a poem about faith, about the speaker's personal relationship with God. Additionally, the word "Batter" suggests the battering rams that armies use to break through the doors of fortresses and city walls. This word choice, then, implicitly compares the speaker's heart to a fortress that must be broken into. This metaphor will come into play throughout the poem.

For now, there are two observations to make about this initial command. First, that it's an instance of apostrophe, an address to a being that cannot respond. Throughout the poem, the speaker addresses God as "you," and God remains silent. This use of apostrophe gives the poem a certain quality—that of prayer. A poem that acts as a prayer or discusses the speaker's relationship with God is called a *devotional poem*, and that's just what "Holy Sonnet 14" is.

Second, this initial phrase is a *command*. The speaker is ordering

God around. That's a bold thing to do, because in Christianity it's usually the other way around—God commands mortals. Ordinary people are supposed to be humble and penitent, quietly asking for forgiveness. In fact, commanding God is not a very pious, reverent thing to do. At the same time, however, piety is exactly what the speaker's after. The speaker wants to grow more faithful, yet speaks in a manner that is against the tenets of the Christian religion. This is a paradox, a purposefully contradictory pair of gestures.

The speaker will employ paradox throughout the poem. This in itself is nothing out of the ordinary. Renaissance poetry, especially love poetry (and this poem, it will become clear, *is* a kind of love poem), was obsessed with paradox. Renaissance poets used it to capture the complicated intensity of human passion. As the poem progresses, paradox will play a prominent role.

As is traditional for English-language sonnets, the poem has 14 lines of rhymed iambic pentameter. This simply means that each line has five feet in a "da-DUM" rhythm. Its rhyme scheme is based on that used by Petrarch, with an added hint of Shakespeare—the two most famous sonnet writers in Italian and English.

LINES 1-4

for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

In this section, the speaker continues to employ paradox—more specifically, the paradoxical metaphor of breaking something to make it new. The speaker continues to address God:

> [...] for you
> As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;

Compared with the verb that began the poem, "Batter," these are gentle verbs. "[K]nock" suggests politely knocking on someone's front door. "[B]reathe," suggests a number of interrelated things: breath represents life and suggests the wind, which is like God's breath. Connected to wind, "shine" evokes the sun. And "seek to mend" refers to trying to heal. In other words, God has been gently and politely trying to heal the speaker, sending the breeze and shining down with the sun to bring light and life into the speaker's soul.

But the speaker is too hardcore. This gentleness won't restore the speaker's faith. Here the speaker reveals both the central problem of the poem and its central paradox. The problem wants to "rise and stand," which is a metaphor for regaining faith in God—implying, therefore, that the speaker has lost that faith. This metaphor compares faith in God to standing upright, and not having faith to lying on the ground. Yet here's where the speaker gets paradoxical. The speaker tells God, "That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me." The speaker is saying, *In order for me to stand upright, you'll need to topple me*. The literal meaning of "o'erthrow" here (i.e., overthrow) is "to seize power." The speaker wants God to take control of the speaker's soul.

In the next clause, the speaker employs a similar paradoxical set of ideas: "bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new." In other words, *Destroy me in order to rebuild me*. Notice how these verbs, "break, blow, burn, and make me new," are deliberate intensification of the verbs in line 2. Here, "knock" becomes "break," "breathe" becomes "blow," "shine" becomes "burn," and "seek to mend" becomes "make me new." Again, the speaker doesn't want it gentle, but rough. The speaker doesn't want a kind, soft God, but a powerful and destructive one. That's because the speaker doesn't need to be healed ("mend[ed]"), but something much more extreme—the speaker needs to be reborn, to become a new person ("make me new"). Only by destroying the speaker's old self can this happen.

These lines rhyme in an ABBA pattern ("you," and "new," "bend" and "mend"). This is the traditional opening rhyme scheme for a Petrarchan sonnet, a famous type of sonnet originated by the Italian poet Petrarch. So, although the speaker is approaching faith in a very unconventional way, the poem still employs a traditional form.

That said, John Donne is well known for writing a very thorny kind of iambic pentameter. This type of meter follows a da-DUM rhythm, with five such feet per line. Yet when Donne writes in this meter, he makes that rhythm a little muddier, a little harder to hear:

> As yet | but knock, | breathe, shine, | and seek | to mend;
> That I | may rise | and stand, | o'erthrow | me, and bend

Line 2, the first line quoted here, employs a spondee (DUM-DUM) to draw attention to each of these verbs, and to establish a forceful rhythm that will come to represent the forcefulness the speaker begs of God. Then, line 3 employs an anapest (da-da-DUM) in its final foot. This extra syllable adds as swinging rhythm that mimics the act of being "o'erthrow[n]." More generally, it contributes to the lurching, contorted rhythm that distinguishes Donne's poetry.

LINES 5-6

I, like an usurp'd town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;

Now the poem's second sentence begins. Here, the speaker clarifies a metaphor that has so far only been implicit, using a simile to compare the speaker's soul to "an usurp'd town to another due." That is, a town that has been taken over by an enemy army. According to this comparison, an enemy of religious faith (perhaps the devil, or atheism, or any number of

sins) has taken over the speaker's soul, so that the speaker no longer feels faith in God.

The speaker is dealing with an intense inner struggle, and the contorted meter of these two lines reflects that:

> I, like | an u- | surp'd town | to ano- | ther due,
> Labor | to admit | you, but oh, | to no | end;

As can be seen here, these lines sometimes stray quite far from the iambic pentameter. Line 5 begins with a trochee (DUM-da) and its fourth foot is an anapest (da-da-DUM). Line 6 is a totally idiosyncratic line. While miraculously keeping a sense of the poem's rhythm, it veers wildly off course. Again beginning with a spondee, it's followed by two anapests, a lone iamb, and ends on a single stressed syllable.

At the same time, the pentameter is never totally lost—rather, it seems to take shape invisibly beneath the language, as the speaker struggles to contort their words into the appropriate form. This ties in with the double meaning of "admit." Here, the word literally means "to let in," but it also has the familiar meaning of "to acknowledge something is true." The troubled meter captures the speaker's attempt to let God into the soul, even though the speaker's intellect may have trouble acknowledging that God is real.

These two lines continue the rhyme begun in the first four lines, following the Petrarchan rhyme scheme ABBAABBA for the first eight lines, or octave, of the sonnet. This rhyme scheme causes all these lines to interlock, forming one cohesive argument or thrust.

LINES 7-8

> *Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,*
> *But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.*

The speaker introduces an important new element here: "Reason." According to the speaker, "Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend." A viceroy is someone who governs in a ruler's stead, such as the governor of a colony. Here, the speaker treats "Reason"—that is, logical thinking—as such a viceroy. Metaphorically, reason is supposed to rule people's souls as God's second in command. Reason should "defend" the speaker against things that would cause faith to weaken. Put more literally, logical thinking is supposed to help people overcome religious doubts.

While modern readers might not associate reason with religion to such an extent, in fact reason and logic have placed a central role in Catholic theology for centuries. Thomas Aquinas, a medieval theologian, reconciled Aristotelian logic with Christianity and connected reason with God. Donne, raised as a Catholic 300 years after Aquinas lived, inherited this tradition. At the same time, Donne is pushing back against it, or at least playing with it. Whereas reason *should* be divine, the speaker says it "is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue." That is, reason has been taken captive, as in a war. Here, "untrue" literally means "unfaithful," like an unfaithful ally. Of course, though the speaker puns on the more common meaning of "untrue" as false. So, reason, which is supposed to lead people to the truth, itself turns out to be false!

This whole comparison falls in line with the poem's extended metaphor comparing the speaker's soul to a city that has been taken over by an enemy. Again, it's helpful to consider the cultural context of this comparison. Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, readers were steeped in tales of military sieges, such as in *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, or any number of romances (medieval adventure stories), such as the stories of King Arthur—stories where the fate of a city depended on the strength of its leaders. Not to mention that current events throughout Europe also involved such sieges! So, this is a comparison that would have made a lot of intuitive sense to Donne's readers.

This section continues to employ a funky version of iambic pentameter:

> Reason, | your vice- | roy in me, | me should | defend,
> But is | captiv'd, | and proves | weak or | untrue.

That said, as unusual as Donne's meter is, a reader quickly grows accustomed to it because it's *consistently* rough—it always has a certain John Donne sound it. Furthermore, Donne's control over the speaker is often evidenced by similar metrical constructions across lines. For instance, both of the these lines begin with a trochee (DUM-da). Additionally, their third and fourth feet each smoosh stressed syllables up against each other ("me, | me" and "proves | weak"). These parallel stress patterns stand out, highlighting how the contents of these lines play off each other, while also assuring the reader that poem is under control, that it's purposefully irregular.

The end of this sentence in line 8 also marks the end of the octave, the first section of a Petrarchan sonnet.

LINES 9-10

> *Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,*
> *But am betroth'd unto your enemy;*

Line 9 begins the poem's sestet, the six-line section that concludes the poem. Typically, the ninth line is where a Petrarchan sonnet's *volta*, or turn is. A turn is just what it sounds like—a point where the speaker's tone and line of argument shift. In "Holy Sonnet 14" the speaker turns from talking about how their soul has been "usurp'd" to focus more on declaring their love for God and begging God to rescue them.

"Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain," begins the speaker. The phrase "would be lov'd fain," means that the speaker would like to be loved in return. The next line, however,

complicates this sentiment. The speaker is "betroth'd unto your enemy"—that is, married to God's enemy. Again, the speaker leaves who exactly this enemy is up to the imagination, but it can be interpreted as an allusion to the devil (or to atheism or sinning in general).

Once again, these lines recall the *romances* that were popular in the Middle Ages and Renaissance—adventure tales, one of whose components was complicated or doomed love affairs. To put it a little reductively, the speaker is playing the damsel in distress here, a lady who has been forced to marry someone against her will and imprisoned by him.

This poem originally circulated as a part of a hand-written manuscript containing more *Holy Sonnets*, and readers would have known Donne was the author. They would have realized that Donne, a man, was taking on a stereotypically feminine role in this poem. This is all the more noteworthy because many of the poems Donne wrote earlier in his career were poems of seduction—poems where an aggressively flirty (probably male) speaker wittily tries to convinces a woman to sleep him, or poems where the speaker feverishly describes sex with a woman in wild and explicit metaphors. Knowing this history, then, the speaker's stance here becomes all the more striking. Donne has swapped the male for the feminine, and the physically erotic for the spiritual.

LINES 11-12

> *Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,*
> *Take me to you, imprison me,*

In these next two lines, the speaker continues to imagine a series of events that might be straight out of a medieval or renaissance romance (or even a contemporary romance novel, for that matter). Speaking metaphorically, the speaker begs to be rescued, for God to take the speaker away and then imprison the speaker once more—except this time it will be a consensual and erotic imprisonment.

The speaker says, "Divorce me," meaning that the speaker wants God to initiate a metaphoric divorce between the speaker and God's enemy (the force that has been testing the speaker's faith). Like a judge or priest capable of legally separating a couple, God should do the same for the speaker. The "knot" the speaker refers to here is marriage (as in the phrase "tie the knot"). So when the speaker says "untie or break that knot," this means God should end the speaker's marriage with the "enemy" by whatever method necessary. Additionally, the image of "break that knot" can be read as alluding to the Gordian knot, a legendary knot that was supposedly impossible to untie until Alexander the Great simply sliced it with a sword.

There are clearly a lot of moving parts in line 11, with its metaphors couched in metaphors. This is a classic feature of Donne's poetry and of the metaphysical poets more generally (the metaphysical poets were a loose movement of Renaissance poets who constructed elaborate metaphors in their poems). At the same time, though, the basic thrust and imagery of this line is clear enough. The speaker wants to be rescued by God, and if it's a dashing rescue, all the better.

Next, the speaker begs of God, "Take me to you, imprison me." The speaker has come to view faith as a kind of beneficial imprisonment. The speaker can only believe in God if God totally possesses the speaker's soul, preventing any other influences from disrupting the speaker's faith. Historically, there have been people called anchorites who voluntarily lock themselves in a single room for the rest of their lives, as part of a practice of intense religious contemplation and devotion. While the poem may not specifically be referring to such people, it does seem to be channeling a similar impulse.

In all, these lines can be read as a bold weaving of the material of both religious and popular culture—a very worldly interest in tales of love and sex, combined with the very spiritual practice of removing oneself from the social world for prayer and study.

LINES 12-14

> *for I,*
> *Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,*
> *Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.*

In the final two lines of the poem, the speaker totally fuses erotic love and religious faith, throwing all the preceding lines in a distinctly sexual light.

These lines hinge on double meanings and paradoxes. Look at line 13 first. "Enthrall" here means "to captivate," as it does for modern English speakers. But it also has an older meaning that would have been just as present for Donne's Renaissance readers, which was "to enslave." Of course, these two meanings clearly have a certain kinship, and the speaker is playing on that connection here. The speaker wants to be enthralled by a God, just as a smitten lover is enthralled by the beloved. And the speaker *also* wants to be metaphorically enslaved by God—again like a lover whose obsession makes them a slave to the one they love.

Now comes the paradox. *Unless* God enthralls the speaker in this way, imprisoning the speaker's soul in a state of total fascination, love, and devotion, the speaker "never shall be free." The speaker can't be free unless the speaker is imprisoned. One way to understand this is to think of the word "free" in a more specific sense: the speaker wants to be *free of* the influences that cause religious doubt. The only way to be free of such influences is to be imprisoned by God.

Alternatively, "free" can be thought of as a word that compares two states of imprisonment. In this first state, the speaker was riddled with religious doubt, presumably unhappy and unable to become the kind of person they wanted to be. In the second state, the speaker is again imprisoned, but this time by a system that gives the speaker clarity, happiness, and a path towards whom they want to be. This is a form of being "free" that

requires a certain "enthrall[ment]" in order to be possible, just as many modern countries have laws that protect certain *freedoms* that couldn't necessarily be guaranteed without those laws.

The very form of a sonnet is also an embodiment of this idea. A sonnet's basic presumption is that certain formal constraints provoke writers into phrasing their thoughts in compressed and elegant ways. The sonnet's form can even help people think *through* their thoughts, as they progress through the exposition of the problem in the octave to its resolution in the volta and sestet.

The final line employs a similar structure, using paradox and ambiguous meanings. The word "chaste" means abstinence from premarital and extramarital sex—but it can also mean complete abstinence from sex of any kind. On the other hand, "ravish" has a distinctly sexual meaning. It can refer to intense sexual pleasure, but it can also refer to sexual assault. The speaker is clearly referring to the first meaning, but may *also* be referring to the second. That is, metaphorically, the speaker is asking God for a total seduction, a rough one, where God "Batter[s]" the speaker. Although in one sense this erotic experience is consensual, in another sense the speaker is pointedly abandoning all distinctions between consent and non-consent; the speaker is surrendering agency to God. The speaker wants God to take control.

It should also be noted that this is all metaphorical—or, at least, not strictly conventional. That is, the speaker isn't referring to a physically erotic experience, but a spiritual one. If the physically erotic involves the interacting and meshing of two bodies, then the spiritually erotic means that two spiritual entities mesh and merge: the speaker's soul and God.

Now look back at the word "chaste." In Christianity, particularly Catholicism, priests and nuns are often said to be married to God. In fact, when they take their religious vows, nuns explicitly dress as brides to undergo a wedding to Christ. At the same time, nuns and priests take vows of celibacy, refraining from sex completely. The speaker is clearly playing off this complicated understanding of the relationship between sex and faith—where physical intercourse is at best something done for the sake of making children with one's spouse, and at worse an act of total depravity; while at the same time the purest religious devotion to God achieves a kind of ecstasy that has sexual overtones.

If this all seems paradoxical, then that's exactly what the poem means to capture with its clear use of paradox here. The speaker doesn't shy away from the complicated nature of religious faith and doubt, nor from the strange relationship between piety and sex. Rather, the poem embraces all this complexity.

SYMBOLS

THE HEART

The heart is commonly used in literature to symbolize passion and love, and that is the case in this poem as well. The heart also represents emotion and feeling more broadly, as opposed to logic and reason. When the speaker asks God to "[b[atter my heart," this is thus a request for God to appeal to the speaker's *emotional* core. Note how the speaker doesn't want God to "[b]atter" the speaker's mind or brain; the speaker doesn't want dispassionate rational or logical arguments about God's existence. Instead, the speaker insists that a return to faith requires passionate love—for God to focus on the speaker's emotional core. Only through this will the speaker rediscover faith.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Batter my heart"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is the guiding light of "Holy Sonnet 14." The speaker boldly speaks to God using a commanding and desperate tone, one that is laced with sexual connotations.

The use of apostrophe to address God in a poem is nothing new. Devotional poems—poems that function as prayers—often use apostrophe, just people directly address God when they pray. George Herbert, an English poet who lived at the same time as Donne, wrote devotional poems in which humble speakers praise God and interrogate their own faithfulness. Tonally, however, Donne's poem is distinct. Herbert would *never* have addressed God as Donne's speaker does, in the manner of sexual partner.

This poem doesn't address God like the almighty, purely good creator of the universe. Instead, the speaker treats God like a potential lover who's not being bold enough in his flirtation with the speaker. If God is going to win over the speaker (i.e., if the speaker is to feel faithful again), then God can't just "knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend." No, he needs to *seduce* the speaker with a dashing rescue followed by rough, "ravish[ing]" sex. Of course, all this is metaphorical. Or, at least, the speaker isn't speaking on *physical* terms. If the poem is erotic, it's erotic on a spiritual level.

The way the speaker addresses God here gives a flavor of the kind of the spiritual relationship the speaker needs. Donne spent his early poetic career writing pretty explicit poems about seduction and sex. In those days, the addressees of his

apostrophes were female lovers. Considering this personal history, then, it makes sense that even as Donne's speakers turn towards more religious considerations, the same underlying erotic urge is still there. Now, however, that urge is directed to God rather than women, and it becomes spiritual rather than physical.

Additionally, it's interesting to note that the implied gender roles have been flipped. Whereas Donne's earlier erotic poetry has generally been interpreted as addressed by a male speaker to a woman, in this poem Donne's speaker takes on characteristics associated with Medieval and Renaissance femininity (helplessness, weakness of reason, the need to be rescued, sexual passivity) and God, the adressee, takes on a male role (strong, powerful, coming to the aid of women). In this sense, then, the poem reaffirms cultural assumptions about gender while also playing with them.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

PARADOX

Renaissance poets were obsessed with paradox, the use of contradictory elements in a single phrase to get at a deeper kernel of experience. Donne was no different. "Holy Sonnet 14" is full of paradox, both in individual lines and on a broader thematic level. Many of these paradoxes hinge on the multiple or ambiguous meanings of words.

In the first four lines of the poem, the speaker paradoxically suggests that the way to be saved is to be destroyed. First, the speaker says, "That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me." The speaker is being metaphorical here, comparing "stand[ing]" to having a renewed faith in God. Yet in order to stand in this way, God needs to "o'erthrow"—that is, topple—the speaker. In order to *stand* the speaker needs to be *thrown down*. On a surface level this doesn't make sense, but on a deeper level it does. The word "o'erthrow" (*overthrow*) actually has a more common meaning that applies to military and political contexts. It means to forcefully take control of a place or organization, getting rid of whoever was previously in power. The speaker is thus asking God to take over the speaker's soul. Only by being taken over in this way can speaker's faith in God be renewed.

The speaker then asks God to "bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new." In other words, the speaker wants to be destroyed in order to be reborn. This paradox is one that contemporary readers are probably more familiar with, and it makes intuitive sense. Becoming a brand new person means letting go of whoever one was before. The concept of rebirth has a long history in Christianity, one that still influences contemporary culture.

Next, the speaker says, "Reason [...] proves weak or untrue." The paradox here stems from the multiple meanings of "untrue." This can mean "false, incorrect," and it can also mean "unfaithful." Here, it's used in the latter sense to suggest that reason has betrayed the speaker. Yet because the speaker is talking about "Reason," i.e., logical thought, the earlier meaning of "untrue" also comes into play. In this sense, the speaker *paradoxically* seems to suggest that reason, the rigorous use of thought to arrive at the truth, can can be a form of falsehood. At the same time, this *does* make sense in the context of religion. Reason alone can't tell people whether to believe in God, since there's no proof either way. Instead, the speaker implies, people's emotions and passions lead them to God.

At the end of the poem, the speaker employs two related paradoxes. First, the speaker says, "I / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free." Again, the paradox here depends on the multiple meanings, this time of the word "enthrall." People usually use *enthrall* to mean "captivate"—being enthralled by another person means to be caught under their spell. But the original meaning of *enthrall* is actually "to enslave." The speaker is summoning both meanings here, paradoxically suggesting that the only way to be free is to be enslaved by God. Another way of saying this is that the speaker can only be freed through God's love.

In the next line, the speaker says they'll never be "chaste, except you ravish me." The word *chaste* can mean never having sex out of wedlock, but it can also mean never having sex at all. Typically, it's associated with religious purity. During Donne's time it was also associated with femininity. *Ravish*, on the other hand, can mean intense sexual pleasure or sexual assault. There are two paradoxes here:

- First, the suggestion that the speaker can only be chaste through intense sexual pleasure. This paradox is resolved by understanding that the speaker isn't referring to a physical erotic act, but to spiritual communion with God.
- Second, that the speaker seems to consent to a sexually aggressive act. This paradox isn't necessarily resolved, but it does add a certain feel to the relationship the speaker wants with God—one where God roughly takes charge.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me,"
- **Lines 3-4:** "bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new."
- **Lines 7-8:** "Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend, / But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue."
- **Lines 12-14:** "for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me."

SIMILE

Although "Holy Sonnet 14" is loaded with metaphor, it only uses one simile. The speaker is compared to a town that has been taken over by an enemy force: "I, like an usurp'd town to another due." To usurp means to take over, getting rid of whoever was in power previously.

In turn, this simile makes explicit a metaphor that runs throughout the entire poem. That is, the comparison of the speaker's soul to a captured town is *implicitly* present in many other lines. So, although this is just one simile, it informs the entire poem. For instance, "o'erthrow" in line 3 suggests such a comparison. Overthrow means to forcibly remove someone who is power and take control. Here, the speaker seems to ask God to recapture the speaker's soul, as if it is "an usurp'd town."

The speaker continues with the simile:

> I, like an usurp'd town to another due,
> Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;

In other words, the speaker keeps trying to let God in ("admit," which here means to allow someone entrance). However, because the speaker has been taken over by an enemy force (sin, the devil, atheism—take your pick) it's a no-go: God can't get in. Additionally, there's a pun on the word "admit." While in the context of the simile it means "to let in," it also has the familiar meaning of "to acknowledge that something is true." This double meaning reinforces the comparison at work: letting God in means admitting that he's real.

From here, the speaker continues riffing off this simile. However, as the lines progress the poem verges more into the territory of metaphor than simile—and so we cover them in the metaphor section of this guide.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "I, like an usurp'd town to another due, / Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;"

METAPHOR

"Holy Sonnet 14" is chock full of metaphor. Basically everything the speaker says operates on a metaphorical level. Because the poem is so rich in metaphor, it's easiest to break the metaphors down into three categories:

1. The speaker's request to "Batter my heart";
2. The speaker's comparison to a "usurp'd down";
3. And the speaker's desire for God to "ravish me."

At the same time, it should be noted that these metaphors aren't necessarily contained by the lines discussed, but bleed over into each other.

The "Batter[ing]" metaphor continues for the first four lines of the poem, and then reappears in the poem's last line. This comparison has two sides to it. On one side, the speaker talks about what God currently seems to be doing to win over the speaker's soul. God is meek, gentle, even shy, and only seems to "knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend"—all words that suggest politeness. In this context they also imply that God has been ineffectual. Instead, on the flip side of this comparison, the speaker wants God to take charge, to roughly shake the speaker out of a faithless stupor. In a parallel construction, the speaker ask God "to break, blow, burn, and make me new." Here, the speaker compares a forceful revelation from God to physical force. The speaker wants to be reinvented, like a town that has been burnt to the ground and rebuilt.

Which brings up the next metaphor. The speaker's soul is like a "usurp'd town to another due"—a town that has been taken over by an enemy force. In lines 5-8, the speaker elaborates on this metaphor. If the speaker's soul is like a town, then "Reason" was God's "viceroy" for that town, God's second-in-command charged with leading that town. In other words, reason (logical thinking) is supposed to help people maintain their faith, keeping them off the path of atheism and sin.

However, "Reason [...] is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue." If, in this comparison, reason is the leader of the town, then reason has been taken hostage—or worse, has voluntarily surrendered the town, betraying its inhabitants. This is what "untrue" means here: unfaithful. Put back into literal terms, the speaker is saying that reason isn't guaranteed to preserve people's faith. In fact, reason is often led away from religion. It's just as easy believe arguments *against* the existence of God as *for* the existence of God.

Finally, in the last six lines, the speaker makes the poem's boldest comparison, comparing faith in God to a seductive, erotic relationship. The final two words of the poem state this most explicitly, as the speaker asks God to "ravish me." Ravish can mean intense sexual pleasure as well as sexual assault, and the speaker is playing with the ambiguity of this meaning here. In earlier lines, the speaker declares "dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain," suggesting a consensual and romantic relationship with God. At the same time, however, the speaker also says "Take me to you, imprison me," suggesting a more forceful relationship. Ultimately, these lines sketch out a desire for a relationship with God that is just as forceful and controlling as the one the speaker has with "your enemy." In other words, believing in God has to be just as intense as doubting his existence—there's no in-between.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

CONSONANCE

The speaker uses consonance pretty consistently throughout. Especially at the beginning of the poem, this consonance helps captures the physicality of the speaker's relationship with God.

The two lines that stand out the most in this regard are lines 2 and 4. As the speaker describes God's seeming attempts to reach the speaker's soul, the speaker uses very physical verbs to capture what this feels like:

> As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;

Here, the /t/, /b/, /k/, /n/, and /d/ sounds fill the mouth like physical scraps of the actions the speaker describes. They aren't overly forceful, but rather moderated, like the sound of someone knocking at the door. Line 4 ups the intensity of these sounds:

> Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

Now, three /b/s in a row create strong alliteration in the middle of the line; ditto with the new /m/ sounds in "make me." Overall, then, this line has a more forceful sound to it, which mirrors the forcefulness that speaker desires from God.

Often, the speaker employs the /r/ sound to help link ideas and phrases, as in line 7-8:

> Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
> But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.

Here, the first half of line 7 and the second half of line 8 call to each other with their /r/ sounds, yielding a compressed version of these lines: "Reason, your viceroy in me, [...] proves weak or untrue."

Line 12 plays with the /m/ sound: "Take me to you, imprison me." Here, the /m/ links "me" and "imprison," suggesting that the speaker's very self *needs* imprisonment. That is, unless God utterly captivates the speaker, making faith inescapable, the speaker's own self (i.e. the speaker's soul) will be lost.

All these instances of consonance demonstrate how "Holy Sonnet 14" uses consonance to emphasize its diverse metaphorical language.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Batter," "heart," "three," "person'd," "for"
- **Line 2:** "yet," "but," "knock," "breathe," "shine," "and," "seek," "mend"
- **Line 3:** "rise," "stand," "o'erthrow," "and," "bend"
- **Line 4:** "Your," "force," "break," "blow," "burn," "and," "make," "me," "new"
- **Line 5:** "town," "to," "another"
- **Line 6:** "to," "admit," "but," "to," "no," "end"
- **Line 7:** "Reason," "your," "viceroy," "me," "me," "should," "defend"
- **Line 8:** "proves," "or," "untrue"
- **Line 9:** "dearly," "love"
- **Line 10:** "betroth'd," "unto," "enemy"
- **Line 11:** "Divorce," "or," "break," "knot," "again"
- **Line 12:** "me," "imprison," "me"
- **Line 14:** "Nor," "ever," "chaste," "except"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout "Holy Sonnet 14," sometimes even verging on internal rhyme. For instance, the earliest instance of assonance is between "breathe" and "seek," whose stressed /ee/ sounds stand out strongly in a line otherwise devoid of assonance. In fact, such an instance throws the rest of the language into relief. For the first line and a half, there aren't many repeating vowel sounds, giving the language an almost prose-like sound. Repeating vowels can often create a melodious, liquid quality to language. By eschewing that melodiousness, the speaker opts for a tougher, chewier sound, one where choppy consonants can come to the fore. Overall, this relative spareness of assonance contributes to the poem's unusual sense of meter and its thorny syntax.

That said, as line 2 demonstrates, the poem does make use of assonance. These strong, controlled instances of assonance punctuate the poem's chewy language, like seeds in a hearty dough. Another use of the /ee/ sound occurs in line 7: "Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend." Here, the repeated sound links "Reason," "me," and "defend," and imparts additional emphasis on the repetition of "me." Logical thinking is *supposed* to help people keep faith in God, but it hasn't been working for the speaker.

As mentioned above, there are a few instances that verge into internal rhyme. These moments are also covered in the rhyme section of this guide, but they're important to note here because they function in much the same way that the rest of the assonance does in the poem. There's "break" and "make" in line 4, and then "break" and "Take" in lines 11-12. In this latter example, the structure of "break" and "Take" parallels that of "your" and "Divorce" that comes before them:

> But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
> Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
> Take me to you, [...]

As this example shows, the poem's controlled distribution of assonance creates a sense of structure and patterning within the poem's thorny, dense language.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "breathe," "seek"
- **Line 3:** "I," "rise," "and," "stand"
- **Line 4:** "Your," "force," "break," "make"
- **Line 5:** "I," "like," "to," "due"
- **Line 6:** "to," "you," "oh," "no"
- **Line 7:** "Reason," "me," "me," "defend"
- **Line 8:** "is," "captiv'd," "proves," "untrue"
- **Line 9:** "you"
- **Line 10:** "your"
- **Line 11:** "Divorce," "break"
- **Line 12:** "Take"
- **Line 13:** "Except," "enthrall," "me," "be," "free"
- **Line 14:** "ever," "except," "me"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration isn't used a lot in "Holy Sonnet 14," but when it is, it packs a punch. In lines 1-4, /b/ alliteration builds towards a climax in the phrase "break, blow, burn." Here, the three /b/s in a row create a feeling of force that mirrors that force that the speaker wants God to exert. Each of the /b/s seems to bang against the lips, just as God metaphorically bangs against the speaker's soul. Fittingly, the /b/ sound is the most alliterative in the poem, appearing again in lines 10-11 with "But," "betrothed," and "break."

The other big example of alliteration is in the final lines of the poem, 13-14. The short /eh/ sound repeats "Except," "enthrall," "ever," and "except." The words "except" and "ever" form part of an argument at the end of the poem, establishing a specific set of conditions the speaker needs in order to be "free" and "chaste." Specifically, the speaker needs to be controlled and limited by God. In fact, the original meaning of *enthrall* is "to enslave." All these alliterating words, then, have to do with restriction and control. By repeating the /e/ sound, as if limited to that sound, the speaker captures this sense of needing to be "enthrall[ed]," needing to be "imprison[ed]" and "ravish[ed]."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Batter," "you"
- **Line 2:** "yet," "but," "breathe"
- **Line 3:** "bend"
- **Line 4:** "break," "blow," "burn," "make me"
- **Line 5:** "town to"
- **Line 10:** "But," "betroth'd"
- **Line 11:** "break"
- **Line 13:** "Except," "enthrall"
- **Line 14:** "ever," "except"

CACOPHONY

In this guide we have described Donne's language as thorny, and that is in part due to his use of cacophony—explosive sounds that clash with each other, making the language difficult to get out of the mouth and discordant to the ear.

This is one of the most striking qualities of Donne's writing, emerging as he did from a tradition that valued lyrical beauty. The sonnet form itself descends from poets such as Petrarch and Dante who wrote in melodious Italian, a language full of complementary vowel sounds and rich in rhymes. While these Italians mined the harmonies of their language, Donne alchemized the clacking, clanging sounds of English into a vehicle for intellectual, spiritual, and erotic energy. His language has sometimes been called muscular because there is a tenseness to it. It doesn't flow, but lurches under the weight of its own thought, or contorts through elaborate metaphors. His speakers can run long stretches without using any similar sounds. Or, if sounds are repeated, sometimes they only slow down the reading even further, like in tongue twisters.

Combined with Donne's unusual distribution of stresses, his language—as in this poem—can feel positively "Batter[ed]." Here is line 2:

> As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;

Here, the /t/, /b/, /d/, and /k/ sounds catch in the mouth, contributing to the *clacking* sound mentioned earlier, which in this poem suggests language that has been beat against by God. It's as if the speaker is using this bent-up language to indicate what God should do.

Donne employs a similar strategy in lines 3-4, but with even more intensity:

> [...] and bend
> Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

Here, the alliterative /b/ sounds combined with the /k/ and /f/ sounds, and to a lesser degree the repeated /m/, create a percussive sensation, pushing the reader to expel air while reading these lines. It's as if each word enacts the beating that the speaker is talking about. Add to this the piling up of stresses, and this line becomes a pounding example of the English language driven to cacophony.

Where Cacophony appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;"
- **Lines 3-4:** "and bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new."

ALLUSION

"Holy Sonnet 14" begins with an allusion to Christian theology. The phrase "three-person'd God" refers to the Christian

concept of the Holy Trinity. In Christianity, God is an entity with three parts—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is God, the being people usually associated with the word *God*. He's the one is encountered throughout the Old Testament, creating miracles, causing acts of destruction, and giving humans laws to live by. The Son is Jesus Christ, God's human form on earth and a symbol of humility and forgiveness. And the Holy Spirit is associated with inspiration, prophecy, breath, and fire.

Taken together, these three forms represent the full power of God. So, when the speaker boldly commands this trinity to "Batter my heart," the speaker is really asking for a good smack down.

The phrase "your enemy" is a bit more ambiguous, but can be interpreted as an allusion to Satan, i.e. the devil. Satan is often referred to as the enemy—of God, humankind, and the world. Although this phrase could also be interpreted as referring to something like sin, atheism, or simply doubt itself, in a way all these things actually *are* the work of devil. At least that's how people at Donne's time would have thought. Furthermore, by referring to the devil here, the speaker balances out the allusion to the God. While God is everything good and pure, the devil represents everything evil and corrupted.

Taking these two allusions together frames the poem as a clear tug of war between God on one hand and Satan on the other. Although the poem is addressed much more clearly to God, there is clear sense that the speaker has been living a life of dissipation and shame. The speaker has not just lost control of life, but feels *taken over* by an "enemy" force. Thus, it's important to think of this "enemy" as actively having power over the speaker, just like the devil.

Additionally, the phrase "or break that knot again," could be taken as a kind of double allusion. First off, it refers to the idiomatic phrase "tie the knot," meaning get married. Breaking the knot, then, is getting divorced. Additionally, the image of breaking a knot summons the story of the Gordian knot, a knot that supposedly could not be untied until Alexander the Great simply cut it with a sword. Read this way, the phrase suggests God is a powerful conqueror capable of breaking any bond. Additionally, it should be noted that Catholics were not allowed to get divorced, though Anglicans were. Here, then, Donne seems to nod to the tenets of his newly adopted faith.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "three-person'd God"
- **Line 10:** "your enemy"
- **Line 11:** "or break that knot again"

CAESURA

Caesura plays a pretty important role in "Holy Sonnet 14." It appears in every line except one and is an important part of Donne's unusual sense of meter. It contributes to bumpiness of the poem's iambic pentameter, mimicking both the speaker's tortured state of mind *and* the speaker's desire to be "Batter[ed]" by God. That is, the language itself has a battered quality to it.

The poem's most distinct use of caesura occurs in lines 2 and 4, when the speaker lists the metaphorical actions God should perform: "knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend," and "break, blow, burn, and make me new." In each of these phrase, the combination of strong, monosyllabic verbs and caesurae affect the meter in the same way:

> but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend
>
> to break, blow, burn, and make me new

This combination creates a spondee, a foot with two stressed syllables (DUM-DUM). As a result, these lines feel heavily stressed, jerking from one word to the next.

In fact, most of the lines in this poem have this jerking quality. Sometimes, the quality has to do with a combination of caesura and unintuitive word order, as in line 7: "Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend." The phrase "me should defend," as opposed to the more natural "should defend me," is actually a pretty standard Renaissance inversion of word order. This stems from the fact that many English poets read Latin and Greek poetry, where a more elaborate grammar allows for flexible word order; it also stems from older forms of English, which also had more complicated grammar.

That said, just because it's not unusual *doesn't* mean it's not messing with poem's rhythm. In fact, the poem is *exploiting* the Renaissance flair for inverted grammar in order to construct such tortured sentences. In this sense, Donne can get away with his twisty-turny use of caesura and syntax because his contemporary readers were used to seeing such constructions. Unusual sentences were part of the game of poetry for Renaissance readers. By dishing out thorny caesurae, Donne just takes that game to new lengths.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "heart, three," "God, for"
- **Line 2:** "knock, breathe, shine, and"
- **Line 3:** "stand, o'erthrow me, and"
- **Line 4:** "break, blow, burn, and"
- **Line 5:** "I, like"
- **Line 6:** "you, but oh, to"
- **Line 7:** "Reason, your," "me, me"
- **Line 8:** "captiv'd, and"
- **Line 9:** "you, and"
- **Line 11:** "me, untie"
- **Line 12:** "you, imprison me, for"

- **Line 13:** " me, never"
- **Line 14:** "chaste, except"

CLIMAX (FIGURE OF SPEECH)

In the first four and last four lines of the poem, the speaker employs a device called climax. This is a rhetorical device where consecutive phrases build up in importance, creating a feeling of increasing intensity.

In the first four lines of the poem, the speaker keeps increasing the intensity of actions the speaker wants God to perform. In line 2, God will only "knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend." Then in line 3, the speaker asks God to "o'erthrow me," and in line 4 to "break, blow, burn, and make me new." In this way, these opening lines detail the spectrum of the kinds of interactions God can have with the speaker, from the gentle and polite to the forceful and brutal. What's so striking about the poem is that the speaker opts for the brutal.

In the final four lines of the poem, the escalation continues. "Divorce me," urges the speaker, meaning that the speaker wants God to divorce the speaker *from* the "enemy." Next, the speaker reframes "Divorce" more viscerally: "untie or break that knot again." This riffs off the idiomatic phrase "tie the knot," which means to get married. Breaking the knot, then, is ending a marriage, probably in a way that is forceful and unpleasant.

The speaker continues: "Take me to you, imprison me." With each phrase, the metaphorical scenario the speaker is imagining grows more intense. Not only is God ending the speaker's marriage to the "enemy," but God is keeping the speaker for himself. Furthermore, God is imprisoning the speaker.

The speaker continues, asking God to "enthrall me," which means both to captivate the speaker and to enslave the speaker. And finally, the speaker asks God to "ravish me," which, similarly, means both intense sexual pleasure and sexual assault. Beginning with the speaker's simple request for God for "divorce," this section culminates in a bold request for God to capture and forcefully seduce the speaker.

Where Climax (Figure of Speech) appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 11-14

POLYPTOTON

The speaker employs polyptoton in line 9: "Yet dearly I **love** you, and would be **lov'd** fain." Here, the word "love" is used in present tense and past tense. Additionally, the speaker is the subject of the verb in the first phrase, and the object of the verb in the second phrase. As with so much of the poem, this poetic device brings out the richness of these words and the grammar in which they're embedded.

Technically in the second phrase "lov'd" is an adjective that modifies that subject "I." That is, *I want to be loved*. However, the phrase directly implies a relationship where God loves the speaker: *I want God to love me*. Phrased this way, the speaker the becomes the object of God's love, just as God is the object of the speaker's love. Overall, then, the speaker use polyptoton to describe a reciprocal relationship with God, one where the speaker loves God and God loves the speaker.

By repeating the word "love" in these two forms, the speaker emphasizes the importance of love in faith, how the speaker wants that love to go both ways. Additionally, because the end of the poem explicitly frames this love in erotic terms, it's important to note that "love" can also be used in the context of *making love*—that is, having sex. Again, then, reciprocity is everything; a total erotic meshing of the speaker's soul with God.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,"

CHIASMUS

The chiasmus in lines 13 and 14 is made clear through the use of diacope in the repetition of "except":

> **Except** you enthrall me, *never* shall be free,
> Nor *ever* chaste, **except** you ravish me.

As the bold and italic phrases show, the structure of the first line is reversed in the second. A*B* becomes *B*A; **Except** / *never* becomes *Nor ever* / **except**.

In general, Renaissance writers and readers prized syntactic structures like these, structures that added elegance to their language and that were stimulating to the mind. Chiasmus additionally creates a bookend effect, where the beginning of the first line and the end of the second line have similar content, stressing their importance.

Here, the speaker emphasizes the desire to be "enthrall[ed]" and "ravish[ed]." In fact, the speaker *needs* these things. The repetition of "except" captures how the speaker cannot be "free" or "chaste" unless these things are achieved. Additionally, the use of "except" is a form of logical reasoning, like the phrase *P if and only if Q*. That is, *Unless, you ravish me, I'll never be chaste.*

This suggestion of logic heightens the paradox of these lines. This paradox is discussed more fully in its own section of this guide. Here, it's important to note how chiasmus plays up paradox by heightening the poem's sense of logical relations, both through the repetition of "except" and through the lines' reversed symmetrical structure. This reverse symmetry (A*B* *B*A) suggests order and logic, the way that the order of

mathematical equations can be changed while the overall results remain constant.

Where Chiasmus appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me."

ENJAMBMENT

"Holy Sonnet 14" is for the most part end-stopped, meaning that lines are grammatically stable and don't need the following lines in order to complete them. This is partly an artifact of renaissance sonnets in general. In many early Renaissance sonnets, speakers tend to fit their thoughts to the line, proceeding one line-sized thought at a time. By following this convention, the speaker conveys poetic control.

Although this is a poem of desperation—one where the speaker pointedly wants *to give up* control and let God take over—that doesn't mean the poem completely flies off the rails. In fact, a device like end-stop can be seen as a kind of control exerted from outside the speaker, a convention of sonnet writing that the speaker has to follow, almost like a religious stricture. In this sense, the end-stops "imprison" the speaker—which is exactly what the speaker begs for.

All this said, there are still a few moments of enjambment. These moments do a great deal to contribute to the tension and thorniness of the poem's language. The first line, for instance, is enjambed. This creates a moment of suspense where the speaker's meaning isn't clear: "for you" ...what? It takes the next line to clarify: "for you / As yet but knock, breathe," etc. The enjambment also contributes to tension established by the rhyme scheme, ABBA, where the word that rhymes with "you" ("new") doesn't appear for another three lines.

As if to parallel this enjambment, the speaker makes the same move in line 3. Here, the enjambment captures the word at the end of the line: "bend." The line itself seems to bend as the reader's gaze shuttles over to the start of line 4. In fact, the word "verse" comes from the Latin word for "turn," suggesting that this moment is playing into a long tradition of poetic expression.

Lines 5 and 12 operate in similar ways.

> I, like an usurp'd town to another **due,**
> **Labor** to admit you, [...]

And:

> Take me to you, imprison me, for **I,**
> **Except** you enthrall me, [...]

In each of these, the speaker takes some time in making these "I," statements, adding qualifications that make the sentence longer, so that it spans two lines. These instances are less obvious as enjambment because they have commas and natural pauses at the end. For Renaissance readers and those concerned with the form of the sonnet, they might even read as end-stops. At the same time, however, they clearly cannot stand on their own grammatically. Instead, they're part of Donne's signature practice of building complex metaphorical arguments—arguments that need several interconnected lines to take shape.

As these examples show, "Holy Sonnet 14" both follows the strictures of Renaissance poetic lines and plays with them, using those strictures to its own advantage.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "you"
- **Line 3:** "bend"
- **Line 5:** "due,"
- **Line 12:** "I,"

VOCABULARY

Batter (Line 1) - Hit repeatedly. One might also think of a battering ram, which is used to knock in heavy doors.

Three-Person'd God (Line 1) - An allusion to the Holy Trinity in Christianity, the doctrine that God is composed of three entities, the Father (God), the Son (Jesus), the Holy Spirit.

O'erthrow (Line 3) - A shorted version of overthrow, pronounced "or-throw," so that the word has one less syllable and better fits the meter. Overthrow means means to forcibly remove someone from power. Here, it also has more literal connotations of knocking someone down.

Usurp'd (Line 5) - To forcibly take power away from someone for oneself. A "usurp'd town," then, is one that has been taken over by an enemy.

Due (Line 5) - Controlled by someone else, i.e., by an enemy force.

Labor (Line 6) - Work, try.

Admit (Line 6) - To let in. In other other words, the speaker is trying to let God into the speaker's soul. This use of word also suggests the meaning of "to acknowledge that something is true"—in this sense, the speaker has trouble admitting that God is real.

Reason (Line 7) - Logical thinking.

Viceroy (Line 7) - Someone appointed to rule in place of a ruler, such as the governor of a colony. The speaker is saying that reason is supposed to take God's place in the speaker's mind, keeping the speaker faithful.

Captiv'd (Line 8) - Captured, made captive.

Proves (Line 8) - Turns out to be. The speaker also puns on the word's other meaning, "to show something is true," an activity associated with reason.

Untrue (Line 8) - Unfaithful, though it also suggests the more familiar use of the word (i.e., "false"), paradoxically playing off the speaker's earlier reference to "Reason."

Lov'd (Line 9) - A shortened spelling of "loved."

Fain (Line 9) - Gladly, with pleasure. In other words, the speaker would like to be loved by God in return.

Betroth'd Unto (Line 10) - Married to.

Divorce Me (Line 11) - Initiate a divorce. The speaker is asking God to end the speaker's marriage to the enemy.

Enthrall (Line 13) - Captivate someone's attention. The original meaning of the word, though, is "to enslave."

Chaste (Line 14) - Abstaining from extramarital sex, or even from all sex.

Ravish (Line 14) - This can mean both to give someone intense sexual pleasure and to sexually assault someone.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Holy Sonnet 14" is a Petrarchan sonnet, one of the most famous forms of the sonnet made famous by the Italian poet Petrarch. A Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two halves, an octave (8 lines) then a sestet (6 lines). In line 9, the first line of the sestet, the speaker usually switches things up in some way, changing tone or the direction of the poem's argument. This is called the *volta*, or turn.

Donne's poem is no different. The volta is directly signaled by the word "Yet." Here, the speaker changes the metaphor at play. Whereas the previous lines treated the speaker's soul like a town that had been captured by enemy forces, now the speaker focuses on love.

Overall, Donne follows the traditional form of the sonnet pretty faithfully. Although the speaker describes what it feels like to have lost control of one's soul, feeling like an "enemy" has taken over one's mind, the form goes against this lack of control. In fact, the sonnet form seems to impose a sense of control on the poem from outside, just as the speaker asks God to impose control on the speaker's soul. Although the language and meter of the poem is a little thorny and bumpy, the overall form of the poem (for instance, the pretty consistent end-stops) contains this roughness within broader stability.

METER

John Donne has a notoriously funky take on iambic pentameter, and that funkiness is on display in this poem.

Traditionally, poets writing in iambic pentameter (five stresses per line in a da-DUM rhythm) have tried to match their language to that rhythm, perhaps carefully switching it up here and there for emphasis. Donne, on the other hand, seems to be fighting against his own meter from line 1.

Some readers have criticized this aspect of Donne's poetry. At the same time, his poems have captivated people for centuries, so it's worth inquiring what exactly it is about Donne's unconventional language that works so well for the kinds of poems he wrote.

As an example of what we're talking about, here is line 9, whose meter can be read multiple ways. Here's one scanning:

Yet dear- | ly I love | you, and would | be lov'd fain

Sometimes the poem is printed with the final words being "belovéd fain"—making the meter different still. Whichever way one choose to interpret the meter, it's clearly not a standard line of iambic pentameter—it could never be, since it has extra syllables.

In lines like these, the speaker comes across as someone who is intelligent and troubled, grappling with contorted thoughts. As the speaker tries to articulate love for God and the need for the God's love in return, the meter captures how this is not an easy fact to articulate. This thought has taken work to reach, lots of introspection. At the same time, though, the poem's speaker is not shy and does not stumble over words. In fact, the speaker is bold, cavalier, flirty. The speaker wittily talks about these inner troubles, capturing them artfully in the form of a sonnet.

The first line provides additional context for how to think about Donne's meter within this poem:

Batter | my heart, | three-per- | son'd God, | for you

This initial trochee (DUM-da) begins the poem with a stress, as if "Batter[ing]" the poem just as the speaker asks God to "Batter my heart." Extrapolating from this moment, the language of whole poem can be read as battered, bent out of shape by force of God and the speaker's crisis of faith.

RHYME SCHEME

For the most part, "Holy Sonnet 14" employs the structure of a Petrarchan sonnet. Interlinking rhymes divide the poems into two sections, an octave (8 lines) followed by a sestet (6 lines):

ABBAABBA CDCDDD

The poem veers from the standard Petrarchan sonnet in the last three lines. Petrarch himself would have normally used a rhyme scheme like CDCDCD or CDECDE.

Donne's slight variation has a couple of effects. First off, he employs an eye rhyme in line 12, so that line might almost be read as not rhyming at all. Read in this way, it's as if a wrench

has been thrown in the machine, this word "I" disrupting the flow of the poem. Such a disruption captures the way that speaker's mind itself (the speaker's "I") has become a disruption, leading the speaker away from faith. That's why the speaker needs God *to take over*, making the speaker's "I" subservient to the power of God.

The second effect is that the poem ends on a rhyming couplet (DD). Ending a poem with a rhyming couplet is part of the form the Shakespearian sonnet (where it's preceded by three rhyming quatrains). As its name suggests, this sonnet form was popularized by William Shakespeare, and so is a distinctly English form, as compared to the sonnets of the Italian poet Petrarch. This subtle nod to the Shakespearian form, whether intentional or not, gives the ending a similar feeling to the Shakespeare's ending couplets:

> [...] for I,
> Except you enthrall me, never shall be **free**,
> Nor ever chaste, except you ravish **me**.

The simple, monosyllabic rhyme of "free" and "me" clicks the poem shut on its boldest assertion: that the speaker must be "ravish[ed]"—sexually consumed—by God.

It should also be noted that there are a couple of instances of internal rhyme. As discussed in the assonance section of this guide, "break" and "make" rhyme in line 4, then "break" again and "Take" rhyme in lines 11-12. There are also a few subtler instances, such as "to," "due," and "you" in lines 5-6, as well "oh" and "no" in line 6. Similarly, the poem employs a slant rhyme with "stand" and "bend" in line 3. These moments add an additional sense of structure to the poem's syntax. Amid language that sometimes veers into a prose-like absence of assonance, these moments are like poetic spikes pinned into the language, keeping its thorny, rambunctious movements under control.

SPEAKER

While the speaker remains anonymous, the poem plays off who Donne himself was, as well the kinds of personas Donne adopted in his earlier work.

What's clear is that the speaker in this poem is undergoing a crisis of faith. The speaker boldly commands God to take over the speaker's soul, as if roughly and forcefully seducing the speaker. To modern readers, the speaker can be read as ungendered and open to interpretation and identification. To Renaissance readers, however, this would have been a distinctly feminine speaker (or at least someone embodying a—stereotypically—feminine role). Note how the speaker says:

> But [I] am betroth'd unto your enemy;
> Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
> Take me to you, [...]

This is the kind of thing that women would say in Medieval and Renaissance literature. This trope is still recognizable to modern readers as the damsel in distress—the woman imprisoned against her will who must be rescued by a gallant knight. Of course, what's unusual here is that *God* is that gallant knight.

It also would have been striking to readers that this is a male poet writing from the perspective of a woman. It's not that male Renaissance poets didn't write poems from the perspectives of women (they did). What's striking is that this isn't really a persona poem; it's not Donne explicitly writing as something he's not. Rather, it's a devotional poem, a combination of personal confession on the part of the poet and the kind of generalized speaker found in prayers, such as The Psalms in the Bible.

This speaker must also be viewed in the context of poems from earlier poems in Donne's career, poems of erotic seduction and celebration. In these poems, witty speakers tried to convince women to have sex with them, or talk about how great this sex is while it's happening. "Holy Sonnet 14" clearly retains some aspects of these earlier speakers, such as boldness and sexual desire. Yet while the speakers of those earlier poems were implied to be masculine, now things have flipped—the speaker embraces a culturally feminine role. In Donne's historical context, this is an act of humility, one that acknowledges God as an all-powerful being to which the speaker must submit.

Readers don't have to agree with these gender roles. Instead, a poem like this can help readers think about the role of gender in discussions of religion. It can help them examine how forms of power have affected how people view their relationship with God, and vice-versa. Additionally, this poem is a good example of how poetry and prayer can offer a space of play, a space where writers can mess with things like gender and power. While Donne by no means escapes the cultural assumptions of his time, at the same time this poem tweaks those assumptions, suggesting the fluidity of the soul and the *difference* between the roles people play in society and the roles they play in their imaginations and in states of prayer.

SETTING

"Holy Sonnet 14" can be said to take place in the speaker's mind. It uses metaphors to capture a purely abstract concept—the relationship between a human soul and God. These metaphors emphasize physical actions and suggest certain objects that give the poem a signature flair and immediacy.

The most place-like quality of the poem is the comparison of

the speaker's soul to "an usurp'd town," a town that has been taken over by enemy forces. At the same time, the speaker's body is often invoked or suggested. This happens from the very first phrase, "Batter my heart." Throughout the poem, the poems suggests acts of physically attacking the speaker's body, or capturing the speaker's body, or, finally, having sex with the speaker's body.

These acts are metaphorical, where the speaker's body stands in for the speaker's soul. At the same time, these moments seem to fade into the metaphor of the speaker's soul as a town. It's as if the speaker's soul as a body is superimposed over the speaker's soul as a town, creating a metaphorical body-soul-town that seems to permeate the poem.

Ultimately, the poem narrows in scope. While God starts outside speaker, battering the doors of the speaker's "town," by the end God has imprisoned the speaker. Things have narrowed down to what can be interpreted (again metaphorically) as a bedroom scene, an erotic encounter between the speaker and God.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne wrote in England during a period of the Renaissance called the Baroque period. The Renaissance was a flourishing of art, literature, and thought in Europe that followed the Middle Ages. During this period, artists and thinkers rekindled an interest in Greek and Roman culture while at the same time developing sophisticated forms of their own. This period is known for its Humanist qualities, meaning that people emphasized the abilities and depths of humans, placing human beings at the center of the universe, rather than God. Baroque art took the accomplishments of the Renaissance and made them more dramatic, complicated, and psychologically intense.

Donne was also associated with a loose movement of writers called the Metaphysical Poets who wrote during this time. These poets were known for embracing long, complicated metaphors and incorporating scientific, philosophical, and theological learning in their poems. Like earlier Renaissance poets, they still focused on ideas related to love, sex, and faith, but how they wrote about these things grew quirkier. The sonnet was the premiere poetic invention of the Renaissance, and these poets continued to write sonnets, even as they moved away from the formulaic expressions that sometimes characterized earlier Renaissance poetry.

Each of the metaphysical poets had their own complicated relationship with religion. Donne was an ardent Catholic who eventually converted to Anglicanism and became a minister in that church. Although Renaissance poetry is usually associated with love poetry, there were also devotional (religious, prayer-like) poems. One of the most famous writers of such poems was George Herbert, whose poems exhibit the kind of tortured psychology that is also on display in "Holy Sonnet 14." Yet Herbert would never have spoken to God so boldly and erotically. That is an approach distinct to Donne.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Donne, like many other Renaissance poets, such as Sir Thomas Wyatt and Andrew Marvell, filled many roles during his lifetime: he was a gentleman soldier, a civil servant, and later in life a famous minister. He was a man of the world, navigating elite circles while at the same time dealing with the constant threat of poverty. Like many poets of the time, he often had to seek out wealthy patrons to support them.

Donne was raised in a Roman Catholic family during a time when Catholics were persecuted in England. After 1588, when England defeated the Spanish Armada—a massive fleet sent by Catholic Spain to invade England—it became increasingly difficult to be a Catholic in England. This pressure probably contributed to Donne's eventual conversion to Anglicanism, the English denomination of Protestantism that was also the state religion of Britain.

Eventually, at the behest of King James, Donne even became a priest in the Anglican church. In the 1620s, he was one of the most celebrated ministers in England. On the basis of the many sermons he wrote, Donne has come to be regarded as an exceptional prose stylist.

Written before any of this happened, "Holy Sonnet 14" can be seen as part of Donne's transition from amorous adventurer to pious minister. More broadly, it captures the uneasy relationship secular humanism and religious piety had in Renaissance England. This was something everyone had to navigate, as Europe journeyed out of the Middle Ages and into Modernity.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Donne's Poem Sung in Doctor Atomic — The minimalist composer John Adams, along with director Peter Sellars, wrote an opera about the development of the atomic bomb. Here, Gerald Finley (as physicist Robert Oppenheimer) contemplates the power of the bomb and sings Donne's poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIUHKHLk_VU)
- Donne's Poem Read Aloud — Listen to a recitation of "Holy Sonnet 14." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YC52PiK4IgU)
- A Short Biography of John Donne — An in-depth essay on Donne's life and writing, along with additional poems, from

the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne)

- The Metaphysical Poets — A concise summary of the Metaphysical Poets along with links to the Poetry Foundation pages for several of them. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/metaphysical-poets)
- An Early Manuscript of Donne's Work — An early handwritten manuscript of Donne's poems, containing Holy Sonnet 14 among many others. From the digital collections of the New York Public Library. (https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6568bda0-2f87-6a81-e040-e00a18064442#/?uuid=6568bda0-2f7f-6a81-e040-e00a18064442)
- Another Manuscript of Donne's Poetry — Another handwritten manuscript of Donne's work, this one from after his death and more ornately bound. From Harvard University's Houghton Library. (https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:12201527$1i)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- Death, be not proud
- Song: Go and catch a falling star
- The Flea
- The Good-Morrow
- The Sun Rising
- To His Mistress Going to Bed

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