The Canonization

POEM TEXT

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,
My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune, flout,
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe His Honor, or His Grace,
Or the King's real, or his stampèd face
Contemplate; what you will, approve,
So you will let me love.

Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?
What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned?
Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?
When did my colds a forward spring remove?
When did the heats which my veins fill
Add one more to the plaguy bill?
Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.

Call us what you will, we are made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly,
We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And we in us find the eagle and the dove.
The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us: we two being one, are it.
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

We can die by it, if not live by love,
And if unfit for tombs and hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
As well a well-wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns, all shall approve
Us canonized for love:

And thus invoke us: You, whom reverend love
Made one another's hermitage;
You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove
Into the glasses of your eyes
(So made such mirrors, and such spies,
That they did all to you epitomize)
Countries, towns, courts: Beg from above
A pattern of your love!

SUMMARY

Listen: just be quiet already and let me be in love. You can go ahead and make fun of my shaky hands or my sore joints, or taunt me for my gray hair or my poverty. You can go make your fortune, or you can educate yourself in some craft; you can take up a new career, or go find a role in a fancy nobleman's retinue, following some lord or some high-up clergyman; you can serve the King, or the coins with his face printed on them; you can do whatever you like, so long as you leave me alone and let me be in love.

Come on, now: who does my love hurt? Have my lovesick sighs sunk any ships? Have my tears flooded anyone's land? Have the times when my lover coldly ignored my advances stopped spring from coming? Did the fever of love in my veins ever add one single death to the register of plague victims? Soldiers still go to war, and lawyers still find argumentative people to sue each other, in spite of the fact that my lady and I love each other.

Whatever you say my lady and I are like, love makes us that way. You might say we're as mortal and lustful as flies, or like shrinking candles burned up by passion. We're strong and wise as eagles and sweet and meek as doves. We embody the legend of the phoenix (the bird that burns up and then is reborn from its own ashes): the two of us together, when we have sex, make one phoenix, creating a hybrid androgynous being out of two bodies. Like the phoenix, we "die" (that is, have orgasms) and then get up again. Our love, you see, makes us into a magical creature.

If we can't live on our love, we can certainly die from it. And even if our love story isn't exactly something you could carve on a tomb or a hearse, it'll be just the ticket for poetry. We might not make it into the history books, but we'll make a home for ourselves in the stanzas of sonnets. Just as an elegant, well-

made urn or a huge, mighty tomb is the right home for the ashes of heroes, the poetry I write will be a fitting monument to us. Reading it, everyone will agree that we should be made saints for our devotion to love.

When people want to pray to us, here's what they'll say: *You two lovers, whom love made into each other's sacred, private chapel; you two, who found peace in a love that is now cause for passionate devotion; you two, who shrunk the soul of the world itself down into the reflective mirrors of your eyes, seeing in each other everything that exists, making each other into the whole wide world with its countries, cities, and noble courts: ask God to send us the pattern that you built your love upon!*

THEMES

THE POWER AND HOLINESS OF LOVE

"The Canonization" suggests that love isn't just a silly game for young people to play, but a serious, lasting, and even holy force. The poem's speaker, a middle-aged man, has fallen deeply in love, and he spends the first stanzas of the poem telling a friend of his to stop making fun of him for his later-in-life romance and just *let* him be in love, already. Love, he insists, is much more than an emotional storm that silly kids get caught up in. It's a power so strong, transformative, and purifying that true lovers are "canonized" by their love. In other words, love can make people into saints, wholeheartedly devoted to a sacred task.

Love, the poem's speaker suggests, is often wrongly considered the purview of the young, starry-eyed, and foolish. When the speaker's friend makes fun of him for falling in love at an age when he has "gray hairs" and creaky joints, the speaker replies that his love doesn't do anybody any harm—and in doing so, he reveals that he's got a pretty level-headed sense of what love is *actually* like. He mocks the kind of clichéd love poetry that suggests love changes the whole world, observing that his "sighs" haven't sunk a single ship and his "tears" haven't "overflowed" one field (and that his friend should therefore leave him alone—his love isn't causing problems for anyone!). The speaker's rejection of over-the-top cliché suggests he knows love well and understands what it *isn't* as well as what it is.

In fact, this mature lover knows that his love can do something much more powerful than whip up storms: it has a huge *internal* effect on him and his beloved. Love makes them so wrapped up in each other that they see the whole world in the magic "glasses" (or mirrors) of each other's eyes. They're so deeply in love that they seem to become one being: when they have sex, the speaker feels that they fuse into a "phoenix," an immortal mythical creature that burns up, dies, and is reborn from its own ashes. (Readers might understand this allusion better if they know that "dying" is Renaissance-era slang for "having an orgasm.") In other words, love makes them everything to each other—and even makes them *into* each other, turning them into a single immortal being that can "die" over and over again and still live!

These images are passionate, but they're also *sacred*. Both the idea of fusing with a beloved and the idea of death and resurrection fit right into Donne's Christianity: the first image echoes the biblical notion that Christ literally becomes part of Christians, and the second echoes the tale of Christ's death and resurrection. By adoring each other so completely, then, the lovers play out the Christian story in their own lives, mirroring what the passionately religious Donne saw as the order of the universe itself. In fact, they become holy through their love, treating each other's very bodies as "hermitage[s]" (that is, private chapels for solitary holy men).

To this speaker, then, love is a "canonization": it makes true lovers into saints, devoted to (and made greater by) adoration. By mirroring the Christian story, the poem suggests, deep love takes people very close to the divine indeed. And if that's true, he and his beloved aren't twitterpated fools: they're veritable saints, whose "pattern" later lovers should strive to follow.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45

LOVE, POETRY, AND IMMORTALITY

Love, in "The Canonization," is a mighty and even holy force. But in spite of love's greatness, the speaker is aware that love *stories* aren't always remembered in books or monuments the way that, say, tales of war or politics are (maybe because they're just too personal). And yet, the poem's speaker reflects, perhaps a big stone monument wouldn't even be the right way to honor a great love. This poem suggests that it takes *poetry* to build true love the monument it deserves: poetry is the only form that can rightly reflect love's power and preserve it eternally.

Love stories don't always make it into the "chronicles" (or history books), the speaker observes: love is too private and too personal to be a matter of historical record. Nobody carves a love story onto the side of a "tomb" or builds a "well-wrought urn" (in other words, an elegant funerary vase) to preserve the ashes of a love affair. Monuments like these are reserved for people who performed publicly heroic acts; great warriors, leaders, and artists get memorialized in stone, but great lovers don't get those kinds of tributes.

The only fitting monument for his own love, the speaker concludes, is poetry. Perhaps that's because poetry is such a good match for love: poetry "becomes" (or suits) love because it can record what love feels like (try doing *that* with a stone

"urn"). But it also "becomes" love because, like love, it's *timeless*. Great poetry can endure for centuries, making the long-dead loves it records feel alive and fresh. It can also show readers that love felt just the same to people hundreds of years ago, reminding them that love itself really is eternal: its "pattern" remains the same.

"The Canonization" itself thus becomes the proof of its own argument: this centuries-old poem has survived, and by surviving, it has immortalized the love it describes.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 28-36

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,
My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune, flout,

"The Canonization" begins with an explosion of frustration. Without preamble, the speaker bursts out: "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love." Slapped awake like this, readers are primed to figure out what on earth could have gotten the speaker so touchy.

Some friend or other, clearly, has been teasing the speaker about being in love. So far, so normal: mocking lovers is a timeless hobby, popular for as long as lovers have existed. But the speaker's next lines hint that his friend isn't *just* making fun of him for being all infatuated. So long as his friend "let[s him] love," the speaker says, it doesn't bother him one bit if they want to mock him for:

> [...] my palsy, or my gout,
> My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune [...]

With "palsy" (shaky hands), "gout" (creaky joints), and "five gray hairs" (which explain themselves), this speaker is no spring chicken. And not only is he older than he used to be, but he's poorer, too: he once had a "fortune," but it's gone now. (Perhaps he's even down on his luck in other ways: a "fortune" can mean both one's wealth and one's fate.)

In other words, this speaker is a middle-aged man who's both down-at-heel and head-over-heels. And who's more mockable than that? Passionate love is often considered the purview of the young and silly; older people who fall hard for each other, in Donne's 17th century as much as now, are easy to accuse of midlife crises or plain foolishness.

But this speaker stands ready to defend himself against such charges. Sure, he's old, and sure, his purse is a little lighter than it used to be—but he doesn't mind being teased about any of that, so long as he can go on being in love. Love, in other words, means he doesn't care one bit about anything else. This poem will celebrate passion, whenever and wherever passion arises.

LINES 4-6

With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe His Honor, or His Grace,

Having made it clear that he doesn't care one bit what his friend says about him so long as they "let [him] love," the speaker further suggests that his friend should consider getting a hobby, already, and leaving him alone. The *way* he says it reveals a few things about his character.

Listen to the chiasmus in this line, for example:

> With wealth *your state, your mind* with arts improve,

This sentence structure folds over on itself, forming an elegant reflection. In essence, the speaker is simply telling his friend to find something to do other than mocking him: to go earn some money or learn some new "arts" (skills or crafts). But his snappy phrasing shows readers that this lover is no fool. Whatever love has done to him, it hasn't touched his intellect.

There's some similarly stylish writing in these next lines. Take a look at the parallelism here:

> Take you a course, get you a place,
> Observe His Honor, or His Grace,

This rhythmic list of commands, all similarly phrased, makes the speaker sound as if he could go on exasperatedly listing possibilities forever. There's *plenty* of better stuff for his friend to do than make fun of him, these lines suggest.

The specific pursuits the speaker recommends here also place the poem in Donne's own 17th-century English world. To "take you a course" simply means to choose a career. But to "get you a place" or "Observe His Honor, or His Grace" means something more specific:

- A "place," in this context, means a position at the court of a wealthy nobleman—the kind of guy you'd call "His Honor" or "His Grace," that is.
- These lines suggest that this speaker and his teasing friend are courtiers: men lower in the Renaissance pecking order than the nobility, but higher than most.
- Still, they're dependent on the patronage (and favor) of rich men. The speaker's "ruined fortune" suggests that he might have fallen *out* of some nobleman's good graces—a predicament not so far from Donne's own, at certain moments in his life.

In just a few lines, then, readers learn a great deal about this speaker, less through what he says about himself than through *how* he talks and *what* he talks about. He's a brilliant wit, an upper-crust guy fallen on hard times—and a person who values love above all else.

LINES 7-9

Or the King's real, or his stampèd face
Contemplate; what you will, approve,
So you will let me love.

Besides getting a job or finding a place in a nobleman's court, the speaker goes on, his friend might consider occupying himself in much loftier ways—or much lowlier ones. The friend, the speaker says, might choose to "contemplate" either "the King's real, or his stampèd face." That is:

- The friend could get a job serving the King himself (King James I of England, at the time this poem was written).
- But they could also just get pragmatic and "contemplate" coins with the King's face "stampèd" (or imprinted) upon them—in other words, focus on getting rich.

With this final bit of advice, the speaker suggests that his friend can do *anything else in the world*—"what you will" (or "whatever you want")—so long as they stop making fun of him and "let [him] love."

Notice that all the courses the speaker has recommended are grounded, pragmatic, and status-focused: getting jobs, learning skills, courting favor with noblemen, or just plain money-grubbing. *If you don't have any time or respect for love*, the speaker seems to say, *then just focus on worldly things. Go be a big shot, I don't care.*

Love, in contrast with all these social-climbing pursuits, must therefore be something rather more elevated, rather more sublime. Here at the end of the first stanza, repetitions begin to suggest just *how* sacred the speaker believes love is.

Take a look back at the first line of this stanza:

> For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,

Now take a look at the last line of this stanza:

> So you will let me love.

"Love" literally begins and ends this stanza. As the poem continues, readers will notice that "love" also begins and ends every *other* stanza: it's the place where the poem starts and the place where it ends.

By structuring the poem this way, Donne suggests that love has more than a little in common with the "God" the speaker invokes in that first line—a figure also said, in Donne's Christian tradition, to literally *be* "Love," the alpha and omega of all existence. Donne, a passionately religious writer (and a noted clergyman), will use this poem to argue that erotic love isn't silly, sordid, or profane: it's divine.

But before the speaker establishes what love *is*, he'll show what love *isn't*.

LINES 10-15

Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?
What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned?
Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?
When did my colds a forward spring remove?
When did the heats which my veins fill
Add one more to the plaguy bill?

In the first stanza, the speaker exploded at a teasing friend, telling them: "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love." Now, the speaker seems to tease his friend right back.

Listen to the epizeuxis in the second stanza's first line:

> Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?

There's some hyperbolic humor going on here. "Alas, alas" is the sort of thing you'd cry to lament a real disaster. But here, the speaker uses a strong repetition simply to say: *Come on now, it's a shame to badger me over something so harmless as falling in love.* There's more of a "tsk, tsk" than a "woe is me" tone happening here. Readers might even hear the speaker putting on a wry, mocking voice—especially as he launches into a series of comical rhetorical questions.

In lines 11-15, the speaker asks, in a variety of ways, *When did my love ever hurt anyone?* At the same time, he makes a satirical point about the clichés of love poetry. Every one of the disastrous examples he gives suggests that Donne is mocking not just the speaker's cynical friend, but a whole host of other 16th- and 17th-century poets:

- The idea that a lovelorn sigh could sink a ship (or launch one, for that matter) could come straight out of Christopher Marlowe.
- Floods of heartbroken tears and fatal fevers of passion are both pure Shakespeare.
- And Edmund Spenser knew plenty about how an icy winter of indifference might chill an early "spring" of affection.

Of course, the speaker isn't making *direct* references to the poems and plays linked above. But that's exactly the point. All the metaphors he brings up here—the pains of love as a storm, a disaster, or a disease—are so common that it's easy to think of countless examples from the work of all sorts of Renaissance writers.

The speaker's big point here, then, is that love *isn't* the way it's often described in poetry. He's old enough and wise enough to know that love doesn't shake the world to its very foundations. Being a lover with "five gray hairs" and "gout" has its advantages: this mature speaker knows better than to believe that anyone besides his lover gives a hoot about his love.

What's more, all of these examples describe the supposed effects of *unrequited* love and heartbreak. And this speaker's love (as readers will soon see) is fully requited, thank you very much. Perhaps part of the reason he brings up all these examples is to suggest that his passion is more harmless than most: not even he himself is "injured by [his] love."

LINES 16-18

Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.

The speaker concludes his series of witty rhetorical questions by observing that his love doesn't change one thing in the outer world. All around him, it's business as usual: "soldiers" still "find wars" to kill each other in, and "lawyers" still find "litigious men"—temperamental fellows who are quick to sue each other—to take sides in courtroom "quarrels."

In other words, the speaker says, the fact that "she and I do love" doesn't mean that everything in the world gets turned upside down by storms of sighs and floods of tears—*or* that everyone in the world holds hands and sings! One couple's love doesn't do much to the outside world for good *or* for ill, no matter what the poets say.

Again, there's a resigned, mature perspective here. The speaker, unlike plenty of lovers, doesn't see himself as the center of the universe just because he's in love.

But he is still quietly making a claim that love is something other than business as usual:

- All the combative goings-on of "soldiers" and "lawyers" seems to take place somewhere far away from the speaker and his beloved, just like all the status-hunting the speaker recommends to his teasing friend back in stanza 1.
- Love, in other words, doesn't change the course of the quarrelsome world—but it might just set lovers *apart* from that world.

Here at the end of the second stanza, look back at the way this poem's meter takes shape. Like a lot of Donne's longer poems, this one uses a meter that jumps all over the place, from longer lines to shorter ones and back again. While most of the lines here are roughly iambic—that is, they're built from iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—there's plenty of variation.

Listen to the rhythms of lines 16-18 for one good example:

Soldiers | find wars, | and law- | yers find | out still
Liti- | gious men, | which quar- | rels move,
Though she | and I | do love.

- That first foot in line 16 is not an iamb, but its opposite: a trochee, a foot with a DUM-da rhythm. It starts a line of otherwise steady iambic pentameter (five iambs in a row) with a bang.
- Then, the next two lines get steadily shorter: line 17 is in iambic tetrameter (four iambs), and line 18 is in iambic trimeter (three iambs).
- The meter thus reflects exactly what the speaker is doing: boiling things down to their essence, reaching a final firm conclusion about what love can and cannot do.

LINES 19-22

Call us what you will, we are made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly,
We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And we in us find the eagle and the dove.

The speaker has just finished rejecting a host of poetic clichés about love, observing that love doesn't sink any ships or spread any fevers. But here at the beginning of the third stanza, he turns right around and embraces a series of traditional metaphors for lovers.

His teasing friend wouldn't be wrong, he notes, to say that love transforms him and his beloved into flies, melting candles, or eagles and doves. In other words: *some* of the things that people always say about love aren't far off.

Each of the metaphors the speaker uses here draws on a long symbolic tradition:

- Flies were a common Renaissance symbol for death—and for lust. Because flies feed on dead meat, Renaissance artists used them as a reminder that the pleasures of the body (like sex) only last as long as bodies do.
- "Tapers," or candles, were also an image of both the power and brevity of love and life. Every second that a candle glows with the metaphorical "flame" of passion, it's a second closer to becoming a burnt-out puddle.
- The "eagle" and the "dove," meanwhile, were both birds with some weighty religious meanings:
    - Besides representing wisdom and power, the eagle was the attribute of St. John the Evangelist—the Gospel writer often honored as the most insightful and sublime. Perhaps it's no coincidence that *John* Donne might nod to a namesake

here.
    - And the dove, which stood for peace and love, was also a symbol for the Holy Spirit itself, one of the three persons of the Christian Trinity (alongside Christ and God the Father).

Readers might notice that all this symbolism suggests two things at once:

- On the one hand, the speaker is agreeing that part of being a lover is accepting that the pleasures of love—especially sex—last only as long as the human body does. (That truth might feel particularly immediate to a middle-aged guy!)
- On the other, he's claiming that he and his lover find all kinds of deathless spiritual virtues in each other: not just love, but wisdom and holiness.
- The poem's juxtaposition of two flavors of symbolism thus moves toward the idea that love can be both fleshly *and* divine, mortal *and* immortal.

These lines also introduce a pun that's about to become important. Take another look at line 21:

> We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,

Candles certainly "die," in the sense of melting down and disappearing. But to "die," in Renaissance slang, also meant "to have an orgasm." Even the word "cost" is a sex joke here: Renaissance lovers were said to "spend" themselves when they orgasmed, too.

This mischievous pun has a sting in its tail. This speaker is well aware that he and his lover do literally "die" a little more every time they "die" in bed: every moment of pleasure is a moment closer to the grave.

All in all, then, these lines introduce an interwoven tapestry of ideas: the poem is about to explore the relationship between sex, death, and immortality. But the worldly-wise, self-deprecating speaker will investigate these huge themes in the most playful and punny of ways. Keep an eye out for the word "die": this isn't the last time it's going to pop up.

LINES 23-27

The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us: we two being one, are it.
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

In the first part of this stanza, the speaker suggested that *some* traditional images of lovers are just right. He agrees that (as the ancient symbols of flies and candles suggest) lovers revel in bodily pleasure, but also must confront the fact that bodies can't last forever. However, in his images of "the eagle and the dove," he also hinted that he sees something eternal and sacred in erotic love. The second part of this stanza will make a daring, witty, fiery claim for the holiness of passion.

When they're in bed together, the speaker says, he and his lover embody the "phoenix riddle"—that is, the story of the phoenix, the legendary bird said to periodically burn to death, then arise, reborn, from its own ashes. For obvious reasons, the phoenix was a common Renaissance symbol for resurrection and new life—and thus, for Christ himself.

Here's how the speaker solves that "phoenix riddle":

- With their bodies joined in sex, he says, he and his lover become "one neutral thing" made of "both sexes": a single androgynous being made from two people.
- Then, together, they "die" (remember that pun?) in fiery passion and "rise" again: they have orgasms, and get right back up! (And there's yet another sex joke in the idea that they can "rise" again. The word "rise" hints that the speaker isn't just able to "die" and get out of bed, but "die" and go *back* to bed: he's sexually inexhaustible.)
- In other words, together, this couple is just like the phoenix, able to die and resurrect over and over again.

This sparkling, irreverent joke has serious theological undertones. Reflect on what the speaker is claiming here:

- Through passion, he and his lover become one person.
- That person can die and resurrect.

Both of these claims have an awful lot in common with Christian beliefs:

- The idea of God becoming part of believers' bodies and souls is right at the heart of Christianity: that's why nearly all Christian denominations take communion, eating bread and drinking wine said either to *be* or to *represent* Christ's body and blood (depending on whom you ask).
- And the idea that Christ returned from the dead—and that *everyone* will resurrect, at the end of time—is a central tenet of Christian faith.

Here, readers might want to look again at the word "love," putting in its usual appearance at the end of the stanza, and remember that even the way the poem repeats the word fits into a Christian framework. If God is love, then isn't passion divine?

Divine "love" and mortal, fleshly "love," the conceit of the

phoenix suggests, might resemble each other much more closely than the speaker's cynical friend from the first stanza is able to comprehend. Passionate lovers, wrapped up in each other and transported far away from the hurly-burly of "soldiers," "lawyers," and the King's "stampèd face," might actually be embodying the sacred drama of the universe.

And perhaps, the speaker will go on to say, such sacred love can even transcend *literal* death, not just the punny kind.

LINES 28-32

We can die by it, if not live by love,
And if unfit for tombs and hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;

Lovers might feel immortal when they metaphorically "die" in bed, but the middle-aged speaker knows all too well that such resurrections can't go on forever: he and his lover can't "live by love" eternally. So now, the speaker digs deeper into the idea of death. If he and his lover must die one day, they should at least be honored with a fitting monument once they're gone.

Great lovers, the previous stanza suggested, touch the divine, mirroring the eternal love of God in their passion. There's something glorious about that, something heroic. But unlike other heroic figures, lovers don't get commemorated in stone monuments or "chronicle[d]" in history books after they die. Their "legends," the stories of their lives, are "unfit for tomb or hearse": decorate the side of a coffin with pictures of a couple's phoenix-like sexual triumph, and people will definitely give you funny looks.

Perhaps, for that matter, the glory of love *can't* be commemorated properly in stone. Rather, only *poetry* will do as a monument to love. Listen to the language the speaker uses here:

> And if **unfit** for tombs and hearse
> Our legend be, it will be **fit** for verse;

This moment of polyptoton stresses that the speaker's point isn't simply that, since you shouldn't carve a lover's triumph on a tomb, you might as well write a love poem instead. Rather, the point is that poetry is the *right* and *best* way to memorialize love.

Rather than trying to carve all the dynamic (and very private!) energy of a love story into a commemorative rock, then, the speaker and his lover will "build in sonnets pretty rooms": that is, they'll make a temple to their love out of poetry, not stone. (There's a submerged pun here, too: the word "stanza," meaning "a group of lines in a poem," translates to "room" in Italian.)

In other words: in this poet's opinion, only in a poem can love be fittingly celebrated and preserved. Poetry is love's monument and love's shrine. The rest of this stanza will explore why that might be.

LINES 33-36

As well a well-wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns, all shall approve
Us canonized for love:

Poetry, the speaker goes on, "becomes" (or suits) lovers in the same way that a "well-wrought urn" (that is, a beautiful vessel for ashes) or a "half-acre tomb" (a vast, grand stone mausoleum) would suit a hero. This idea might invite readers to ask: *aside from the fact that the speaker is a poet, why would he feel that poetry is the most fitting way to honor love?*

To answer that question, readers might consider the *differences* between a "well-wrought urn" and a poem:

- An "urn" or a "tomb" is a solid object made from stone. It stays in one place. And while it might last a long time, it's also ultimately as mortal as the ashes it contains: once it falls into ruin or erodes away, its "life" is over.
- A poem, meanwhile, doesn't even *need* a physical body to live on. It can travel the world, replicating endlessly through print or copying—and it can live on as long as someone remembers its words.

Both love and poetry, then, allow mortal humans to touch eternity.

This moment might give readers a little shiver. Like William Shakespeare on his beloved, like Walt Whitman on his ferry, John Donne proves his own claim: 400 years after it was written, this poem lives on, still singing of deathless passion. This very "verse" has immortalized both itself and the love it celebrates.

Through a poetic memorial, then, love really can become eternal. And "by these hymns"—that is, through the speaker's love songs, now presented as sacred music—the whole world will agree that the speaker and his beloved are "canonized for love."

With those words, the poem finally gets around to the conceit it hinted at in its title: an extended metaphor of lovers as "canonized" saints (that is, official and bonafide saints in the eyes of the Catholic church).

The speaker has already made it clear that he sees passionate romantic love as next to divine love, a little mirror image of the very "Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (to borrow a phrase from Dante). So far, so saintly. But:

- To be officially *canonized*, prospective saints must meet all kinds of other stringent requirements: they

have to perform miracles, and their bodies have to remain "incorrupt," at least partly untouched by decay.
- Luckily for the speaker and his lover, the miracle of an immortal "hymn" like this one—a poem that preserves the lovers long past their deaths—fits the bill!

LINES 37-39

And thus invoke us: You, whom reverend love
Made one another's hermitage;
You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;

As the final stanza begins, readers might want to look back at the beginning of the poem and think how far the speaker has come. A poem that began as a rebuke to a cynical friend has evolved into an exploration of the way that passionate earthly love can touch heavenly immortality. Now, the speaker presents himself and his beloved as canonized love-saints, figures that the lovers of the future can pray to for guidance.

This is a dramatic, reverent climax to a passionate poem—but readers shouldn't forget that it's *funny*, too:

- Remember, this speaker is a seasoned, worldly, and rather self-deprecating middle-aged guy. He's already proven he has his feet firmly on the ground—and that what he says about love, he says with clear eyes.
- Readers thus get the sense that, when he describes himself to his friend as an honest-to-God *saint*, he's being deadly serious and ever-so-slightly tongue-in-cheek at exactly the same time.

In fact, that wry sense of humor is a big part of what will make the poem's conclusion moving. Even an ordinary guy with "five gray hairs," "gout," and a "ruined fortune," the speaker suggests—a guy who's seen enough of the world to know that love sinks no ships and stops no wars—can still reach divinity through loving well. Anyone could, and perhaps should, aspire to such heights.

So the speaker recommends a prayer to those who want to follow in his and his beloved's footsteps—the people worshiping at this poem's metaphorical temple. Listen to the speaker's anaphora as he describes how later lovers should "invoke" (that is, call upon) the happy pair:

> [...] You, whom reverend love
> Made one another's hermitage;
> You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;

Those solemn, repeated "you"s feel like a drumroll, a grand lead-up to the poem's finale.

And take a closer look at the way the speaker imagines his followers might describe him and his beloved:

- They're "one another's hermitage": that is, one another's private, secluded chapel. Again, bodies become divine here: the lovers, this metaphor suggests, were places of holy worship to each other.
- And their love once gave them "peace" and rest, but now provokes "rage"—a word that here doesn't mean anger, but fervor, as in "all the rage."
    - In other words, the couple's love now inspires passionate religious devotion (and perhaps other kinds of passion, too!).
    - The phrasing here suggests that the "peace" and the "rage" of love might be two sides of the same coin: transcendent passion might be its own kind of restful bliss.

LINES 40-44

Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove
Into the glasses of your eyes
(So made such mirrors, and such spies,
That they did all to you epitomize)
Countries, towns, courts:

In the first lines of this stanza, the speaker began imagining the prayers his followers might say as they "worship" at the temple of this poem, invoking the speaker and his beloved as love's canonized saints. Now, at the climax of this prayer, he reaches for an ancient and beautiful metaphor that reflects—literally—the endless glory of love:

- The speaker and his lover, the imagined prayer goes on, look into each other's eyes and see *mirrors*.
- Here, readers might want to think about the last time they stood between two mirrors, and saw reflections reflecting reflections, stretching on forever. Gazing at each other with their matched "mirrors," the lovers see the infinite.
- And in seeing the infinite in each other, they see the "whole world's soul": *everything*, themselves included, seems to live inside the beloved, "epitomize[d]" in that reflection—a word that can mean both "summed up" and "shown at its absolute best."
- "Countries, towns, courts": the world entire is both encompassed and glorified by those beloved, mirroring eyes.

And look how Donne says so:

> Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove
> Into the glasses of your eyes

(So made such **mirrors**, and such spies,
That they did **all to you epitomize**)
Countries, towns, courts [...]

Here, the speaker:

- describes the two lovers' eyes as "glasses" (or **mirrors**)—
- then, in an aside, calls their eyes "**mirrors**" again—
- then, still in the aside, says those mirrored eyes contain **everything in the world**—
- then, returning to the original sentence, says that the "glasses" take in "countries, towns, courts"—that is, **everything in the world**!

In other words: this intricate sentence says everything twice. That same-but-different repetition *mirrors* the metaphorical *mirrors* the speaker is describing.

Once again: this "well-wrought urn" of a poem doesn't just *contain* love, but *reflects* it: love is indeed "fit for verse" here, and verse is fit for love. This is the poem's rhetorical zenith; readers might just about hear fireworks going off in the background.

LINES 44-45

Beg from above
A pattern of your love!

The final stanza has been an increasingly intense prayer to the poem's "canonized," saintly lovers, culminating in an image of a loving gaze that expands to embrace infinity. After that final grand flourish, only one thing remains: those who worship at the temple of the speaker and his beloved, the poem concludes, will have to ask them to "beg from above / A pattern of your love!" In other words, they'll pray to be given the design this love was built from, so they can love as passionately themselves.

This is a distinctly theological conclusion. Note that the imagined worshipers aren't asking the speaker and his beloved to pony up the "pattern of [their] love" *themselves*. Instead, the worshipers ask the canonized lovers to *intercede* for them: to carry their prayers to God, just as Christian saints are said to.

The kind of love the speaker hymns in this poem, in other words, isn't something that people make up all by themselves. It's a divine gift, an act of grace. And it's all part of the miracle that such gifts aren't limited to the young, foolish, and beautiful. Love, "The Canonization" suggests, is all the more divine *because* it raises flawed and mortal beings—people all too aware of their "five gray hairs" and their general frailty—to the brink of heaven. An immortal poem is the only fitting monument to such a love.

SYMBOLS

THE PHOENIX

While the speaker uses the phoenix as a metaphor in this poem, not a symbol, it's important to know about traditional phoenix symbolism to understand what the poem is *doing* with that metaphor.

The phoenix was a mythical bird, said to periodically catch fire, burn to death, and then arise, reborn, from its own ashes. For obvious reasons, then, the phoenix was a symbol for rebirth, rejuvenation, and resurrection. In the Christian tradition, the phoenix also symbolized Christ himself.

The speaker thus draws on phoenix symbolism to suggest that passionate love makes him and his lover both immortal and divine—and to make a daring joke. The two of them, he observes, can burn up in the fires of passion, "die" (or have orgasms), and then get up again, good as new!

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-27:** "The phoenix riddle hath more wit /
By us: we two being one, are it. / So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit. / We die and rise the same, and prove /
Mysterious by this love."

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

Like a lot of Donne's poems, "The Canonization" revolves around a central conceit: an elaborate extended metaphor. Here, in fact, there are *two* conceits: poetry as a monument, and lovers as saints.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker notes that when lovers die, their love is rarely commemorated with a mighty "tomb" or a "well-wrought urn." Leaving aside the speaker's naughty joke (to "die," in Renaissance slang, was to have an orgasm—definitely the kind of event nobody builds a tomb about), there's a serious point here:

- Passionate love, in this speaker's eyes, is one of the greatest and most divine forces in the world, and lovers *should* be celebrated just as great heroes are.
- But love, the speaker thinks, also needs a different *kind* of monument than a dead hero. Instead of building a stony "urn" to commemorate his love, the speaker will therefore build a metaphorical temple out of poetry, making "pretty rooms" in "sonnets." (There's another pun implied here: the word "stanza," meaning the groups of lines out of which poems are built, actually means "room" in Italian.)

This poem itself thus becomes a kind of "well-wrought urn," a beautifully designed container that will preserve the speaker's love.

A monument like this poem, the speaker goes on, a poem that commemorates a love as deep as his, will itself become a temple worthy of a holy pilgrimage. It might even have powers a physical temple never could: a poem, after all, can travel the world and endlessly replicate in print, while a building, a tomb, or an urn stays resolutely in one place.

If the speaker writes a poem as a monument to his love, then, people everywhere will be able to visit that monument—and to worship there. In the poem's other major conceit, true lovers like the speaker and his beloved are "canonized" by their love: that is, they're made into Catholic saints. Love, this poem argues, has an awful lot in common with the Christian faith:

- Love (and sex) makes "two" separate people into "one"—in much the same way that God is said to become part of every soul.
- Love can also make people immortal, allowing them to "die" and resurrect like a phoenix—or like Christ himself.

Passion, the conceit of canonization suggests, is a near neighbor to the divine. Far from being a sinful distraction, love can raise mortal beings to the brink of heaven.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- **Lines 28-45:** "We can die by it, if not live by love, / And if unfit for tombs and hearse / Our legend be, it will be fit for verse; / And if no piece of chronicle we prove, / We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms; / As well a well-wrought urn becomes / The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs, / And by these hymns, all shall approve / Us canonized for love: / And thus invoke us: You, whom reverend love / Made one another's hermitage; / You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage; / Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove / Into the glasses of your eyes / (So made such mirrors, and such spies, / That they did all to you epitomize) / Countries, towns, courts: Beg from above / A pattern of your love!"

PUN

A lot of this poem's philosophy hinges on a single dirty pun: to "die," in the Renaissance, didn't just mean to literally keel over, but to have an orgasm. Returning to this pun over and over, looking at it from different angles, the poem's speaker makes it clear that death has no power over his love.

This pun first appears in line 21, when the speaker observes that he and his lover are like "tapers," or candles: they "die" at their "own cost." Here, the speaker alludes to a common piece of Renaissance candle symbolism, suggesting that the lovers' passion burns like a flame—but also that it burns them up, melting them away. In other words, there's no forgetting that every time the two of them "die" in a sexual sense, they're also a few minutes closer to literal death. The pleasures of sex require a body—and bodies are mortal.

But the speaker also laughs in the face of death. Every time he and his lover "die" in bed, he observes, they "rise the same"—that is, they can "die" sexually over and over and still get up again. (There's also yet another sex joke in the idea that the speaker can "rise" after he "dies": in other words, with his lover, he's sexually inexhaustible.) The little death of passion, the speaker insists, fuses him and his lover into one immortal "phoenix," eternally reborn to *more* passion.

And the fact that this pair can go through this punny "death" over and over isn't just a joke. The speaker genuinely believes that the kind of passion he and his lover feel for each other is *immortal*—or at least, it can be, if preserved through the metaphorical monument of a poem like this one. He explores that idea through a subtler pun. When he says that he and his lover will "build in sonnets pretty rooms," he's making a submerged pun on the word "stanza," which means "room" in Italian. In other words: he and his lover might not be remembered with a physical shrine once they're dead, so this poem will have to be their temple instead. The "pretty rooms" of poems like this one will immortalize their deathless passion.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,"
- **Line 26:** "We die and rise the same"
- **Line 28:** "We can die by it, if not live by love,"
- **Line 32:** " We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;"

METAPHOR

The poem's tapestry of metaphors helps the speaker to evoke his experience of love and to suggest that sexual passion isn't sinful, but holy.

A long sequence of metaphors in lines 20-24 depict the speaker and his lover as a number of animals and objects laden with traditional Renaissance symbolism:

- Flies often appeared in art and poetry as symbols of death, sin, and lust: because they feed on dead bodies, they were meant to remind people that earthly, fleshly pleasures (including sex) were fleeting.
- "Tapers," or candles, were another symbol of lust and mortality: as candles burn (just like lovers "burning with passion"), they get eaten up and disappear.
- The "eagle" symbolized wisdom, insight, and power

(and was the attribute of St. John the Evangelist, known as the most keen-sighted and theological of the Gospel authors); the "dove" represented peace, love, and the Christian Holy Spirit itself.
- The "phoenix," finally, was a symbol of immortality: it was a legendary bird said to burn to death, then be reborn from its own ashes. As an image of resurrection, it was often associated with Christ.

Taken all together, these metaphors suggest that the speaker experiences love as something both fleshly and sacred. He and his love are fated to "die" in more than one way: they're mortal beings, but they also "die" in bed together ("dying" was Renaissance slang for "having an orgasm"). But their love also makes them more than flesh: it puts them in touch with the immortal virtues of a whole host of sacred birds, and perhaps seems to give them *wings*, too.

Such a love as this, the poem suggests, needs a monument or a temple to honor it. In lines 37-38, the lovers themselves become "one another's **hermitage**": that is, each other's secret, private places of worship.

But the speaker wants *other* people to be able to appreciate the holiness of his love, too, even long after he and his lover are dead and no one can visit those "hermitage[s]" anymore. That's why he describes building "in sonnets **pretty rooms**" for his love to live in: in other words, poems just like this one become metaphorical temples in which love can be preserved and worshiped. (That fits right in with the conceit of the lovers themselves as "canonized" saints, too.)

The poem's final metaphor is an ancient, rich, and mysterious one. In the last stanza, the lovers' eyes become "glasses," or mirrors. As the two of them look at each other, in other words, their eyes reflect back and forth into infinity. Readers who have stood between two mirrors will be able to imagine this clearly.

These mirrored eyes thus seem to contain the whole universe: they make the lovers *everything* to each other. (Donne isn't the first person to play with the image of lovers' eyes as mirrors, or to see such loving reflections as sacred—see *Paradiso*, the last book of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for another famous example.)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** " Call her one, me another fly,"
- **Line 21:** "We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,"
- **Line 22:** " And we in us find the eagle and the dove."
- **Lines 23-24:** "The phoenix riddle hath more wit /
  By us: we two being one, are it."
- **Line 32:** " We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;"
- **Lines 37-38:** "You, whom reverend love / Made one another's hermitage"
- **Line 41:** "the glasses of your eyes"
- **Line 42:** "So made such mirrors, and such spies,"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker's rhetorical questions in lines 10-15 help to characterize him as a grounded, knowing person—and thus make his declaration of faith in love that much more powerful.

In this passage, the speaker repeatedly asks his mocking friend: *What harm did my love ever do to anyone?* His love, he observes, hasn't "drowned" any ships, "overflowed" any fields, "remove[d]" the spring from the countryside, or added even "one more" death to the plague's toll.

But these specific examples are pointed. Every ludicrous possibility the speaker lists here alludes to a common trope in Renaissance love poetry: the ideas that lovestruck sighs can sink ships, heartbroken tears can flood the world, rejection can feel icy as winter, and passion can burn like a fever are, shall we say, not too hard to find in the writings of Donne's contemporaries.

By rhetorically pointing out that his love *isn't* a force with real-world destructive power, the speaker makes it clear that he's not a delusional, self-centered, lovesick fool, so crazy in love that he believes his passion shakes the whole world. That realism only makes his eventual exploration of love's *actual* power feel that much more persuasive. The rhetorical questions here thus invite readers to take the speaker's passion as seriously—and as lightly—as he does.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-15:** "Alas, alas, who's injured by my love? /
  What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned? /
  Who says my tears have overflowed his ground? /
  When did my colds a forward spring remove? /
  When did the heats which my veins fill / Add one more to the plaguy bill?"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism gives emphasis and power to the speaker's witty argument.

For example, listen to the way this device works in the first stanza, in which the speaker tells his friend to get a hobby and quit bugging him about his love affair, already:

> **Take you** a course, **get you** a place,
> **Observe** His Honor, or His Grace,

Here, parallelism makes it sound as if the speaker is working up a head of steam: this repetitive sentence structure, in which each clause begins with a new command, could just go on and on. This phrasing makes it sound like the speaker is saying, *Do whatever the heck you like, just leave me alone.*

That effect gets even more pronounced in the second stanza, where the speaker uses parallelism to introduce a whole host of

rhetorical questions:

> What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned?
> Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?
> When did my colds a forward spring remove?
> When did the heats which my veins fill
> Add one more to the plaguy bill?

All these similarly phrased questions imply a further one: *if my love hasn't done anyone any harm, then* **why** *are you bothering me about it?*

Parallelism also helps the speaker to drive home his point about poetry:

> And if unfit for tombs and hearse
> Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;

Here, the speaker uses repetitive phrasing to introduce the idea that poetry is the ideal, most befitting monument to dead lovers. (A stony "tomb" can't preserve the experience of passionate love, but a poem like this one sure can.)

And anaphora plays an important role in the prayers the speaker imagines later readers offering at the shrine to love this poem will become:

> And thus invoke us: You, whom reverend love
> Made one another's hermitage;
> You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;

Those initial "You"s sound reverent and solemn, as if the imagined visitors are invoking sacred spirits. And that's just the point the speaker is making: he and his lover share a passion so deep that it should be treated as something holy, not as a matter for mockery (as his teasing friend in the first stanza seems to think).

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Or," "or"
- **Line 3:** "My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune,"
- **Lines 5-8:** "Take you a course, get you a place, / Observe His Honor, or His Grace, / Or the King's real, or his stampèd face / Contemplate"
- **Lines 11-15:** "What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned? / Who says my tears have overflowed his ground? / When did my colds a forward spring remove? / When did the heats which my veins fill / Add one more to the plaguy bill?"
- **Line 19:** "Call"
- **Line 20:** "Call"
- **Line 29:** "unfit for tombs and hearse"
- **Line 30:** "fit for verse"
- **Line 33:** "As"
- **Line 34:** "as"
- **Line 37:** "You"
- **Line 39:** "You"

REPETITION

Repetitions carry readers back again and again to the poem's central ball of wax: "love." "Love" appears as the final word in both the first and last line of every stanza—and thus frames the whole poem. This repetition fits in with the speaker's sense of love's divinity. "Love," in this poem, is the beginning and the ending, the alpha and the omega: in other words, it's just what God is said to be. A fervently religious man, this speaker clearly believes that if God *is* love (as Christianity holds), then intense sexual passion must be pretty close to godliness.

The speaker also uses repetitions for emphasis and flair. Take a look at the epizeuxis in line 10, for instance:

> Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?

This strong repetition almost makes it sound as if the speaker is teasing his friend from the first stanza right back. A full-blooded "Alas, alas" feels hyperbolic in this context: it's more like something you'd say when, for instance, your ship went down than when your friend made a little fun of you. Readers might even imagine the speaker putting on a sly, mocking voice here.

Meanwhile, back in the first stanza, the speaker uses a moment of chiasmus to tell his friend to get a hobby:

> With wealth *your state*, *your mind* with arts improve,

This elegant inversion turns the line inside out—and makes the speaker sound completely in control of this situation. He's not just a dreamy lover, this moment suggests, but a rhetorician at the height of his powers.

And in the fourth stanza, the speaker uses polyptoton to make an emphatic point about the relation between love and poetry:

> And if unfit for tombs and hearse
> Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;

This altered repetition makes it clear that the speaker sees poems like this one, not as a consolation prize for lovers unmemorialized in statues and "tombs," but as the exact right monument to great loves.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "love"

- **Line 4:** "With wealth your state, your mind with arts"
- **Line 9:** "love"
- **Line 10:** "Alas, alas,," "love"
- **Line 18:** "love"
- **Line 19:** "love"
- **Line 27:** "love"
- **Line 28:** "love"
- **Line 29:** "unfit"
- **Line 30:** "fit"
- **Line 33:** "well," "well"
- **Line 36:** "love"
- **Line 37:** "love"
- **Line 45:** "love"

ALLUSION

The poem's allusions poke some fun at the world's misconceptions about love—and help the speaker to explore what love is *really* like.

There's a whole sequence of veiled, satirical allusions to Renaissance love poetry in the rhetorical questions that take up lines 10-15. Everything the speaker says love *can't* do in this passage—sink ships, flood fields, cause unseasonable frosts, kill people like a fever—is something that other poems of the era say love absolutely can do. Love, these mocking allusions suggest, is powerful, but not in quite the way it's cracked up to be. To this speaker, love only transforms the world from the inside out: it changes *lovers*, intimately, but it doesn't launch any ships on its own.

But the speaker also alludes to a bunch of inherited Renaissance symbolism when he describes what love *does* feel like to him in lines 20-23. Love makes him and his lover into a pair of "fl[ies]," an "eagle" and a "dove," melting "tapers" (or candles), and a "phoenix," a mythic bird that burns up and then resurrects. These images all touch on passion, mortality, and the sacred; there's a deeper dive on their meaning under "Metaphor" above.

What's broadly important here is that all of these allusions suggest that *some* of the things people often say about love are quite right. Just as traditional symbolism would have it, these lines say, physical passion needs mortal bodies—bodies that will die. But sexual "dying" (that is, having an orgasm, in Renaissance terms) also seems to put the speaker and his lover in touch with immortality: like the phoenix, they're still alive after they "die," and their passion promises to outlive them in the form of a poem.

The poem's allusions thus make a case for what love *is*, and what it *isn't*. To this speaker, love is too great and sacred to diminish it with outlandish cliché.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-15:** "What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned? / Who says my tears have overflowed his ground? / When did my colds a forward spring remove? / When did the heats which my veins fill / Add one more to the plaguy bill?"
- **Lines 20-22:** "Call her one, me another fly, / We're tapers too, and at our own cost die, / And we in us find the eagle and the dove."
- **Line 23:** "The phoenix riddle"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambments help to give the poem energy and momentum—and structure some of Donne's notoriously intricate sentences.

The simpler enjambments here merely do what enjambments often do: they pick up the poem's pace, making one line flow smoothly into the next. The end of the third stanza provides one good example. After describing himself and his lover forming a hybrid phoenix-like being during sex, the speaker concludes:

> We die and rise the same, and **prove**
> **Mysterious** by this love.

Here, the enjambment makes these two lines feel like one sinuous piece. (There's a similar effect at the end of the remaining two stanzas as well.)

But Donne also uses enjambments in trickier ways. Take a look at what happens in lines 6-8, for instance:

> Observe His Honor, or His Grace,
> Or the King's real, or his stampèd **face**
> **Contemplate**; what you will, approve,

An enjambment here pulls this sentence in two directions:

- On a first scan, readers are likely to imagine that the verb "observe" also applies to the "King's real, or his stampèd face": in other words, "His Honor," "His Grace," and the King's various faces are all things meant to be *observed*.
- But as it turns out, lines 7-8 are enjambed, and the verb "contemplate" is actually meant to conclude the line about the King's face. That is: one should *observe* "His Honor, or His Grace," but *contemplate* the King.

This enjambment thus creates a surprise chiasmus, putting a verb at both the beginning and the end of this passage. Such elegant, knotty phrasing helps the speaker to demonstrate that, whatever love has done to him, it's had no effect at all on his

intellect or his eloquence. This enjambment is a spur to readers: it's as if the speaker is saying, *keep up! Stay on your toes!*

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "face / Contemplate"
- **Lines 14-15:** "fill / Add"
- **Lines 16-17:** "still / Litigious"
- **Lines 23-24:** "wit / By"
- **Lines 26-27:** "prove / Mysterious"
- **Lines 29-30:** "hearse / Our"
- **Lines 33-34:** "becomes / The"
- **Lines 35-36:** "approve / Us"
- **Lines 37-38:** "love / Made"
- **Lines 40-41:** "drove / Into"
- **Lines 44-45:** "above / A"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives the speaker's voice notes of gentle music even in his pricklier moments.

For instance, a touch of /l/ alliteration both opens and closes the first stanza as the speaker demands (and demands again) that his mocking friend "let [him] love." That liquid /l/ sound is a favorite in a lot of love poetry—and not just because it starts the word "love" itself. The drawn-out, gentle /l/ just plain feels luxurious and languorous to read aloud. By turning from the explosive "for God's sake hold your tongue" to the smooth "and let me love," the speaker makes it clear that he's rejecting his friend's cynicism in the name of delicious passion.

Another moment of alliteration in line 3 suggests that the speaker feels rather irritated by his friend's incomprehension—but that he can give as good as he takes. So long as his friend "let[s him] love," he says, no other kind of mockery makes the slightest bit of difference to him:

> My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune, flout,

That fricative /f/ sound sounds like a spitting cat. Even as the speaker makes some jokes at his own expense, admitting that he's not as young or as rich as he used to be, his defiant alliteration makes it clear that he doesn't care one bit about any of those things: love is at the center of his world now.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "let," "love"
- **Line 3:** "five," "fortune," "flout"
- **Line 9:** "let," "love"
- **Line 19:** "what," "will, we"
- **Line 21:** "tapers too"
- **Line 28:** "live," "love"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, gives the poem music.

For example, listen to the sounds in this line from the poem's climax:

> Who did the whole world's soul contract [...]

That long /oh/ feels as round as the "whole world" itself, and that big sound helps to give this moment its grandeur.

Meanwhile, back in line 26, assonance draws attention to an image that's at once beautiful and mischievous. Like the phoenix, the speaker says, he and his lover "die and rise"—in bed. This punny joke, which plays on Renaissance slang for orgasms, feels all the more pointed because of that drawn-out /eye/ sound.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tongue," "love"
- **Line 2:** "chide"
- **Line 3:** "five"
- **Line 4:** "state"
- **Line 5:** "Take," "place"
- **Line 11:** "my sighs"
- **Line 16:** "wars," "lawyers"
- **Line 19:** "such," "love"
- **Line 22:** "we," "eagle"
- **Line 23:** "phoenix"
- **Line 26:** "die," "rise"
- **Line 28:** "live"
- **Line 29:** "if," "unfit"
- **Line 34:** "ashes, as half"
- **Line 37:** "You, whom"
- **Line 39:** "You, to whom"
- **Line 40:** "whole," "soul"

VOCABULARY

Hold your tongue (Line 1) - Shut up, be quiet.

Chide my palsy, or my gout (Line 2) - That is, "Make fun of my shaky hands or my creaky joints."

Flout (Line 3) - Mock, make fun of.

State (Line 4) - Situation, circumstances.

Arts (Line 4) - Skills, crafts, new kinds of expertise.

Take you a course (Line 5) - Choose a career.

Get you a place (Line 5) - Find yourself a position in the court of a nobleman.

His stampèd face (Line 7) - In other words, coins with the King's face printed on them.

What you will, approve (Line 8) - In other words, "Try whatever you want."

A forward spring (Line 13) - An early, warm springtime.

The plaguy bill (Line 15) - The weekly death register that recorded the number of plague victims.

Litigious men (Line 17) - Men who are quick to sue each other

Quarrels (Line 17) - Fights, disputes. Here, the word specifically suggests lawsuits.

What you will (Line 19) - Whatever you want.

Fly (Line 20) - Flies were common Renaissance-era symbols of both mortality and lust.

Tapers (Line 21) - Candles.

Die (Line 21, Line 26, Line 28) - All through this poem, Donne puns on the word "die": it can mean both "to literally die," and "to have an orgasm."

The eagle and the dove (Line 22) - Symbols of courage and wisdom or gentleness and sweetness, respectively.

The phoenix riddle (Line 23) - That is, the story of the phoenix, the legendary bird said to burn to ashes and then come back to life.

Hath (Line 23) - Has.

Neutral (Line 25) - Androgynous, having both male and female features.

Unfit (Line 29) - Inappropriate.

If no piece of chronicle we prove (Line 31) - In other words, "If we don't end up making it into the history books."

We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms (Line 32) - Here, Donne is making a quiet pun: the word *stanza* is Italian for "room," as well as meaning "a chunk of a poem." So the stanzas a sonnet is built from will be "rooms" for the speaker and his lover to live in.

Well-wrought urn (Line 33) - A beautifully-made funerary urn, meant to contain the ashes of a cremated body.

Canonized (Line 36) - Officially declared to be saints.

Invoke (Line 37) - Call on in prayer.

Reverend (Line 37) - Holy, honorable, revered.

Hermitage (Line 38) - A private chapel where a hermit, a solitary holy man, would pray.

Rage (Line 39) - Intense passion—here, spiritual passion, though sexual passion is also implied!

Contract (Line 40) - Shrink down, concentrate into a small place.

Glasses (Line 41) - Mirrors.

Epitomize (Line 43) - Here, this word might mean both "to sum something up" and "to be the best example of something."

A pattern of your love (Line 45) - That is, people reading the speaker's poem might pray to be given the model his love was built on, so they can imitate this love themselves.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Canonization," like a lot of John Donne's poems, uses a brand-new form of Donne's own invention. The poem is built from five nine-line stanzas, and all those stanzas have something in common: their first and last lines end with the word "love." The poem, like the speaker, thus returns and returns to the same preoccupation.

No matter how much people tease the speaker for his late-in-life love affair, this form suggests, he's unruffled. While he's old and wise enough to know that passion can't really have much effect on ships (no matter what Christopher Marlowe says), he also believes that, memorialized in verse, love has immortal power. This very poem is the proof.

METER

This poem's fluid, tricksy meter shifts its shape line by line but repeats stanza by stanza. In other words, while each stanza is built from many different kinds of lines, those lines always fall in roughly the same *pattern*.

While most of the lines here are iambic—that is, they're built from iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—they switch between pentameter (five iambs per line), tetrameter (four iambs per line), and trimeter (three iambs per line). Here's an example from the first three lines:

> For God's | sake hold | your tongue, | and let | me love,
> Or chide | my pal- | sy, or | my gout,
> My five | gray hairs, | or ru- | ined for- | tune, flout,

Here, the meter moves from pentameter to tetrameter and back again. The last line of each stanza, meanwhile, is always in iambic trimeter, as in line 18:

> Though she | and I | do love.

Those shorter lines add extra punch to the speaker's repeated reflections on love.

A lot of iambic poetry throws in some different rhythms for flavor, and this poem is no exception: the speaker has a few tricks up his sleeve. For example, readers might hear a spondee (DUM-DUM) on the second foot of line 1 ("sake hold"), adding some forceful oomph to the speaker's demand that his listener be quiet. And listen to the hammering rhythm of line 5:

> Take you | a course, | get you | a place,

The first and third feet of this tetrameter line aren't iambs, but trochees, the opposite foot, with a DUM-da rhythm. Those up-front stresses mirror the speaker's exasperation with his disapproving friend.

Overall, the poem's meter feels flexible, playful, and musical. The combination of shifting lines and steady stanzas might mimic the speaker's own situation: love, to him, feels both as constant and as ever-changing as a flaming phoenix.

RHYME SCHEME

Each nine-line stanza of "The Canonization" uses the same intricate rhyme scheme:

ABBACCCAA

What's more, one of those rhymes is always the same across the poem: the first and last rhymes of each stanza are identical, repeating the word "love." The poem's rhymes thus keep on carrying the reader back to the main thing on the speaker's mind.

The movement of rhymes in the first four lines of each stanza feels pretty familiar: Italian sonnets, for instance, always start with ABBA rhymes. (This Donne sonnet is a good example!) But those surprising, forceful C-rhyme triplets (like "place"/"Grace"/"face" in lines 5-7) give the second part of each stanza a gathering momentum—and sometimes a hint either of irritation or of rapturous fascination.

Note that, to modern readers, many of the rhymes here sound slant—"prove" and "love" in lines 26-27, for instance. In Donne's 17th-century London accent, however, those rhymes would likely have felt a lot closer to perfect!

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a lover—and, notably, not a *young* lover. With his "five gray hairs" and his "gout," he sounds like he's well into middle age. Perhaps that's why the teasing friend he shouts down at the beginning of the poem is giving him such a hard time: passionate, head-over-heels love is often considered the purview of the young. This speaker doesn't care, though: to him, a love like the one he's experiencing is timeless, deathless as a phoenix.

Like the speaker in many of Donne's poems, this lover seems to have a lot in common with Donne himself. His brilliant wit, his passion, and his fondness for a dirty pun are all the poet's own.

SETTING

There's no clear setting in this poem: it all takes place in the speaker's mind and heart. But some clues help readers to understand that the poem comes from John Donne's own 17th-century English world.

When the speaker tells the scornful person he's talking to at the beginning of the poem to "get you a place" at some nobleman's court, for instance, it's a very 17th-century way of saying "jeez, get a hobby." Many upper-class people at the time kept themselves busy by joining the retinues of the nobility, keeping great lords and ladies company in return for social connections and opportunities.

The poem also uses a lot of classic 17th-century metaphors, like presenting the speaker and his lover as "flies" and melting "tapers" (or candles)—both traditional images of passion, lust, and death.

And, generally speaking, mocking and praising love and lovers were popular Renaissance pastimes, as Donne (and his contemporaries) observed in many other poems of the era.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne (1572-1631) is remembered as one of the foremost of the "metaphysical poets"—though he never called himself one. The later writer Samuel Johnson coined the term, using it to describe a set of 17th-century English writers who wrote witty, passionate, intricate, cerebral poetry about love and God; George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Thomas Traherne were some others.

Donne was the prototypical metaphysical poet: a master of elaborate conceits and complex sentences and a great writer of love poems (like this one) that mingle images of holiness with filthy puns. But during his lifetime, he was mostly a poet in private. In public life, he was an important clergyman, rising to become Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Like the vast majority of his poetry, "The Canonization" didn't appear in print until several years after his death in 1633, when his collection *Poems* was posthumously published.

Donne's mixture of cynicism, passion, and mysticism fell out of literary favor after his 17th-century heyday; Johnson, for instance, a leading figure of the 18th-century Enlightenment, did not mean "metaphysical poet" as a compliment, seeing Donne and his contemporaries as obscure and irrational. But 19th-century Romantic poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge were stirred by Donne's mixture of philosophy and emotion, and their enthusiasm slowly resurrected Donne's reputation. Donne is now remembered as one of the most powerful and influential of poets, and he's inspired later writers from T.S. Eliot to Yeats to A.S. Byatt.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem's witty reference to a passionate "canonization"—that is, the official process by which someone becomes a saint in the Catholic church—plays on a major religious conflict in Donne's time. Donne was born during an

era in which Protestantism had become the official state religion of Britain. English Catholics were often persecuted and killed. Donne himself was born into a Catholic family; his own brother went to prison for hiding a priest in his home. (The priest, not so fortunate, was tortured and executed.)

All this violence emerged from the schism between English Catholics and Protestants that began during the reign of Henry VIII, who died about 30 years before Donne was born. Wishing to divorce his first wife and marry a second—unacceptable under Catholicism—Henry split from the Pope and founded his own national Church of England (also known as the Anglican church). This break led to generations of conflict and bloodshed between Anglican Protestants and Catholic loyalists.

Donne himself would eventually renounce Catholicism in order to become an important Anglican clergyman under the patronage of King James I. While his surviving sermons suggest he had a sincere change of heart about his religion, his use of Catholic language hints that he didn't altogether abandon the beliefs of his youth.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a lively performance of the poem. (https://youtu.be/4Psjq4TXrwc)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Donne's life and work at the British Library's website. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-donne)
- Poems (1633) — See images of the posthumous collection in which this poem was first published. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-john-donnes-poems-1633)
- The Metaphysical Poets — Learn more about Donne's role as one of the foremost "metaphysical poets." (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/john-donne-and-metaphysical-poetry)
- Donne's Portrait — Take a look at a famous portrait of Donne. Donne is intentionally playing the part of the melancholy, elegant lover here! (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw111844/John-Donne)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God (Holy Sonnet 14)
- Death, be not proud
- No Man Is an Island
- Song: Go and catch a falling star
- The Flea
- The Good-Morrow
- The Sun Rising
- The Triple Fool
- To His Mistress Going to Bed

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