The Collar

POEM TEXT

I struck the board, and cried, "No more;
I will abroad!
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free, free as the road,
Loose as the wind, as large as store.
Shall I be still in suit?
Have I no harvest but a thorn
To let me blood, and not restore
What I have lost with cordial fruit?
Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.
Is the year only lost to me?
Have I no bays to crown it,
No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?
All wasted?
Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,
And thou hast hands.
Recover all thy sigh-blown age
On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute
Of what is fit and not. Forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,
Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee
Good cable, to enforce and draw,
And be thy law,
While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.
Away! take heed;
I will abroad.
Call in thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;
He that forbears
To suit and serve his need
Deserves his load."
But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I replied *My Lord.*

SUMMARY

I pounded the table, and shouted, "That's it! I'm leaving! Am I meant to sit around feeling bad forever? I can do what I please: my life is free as the open road, wandering as the wind, and overflowing with possibilities. So why should I behave like a servant? Do I get any rewards besides stabs of guilt and sorrow, with no refreshing pleasures in return? I know that I used to relish wine before I dried it all up with my heavy sighs, that I ate fresh bread before I soaked it in my tears. And am I the only person who doesn't get to have any fun this year? Has this stretch of time earned me no celebratory bouquets, no triumphant crowns of laurels, no beautiful wreaths to honor my brilliance? Are those all faded and withered away? Absolutely not, old boy: pleasure still exists, and you can go out and grab it. Make up for your long years of guilt and suffering by enjoying yourself twice as much: stop fretting about morality all the time. Give up this false cage, this fake net you've made for yourself out of your own thoughts. Those "ropes" have worked pretty well to force you to obey all the moral rules you made up; you refused to see that they were all your own inventions, not real laws. I said that's *it*! You listen to me! I'm getting out of here. Call off that menacing skull that's meant to remind me of death; lock your fears away. It's the people who don't do exactly what they want who deserve the burdens of guilt and duty." But the longer I ranted and raved like this, the more I thought I could hear a voice calling to me. It said "Child!" and I answered, "My Lord."

THEMES

THE WEIGHT OF FAITH

The speaker in George Herbert's "The Collar" feels collared both literally and metaphorically: he's a priest wearing the traditional white "dog collar," and he can't escape the demands of his Christian faith. Feeling weighed down by his duties and his conscience, he longs to do whatever he wants without his religious scruples tapping him on the shoulder—or, at the very least, to be rewarded for all the sacrifices he makes for his religion. In his frustration, he even starts to convince himself that his beliefs are just an illusory "cage" he's built from his own "thoughts." But the more he struggles to be free, the more he hears God summoning him back. Religious faith (and religious callings), this poem suggests, can feel like a heavy and unrewarding burden—but ultimately, God just can't be ignored.

Faith, the poem suggests, can feel restrictive, and its rewards aren't always clear. Fed up with agonizing over "what is fit and not" (that is, what's morally correct), the speaker longs to throw off all his scruples and live a life as "free as the road." His priestly responsibilities and his intense moral self-examination have left him pierced through with "thorn[s]" of guilt and

suffering—suffering that God doesn't seem to honor with compensatory pleasures. The speaker feels he's enduring all the pains of sacrifice, guilt, and confinement without a touch of joy to sweeten the deal. Meanwhile, plenty of other people seem to go about their lives blithely doing what they will; in a moment of self-pity, the speaker wonders if it's only *he* who has to be so good all the time.

When faith seems to offer no consolations, the poem goes on, it's easy for dissatisfaction to turn to doubt. Longing for the "pleasures" of a life without religious duty, the speaker starts to talk himself into the idea that his faith was only ever a "rope of sands" anyway—an apparently tight snare that would actually be easy to shake. Perhaps, he thinks, the priestly "collar" he wears is made only from his "thoughts"—and if he tore it off, he could embrace the "double pleasures" of a hedonistic life without a burdensome conscience.

But God, the poem concludes, can't be escaped so easily as a "rope of sands." Right in the midst of his "fierce," "wild" rebellion, the speaker hears God calling, "*Child*," and finds himself answering, "*My Lord*." Faith, the poem thus suggests, *isn't* just a "rope of sands," a net of thoughts that entraps people too weak to strike out on their own. It's a response to an inescapable fact: the speaker ultimately has to admit that God exists and must be obeyed, whether he likes it or not.

That doesn't mean that faith is simple. If the speaker acknowledges that he's a "child" of God, he'll also have to accept that God doesn't choose to give him a freewheeling and pleasurable life (at least not at the moment). But then, the very fact that God calls the speaker "*child*" also suggests that God is a loving parent with the speaker's best interests in mind, even if the speaker can't always see how. Faith, especially the kind of faith that calls people to priesthood, might often be heavy, and it's no guarantee of an easy life—just the opposite. But for this speaker, it's also a truth that one has to accept.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-36

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

I struck the board, and cried, "No more;
I will abroad!
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free, free as the road,
Loose as the wind, as large as store.

"The Collar" begins with a literal bang. The speaker, fed up, smacks the "board" (that is, the table) at which he sits and declares that he's not going to take this anymore: he's going to give up his pious, do-gooding life as a priest and hit the road, living only for pleasure.

He doesn't actually tell readers he's a priest; the poem's title does that job for him. The "Collar" here has both a straightforward and a metaphorical meaning:

- It's a literal clerical collar, the traditional white neckband of Christian clergymen.
- But it's also a figurative restraint, a set of beliefs that holds the speaker back from doing just what he likes.

As the poem begins, then, the speaker seems like a dog about to snap his leash and chase all the pigeons his heart desires. He's tired of sitting around being responsible and feeling guilty, always "sigh[ing] and pin[ing]" over his many sins. He'd rather live a life as "free as the road."

Listen to the ways he repeats himself as he says so:

> My lines and life are free, free as the road,
> Loose as the wind, as large as store.

His epizeuxis on the word "free" here makes him sound wild with rebellious anger: *You can't make me stay, I'm free, free!* And the parallelism of all those similar phrasings sets up a linked series of revealing similes:

- If the speaker wants to live a life as "free as the road," he wants to follow his nose wherever he likes, no longer bound to his duty, his parish, or his church.
- If he wants to be "loose as the wind," he also wants to be *uncontainable*: to be unrestrained by laws and rules.
- And if he wants to live a life as "large as store," then he wants to feel that the world is as full of possibilities as a well-stocked larder is with treats—and perhaps to make up for lost time with a stored-up feast of pleasures.

In other words, this clergyman (whose circumstances sound an awful lot like those of his author, George Herbert) seems ready to make like a 20th-century hippie—or a pre-Christian Epicurean, for that matter. He wants to put his own desires and his own pleasure first. And his poetry, his "lines," should reflect that freewheeling energy.

But already, the poem hints that pursuing a life of self-centered pleasure might not be as simple as getting up and leaving. Listen to the speaker's rhetorical question here:

> What? shall I ever sigh and pine?

The intended unspoken answer is: *No, I will NOT "sigh and pine" over my sins forever, that's ridiculous and I won't do it*. But it's not so easy to run away from guilt and sorrow: wherever the

speaker goes, there he and his feelings will be. Religious faith, this poem will suggest, isn't something a person can just shake off like a loose leash, no matter how fed up they are.

That doesn't mean the speaker isn't having a serious fit of rage and doubt. The titular "collar" might also pun on "choler," or anger, an emotion that the speaker is going to vent in most of this poem's 36 unpredictable lines.

LINES 6-9

Shall I be still in suit?
Have I no harvest but a thorn
To let me blood, and not restore
What I have lost with cordial fruit?

Having declared his intention to give up his pious, priestly life and live for his own satisfaction from now on, the speaker begins to ask indignant rhetorical questions, showing just how hard done by he feels.

"Shall I be still in suit?" he begins—in other words, *Must I always be a servant?* Ministering to his congregation seems to have worn him out. His faith itself might also feel like servitude; if he's been fretting so much about his behavior, "sigh[ing] and pin[ing]" over his sins, then he might feel as if he's been cowering under a divine master who judges his every move.

And not only that, he hasn't even been rewarded for his service. Take a look at the images he uses in his second complaint:

> Have I **no harvest but a thorn**
> To let me blood, and not restore
> What I have lost with **cordial fruit**?

The speaker, in other words, feels all his hard work and self-examination haven't even brought him satisfaction. He's "harvested" only thorny suffering, metaphorically speaking, without a sniff of the sweet, healing fruits of pleasure. Not only does he feel restricted by his job and his faith, he feels *hurt* by them: they seem to offer him no rewards but pain.

But perhaps he tells on himself a little in the images he chooses. The "thorn" might be an ancient symbol of pain and difficulty (as when people complain about "thorny problems"), but it's also rich in Christian meaning. Christ himself, the biblical story goes, was forced to wear an ironic "crown" of thorns on the day of his crucifixion.

This subtle allusion nods to the idea that *no one* can count on being rewarded for their good behavior on this earth: if not even God incarnate can dodge undeserved thorns, then how much less the speaker?

In other words, even as the speaker cries out that things aren't fair, his images undercut him. *Life's* not fair, this moment suggests—which might be one good reason to look to God for hope. The crown of thorns and death on the cross, after all, isn't the end of the Christian story: after pain and suffering come resurrection and glory.

But the speaker is in no mood to reflect on the unintended connotations of his metaphors. By now, readers will have noticed that the rhyme scheme and meter here are both, like the speaker, flailing around in a rage: while the poem uses both rhyme and meter, it doesn't stick to predictable patterns of either.

In fact, lines 7-9, written in regular iambic tetrameter—lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—are the longest passage with a consistent meter so far. Listen to them again:

> Have **I** | no **har-** | vest **but** | a **thorn**
> To **let** | me **blood,** | and **not** | re**store**
> What **I** | have **lost** | with **cor-** | dial **fruit**?

Not only are these lines steadily iambic, they're all enjambed, so one long question gets broken across three lines. These urgent rhythms make the speaker sound as if he's trying to register his complaint without letting anyone—not God, not his conscience—get a word in edgewise.

LINES 10-12

Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.

Up until now, the speaker has sounded indignant: he's angry that his piety has brought him plenty of pain and guilt, but little comfort. In these lines, he begins to sound sad and bewildered, too. Once upon a time, he remembers, there was plenty of metaphorical "wine" and "corn" (or wheat) to savor, before his sorrowful "sighs" and "tears" spoiled them. In other words, life once felt like a banquet table, and now feels like a storm-wracked landscape.

Listen to the plaintive music of these lines:

> Sure there was **w**i**ne**
> Before my **s**i**gh**s did d**r**y it; there was c**or**n
> Bef**or**e my tears did drown it.

That assonance/consonance of /i/ and /oar/ sounds make this passage sound like a song of lamentation—perhaps like one of the sadder psalms. The parallelism here—two clauses in a row that use a "there was [...] before" structure—underlines that wistful, musical quality.

And consider the images the speaker uses to reflect on happier times:

- On the one hand, "wine" and "corn" suggest a bountiful harvest of joys and pleasures: bread and wine in abundance. Life was once a feast.
- But just as in the speaker's metaphor of the "thorn,"

there's also some heavy Christian symbolism going on here. Bread and wine are the sacred foods that most Christian denominations use at the altar: foods that embody Christ's flesh and blood, connecting the faithful to God through their bodies as well as their souls.

In other words, the speaker's problem isn't just that he used to be able to enjoy earthly pleasures before his religious duty and guilt got in the way. It's that he used to feel nourished *by* his faith, linked to something holy and good. But now he can't even connect with one of his religion's most important rituals.

Here, readers might think back to the moment when the speaker "struck the board" in line 1. Perhaps that "board" wasn't his kitchen table, but the altar of his church: a place he once found joy and solace, and now can't even seem to scare up a crumb of consolation.

LINES 13-16

Is the year only lost to me?
Have I no bays to crown it,
No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?
All wasted?

In the poem's first 12 lines, the speaker fumed about how unrewarding his religious life feels and mourned the lost joy he once took in the "wine" and "corn" of Christian ritual. Now, in another barrage of rhetorical questions, he hints at a kind of life he could have led instead: a career as a celebrated poet.

But before he gets there, he's going to indulge in a moment of self-pity. "Is the year lost only to me?" he asks, rather in the tone of a whining child: *Why am I the only one who doesn't get to have any fun?* This line, like the earlier complaint about his "thorn[y]" harvest, hints that this fit of choler over his collar might have blinded the speaker to the realities of the world. He is, of course, far from the only person who feels guilty, sad, and stymied, with nothing to show for his year.

That doesn't mean he doesn't have some special, personal complaints, though. Take a look at the images he uses here:

Have I no **bays to crown it**,
No **flowers**, no **garlands gay**? [...]

Every plant the speaker names here is heavy with symbolism:

- Those "flowers" and "garlands" (or wreaths) aren't just decorative: flowers traditionally evoke the pleasures of springtime, like love, sex, beauty, and newborn life. And bright, cheerful "garlands" of flowers suggest a full-throated celebration of all those pleasures. In other words, the speaker might be feeling like the joys of youth have passed him by.
- But those "bays" are even more pointed. Crowns of bay leaves, also known as laurel leaves, were traditionally presented to great poets: they symbolize artistic genius.

The speaker thus longs not just for pleasure but for recognition. Here, the distinction between the poem's speaker and its author feels especially slim: George Herbert was a clergyman, and his poetry wasn't even published until after his death.

No wonder that a brilliant poet might feel hard done by without any "bays" to honor him. The closing words of this passage suggest the speaker's outright disbelief that he could be *just this good* and see no rewards for it: can these symbolic plants and flowers truly be "All blasted? / All wasted?" Those specific words, "blasted" and "wasted," evoke a winter storm coming along to shrivel up the speaker's harvest of joy before it's even ripe.

LINES 17-21

Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,
And thou hast hands.
Recover all thy sigh-blown age
On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute
Of what is fit and not.

In line 17, the poem reaches a turning point. So far, the speaker has recorded an outburst of fury, misery, longing, and disappointment. Now, he starts egging himself on in a second-person passage of encouragement: *Yeah, go on, give up your religion and your job and go indulge yourself, you deserve it!* In cartoon terms, he's listening to the little devil on his shoulder.

"Not so, my heart," this inner voice answers his cry of dismay from the previous lines: *Your youthful hopes and dreams aren't "blasted" and "wasted" at all*. The pleasures of the world aren't out of his reach, he goes on:

[...] there is fruit,
And thou hast hands.

The line break here leaves the speaker's will and power, his "hands" for grabbing what he wants, isolated in their own line. The effect is both dramatic and sinister; the speaker's inner voice sounds a bit like Lady Macbeth egging her husband on to murder.

There's real *temptation* here, in other words. The speaker is dreaming that he might almost be able to reverse time: to "recover" his "sigh-blown age" by indulging in "double pleasures." In other words, he's telling himself to get out there and make up for lost time, striking out for a life of nonstop hedonistic delight.

The idea that the speaker's "age" (which the reader can guess must be at least middle) is "sigh-blown" might even punnily hint

at a desire to evade death itself, or at least stop worrying about it. "Sigh-blown" sounds a lot like "fly-blown," which is what a corpse becomes when you leave it out in the sun. And heavy thoughts of death fit right in with a pious, aging Christian's concerns about the afterlife.

But all the speaker will have to do to dodge such gloomy worries, he tells himself, is to:

> [...] leave thy cold dispute
> Of what is fit and not. [...]

In other words: the speaker tells himself to stop fretting so much about what the right and moral way to behave is. All he has to do is give up that inner debate and live for himself, and he can harvest all the "cordial fruit" he feels he's been denied.

This is certainly a tempting vision. But there are plenty of hints here that the speaker is only fooling himself. Even people who follow their midlife crisis dreams don't get to enjoy a life of "double pleasures" all the time. There's no real chance the speaker can escape into a fantasy world of nonstop self-indulgent bliss. But for the next few lines, he's going to keep trying to persuade himself he can.

LINES 21-26

Forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,
Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee
Good cable, to enforce and draw,
And be thy law,
While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.

As the speaker goes on encouraging himself to abandon his priesthood for a life of pleasure, he also creeps closer to the idea of abandoning his faith altogether. Perhaps, he thinks, all his beliefs (and the conscience that comes with them) were only ever "petty thoughts."

Take a look at the metaphors he uses here:

> [...] Forsake thy cage,
> Thy rope of sands,
> Which petty thoughts have made, [...]

The idea of an emotional or spiritual restriction as a "cage" is a pretty familiar one. But that "rope of sands" feels so strange and personal that it might have come straight out of a dream:

- The speaker is picturing struggling against ropes that only hold him back as long as he believes in them. As soon as he stops treating his scruples as real and "binding," he tells himself, they'll dissolve away in an unresisting rush. Readers might imagine the speaker sitting up suddenly like a kid whose friends have buried him on the beach, showering unresisting sand all around him.
- This movement from a worn metaphor to a fresh and vivid one makes the speaker's inner voice sound even more wheedling and persuasive: he's rolling out the *good* figurative language for this job.

If his faith was only ever built from his own "petty thoughts," the speaker tells himself, then it needs to restrict him only as much as his thoughts do. Sure, thoughts might make pretty "good cable," both "draw[ing]" the speaker toward his priestly duties and "enforc[ing]" inner "law[s]" on him by tying him to a strict sense of right and wrong. But, the speaker goes on, such "cable" can only hold for as long as he "wink[s]": that is, as long as he closes his eyes to the idea that his faith is all in his head.

In 17th-century terms, this is a shocking argument! And the fact that the speaker puts all these wheedling lines in the second person suggests that there's more going on here than just a plain old conversation with himself. Since line 17, remember, the speaker has been addressing himself as "you," as if he were two people:

- On the one hand, that's just something that people do, especially when they're trying to spur themselves on to make a big change.
- On the other hand, this separate, tempting voice sounds more than a little devilish.

That sense that the voice whispering in the speaker's ear might not have his best interests in mind is only underscored by all the little moments of short-sightedness and self-pity noted earlier on. This voice is promising the speaker an illusory life of nonstop "double pleasures" like nothing *anyone* has ever enjoyed on earth—if only he'll abandon his faith.

These hints of Satanic temptation don't mean that the poem is literally about the devil coming along to lure the speaker to Hell. But it *does* suggest that pure self-interest is a dangerous pursuit: wanting to be the uncontested master of his own fate, after all, is how Satan was said to have become Satan in the first place.

(Note, though, that a lot of stories about Satan are cultural rather than textual: the unified figure of Satan is built from elaborations and speculations on a bunch of separate biblical stories. The "serpent" in Eden, for instance, is never canonically said to be Satan at all! And the figure cast down from Heaven in the Book of Revelations is called only the "dragon.")

LINES 27-32

Away! take heed;
I will abroad.
Call in thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;
He that forbears
To suit and serve his need

Deserves his load."

Since line 17, the speaker has been talking himself into throwing over not just his priestly duties, but his faith itself. His own voice has turned devilish, promising him constant pleasure if he gives up his beliefs. And in this passage, he seems persuaded—almost. The poem returns to the first person, and the speaker repeats the same threat he made back at the beginning of the poem: "I will abroad," *I'm getting out of here.*

But perhaps he isn't all the way to *acting* on this resolution. He still has to egg himself on. Take a look at his symbolism in line 29:

> Call in thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;

"Death's-heads"—skulls, that is—are a common and obvious symbol of mortality. During the Renaissance, Christians kept images of skulls around (or built chapels out of real ones) to remind them to keep their eyes on the promise of an eternal afterlife, not on fleeting earthly pleasures. When the speaker tells himself to "call in" a death's-head, then, he's saying, *put that skull away! Quit fretting about death, already; live for today.*

And if he's to do that, he'll also have to metaphorically "tie up" his fears—presumably with a stronger rope than the "rope of sands" that was his faith. The very repetition of the image invites readers to ask: can fears about mortality really be restrained so easily? Yet again, the speaker sounds more short-sighted and self-deluding than bold here.

He concludes: it's only the kind of guy that "forbears" (or refrains from) "suit[ing] and serv[ing]" his own desires who "deserves" to bear the heavy burden of grief and guilt.

And here, the speaker's tirade ends. Readers might be a little startled to see that closing quotation mark in line 32. The speaker has been so caught up in his rage that readers might well have completely forgotten that, since line 1, they've been listening to him reporting his own angry rant.

But four lines remain: the speaker's story isn't over yet.

LINES 33-36

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Methought I heard one calling,
Child!
And I replied
My Lord.

By the end of the poem, readers have gotten used to the speaker's angry ranting, his struggle against responsibility and guilt, his half-baked ideas about how life will be great all the time if he only puts down the burden of his faith. His tirade is over now, though, and the poem's final four lines begin with a powerful word:

> But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
> At every word,

That "but" suggests that something is about to change. And the words that follow it show that the speaker has gotten some distance from the "rav[ing]," furious self of the past 32 lines of monologue.

The poem moves back into the past tense to describe what *else* happened while the speaker was ranting on:

> Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*
> And I replied *My Lord.*

In the very midst of his rage, then, with every angry "word" he speaks, the speaker hears the voice of God calling to him—and answers almost reflexively, before he even has time to think about it. All his lengthy arguments seem insignificant in the face of a single word from his "Lord."

His faith, in other words, is no dissolving "rope of sands." It's a fact as inescapable as his own life: calling the speaker "Child," God reminds the speaker that he *exists at all* only because God made him.

The word "Child" also suggests a great consolation, however. The idea of God as a loving parent is so fundamental to Christianity that it's hard to even pick out specific biblical allusions here. But here are two possibilities:

- If the speaker, like all people, is God's "child," then he has something in common with Christ—and perhaps can learn to bear his "thorns" of suffering with Christly patience, too.
- And God's children, St. Paul famously preached, are also God's heirs, and by following Christ, they inherit not just his agony but his glory. In a Christian worldview, God transforms earthly pain, sorrow, and death into heavenly joy, bliss, and resurrection.

The speaker's instinctive response to the God who calls him, in other words, gives the lie to all his selfish fantasies. Ultimately, even when he bucks against the restrictions and apparent unfairness of his current life, he feels in his bones that God loves him, that God's will is ultimately good—and that a patch of spiritual dryness can't alter those fundamental truths.

Even the sounds here suggest a constant backdrop of harmony and calm beneath the speaker's rage. After a poem full of raggedy, unpredictable rhyme, these last four lines fall into a steady, singsong ABAB pattern: order after chaos.

Here at the end of the poem, then, the "collar" of the title takes on yet another punny meaning: the speaker hears, and answers, a "caller," and thus accepts his priestly calling. And the divine voice that summons him might lead him to reflect that his own "collar" is not just a restraint, but a light, easy "yoke" that God

will help him to bear.

SYMBOLS

PACKING UP THE "DEATH'S-HEAD"

The "death's-head," or skull, that appears in line 29 is a straightforward symbol of death. Thus, when the speaker admonishes himself to pack up his "death's-head," he's also trying to convince himself not to worry so much about the life to come (i.e., in Heaven or Hell) and to live for pleasure instead.

Lots of Renaissance art and literature used images of skulls to remind people that life was short and pleasure fleeting. Keeping a skull around, the idea went, was a good way to remind yourself that you shouldn't get too distracted by all the fun you can have on earth: it's more important to keep your eyes fixed on the joys (or horrors!) of the *afterlife*.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 29:** "Call in thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;"

PLANTS, FRUITS, AND FLOWERS

The poem's images of plants, fruits, and flowers have a wealth of symbolic meanings. Besides drawing on traditional Christian images of sacrifice, suffering, and redemption, they represent the speaker's longing for earthly rewards and poetic glory.

When the speaker bemoans the fact that, all through his pious life, he's harvested "thorns" but no "fruit," he's playing on two old symbols:

- Besides representing pain and suffering (for obvious reasons!), thorns evoke the tormenting Crown of Thorns that Christ wore at the Crucifixion. They thus symbolize not just pain, but pain that mysteriously transforms into glory.
- Fruit, meanwhile, is an ancient image of pleasurable rewards—as in "seeing the fruits of your labors."

The symbolic thorns of suffering and self-sacrifice, the poem hints, bear fruit in the afterlife, not on earth—but the speaker is in no mood to hear that right now. He'd rather go out and grab earthly fruits in his own two "hands."

Another of the poem's harvests is similarly symbolic:

- The "wine" and "corn" (which here means wheat, not corn on the cob) that the speaker remembers enjoying once are more bits of good old-fashioned harvest symbolism: they both suggest fertility, abundance, celebration, and the rewards of one's labors.
- But they're also pointedly Christian: bread and wine are the foods of the Last Supper and the communion table, embodiments of Christ's body and blood.

Once again, in the midst of his tantrum, the speaker wants the *earthly* versions of these symbolic rewards rather than the heavenly ones—but the heavenly versions hover in the background.

Meanwhile, the "bays," "flowers," and "garlands" in lines 14-16 symbolize victory, glory, and pleasure. Those "bays" are worth particular attention: the bay tree, also known as the laurel, was a traditional symbol of *poetic* victory. Great poets, in the classical world, were sometimes crowned with laurel leaves—a tradition that echoes today in the term "poet laureate." Complaining that he has no "bays," this speaker suggests that he'd have liked a little more recognition for his poetry, not just for his good deeds!

The "flowers" and "garlands," meanwhile, also suggest glory: one might use such decorations to adorn a great artist in a triumphal parade. But they also suggest plain old pleasure. Flowers are a common symbol of love, hope, and new life; in longing for flowers, the speaker might be longing for the lost "springtime" of his youth, too.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-12:** "Have I no harvest but a thorn / To let me blood, and not restore / What I have lost with cordial fruit? / Sure there was wine / Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn / Before my tears did drown it."
- **Lines 14-18:** " Have I no bays to crown it, / No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted? / All wasted? / Not so, my heart; but there is fruit, / And thou hast hands."

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

"The Collar" is built around the conceit of, well, the "collar": the clerical "dog collar" the speaker wears becomes a metaphor for the inescapable clutches of sincere religious faith.

If the speaker wears a clerical collar, he's a Christian priest: a guy who has devoted his whole life to faithful service. As the poem begins, he's fed up with all the sacrifices this career has demanded of him. Rather than living the life of a famous poet crowned with the "bays" (or laurel wreath) of artistic glory, the speaker feels he's stuck "in suit," a mere servant. Worse, he has to spend most of his time "sigh[ing] and pin[ing]" over his sins, dithering over "what is fit and not," obsessing about moral

dilemmas.

In this sense, then, his clerical collar is a metaphorical restraint, a thing that holds him back from leading a free-and-easy life of hedonistic pleasure. Like a dog on a leash, he feels prevented from jumping impulsively after the squirrels of possibility.

But even as he rants and raves, threatening to abandon not just his priesthood but his religious faith itself, a single word from God stops him in his tracks: all God has to say is "Child!" for the speaker to answer, almost reflexively, "My Lord." It isn't so easy to slip the "collar" of faith, the poem suggests—and that collar's restraints might be meant more to keep believers from running into spiritual traffic than to deny them all the squirrels they can eat.

That's true not just for priests, the poem hints, but for all Christian believers. Perhaps, then, this collar is also meant to evoke the light, easy "yoke" in a famous biblical parable. Faith might feel heavy sometimes, the speaker suggests, but it's a lighter burden than sin.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

PUN

Like all of the metaphysical poets, Herbert was not averse to a good pun. This poem's very title contains a whole web of punny possibilities.

On the most literal level, the "collar" of the title is the speaker's white clerical collar, sometimes known as a "dog collar": the garment that marks him as a clergyman, the garment that he longs to tear off so that he can run away and live for himself. Metaphorically, then, this collar is also more of a dog collar in earnest, a chain that subjugates him and holds him back.

"Collar" also plays on "choler," or anger, one of the four traditional temperaments (alongside sad melancholy, dull phlegm, and cheerful sanguineness). This speaker, throwing a temper tantrum at God, is certainly choleric! Perhaps this poem is even meant to be a *treatment* for the speaker's "choler," a kind of purgation that expels the anger from his body so he can return more patiently to his "collar."

But that's not the only possible pun here. The speaker's "choler" at his "collar" might also be cured by a "caller": the divine voice that speaks to him at the end of the poem.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

METAPHOR

The speaker's metaphors transform his abstract thoughts of freedom, reward, justice, and pain into tangible, graspable objects—or, for that matter, into slippery ones. Take a look at the vivid images in lines 21-22, for instance:

> [...] Forsake thy cage,
> Thy rope of sands,

The idea of restrictive beliefs or emotions as a "cage" is a familiar one. But the notion of such thoughts and feelings as a "rope of sands" is as strange and vivid as an image from a dream. Readers might picture the speaker tied up with cords that dissolve as soon as he realizes he can shake them off. Rather than feeling restrained by his beliefs, the speaker exhorts himself to turn the tables and "tie up [his] fears" of mortality and damnation instead. (Of course, the speaker will go on to suggest that the idea of belief as an illusion is *itself* just a mirage—and that it might be wise to keep death in mind.)

Earlier in the poem, the speaker's metaphors draw on biblical tradition:

- The "thorns" of suffering allude to the Crown of Thorns Christ wore at the Crucifixion.
- The "wine" and "corn" (or wheat) of bodily pleasure suggest the bread and wine of the Last Supper and the Christian rite of Communion.

These metaphors make it clear that the speaker thinks in Christian terms even as he plots to flee his faith and his calling. He's "in suit" to God no matter what he does: in other words, he's God's servant, like it or not.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Shall I be still in suit?"
- **Lines 7-9:** "Have I no harvest but a thorn / To let me blood, and not restore / What I have lost with cordial fruit?"
- **Lines 10-12:** "Sure there was wine / Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn / Before my tears did drown it."
- **Line 17:** "there is fruit,"
- **Line 20:** "cold dispute"
- **Lines 21-26:** "Forsake thy cage, / Thy rope of sands, / Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee / Good cable, to enforce and draw, / And be thy law, / While thou didst wink and wouldst not see."
- **Line 29:** "tie up thy fears;"

SIMILE

The similes in lines 4-5 conjure up the speaker's visions of what a life free of conscience and duty might look like.

Feeling burdened by his religious faith (and his job as a priest), the speaker angrily bursts out that his:

> [...] lines and life are free, free as the road,
> Loose as the wind, as large as store.

Take a look at these similes one by one:

- If the speaker feels his life is (or at least should be) "free as the road," then he feels he can go anywhere, following his nose to adventure and pleasure. That's rather different than the proverbially "straight and narrow" path to Christian salvation that he's been trying to follow.
- If life should be "loose as the wind," it should similarly be free to go where it chooses—but it should also be uncontainable. This simile evokes the speaker's longing to *do* what he wants, not just *go* where he wants.
- And if life should be "as large as store," then it should feel like a treasure house of infinite possibilities. Perhaps there's even a hint here that the speaker feels he's been "stor[ing]" up a lot of sinful pleasures during his time as a responsible, God-fearing kind of guy—and now it's payback time.

All these similes thus evoke the speaker's (rather childish) fantasies of living a life of total irresponsible freedom.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "free as the road, / Loose as the wind, as large as store."

ALLUSION

The speaker's allusions connect him both to the world of art and the world of biblical tradition—and suggest that, struggle though he might to escape his priestly calling, he has a faith as deep as his anger.

Even when he's complaining that he should see *some* kind of reward for all the struggle and sacrifice of a religious life, the speaker can't help but use Christian images. For instance, when he asks, "Have I no harvest but a thorn / To let me blood[...]?" he incidentally conjures up the tormenting "Crown of Thorns" that, according to biblical tradition, Christ wore on the day of the Crucifixion. This allusion hints that the speaker is being a little bit foolish in expecting earthly rewards for his piety: even the Son of God gets no such guarantee!

And when the speaker longs for pleasure and satisfaction outside his priesthood, he reaches for biblical images again:

> Sure there was wine
> Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn
> Before my tears did drown it.

The "wine" and "corn" (or wheat) here might suggest good old material pleasures, but they're also inescapably connected to the foods of the Communion table: the wine and bread said to embody Christ's blood and flesh. This allusion suggests that the speaker's problem isn't just that he wants to have more fun and less guilt in his life, but that he's having a real crisis of faith, finding no nourishment in the sacred rituals he performs.

He's also can't get any satisfaction from his poetic career. When he longs for "bays" to "crown" his year, he's alluding to a practice stretching back to ancient Greece: great poets were traditionally crowned with bay leaves, also known as laurel leaves (hence the term "poet laureate"). A little bit more recognition for his artistic brilliance, the speaker hints, wouldn't go amiss.

The poem's final allusion suggests that the speaker may find consolation in his faith after all. In spite of all his "fierce" anger about his burdens and his sacrifices, the speaker finally hears God calling to him with one simple word: "*Child!*" The idea of all human beings as God's beloved children has any number of biblical sources, but the speaker might have a particular passage of the New Testament in mind:

- In a famous excerpt from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, St. Paul points out that if people are God's children, they're also God's heirs.
- In other words, following in Christ's footsteps, the faithful can have hope that their suffering won't be for nothing: they might have to endure a lot, but they'll also "be glorified" as God's own family. Perhaps that's a message this particular speaker needed to hear.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "Have I no harvest but a thorn / To let me blood"
- **Lines 10-12:** "Sure there was wine / Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn / Before my tears did drown it."
- **Lines 14-15:** "Have I no bays to crown it, / No flowers, no garlands gay?"
- **Lines 35-36:** "Methought I heard one calling, / Child! / And I replied / My Lord."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker's many rhetorical questions demonstrate his frustration with one of the major indignities of the human condition: life just doesn't seem *fair*. But they also suggest that he's not seeing the whole picture.

A priest, the speaker has sacrificed a lot for his job, and he suffers a great deal from his guilty conscience: he notes that he spends a lot of time going back and forth about "what is fit and not." His first two rhetorical questions suggest that he's fed up with all this hard work and guilt:

> What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
> [...]
> Shall I be still in suit?

Both of these questions seem to answer themselves with a firm "no": the speaker's point is, *This is too much to bear, and I'm done with it.* But, on the other hand, there's a little unease here, too:

- Even if the speaker runs away to start a new life as a lion tamer, there's no real guarantee that he'll stop "sigh[ing] and pin[ing]": sorrow comes from within, not just from one's circumstances.
- And, as the poem later points out, he's going to be "in suit" (or in service) no matter what he does. Turns out, the poem suggests, you can't outrun or outwit the creator of the universe: God, the "Lord" the speaker can't help but serve, is everywhere.
- These rhetorical questions thus might be a little closer to *real* questions than the speaker intends—and the answers might not be the ones he wants.

His next rhetorical question similarly undermines itself:

> Have I no harvest but a thorn
> To let me blood, and not restore
> What I have lost with cordial fruit?

This is a very classic *life's not fair* complaint: the speaker is saying that he deserves some "cordial," restorative pleasures to make up for all the suffering and sacrifice of his religious life. But one specific image he uses here, the fruitless "thorn," alludes to the "Crown of Thorns" which Christ wore on the day of the Crucifixion. In other words:

- This question suggests that the speaker is asking for a kind of satisfaction that even God incarnate didn't get—and hints that the rewarding "fruit" of a good life grows in Heaven, not necessarily on earthly soil.
- Again, then, this rhetorical question has a hidden non-rhetorical quality: the answer might be different than the speaker thinks!

By the time the speaker's final series of rhetorical questions rolls around, he sounds downright self-pitying:

> Is the year only lost to me?
> Have I no bays to crown it,
> No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?
> All wasted?

That "is the year lost only to me?" has a plaintive, little-kid tone: "Why don't *I* get to have any fun? The *other* kids get to play outside." But the speaker's following questions are more adult and more solemn:

- All the plants he wants to "crown" his year symbolize not just pleasure, but glory (especially poetic glory). Great poets were traditionally crowned with "bays," or laurel leaves.
- The rewards the speaker longs for, in other words, aren't just hedonistic delights, but recognition for his artistic brilliance.
- Readers who know a bit about Herbert's biography might find these autobiographical lines rather poignant: this poem, like most of Herbert's work, wasn't published or recognized until after his death.
- But perhaps these rhetorical questions *also* point to a kind of hope the speaker isn't thinking about as he writes: these very words *aren't* "blasted" and "wasted," but survive to this day.

All through the poem, then, rhetorical questions turn out not to be so rhetorical—and their unexpected answers offer both a gentle scolding and an uplifting dose of hope.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "What? shall I ever sigh and pine?"
- **Line 6:** "Shall I be still in suit?"
- **Lines 7-9:** "Have I no harvest but a thorn / To let me blood, and not restore / What I have lost with cordial fruit?"
- **Lines 13-16:** "Is the year only lost to me? / Have I no bays to crown it, / No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted? / All wasted?"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism makes the speaker sound urgent, commanding, and indignant. For example, take a look at the way he uses anaphora and parallelism as he introduces his plan to flee from a life of piety:

> What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
> My lines and life are free, free as the road,
> Loose as the wind, as large as store.
> Shall I be still in suit?

Here, the speaker bookends parallel similes about how "free" and "loose" his life *could* be with rhetorical questions that both ask: "*Shall I" give up my life to pious servitude forever?* These repetitive sentence structures make the speaker sound so furious that he returns to similar ideas over and over. (Readers who have been through a fit of rage might recognize the phenomenon!)

There's a similar perseverating fury in the speaker's anaphora here:

> Is the year only lost to me?
> Have I no bays to crown it,
> No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?

All wasted?

First, all those "no"s in a row feel indignant: it's as if the speaker is saying, *come on, seriously, not* one *little reward for all I've sacrificed?* Then the repeated "all"s suggest shocked disbelief: *can I really have lost all my chances to earn such glories?*

Riding on this head of angry steam, the speaker eventually starts pumping himself up:

Call in thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;

The verb-driven parallelism here makes him sound like he's egging himself on, focusing on all the things he can *do* to escape his religious scruples. Joke's on him: at the end of the poem, no procession of forceful verbs can keep him from replying "My Lord" when God calls him.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "shall I ever sigh and pine?"
- **Lines 4-5:** "free as the road, / Loose as the wind, as large as store."
- **Line 6:** "Shall I be still in suit?"
- **Lines 10-12:** "there was wine / Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn / Before my tears did drown it."
- **Lines 14-15:** "no bays to crown it, / No flowers, no garlands gay?"
- **Lines 15-16:** "All blasted? / All wasted?"
- **Line 19:** "Recover"
- **Line 20:** "leave"
- **Line 21:** "Forsake"
- **Line 29:** "Call in," "tie up"

REPETITION

Moments of repetition frame the speaker's argument and conjure up his frenzied, privately doubtful voice.

Near the beginning and end of his tirade, for instance, the speaker repeats the same intention (or threat): "I will abroad." (Or, in other words: "I'm out of here!") This repetition might feel familiar to anyone who's ever felt fed up with their current circumstances:

- The first time the speaker says "I will abroad," he says it impulsively, accompanied by a good solid table-thump. It's an impulse born of a fit of rage.
- But the second time he repeats those words, he's worked his way through all the *reasons* he's fed up and ready to leave his home, his job, and his faith behind.
- Reiterating that he's already got his foot out the door, he thus might sound at once decisive and privately nervous, as if he's trying to spur himself on.

And there's a related effect when he repeats his metaphor of fruit:

- He introduces this metaphor in line 9, where he complains that his religious faith (and his priesthood) have brought him only life's painful "thorns" and none of life's "cordial fruit"—that is, its restorative, healing pleasures.
- For a moment, that idea makes him worry that he might have lost his shot at such pleasures forever: perhaps they're "all blasted" and "all wasted."
- But then he turns around and eggs himself on, repeating the same metaphor: "there is fruit" after all, he says, and he's going to go find it. Once again, he sounds like he's trying to convince himself as much as anybody else!

And early in the poem, a moment of epizeuxis works to similar effect:

My lines and life are free, free as the road,

That repeated "free" feels at once insistent and a little crazed: it's as if the speaker is babbling, in his fit of rage, *I'm free, free as a bird, I tell ya!* While there's a genuine feeling of wide-open space in that repeated "free," the reader might also get the sense that the speaker protests a little too much.

The poem's repetitions thus often make a similar point: even as the speaker angrily reaches for freedom from duty and pain, he has a few private doubts that such freedom exists.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "I will abroad!"
- **Line 4:** "free, free"
- **Line 9:** "fruit"
- **Line 17:** "fruit"
- **Line 28:** " I will abroad."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambments help to conjure up the speaker's flailing wrath. The more he enjambs, the faster he seems to be speaking; it's as if he's caught up in a storm of frustration.

For instance, listen to the enjambments that run through this furiously self-pitying passage:

Have I no harvest but a thorn
To let me blood, and not restore
What I have lost with cordial fruit?
Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.

The enjambments here rush these ideas right along from line to line. It sounds almost as if the speaker is talking faster to drown out objections, letting neither his conscience nor God get a word in edgewise.

There's a similar effect in lines 19-21:

> Recover all thy sigh-blown age
> On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute
> Of what is fit and not. [...]

Here, the speaker moves from his earlier first-person complaints ("Why don't I ever get to have any fun?") into second-person exhortations ("Come on, old man, you can do whatever you want"). Again, this passage is marked by enjambments that move the lines along so quickly that there's no room to fit in any objections.

In other words: by rushing the poem along, enjambments reflect both the speaker's fury and his deep-down doubts about what he's saying. Only a guy who might actually be able to think of a *number* of good reasons not to become a carefree hedonist would need to put up such a quick-talking defensive front.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "thorn / To"
- **Lines 8-9:** "restore / What"
- **Lines 10-11:** "wine / Before"
- **Lines 11-12:** "corn / Before"
- **Lines 19-20:** "age / On"
- **Lines 20-21:** "dispute / Of"
- **Lines 23-24:** "thee / Good"
- **Lines 30-31:** "forbears / To"
- **Lines 31-32:** "need / Deserves"
- **Lines 33-34:** "wild / At"

ASSONANCE

Assonance gives the speaker's burst of outrage its strange music.

For instance, listen to the forceful assonance (and consonance) in the poem's opening lines:

> I struck the board, and cried, "No more;
> I will abroad!
> What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
> My lines and life are free, free as the road,

That first long /oar/ sound in "board" and "more" connects the speaker's dramatic table-pounding to his frustrated rejection of the life he's led. Then, a long /i/ links the speaker's self, his "I," to both the "sigh[ing]" and "pin[ing]" he's been doing as a devout clergyman and the wider, freer "lines and life" he threatens to take up now.

The /oar/ sound returns in lines 7-9:

> Have I no harvest but a thorn
> To let me blood, and not restore
> What I have lost with cordial fruit?

Here, that sound creates slant rhymes, giving the speaker's voice extra urgency and focus as he begins to enumerate his complaints.

But perhaps the most pointed moment of assonance turns up right at the end of the poem:

> Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*
> And I replied *My Lord.*

There's that long /i/ sound again—but this time, it's linking the speaker and his immediate, almost involuntary reply to his identity as God's "Child." Whether he likes it or not, he can't escape his heavenly parent.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "board," "more"
- **Line 3:** "sigh," "pine"
- **Line 4:** "lines," "life"
- **Line 7:** "thorn"
- **Line 8:** "restore"
- **Line 9:** "cordial"
- **Line 10:** "wine"
- **Line 11:** "sighs," "dry," "corn"
- **Line 12:** "Before"
- **Line 14:** "crown"
- **Line 15:** "flowers"
- **Line 21:** "Forsake," "cage"
- **Line 23:** "made"
- **Line 24:** "cable"
- **Line 26:** "see"
- **Line 27:** "heed"
- **Line 35:** "Child"
- **Line 36:** "I replied"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration, like assonance, gives the poem music and meaning.

For example, listen to the liquid /l/ sound that threads through lines 4-5:

> My lines and life are free, free as the road,
> Loose as the wind, as large as store.

That repeated, drawn-out /l/ feels as expansive (and even luxurious) as the life of freedom and pleasure the speaker imagines might be just within his reach.

Later, the speaker admonishes himself for getting tied up in imaginary moral knots for years without even realizing it; it all happened, he says:

> While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.

That alliterative /w/ feels like a whip-crack: the speaker is bitterly lashing out at his own unacknowledged timidity here.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "lines," "life"
- **Line 5:** "Loose," "large"
- **Line 6:** "still," "suit"
- **Line 7:** "Have," "harvest"
- **Line 11:** "did dry"
- **Line 12:** "did drown"
- **Line 15:** "garlands gay"
- **Line 18:** "hast hands"
- **Line 26:** "While," "wink," "wouldst"
- **Line 29:** "fears"
- **Line 30:** "forbears"
- **Line 31:** "suit," "serve"

VOCABULARY

Board (Line 1) - A table—though here, it's also possible that the speaker means the altar of his church!

I will abroad (Line 2) - In other words, "I'm getting out of here!"

Pine (Line 3) - Sit around sorrowfully.

My lines and life (Line 4) - The word "lines" here suggests both the speaker's poetry and the paths his life might take.

As large as store (Line 5) - That is, "As big as everything stored up." The implication is that the speaker has been squirreling away a lot of pleasures by not indulging in them!

In suit (Line 6) - In service, as a courtier would be to a nobleman.

Cordial (Line 9) - Healing, restorative.

Sure (Line 10) - Surely, definitely.

Corn (Line 11) - Here, "corn" doesn't mean corn on the cob, but wheat, the grain bread is made from.

Bays (Line 14) - Laurel leaves (traditionally used to crown great poets).

Garlands gay (Line 15) - Bright, beautiful wreaths of flowers and leaves.

Blasted (Line 15) - Withered, frozen.

Thou (Line 18, Line 26) - An old-fashioned way of saying "you."

Thy (Line 19, Line 20, Line 21, Line 22, Line 25, Line 29) - An old-fashioned way of saying "your."

Sigh-blown (Line 19) - Buffeted around by sorrowful sighs.

Cold dispute (Line 20) - Icy, dispassionate inner argument.

What is fit and not (Line 21) - That is, what's morally correct, and what's wrong.

Forsake (Line 21) - Give up, abandon.

Rope of sands (Line 22) - In other words, an illusory snare, a net that would be easy to break free from.

Cable (Line 24) - Ropes, restraints.

Enforce and draw (Line 24) - Restrict and lead.

While thou didst wink and wouldst not see (Line 26) - In other words, "While you had your eyes closed and weren't paying proper attention."

Death's-head (Line 29) - In other words, a skull (a symbolic reminder of mortality).

Forbears (Line 30) - Restrains oneself from, refrains from.

Raved (Line 33) - Angrily (or madly) ranted.

Methought (Line 35) - I thought.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Collar" invents its own form to tell its tale of rebellion and resignation. The poem is built from one long, irregular stanza. Lines of different lengths give the poem a bristly look even before one starts reading the speaker's bristly complaints.

The lack of stanza breaks here makes the poem feel like one big outburst. And much of it is in the *form* of an outburst, too: in lines 1-32, the speaker quotes his own tirade against the duties and burdens of his Christian faith and his priesthood. But after that long passage of invective ends, the last four lines of the poem turn into a dialogue: God calls to the speaker, and before he even knows what he's doing, the speaker answers.

This movement from long, angry rant to simple, brief call-and-response makes it clear that human rage pales in comparison to the power of a single word from God.

METER

"The Collar" uses a jolting, irregular meter to capture the speaker's rebellious rage. While the poem is roughly iambic—that is, it's built from iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—the line lengths are all over the place, evoking spasms of fury. And, as in a lot of iambic verse, the feet dance around, too: the speaker often throws in a trochee (the opposite of an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm) or even a spondee (a foot with two punchy stresses in a row, DUM-DUM) for emphasis.

For instance, listen to the first two lines:

> I struck | the board, | and cried, | "No more;
> I will | abroad!

The first line seems as if it's going to be in straightforward iambic tetrameter (four iambs in a row)—but then breaks that pattern with the powerful spondee of "No more." The short second line, in iambic dimeter (just two iambs), feels curt and clipped: *I'm done, and that's final*, the speaker seems to say. Abrupt metrical changes like these make most of the poem sound downright furious.

But listen to what happens in the poem's closing lines:

> But as | I raved | and grew | more fierce | and wild
> At ev- | ery word,
> Methought | I heard | one cal- | ling, *Child!*
> And I | replied, | *My Lord.*

As the speaker responds to God's summons, the meter slows and settles. While the lines still aren't quite regular here (moving from pentameter/dimeter to tetrameter/trimeter), readers will notice that they *feel* oddly regular, read aloud. That's because:

- These lines are written in steady, pulsing iambs, without variations.
- And lines 33-34 and 35-36, each a complete thought, both use seven iambs in total—just divided differently between lines.

As the poem ends, the changing meter makes it sound as if the speaker is finally resigning himself to his fate, reaching an accepting and even humble state of mind.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "The Collar" is as prickly and combative as the speaker. The poem uses plenty of rhyme, but it doesn't follow any steady, predictable pattern.

For instance, a rhyme that first appears in line 3 ("pine") disappears for a long spell, only to pop up again all the way down in line 10 ("wine"). Rhymes sometimes weave in and out of each other, and sometimes hit two in a row, as in "blasted"/"wasted" in lines 15-16. (That sounds like a slant rhyme now, but in Herbert's Renaissance-era English, it might well have felt close to perfect.)

Only at the very end of the poem do the rhymes take on a familiar form. The last four lines, in which the speaker responds to God's call, run like this:

ABAB

(Note that this is another situation in which a rhyme that sounds slant now, "word"/"Lord," might well have sounded firmer in Herbert's accent.)

The poem's rhymes thus reflect the poem's ideas. The lives of the faithful might often feel nonsensically unfair, burdensome, and chaotic, the rhyme scheme suggests, but that doesn't mean that God's plan isn't still at work beneath it all.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Collar," like the speaker in a lot of George Herbert's poems, has much in common with Herbert himself. Like his author, this speaker is a passionate, moody clergyman. And he's fed up with being so good all the time for what seem to be no earthly rewards. Once, he remembers, he got to enjoy the metaphorical "wine" and "corn" (or wheat) of pleasure, rather than feeling bound to dull and burdensome duty all the time. But even the metaphors he chooses suggest he knows, deep down, that for him there's no escaping God: wine and wheat themselves are sacramental materials, the sacred foods that priests offer up on the communion table. This priest might sometimes wish he could escape his religious faith, but for him, it's a matter as fundamental as eating.

SETTING

There's no clear setting in this poem: aside from the "board" (or table) that the poem's speaker smacks in frustration in the first line, the poem's events could take place anywhere. But that one little detail hints that the speaker is sitting at home, perhaps at his own kitchen table, fuming over how much his life as a priest demands from him and how little joy it's currently giving him in return. The line might even suggest the speaker is so fed up that he's pounding the altar—the table upon which Christian priests perform their rites.

In the course of his angry "rav[ing]" against his religious duties, the speaker conjures a picture of the "free" and open "road": perhaps his frustration at his inner predicament also reflects a weariness with staying at home, bound to one church and one parish. Readers might well imagine that this speaker (who's almost certainly a voice for Herbert himself) also lives in surroundings like Herbert's, serving a little church in an out-of-the-way country town.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

George Herbert (1593-1633) had more than a little in common with the speaker of this poem. A passionate, poetic soul, Herbert lived a humble life as a country priest, serving a small English parish that bore the exuberant name of Fuggleston-cum-Bemerton. Herbert, born a nobleman and raised a brilliant

scholar, often struggled with the limitations his calling imposed on his life; he could easily have made a splash in a royal court, but he felt inexorably drawn to the priesthood.

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

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

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During his short life, George Herbert saw Britain moving from a golden age of power and prosperity into an unsettled (and unsettling) era of change. Herbert was born under the reign of Elizabeth I, a queen who presided over a time of both military and artistic glory: she was a famous patron of writers like Shakespeare, Spenser, and Marlowe. But, true to her image as a goddess-like "Virgin Queen," Elizabeth died unmarried and without children.

Next in line to the throne was James VI and I of Scotland and England, Elizabeth's distant cousin. A largely competent and thoughtful king, he was nonetheless a less awe-inspiring and more divisive figure than his predecessor, to the point that a group of conspirators (including the infamous Guy Fawkes) tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament while he was in them.

This kind of unrest would eventually swell into outright insurrection. By 1633, when Herbert died, James's son Charles I had ascended to the throne—but not for long. In 1649, he would be not just dethroned but decapitated. A group of rebels led by Oliver Cromwell overthrew the monarchy, chopped Charles's head off, chased his son into exile in France, and declared a republic (though it ended up being more of a short-lived dictatorship). In the ensuing chaos, England was nearly destroyed by civil war.

While Herbert died before that time of bloodshed began, he lived to feel the rumbles of one of the most tumultuous periods in English history.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Herbert in Bemerton — Visit a website dedicated to Herbert and the church where he lived and worked. (https://www.georgeherbert.org.uk/index.html#home)
- The Temple — Learn more about The Temple, Herbert's famous posthumous poetry collection. (https://special-collections.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2015/05/06/reading-the-collections-week-14-george-herbert-the-temple-cambridge-thomas-buck-and-roger-daniel-1633/)
- Herbert's Legacy — Read author Wendy Cope on Herbert's lasting importance. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/dec/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview31)
- A Short Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation to learn more about Herbert's life. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/george-herbert)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Prof. Iain McGilchrist performing the poem. (https://youtu.be/Av1gCoolA9I)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GEORGE HERBERT POEMS

- Easter Wings
- The Flower

HOW TO CITE

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