A Hymn to God the Father

POEM TEXT

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year or two, but wallow'd in, a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done;
I fear no more.

SUMMARY

Will you forgive me for the original sin I was born with—sin which is mine, even though it's also everyone's, ever since Adam and Eve? Will you forgive me for the sins I'm still committing now, in spite of how I hate them? When you've forgiven me for those sins, your work won't be over: I have more sins to confess.

Will you forgive me for tempting other people to sin, using my sins to invite them to sin themselves? Will you forgive me for the sins I managed to stop committing for a year or two, then indulged in for twenty years? When you've forgiven me for those sins, your work won't be over: I have more sins to confess.

One of my sins is my fear that, when my life is over, I won't make it to heaven. But, God, swear in your own name that when I die, Christ will be as good to me as he is now, and has been before. When you've done that, *then* your work will be over: I'll no longer be afraid.

THEMES

SIN AND FORGIVENESS

The speaker of "A Hymn to God the Father" fears that no matter how many of his sins he confesses to God, there will always be "more" sins where those came from. Over the course of this short, reflective poem, the speaker decides that this fear is the most needless sin of all because it shows a blameworthy lack of trust in God. God, this poem says, is merciful, offering boundless forgiveness to even the worst of sinners if they'll only ask.

Reflecting on his life from birth to the present day, the speaker feels sure that he could keep on listing his sins forever and still not scrape the bottom of the barrel. He's sure he's misbehaved in every conceivable way; he keeps on doing things he "deplore[s]," managing to stop for "a year or two" only to relapse and "wallow[]" in sin again. Worse still, he's tempted other people into sin, becoming a dangerous "door" that leads nowhere good.

With such a long rap sheet, the speaker finds it hard to believe that God could possibly forgive him. Even when God is "done" forgiving the sins the speaker has mentioned so far, the speaker warns, God still "hast not done: / For I have more." The speaker thus fears he'll finally sin so much that, when he dies, he'll "perish on the shore" of heaven—an image that presents him as a man drowning just when he was about to reach safety. In other words, he worries that all his good intentions and efforts to improve aren't enough to stop him from sinning his way into damnation.

This fear, the speaker finally decides, might actually be the biggest and most needless sin of all. By worrying that God's forgiveness might have limits, the speaker feels he's revealing his own weak faith. To believe in a truly all-loving and all-merciful God means believing that God can and will forgive repentant sinners no matter what they've done. With that in mind, the speaker reaches out to God's "Son," Christ, praying to be reminded that Christ's mercy has always been there and will always be there.

In thinking about sin, the poem thus argues, people need to remember that God's capabilities are very different from humanity's. *People* might eventually wash their hands of someone who sins constantly, but *God* will always forgive anyone who asks.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?

In "A Hymn to God the Father," the speaker grapples with one of the oldest difficulties of religious faith: it's *hard* to believe that God is truly all-merciful and all-loving.

Reaching out to God in a direct and desperate apostrophe, the speaker wonders how God could possibly forgive him for his many sins. The speaker, this question implies, would certainly find it hard to forgive himself, were he in God's place.

That's partly because, from this speaker's Christian perspective, everyone has sin in them from the very day they're born:

> Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
> Which was my sin, though it were done before?

Here, the speaker alludes to the doctrine of original sin: the Christian idea that people are born sinful and need to be washed clean by baptism. This sin, the idea goes, was indeed inherited from "before," all the way back when Adam and Eve ate the fateful forbidden fruit. Christ's self-sacrifice redeems that sin, but it's still there.

This is a reverent theological question to start with; the speaker is essentially saying, *God, do you really have it in you to forgive me for the sin I was born with, as my faith says you do?* The next question, though, gets uncomfortably personal:

> Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
> And do run still, though still I do deplore?

The sin the speaker's talking about here isn't just the sinfulness inherent in human nature. It's all the sin he's committed himself and keeps on committing, even though he "deplore[s]" (or despises) it. His diacope on "through which I run, / And do run still" evokes his pain: alarmed by how he just keeps doing things he doesn't want to do, he seems exhausted, discouraged, and frightened.

Notice, too, the way the speaker uses anaphora in these lines. Starting both of his questions with the words "Wilt thou forgive that sin," he sounds as if he's making a formal prayer, getting down on his knees to ask God: *Truly? Can you really forgive me for all this?* This poem will become not just a hymn, but a confession and a prayer.

LINES 5-6

When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

In the first four lines of the poem, the speaker introduced his dilemma. Painfully aware of all his sins, he reaches out to God to ask if he can really be forgiven for everything he's done.

The last two lines of this stanza suggest that it's going to take a lot to convince him. God might forgive him for original sin, or for going on sinning in spite of the fact that he hates his sins. And yet:

> When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
> For I have more.

These words will become the poem's humbling refrain. No matter how many sins God forgives him for, the speaker insists, there will always be "more" to forgive.

A change in the poem's meter here makes these words sound both deadly serious and grimly funny:

- So far, the poem has been written in iambic pentameter: that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm ("Wilt thou | forgive | that sin | where I | begun").
- These last two lines *shrink*, first to tetrameter (four iambs) and finally to the stark two-iamb dimeter of "For I | have more."

The shortening lines make it sound as if the speaker is boiling his predicament down to its essentials. They also read like a dark joke at his own expense: *Oh, you think you're done forgiving my sins? Well, I'm not done listing 'em—or sinning.*

Speaking of being "done," the speaker is also making a pointed pun here. This, remember, is a poem by John Donne. When the speaker proclaims that God "hast not done" (or isn't finished yet) he's also lamenting that God doesn't have *Donne*—that Donne still sins, turning away from God's will and God's embrace.

These words express the speaker's wit and his desperation. He's in a serious bind: he can't seem to stop sinning, and he worries that his disobedience will tear him away from the God he loves. Still, he can't stop himself from indulging in a little gallows humor.

LINES 7-12

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year or two, but wallow'd in, a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

As if to prove that his well of sins is indeed bottomless, the speaker returns to confessions in the second stanza, even using the same anaphora he used before:

> Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
> Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
> Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
> A year or two, but wallow'd in, a score?

Now, though, he deepens his repentant self-portrait with some metaphors.

Not only has he sinned, the speaker confesses, he's invited "others to sin," turning his own sin into a "door"—a potent way of saying "One sin leads to another." This door of sin might open onto a whole horrible palace of sins. By not specifying exactly *how* he's made his sin into a door, the speaker implies he's done all sorts of things in this category (peer pressure? illicit sex?) that he feels too guilty even to spell out.

His disgust with himself feels even more pronounced when he describes an experience that readers will likely find familiar: he swears off his sins for a couple of years at a time, only to backslide and "wallow" in them for ten times as long as he resisted them. The word "wallow" (or "roll around in")—a word often used of pigs—metaphorically suggests that sin is like mud, like filth. It's a grimy, oozy substance the speaker just can't seem to keep out of, no matter how disgusted he feels with himself.

Sin, the speaker's series of questions implies, just multiplies and multiplies. People are born sinful; they keep on doing sinful things; their sin invites other people to sin; they find sin strangely irresistible at the same time that they hate it. Trying to resist sin, for this speaker, only means recognizing just how pervasive it is. Another round of his refrain drives the point home: if God is going to forgive his sins, God is going to have to forgive them endlessly: "For I have more."

LINES 13-14

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;

After two stanzas of guilty, anxious confessions, the speaker finally has a breakthrough. The poem's structure changes to mark this change of perspective, dropping the anaphora of "Wilt though forgive that sin" and the very idea of asking God such tormented questions. Instead, the speaker makes a declaration:

> I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
> My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;

Here, the speaker singles out one sin in particular for God's attention: the "sin of fear," the very anxiety he's expressed in the past two stanzas. He confesses that he's terrified that God won't and can't forgive him. When the metaphorical "thread" of his life runs out, will he "perish on the shore"? In other words, will he be like a drowning man who makes it to the shore only to die there? Will he make it right to the brink of heaven, then fail to get in at the very last minute?

This worry, the speaker realizes, betrays a sinful lack of trust in God. And that's the crux of this poem—the problem upon which all the rest of the speaker's problems rest. To doubt that God's mercy is infinitely greater than any sin is to doubt that God is, well, God: an all-powerful, all-forgiving, all-loving deity, generous and good beyond human limits.

Renaissance theologians like Donne argued that this kind of doubt was one of the most serious sins. For instance, Judas, the apostle who betrayed Christ to the Romans, was said to be damned not because of that betrayal, but because he hanged himself in despair, unable to believe that God could forgive him for what he'd done. If one can't accept that God can hear one's repentance and grant forgiveness, the reasoning goes, one can't accept God.

Faith, this poem thus suggests, means being humble enough not to be one's own judge! To imagine that God might be as ashamed of him as he is of himself, the speaker realizes, is to severely (and sinfully) underestimate God.

LINES 15-18

But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done;
I fear no more.

The speaker's realization that his difficulty believing in God's mercy is itself sinful transforms the poem. Now, rather than asking tormented questions about whether he's forgivable, the speaker makes a prayer for faith, calling on God in God's own name. Being Donne, he can't resist making another pun at the same time:

> But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
> Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;

Readers might want to look back at the poem's title here: "A Hymn to God the Father." The speaker, a believer in a trinitarian God composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has so far been talking to the fatherly part of that trio. Now, he introduces the "Son," Christ—who is also, punnily, the sun who "shines" on the speaker "now" just as he shone on him "heretofore" (that is, up until now).

This pun isn't just an opportunity for the speaker to show off his wit, but a touchstone. If Christ is the sun, he both sets and rises—a reference to Christ's death and resurrection, and to the idea that dark nights are never the end. Just as the sun always comes up, just as Christ suffered, died, and came back to life, the speaker can sin and be welcomed back into God's light.

If God can help the speaker to overcome his "sin of fear," then, it's by helping him to keep the example of Christ in mind. That, the speaker concludes with a new twist on his refrain, is really all he needs:

> And, having done that, thou hast done;
> I fear no more.

A fear that God will be unmerciful, the poem thus suggests, is the fundamental sin. Being human, the speaker insists, means struggling with sin all one's life. Being a faithful Christian means believing that God can forgive even the worst of that sin—and, indeed, that this loving "Father" wants nothing more than to help.

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The speaker's apostrophe to God reminds readers that, to this speaker, God is indeed a loving "Father."

Much of what the speaker has to say to God in this poem feels like a confession. The speaker shamefacedly tells God he's done things he "deplore[s]": he's "won others to sin," "shun[ned]" sin for a little while only to "wallow" in it again. Asking God if God could possibly forgive him for all these things, the speaker closes each list of confessions with words readers might hear as at once contrite and darkly funny: "When thou hast done" ("when you've forgiven those sins," that is), "thou hast not done, / For I have more."

In other words, the speaker is baring his soul to God, admitting to every rotten thing he's ever done and humbly accepting that he probably can't even *think* of every sin he's committed. This is an act of deep trust—a point that becomes even clearer when the speaker confesses his "sin of fear," his worry that God *won't* forgive him, but turn around and damn him for all his sins in the end. The only cure for this fear, the speaker tells God, is for God to "swear by thyself" that Christ will go on being merciful and loving.

Confessing that his deepest fear is that God *couldn't* forgive him, the speaker reveals how deep his faith really is. God, his apostrophes suggest, is the only cure for both his sin and his fear that he's unforgivable. This loving "Father" can both forgive any sin the speaker lays down and remind the speaker that this is so.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12
- Lines 15-17

REFRAIN

This "Hymn" is anchored by a humble, honest refrain.

The speaker addresses God directly, wondering how God could ever forgive all of his many sins. Every time he finishes listing the dreadful things he's done, he says, in essence, "And I could go on":

> When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
> For I have more.

These words appear at the end of both the first and second stanzas, underlining the speaker's conviction that he's a bottomless well of sin. No matter what, this refrain suggests, the speaker could always dig up another crime to confess to God; God can thus never be completely "done" forgiving him.

The speaker's conviction that he's endlessly sinful makes it hard for him to believe that God's patience with him will last—a fear that transforms this poem from a confession into a prayer for reassurance. In the final stanza, when the speaker begs God to help him believe him that Christ's mercy is truly infinite, his refrain changes to match his new approach:

> And, having done that, thou hast done;
> I fear no more.

Deep faith, this new language suggests, can provide an answer for even the most haunting fears: the speaker needs only to remember that God's compassion is far greater even than his apparently endless sins.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more."
- **Lines 11-12:** "When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more."
- **Lines 17-18:** "And, having done that, thou hast done; / I fear no more."

PUN

John Donne loved a pun—so he was lucky to have a thoroughly punnable name. "Donne" is pronounced just like "done," a fact the poem plays on in its refrain:

> When thou hast **done**, thou hast not **done**,
> For I have more.

The pun here doesn't just introduce two subtly different meanings of the word "done" ("acted" in the first instance, "finished" in the second), but suggests that no matter how much Donne wants to give himself fully to God, his sins just keep holding him back. God has Donne, in the sense the Donne

believes fervently in God; God still doesn't have Donne, in the sense that Donne keeps on doing things that he feels are against God's will.

That pun helps to give the refrain its complicated tone. The speaker here is genuinely sorry for his sins and frightened that God couldn't possibly forgive them all, but he's also grimly smiling, poking fun at himself: "Oh, you think ol' Donne is done? He's got *plenty* more sins to tell you about."

The only cure poor Donne can find for his worries also appears in the form of a pun. Listen to what he asks of God here:

> But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
> Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;

Here, God's "Son," Christ, is also the sun, offering the warmth of mercy and forgiveness. This pun presents Christ as an endlessly powerful and life-giving force, one that the speaker can rely on: the sun always rises, after all.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "When thou hast done, thou hast not done"
- **Line 11:** "When thou hast done, thou hast not done"
- **Lines 15-16:** "thy Son / Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore"
- **Line 17:** "And, having done that, thou hast done"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora helps to give the speaker's confession a stark, formal tone.

In the first two stanzas, the speaker asks God how he can be forgiven for his many, many sins. Each time he introduces a new flavor of sin, he uses exactly the same words:

> Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
> Which was my sin, though it were done before?
> Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
> And do run still, though still I do deplore?

These exact repetitions make these lines sound like official prayers—the speaker's own private version of an "Our Father" or a "Hail Mary." This formality characterizes the speaker, suggesting that he's taking his confession and his sins seriously.

All that repetition also prepares the ground for the third stanza, where the speaker abandons this pattern to introduce his last and perhaps his greatest sin, as he sees it: a shaky faith in God's infinite mercy, the weakness that leads him to worry about forgiveness in the first place. Breaking out of his rigid pattern of anaphora, the speaker also seems to be breaking into a new way of thinking—one in which he can trust God to offer not just forgiveness but reassurance.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Wilt thou forgive that sin"
- **Line 3:** "Wilt thou forgive that sin"
- **Line 7:** "Wilt thou forgive that sin"
- **Line 9:** "Wilt thou forgive that sin"

METAPHOR

The speaker's metaphors help to make abstract concepts feel tangible and immediate.

In the second stanza, the speaker frets that he hasn't just sinned, but tempted other people to sin. In so doing, he says, he's "made [his] sin their door"—a deceptively simple metaphor that opens up some complex possibilities. The picture the speaker paints here is of sin everywhere you turn: if his sin is a "door," it's a door that opens onto a room *full* of sin. This is a vivid way of saying that one sin leads to another!

Not only has the speaker made sinners of the people around him, but he's also failed to hold himself back from sinning. For a "year or two" at a time, he says, he can "shun" sin, turning away from it in disgust. Not long after, though, he'll find he's "wallow[ing]" in sin again, and for ten times as long as he shunned it. The word "wallow'd," meaning "rolled around in" suggests that the speaker imagines his sin as a mucky, oozy substance, the kind of stuff you'd find at the bottom of a pigsty. He's disgusted by it, but he just can't seem to keep away.

His last two metaphors follow close on each other's heels:

> I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
> My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;

In speaking of spinning his "last thread," the speaker draws on an old tradition. In Greek mythology, every person's thread of life was said to be spun by the Fates—three ancient goddesses who also chose when to snip that thread. Here, the speaker spins his own life, an image that reflects the responsibility he's taking for his sinful actions.

When his thread runs out, he fears, he'll "perish on the shore," an image that presents his soul as a drowning man who makes it to the beach, only to collapse and die just when he was nearly saved. The speaker's great terror, in other words, is that he'll fail at the very last moment: that he'll finally have sinned so much that God simply can't forgive him, and he'll be lost forever on the very brink of heaven. This mistrust of God, he understands, is itself a sin he needs to banish.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "made my sin their door"
- **Line 10:** "but wallow'd in, a score"
- **Lines 13-14:** "when I have spun / My last thread"

- **Line 14:** "perish on the shore"

VOCABULARY

Wilt thou (Line 1, Line 3, Line 5, Line 7, Line 9, Line 11, Line 17) - An old-fashioned way of saying "Will you." Note that "thou," which sounds pretty formal to modern ears, would once have been an intimate, familiar way of saying "you."

My sin, though it were done before (Line 2) - Here, the speaker alludes to the Christian doctrine of Original Sin: the idea that every person is born carrying the sin of Adam and Eve. Baptism was said to wash original sin away.

Deplore (Line 4) - Condemn, despise.

Shun (Line 9) - Turn away from, reject.

Perish (Line 14) - Die.

Thyself/Thy (Line 15) - Old-fashioned ways of saying "yourself"/"your."

Heretofore (Line 16) - Before now.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem is a hymn, a religious song. John Donne was Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London when he wrote it; much to his delight, the cathedral's choir set the poem to music and often performed it.

Like a lot of Donne's poems, "A Hymn to God the Father" uses an innovative form of Donne's own design:

- Each of its three stanzas is a sestet (six-line stanza) rhymed ABABAB.
- And the lines of each of those sestets *shrink*, moving from standard iambic pentameter (lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this: "Wilt thou | forgive | that sin | which I | have won") to a teeny little dimeter conclusion: "For I | have more." It's as if the speaker's voice trails off as he owns up to his sinfulness.

All these strict formal choices reflect a speaker grappling with a religious dilemma: he believes in an all-merciful and forgiving God, but also can't imagine how God could possibly forgive him for his countless sins. By putting his speaker's confessions into a neat, tight form, Donne declares his faith in an eternal law: yes, God can and will forgive, and that's *always* true.

METER

"A Hymn to God the Father" is written in iambs—that is, metrical feet with a pulsing da-DUM rhythm. The first four lines of each stanza are in iambic pentameter, a meter with five iambs per line. Here's how that sounds in line 1:

Wilt thou | forgive | that sin | where I | begun,

In the last two lines of each stanza, though, the lines shrink down, first to iambic tetrameter (four iambs in a row) and then to iambic dimeter (just two iambs in a row):

When thou | hast done, | thou hast | not done,
For I | have more.

Those shortening lines make the stanzas seem to tense up, reflecting the speaker's desperate fear that he might simply have sinned too much to be forgiven.

In the final stanza, though, that shrinking-down has a different effect: the speaker's brief closing line, "I fear no more," doesn't feel constricted, but firm, calm, and final.

RHYME SCHEME

The alternating rhyme scheme of "A Hymn to God the Father" runs like this:

ABABAB

Relatively unusually, the poem uses exactly the same rhymes all through the poem. That is, rather than moving on to a new set of rhymes in the same alternating pattern, the poem sticks to the same A and B rhymes throughout: *begun* in stanza 1 rhymes with *won* in stanza 2 and *spun* in stanza 3, for instance.

Even more strictly, the last two lines of each stanza always end with the same words, *done* and *more*. The first two times those words appear, they're even part of a refrain, whole repeated lines in which the speaker frets that he'll always have more sins to lay at God's feet.

All of these rigid rhymes reflect two inescapable things: the speaker's sinfulness, and God's forgiveness. Afraid he'll sin so much that God *can't* forgive him, the speaker comes to understand that such a fear is a sin in itself: the only thing more endless than his capacity to do wrong is God's capacity to forgive. By using the same patterns over and over, the poem's rhyme scheme reflects the speaker's belief that, truly, no matter what, God always extends forgiveness to those who ask for it.

SPEAKER

While readers might reasonably interpret this poem's speaker as any repentant Christian sinner, the poem gives a strong hint that the speaker is John Donne himself. The clue is in a pun.

Whenever the speaker tells God that "when thou hast done, thou has not done," he means not just that it's hard to believe

God could ever forgive his endless supply of misdeeds, but that he fears God will never "have Donne" completely, never cure him of all his sins. Some critics have observed that the line "I have more" might be punny, too. John Donne's wife, with whom he illegally eloped—a choice for which he served jail time—was named Ann More.

With or without this pun, the poem's speaker is a deeply religious and reflective person, trying his best to believe that God can forgive the speaker for sins the speaker can't forgive himself for.

SETTING

There's no clear setting in this poem; the speaker is looking too deeply inward to remark on the world around him. However, if readers interpret the speaker as Donne himself (which the poem's punning on the word "done" certainly invites), then they can guess that his wrangle with sin and salvation takes place in the early 17th century, and even pinpoint the year. Donne's biographer Izaak Walton noted that Donne wrote the poem when he was suffering from a near-fatal fever in 1623—a fever that likely produced more than one of Donne's fervent hymns.

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 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. Most of Donne's poems weren't printed until 1633, when his collection *Poems* was posthumously published. "A Hymn to God the Father," however, was well-known during Donne's life: he had it set to music and enjoyed listening to the cathedral choir performing it.

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 religious fervor flows from both Donne's life and his times. 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 the great Shakespearean actor Simon Russell Beale perform this poem and discuss what it means to him. (https://youtu.be/92HTLaPCYYY)
- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to one of the many musical versions of the hymn. (https://youtu.be/I3qh4rE9I9U)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Donne's life and work from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-donne)
- Donne's Effigy — See images of Donne's startling funeral monument, which depicts his shrouded corpse standing bolt upright—an image that reflects his faith in the resurrection. (https://churchmonumentssociety.org/monument-of-the-month/the-john-donne-monument-d-1631-by-nicholas-stone-st-pauls-cathedral-london)
- The Metaphysical Poets — Read an introduction to the Metaphysical Poets (for whom Donne is the poster boy). (https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/john-donne-and-metaphysical-poetry)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

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

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