No Man Is an Island

POEM TEXT

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a
piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod
be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well
as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy
friend's or of thine own were; any man's death
diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and
therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.

SUMMARY

No human being is separate and isolated from the rest of humanity, like an island entirely on its own. Instead, every person is a part of the big metaphorical landmass that is humanity itself, one small piece of a larger whole. If a tiny lump of earth were to disappear into the ocean, then Europe would get smaller—just as it would get smaller if a big chunk of the coast broke off, or if your friend's house, or your own house, were to wash away. Likewise, the death of any person affects me, because I am a part of humanity. So, if you hear the death-knell ringing, never ask who it's ringing for: it's ringing for you.

THEMES

HUMAN CONNECTION

"No Man is an Island" is an excerpt from a series of meditations and reflections on the meaning of life written by John Donne. Donne argues that every human being is connected to every other human being by comparing humanity itself to a vast landmass. No one is "an island" in the sense that no one is *separate* from this metaphorical "continent"; just by being human, everyone is *part* of humanity.

On one level, Donne's conceit emphasizes the importance of connection and community. The human continent is made up of individual clumps of earth that represent individual people. When all those "clods" come together, they form something larger and stronger than themselves. On their own, meanwhile, a clod might "be washed away by the sea." In other words, Donne is saying that people are social creatures and that no one can be truly self-sufficient; people need each other and are better together than they are apart.

Because people are all connected, Donne continues, something that happens to *one* person affects *every* person. The loss of a single "clod" into the ocean diminishes (however subtly) humanity's metaphorical continent. Basically, Donne is implying that no one is expendable. Anyone who is truly "involved" with humankind is directly affected by things that happen to other human beings.

Building on this idea, Donne argues that "any man's death diminishes me" and tells the reader not to ask "for whom the bell tolls." That is, they don't need to ask who death is coming for, because it's coming for *everyone*. Another implicit point here, then, is that people should cherish being alive, and, while alive, embrace being part of the wider human family.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

No man is an island, entire of itself;

This excerpt from Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* opens with the famous line (often wrongly attributed to Shakespeare!), "No man is an island, entire of itself." (Note that, though Donne uses "man" throughout this except, it's not really gender-specific.)

The phrase introduces the main conceit, or elaborate extended metaphor, of this discussion. An island is a piece of land surrounded on all sides by water; it's entirely cut off from the mainland. In saying that nobody is an island, then, Donne is saying that nobody exists entirely cut off on all sides from the metaphorical mainland of humanity. In other words, nobody is completely isolated and alone. (Note that "Island" *could* be considered a subtle pun too: no one person can be an "I" land—a land devoted totally to oneself!)

Donne then emphasizes this point, noting how an island is something "entire of itself"—basically, it's something that's entirely *on its own*. But Donne insists that human beings aren't like that. People might sometimes live under the illusion of total self-sufficiency and independence, but being human requires participation and engagement with the wider community that is humankind. (Donne will elaborate on this idea in the following lines.)

There's another, subtler implication of the phrase "entire of itself" as well. The word "entire" means *whole*. The line thus suggests not only that people shouldn't try to (or simply can't)

isolate themselves from the rest of humanity, but also that people aren't *complete* human beings on their own. Without other people, there's something missing.

Though this passage doesn't refer directly to God, it's worth remembering that Donne's Christianity informs the rest of the Meditation (and the whole book in which this appears). Human beings, then, are also united through being part of God's creation and an expression of his will.

LINES 1-2

every man is a
piece of the continent, a part of the main;

The second sentence develops the conceit established by the first. Here, Donne compares humanity itself to a "continent," an enormous landmass. Every single person is one "piece" of that huge continent ("a part of the main"). It follows that each person's *individual* actions affect the *whole* of humanity. Implicit in this argument is the importance of empathy with one's fellow human beings.

The phrase "every man" also contrasts directly with "no man" from the opening sentence. Together, these two lines create something called antithesis. Note, too, the parallelism of the phrasing here:

> every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;

Devices like these add rhetorical force to Donne's argument (and they also reflect the fact that he was a skilled preacher!).

There's also another possible pun here: "main," which is short for *mainland*, is very close in sound to "man." The two words are *almost* homophones, and this emphasizes the deep connection between all of humankind. Each "man" is inseparable from the "main."

LINES 2-5

if a clod
be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well
as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy
friend's or of thine own were;

Donne expands on his conceit even more here. (This is a common technique in Donne's writing: set up a metaphor that seems a bit far-fetched and then justify it through logic, argument, and examples.)

Donne points out that *any* change to a landmass affects its shape. If even a single tiny lump of earth (a "clod") from the European continent were to crumble into the sea, Europe itself would become smaller (it would be "less"). While this change might seem too small to matter, Donne insists that it does: the phrase "as well as" suggests that the loss of this little clod is, in essence, no different from the loss of an entire "promontory" (a piece of land jutting into a body of water).

Again, all this talk of land and water is meant to illuminate Donne's belief about humanity. The loss of a *single* human being (or, perhaps, one person's deliberate refusal to connect with the rest of humanity) affects humanity as a *whole*. The implication here is that humanity is only as strong as the sum of its parts; the loss of a single part—be it a clod or cliff—invariably makes it weaker.

Donne then gives another example to show how a continent like Europe might be altered:

> as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were;

That is, if the reader's house, or the house of one of the reader's friends, were to crumble into the sea, this would also make the continent "less." This really says the same thing as the "clod" and the "promontory" examples, but makes it feel more personal. Donne is no longer talking about bits of earth, but the homes of his readers and their loved ones. (The mention of such structures being "washed away by the sea" might also make readers think of just how fragile and ephemeral humanity's creations are. Donne, then, might also be emphasizing the importance of service to God, which he focuses on a lot throughout the longer text from which this famous excerpt comes.)

And again, Donne turns to repetition to give the lines a sermon-like flavor, with anaphora and epistrophe adding force and intensity:

> [...] as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were;

The language sounds like a well-reasoned, logical argument.

LINES 5-6

any man's death
diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind,

Before diving into this chunk, a reminder that this famous paragraph is actually an excerpt from a larger meditation that Donne wrote. He'd been inspired by the sound of a church bell (used to indicate that someone is dying or has died); the mention of death, then, doesn't come out of nowhere—it's already in the mix by the time Donne gets to this point.

So far, Donne has argued that humankind is one great "continent," a solid landmass that's diminished by the loss of a single "part of the main." Here, he takes that argument a step further. If every person is a part of the great big entity that is humanity, and the loss of one person affects humanity, then the loss of one person also affects every other person!

Specifically, Donne argues that *any* person's death "diminishes"

him. In other words, one death affects everyone who is still alive by changing the shape of humanity as a whole. And anyone who appreciates the relationship between one human being and another ought to *feel* someone's death as though a part of themselves were dying too.

Donne's "involve[ment] in mankind" represents a kind of emotional and spiritual investment in his fellow human beings. Donne seems to actively *care* about what happens to humanity, implying that people *en masse* can only ever be as great or as terrible as the total sum of their individual actions.

The phrase "death diminishes" uses prominent and forceful alliteration. This speaks to death's power to alter the shape of humanity. The alliteration also links the two words together, supporting the idea that "death" makes humanity as a whole *smaller*. This doesn't have to be read literally, but speaks to a more subtle sense of *spiritual* loss when someone dies. (Elsewhere, Donne argues that, as believing human beings are reunited in the heavenly afterlife, this is all part of God's majesty.)

Notice, too, how the polyptoton of "man's" and "mankind" shows how the former *belongs* to the latter. That is, the community of "mankind" is made up of many smaller elements (individuals).

LINES 6-8

> *and*
> *therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;*
> *it tolls for thee.*

Here, Donne comes to a conclusion based on the logic presented so far in this excerpt:

1. No human being can be completely isolated, because to be human is to be part of humanity.
2. Each death affects humanity, meaning each death also affects everyone human being.
3. Therefore, there is no need to ask *who* died when "the bell" rings. In ringing for *one* person, it rings for *every* person; it signals a change in the shape of the human continent that all people share and also reminds people of their own eventual deaths. Donne doesn't want or need to "know for whom the bell tolls," because he's part of humanity, and a little part of humanity has died—meaning a little part of himself has died too.

The diacope of this final line makes it all the more memorable and powerful:

> therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
> it tolls for thee.

The repetition here emphasizes that the bell ringing for another is also ringing for "thee" ("you").

The Meditation in which this excerpt appears mentions the church bell multiple times before this moment. In fact, it's the imaginative launchpad from which the *whole* section of the book takes off! Donne, lying in bed and fearing his own death, could hear a bell ringing to signify that someone has died (or was dying). So the arrival of the tolling bell is not a *new* element in the text (and Donne had used it in an earlier work too), but a common symbol. The bell, both in real life and in the poem, symbolizes death's presence in the world, and the need for people to value their lives and, by implication, their place in the wider human family.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

There are just a handful of examples of alliteration here, which lend subtle music and intensity. For example, note the crisp /p/ sounds of "piece of the continent" and "part of the main," which emphasize each individual's small but invaluable role within humanity. The gentle /w/ sounds of "washed away," meanwhile, add a bit of lyricism to this image of a "clod" (that is, a little chunk of earth) being swept away by the ocean. (Note that "away" counts as alliteration because the shared /w/ sound falls at the start of a stressed syllable.)

The most striking alliteration, however, is in the phrase "any man's death diminishes me." Two strong /d/ sounds here make for a powerful moment, adding a bit of drama. This is the point at which Donne's whole conceit—that every human being is part of the human continent, rather than an isolated island—reaches its conclusion: Donne feels another person's death as if it were his own, or as if a part of himself were dying. Hearing the death-knell (church bell) ringing for someone else anticipates the time when it will ring for *him*.

The two /d/ sounds here make death a sudden and shocking presence in the poem, a kind of timely reminder that all human beings are mortal—and that there is a strange kind of community in this shared mortality.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "piece," "part"
- **Line 3:** "washed away"
- **Lines 5-6:** "death / diminishes"

CONCEIT

In the first section of this excerpt, Donne builds a powerful conceit (a kind of elaborate extended metaphor) that compares humankind to a "continent," a vast landmass, made up of individual "clods" of earth that represent individual human beings. Because this is all done in service of illustrating a

broader point about humanity, this section can also be considered an analogy. Whatever term readers use, the figurative language here is meant to support the idea that people rely on one another and that every individual is part of the vast community or family that is humanity itself.

The flip-side of this idea is that "No man is an island, entire of itself," meaning that no one can truly survive and/or exist in complete isolation from the rest of humanity. Whereas islands exist in isolation, surrounded on all sides by water, every human being is "a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Everyone is part of humanity simply by being human (and, Donne points out elsewhere in this Meditation, created by God).

Donne expands this concept by describing different parts of the European continent falling into the ocean:

> if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were [...]

In other words, the loss of even a *single* clod of dirt will change the shape of the continent, just as the loss of a whole "promontory" (a coastal piece of land that just out into the water) would change it. The loss of a clod might be subtle, but it's still very much a loss. Likewise, the loss of one human being is a loss to the whole of humankind.

Donne isn't complaining about death. In fact, he acknowledges elsewhere in this Meditation that death is part of life and, importantly, promises a reunion with God. Nevertheless, one death *changes the shape* of humankind, and it will never quite be the same again. In this way, Donne implies that every human being is important—and should be valued as such.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5

PUN

This excerpt's famous opening sentence contains one *possible* pun:

> No man is an island, entire of itself;

It's not certain whether Donne did this on purpose, but his poetry, in general, *is* full of wordplay. Here, the pun *might* be playing with the first-person pronoun. A "man" entirely on their own would be a kind of island: a land in which there is only "I" (or a land made out of "I"; "No man is an 'I'+ land, entire of itself").

Of course, Donne rejects the idea that anyone can be either *complete* on their own or *completely* on their own. Togetherness, community, empathy, understanding—these are all necessary elements for living as a human being on planet Earth. The pun thus conjures an image of a Robinson Crusoe-type figure trying to survive without any external help, while also pointing out that, in reality, no one can live that way (nor should they attempt to do so!).

It's worth noting, too, that there is a kind of wordplay at work between "man" and "main" here: "every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." The word "main" sounds a whole lot like the word "man"—subtly reinforcing the idea that each individual human being is a part of the greater continent (or *main*land) of humanity.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "island," "man"
- **Line 2:** "main"

REPETITION

Donne uses many types of repetition to construct a powerful, persuasive argument. This repetition adds emphasis to his point and also lends the Meditation a biblical, sermon-like quality.

For example, note the parallelism of these lines:

> every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;

The structure of the phrases on either side of the comma is exactly the same. In fact, both phrases are saying the same thing! Donne is hammering home the argument here.

More parallelism appears in the next sentence:

> if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were [...]

These lines feature both anaphora ("as well as if a") and epistrophe ("were"). Together, these devices lend this passage a powerful sense of rhythm and momentum. Readers/listeners might get the sense that this list of proofs could go on and on.

Later, the polyptoton of "man" and "mankind" cleverly reflects the speaker's belief in the inherent connection between all of humanity. The word "mankind" contains "man" just as the *concept* "mankind" contains all men (and women!).

Finally, the end of this excerpt famously uses diacope:

> therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

The echo here of the word "toll" emphasizes the speaker's point: that one person's death affects every else, because everyone is connected. The repetition of the word "tolls" might also subtly evoke the "tolling" being described (that is, the

ringing of a church bell).

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a"
- **Line 2:** "of the," "a," "of the"
- **Lines 3-4:** "as well / as if a"
- **Line 4:** "were," "as well as if a"
- **Line 5:** "were," "man's"
- **Line 6:** "mankind"
- **Line 7:** "tolls"
- **Line 8:** "tolls"

ANTITHESIS

The famous opening lines of this excerpt are an example of the literary device antithesis. Donne sets two opposing sentiments side by side, using parallel grammar:

> No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;

Notice how similar these phrases are: "No man" becomes its opposite, "every man"; an isolated "island" becomes a huge "continent"; being complete on one's own (in "itself") becomes being "part" of something greater. The similarity of these phrases in terms of language and grammar helps to highlight their difference in *meaning*. Antithesis thus is essential to the speaker's whole point: that human beings do *not* exist in isolation, but rather are all connected by the experience known as being human.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a / piece of the continent, a part of the main;"

VOCABULARY

Entire of itself (Line 1) - Completely alone/a complete entity on its own.

Main (Line 2) - The mainland/the larger whole.

Clod (Line 2) - A small clump of earth.

The less (Line 3) - Made smaller/inferior, diminished.

Promontory (Line 4) - A point of coastal land that sticks out in the water (but is still connected to the mainland).

Manor (Line 4) - A house and/or area of land.

Thy (Line 4) - Archaic form of "your."

Thine (Line 5) - Archaic form of "your."

Diminishes (Line 6) - Lessens/makes smaller.

Send to know (Line 7) - Ask about/seek out.

Tolls (Line 7, Line 8) - Rings.

Thee (Line 8) - Archaic form of "you."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"No Man Is an Island" isn't really a poem at all; it's an excerpt from a longer work of prose titled *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. This book contains 23 sections, each of which is divided into a "Meditation," "Expostulation," and a "Prayer."

This famous paragraph comes from the 17th Meditation, itself a longer section of writing inspired by the sound of a church bell (which this excerpt ends with). The persuasive rhetorical shape of the text—with its frequent repetitions and lyrical language—makes it feel almost like a poem, which is why it's often presented with line breaks (just remember, though, that those don't belong to Donne!).

METER

This is an excerpt from a prose work written without any meter. There's something authentic and refreshing about the *lack* of meter, even if the text still uses many other poetic conventions (despite not being an actual poem!). It's worth noting, though, that the last four words are perfectly iambic (that is, they follow an unstressed-stressed, da-DUM, syllable pattern):

> it tolls for thee.

This final phrase has a strong rhythm that ends the paragraph on a firm, resounding note.

RHYME SCHEME

There's no rhyme scheme at work here! Donne strives to speak truthfully and thoughtfully, without needing to demonstrate poetic virtuosity.

SPEAKER

It's fair to read the speaker in "No Man Is an Island" as John Donne himself. This paragraph is an excerpt from a deeply personal work called the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. Donne started the *Devotions* while seriously ill and likely thinking he was going to die. Accordingly, the speaker—or Donne himself—strikes a philosophical tone, as if he is trying to use his last days to get to the core of fundamental truths about what it means to be human.

SETTING

This excerpt doesn't have a particular setting. That is, it doesn't take place in a certain location or at a certain time; instead, Donne is reflecting on the fundamental nature of humanity—something that would apply across all time and space.

That said, the mention of "Europe" reflects the fact that Donne was British (and thus understandably turned to Europe to illustrate his metaphor of humankind as a "continent"). The church bell mentioned in the final moments also appears throughout the rest of the Meditation from which this excerpt is drawn, conjuring an image of Donne lying sick in bed, reflecting (*meditating*) on the meaning of the sound.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne lived from 1572 to 1631 and was one of the most important English writers of his generation. In addition to being a poet, he was a politician, scholar, soldier, and clergyman—in short, a true Renaissance man! He's usually counted as one of the "Metaphysical Poets," Renaissance writers renowned for their inventive conceits and twisty logical arguments.

This paragraph is not actually a poem, but rather an excerpt from a prose work titled *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Composed in 1623 and published the following year, the book reflects on life, death, sickness, and humanity's relationship with God. Donne wrote *Devotions* during a period when he was seriously sick and likely thought he was going to die. The book is divided into 23 parts called "The Stations of the Sickness" in reference to the 23 days of Donne's feverish illness. Each of these sections consists of a "Meditation," an "Expostulation" (a kind of *response* to the meditation), and a "Prayer." This famous excerpt comes from the 17th Meditation.

"No Man Is an Island" is better known than any other section of the *Devotions*, often quoted out of context and wrongly attributed to Shakespeare. Readers might also recognize the line "for whom the bell tolls" as the title of a famous novel by Ernest Hemingway.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John Donne's life straddled two significant eras in British history: the Elizabethan and the Jacobean. *Devotions* was written during the latter period, after James I had inherited the English throne. The Jacobean period was rich in cultural and scientific exploration. This was also the time during which Shakespeare wrote some of his most important plays and the King commissioned the King James Version of the Bible.

Donne was raised Catholic during a difficult time for Catholicism, which was in conflict with the Church of England (which Henry VIII had established earlier in the 16th century). Donne's brother, Henry, for example, was imprisoned for his Catholicism and died soon after. By the time *Devotions* was written, Donne had converted to Anglicanism and was well-known for his powerful sermons.

The exact nature of the illness that inspired *Devotions* is unknown. Some scholars speculate that it was typhus, while others view relapsing fever as the more likely candidate. Either way, the book ties in with the 16th-century idea that sickness could be a visitation from God as a kind of spiritual lesson, particularly as a reminder of humankind's sinfulness and need for salvation.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a live reading by musician P.J. Harvey. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUbtFw-mXgM)
- Donne's Life and Work — Learn more about Donne's life story via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne)
- Donne and Death — A podcast discussing the poet's attitude towards mortality. (https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/donne-death)
- The 17th Meditation — Check out the longer Meditation in which this famous excerpt appears. (http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/meditation17.php)
- Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions — Explore the full text of the book in which this famous paragraph appears, written by Donne during a period of sickness (and recovery). (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23772/23772-h/23772-h.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God (Holy Sonnet 14)
- Death, be not proud
- Song: Go and catch a falling star
- The Flea
- The Good-Morrow
- The Sun Rising
- The Triple Fool
- To His Mistress Going to Bed

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*No Man Is an Island*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Oct 2021. Web. 9 Nov 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*No Man Is an Island*." LitCharts LLC, October 20, 2021. Retrieved November 9, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/john-donne/no-man-is-an-island.