On My First Son

POEM TEXT

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.
Seven years thou'wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O, could I lose all father now! For why
Will man lament the state he should envy?
To have so soon 'scap'd world's and flesh's rage,
And, if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.
For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such,
As what he loves may never like too much.

SUMMARY

Goodbye to you, my favorite child, my joy. I placed too much hope in you, beloved child. You were lent to me for seven years and now I have to pay back the loan—fate demands it. Oh, I would give up being a father altogether now! Why should we grieve at all? We should, instead, envy you. You have escaped so quickly from the demands of the world and of the body. You will never have to experience the torment of aging. So rest peacefully—and if anyone asks you, tell them, "Here is the best poem Ben Jonson ever wrote." For your sake, I will vow from here forward not too love anything too much.

THEMES

DEATH, GRIEF, AND FAITH

"On My First Son" is an elegy for Ben Jonson's eldest son, who died of the plague in 1603 when he was just seven years old. The poem mourns this tragedy in intimate, moving terms. The loss has thrown Jonson (the poem's speaker) into despair. In his anguish, he wrestles with some of the most difficult questions that a person can face. He wonders whether it is possible to recover from such a biting, bitter loss. Breaking with the traditions of the elegy, Jonson argues that no consolation will serve in the face of such a tragedy: not even religion—with its promise of eternal life—can comfort him.

In the wake of his son's death, Jonson turns to religion, hoping that it will console him. He asks why he feels grief at all—he should "envy" his son his new "state." That is, his son is now in Heaven, and not only that; by dying young, he has escaped the "world's and flesh's rage" as well as the "misery" of "age." In other words, death has freed his son from all the suffering and temptation that human beings usually endure on earth. The poem even suggests that the child's true home was never on earth. He was simply here on loan: "Seven years thou'wert lent to me[.]" He doesn't belong to his earthly family or to his father—instead his true home and his true owner are in Heaven; his true father is God.

This is a powerful consolation—or, at least, it should be. In his other elegies—like "On My First Daughter," which also mourns the death of a child—Jonson uses very similar language to try to console mourning family members (including himself). This is what an elegy traditionally does. It starts with grief: sharp, unbearable grief. But then it works its way toward consolation, often using the Christian hope of Heaven to soothe the pain. That should work here too: thinking of Heaven should make Jonson feel better about his son's tragic and untimely death.

But it doesn't seem to soothe his grief: he ends the poem as devastated as he was at its beginning. Instead of moving on, heartened by his religious faith, he closes the poem with a bitter vow: "henceforth all his vows be such / as what he loves may never like too much." In other words, he vows to never again love anyone or anything as much as he loved his son. In these lines, Jonson wrestles with a terrible question. He wonders whether it is worth loving someone at all, given that they will die—and could die at any moment. His answer seems to be a resolute no. Rather than renewing his confidence or his faith, then, his elegy—with its beautiful, traditional religious consolations—fails to help him recover from his grief and suggests that all such intense grief may be impossible to resolve.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

FATHERHOOD AS AUTHORSHIP

"On My First Son" wrestles with a devastating tragedy: Ben Jonson's son has died of the plague at seven years old. Jonson feels profound and searching grief in response—grief so powerful that it calls into question some pretty basic things. We've already seen how (in our themes entry on "Death, Grief, and Faith") the death of his son makes Jonson question whether religion can console him in the face of tragedy. But the failure seems contagious: even as religion fails

to console him, so too do fatherhood and family.

In a striking metaphor at the heart of "On my First Son," Jonson equates poetry and fatherhood. He compares his son to a literary text, calling him, "[my] best piece of poetry." In other words, fathering a son is like writing a poem: Jonson considers himself to be his son's author. This is a moving statement from a poet who had such a high opinion of himself and his own poetry that he once wrote an ode to himself, "An Ode to Himself." Jonson is saying here that being a father is more important, more powerful, than any poem he's ever written.

But Jonson refuses to find consolation in fatherhood. One could imagine him turning to his surviving children with a renewed sense of love—renewed by his sharp sense of their frailty and mortality. But his son's death produces just the opposite reaction. It makes him want to give up being a father altogether: "O, could I lose all father now!" he proclaims in line 5. He closes the poem by vowing to himself that he will never love someone as much as he loved his son. When Jonson calls his son "[my] best piece of poetry," he not only offers his dead son a moving and elegant compliment. He also quietly suggests how deep his grief is, how difficult to assuage. Neither religion nor family can comfort him. And even poetry itself seems diminished—after all, his "best piece of poetry" now lies moldering in the grave.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 5
- Lines 9-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.
Seven years thou'wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.

The first 4 lines of "On My First Son" establish the poem's themes and its form. The speaker of the poem is Ben Jonson himself; he is mourning the death of his first son, who died from the plague in 1603 when he was just seven years old. Jonson describes him as the "child of my right hand." These words indicate that he hasn't lost just any child: he's lost his favorite child, the one he loved the most and put the most hope in. Indeed, he complains that he had "too much hope of thee, lov'd boy." In other words, he had high expectations for his son, which makes his death all the sadder. An alliterative /h/ sound links together "hand" and "hope"—emphasizing the force and power of Jonson's hopes.

Even as Jonson mourns his son's death in powerful and affecting terms—unusual for a poet who is often biting and sarcastic—he also recognizes that human life is frail and fleeting. In lines 3-4, he describes human life as a metaphorical loan. His son was "lent to [him]. " The metaphor suggests that Jonson's son doesn't belong on earth; his true home is in Heaven. However, the sound of these lines suggests that Jonson has a hard time accepting this idea. Note the sharp and tough /t/ consonance in line 4:

> Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.

It almost sounds like Jonson's teeth are clenched, like he's spitting out this line in frustration.

Lines 1-4 thus establish the poem as an elegy—a poem of mourning. Usually, elegies follow a set pattern or narrative. They start with a speaker deep in grief—but the speaker eventually finds consolation. Jonson's elegy *does* begin with its speaker deep in mourning for his son. In the first four lines of the poem, Jonson focuses on his grief, wallowing in it. All of the first four lines of the poem are end-stopped, which makes them feel slow and ponderous, as though Jonson were dwelling on each detail of his grief, unable to let anything go.

Further, Jonson talks directly to his son—an instance of the poetic device apostrophe—as though he were still alive, negotiating, complaining, and rehearsing their relationship. The use of apostrophe suggests that he is having trouble letting go: he can't accept that his son is dead, even as he bids him "farewell." He loved his son too intensely to simply give him up. From the first lines, then, there is strong evidence to suggest that Jonson struggles to find consolation. Even though an elegy is supposed to comfort people in mourning, the author of this elegy cannot find a way to comfort himself: it seems that there is no consolation powerful enough to overcome this tragedy. And indeed, as the poem continues it will become clear that Jonson is breaking the elegy's usual pattern; he doesn't succeed in finding a source of consolation that can soothe his despair.

The first four lines of "On My First Son" also establish the poem's formal pattern. It is written in heroic couplets. In other words, each line of the poem is in iambic pentameter—a meter that features five poetic feet per line, in an unstressed-stressed da-DUM rhythm. Jonson deploys this meter consistently throughout, with the exception of a few ambiguous lines, like line 3. The lines also rhyme with each other in an *AABB* pattern. Heroic couplets are a distinguished form in English poetry; they are usually reserved for elevated topics, like heroic battles or serious philosophical disputes. But Jonson chooses to use the form here, for a poem about his personal grief. In doing so, he makes an implicit argument about his son's death: it is as monumental an event as any battle; his son is as important as any hero.

LINES 5-8

O, could I lose all father now! For why
Will man lament the state he should envy?
To have so soon 'scap'd world's and flesh's rage,
And, if no other misery, yet age?

In the first 4 lines of "On My First Son," Ben Jonson sinks deep into despair. His seven-year-old son has died—and the blow is so powerful that he finds it hard to imagine any possible comfort in his grief. Indeed, at the start of line 5, he proclaims: "O, could I lose all father now!" That is, he's ready to give up being a parent entirely; even his other children don't offer him any comfort in his grief.

As Jonson wrestles with this ongoing despair, he poses two rhetorical questions. These rhetorical questions raise a potentially comforting possibility. Instead of "lament[ing]" his son's death, Jonson thinks that he should "envy" his son's new "state." After all, his son is in Heaven; by dying he has, metaphorically, "'scap'd" from the "world's flesh and rage." In other words, he won't have to confront the temptations and worries that oppress human life and make it hard to achieve salvation; he doesn't have to endure the "misery" of aging. The assonant /a/ sound in "state," "'scap'd," and "rage" underscores the dangers the son faced—and his good fortune in escaping them. This firm sound helps make these lines seductive and powerful, much like the danger the son has been freed from. Indeed, the possibilities Jonson presents here are traditional—and usually compelling—religious consolations. It's a bit like saying, "They're in a better place now," to someone who's lost a loved one. For that reason, these ideas are often used in elegies. Poets fall back on them to comfort grieving family members. Indeed, Jonson himself uses very similar language in some of his own elegies, like "On My First Daughter." (And in that elegy, he takes comfort in these ideas.)

But there's some evidence in this poem to suggest that in the case of his son's death, Jonson does not welcome these rhetorical questions or find them comforting. Indeed, they seem to intrude on him. The first begins only after an awkward and surprising caesura, which falls unusually late in line 5. Because the question starts so late in the line, it forces an enjambment at the end of the line—the poem's first enjambment. That enjambment is awkward too, underscoring the discomfort that Jonson feels as he poses the question. It feels like he's raising these possibilities because he has to, not because he finds them legitimately comforting. Further, Jonson uses consonant /m/ and /l/ sounds to suggest that he *should* "lament" his son's death—whether the son is in Heaven or not:

> Will man lament the state he should envy?

The consonance here suggests that it's simply part of man's lot to "lament": yes, man *will* lament—it is an unavoidable part of being human, and no statement of religious piety can change that.

Like the first 4 lines, these lines are in heroic couplets—rhyming lines of iambic pentameter. It's an elevated, distinguished form, usually reserved for the most important subjects. By using that form to talk about a private matter—his personal grief—Jonson suggests that his son's death is as important as any battle or philosophical dispute. Although he does not accept the religious consolations on offer in these lines, he pays tribute to his son's life by writing him a poem of immense beauty and elegance.

LINES 9-12

Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.
For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such,
As what he loves may never like too much.

In lines 5-8, Jonson considers an idea that often helps to soothe grief, especially in elegies. His son may be dead, but now the son is in a better place, free from the cares and worries of human life. Though Jonson doesn't explicitly reject that idea, there is some evidence that it feels forced on him—as if it's an imposition in his grief. And in the poem's final four lines, it becomes clear that he is not comforted or consoled by it.

In lines 9-10, Jonson imagines an epitaph for his son. In doing so, he returns to apostrophe, addressing his son directly and imagining him interacting with other people (being "ask'd"). Once again, the use of apostrophe makes it feel like Jonson hasn't quite accepted his son's death. And he seems to struggle to come up with an appropriate epitaph, something worthy of his son. He pauses awkwardly at the end of line 9—only the poem's second enjambment—as though he can't quite decide what to say. (The line itself is marked by a series of caesuras which also suggest that he is stumbling over himself, unable to quite say what he needs to say). When he does finally decide what to say about his son, in line 10, he offers a striking metaphor. His son is "Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry." In other words, his son is the best thing Jonson ever wrote (or will write): fatherhood is like authorship.

Jonson follows this metaphor in lines 11-12 with a dark and despairing vow—a vow that suggests his elegy has failed to offer him any comfort or consolation. He vows that from now on, "what he loves may never like too much." In other words, he's not going to love anyone or anything too much; he can't handle losing anyone or anything else. He also makes it clear that this vow is specifically caused by his son's death, as he notes that it is his son "For whose sake" he's making it. As the poem ends, then, Jonson is not reconciled to his son's death; he has not found comfort or consolation. Instead, he resolves to withdraw from the world as a result of this devastating loss, to refuse to form any more strong attachments or loves.

This is a forceful vow—and its strength is underscored by the firm end-stops in lines 10 and 12. But there are a few small

signs that things are not as settled, as final, as Jonson might wish. The enjambment in line 11 feels like a moment of uncertainty, as if Jonson hasn't quite decided what the vow will be. Similarly, the alliteration between "loves" and "like" suggests that the vow will be impossible to uphold—"love" and "like" can't be that cleanly separated.

More broadly, the poem's elegance suggests that Jonson feels it is at least worthwhile to mourn his son's death: instead of simply withdrawing into despair, he produces a refined poem celebrating his son's life. (Like the rest of the poem, lines 9-12 are written in heroic couplets, rhyming lines of iambic pentameter.) While the poem may fail to find Jonson any lasting consolation or comfort, it nonetheless stands as a powerful testament to his love and affection for his son—and to the value of loving passionately and intensely, even if human life is frail and fleeting.

SYMBOLS

RIGHT HAND

The "right hand" is a symbol of power, prestige, and importance. The symbol assumes that most people are right-handed—and that therefore the right hand is stronger and more powerful than the left. The power and importance of the right hand (for most people, anyway) is reflected in common English idioms and phrases like "right hand man." A "right hand man" is as vital and important as someone's right hand. When Jonson calls his son his "right hand," he thus suggests how important his son was to him. He can't imagine living without his son; in his absence, he is a weakened, diminished man. Indeed, he may even be suggesting that his "first son" was his favorite child—the most important of his offspring. The symbol thus suggests how close Jonson and his son were—and how devastating the son's death is for Jonson.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "right hand"

THE WORLD

In this context, the "world" is a symbol for all the mundane cares and responsibilities—business, household chores, taxes, etc.—that slowly grind people down, taking away the joy and pleasure they might otherwise experience. For the speaker, these difficulties form a kind of "rage": they build and build until they become overpowering. His son thus should be considered lucky—from one standpoint—to have escaped all these cares and worries with his child-like wonder and joy intact. But the speaker finds it hard to accept that viewpoint. Even though he knows he should be glad his son is in Heaven—and free from the miseries of the "world"—he cannot help grieving his death, passionately and intensely. Indeed, this reluctance to celebrate his son's death indicates that maybe Jonson doesn't view the troubles of the "world" as so overwhelmingly negative after all—perhaps because they come alongside immense joys like love and family.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "world"

FLESH

"Flesh" here is a symbol of sexual desire, temptation, and sin. Literally speaking, of course, the word just refers to the human body, its muscles and bones. But there is a long tradition, particularly in Christianity, of thinking of the body as a sinful and unholy thing—the place where uncontrolled erotic desires come from, for instance. The body thus drags the soul down, essentially getting it dirty; it puts the soul at risk of losing its place in Heaven. For Jonson, then, his son could be considered lucky, since he will never have to endure the temptations of sexuality or wrestle with his own desires. Dying as an innocent child, he is virtually assured a place in Heaven, without any of the trials and tribulations that most Christians must go through on their way there. It is thus a measure of Jonson's deep despair that even the idea of his son escaping his "flesh" doesn't console him.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "flesh"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the lines in "On My First Son"—three-quarters of them—are end-stopped. As a result, the poem generally feels slow, measured, and reflective. These long, pensive pauses give the reader a sense of Jonson's mood as he meditates on his son's death. Instead of rushing through his grief or trying to work his way toward resolution, he lingers on it—even wallows in it.

This is evident in the run of end-stopped lines that open the poem. All of the poem's first four lines are end-stopped:

> Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
> My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.
> Seven years thou'wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
> Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.

As Jonson lays out the facts, meditates on his own "sin," and

describes the harsh terms of the loan he has been forced to repay, he pauses at the end of each line. These end-stops are heavy, ponderous. It almost feels like Jonson is having a hard time continuing the poem—as though he wants to give up at the end of each line.

Since these end-stops are so strong—and since they dominate the first four lines of the poem—they strongly shape the reader's experience of the poem's rhythm, pace, and mood. The poem's few enjambments feel like deviations from this rhythm, so the end-stopped lines that follow these enjambments feel less like closure and certainty and more like a return to despair. The reader can see this effect in lines 9-10, for instance:

> Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lie
> Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.

The enjambment in line 9 creates a sense of expectation and uncertainty: the reader wonders how Jonson will characterize his son's death, what he will choose as an epitaph. But then line 10—and its strong end-stop—feels like a return to the steady, almost monotonous despair of the rest of the poem. The return to firm end-stop suggests that it doesn't matter much what the epitaph is; Jonson's son is still dead, and nothing can change that.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "joy;"
- **Line 2:** "boy."
- **Line 3:** "pay,"
- **Line 4:** "day."
- **Line 6:** "envy?"
- **Line 7:** "rage,"
- **Line 8:** "age?"
- **Line 10:** "poetry."
- **Line 12:** "much."

ENJAMBMENT

"On My First Son" contains just three enjambments. The vast majority of its lines—three-quarters, in fact—are end-stopped. End-stop dominates the reader's experience of the poem, establishing its rhythm, pace, and mood. The end-stops give the poem a slow pace and a ponderous mood—they make it feel as if Jonson is wallowing in his grief, barely able to continue his own poem. The poem's few enjambments thus feel like deviations from this mood—moments where Jonson is uncertain, insecure, or unsettled.

For example, in lines 5-6, Jonson poses a rhetorical question about why he's grieving his son's death at all:

> ... For why
> Will man lament the state he should envy?

The question is an expression of religious piety. Jonson is saying that if he truly believes that his son is safe in Heaven, free from the trials and tribulations of human life, then he should celebrate his death—not grieve it. But this traditional religious sentiment does not comfort him. And the enjambment, awkwardly cutting the sentence in two, underlines the discomfort that Jonson feels as he poses the question. The question almost seems intrusive, an unwelcome interruption in his grief. As the poem's first enjambment—coming after four straight end-stopped lines—the line break between lines 5-6 is itself intrusive and disruptive.

The poem's second and third enjambments express a similar sense of disruption and strain—though, in lines 9-10 and 11-12, the strain comes from within Jonson himself, not from an external sense of religious expectation. At the end of line 9, he pauses awkwardly, as though he can't quite decide what he wants his son's epitaph to be:

> Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lie
> Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.

Similarly, at the end of line 11, the sentence is suspended in mid-air, incomplete—as though Jonson isn't certain what his vows should be (note that, especially for older poems like this one, punctuation does not necessarily mean that a line is not enjambed):

> For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such,
> As what he loves may never like too much.

These enjambments crop up at key moments in the poem: moments when Jonson tries to express what his son's death means to him. They suggest that he struggles to find the words to adequately express the impact of the tragedy and the force of his grief; the pauses convey a sense of a speaker struggling to find the right words. The poem's few enjambments thus break the poem's meditative mood, its slow, ponderous grief—and introduce a sense of strain and difficulty, as the speaker tries to figure out how to respond to his son's death.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "why / Will"
- **Lines 9-10:** "lie / Ben"
- **Lines 11-12:** "such, / As"

CAESURA

Caesuras appear frequently throughout "On My First Son." They generally support the work of other poetic devices—especially the poem's use of enjambment and rhetorical questions.

For example, note the caesura that splits line 5 in an awkward

and unexpected place:

> O, could I lose all father now! For why
> Will man lament the state he should envy?

The rhetorical question in lines 5-6 already feels like an intrusive and unwelcome thought—as though an external sense of religious piety has invaded Jonson's grief. That intrusiveness is strongly underlined by the enjambment in line 5 (the poem's first enjambment) and it is further strengthened by the caesura in line 5. The exclamation point falls almost at the end of the line—between the fourth and fifth metrical feet. That's an unusual and disruptive place for a caesura to fall in a line of iambic pentameter. (It's much more normal to find them between the second and third or the third and fourth feet.) As a result, the rhetorical question feels even more like an interruption—something that disturbs the speaker's grief rather than soothing it.

Similarly, line 9 contains three caesuras in close succession:

> Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lie

These caesuras interrupt the flow and rhythm of the line. Poets writing in iambic pentameter generally avoid placing caesuras in the middle of metrical feet: the meter flows more smoothly if the caesuras fall *between* metrical feet. As a master of meter, Jonson surely was aware of this—but, in line 9, the caesura between "and" and "ask'd" breaks up a poetic foot. The result is a sense of confusion and disruption in the line. It feels like Jonson is struggling not only to think of an appropriate epitaph for his son, but also struggling simply to admit that such an epitaph is needed—that his son is really dead. The poem's caesuras thus work to reinforce some of the poem's other devices, amplifying the poem's sense of powerful grief and disorientation.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ", " ", "
- **Line 2:** ", "
- **Line 3:** ", "
- **Line 4:** ", "
- **Line 5:** "! "
- **Line 8:** ", " ", "
- **Line 9:** ", " ", " ", "
- **Line 11:** ", " ", "

ALLITERATION

In "On My First Son," Jonson pays tribute to his dead son by writing him a highly polished and sophisticated poem. That sense of refinement and elegance comes from several sources, and alliteration is one of the primary tools that Jonson uses to achieve it.

The poem uses alliteration throughout, often with multiple alliterations in the same line, as in the poem's final line:

> As what he loves may never like too much.

The alternating /l/ and /m/ sounds give the line a lilting, elegant sound. At the same time, they undermine the dramatic, even hyperbolic, vow that the speaker makes. The alliteration binds together "loves" and "like"—even though the speaker is drawing a contrast between "love" and "like." This alliteration suggests that the speaker's vow is hopeless: that it is impossible to separate the two feelings, to diminish the attachment the speaker feels to the earthly—and mortal—things he loves.

Elsewhere, though, the poem uses alliteration to reinforce its argument, as in lines 1-2, with their alliteration between "hand" and "hope":

> Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
> My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.

The alliterative /h/ sound links together "hand" and "hope"—and suggests the reason why Jonson loved his son so much, treating him as his "right hand" or his favorite: he loved him, at least in part, because of the hopes he had for him. In other words, he expected that he would achieve great things and live a long and successful life. The alliterative /th/ sounds of "thou" and "thee" in the same lines also highlights the lost son—to whom Jonson is speaking—as the unavoidable focus of the poem.

Running through the poem, alliteration thus shapes the poem's mood and tone, giving it a refined and polished feel. And, at the same time, it often works to subtly support the speaker's arguments—and sometimes to undermine his dramatic pronouncements about his own grief.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "thou," "hand"
- **Line 2:** "sin," "much," "hope," "thee," "lov'd"
- **Line 3:** "Seven," "thou," "lent," "me," "thee"
- **Line 4:** "thy," "fate"
- **Line 5:** "lose," "father," "For," "why"
- **Line 6:** "Will," "lament," "state"
- **Line 7:** "so," "soon," "'scap'd"
- **Line 9:** "soft," "peace," "and," "ask'd," "say," "here"
- **Line 10:** "Ben," "his," "best," "piece," "poetry"
- **Line 11:** "whose," "sake," "henceforth," "his," "such"
- **Line 12:** "he," "loves," "may," "like," "much"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout "On My First Son." Though it is not as ubiquitous as alliteration or consonance, it does play an important role in shaping the reader's experience of the poem.

Jonson expresses his grief in a refined and elegant poem; assonance helps establish that elegance and refinement. It also underlines some of the key ideas and arguments that Jonson expresses over the course of the poem.

For example, there's an assonant /a/ sound in lines 6 and 7 (quoted with the end of line 5 for context):

> ... For why
> Will man lament the state he should envy?
> To have so soon 'scap'd world's flesh and rage,

In these lines, Jonson considers a traditional religious consolation: his son has escaped the trials and tribulations of human life; he lives in Heaven now, in eternal bliss. This a seductive way of thinking, designed to help Jonson get over his grief—and the assonant /a/ sound helps it achieve this seductive power. It links together "state" and "'scap'd"—suggesting that his son owes his blissful state entirely to his escape from earthly life. And it also reminds Jonson of the difficulties his son has escaped from—the "rage" of the "world." Ultimately, Jonson rejects this idea—or at least rejects the possibility that believing it might lessen his grief. But the assonance that runs through these lines suggests the capacity this idea *should* have to help him get through this tragedy.

Lines 9-10 provide an even more dramatic instance of this same tension between comfort and despair:

> Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lie
> Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.

These lines contain four separate repeating vowel sounds, mostly soft ones like /e/ and /o/, and it's no coincidence that the assonance here is more dense than anywhere else in the poem: this is where Jonson composes a deeply felt epitaph for his son. Like the above religious consolation, these lines seem like they should offer Jonson some comfort, and the gentle assonance makes the lines feel soothing. But again, the next lines make it clear that Jonson is *not* soothed—he ends the poem by vowing never to love anyone deeply again. Even the most beautiful lines of poetry, it seems, cannot do anything to resolve Jonson's grief.

Moments like these demonstrate the sophisticated dual role that assonance plays in "On My First Son." Even as it helps transform this document of despair and grief into a powerful and elegant poem, it also underlines the arguments and problems Jonson struggles with as he grieves.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "child," "my," "right," "joy"
- **Line 2:** "thee," "boy"
- **Line 3:** "Seven," "years," "lent," "me," "thee," "pay"
- **Line 4:** "by thy," "day"
- **Line 5:** "O," "For," "why"
- **Line 6:** "state," "envy"
- **Line 7:** "so," "'scap'd," "flesh's," "rage"
- **Line 8:** "no," "yet," "age"
- **Line 9:** "Rest," "soft," "peace," "and, ask'd," "here," "doth," "lie"
- **Line 10:** " Ben," "Jonson," "best," "piece," "poetry"
- **Line 11:** "For," "sake," "henceforth," "such"
- **Line 12:** "may," "much"

CONSONANCE

Consonance appears at least once in every line of "On My First Son," often in the form of elegant alliterations. These alliterations help make the poem—with all its despair and grief—into an elegant tribute to a deceased child. But even as the poem's use of consonance and alliteration help make it feel highly literary and refined, they also convey the bitterness and despair the speaker feels.

For example, listen to the sharp and tough /t/ sounds in line 4:

> Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.

In line 3, Jonson compared his son to a loan—a loan that "fate" has now come to collect (or, in the vocabulary that Jonson uses, to "exact"). His frustration with this loan is expressed by the /t/ sounds that run through the line: it sounds like he's spitting it out through clenched teeth, so angry that he's barely able to get the words out. That's particularly true of the word "just" at the end of the line. Literally, the word means the agreed-on day in the terms of the loan. But the word's other sense—meaning equitable or fair—haunts the line, because of course, Jonson doesn't think anything about his son's death is fair or just. The bitterness and irony of the word is amplified and intensified by the sharp /t/ sound at its end.

Elsewhere, consonance works to subtly underline and reinforce the speaker's questions and arguments. For example, note the /m/ and /l/ sounds in line 6:

> Will man lament the state he should envy?

The repeated sounds link together the words "will," "man," and "lament"—suggesting that it's simply part of man's purpose to "lament." In other words, the consonance suggests an implicit answer to Jonson's rhetorical question: yes, man *will* lament—it is an unavoidable part of being human. Consonance thus plays a variety of roles in "On My First Son": it helps make the poem feel elegant and refined; it expresses the speaker's bitterness; and it reinforces his arguments and questions.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Farewell," "thou," "right," "hand"
- **Line 2:** "sin," "much," "hope," "thee," "lov'd"
- **Line 3:** "Seven," "years," "thou," "wert," "lent," "me," "thee"
- **Line 4:** "Exacted," "thy," "fate," "just"
- **Line 5:** "could," "lose," "all," "father," "For," "why"
- **Line 6:** "Will," "man," "lament," "state," "envy"
- **Line 7:** "have," "so," "soon," "'scap'd," "world's," "flesh's"
- **Line 8:** "misery"
- **Line 9:** "soft," "peace," "ask'd," "say," "here"
- **Line 10:** "Ben," "Jonson," "his," "best," "piece," "poetry"
- **Line 11:** "whose," "sake," "henceforth," "his," "such"
- **Line 12:** "he," "loves," "may," "like," "much"

METAPHOR

Ben Jonson uses metaphor throughout "On My First Son" to express the deep love that he felt for his son—and his deep grief at his tragic and untimely death.

For example, in the poem's first line, he calls his son the "child of my right hand"—a metaphor which indicates that his "first son" was also his favorite child, or at least the one he relied on for strength and security. Then in lines 3-4, he compares his son's life to a loan:

> Seven years thou'wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
> Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.

In other words, Jonson is saying that he never really possessed his son. He was just a loan—and the time has come for "fate" to collect its loan. The metaphor thus expresses the speaker's sense of life's fundamental frailty: human beings don't really belong on Earth, and their lives are not their own. Instead, they are at the mercy of an indifferent and cruel fate.

Jonson uses metaphor again in line 7 when he pauses to consider some of the consolations offered to grieving parents. Paraphrasing a traditional religious sentiment, he considers the possibility that his son's death is, metaphorically, an escape from the world and its burdens. The metaphor offers the possibility that his son's death is not such a bad thing after all, but however seductive this possibility may be, Jonson rejects it: his grief is too powerful to succumb to such an argument, even when it's framed as a beautiful metaphor.

Finally, when he imagines an epitaph for his son, Jonson uses a powerful and evocative metaphor:

> Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lie
> Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.

Here, Jonson compares his son to a literary text, specifically a piece of poetry—and in doing so, he also implicitly compares fatherhood to authorship. Fathering a child, these lines suggests, is like writing a poem. This is an elegant and moving compliment coming from someone like Jonson—who had an almost comically inflated authorial ego. And it also suggests that, in his son's absence, poetry itself will be diminished: the best piece of poetry is forever lost.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-1:** "t / hou child of my right hand"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Seven years thou'wert lent to me, and I thee pay, / Exacted by thy fate, on the just day"
- **Lines 7-8:** "To have so soon 'scap'd world's and flesh's rage, / And, if no other misery, yet age"
- **Lines 9-10:** "say here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry"

APOSTROPHE

At points in "On My First Son," Ben Jonson directly addresses his dead son, discussing his own grief and disappointment or offering him instructions. These moments of direct address are instances of the poetic device apostrophe. In the context of an elegy—a poem of mourning—the use of apostrophe suggests that Jonson has not fully accepted his son's death. Instead of treating his son as a dead person, he continues to talk with his son, to negotiate with him and instruct him as though he were a living person.

The speaker uses apostrophe throughout the poem's first four lines, speaking directly to his son. These lines sometimes feel resigned—like the poem's first line:

> Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;

Though the speaker is talking to his son here, he's doing so in order to say goodbye. But in the next line he switches things up:

> My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.

The second line makes it clear that instead of just saying goodbye, Jonson is reflecting on their relationship, on the mistakes he made—or thinks he made—as a father. And he's doing so in dialogue with his son, talking to him directly about their relationship. As a result, it feels like the speaker hasn't quite let go, like he still has important things he wants to say to his son.

That sense is strengthened when apostrophe reappears in lines 9-10, where the speaker offers his son explicit instructions:

> Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lie
> Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.

Instead of simply saying something like, "My son's epitaph will be..." Jonson imagines his son continuing to talk with living

people. The apostrophe here thus subtly suggests that—in Jonson's own mind—his son is still alive. As it appears and disappears in the poem, apostrophe conveys the ongoing difficulty Jonson experiences in accepting his grief and letting his son go.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy; / My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy. / Seven years thou'wert lent to me, and I thee pay, / Exacted by thy fate, on the just day"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

There are two rhetorical questions in "On My First Son." They appear back to back in lines 5-8, when Jonson wonders whether it makes sense to be sad about his son's death when his son is presumably in a better place now.

After four slow, contemplative lines, in which a heartbroken Jonson meditates in stark and moving terms on the loss of his son, the rhetorical questions in lines 5-8 feel like sudden and disruptive interruptions. (That sense of disruption is enhanced by the way the poem uses enjambment and caesura here.) The rhetorical questions ask him to consider an alternate possibility: that his son's death might have been a good thing. After all, according to a Christian worldview, one should "envy" the dead. They are no longer subject to the temptations, worries, and pains that beset human life; they are safe and happy in heaven.

These are traditional religious consolations—the kind of thing a minister or a friend might say to a grieving parent to help assuage their grief. And they are also traditional components of an elegy; elegies generally move—or try to move—from grief to consolation. Even Jonson himself uses very similar ideas to console himself in his poem "On My First Daughter." But the traditional consolations don't seem to work here; Jonson's loss is too sharp, too severe, and so he continues grieving even after considering them. The rhetorical questions thus don't feel authentic—they don't feel like something the speaker really believes. Instead, they express a traditional and pious viewpoint that he feels obliged to acknowledge, even though it fails to comfort him.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "For why / Will man lament the state he should envy?"
- **Lines 7-8:** "To have so soon 'scap'd world's and flesh's rage, / And, if no other misery, yet age?"

VOCABULARY

Thou (Line 1, Line 3) - An obsolete way of saying "you." In its second appearance in the poem, it's part of the contraction "thou'wert." The apostrophe indicates that it should be pronounced as one syllable, and the compound word means "you were."

Thee (Line 2, Line 3) - *Thee* means "you." An informal—and now obsolete—way of addressing someone.

Wert (Line 3) - Were.

Exacted (Line 4) - Demanded. Fate is collecting on its loan—taking back the son it lent to Jonson.

Thy (Line 4) - *Thy* is an archaic way of saying "your."

Just Day (Line 4) - The day agreed upon in the terms of the loan the speaker describes in line 3.

All Father (Line 5) - All claims to being a father. The speaker wants to renounce fatherhood entirely, so that he doesn't have to endure another loss.

State (Line 6) - Condition, state of being.

'Scap'd (Line 7) - Escaped.

Rage (Line 7) - Painful demands, in this case the problems and worries of human life on earth.

Misery (Line 8) - Suffering, sorrow.

Age (Line 8) - Old age.

Ask'd (Line 9) - Asked, questioned.

Doth (Line 9) - A formal way of saying "does." In this context, "doth lie" simply means "lies."

Be Such (Line 11) - Come down to, amount to.

What (Line 12) - Whatever or whoever.

Like (Line 12) - Enjoy, take pleasure in.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"On My First Son" is an elegy—a poem of mourning. It is 12 lines long and is just one stanza (though this stanza can be broken down into six couplets). Elegies don't have a set form, like the sonnet or the villanelle. They can take many forms. For his elegy, Ben Jonson chose heroic couplets, a dignified and elevated form that is often used in poems about the most serious and prestigious themes. Usually, heroic couplets are reserved for poems about heroic quests, political intrigue, or philosophical disputes. By using heroic couplets for a poem about a private matter—his personal grief over the death of his son—Jonson suggests that his grief is as important, as monumental, as any of these serious, elevated subjects.

Although elegies don't have a set form, they do tend to follow a narrative pattern. Elegies start with grief: their speakers have lost someone or something important. That loss feels devastating, irreparable. But elegies usually move toward consolation: the speaker finds some form of comfort that helps them move on from their grief. Jonson's poem, however, doesn't entirely follow this pattern. Like most elegies, it begins with a speaker in despair, so deep in grief that he "could…lose all father now!" That is, he's so sad that he doesn't even want to be a father anymore. At the same time, he does recognize that his son's early death—while tragic—has spared the son much pain and suffering on earth. Instead of enduring "world's and flesh's rage," his son can "rest in soft peace." The question, however, is whether the speaker finds any consolation in this vision of his son in a Christian heaven.

There are good reasons to believe that he doesn't. Instead of celebrating his son's blissful afterlife, he still feels miserable after contemplating it—he even vows that whatever he "loves" going forward he will "never like too much." In other words, he won't take too much pleasure in the people he loves from now on. The speaker's bond with his son is so tight, his love so intense, that the traditional consolations don't help in his grief; even imagining his son in heaven isn't enough. The poem thus breaks some of the traditions of the elegy. Instead of finding consolation, the speaker seems to reject it, overwhelmed by both grief and love for his lost son.

METER

"On My First Son" is written in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter has a da DUM rhythm, with five feet per line. The reader can hear this steady rhythm in the poem's second line:

My sin | was too | much hope | of thee, | lov'd boy.

Iambic pentameter is an important and distinguished meter in English poetry. At the time Jonson was writing, in the early 17th century, it was everywhere: in the plays that he and his friends (like William Shakespeare) were writing, and in the sonnets and love poems of aristocratic poets like Sir Philip Sidney. It was close to being the default meter for poems being written in this period. And Jonson was a master of iambic pentameter: he prided himself on his capacity to control and manipulate it.

The meter of "On my First Son" is thus, unsurprisingly, generally smooth and controlled. Many of its lines are in perfect iambic pentameter. And many of the lines that do have metrical substitutions use predictable and commonly accepted substitutions. For example, line 9 starts with a trochee (stressed-unstressed):

Rest in | soft peace, | and, ask'd, | say here | doth lie

A trochee in the first foot of a line of iambic pentameter is fairly ordinary and expected. It's one of the substitutions that poets use regularly to keep their poems from getting too steady and predictable in their rhythms. These smooth lines of iambic pentameter form a steady structure, something for the speaker to cling to as he process his grief for his dead son.

That said, there are a few places in the poem where the meter breaks down a little bit, as in the metrically ambiguous third line of the poem:

Seven years thou'wert lent to me, and I thee pay,

The reader could scan this in a couple of different ways. Arguably, the most logical thing to do is to treat the first three syllables of the line as a single, three-syllable foot, "Seven years"—an anapest (though it is certainly also possible to scan this first section as "Seven years"). After that, the line falls into iambs. An anapest in the first foot of an iambic line is similar, rhythmically, to an iamb (it just takes an extra syllable to get to the stress), and it's similarly acceptable as a metrical substitution. But the rhythm of the line is not strong; it relies on an awkward elision (the reader is somehow supposed to pronounce "thou'wert" as one syllable) and takes a while before it falls convincingly into iambs. The poem's confidence seems shaken here—for the speaker, it seems, just imagining his son as a loan is so disconcerting that it knocks the whole poem off its rhythm.

RHYME SCHEME

"On My First Son" is written in rhyming couplets. Its rhyme scheme is thus:

AABBCCDDEEFF

Its rhymes tend to be simple, straightforward, and strong. There are only two rhyme words that are more than one syllable ("envy" in line 6 and "poetry" in line 10), and all of the poem's rhymes are perfect rhymes. (Some of them may sound like slant rhymes to a modern ear—like the rhyme between "why" and "envy" in lines 5-6—but that's because English pronunciation has shifted since Jonson's day; he and his early readers would have heard the rhymes as perfect rhymes.) Even as the speaker confronts serious, debilitating grief, the poem's rhymes remain strong.

In fact, the poem's use of rhyme tells us something about the way that the speaker grieves the death of his son. The poem is in heroic couplets—rhyming lines of iambic pentameter. This is a form generally reserved for dignified topics like heroic battles, political disputes, or philosophical and religious questions—not personal matters and private griefs. But Jonson uses heroic couplets here, even though the poem is personal and private. In doing so, he makes an implicit argument: his son's death is as monumental, as important, as any historical battle or theological question. The speaker uses strong, direct

rhymes—despite the overpowering grief he feels—as a way of insisting on the dignity of his son's life and the importance of his death.

SPEAKER

"On My First Son" is an autobiographical poem. Its speaker is the poet, Ben Jonson. Indeed, he even names himself in the poem. The poem addresses a real event in Ben Jonson's life: in 1603, his seven-year-old son died of the plague. (Just before his son's death, Jonson reportedly had a prophetic dream in which his son appeared before him with a bloody cross cut into his forehead.)

The poem wrestles with the grief and despair that Jonson felt after his son's death. Indeed, the poem is unusual for Jonson. Often a satirical, biting, and witty poet, he wrestles here with some of the most difficult and complex questions that any parent—indeed, any person—has to face: he wonders why should he love anyone or anything, since everyone will die and everything will pass away. At the end of the poem, Jonson seems to conclude that the risk isn't worth it. Not even imagining his son in heaven comforts him, and so he vows in the poem's final line not to get too attached to anything he loves from here on out.

SETTING

"On My First Son" is an autobiographical poem: it recounts the grief and despair that consumed the poet, Ben Jonson, after his seven-year-old son died of the plague in 1603. The poem is thus set in 17th-century England, where (and when) Jonson lived. However, the poem makes no specific references to the country or the period. (For instance, it was likely written the same year that Queen Elizabeth, the long-time ruler of England, died—but it says nothing about her or her death). Instead, when it references the real world it does so in vague, general terms. For instance, in line 7, the speaker describes the "world's and flesh's rage." So while he acknowledges the existence of the world—with its suffering and sorrow—he doesn't describe with any specificity or detail. Instead, the true setting of the poem is the inner life of Ben Jonson himself: it is a poem that takes place inside his mind and heart, in the dark parts of himself where he wrestles—unsuccessfully—with his intense grief and despair after his son's death.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ben Jonson wrote "On My First Son" during one of the most dazzling periods in the history of English literature. The last decades of the 16th century are sometimes called the Golden Age of English literature, with the creation of major poems and plays by William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Christopher Marlowe, and Jonson himself. These poets did a lot to set the agenda for English poetry. For instance, they developed and perfected iambic pentameter—which quickly became the most prestigious and the most widely used meter in the English language.

In "On My First Son," Jonson draws on the innovations of his era. Jonson became a master of iambic pentameter, building on the example of poets like Sidney and Spenser. That mastery is frequently on display in "On My First Son." His iambic pentameter lines rhyme with each other, forming heroic couplets. In the way that he uses heroic couplets, however, Jonson breaks with the poets who came before (and after) him. The break is subtle but important to understanding the poem. Where other poets generally reserve heroic couplets for the most dignified problems and themes—bravery and battle, religious questions, philosophical disputes—Jonson uses the form to discuss a private matter: his personal grief over the death of his son. In doing so, Jonson quietly insists that his son's death is as important as any battle or political dispute—that his life had the dignity of any king or hero.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"On My First Son" was written shortly after Ben Jonson's seven-year-old son died of the plague in 1603. It reflects one of the sad and difficult facts about life in pre-modern England. In the absence of effective medicine, 12% of all children died by the end of their first year (and more than a third of all women died in childbirth). Children had roughly a 50/50 chance of reaching the age of ten—and 36% of children died before the age of six. By modern standards, these numbers are astonishing. But for families in Renaissance England, when Ben Jonson wrote, these tragedies were part of everyday life; almost every family would lose a child. Many families lost most or all of their children, and indeed, Jonson's first child, a daughter named Mary, died as an infant in 1593. Jonson memorialized her in his elegy "On My First Daughter."

For parents like Jonson, each of these deaths was a wrenching tragedy—a blow so severe it could draw them into despair. That despair is evident in "On my First Son"; indeed, the speaker seems consumed by grief—so completely submerged in it that he has lost his connection with the world around him, including the broader historical context that surrounds the poem and his son's death.

1603, the year that Jonson's son died, was an eventful year in English political life. In March of that year, Queen Elizabeth I—the country's powerful, revered, and long-time queen—died. Elizabeth never married; her image as a virgin queen, betrothed to her country, was key to maintaining her power and control in a deeply patriarchal, male-dominated society. But she died

without an heir—and her distant relative, James VI of Scotland, took the throne after her death, starting the Jacobean period in English history. This became a period of considerable turmoil, anxiety, and transformation in English society. For a poet like Jonson—who aligned himself closely with the aristocracy, using them to secure his own social and professional advancement—it would've been an important moment: a time to find new alliances and adjust to the shift in power and personality at the head of the English state. The complete absence of these concerns from "On My First Son" suggests just how deep and consuming Jonson's grief was.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More About Ben Jonson — A detailed biography of Ben Jonson from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ben-jonson)
- Ben Jonson at the British Library — A collection of resources on Ben Jonson's life and work from the holdings of the British Library, including facsimiles of early printings and manuscripts. (https://www.bl.uk/people/ben-jonson)
- "On My First Son" Read Aloud — Thomas Whichello recites aloud Ben Jonson's "On My First Son." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZfJsvxjku4)
- Carol Rumens on Ben Jonson — At the Guardian newspaper, Carol Rumens discusses Ben Jonson's life and career, including "On My First Son." (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/jun/16/poemoftheweek43)
- Health in England in the 16th-18th Centuries — Lynda Payne describes in detail the medical challenges that faced England during Ben Jonson's lifetime—and the resulting high rate of child mortality. (http://chnm.gmu.edu/cyh/teaching-modules/166)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER BEN JONSON POEMS

- On My First Daughter

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