Song: Go and catch a falling star

📝 POEM TEXT

1   Go and catch a falling star,
2   Get with child a mandrake root,
3   Tell me where all past years are,
4   Or who cleft the devil's foot,
5   Teach me to hear mermaids singing,
6   Or to keep off envy's stinging,
7   And find
8   What wind
9   Serves to advance an honest mind.

10   If thou be'st born to strange sights,
11   Things invisible to see,
12   Ride ten thousand days and nights,
13   Till age snow white hairs on thee,
14   Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me,
15   All strange wonders that befell thee,
16   And swear,
17   No where
18   Lives a woman true, and fair.

19   If thou find'st one, let me know,
20   Such a pilgrimage were sweet;
21   Yet do not, I would not go,
22   Though at next door we might meet;
23   Though she were true, when you met her,
24   And last, till you write your letter,
25   Yet she
26   Will be
27   False, ere I come, to two, or three.

📄 SUMMARY

The speaker directs a listener to do a number of impossible things: to catch a falling star, to impregnate a mandrake root, to find what happens to time that has passed, to discover who divided the devil's hoof into two parts, to teach him to hear the songs of mermaids or to avoid ever feeling envy, and, finally, to discover the favorable wind that might push a truthful and faithful person onward.

If the listener was born with power to see mysterious and invisible things, the speaker continues, then he should go on an impossibly long quest of ten thousand days, until he has become an old man and his hair has gone white. When he comes back from this journey, he'll have all kinds of stories about the magical things he saw, but he'll swear that among them all, he never saw a woman who was both faithful and beautiful.

If the listener does find such a woman, he should tell the speaker: it would be wonderful to journey to meet her. But no: the speaker changes his mind. He wouldn't go to meet this imaginary woman even if she lived next door. Because even if she were faithful when the listener met her, and stayed faithful long enough for the listener to write the letter describing her to the speaker, she'd inevitably have cheated on two or three lovers by the time the speaker got to her.

◉ THEMES

WOMEN'S INFIDELITY

The poem explores a traditional (and misogynistic) literary theme of Donne's era: women's romantic infidelity. Using vivid images of magic and mystery, the speaker insists that a faithful woman is so hard to find, she might as well be the stuff of legends!

The speaker begins by commanding his listener to perform a series of impossible tasks, with the implication being that female honesty (or faithfulness) is in the same realm of impossibility. Some of the speaker's tasks sound like they're right out of a fairy tale: impregnating a mandrake root (a tuber whose roots vaguely resemble a human and are often granted magical qualities in folklore), listening to mermaids, and investigating the devil's cloven foot. These images all have transgressive and/or sexual connotations: mermaids were meant to lure sailors to their deaths, impregnating a root would take black magic, and the devil's foot—well, it belongs to the deceitful devil.

The other tasks the speaker commands are more abstract and wistful. Seeking "past years" suggests a longing for lost time, while preventing "envy's stinging" makes the reader suspect that the speaker might have had some painful romantic disappointments lurking in those vanished years. The final lines, asking the listener to "find / What wind / Serves to advance an honest mind" punches the point home: rewards for the faithful are as hard to find as any legendary creature.

Expanding on this idea, the speaker says that even if his listener spent an entire *lifetime* searching for a faithful woman, he wouldn't find her. He imagines the listener on a visionary quest, creating a sense that the impossibilities of the first stanza *might*

just be found somewhere. The speaker also imagines his listener has the power to see "strange sights": a magical gift that might allow him to discover the impossibilities of the first stanza. But even if such a seer were to spend his whole life looking, he'd never find "a woman true, and fair."

Here, the magical things of the first stanza are presented as just within the realm of possibility: a gifted person *might* be able to find them. However, he'd still never be able to find a faithful woman. This makes women's fidelity even more legendary than a mermaid!

The speaker concludes by imagining that, even if his listener *did* find a faithful woman, that woman's faithfulness would never last. The speaker wouldn't bother going to see this hypothetical woman even if she were "next door," because while she might have been faithful when the friend met her, she'd be unfaithful before the speaker could reach her. The final stanza thus moves from the magical uncertainty of the earlier part of the poem—when, after all, there's some chance that one might see the invisible—to an earthly cynicism. The wistful romance of pilgrimages, falling stars, and magical quests is broken by the speaker's grim belief: no one will *ever* find a woman "true, and fair."

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> - Lines 1-27

🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

> *Go and catch a falling star,*
>   *Get with child a mandrake root,*
> *Tell me where all past years are,*
>   *Or who cleft the devil's foot,*

The poem begins with a strange command: "Go and catch a falling star." This is only the first of a list of impossibilities that the speaker demands of his listener.

The enchanted world the speaker begins to evoke in these first four lines is one that's both melancholy and a little sinister. To catch a falling star is plainly impossible, but the image is beautiful. Similarly, seeking "all past years" is a fool's errand, but one whose success would be deeply rewarding: think of all the lost things and lost people that one might find in those years! There's a tension in these images between longing and inevitable disappointment. The imagination can conjure how wonderful it would be to catch a star or reclaim the past, but the rational mind knows it's never going to happen.

Alongside these sad and lovely images, though, the speaker makes some rather less wistful demands. To "get with child a mandrake root"—in other words, to impregnate a creepy

humanoid tuber—is less a fantasy, more a body-horror nightmare. This is a command to get involved in sexual black magic with a plant noted for its dangerous hallucinogenic properties. (See the Symbols section for more on mandrakes.) It also introduces a note of sexual menace that's going to be important later on in the poem. The [juxtaposition](#) between this image and the falling star that precedes it is jarring.

Similarly, discovering "who cleft the devil's foot" sounds like a task with less obvious rewards; if you're researching that foot, you're not only getting pretty close to a decided enemy of humankind, you're also prying into his business, and perhaps seeking knowledge that humans aren't allowed. But the image of the devil's foot as "cleft"—in other words, like a goat's hoof—lightens the image up a bit. Rather than a terrifying and powerful adversary, this goat-footed devil seems more like the cartoonish figure of folklore: a sinister trickster, certainly, but one you might be able to engage in a contest. The tone of this devil-seeking stays light and wry.

However, the introduction of the devil also inflects the images that come before it. The "falling star" might itself have a devilish quality—a fallen star is not unlike a fallen angel, as the devil was said to be. And seeking "all past years" is the sort of thing one might seek some devilish assistance with—let alone impregnating a strange root-creature.

In short: these first four lines create a vivid picture of a world full not just of impossible tasks, but impossible *longings*. And that world brims with sexual deviance, ugly conflict, beautiful things turning bad, and lost things that can never be recaptured.

Importantly, it does all this in the form of an [apostrophe](#). The speaker is commanding his listener to go out and perform these tasks, and he does so in no uncertain terms, using an insistent [trochaic](#) meter (meaning that the feet follow a **stressed**-unstressed pattern):

> **Go** and **catch** a **fall**ing **star**

The final trochees are cut short, thus beginning and ending the line on a **stressed** beat. This even, musical, but unrelenting beat helps to set the tone. This poem will be both forceful and light, imaginative and resigned, beautiful and ugly.

LINES 5-6

> *Teach me to hear mermaids singing,*
> *Or to keep off envy's stinging,*

In lines 5 and 6, the poem's meter softens by allowing for the final unstressed syllables expected of [trochaic](#) meter, whereas before there were punchy monosyllabic words at the end of lines:

> **Teach** me to **hear** mer**maids** **sing**ing,
> **Or** to **keep** off **en**vy's **sting**ing

This change occurs alongside another surprising juxtaposition, like that of the desirable falling star with the disturbing mandrake root in the first two lines. The speaker continues his list of impossible tasks, but one of these tasks is not like the other. To "hear mermaids singing" seems at first blush to be much further outside the realm of possibility than to "keep off envy's stinging" (that is, to stop being jealous of other people). The surprise of these two images next to each other might lead the reader to reflect on the speaker's own state—what the speaker thinks is particularly difficult. Even if the reader thinks they might just about learn not to feel the pain of envy, the speaker clearly believes it to be impossible—and that suggests he's suffered from it quite a bit over the course of his life.

The juxtaposition with the mermaids thus becomes even more telling. Mermaids were known as murderous seductresses who lured sailors to their deaths with their beautiful songs and their beautiful upper halves. (More on this in the Symbols section.) When dealing with mermaids, one has to fear what's under the surface. The mermaids here create an aura of sexually-charged menace that ties back into the creepy situation with the pregnant mandrake root, and also suggest that "envy's stinging," for the speaker, might have more than a little to do with sex. In other words, this is probably a person who's been burned by love, badly.

These lines also make use of parallelism, repeating the sentence structure of the two lines before them: "Do this thing / or do this thing." The thematic and structural repetitions here all contribute to a growing sense of hyperbole. The speaker is making an insistent, exaggerated pile of these impossible tasks, and the reader might begin to suspect he's got some larger point in mind—a point that very well might have to do with disillusionment, impossibility, and sexuality.

LINES 7-9

> *And find*
> *What wind*
> *Serves to advance an honest mind.*

The shape of the poem changes dramatically in the last three lines of the stanza—a pattern that will repeat throughout the poem. The poem now moves from a thumping trochaic tetrameter into iambic monometer—which just means that there is a single iamb, a foot with an unstressed-**stressed** beat pattern, per line:

> And **find**
> What **wind**

This is a forceful and unusual metrical choice, especially in combination with the strong alliteration of "**W**hat **w**ind", and it gets the reader's attention: something important is happening in these lines, some big summing-up.

And what's that summing-up about? Exactly what the earlier

lines hinted at. The last impossibility the speaker is urging his listener to take on is to figure out what kind of wind might possibly fill an honest (that is, faithful, loyal, and truthful) person's imaginary sails.

From the context of the earlier lines, the reader can be pretty sure that the "honesty" under discussion here is sexual honesty. But whose? And is it so completely impossible to get ahead as a romantically honest person? The speaker of this poem thinks so, and from the hints he's dropped in only these few lines, the reader gets the sense that he might be speaking from his own painful experience.

There's something interesting going on in the rhyme scheme here. "Wind," in sequence with "find" and "mind," demands to be pronounced with a long /i/ sound: "why-nd," not "wihnd." This wouldn't be odd to John Donne: all available evidence suggests that "wind" was always pronounced with a flat /i/ sound in 17th-century English. To the modern reader, it adds a little layer of oddity, and perhaps even helps to support the theme of trickiness: "wind" (as in the thing that keeps a kite in the air) and "wind" (as in "wind it up") are homonyms, presenting the same face but meaning different things. That sounds an awful lot like what the speaker's talking about when he worries about dishonesty and faithlessness. This isn't an effect that Donne could have predicted, but it's a good example of how languages are living (and often tricky) things.

LINES 10-13

> *If thou be'st born to strange sights,*
> *Things invisible to see,*
> *Ride ten thousand days and nights,*
> *Till age snow white hairs on thee,*

Having completed his list of half-cynical, half-romantic impossibilities, the speaker adjusts the terms of his argument. "Okay," he suggests, "let's say that you *could* do those things—that you had a special gift to see the invisible." He then sends his listener off on an imaginary quest.

This quest fits right in with the magical, dangerous landscape the speaker has created in the first stanza. It's a lifelong quest of "ten thousand days and nights" on horseback—an image straight out of a fairy tale or an Arthurian legend. The listener is told to spend his whole life on this journey, until he's old and his hair has turned "snow white." Extensive sibilance ("**s**trange **s**ights," "thing**s** invi**s**ible to **s**ee") contributes to a hushed, whispered sense of magic.

This all feels profoundly romantic, and lands on the side of the first stanza's more wistful images of seeking lost time or catching falling stars. One wouldn't devote one's whole life to this kind of quest for anything less than a truly valuable goal.

Old age here is represented, in a commonplace metaphorical way, as the winter of life through the speaker's use of the word "snow" to describe how hair goes gray. This links back in with

the thought of lost time: this process of seeking that the speaker commands can eat up a life's warmer seasons.

The rhyme scheme here is the same as that in the first stanza so far, with an ABAB pattern. The rhymes are clear and full, adding to the poem's musicality.

LINES 14-18

> Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me,
> All strange wonders that befell thee,
>   And swear,
>   No where
> Lives a woman true, and fair.

Now, in the middle of his poem, the speaker comes to his point. He's warmed the reader up with suggestive images of sexuality and deceit; he's primed the reader with the idea of a magical quest in a world of impossibilities; he's set a metrical pattern that moves from force to gentleness to more force. And now he makes his blunt case: even if his listener had magical powers, and spent all the best years of his life searching, he'd never find a woman who was "true, and fair"—both beautiful and faithful.

Mixing the idealism of questing and star-seeking with emphatic cynicism (the listener won't just mention he didn't happen to find a faithful woman on his quest, he'll "swear, / No where" is such a woman to be found), the speaker creates a complex emotional landscape. His conviction that there's not a single faithful woman in the world is underpinned by fears so deep they take on magical form as mandrakes and mermaids. And this conviction also seems to come from a place of hurt; the speaker likely feels that he himself has lost time and wasted years on someone who broke his heart. Yet all this is wrapped up in a witty, argumentative, and strangely light tone: he's making an argument that has an edge of dark and hyperbolic comedy.

The shape of the poem helps to support this complex mixture of moods, as the speaker again switches into punchy two-syllable lines that elongate the end of the stanza with their enjambment. The speaker is building suspense and anticipation, dragging out the reveal of what all this journeying has been for.

Notice, as well, what happens with the punctuation in line 18:

> Lives a woman **true, and fair.**

That's an awfully cynical and loutish comma: maybe, just maybe, it suggests, there's a true woman somewhere, but if there is, she's definitely not pretty ("fair"). This is a wall of witty defense against fears and injuries—an effort, perhaps, to "keep off envy's stinging."

LINES 19-20

> If thou find'st one, let me know,
>   Such a pilgrimage were sweet;

In the third stanza, the speaker again revises the terms of his argument. Here he's being something of a rhetorician (that is, a trained argument-maker), bringing up the counterpoints to his points the way you might learn to when you're writing an essay. So far he's moved from "you can't do these impossible things" to "even if you *could* do these impossible things, you'd never be able to find a faithful woman." In this last stanza, he begins, "okay, let's say you *did* find this faithful woman."

In keeping with the images of devoted questing in the second stanza, he imagines that if his listener found this hypothetical woman, he'd want to make a "pilgrimage" to see her. A pilgrimage, a sacred devotional journey to see the shrine of a saint, is a pretty strong word to apply here, and fits back into the speaker's wistful idealism. But it also contributes to the note of humor. The juxtaposition between saintliness and a person who is, after all, just a regular everyday woman, gives these lines a strong ironic flavor.

There's also a hint of lasciviousness in the speaker's use of the word "sweet." Sweetness is of course a common metaphor for general goodness, niceness, prettiness, and so on. But it's a metaphor taken from *taste*: a very intimate and physical sense. The end of a devout pilgrimage to see this imaginary woman might similarly be more intimate than reverently respectful. The sibilant alliteration of "such" and "sweet" adds a subtly lustful hiss to the line.

LINES 21-22

> Yet do not, I would not go,
>   Though at next door we might meet;

The speaker interrupts his own half-holy, half-sexy imagining of heading out on a pilgrimage to an imagined faithful woman, bringing things back down to earth with a bump. "Never mind, don't tell me," he says, "because even if you *did* find this woman I wouldn't bother to seek her out."

Meanwhile, the irony of treating a regular woman like a saint is here underlined by the ordinariness of going on a pilgrimage all the way to... "next door." The common modern-day idea of the "girl next door" might help the reader to understand the absurdity here. Imagining that the speaker wouldn't even bother to put his shoes on to go and meet the reputedly faithful woman gives the reader a strong sense of his cynical disgust.

There's another instance of clear alliteration here in line 22:

> Though at next door we **m**ight **m**eet;

"Might meet" repeats not only the initial /m/ sounds, but has consonance on the ending /t/ sounds: "might" and "meet" match closely. Perhaps there's a hint of the speaker's crushed idealism in this meeting: two similar-but-different things fitting nicely together is what one might *hope* for in the romantic relationship one went out seeking.

LINES 23-27

Though she were true, when you met her,
And last, till you write your letter,
  Yet she
  Will be
False, ere I come, to two, or three.

It's time now for the speaker to deliver his death-blow to the very idea of a faithful woman. The speaker uses his accustomed metrical wind-up, with a comparatively gentle [couplet](#) (lines 23-24) setting up the punchy conclusion. His tone is comical: "even if this hypothetical lady were faithful when you met her," he says, "she'd have cheated on two or three lovers before I'd even reached her."

This is an obviously [hyperbolic](#) point: two or three cheatings in the time it takes to get next door would be an awfully busy afternoon for anyone. These lines again make subtly witty use of punctuation humor. The third comma in line 27 suggests the speaker having a second thought: having already made an exaggerated claim, he throws yet another betrayed lover onto the imaginary woman's tally:

> False, ere I come, to two, or three

The [consonance](#) of sharp /t/ sounds throughout these final lines adds to the biting, dismissive tone as well:

> Though she were **t**rue, when you me**t** her,
> And las**t**, **t**ill you wri**t**e your le**tt**er,
> …
> False, ere I come, **t**o **t**wo, or three.

The poem's bitterly humorous climax gets its sense of finality from a sense of devastated hopes. All through the poem, the speaker has made more and more concessions: maybe you can see the invisible; maybe you could find a faithful woman. But even if faithfulness existed for a moment, he finally concludes with a wild gesture, can never last.

This ties back into the ideas of lost time and wasted years the speaker has hinted at in the earlier stanzas. This poem is using a commonplace misogynistic trope common in Donne's period. But it's engaging with that trope in a way that has as much to do with deep fears and sadnesses as it does with scorn and condescension to women. Indeed, the exaggerated dismissiveness comes across as a defense disguised as an attack.

SYMBOLS

THE FALLING STAR

The poem's famous first line prepares the reader for a lot of the ideas to come. To catch a falling star is, of course, impossible. But the effort to do so suggests the speaker's crushed dreams. The stars have long been [symbols](#) of divinity, purity, hope, wishes, faithfulness, and inspiration. (Check out Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which every book ends with the word "stars," for a powerful example of this ancient symbolism.) Once can fix wishes to a star, or navigate by it. If the star here is "falling," the speaker's wishes and hopes for a true and faithful lover are falling too—and there's absolutely no chance that he's going to be able to rescue them.

In Donne's English, "falling" also has sexual connotations suggesting that this imagined star has lost its purity.

> **Where this symbol appears in the poem:**
> - **Line 1:** "falling star"

MANDRAKE ROOT

This vivid and startling image, which might at first strike the reader as purely weird, plays right into the poem's larger argument about women's infidelity. Mandrake roots, which often grow in humanoid shapes, have a long folkloric history. They were believed to climb out of the ground and walk around at night, or to have magical powers—and in fact they do have hallucinatory properties when eaten.

To impregnate a mandrake root, then, would be to do something seriously illicit, dangerous, and tricky. The idea of a hybrid human-root baby relates to the speaker's concerns about fidelity: two things that *shouldn't* have mixed *have* mixed in order to make this strange creature. And the mandrake's associations with visions and hallucinations speaks to the poem's themes of infidelity and untrustworthiness.

The mandrake, then, works with the poem's other [symbols](#) in this stanza to reiterate the speaker's fear of deceit and his mistrust of women. The speaker lumps women in with these images of depravity, lust, and outright evil.

> **Where this symbol appears in the poem:**
> - **Line 2:** "mandrake root"

THE DEVIL'S FOOT

The devil—and more particularly, his foot—introduces an element of religious unease to the poem. The devil is the arch-deceiver, of course, a figure of

sinister trickery and dishonesty, and thus fits right in with the poem's theme of unfaithfulness. Here, one might say that being "faithless" *romantically* is linked with being *spiritually* faithless.

The devil's cleft foot, similarly, suggests a split: for instance, between what someone says and what they do. The devil was often depicted with goat legs; goats were a common symbol of sexual insatiability and lust. To walk through the world on a devil's cleft foot, then, would be to move in a way both lustful and dishonest. In the poem, the devil's cleft foot works alongside the other symbols of lust, deceit, and disappointment—the star, mandrake root, and mermaids—to hammer home the speaker's distrust of women and vision of women as faithless, immoral creatures.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "the devil's foot"

MERMAIDS

Mermaids are a traditional symbol of the attractions and dangers of sex. Thought to lure sailors to their deaths with enchanting songs, mermaids are part of the same family tree as the Sirens, who played similar tricks in classical literature.

A mermaid, like the devil's foot, is also *split*. Mermaids are dishonest not only in that their sexy singing only spells sailors' dooms, but in that their top and bottom halves don't match up: that beautiful lady is fish from the waist down. The sailor who follows the song of a mermaid is thus doubly deceived.

Together with the image of the falling star, mandrake root, and devil's cleft foot, it's clear the speaker has some serious trust issues when it comes to relationships! Each of these symbols can be thought of as relating to duplicity and deception. The fact that the speaker lumps an honest woman in with them, then, tells readers everything they need to know about the speaker's mindset when it comes to ladies.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "mermaids"

⚒ POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Donne doesn't use a lot of alliteration in this poem, but the way in which he does use it plays an important tonal role.

While the themes and opinions of "Go and catch a falling star" are sour at best, the poem itself doesn't *feel* sour. Rather, it's lively, energetic, witty. Some of that is down to the poem's driving, rollicking rhythm (see the entry on Meter for more on

that). But alliteration also plays a part in keeping the poem sparky and pleasant on the level of sound.

Much of the alliteration here appears in two-word sequences, which fits right in with the poem's use of those striking two-word iambic lines (remember that an iamb is just a poetic foot with a da-DUM beat pattern). In one case, "What wind" in line 8, the alliteration and the iambs happen at the same time. This is a strong effect, not at all subtle, and it contributes to the poem's highly stylized flair. Strong alliteration doesn't happen all that often in day-to-day speech, and thus catches the reader's attention: it sounds pleasing, but it also sounds artful rather than natural. And artfulness (the sometimes deceptive reshaping of reality) is one of the main things the poem is about. Donne's speaker, through his mannered alliteration, draws our attention to the artifice of poetry as well as the artifice of love.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "singing"
- **Line 6:** "stinging"
- **Line 8:** "What," "wind"
- **Line 10:** "be'st," "born," "strange," "sights"
- **Line 20:** "Such," "sweet"
- **Line 22:** "might," "meet"
- **Line 24:** "last," "letter"
- **Line 27:** "to," "two"

APOSTROPHE

"Go and catch a falling star" is written entirely in the form of an apostrophe. The speaker commands his listener: *just try and find me a faithful woman, I dare you.*

Frequent direct address to the listener (and, by extension, the reader) modifies the tone of the poem, adding a taste of wry camaraderie to what might otherwise be too bitter a pill. By aiming his poem at a listener, the speaker *includes* that listener in his dilemma, makes that listener complicit. After all, if there isn't a single faithful woman in the world, every straight man is in the same predicament. And it's therefore heavily implied that the poem's listener must also be a man: the speaker wouldn't speak this way about women to a woman's face.

Apostrophe thus gives the poem an edge of desperate comedy. There's something very funny in the idea of the listener—who becomes a legendary wanderer, travelling the world for years and years in search of "a woman true, and fair"—breathlessly sitting down to scribble a postcard back home to the speaker, as he's said to in line 24. Perhaps, to the speaker, there's something even funnier in the idea that this lifelong quest would end up being all for nothing.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "thou"
- **Line 13:** "thee"
- **Line 14:** "Thou"
- **Line 19:** "thou"
- **Line 23:** "you"
- **Line 24:** "you," "your"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is one of the most common devices in poetry generally, and there's a few moments of it in "Go and catch a falling star." But, rather unusually, much of this poem's assonance falls on pretty unremarkable words. For instance, in the first stanza there's a chain of long /ee/ sounds in "teach," "me," and "hear," and in the second, a chain of short /ih/ sounds in "Things" and "invisible."

This creates a sort of cushiony backdrop of similar sounds, rather than catching the reader's attention by weaving bigger and more significant words into the sound-patterning. In other words, the assonance makes the poem sound bouncy and pleasant. (Also note that the poem uses many clear end rhymes, which feature more shared vowel sounds; more on that in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide.)

The unassuming use of assonance here sets off the poem's much more aggressive alliteration and sibilance (entries on both of which are elsewhere in this guide). The relationship between these devices perhaps mirrors the combative relationship between the poem's variety of tones and moods: the understated assonance creates a smooth, enchanting sound that the sharp alliteration and the emphatic sibilance break up.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "cleft," "devil's"
- **Line 5:** "Teach," "me," "hear"
- **Line 6:** "keep," "envy's"
- **Line 9:** "advance," "an"
- **Line 11:** "Things," "invisible"
- **Line 16:** "swear"
- **Line 17:** "where"
- **Line 21:** "go"
- **Line 22:** "Though," "we," "meet"
- **Line 23:** "when," "met"
- **Line 24:** "letter"
- **Line 25:** "she"
- **Line 26:** "be"

ENJAMBMENT

Startling enjambments mark the poem's most emphatic moments. One important thing enjambment does is simply draw out the final three lines of each stanza, building a sense of

suspense and tension as the speaker holds back the reveal of his actual point: that an honest woman is even harder to find than all these impossible wonders.

The enjambment of the closing triplet of each stanza makes these forceful lines stand out. It also makes unexpected metrical demands, as the two-word lines, isolated, ask to be read as iambs: "And find / What wind"; etc.

The final effect is at once lively and jarring. There's a metrical pleasure in those thumping iambs set off on their own, but the enjambment here—cutting off lines at unnatural moments—doesn't allow the reader to forget that they're reading a poem. And oddly enough, this serves the poem's thematic purposes. Unnatural enjambments remind the reader that they're experiencing a poem about falseness and craftiness—and art itself can be false and crafty. Enjambment also keeps the reader from getting too comfortable. This is not a soothing, enchanting, spellbinding poem about a magical adventure, but a bitter, despairing (and yet still wry) poem about hopeless romantic cynicism. The weirdness of the enjambments here keeps that reality right in front of the reader's ears.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "And find / What wind / Serves to advance an honest mind."
- **Lines 16-18:** "And swear, / No where / Lives a woman true, and fair."
- **Lines 25-27:** "Yet she / Will be / False, ere I come, to two, or three."

SIBILANCE

Sibilance most often appears in "Go and catch a falling star" in moments of mystery and magic—and it's therefore especially prominent in the second stanza. Here, extensive sibilance arises during the listener's imaginary journey through lands of "strange sights." The weaving thread of /s/ sounds helps to evoke the listener's legendary adventure.

The hushed quality of sibilance lends itself well to the idea of taking a journey in order to see things that most people can't perceive. The speaker imagines that the listener might have the capacity to discover "things invisible to see": that is, the deepest kind of mysteries, revealed only to those with special powers. Sibilance here (in the form of a /z/ sound, which is considered sibilant in broader definitions of the term) works like a whisper, passing along secret knowledge.

Sibilance appears elsewhere as well. In the first stanza, the shared /s/ sound of "singing" and "stinging" seems to evoke the words themselves—the gentle lull of mermaid's song and the sharp bite of envy's "sting." The final line of the stanza features some /s/ sounds as well, subtly evoking the "wind" filling those sails of "an honest mind":

Serves to advance an honest mind.

Finally, the hissing /s/ sounds of "Such" and "sweet" in line 20 perhaps suggests an element of lasciviousness, reflecting the sexual undertones of the "sweet" "pilgrimage" being described.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "singing"
- **Line 6:** "stinging"
- **Line 9:** "Serves," "advance," "honest"
- **Line 10:** "be'st," "strange," "," "sights"
- **Line 11:** "Things ," "invisible," "see"
- **Line 12:** "thousand days and nights"
- **Line 13:** "snow," "hairs"
- **Line 20:** "Such," "sweet"

ALLUSION

[Allusion](#) to shared folkloric and religious knowledge helps the speaker to create his magical, mystical atmosphere. The "mandrake root" in line 2 is a reference to the mandrake plant, a tuber with roots that are often thought to resemble a human being (or a fetus) and which often play a role in folklore. To impregnate such a plant is a disturbing image, one that suggests an association with dark magic or something unnatural.

The speaker's reference to mermaids brings up a lot of thematic associations, some of which are discussed further in the "Symbols" section. While a modern-day reader might be more likely to associate mermaids with shell bras and musical crabs, to a contemporary of John Donne's, mermaids would have much more sinister connotations. Mermaids were said to lure sailors to their deaths with their beauty and their haunting songs. When the speaker includes mermaids in his catalog of magical impossibilities in the very first stanza, he's already creating an atmosphere of sexual betrayal.

Similarly, the "devil" would have been a much realer figure to Donne's audience than to many modern-day readers. But the devil as Donne portrays him here is also a rather folkloric devil: not a terrible fallen angel, but a tricky guy with goat's feet. Allusion to the devil here raises real issues of sin and deceit, but not in a way that darkens the poem too much. Placing the devil among mandrake roots and mermaids in fact helps to create the speaker's mood. This isn't a poem of heartbroken despair, but of witty, resigned cynicism.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Get with child a mandrake root"
- **Line 4:** "cleft the devil's foot"
- **Line 5:** "mermaids singing"

HYPERBOLE

The poem is filled with [hyperbole](#). The speaker is deliberately dramatic throughout, making the claim that finding an honest woman is harder than spotting a mermaid—i.e., that it's impossible. The images here are *purposefully* outrageous in order to underline the speaker's point. Were the speaker to compare finding a faithful woman to, say, spotting a penny on the ground, the idea would lose its oomph, becoming rare and lucky but certainly within the realm of possibility.

Instead, the speaker insists hyperbolically that his listener could spend "ten thousand days and night," riding until his hair turned white, and *still* not find an honest woman *anywhere* in the *entire world*. And even if he *did*, and even if she were r*ight next door*, by the time the speaker walked over to her front door she would have cheated at least two, if not three, times!

The hyperbole is a way for the speaker to add emphasis to his points, to portray his own certainty in his message, while also adding a touch of humor to the poem. Indeed, the hyperbole also makes the poem feel less serious, and perhaps more satirical, since the comparisons are so patently ridiculous. The hyperbole also betrays the speaker's own cynicism and bitterness; he clearly seems to be someone who has been so badly burned in love that he can't fathom the existence of a single "woman, true and fair."

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "Ride ten thousand days and nights, / Till age snow white hairs on thee,"
- **Lines 17-18:** " No where / Lives a woman true, and fair."
- **Lines 21-27:** "Yet do not, I would not go, / Though at next door we might meet; / Though she were true, when you met her, / And last, till you write your letter, / Yet she / Will be / False, ere I come, to two, or three."

REPETITION

The poem uses a few different kinds of [repetition](#) throughout. One important example of this is the [parallelism](#) in the first stanza, which helps to establish the mood of the poem. The speaker begins by commanding his listener to take on a series of impossible magical tasks. But the way he *structures* those commands makes it clear that he doesn't *really* expect the listener to head out the door and get to searching. The parallel repetition of similar phrasing sets, instead, a [rhetorical](#) tone: this is a listing of *examples*, rather than a set of marching orders.

Repeatedly beginning a new line with "Or" (an example of [anaphora](#)) especially helps with this. The repeated "or" gives the reader a sense of a pile-up, a [hyperbolic](#) accumulation of impossibilities that could really just go on forever.

The third stanza then uses more anaphora in the repetition of "Though" in lines 22 and 23. The first of these refers to the future, when the speaker "might meet" this woman, and the second to the past, when his listener has already "met her." Together, these lines help to conclusively undermine any glimmer of hope the listener might for a moment have had in finding a faithful woman. Who she was in the past will not be who she is when the speaker meets her.

In both of these instances, repetition creates a rhetorical punch. The speaker is not just giving his opinion, but insisting. Structural and rhythmic echoes make the reader feel the speaker's cynical conviction. It's as if the parallelism is helping the speaker to say: *no, really, I'm dead serious*.

Finally, there's a moment of minor repetition in the polyptoton of "sights" and "see" in lines 10 and 11. Line 11 essentially just rephrases what the speaker already said in line 10, replacing "strange sights" with "Things invisible to see." It's as though the speaker is saying, "If you're born with the ability to see the abnormal, to see what other people can't, then go off and look for this woman." The polyptoton thus underscores how "strange" and "invisible"—how impossible—the sight of "a woman true, and fair" is.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-6:** "Tell me where all past years are, /   Or who cleft the devil's foot, / Teach me to hear mermaids singing, / Or to keep off envy's stinging,"
- **Line 10:** "sights"
- **Line 11:** "see"
- **Lines 22-23:** "   Though at next door we might meet; / Though she were true, when you met her,"

IRONY

The poem gets much of its rhetorical punch from the sharp juxtaposition of mythical, legendary images against something the speaker insists is even *more* impossible and rare: an honest woman. The contrast between something ordinary and mundane against things like mermaids and mandrakes is meant to be ironic (and, as noted throughout this guide, hyperbolic). Among all the world's wonders and impossibilities, the speaker maintains, the *most* magical, wondrous, and impossible thing of all is a *regular* woman who happens to be faithful.

Later the speaker imagines that, if such a woman were found, she'd be worthy of a "pilgrimage," a devotional religious journey. But then he takes it back: he wouldn't even bother to go "next door" on a quest to meet this woman. The juxtaposition of this saintly pilgrimage with normal old girl-next-door jadedness lays yet more fuel on the ironic fire. One makes pilgrimages to holy sites, not next door to visit a potential girlfriend!

The contrast here underscores once again how impossible it is to come across an honest woman, implicitly elevating such a

woman to something sacred. What's more, the idea that this woman would have already cheated "two, or three" times before the speaker could arrive makes the whole idea of a "pilgrimage" even more ironic, given that the destination—"next door"—is now implied to be a decidedly *unholy* place.

There's also an irony in the third stanza's whole premise. The imaginary true woman, discovered after long and legendary labor by the listener, will herself turn out to be just as false as any other. The speaker's attitude towards the problem of women's fidelity is ironic in a broader tonal sense as well: jaded, knowing, and disillusioned, this speaker is one whose hopeful expectations have been dashed by unpleasant experience.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18
- Lines 19-22
- Lines 23-27

📖 VOCABULARY

Mandrake (Line 2) - A kind of tuber that often resembles a human, legendary for its magical properties.

Cleft (Line 4) - Divided in two.

Mermaids (Line 5) - Mythical creatures that are half woman, half fish. In folklore, mermaids are often said to lure sailors to their deaths with seductive songs.

Envy (Line 6) - The painful desire for something that belongs to someone else. ("Jealousy," often used interchangeably with "envy," means the desire to keep something that belongs to you all to yourself. The more you know!)

Advance (Line 9) - To further, support, or help.

Thou (Line 10, Line 14, Line 19) - An informal, familiar "you."

Be'st (Line 10) - Be. The speaker is saying, "If you are born to strange sights."

Thee (Line 13) - The object form of "thou"—also an informal or familiar way of saying "you."

Wilt (Line 14) - Will.

Befell (Line 15) - Happened to.

True, and fair (Line 18) - In this context, "true, and fair" means "romantically faithful, and beautiful."

Find'st (Line 19) - Finds.

False (Line 27) - Sexually unfaithful.

Ere (Line 27) - Before.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Donne invents his own form here. "Go and catch a falling star" was first printed under the title "Song," and there is certainly a musical quality to the poem's shape—a melodic rhythm that even sometimes overrides a more natural-sounding pronunciation. (See the "Devices" entry on enjambment for more on this.) And, like a song, this poem introduces a theme and then embellishes it.

This poem uses three nine-line stanzas, each with the same rhyme scheme and meter. Three-part structure allows the speaker to make a forceful argument—almost a formal argument, like one might make in an essay. In his first stanza, he establishes his major point: fidelity is about as real as a mermaid. In the second, he provides (and swiftly addresses) a counterpoint: even if you COULD find a mermaid, you couldn't find a faithful woman. And in the third stanza, it's point/ counterpoint again: if you DID find a faithful woman, she wouldn't stay faithful.

Thus, each stanza of the poem hands on and ramps up the speaker's argument, bringing him to an uncompromising and damning judgement on women's fidelity.

METER

The predominant meter in "Go and catch a falling star" is a forceful, percussive trochaic tetrameter. These means most lines are made up of four feet, each with a **stressed**-unstressed beat pattern. The pattern has plenty of variation throughout, however. Take lines 1 and 2:

> **Go** and **catch** a **fall**ing **star**,
> **Get** with **child** a **man**drake **root**

These lines are missing their final expected unstressed syllables, ending them on a forceful note. The seventh and eighth lines of each stanza are then different entirely, each consisting of a single iamb—making them something called iambic monometer. Take lines 7 and 8:

> And **find**
> What **wind**

The sudden, emphatic switch in meter in these lines demands attention, drawing out the speaker's speaker's cynicism. Monometer is rare, and also can seem a little hokey and funny, which keeps the poem relatively light-hearted as the speaker builds up to his punchline.

RHYME SCHEME

There's a consistent, predictable rhyme scheme in "Go and

catch a falling star." This keeps the poem moving forward steadily, with a gentle, sing-song pattern that lightens the tone. Each stanza runs:

> ABABCCDDD

The "D" rhymes are especially notable for stepping a little outside the poetic conventions of Donne's time: couplets were common, triplets much less so.

The rhymes are full and clear throughout, without any half or slant rhymes to complicate things and distract from the speaker's argument. Readers might get caught up in the first stanza, however, where "wind" is made to rhyme with "find" and "mind." "Wind" here means the movement-of-air kind of wind, but it would likely have been pronounced like with a long /i/, as in "wind things up," in Donne's day.

👥 SPEAKER

The speaker of "Go and catch a falling star" is a man who's suffered some embittering romantic experiences. Though the poem is one massive generalization ("there is no honest woman *in the whole world!*"), and one that follows a standard trope of the time period when it was written, there are hints that the speaker may have gone through some more personal and specific pain. When, in the first stanza, he wonders "where all past years are" and how "to keep off envy's stinging," the reader gets a sense that the speaker may be mourning time lost to painful longing and disappointment.

This speaker is disillusioned, certainly, but he also has a vivid imagination. And while he's uncompromising about the apparently inevitably infideliy of women, he's willing to believe that a person with special gifts might be able to see an invisible world. In this voice, cynicism and magic interweave.

🌐 SETTING

Two worlds exist side by side in this poem: the world of magic, where a gifted explorer might indeed hear mermaids singing, and the down-to-earth world of "next door," where things are very far from magical.

The first stanza's world is populated with strange creatures: humanoid mandrake roots, singing mermaids, and the devil himself. It ranges from the sky to deep underground to Hell, taking in the ocean on its way. There's a sense of great scope and scale in this world: a person would have to "ride ten thousand days and nights" to see it all.

While the first stanza presents the magic-world as a place of impossibilities, the second plays a complicated trick with that idea. The speaker imagines that his listener might actually be able to make the fairy-tale discoveries of the first stanza. But this only underlines his bigger point: even an enchanted world

can't produce a faithful woman.

This brings readers back to the real world, where the speaker sits in a normal house on a normal street, and wouldn't venture even so far as down the block to meet a supposedly virtuous woman.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne (1572-1631) is perhaps foremost among the metaphysical poets. These were a loose group of British poets (including Andrew Marvell, Thomas Traherne, and George Herbert, among others) who wrote heady, complex, and richly symbolic poems, often on religious and spiritual themes. The metaphysical poets are especially well-known for their elaborate conceits, and their poems often explored a single metaphor in intricate detail. Donne is known in particular for his love poetry and his religious poetry, and these two genres often interweave in his work. His famous sequence of Holy Sonnets, for instance, is as passionate and sexual as any love poetry.

Though in his lifetime Donne was better-known as a clergyman (he worked for some time as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London), his poetry became deeply beloved and influential after his death. His work underwent a renaissance in the 20th century, when modernist poets like Eliot and Yeats rediscovered him. His influence can be seen in the vivid spiritual and philosophical dimensions of their work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John Donne lived in a divided and uncertain England, one marked by the death of the feared and beloved Elizabeth I and the less-popular kingship of James I; he lived to see the coronation of Charles I, whose reign would end bloodily and headlessly after an unprecedented popular uprising against the monarchy. This was a political and religious landscape in which much that had seemed certain was now unsure.

At this time, Catholicism was illegal in England, and John Donne was born to a Catholic family. He struggled a great deal with this troubled religious inheritance, and led a wild and dissolute early life. But he was passionately pious, and eventually renounced Catholicism in order to become a Protestant clergyman. King James himself counseled this move, and Donne served the King directly for much of his life, becoming well known for his beautiful sermons. (His poetry was less widely known during his lifetime, and was only widely read after his death.) In 1621, he rose to the prominent

position of Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral (London's central and most important church), where he served for some years.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Donne's Life and Work — A short biography and links to more of Donne's work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne)

- Richard Burton Reads the Poem — The famous actor gives a dramatic reading. (Notice his pronunciation of "wind"!) (https://youtu.be/qiZygUSkMYw)

- Donne's Grave — The story of John Donne's burial in St. Paul's Cathedral, where he was the Dean. (https://www.poetsgraves.co.uk/donne.htm)

- Close Readings From the British Library — A biography and an in-depth look at a few of of Donne's poems. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-donne)

- Digital Donne — A comprehensive scholarly guide to John Donne's manuscripts. (http://digitaldonne.tamu.edu/index.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

HOW TO CITE

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