# The Triple Fool

## POEM TEXT

1       I am two fools, I know,
2   For loving, and for saying so
3       In whining poetry;
4   But where's that wiseman, that would not be I,
5       If she would not deny?
6   Then, as the earth's inward, narrow, crooked lanes
7   Do purge sea-water's fretful salt away,
8       I thought, if I could draw my pains
9   Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay:
10  Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce;
11  For he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

12      But when I have done so,
13  Some man, his art and voice to show,
14      Doth set and sing my pain,
15  And, by delighting many, frees again
16      Grief, which verse did restrain.
17  To love and grief tribute of verse belongs,
18  But not of such as pleases when 'tis read;
19      Both are increasèd by such songs:
20  For both their triumphs so are publishèd,
21  And I, which was two fools, do so grow three;
22  Who are a little wise, the best fools be.

## SUMMARY

I'm two kinds of foolish, I'm aware: I'm foolish for falling in love, and I'm foolish for writing whiny poetry about my love. But what smart man wouldn't want to be a fool like me—if only the lady I loved loved me back? In the same way that the winding tunnels inside the earth draw the salt out of ocean water and make it fresh, I thought I could take the sting out of my own heartbreak by forcing it through the difficult twists and turns of poetry. If you can shape your grief into metered verse, it can't be so painful; the man who chains his feelings up in poetry masters his suffering.

But now that I've written a poem, some guy, wanting to show off his musical skill, puts my agonized words to music and sings them. Even as he gives other people pleasure through this song, he releases the heartbreak that I thought I had trapped in the poem. Poetry is the appropriate way to commemorate both love and grief—but it's not wise to put those feelings into poems that people read and like! Both love and grief get stronger when one writes a well-liked poem because such poems spread and trigger exactly the feelings the poem was meant to control—and thus declare those feelings' ultimate victory. So I—who was already two kinds of foolish—become a third kind of foolish (by sharing my love poetry and thus releasing my painful feelings to the wild, where they can come back and bite me). It's the people who have some smarts who wind up being the biggest fools.

## THEMES

### THE DANGER OF MAKING ART ABOUT HEARTBREAK

In terrible pain over unrequited love, the speaker of "The Triple Fool" has an idea: he'll take the sting out of his feelings by turning them into a poem, "tam[ing]" them by forcing them to fit into an orderly shape. But the joke's on him: someone sets his poem to music, and when the speaker hears this song, it releases all his agonized feelings.

The process of creating art, the poem suggests, can momentarily soothe, transform, and capture strong feeling—but the art itself ultimately isn't under its creator's control. And, ironically, the danger of turning heartbreak into art is that powerful, emotional artwork may spark the very emotions it was supposed to defeat.

At first, the speaker thinks that art has the power to tame overwhelming feelings by forcing them into some kind of order. The speaker imagines "tam[ing]" his "grief" over his unrequited love by forcing it into "rhyme" and "numbers" (or metered poetry), bending it to his artistic will. Doing so, the speaker believes, will "purge" his pains, allowing him to contain, control, and weaken his feelings even as he expresses them. Art, then, is meant to be able to transform pain into beauty—and to "fetter[]" it, chaining it to the page.

But when the speaker "fool[ishly]" shares his grief-stricken poem, it develops a life of its own: it's so moving that "some man" sets it to music, "delighting many" with its beauty. And when the speaker hears the song, it brings all of his agony freshly to life again. There's an irony here: by capturing his feelings on paper, the speaker has actually embodied them in a form that can travel, spread, and come back to bite him! Far from conquering feelings, art does just the opposite, releasing exactly the emotions the speaker sought to neutralize and contain.

Art, in other words, doesn't simply "capture" feelings: in giving them a body, it also gives them wings. The speaker's ability to

put his heartbreak into compelling words, and his decision to release those words into the world, in the end makes him the greatest possible "fool": in trying to master his feelings, he's only given them an independent (and powerful) existence in a work of art. But perhaps he feels some consoling pride about this, too: he may be three different kinds of fool, but at least he's a "triple fool" whose work "pleases when 'tis read."

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

## 🔍 LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-3

> *I am two fools, I know,*
> *For loving, and for saying so*
> *In whining poetry;*

"The Triple Fool" begins with a few brusque, self-deprecating lines. The speaker starts things off as if he's trying to preempt criticism: you don't have to tell *him* that he's a fool—he'll say so himself!

In fact, he's two kinds of fool at once: he's a fool for "loving," and a fool for writing "whining poetry" about his love. Already, then, the reader gets the sense that love has not treated this speaker especially well. And in his own eyes, he should have known better than to fall in love in the first place.

What's more, *art* seems to be treating him poorly. The speaker suggests that there's something pathetic about his love poems: they're just "whining," just self-pitying cries of pain. But, as the rest of this poem will reveal, the folly of writing love poems isn't just that one might write a bad one. It's that *good* poetry is dangerous—especially good poetry about suffering! As this speaker tries to blunt the agony of unrequited love through verse, he'll discover that art doesn't just transform or trap pain: it evokes and releases it, too.

These first lines express deep sadness, concealed in a defensive cynicism. Criticizing his own foolishness and his "whining poetry," the speaker seems to see himself as uncomfortably similar to a figure like Duke Orsino in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, a self-pitying lover wrapped up in his own grief. Making fun of yearning, melodramatic lovers was as popular a hobby in the 17th century as it is now, and in proclaiming his own folly, the speaker seems to be mocking himself before anyone else can get there. And that suggests that he's trying to shield himself from even *more* suffering. He's frustrated with himself, but he's also in a lot of genuine pain.

Listen to the way the poem's first short, sharp line evokes his frustration:

> I am two fools, I know,

Every word in this brisk line of iambic trimeter (that is, a line of three iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm) is a clipped monosyllable—and the assonant /oo/ of "two fools" lays special emphasis on this hyperbolic declaration.

### LINES 4-5

> *But where's that wiseman, that would not be I,*
> *If she would not deny?*

Having established that he's "two fools" in one—first for falling in love, and then for writing poetry about it—the speaker seems to be about to offer a counterpoint, in the form of a rhetorical question:

> But where's that wiseman, that would not be I,
> If she would not deny?

But there's a sour irony in what at first appears to be a consolation. Take a look at the way the logic of this question develops:

- The speaker says, in essence: *sure, I'm a huge fool, but what wise man wouldn't want to be a fool like me, so long as his beloved returned his affections?*
- But here's the problem: the speaker's beloved *does* "deny" the speaker's love. She doesn't love him back.

In other words, in asking this question, the speaker is saying that even the wisest man would want to be a lovelorn fool like him—if his love were returned. But his love *isn't* returned. He's therefore in the most degraded position possible. Not only is he that doubly foolish figure—a poet in love—he's a poet in *unrequited* love. And *nobody* wants to be that guy.

This question introduces the speaker's beloved, a nameless "she." The speaker suggests just how deep his feelings for her are in sort of the same way that a visual artist uses negative space to reveal a shape. The speaker won't ever describe his beloved directly. But what he *will* say is that anyone would want to be in his position "if she would not deny." In other words, the favor of this astonishing woman could make any person happily relinquish all their dignity and wisdom, just for the chance of being with her.

The speaker's beloved will never directly appear in the poem again; the speaker will instead grapple with the pain she left behind her. But it's precisely by *not* talking about her that he suggests just how deeply he loves her, and just how much pain he's in now. He can talk a lot about his suffering over her—but he can hardly bear to look at her directly.

### LINES 6-9

> *Then, as the earth's inward, narrow, crooked lanes*

*Do purge sea-water's fretful salt away,*
*I thought, if I could draw my pains*
*Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay:*

Abruptly, the speaker turns away from thoughts of the "she" who "den[ies]" him her love and toward possible treatments for his heartbreak. The first idea that comes to him is, of course, to write a poem. Poetry, he thinks, might be able to "purge" his pain as underground tunnels leach the salt from seawater.

Take a look at the speaker's strange imagery in these lines:

> Then, as the earth's **inward, narrow, crooked** lanes
> Do purge sea-water's fretful salt away,

Here, the speaker's vision takes readers to places human eyes can never see: dark, secret passages that thread through the earth. There's something a little claustrophobic about this tight, pressured image—but there's also something almost magical about it. The speaker is describing a long, mysterious, and very "inward" process.

And in fact, those "inward, narrow, crooked lanes" are a simile for "inward, narrow, crooked" *lines*—for poetry itself. Just as these tunnels draw the "fretful salt" out of seawater, the speaker hopes, poetry will take the sting out of his tears. Forcing his feelings through the "vexations" (that is, the difficult twists and turns) of verse will soften them, and alleviate his pain.

This simile offers a vivid image of what writing a poem is like. The poet "draw[s]" feelings through a poem like the mysterious forces of nature draw seawater through dark tunnels. This process channels emotion into a "narrow" shape—a rigorous, controlled structure, with rhythms and rhymes. (And perhaps the "crooked[ness]" here might draw the reader's attention to this very poem's varied meter and changing line lengths.)

And something about putting a feeling through this process alters it. As pain travels through the "narrow" channels of poetry, it loses its sharpness, it stops stinging in quite the same way. Or so the poet once "thought."

## LINES 10-11

*Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce;*
*For he tames it, that fetters it in verse.*

In the speaker's previous simile, emotional "pains" are water: a flowing substance shaped and transformed by the "inward, narrow, crooked lanes" of poetry. While there's certainly a sense of rigor and control in this image, there's also movement and change.

But now, those liquid "pains" turn into a personified "grief"—a "fierce" nemesis that the canny speaker has "fetter[ed]" in poetry. Poetry becomes, not a channel, but a chain.

And that image makes a certain amount of intuitive sense:

- Written language appears on the page as a connected series of words, just as a chain is a connected series of links.
- And poetry can also be a "chain" in that rhymed, metered poetry makes some pretty rigorous structural demands. (See the later poet John Keats's sonnet "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd" for just one examination of this common metaphor.)

By forcing a huge, powerful, overwhelming "grief" to fit into the rigorous shape of a poem, the speaker thus hopes to "tame[]" it—to bring it to heel, to make it manageable.

The metaphor here feels, in many ways, completely different: rather than hoping to guide, shape, and subtly alter his feelings, the speaker is now just imprisoning them. But there's a similarity, too. In both of these moments of figurative language, poetry is a kind of enclosure for feeling, a way of containing it in a "narrow" space or tying it down.

And perhaps the movement from flowing water to a chained prisoner also suggests the movement from the *act* of writing to the final *product* of writing. The speaker must first actively "draw [his] pains" through "verse"; then, when he's done, he finds his grief imprisoned on the page, fixed in one place, and thus less able to hurt him.

Poetry, in other words, can make the unbearable bearable by transforming it into a contained and structured work of art. Through the process of writing, a whole sea of pain becomes fresh, drinkable water; in a finished poem, a "fierce" grief has become a tame, chained giant, sitting on the page where one can keep an eye on it.

But there's something ominous in the speaker's movement from the metaphor of transformation to the metaphor of imprisonment. A chained prisoner, after all, can always escape.

## LINES 12-14

*But when I have done so,*
*Some man, his art and voice to show,*
*Doth set and sing my pain,*

The first stanza ends with the poet's hope that he has "tame[d]" his grief by "fetter[ing] it in verse." The second stanza begins with one of the world's most ominous words: "But." That grief isn't going to stay docile and imprisoned for long.

For along comes "some man"—and note the speaker's exasperated tone there—to show off his "art and voice" (that is, all his musical skill) by setting the speaker's "pain" to music and singing it.

In other words: by imprisoning "grief" in a poem, the speaker has also released it into the world! That's because, when a feeling turns into a poem, other people can read it. Other people can like it and respond to it. Other people can make

*music* out of it. And music is notoriously good at evoking feelings.

There's something that feels particularly 17th-century about this moment. In Donne's time and place, poetry was both a communal activity and a private one: poets would circulate their work within relatively small (and usually upper-class) circles, often avoiding wider publication. Within those circles, someone very well *might* decide to pay someone's poem a compliment by elegantly setting it to music.

This speaker's problem, then, is that he's done too good a job at getting his "pain" into the form of a poem. His poem has worked well enough that it has moved someone else—and that success is about to come back and bite him.

The speaker has been using a deliberately strange shape for this poem so far: an 11-line stanza (very unusual in English-language poetry) with an ever-changing, elusive meter. This "crooked" shape feels shifty and wily, unpredictable—and it shows off the poet's tremendous technical skill. But technical skill alone, it turns out, isn't enough to trap "grief."

## LINES 15-16

> And, by delighting many, frees again
>     Grief, which verse did restrain.

By "fetter[ing]" his grief in a poem, the speaker has made a terrible mistake. In order to chain an emotion up, you have to give it a body. In other words, poetry isn't just a chain for grief: it's an *expression* of grief, giving grief a form. And now, that personified grief has escaped through the power of music.

It's precisely because the speaker has so movingly embodied his heartbreak in poetry that it can "delight[] many" in the form of a song. If he hadn't done such a good job "capturing" his feeling in words, he wouldn't have made such an impression on the musician who interprets his poem or the people who relish it as a song.

All this might take readers back to the *other* idea about poetry in the first stanza: that it can *purify* grief as the earth purifies saltwater. In other words, it can make grief beautiful and refreshing, transforming it into something that people *want* to experience: art. The trouble is, part of experiencing art and being deeply moved by it is feeling the feelings it describes.

And the poem's transformation into music makes it doubly potent. Music, after all, is the metaphorical "food of love," as one of Donne's contemporaries memorably wrote. The right song, as any heartbroken person knows, has the power to cut straight to the heart.

So when the poem's embodied grief becomes a song, it presents itself afresh to the speaker himself. Listening to his own words set to music, the speaker feels as if the very prisoner he thought he'd locked up has escaped and met him in the street, waving cheerily: *remember me?*

Take a look at the way the speaker uses meter to evoke the jolt he feels at this unwanted reunion. Most of this poem's meter has been iambic: that is, built from iambs, metrical feet with an unstressed-**stressed**, da-**DUM** rhythm. And line 15 here is in textbook iambic pentameter: five iambs in a row, lilting and hypnotic:

> And, by | de**light-** | ing **man-** | y, **frees** | a**gain**

But the next line stumbles, bringing the speaker up short:

> **Grief,** which | **verse did** | re**strain.**

The first foot of this short trimeter line is a trochee: a foot with a **stressed**-unstressed, **DUM**-da rhythm. That means that the poem hits the stressed word "**Grief**" like a wall. Then it runs smack into a spondee, two stresses in a row (**DUM-DUM**), and seems to fall over its own feet for a moment, thrown out of its groove.

And that's just another way that poetry can embody pain! The speaker is doing exactly what he's describing here: writing a poem that gives form to his own suffering.

## LINES 17-20

> To love and grief tribute of verse belongs,
> But not of such as pleases when 'tis read;
>     Both are increasèd by such songs:
> For both their triumphs so are publishèd,

Forced to reckon with his grief once more, the speaker now ruefully retreats into philosophical musings on what inevitably happens when poets write about "love and grief."

Those feelings, he reflects, are natural subjects for poetry; in fact, the "tribute" of poetry "belongs" to them, as if they were personified monarchs at whose feet gifts of poetry must be laid. (And a long, long, long tradition of poems about heartbreak suggests that he's not wrong.)

But—and this is an important "but"—poets ought to be careful not to write *popular* poems about their love and grief, or at the very least to avoid sharing such poems with other people! A "song" that "pleases" actually *intensifies* painful emotions, for two reasons:

- A "pleas[ing]" poem of love or grief is one that has movingly captured that feeling—and thus given that feeling its own dangerous body, as the speaker noted in the first part of this stanza.
- Such a poem also "publish[es]" the "triumph" of love and grief by spreading it around, releasing it into the wild—where people can, just for instance, make devastating songs out of it.
    - Here, to publish just means to publicly proclaim—but there's an obvious hint

that part of the problem is also literal *publication*, the way a written poem spreads.

Sharing a poem about love and grief thus means publicly declaring that love and grief have beaten you, *and* running the risk of meeting them again.

There's some tongue-in-cheek irony in the speaker's regrets here. After all, he's writing yet another poem about the difficulty his poem of heartbreak got him into—and he's clearly not about to keep this one to himself, either. Even if good art evokes pain in the very act of capturing it—even if, by turning his pain to art, the speaker understands he's likely to have to feel his heartbreak all over again when other people reflect it back at him—he just can't seem to stop himself.

And there's more than a little pride here, too. Even as the speaker writhes in agony, he also knows that he's clearly written something that "pleases when 'tis read": his restored pain is the very mark of his artistic triumph.

### LINES 21-22

> *And I, which was two fools, do so grow three;*
> *Who are a little wise, the best fools be.*

Since writing a poem about heartbreak gives that heartbreak a poetic "body," a physical form made of language—and since sharing that poem means the heartbreak can escape its "fetters" and come back to bite the poet—the speaker concludes that he's not just "two fools," he's "three." Now, he's a fool for loving, a fool for writing, and a fool for sharing what he wrote with other people.

And his little bit of "wis[dom]" only makes things worse. The "best fools" are those who have the skills and wits to get themselves into real trouble. In other words, the speaker's own poetic brilliance makes him the absolute best fool possible. If he hadn't written such a compelling poem about his heartbreak, he wouldn't have had to feel his heart break all over again when that poem got turned into an emotionally overpowering song. A lesser poet would have suffered less.

Using poetry to "fetter[]" feeling, this speaker has discovered, absolutely does not work: feeling will always get the last word. But, paradoxically, the speaker has also succeeded in everything he set out to do in the first stanza:

- He has transformed the "fretful salt" of his heartbroken tears into a fountain of fresh poetic "water" that other people are eager to "delight[]" in.
- And he has tied his feelings down on the page, embodying them in a lively enough way that they can leap right back *off* the page

Poetry *can* capture a feeling, and it can make even the worst agony into something beautiful. What it can't do is conquer or kill that agony. The best a foolish poet can hope for is that a poem will *deepen* a feeling.

That might take readers back to the beginning of the poem, when the speaker declares that he's a fool for "loving" at all. Of course, "loving" in the way the speaker loves that mysterious "she" isn't the sort of thing a person chooses to do. Love is perhaps the most ungovernable feeling of all—and if the speaker thinks he was completely in control over whether he fell in love or not, he's only fooling himself. Poetry can't rescue poets from their own hearts.

Even if the speaker isn't exactly having the time of his life right now—sobbing in the bathroom, one imagines, while a bewildered musician taps on the door—he can also feel an ironic pride in the fact that, in so compellingly capturing and beautifying "love and grief," his poem is a genuine artistic achievement. And so is the poem he's written about that poem.

### 🛠 POETIC DEVICES

#### PERSONIFICATION

When the speaker of "The Triple Fool" personifies his "grief," he makes it seem like an independent force with its own mysterious intentions.

The speaker's relationship with his grief is not a friendly one. In the first stanza of the poem, his whole plan is to imprison his grief in a poem—to chain it up in the metaphorical "fetters" of "verse." But grief is too wily for him: no sooner has he imprisoned it than it escapes again, freed when its poem-jail becomes a song.

By presenting his grief as a person—and a "fierce" person at that, one whom no jail can hold!—the speaker thus gives readers a sense of how thoroughly at its mercy he feels. Grief isn't just a substance to be manipulated or a passing mood. It's a powerful and cunning enemy that can spring out and "triumph[]" over the speaker when he least expects it. There's a strong sense here that grief is *winning*, defeating the speaker no matter how hard he fights.

In the second stanza, grief also has a traveling companion: "love." While love isn't as clearly personified as grief is here, it shares in grief's "triumph[]" over the speaker. These two emotions, it seems, walk hand in hand, and they're as powerful as they are merciless.

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**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 10-11:** "Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce; / For he tames it, that fetters it in verse."
- **Lines 15-16:** "And, by delighting many, frees again / Grief, which verse did restrain."
- **Line 17:** "To love and grief tribute of verse belongs,"

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- **Line 20:** *"For both their triumphs so are publishèd,"*

## METAPHOR

In "The Triple Fool," poetry doesn't appear as a pair of liberating wings or as a roaming beast, but as a metaphorical chain for restraining painful feelings.

Using "fetters" as a metaphor for poetry makes a certain instinctive sense: written language, after all, appears on the page as a linked "chain" of words. And poetry that uses rhyme and meter is also restrictive, "chained" by its self-imposed rules (a metaphor that Keats explores in his sonnet "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd"). To this speaker, poetic "fetters" are there to imprison his emotions. By locking up his terrible "grief" in a rigorous, carefully structured poem, the speaker hopes that he can capture his pain and hold it still—and keep it from tormenting him anymore.

But, unfortunately for the speaker, the poem-as-chain metaphor contains the seeds of its own destruction. By imprisoning his grief in his poem, he also *embodies* his grief, *giving it its own independent life*. Before he put his feelings in poetry, they were private and personal. But now that they're "fetter[ed]" on the page, they can also be "free[d]" when other people "sing" them. The speaker ends up being ambushed by exactly the feelings he tried to chain down—*because* he tried to chain them down.

There's thus something ironic about this metaphor. To chain his grief up, the speaker has to give it a body—and if it has a body, it can always escape!

> **Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 11:** *"For he tames it, that fetters it in verse."*
> - **Lines 15-16:** *"And, by delighting many, frees again / Grief, which verse did restrain."*

## SIMILE

The poem's one long simile suggests that poetry can purify feelings just as the inner passages of the earth purify saltwater. This is a pretty different angle on the relationship of poetry to suffering than the metaphorical "fetter[ing]" the speaker explores a few lines later. In this simile, the speaker hopes not to *trap* his feelings *in* poetry, but to *alter* them *through* poetry, drawing out their stinging "salt" and making them easier to endure.

In this image, the "narrow, crooked lanes" inside the earth "purge" the salt from ocean water and make it fresh and drinkable—a process, the speaker says, that reflects the *writing* of poetry. Those "narrow, crooked lanes" are also a poem's narrow, crooked *lines*, with feelings rushing through them.

Sending his feelings through the difficult, convoluted

"vexations" of "rhyme[]," the speaker hopes, will soften their intensity. Perhaps the image of the ocean water's "fretful salt" also hints that he hopes not to be doing quite so much crying after he's gotten this poem out.

This simile thus deals not with the idea of a completed poem as a prison for a feeling, but the idea that the *act* of writing a poem about heartbreak might subtly alter the heartbreak, making it a source of refreshment and beauty rather than a stinging and dangerous ocean of feeling.

And the speaker's problem is, he's not altogether wrong. It's precisely because his poetry *does* make his heartbreak beautiful that "some man" gets it into his head to turn the speaker's love poems into a song—a song that forces the speaker to feel all his pain just as sharply as he ever did.

> **Where Simile appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 6-9:** *"Then, as the earth's inward, narrow, crooked lanes / Do purge sea-water's fretful salt away, /     I thought, if I could draw my pains / Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay:"*

## IMAGERY

The speaker uses a striking passage of imagery when he imagines pain being purified through poetry in the way that the inner passages of the earth purify saltwater. That imagery supports the speaker's simile, evoking the emotional process of writing by giving readers a strange and vivid picture of the insides of the earth.

In this speaker's view, the ocean's saltwater becomes freshwater by being "purge[d]" in underground passages: the earth's rocks leach the salt out of the water and make it potable. Listen to the way the speaker describes these dark subterranean tunnels:

> Then, as the earth's **inward, narrow, crooked lanes**
> Do purge sea-water's fretful salt away,

There's something both mysterious and claustrophobic about those "inward, narrow, crooked lanes": they're enclosed, windy, difficult, and visible only to the imagination. And something about that difficulty is purifying. The imagery here gives readers the sense that the process of "purg[ing]" means channeling a mighty force—the waters of the sea itself—into a tight and restrictive form.

And writing poetry, in the speaker suggests, works in just the same way. It's "inward," a private and personal process. It's "narrow," demanding that big feelings fit into restrictive forms. It's "crooked"—just like the varied meter of this poem. And—he hopes—it can change the stinging "salt" of his heartbreak into the freshness of beauty, changing his tears into something restorative.

**Where Imagery appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 6-7:** "Then, as the earth's inward, narrow, crooked lanes / Do purge sea-water's fretful salt away,"

## RHETORICAL QUESTION

The rueful rhetorical question in the poem's first stanza gestures at the pain that underlies this whole poem: the speaker is in love with a woman who doesn't love him back.

The poem begins with an exasperated, impatient, and self-deprecating declaration, as if the speaker is trying to preempt criticism. He'll be the first to say that he's not just a fool, but *two kinds of fool*: he's a fool for falling in love in the first place, and a fool for writing sad little poems about it. These lines feel short, sharp, and blunt.

But in lines 4-5, his tone changes:

> But where's that wiseman, that would not be I,
> If she would not deny?

There's a lot of complicated emotion and thought wrapped up in this simple rhetorical question:

- The speaker introduces what seems like a counterpoint to all these self-accusations of foolery: *sure, I'm a fool, but who wouldn't rather be a fool than a wise man if he were a fool whose beloved cared for him?*
- The problem, of course, is that the speaker's beloved *doesn't* love him back. So his rhetorical question turns back on itself: no wise man would want to be in the predicament of a foolish, lovelorn poet whose affections aren't even returned!

This question thus introduces the speaker's problems with rueful humor.

Notably, this is the only place in the poem that the speaker's "she," his lady-love, appears directly. For the rest of the poem, it's as if the speaker is so wrapped up in his "grief" that he can't even bear to bring her up: he grapples with his feelings alone.

**Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 4-5:** "But where's that wiseman, that would not be I, /     If she would not deny?"

## SIBILANCE

The poem is filled with sibilance: lots of words that start with /s/ travel in packs here. All those /s/ sounds evoke two aspects of the speaker's feelings: his angry frustration, and his quiet sorrow.

For instance, listen to the biting sibilance in lines 12-14:

> But when I have done so,
> Some man, his art and voice to show,
> Doth set and sing my pain,

Here, the speaker's sibilance sounds like a furious hiss. He *just* thought he'd found a way to escape his pain by "fetter[ing]" it in poetry—and now "some man" who wants to show off his nice voice comes along to "set and sing" his suffering, stabbing him freshly in the heart with the feelings he thought he'd conquered. His icy /s/ sounds here evoke all that renewed agony—and his frustration over it.

The longer, more reflective lines later in the stanza use sibilance to a quieter effect:

> Both are increasèd by such songs:
> For both their triumphs so are publishèd,

Reflecting on the way that successful poetry (and *especially* poetry set to music) really only strengthen the feelings they describe, the speaker sounds quieter and more rueful, and so does his sibilance. As he admits defeat, his hissing /s/ sounds slowly soften into a /sh/.

**Where Sibilance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "saying so"
- **Line 7:** "sea-water's," "salt"
- **Line 12:** "so"
- **Line 13:** "Some," "voice"
- **Line 14:** "set," "sing"
- **Line 16:** "verse," "restrain"
- **Line 19:** "increasèd," "such," "songs"
- **Line 20:** "triumphs," "so," "publishèd"

## ASSONANCE

Assonance helps to give this poem its music and meaning. For instance, listen to the way vowel sounds thread through the lines in which the speaker imagines purging his pain through poetry:

> Then, as the earth's inward, narrow, crooked lanes
> Do purge sea-water's fretful salt away,
> I thought, if I could draw my pains
> Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay:

The vowel sounds evolve here like the saltwater slowly getting fresher as it travels through the earth: the speaker moves from the neutral /uh/ sound of "earth," "inward," and "purge" (a vowel known as a schwa) to the clearer /aw/ of "water," "salt," "thought," and "draw," while "pains," "vexation," and "allay" all use a long /ay/.

In other words, the sounds here echo the process the speaker

describes, harmoniously evoking the transition from one state to another—from salt water to fresh, and from pain to relief.

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**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "two fools"
- **Line 4:** "wiseman," "I"
- **Line 7:** "water's," "salt"
- **Line 8:** "thought," "draw," "pains"
- **Line 9:** "vexation," "allay"
- **Line 10:** "Grief," "fierce"
- **Line 18:** "pleases"
- **Line 19:** "increasèd"
- **Line 21:** "two fools," "so grow"

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## 📄 VOCABULARY

**Deny** (Line 5) - Refuse to return the speaker's love.

**The earth's inward, narrow, crooked lanes** (Line 6) - In other words, the passages and tunnels inside the earth, which purify the ocean's salty water and make it fresh (or so this speaker believes).

**Fretful** (Line 7) - Restlessly unhappy.

**Vexation** (Line 9) - Here, "vexation" can both mean "annoyance or difficulty" and "convoluted twists and turns."

**Allay** (Line 9) - Quell, alleviate, or weaken.

**Numbers** (Line 10) - Metered poetry. In other words, grief that has been forced into the orderly shape of a poem doesn't hurt quite so badly!

**Fetters** (Line 11) - Chains up.

**Art and voice** (Line 13) - That is, artistry and musical talents.

**Doth** (Line 14) - An old-fashioned word for "does," pronounced "duth."

**Set and sing** (Line 14) - That is, set to music and then perform.

**'Tis** (Line 18) - A contraction of "it is" (like our modern "it's").

## ⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

John Donne invents his own form for "The Triple Fool." The poem is built from two 11-line stanzas (unusual in English-language poetry) with a fluid, varied meter. Those stanzas mirror each other, using the same rhyme scheme and rhythms.

This form reflects both the speaker's skill and his frustration—and through them, the poem's ideas about poetry and power. Part of this speaker's problem is that he's *just too good a poet.* His ability to put his feelings into elegant verse backfires on him when his latest poem of longing and grief gets

so popular it's turned into a song. Forced to confront his own words in the form of emotionally overpowering music, the speaker is no longer able to believe that he has successfully "fetter[ed]" his feelings in his poetry.

This poem—with its stop-and-start meter and its off-kilter 11-line stanzas—might thus seem like an effort to *evade* the musicians: this poem isn't straightforwardly "harmonious" or rhythmic in a way that lends itself to songwriting. But in its very weirdness, this form is also tightly controlled, and it shows the speaker mastering poetry even as he writes about how his poetry mastered him.

### METER

"The Triple Fool" uses a varied meter. While the poem is mostly iambic—that is, it's built from iambs, metrical feet with an unstressed-**stressed**, da-**DUM** rhythm—it ranges from trimeter (three iambs in a row) to pentameter (five iambs in a row). Broad metrical patterns repeat across the poem: in both stanzas, lines of trimeter, tetrameter, and pentameter fall in the same places.

These patterns of longer and shorter lines help the speaker subtly alter the poem's tension and mood. For instance, when the poem begins with a trimetric "I **am** | two **fools**, | I **know**," the reader already gets the sense that the speaker is feeling pretty fed up: this short line of monosyllabic words feels abrupt and even rude. The flowing pentameter of lines 6-7, meanwhile, has a very different mood, suggesting that the speaker is getting wistfully caught up in his own imagery as he recalls his hopes that poetry might "purge" his pain.

Within these patterns, the speaker does a lot of fancy footwork. Both stanzas, for example, close with a couplet of iambic pentameter—or at least, couplets *based* on iambic pentameter. But take a look at how wild the patterns of stresses get at the end of the first stanza, in lines 10-11:

> **Grief** brought | to **num-** | bers **can-** | not **be** | so **fierce;**
> For **he** | **tames** it, | that **fet-** | ters it | in **verse.**

The speaker introduces these lines with a trochee (a foot with a **stressed**-unstressed, **DUM**-da rhythm). While that's a little irregular, it's a fairly common technique in iambic-pentameter poetry. But in line 11, the trochee that appears in the *second* foot ("**tames** it") is a lot more unusual. That trochee forces two stressed words—"he" and "tames"—to collide with each other, breaking up the meter's comfortable flow.

And that's all part of the speaker's point! No matter what the speaker claims, the "verse" here doesn't feel "tame[d]" or orderly at all: that tricky rhythm makes it feel as if the poem might be about to buck the speaker right off.

The speaker's metrical variations thus subtly reflect exactly what this poem is about. Try all you like to "fetter[]" your

feelings with poetry, the speaker suggests, but don't get too comfortable: poetry itself isn't as orderly, "tame[]," or tractable as you might expect.

(The double irony here, of course, is that the speaker is completely in control of these wild rhythms: he's creating this effect on purpose!)

## RHYME SCHEME

The complex, subtle rhyme scheme of "The Triple Fool" runs like this:

> AABBBCDCDEE

There's something a little off-kilter about this rhyme scheme. While each stanza begins and ends with a solid, balanced couplet, the lines in the middle feel wilder, following a striking triplet with a more leisurely, back-and-forth CDCD pattern. These changing rhymes reflect the speaker's changing moods: as he moves from the brusque exasperation of "I am two fools, I know" into strange images of the depths of the earth, his rhymes also move from insistent matching into hypnotic alternations.

The different moods of those patterns also support the poem's varied meter. The harmonious CDCD lines, for instance, are all in iambic pentameter—and feel more reflective and philosophical, less immediate, than the short, unpredictable lines around them.

To a modern reader, a number of the rhymes here sound slant: "poetry" and "I," or "fierce" and "verse," for instance. Some of these distinctions wouldn't have felt as sharp in Donne's 17th-century London accent. But these subtle mismatches do fit right in with the way this poem often plays with irregularity: even as the speaker vainly hopes to "fetter[]" his feelings in rhyme, his rhymes aren't even that tightly "fetter[ed]" to each other!

## 👤💬 SPEAKER

A wit, a lover, a philosopher, and a poet, the speaker of "The Triple Fool" seems an awful lot like John Donne himself. This poem's simultaneous cynicism and sincerity is classic Donne: Donne's poems often unite a deep skepticism about love and art with intense, passionate feeling.

But the reader doesn't absolutely have to interpret this speaker as Donne. The speaker could be a voice for any suffering poet who has tried to relieve their feelings in verse—and then found that poems have ideas and lives beyond their writers' intentions.

What separates this speaker from a lot of other lovelorn writers is his focus, not so much on love, but on love *poetry*. Here, the speaker's attempt to "fetter[]" his heartbreak by putting it into verse turns into a philosophical reflection on the

relationship between feeling and art. This self-deprecating, rueful, heartbroken speaker at least has his own alert mind to keep him company.

## 🌄 SETTING

While there's no particular setting in this poem, its ideas and events suggest that it's taking place in Donne's own Jacobean London. The speaker's ideas about what poetry and music might be for—and how they might work on people's feelings—are grounded in 16th- and 17th-century thought. (Just for instance, see the very first lines of *Twelfth Night* for a famous speech on the relationship of music to love.)

The action of this poem, in which a musician sets the speaker's words to music, also fits into Donne's literary world. During Donne's lifetime, poets (who were mostly from the educated upper and middle classes) often only shared their work with a close circle of friends; wider publication was often seen as rather vulgar, and Donne's own works didn't appear in print until after his death.

But even so, poetry could develop a life of its own. It wouldn't have been uncommon for "some man" or another to make a song out of a manuscript that was doing the rounds.

## ⓘ CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne (1572-1631) was an intense and complex poetic personality: he wrote witty, cerebral poems about love and passionate, sexual poems about God. Known for his elaborate conceits, he's considered one of the most important of the metaphysical poets, a group of 17th-century writers including George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Thomas Traherne. These poets didn't see themselves as a movement at the time; it's only in retrospect that they've been grouped together as writers of intricate, ingenious, and sometimes mystical verse.

While Donne is now remembered primarily as a poet, he mostly worked as a clergyman, becoming the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. He didn't publish any of his poetry during his lifetime; in 17th-century literary circles, publication in print was often seen as a bit vulgar, as it opened one's work up to anyone who had money to buy a book. (And the regret the speaker of "The Triple Fool" feels over having shared his own verse suggests that publication also makes poets vulnerable to emotional danger!) Instead, Donne shared his handwritten manuscripts among his friends. "The Triple Fool" didn't appear in print until 1633, two years after Donne's death.

Donne and the other metaphysical poets fell out of favor after their deaths. Even the term "metaphysical poets" comes from Samuel Johnson's disapproving and dismissive summation of

Donne and his contemporaries. But 19th-century Romantic poets like Coleridge rediscovered Donne's work, and by the time Modernism rolled around in the 20th century, Donne's reputation had been fully revived. Writers like T.S. Eliot and Yeats considered Donne a major influence.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John Donne lived and wrote during a time of intense change. He was born at the end of an era, growing up during the last years of Elizabeth I's reign. After a rocky start, Elizabeth stabilized an England still thrown into turmoil by religious schism: her father Henry VIII's decision to split from the Pope and found his own national Church of England led to generations of conflict and bloodshed between English Protestants and Catholic loyalists. Elizabeth's political skill, her dramatic military victories against the Spanish, and her canny decision to present herself as an almost supernatural, Artemis-like "Virgin Queen" all helped to create a new sense of English national identity in the midst of chaos.

The ambitious Donne first gained a political foothold as a courtier in Elizabeth's service, but he was ignominiously thrown into prison when he eloped with Anne More, the daughter of an important official. By the time he was released, reconciled with his father-in-law, and returned to polite society, he had to work his way into the favor of a whole new monarch: James I, who took the throne in 1603.

James's court was worldly, intellectual, and superstitious all at once. James was a patron of the arts and sciences, but also pious in a rather paranoid way, anxious about demons and witches. Luckily for Donne, James was impressed with his poetry. But James was also convinced that Donne would make an outstanding clergyman, and refused to accept him as a run-of-the-mill courtier, instead insisting that he become a priest. James finally made Donne Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London—an important post that Donne was hesitant to accept at first. But as James had predicted, Donne became a passionate and influential Anglican preacher.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Celebration of Donne — Watch a celebration of Donne (during which, appropriately enough, some of his poems are set to music) from St. Paul's Cathedral in London, of which Donne was a famous Dean. (https://youtu.be/TaPkcphHzmw)

- A Donne Rediscovery — Read about a recently rediscovered volume of Donne's poetry, written by hand—and learn about why he didn't want his poetry widely published during his lifetime! (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/dec/06/the-book-of-love-400-year-old-tome-of-john-donnes-poems-is-unveiled)

- Poems (1633) — Learn more about John Donne's book Poems, the collection in which "The Triple Fool" was first posthumously published. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-john-donnes-poems-1633)

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to actor Richard Burton reading the poem aloud. (https://youtu.be/L3NY-mznMpQ)

- A Short Biography — Learn more about John Donne's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

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

## HOW TO CITE

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