A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

POEM TEXT

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did, and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

SUMMARY

The speaker opens with an image of good men dying quietly, softly urging their souls to leave their bodies. These virtuous deaths are so imperceptible that the dying men's friends disagree about whether or not the men have stopped breathing yet.

The speaker argues that he and the lover he's bidding farewell to should take these deaths as a model, and part ways silently. They should not give in to the temptation to weep and sigh excessively. In fact, grieving so openly would degrade their private love by broadcasting it to ordinary people.

Natural earthly disturbances, such as earthquakes, hurt and scare human beings. Ordinary people notice these events happening and wonder what they mean. However, the movements of the heavens, while being larger and more significant, go unnoticed by most people.

Boring, commonplace people feel a kind of love that, because it depends on sensual connection, can't handle separation. Being physically apart takes away the physical bond that their love depends on.

The speaker and his lover, on the other hand, experience a more rare and special kind of bond. They can't even understand it themselves, but they are linked mentally, certain of one another on a non-physical plane. Because of this, it matters less to them when their bodies are apart.

The souls of the lovers are unified by love. Although the speaker must leave, their souls will not be broken apart. Instead, they will expand to cover the distance between them, as fine metal expands when it is hammered.

If their souls are in fact individual, they are nevertheless linked in the way the legs of a drawing compass are linked. The soul of the lover is like the stationary foot of the compass, which does not appear to move itself but actually does respond to the other foot's movement.

This stationary compass foot sits in the center of a paper. When the other compass foot moves further away, the stationary foot changes its angle to lean in that direction, as if longing to be nearer to its partner. As the moving foot returns, closing the compass, the stationary foot stands straight again, seeming alert and excited.

The speaker's lover, he argues, will be like his stationary foot,

while he himself must travel a circuitous, indirect route. Her fixed position provides him with the stability to create a perfect circle, which ends exactly where it began—bringing the speaker back to his lover once again.

THEMES

LOVE AND DISTANCE

John Donne wrote "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" on the occasion of his separation from his wife, Anne, on diplomatic business. The poem concerns what happens when two lovers have to part, and explains the spiritual unification that makes this particular parting essentially unimportant. The speaker argues that separation should not matter to him and his lover because genuine love transcends physical distance.

A valediction is a farewell. Donne's title, however, explicitly prohibits grief about saying goodbye (hence the subtitle of "Forbidden Mourning") because the speaker and his lover are linked so strongly by spiritual bonds that their separation has little meaning. Indeed, the speaker characterizes himself and his lover as "Inter-assured of the mind." Donne created this compound word—which combines the prefix "inter," meaning mutually and reciprocally, with "assured," meaning confident, secure, or dependable—to emphasize that the two lovers are linked by a mutual mental certainty about their love. They are so close in this way that the separation of their bodies doesn't mean much.

The speaker further assures his lover that their souls, as well as their minds, are unified. Physical separation doesn't "breach" or break this bond. Instead, their souls expand outward to cover the distance between them, as a soft metal is beaten to spread thinly over a larger surface area.

The speaker introduces the most detailed simile in the poem when he compares the soul of himself and his lover to the two legs of a drafting compass, in order to explain how they are still connected even when physically apart. The addressee of the poem is the "fixed foot" of the compass, the point that stays on the paper. The speaker is the moving point, which draws the circle. Although one leg of the compass doesn't move, the speaker points out that it "leans" as the other leg moves farther, making a wider circle, and "grows erect" when the other leg comes nearer.

The speaker asserts that his lover will play the "fixed foot" to his moving foot. Although the speaker "must" travel away, he will remain on a "just" path, correct and faithful. Together, the legs of the compass create a circle, which has an associative resonance with the spheres in stanza 4. In the popular philosophy of the time, circles and spheres represented perfection, harmony. The speaker's faith in his lover's "firmness" will make him trace a perfect circle, which ends precisely where it began. This ending also implies a promise of return, since the speaker intends to "end where I begun," coming back to his lover after his travels. True love, in the speaker's summation, not only can withstand any separation, but will always bring lovers back to each other.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 5
- Lines 17-36

PHYSICAL LOVE VS. SPIRITUAL LOVE

The speaker of Donne's poem argues that visible grief at the lovers' parting would be a "profanation of our joys"—that is, that to loudly mourn would belittle the love the couple shares by proclaiming it to the ordinary world. Yet even as the poem urges a reliance on the power of spiritual connection in order to soften the pain of separation, it presents such connection as rare. The speaker disparages more ordinary, earthly love, as well as any bold proclamations of feeling, as indicative of the need for physical proximity. In doing so, he elevates the quiet surety he shares with his partner as the mark of true, spiritual love.

The speaker begins by describing the quiet deaths of "virtuous men." These deaths are almost imperceptible as the men "whisper to their souls to go," indicating their readiness for death with the smallest possible sound. Their watching friends in fact have difficulty telling whether or not their breathing has actually stopped, because it is already so subtle and faint. The speaker argues that his parting with his lover should imitate the quiet quality of the deaths he describes. He cautions against "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests," the usual signs of separation, because they make the grief of parting too readily apparent to others. Their particular kind of love, he claims, would be degraded by letting other people know about it. The parting he wants is thus invisible to the outside world. It doesn't make a sound, or show signs of physical grief like tears and sighs.

By referring to the rest of the world as "the laity" (usually used to contrast ordinary people with clergy), the speaker also implies a religious element to the love he shares. He and his lover have a sacred spiritual bond, which other people cannot understand. In this way, the speaker further indicates that the love he's talking about is different from the usual kind. The speaker then contrasts movements of the earth (possibly referring to earthquakes and similar natural disasters) with the "trepidation of the spheres" (although it's commonly used to indicate anxiety and fear, an archaic meaning of the word "trepidation" is a physical trembling motion). The speaker points out that disturbances of the earth are very noticeable, causing "harms and fears." This is an implied analogy for the troubles of ordinary lovers, whose separations are stormy and

public. In contrast, the trembling of the cosmos (according to the Ptolemaic model), while actually much more significant, goes unnoticed by people on earth. For the speaker, then, his parting with his lover should follow this example. It's a massive event, yet must remain invisible to outsiders.

The speaker goes on to stress that his refined, highly mental conception of love is different from that of "dull sublunary lovers," who need concrete proximity to one another. "Sublunary" means both "under the moon" and "mundane" or "worldly." Donne thus refers to popular love poetry's use of the moon as a romantic image, yet dismisses this as earth-bound and boring. The "soul" of commonplace love is "sense," or physical sensation. This kind of love cannot cope with absence, because it is essentially about sharing pleasures of the body.

The speaker and his lover, in contrast, have a connection of mind and soul that makes physical presence less important. For them, love has been "so much refined" that it is beyond even their understanding. What they can understand is the link between them, which goes beyond ordinary romantic and sexual feeling. They are "Inter-assured of the mind," and so do not need their bodies to be near each other in order to preserve their love. In this way, Donne implicitly separates mundane, worldly love from what, in his eyes, is more genuine, spiritual connection.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-20
- Lines 21-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No:

The opening stanza of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" sets up the first half of an analogy that will continue in the second stanza. By beginning with the word "As," the speaker signals that he will be comparing the opening image with something else. This strategy keeps the reader alert through the description, as they wait for the completion of the analogy. The stanza ends with a colon, signaling the end of the image and a transition to the argument.

The opening image presents the death of "virtuous men" who pass away without a fuss, almost unnoticeably. They "whisper to their souls to go," giving a quiet indication that they accept death. This passing is almost invisible to their friends, who disagree about whether or not it has even happened yet.

Donne makes the moral goodness of these men explicit, and this sets up the implication that their way of dying is a positive example.

Donne also uses soft, gentle sounds to underline this image of restraint. The hardest consonant in the stanza is the "p" in "pass." The rest of the words have mild consonants, echoing the quietness of the described deaths. This stanza also includes a lot of sibilance, with no less than 12 instances of "s" sounds contributing to the image's hushed atmosphere. When read aloud, sibilance forcibly slows down the poem and lowers its volume. Because "s" is an unvoiced consonant, it forces the reader to "whisper" along with the dying men. It is also difficult to speak a lot of "s" sounds quickly in sequence (as popular tongue-twisters demonstrate). The language of these lines, then, echoes the pace of the slow, calm death they describe.

LINES 5-8

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

The second stanza completes the opening sentence, and moves on to the meat of the speaker's argument. He says that the parting of two lovers should be as quiet as the deaths he described in the first stanza. They should not show the physical effects of grief, because this would make their bond visible to the outside world, which would "profane" it.

There are a few interesting things happening in this stanza. The use of the word "melt" is striking, as it can only be metaphorical (people don't really "melt" in a literal sense). The word refers to parting, but it is a gentle way of talking about a separation. It invokes the melting of ice or snow, a kind of warm dissolving sensation. This mildness supports the speaker's conception of an ideal goodbye: it looks easy and fluid from the outside, and happens without a fanfare.

In the stanza's second line, Donne invents two compound words. "Tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests" are both hyperbolic ways of describing visible signs of grief. In contrast to the gentle thaw of the previous stanza, this is intense weather. The hyperbole subtly paints physical mourning as absurd and embarrassing. People who exhibit floods of tears and windstorms of sighs are showing off their grief, making themselves appear ridiculous or in need of validation. The speaker cautions his lover that they shouldn't let other people see how upset they are about parting, as to do so would be degrading.

The use of "profanation" and "laity" make it clear that the speaker considers his love spiritual, even religious. "Profane" is an antonym of "sacred." While it can mean simply "worldly," or unrelated to religion, it is most commonly used to talk about corruption or sacrilege. "Laity" refers to people who aren't clergy members. By using the term to describe people outside

of his bond with his lover, the speaker implies that this bond is special, sacred, on another plane from the love of mere lay people. Because of this, it should be private. Opening it up to the gaze of outsiders would corrupt it.

The stanza keeps up the gentle sounds of the first stanza. Although there is less sibilance here, there are several instances of consonance: "melt," "make," and "move"; "tear" and "tempests"; "laity" and "love." These repeated consonant sounds create a sense of musical harmony, upholding the speaker's implicit portrayal of his love as divinely harmonious.

LINES 9-12

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did, and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

In the third stanza, the speaker moves into an argument about natural disturbances, both on the earth and outside it. Although he doesn't explicitly link it to the rest of his argument, this stanza acts as a metaphor for the speaker's bond with his lover. It draws a distinction between earthly and heavenly events, which the speaker will then turn to in order to differentiate spiritual love from the ordinary, physical kind.

The first line of the stanza includes a contraction. Donne shortens "the" with an apostrophe, indicating that it should be read as one syllable with "earth." This kind of a contraction was common enough in poetry at the time, giving poets more flexibility with their meter. However, it does produce a slight hiccup in the smoothness of the line, which resonates with the shake-up he is describing.

"Moving of th' earth" probably refers to earthquakes and similar natural disasters. As the speaker points out, these have very obvious effects, and cause people to comment about them. This is implicitly tied to the "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests" of the previous stanza. The parting of ordinary lovers is like an earthquake: noisy and visible to everyone.

The speaker contrasts these earthly movements with "trepidation of the spheres," which may be much more significant than an earthquake, but which is invisible to people on earth. Though today "trepidation" usually refers to nervousness or anxiety, its use here means a trembling motion. Ptolemy's model of the cosmos put the earth at the center of several concentric spheres, a theory which persisted well past Donne's time. In the Ptolemaic model of the universe, the trembling of the outermost sphere has a massive effect on the stars and planets within it. This heavenly trembling is like the noiseless parting that the speaker idealizes. It causes important events, but goes unnoticed by most human beings, who take these events for granted. It is "innocent," meaning that it does no harm.

The shape of Ptolemy's spheres and their system of movement, for later Christian philosophers, represented the ideal harmony of a world designed by God. By referencing the spheres, then, the speaker again makes an implication that the connection between himself and his lover is holy, divinely ordered, higher than ordinary love.

LINES 13-16

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker explains his understanding of the kind of ordinary lovers who would make a big show of parting from each other. He characterizes them as "dull," or boring and unremarkable. He also calls them "sublunary," a word which means both "under the moon" and "mundane" or "worldly." This word again heightens his belief that *his* love, by contrast, is not of this world, but rather is something higher. Here Donne also slyly mocks conventional love poetry, which often links the moon with passion and romance. For the speaker, a devotion to the moon is uninspired.

The speaker further describes ordinary love as essentially physical, and therefore limited. Its "soul is sense," meaning that it depends on bodily sensation. These lovers must see and touch one another in order to fulfill their love. Because of this, a separation removes the necessary elements of their connection. Common lovers cannot part from each other without a struggle, because a physical bond is all they have.

The first line of this stanza demonstrates heavy alliteration, with the repetition of "l" sounds in the stressed syllable of every word (note that some people believe that alliteration only counts when it occurs in the *first* syllable of each word, as opposed to in the *stressed* syllables; those people would describe this line as having consonance but not alliteration). Because "l" is a relatively long consonant sound, its repetition slows down the line. It submerges the reader in the dullness of commonplace love.

LINES 17-20

But we by a love so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Stanza 5 contrasts the speaker and his lover with the people of the previous stanza. These two share a love that is "so much refined" that they can't completely understand its nature. What they do know is that it differentiates them from other lovers, because they do not rely on physical closeness to feel complete.

The word "refined" means both "purified" and "improved." Again, this love is higher and more sacred than other kinds of love. The speaker also characterizes himself and his lover as "inter-assured of the mind," drawing on a compound word

combining the prefix "inter," essentially meaning reciprocally, with the adjective "assured," meaning confident or secure. The two lovers, then, are linked by a mutual confidence about their bond. This gives them some freedom from the usual pain of separation. They "care less" than other lovers do about missing one another's bodies.

In the last line, the speaker lists examples of specific body parts that ordinary lovers might miss. The list is connected with commas rather than conjunctions (such as "and" or "or"). This makes the line move quickly, underlining the unimportance of these physical parts; they are mere items on a commonplace list. There may be another jab at conventional love poetry here, since many poets devoted their verse to praise of the features that are dismissed here. The speaker has little use for the physical elements that make up a lover, arguing that they are minor compared to the mind and soul.

LINES 21-24

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

Stanza 6 begins with an apparently paradoxical statement. The speaker refers to "Our two souls" but also says that they "are one." While it's strange to argue that two separate souls can also be one, this line most likely references the idea of marriage as a union of souls. The speaker is urging his lover to trust in the firmness of their marriage, which spiritually combines them.

The speaker argues that, although he "must go," physical separation will not cause a "breach" or break between his soul and that of his lover. Instead, their combined soul will expand, stretching out to cover the distance between them. He uses the image of beaten gold to describe how this might work. A soft metal responds to beating by spreading, growing thinner and covering more surface area the more it is worked. No matter how far the speaker goes, the connection between him and his lover will span the ground between them.

The image of gold beaten as fine as air, stretching to cover the distance between two lovers, is beautiful. However, it also suggests a certain fragility; metal beaten too thin is brittle. This perhaps is a reflection of the fact that travel can be dangerous, and the speaker cannot guarantee his safety or that of his lover while they are separated. The word "yet" underlines this fragility: he reassures his lover that their souls will not *yet* endure a break, but cannot promise this will always be true.

This stanza deviates slightly from the strong and simple end rhymes in the rest of the poem. Donne rhymes "yet" with "beat," which is a slant rhyme: the ending consonants match, but the vowel sounds of the words are different. He also rhymes "one" with "expansion," which is closer in terms of vowel sound but still not identical. The slight disturbance of the rhyme scheme here serves to underline the element of fragility in the stanza.

LINES 25-28

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.

Stanza 7 introduces the poem's central conceit, the comparison between two lovers' souls and the legs of a drawing compass. The first line reverses a little, revising the assertion about unified souls in the previous stanza. The lovers may have two separate souls, after all.

"If they are two," however, it's in the way that something like a drawing compass has two legs. There are obviously two of them, but they are still two parts of one whole. The speaker digs into his metaphor, asserting that the "fixed foot" or central point of the compass represents his lover's soul. It "makes no show/To move," staying firmly on its ground. However, if the other half of the compass is moving, the first foot does in fact move by spinning in place.

This discreet movement represents the behavior the speaker wants his lover to exhibit. Rather than making a "show" of being moved, the fixed foot confines its motions to a firm, modest rotation. This recalls the caution about "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests" in stanza 2. Again, the speaker emphasizes, parting should not look like anything dramatic to the outside world.

In this stanza, the speaker uses the archaic second-person possessive pronoun "thy" for his lover. As a personal pronoun, "thy" is now mostly associated with religious and formal contexts, or with mock-archaic language. In the 17th century, though, it was still in common use as an informal or intimate alternative to the more formal "you." By using it to speak to his lover, the speaker emphasizes the closeness between them.

LINES 29-32

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Here, the speaker goes into greater detail about the movement of the compass's fixed foot. It sits in the "center" of the circle being drawn. However, when the other foot moves further away, making a wider circle, the central one "leans," angling itself towards its other half. The speaker personifies the fixed foot, saying that it "hearkens," or yearns, after its partner. Although an inanimate object doesn't actually feel emotion about its position, the conceit allows the reader to imagine it does.

The speaker's lover must wait, like the fixed foot, but will experience longing as her soul strains towards that of the speaker. The love that connects them draws her towards him, spiritually if not physically. When the compass is closed after use, the moving foot returns to its partner. The fixed foot stops

leaning as the other "comes home," instead standing straight up.

Donne's use of the word "erect" is interesting. Literally, he is referring to the rigid, upright position of the compass's leg. In terms of the soul it represents, to be "erect" implies alertness. The soul of the speaker's lover is awake, excited for his return.

Donne is also famous for the eroticism of his poems, so the line can also be read as about sexual eagerness for the lover's arrival. Although this poem focuses on the mind and soul as the primary elements of love, the body is not completely unimportant. The speaker's lover can experience both a spiritual and a physical excitement about the reunion of their two bodies.

LINES 33-36

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

The last stanza is an affirmation, concluding the metaphor of the compass and making an assertion about how things will be. It begins with the firm statement, "Such wilt thou be to me." While it is spoken with the intimate pronoun, this line is notable for its inflexibility: the speaker is explaining how things *will* be, leaving no room for argument. He "must" make his journey, and relies on his lover to remain the fixed foot.

The speaker also refers to himself as moving "obliquely." This is literal in terms of the metaphor, since the moving foot of the compass slants back towards its other half. It runs its course, always with an inclination towards home. Similarly, the speaker will make his journey, but assures his lover that his soul will lean towards her just as her soul leans towards him. In another sense, the word "oblique" can mean roundabout or evasive. Since the poem was written on Donne's departure for a diplomatic mission, the reference to obliqueness might be about the circuitous and indirect nature of diplomacy.

The third line of this stanza makes it explicit that the speaker counts on his lover's "firmness" to keep his own course correct. The fixed point of a drawing compass must remain steadily in one place in order for the moving foot to draw a perfect circle. The speaker's lover has to remain steady for a similar reason. Her faithfulness gives him a reason to continue on his intended course, and later to return.

A perfect circle ends exactly at the point where it began. It is "just," or correct and accurate. If the speaker's lover is stable, he will be able to return to her just as he left. In another sense of "just," his lover's stability *justifies* the speaker's journey, makes it the right thing to do.

By comparing their relationship to a device for drawing perfect circles, the speaker again links his love with the divine perfection of the spheres. The love he describes is part of a heavenly system, one that includes both reason and mystery.

SYMBOLS

SPHERES AND CIRCLES

Spheres and circles make frequent appearances in Donne's work. For him, they represent eternity, and the perfection of a divinely-ordered universe. In "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," he compares true love to spheres and to circles, as a way of demonstrating love's power, beauty, and endurance.

In stanza 3, the speaker contrasts movements of the earth with "trepidation of the spheres," referencing the ancient astronomical theory that the universe is arranged as a series of concentric spheres. On earth, which was seen as existing within the "sublunary" sphere, things grow, change, and die. The outer spheres are eternal, and their movements are regular, circular, perfectly arranged. In this third stanza, then, the spheres symbolize the speaker's relationship with his lover. Unlike ordinary lovers, they move apart and together by divine plan. Their love is not influenced by minor changes on earth, like temporary separation.

The poem's central conceit is the image of a drafting compass, which the speaker uses to talk about the motion of joined souls. He describes the compass as it creates a circle, which ends at the same point where it began. The circle represents eternity, an escape from time. It defeats mortality by turning its end into a beginning. It symbolizes an enduring love, which returns to its source unchanged by time apart.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "spheres"
- **Line 26:** "compasses"
- **Line 35:** "circle"
- **Line 36:** "And makes me end where I begun"

POETIC DEVICES

SIMILE

In a poem packed with figurative language and extended, unlikely comparisons, one simile stands out as particularly simple and beautiful. In stanza 6, the speaker talks about the expansion of souls that are spiritually joined but physically distant. In line 24, he explains this expansion with a concrete simile:

> Like gold to airy thinness beat.

Beaten metal expands to cover more surface area, while becoming thinner. In this simile, a very valuable metal is beaten so thin that it is the texture of air. It becomes a part of the

atmosphere between the separated lovers. This simile serves to underline the precious quality of the bond between two lovers. For the speaker, it is as fine and rare as gold. Like gold, it is also capable of withstanding expansion. There also may be a hint of fragility in this image, since thinly beaten metal becomes easier to break. However, the dominant sense of the simile is that the linked souls are weightless and boundary-less, able to cover as much distance as necessary.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "As virtuous men pass mildly away, "
- **Line 24:** "Like gold to airy thinness beat. "
- **Lines 25-26:** "If they be two, they are two so / As stiff twin compasses are two; "

CONCEIT

The metaphor of the compass serves as this poem's central conceit. Donne's poetry is well-known for its use of conceits, which he uses to explain or argue something by an unlikely analogy. In this particular instance, the poem's speaker compares the twin feet of a drafting compass to the souls of true lovers.

This conceit extends over the last three stanzas of the poem, as the speaker obsessively details his argument. He analyzes every action of the compass's feet, explaining how it represents the link between two souls that are separated by physical distance.

In this poem, the conceit exists to make a detailed explanation of how the speaker feels. It uses a concrete object to express an abstract relation, making the point clearer and more persuasive to the reader. The reader of the poem is encouraged to imagine the soul in a new way, and understand the possibilities that this imagining presents. If two souls really behave like the points of a compass, there is no need to fear and mourn a separation.

Finally, this conceit is also a rather showy move, proving that the speaker (and the poet) are clever enough to make a natural-seeming connection between a drafting tool and two human souls. As with many poems under the umbrella of metaphysical poetry, it's partly an example of technique; the brilliance of the speaker's logical thought is an important virtue here.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-36:** "If they be two, they are two so / As stiff twin compasses are two; / Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show / To move, but doth, if the other do. / And though it in the center sit, / Yet when the other far doth roam, / It leans and hearkens after it, / And grows erect, as that comes home. / Such wilt thou be to me, who must, / Like th' other foot, obliquely run; / Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end where I begun. "

HYPERBOLE

The speaker uses hyperbole to ridicule common ways of expressing grief about parting. He refers to "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests," cautioning against public display of mourning. He implies that the kind of people who would show wild emotion about separation are not experiencing true, spiritual love.

Tears do not actually come in floods, and sighs can't create a violent windstorm. This hyperbolic language is about what the speaker sees when he looks at ordinary people crying and sighing about their grief. He thinks of these expressions as excessive and ridiculous. Because they are public, they degrade the quality of privacy that he believes genuine feelings should have.

These outbursts are also bound to the earth, being linked to mundane natural events. Because of this, they stand in contrast to the love the speaker and his lover share, which is more closely linked to heavenly bodies and their movements.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "tear-floods," "sigh-tempests"

ALLITERATION

"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" contains several instances of alliteration, although most of them don't extend beyond two or three repeated sounds. For the most part, these exist to provide a musical effect within the poem. Because this is a poem about the harmony of true spiritual love, it makes sense to harness the music of language to underline this harmony.

Alliteration is particularly present in the poem's last stanza, which is full of "m" sounds:

> Such wilt thou be to me, who must,

is followed by

> Thy firmness makes my circle just,
> And makes me end where I begun.

This trove of "m" sounds gives the last stanza warmth and musical depth. It also draws attention to the words with those sounds, which are all important to the speaker's argument. Although he "must" go on his journey, the "firmness" of his lover "makes" him faithful, and ensures his return.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “some,” “sad,” “say”
- **Line 4:** “some say”
- **Line 5:** “melt, and make,” “no noise”
- **Line 8:** “laity our love”
- **Line 13:** “Dull sublunary lovers' love”
- **Lines 14-15:** “admit / Absence”
- **Line 16:** “Those things”
- **Line 33:** “me, who must”
- **Line 35:** “firmness makes my”
- **Line 36:** “makes me”

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" are end-stopped, finishing a complete phrase or sentence with its appropriate punctuation. Donne does use enjambment sparingly. Where it occurs, it serves mostly to keep the poem going. For example, line 7 reads:

> 'Twere profanation of our joys

This doesn't make sense (*what* would be profanation of their joys?) until the reader moves on to the next line, which completes the sentence. The brief question keeps the reader involved, asking what comes next.

Stanza 4 includes the most enjambment, which lends a little confusion and instability to the complete sentence it contains. None of the lines in this stanza stand on their own grammatically. The "sublunary" love the speaker describes in this stanza is also unstable, unable to stand on its own without the support of bodily closeness. The form of the stanza echoes its meaning, if only in a subtle way.

The two instances of enjambment in stanza 7, by contrast, propel's the poem's main conceit forward, pushing the reader to appreciate the novelty and cleverness of the comparison between the lovers and the drafting compass.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** “'Twere profanation of our joys / To tell the laity our love.”
- **Lines 13-16:** “Dull sublunary lovers' love / (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit / Absence, because it doth remove / Those things which elemented it.”
- **Lines 25-26:** “If they be two, they are two so / As stiff twin compasses are two”
- **Lines 27-28:** “Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show / To move, but doth, if the other do.”

DIACOPE

Donne uses elaborative diacope in lines 25 and 26, with the triple repetition of "two":

> If they be two, they are two so
> As stiff twin compasses are two;

This repetition develops the idea of souls being separate, and brings the speaker into the final argument where he explains how two things can also be one.

The first "two" doubles back on a previous statement. While the previous stanza argues that the souls of the lovers are "one," this phrase admits that they may also exist separately. However, *if* they are two, they are "so" in a different way than one might expect. They are, in fact, like the two halves of a joined object.

The effect of this triple repetition is to emphasize the word "two," drawing attention to the apparent paradox that the speaker is about to solve. It is something like the action of a magician, who directs attention towards the apparent subject of a trick while secretly preparing the actual effect.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 25:** “If they be two, they are two so ”
- **Line 26:** “ As stiff twin compasses are two; ”

APOSTROPHE

This is a poem with a clear audience. The speaker is addressing a lover he is about to leave behind for a journey. The main effect of the apostrophe in this poem is a feeling of intimacy. It's a direct address, a private argument, a love letter. Since Donne wrote mostly for his own personal purposes, not for publication, the poem is truly intimate.

One element that heightens the emotional closeness between the speaker and his audience is the use of the archaic second person pronoun, "thou." Contemporary use of "thou" is mostly religious and formal, sometimes mockingly so. However, in the 17th century the form still persisted as a *less* formal mode of address. "You" was for respect and unfamiliarity. "Thou" conveyed affection, familiarity, or contempt. It could be used to address one's friends and family, or one's social inferiors. By using this pronoun for his addressee, the speaker shows that they are close, familiar with one another.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Line 5
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 21-32
- Lines 27-28
- Lines 33-36

PERSONIFICATION

The metaphor of the compass contains an element of personification. In order for the speaker to fully explain the

connection between the legs of the compass and two joined souls, he attributes emotion to the inanimate object's action. He does this with one word, "hearkens," imagining that one foot of the compass is actively listening for signs of the other. Since a compass cannot literally listen, this action is more clearly about the behavior of the human beings in the poem.

However, imagining that the compass *does* listen, one can imagine that its other actions are also caused by emotion. One foot "leans" in the direction of its twin because it longs to be reunited. It "grows erect" on the other's return because it is alert, excited to be joined again. Personifying the compass allows the speaker to more explicitly draw the connection between his example and the actual events he's talking about. It also gives the reader a deeper reason to care about the image, understanding the device's movements as an indication of emotion.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 31:** "It leans and hearkens after it, "

METAPHOR

Metaphors are an integral feature of the school of metaphysical poetry, and Donne's work is packed with them. "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is no exception. The poem's central metaphor is that of the drafting compass, which is compared to the lovers' souls. This is considered the conceit of the poem.

Another important example of metaphor comes in stanza 3, which contrasts earthly disasters with heavenly disturbances. The speaker does not draw an explicit connection between these events and the subject of the rest of the poem. It is obvious from context, though, that he is continuing to contrast the parting of ordinary lovers with the separation of true spiritual partners.

"Moving of th' earth," most likely referring to earthquakes and similar events, is in the same arena as the "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests" the speaker warns against. Common lovers express their grief at parting in an overblown, destructive way. It is, for them, the end of the world. The metaphor of earthquakes passes a judgment on public mourning: it's harmful, noisy, and upsetting for other people.

In contrast, the speaker presents the "trepidation of the spheres," referring to ancient ideas about the trembling of the cosmos. Heavenly vibrations cause the seasons and move the planets, but are invisible to those on earth. Similarly, the parting of true lovers is a huge and important event, but shouldn't be apparent to the rest of the world. The speaker uses this comparison to uphold the sacred, mysterious quality of the love he shares with his partner.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "So let us melt, and make no noise, "
- **Lines 9-10:** "Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears, / Men reckon what it did, and meant; "
- **Lines 11-12:** "But trepidation of the spheres, / Though greater far, is innocent. "
- **Lines 25-36:** "If they be two, they are two so / As stiff twin compasses are two; / Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show / To move, but doth, if the other do. / And though it in the center sit, / Yet when the other far doth roam, / It leans and hearkens after it, / And grows erect, as that comes home. / Such wilt thou be to me, who must, / Like th' other foot, obliquely run; / Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end where I begun. "

PARADOX

Line 21 contains a paradox, in which the speaker claims that "two souls" can also be "one." Since two separate things cannot at the same time be one thing, this claim requires some explanation.

One way to read the paradox is in terms of religious concepts of marriage. Donne was raised as a Catholic, and later ordained as an Anglican priest. Theology is heavily present in his poems. Because of this, his paradox in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" likely references the Biblical concept of two people becoming "one flesh" through marriage. Donne takes this idea a step further, imagining that marriage also combines two souls into one.

Donne's poetry often features the conflict of two things that apparently contradict each other. In this poem, the effect of the paradox is to heighten emotion through apparent contradiction, and move the argument forward. The lovers are two separate people, but feel themselves to be part of the same soul. This is a conflict between reason and emotional understanding, which gives the poem momentum to move into the final explanation.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "Our two souls therefore, which are one, "

VOCABULARY

Tear-floods (Line 6) - This compound word combines tears with "floods," massive overflowings of water. The speaker is talking hyperbolically about the melodramatic amounts of tears shed by commonplace lovers when they part.

Sigh-tempests (Line 6) - Again using hyperbole, the speaker combines sighs (loud breathing that expresses an emotion such as sadness) with "tempests," which are violent, windy storms.

This combination is meant to highlight the absurdity of showy grieving.

Profanation (Line 7) - "Profane" is an antonym for "sacred." It can mean simply "non-religious," but usually has connotations of irreverence and sacrilege. "Profanation" is blasphemous or cheapening behavior, which may strip something holy of its goodness. Here, the speaker uses "profanation" to explain that attention from ordinary people would degrade a love he considers sacred.

Laity (Line 8) - "The laity" refers to "lay" or non-ordained people, as opposed to members of the clergy like priests or nuns. The speaker is using the language of religion to explain how ordinary people are separate from his love and incapable of understanding it. The speaker and his lover are ordained in a religion of shared spiritual love. Everyone else is an outsider.

Trepidation (Line 11) - Trepidation in contemporary use refers to fear and anxiety. However, the older meaning is a literal trembling, vibrating motion. The speaker is talking about the movement of the universe, referring to ancient philosophical theories of astronomy like Ptolemy's model of the cosmos, in which the stars and planets are contained in a series of concentric spheres. In Ptolemy's system, "trepidation" of the outermost sphere of the universe causes changes in the whole cosmos. These shifts, the speaker argues, are immense but not noticeable to those on earth.

Spheres (Line 11) - A sphere is a round, solid shape, the three-dimensional version of a circle.Here, the speaker is referencing the scientific and philosophical use of spheres in astronomy, particularly the theories of Ptolemy. The Ptolemaic model of the cosmos places the earth at the center of a system of concentric crystalline spheres, which control the motion of the sun, the stars, and the various planets.Ptolemy used "trembling" of the outermost sphere to explain various events, like equinoxes, that didn't have another explanation at the time. Here, the speaker points out that such movements have no harmful effect, although they hold enormous sway over the earth.

Sublunary (Line 13) - Sublunary means "under the moon." The word can refer to literal placement in the moonlight, or refer to something controlled by the moon. It can also mean mundane or earthly. To be under the moon, one has to be earthbound.

Elemented (Line 16) - The elements of a thing are its parts—those things that make it what it is. Scientifically, the elements are the basic substances that make up all matter on the planet. To be "elemented" by something is to be made of it. The love of "sublunary lovers" is thus made of their bodies and their shared sensations.

Refined (Line 17) - Something is "refined" when it has been purified of unwanted elements. Refinement can mean that something is distilled, or concentrated to its purest form. It implies that its object has been worked on until it is perfect. It can also refer to elegance and distinction.

Inter-assured (Line 19) - This is the third compound word in the poem. "Inter-assured" combines the prefix "inter," meaning "mutually, reciprocally, between," with "assured," meaning "confident, positive, reliable." To be inter-assured, then, is to be mutually confident, sharing a solid common foundation.

Breach (Line 23) - A breach is a break or gap. It can be used concretely: for example, a "breach in the wall" would be a physical rupture. It can also be used abstractly: for example, "a breach between father and son" would mean an estrangement, a distance between two people.

Compasses (Line 26) - The "compasses" of this poem refer to a drafting compass, which is a technical instrument used to draw circles or arcs. Compasses are a common tool, used in mathematics, architecture, navigation, and many other subjects.

Hearkens (Line 31) - To "hearken" is to listen. This is an archaic word, not really present in contemporary English except in the phrase "hearken back to," meaning to reference or evoke something previously mentioned.

Obliquely (Line 34) - "Obliquely" means "at an angle" or "indirectly." In geometry, it is a line, figure, or surface inclined at any angle that isn't a right angle. More abstractly, it can refer to something evasive or roundabout.

Just (Line 35) - "Just" can have multiple meanings here. It references something correct or perfect—in the context of the poem's central conceit, Donne is saying that his lover's influence makes his own path a perfect circle. It keeps him in line, essentially, even as he travels away from his lover, and ensures that he ends up where he started—that is, beside his lover once again. "Just" can also mean that something is proper or righteous, thereby implying that the speaker's path away from his lover remains upstanding; he will not stray or betray her trust.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is a set of nine quatrains, resulting in 36 lines total. The poem does not follow any particular verse form, but is consistent in terms of the length and style of its stanzas. Each stanza is grammatically complete, and all except the first conclude with an end-stopped sentence.

While Donne often invented complicated formal patterns for his poems, this one is straightforward, moving along with the development of a rhetorical argument. The simplicity of the poem's form removes possible distractions from the reader, and places focus solely on the speaker's argument and central conceit.

METER

The meter of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is consistently iambic tetrameter. There are some moments of deviation from this meter. One of them, strikingly, is the opening line:

> As virtuous men pass mildly away

This line contains two very brief extra unstressed syllables in "virtuous" and "mildly," almost like ghosts in the rhythm. If read quickly enough, these extra syllables are as imperceptible as the deaths the speaker describes.

Another brief deviation from the meter comes in line 9:

> Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears

This line starts off with a jolt in the meter, giving a stressed syllable where one expects an unstressed one. This works with the subject of the line, which is about disturbances like earthquakes. A bump in the poem's rhythm echoes the shock and upheaval the speaker describes.

In line 23, the meter apparently forces the word "expansion" to cover four syllables. This echoes the literal spreading that the speaker describes, since the word itself has to stretch to cover more distance than it usually does.

> A breach, but an expansion

Overall, the simple iambic tetrameter of the poem serves the purpose of straightforward argument. There is little to distract the reader from paying attention to the progression of rhetoric.

RHYME SCHEME

"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" follows a simple alternating rhyme scheme. The first line of each stanza rhymes with the third, and the second line rhymes with the fourth in the following pattern:

ABAB

Most of the rhymes throughout the poem are straightforward perfect rhymes, granting the poem a sense of rhythmic ease that allows the speaker to draw focus to his argument and central conceit. However, there are a couple of deviations. In stanza 2 and stanza 4, Donne rhymes "love" with "move" and "remove." In contemporary English pronunciation, these are eye rhymes, since they *look* like perfect rhymes but do not sound the same. The poem's other deviation comes with "yet" and "beat" in lines 22 and 24. These are slant rhymes rather than eye rhymes, since the words include different vowels.

One thing to note is that possibly these words rhymed more closely in 17th century spoken English; the pronunciation we use today is often quite different from earlier speech.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is someone leaving on a journey, bidding farewell to a lover who must stay at home. The genders of the speaker and the lover are never explicitly mentioned, nor are any of their specific characteristics. However, we know that this poem was written on the occasion of John Donne's parting from his wife on diplomatic business. It is fair to read the speaker as Donne himself, and the lover as Anne Donne.

The speaker's goal is to present an argument about how true lovers should handle separation, and to reassure his lover that their love is capable of endurance. He wants his lover to refrain from obvious public mourning at his absence. He wants their love to be private, since he considers it a high and special kind of love, too sacred to be observed by others.

Explaining the nature of their love leads the speaker to the poem's central conceit, in which he describes their two souls as the twin feet of a drawing compass. This image, as well as the others that precede it, are meant to reassure the lover that parting is not harmful for their relationship. The speaker asks for steadfast faithfulness in his absence, and promises a return at the end of his journey.

SETTING

"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" does not take place in an explicit physical setting. Arguably, it takes place in the minds of the speaker and his lover, exploring the link between the two. The poem covers various spaces as it unfolds, beginning at the imagined deathbeds of good men. It touches on the sites of earthquakes, and moves into space to observe the disturbances of planets. It glances briefly at "sublunary lovers," who meet under the moon.

Finally, the poem moves into the space of two souls, which the reader is told to imagine as precious metal metaphorically covering a distance (the distance between England and France, if one reads the speaker of the poem as Donne himself). The final three stanzas take place on a piece of paper, on which a compass draws a circle. The compass isn't literal, however. It's a metaphor, serving to explain the abstract relationship of two souls.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Donne is often grouped as part of the "Metaphysical" school of poetry, which is a broad term coined by Samuel Johnson in the 18th century to criticize work he disliked. The general understanding of Metaphysical poetry is that it values wit and wordplay, employs inventive conceits in order to further an

argument, is often persuasive, and emphasizes the spoken quality of its language. Critics of the Metaphysical poets characterize them as cold, showy, and clumsily disrespectful towards the traditional forms of poetry.

Overviews of the poets belonging to the Metaphysical "school" usually include John Donne, George Herbert, Abraham Cowley, Andrew Marvell, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughan, among others. The poets of this school show a general influence from earlier writers like William Shakespeare and Sir Walter Raleigh. They also find material in the work of ancient philosophers, such as Plato and Ptolemy.

Donne's poems were never formally published within his life. Instead, they were circulated among friends and admirers in manuscript form. His early writing is largely erotic, celebrating courtship and sex. As his life continued, his work took on a more serious tone, although it remained concerned with romantic love. His work includes bitter political satires, as well as reflections on humanity's relationship with God. "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" comes at a point in his career after his scandalous marriage to Anne More, when he was dealing with poverty, illness, and the deaths of his friends. All these elements contributed to the increasing seriousness, even gloom, of his later work.

Although Donne's work arguably influenced younger poets like Alexander Pope, John Milton, and John Dryden, it was not popular in the centuries following his death. Samuel Johnson was one of many critics who characterized Donne and his contemporaries as shallowly witty and unskilled. The later poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Browning expressed admiration for Donne, but it was not until the early 20th century that his poems were widely rehabilitated by the Modernist movement, with the particular championing of William Butler Yeats and T.S. Eliot.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John Donne's marriage to Anne More Donne took place under inauspicious circumstances. He was working as secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, and Anne was the daughter of Egerton's brother-in-law, Sir George More. They carried on a courtship, marrying secretly in 1601. When the marriage was revealed, More had Donne thrown into prison and attempted to have the marriage annulled.

While this effort failed, and More was eventually reconciled with his son-in-law, it was a rocky beginning to a marriage that would see many difficulties. The Donnes lived in relative poverty for most of their relationship. They had many children, and both of them suffered from various illnesses. In order to stay financially solvent, Donne was forced to travel frequently. Anne More Donne died during childbirth in 1617, while he was away on a business trip like that described in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning."

In 1611, when John Donne composed "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," England was in between two times of massive change: the Reformation and the Enlightenment period. The advances of science and an increasing political instability encouraged thinkers to explore ideas of utopia, egalitarianism, and progress. Literacy was expanding immensely, and European economies developing at a much faster rate than in the past. In writing, reason and logic were emphasized, and rhetorical ability was a virtue in poetry as well as other arenas.

Donne, who was employed as a lawyer and as an assistant in diplomatic affairs, had a deep engagement with political life that extended to his poetry. His satirical work criticizes public figures and policies, and exhibits the opinion that the world is largely degenerate, corrupted, and far from grace. Raised as a Catholic at a time when practicing this faith was punishable in England, he saw his brother die while in prison for harboring a priest. Donne himself converted to Anglicanism, and became a highly respected cleric. His later work turned intensely towards religion as the answer to the shortcomings of human systems.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- John Donne's Biography — A detailed overview of Donne's life and work, provided by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne)
- A Brief Guide to Metaphysical Poets — A short overview and explanation of Metaphysical Poetry, provided by the Academy of American Poets. (https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-metaphysical-poets)
- Ptolemaic Astronomy — A more in-depth explanation of the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos, by M.S. Mahoney. (https://www.princeton.edu/~hos/mike/texts/ptolemy/ptolemy.html)
- Listen to "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" — Audio and text of the poem, provided by the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44131/a-valediction-forbidding-mourning)
- The Reformation — A brief overview of the Protestant Reformation and its effect on Europe leading up to Donne's day. (http://history-world.org/reformation.htm)
- The Enlightenment — An overview of the Enlightenment period in Europe, following the Baroque era in which Donne and his contemporaries wrote. (https://www.history.com/topics/british-history/enlightenment)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- Death, be not proud
- The Flea

- The Good-Morrow
- The Sun Rising
- To His Mistress Going to Bed

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