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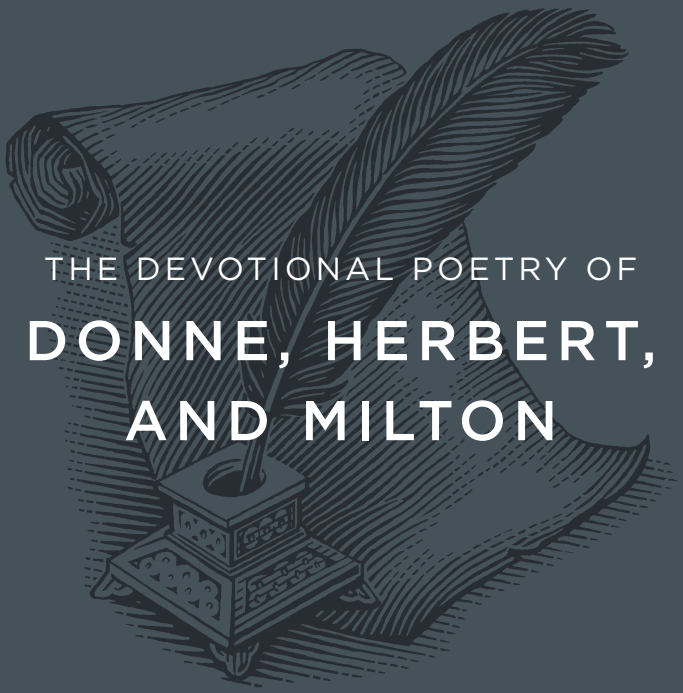

THE DEVOTIONAL POETRY OF DONNE, HERBERT, AND MILTON

LELAND RYKEN

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The Devotional Poetry of Donne, Herbert, and Milton

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Contents

Lyric Poems as Classics 7
Lyric Poems as a Genre 8
A Guide to Explicating Poetry 9
The Sonnet as a Verse Form 11
How Metaphor, Simile, and Allusion Work 12
The Content and Format of This Guide 13

JOHN DONNE

John Donne and His Poetry 15
Holy Sonnet 1: Thou Hast Made Me 16
Holy Sonnet 2: As Due by Many Titles I Resign 18
Holy Sonnet 4: O My Black Soul 20
Holy Sonnet 6: This Is My Play's Last Scene 22
Holy Sonnet 7: At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners 25
Holy Sonnet 10: Death, Be Not Proud 28
Holy Sonnet 11: Spit in My Face, You Jews 31
Holy Sonnet 14: Batter My Heart 34
Holy Sonnet 15: Wilt Thou Love God as He Thee? 37
Meditation Seventeen from *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* 40
From *Sermon 7* 43

GEORGE HERBERT

George Herbert and His Poetry 47
Aaron 48

Redemption 51
Prayer 54
Virtue 56
The Pulley 58
The Agony 60
Love (III) 62
The Elixir 64
Easter (Song) 67
The Collar 69

JOHN MILTON

John Milton and His Sonnets 75
Sonnet 7: How Soon Hath Time 76
Sonnet 9: Lady That in the Prime of Earliest Youth 79
Sonnet 14: When Faith and Love 82
Sonnet 19: When I Consider How My Light Is Spent 85
Sonnet 23: Methought I Saw My Late Espouséd Saint 89

Further Resources 93
Glossary of Literary Terms Used in This Book 94

Lyric Poems as Classics

This guide to selected devotional poems by three seventeenth-century English poets appears in a series of guides to the classics. Other guides in the series are devoted to major masterworks—epics, plays, or novels. A question that naturally arises is whether and how a short lyric poem can rank as a classic.

To answer that question, we can profitably ponder some well-known definitions of what constitutes a classic, as follows:

- Among the best of a class; of the highest quality in a group
- A work that has achieved a recognized position in literary history for its superior qualities
- A work that has gained a place for itself in our culture
- A work possessing greatness of style
- A work that lays itself permanently on the mind and prompts us to return to it again and again
- A work that has become part of the educational curriculum within a culture

It is obvious that a lyric poem can meet all these criteria. The customary exclusion of short poems from the canon of literary classics has unjustifiably deprived many readers of one of the greatest treasures.

Lyric poems possess unique qualities that make them a complement to the epics, novels, and plays that we most customarily think of as classics. Poems are short and can be mastered in a single brief reading experience. They possess qualities of compression and artistry that set them apart from other genres of literature. They are so packed with meaning that they have what C. S. Lewis called line-by-line deliciousness. Lewis also believed that one quality of a classic is that it is entirely irreplaceable by any alternative, so that when we want that particular thing, nothing else comes even close to being an adequate substitute. Reading and pondering lyric poems give us something that epics, novels, and plays do not.

Lyric poems fill their own niche among the classics. John Milton said that they "set the affections [the old word for emotions] in right tune." Romantic poet William Wordsworth similarly said that as we absorb a lyric poem "the affections are strengthened and purified," and he also claimed that the task of the lyric poet is to "rectify" people's feelings and "give them new compositions of feeling." Another Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, believed that when we read lyric poetry "the good affections are strengthened," resulting in "an exalted calm." These claims will be confirmed by the poems that are explicated in this guide.

Lyric Poems as a Genre

A lyric poem is a short poem that expresses the thoughts or feelings of a speaker. The word itself comes from Greek antiquity, when the poems were recited or sung to the accompaniment of a lyre. While it has been natural to think of lyric poems as expressing primarily the feelings of the poet or speaker in the poem, a lyric poem is just as likely to be a meditation or reflection in which the speaker enacts a process of thinking. This is especially true of devotional poetry of the type discussed in this guide. Lyric poems possess three primary traits.

First, lyrics are personal or subjective. Lyric poets speak directly instead of projecting their thoughts and feelings onto characters in a story. They speak in their own person, using the pronouns *I*, *my*, and *me*. The effect is that we overhear the speaker as he or she engages in a reflective thought process or a sequence of feelings.

Second, lyrics are identifiable by their content. Instead of telling a story, a lyric poet shares a sequence of thoughts or feelings. We can therefore divide lyric poetry into the two categories of reflective/meditative and emotional/affective. In both cases, heightened or charged language expresses more-than-ordinary insight or feeling.

Third, lyrics are brief and self-contained. They are compressed in content, capturing a feeling at its moment of greatest intensity or a thought at its moment of greatest insight and conviction. Unity of effect is important in a lyric poem.

In addition to possessing these general traits, lyric poems are structured on a three-part principle, as follows:

1. Statement of the controlling theme, which can be an idea, a feeling, or a situation to which the poet is responding. Lyric poetry is always a response to a stimulus, and the poet's first item of business is to indicate what the stimulus is.
2. Development of the controlling theme, in one or more of the following ways: (a) repetition (restating the central idea or emotion in different words and images); (b) list or catalog; (c) contrast; and (d) association (branching out from the original subject to a related one).
3. Resolution or rounding off the poem with a note of finality and closure.

A lyric poem has symmetry akin to a picture that is framed.

A Guide to Explicating Poetry

Explication is the word that literary scholars use for close reading of a text, especially a lyric poem. When readers conduct a close reading or *analysis* of a poem using the format that is described below, they follow the path that the poet has laid out. Readers collaborate with the poet in composing the poem. They are not "tearing the poem apart"; they are putting the poem together in approximately the same way that the poet followed when composing the poem.

The method of explicating a poem commended below will make more sense if we understand the type of discourse that constitutes a poem. First, the subject of lyric poetry is the same as that of all literature—human experience concretely embodied. An important part of explication is to observe and delineate as accurately as possible the exact nature of the experience(s) presented in a poem.

Second, poetry is more concentrated than prose and therefore requires more careful reading and analysis than other kinds of writing. Concentration is achieved through the use of images, symbols, allusions, metaphors, similes, emotive or evocative vocabulary, and words with multiple meanings. Each needs to have its meaning unpacked, and this requires us to ponder the details, not to hurry along. Reading poetry is a different kind of reading experience from reading a story.

Third, poetry is also a more consciously artistic performance than other kinds of writing. Robert Frost called a poem "a performance in words." Poetry relies more consistently on such elements of artistic form as pattern or design, unity, theme or centrality, balance, contrast, unified progression, recurrence, and variation. The high incidence of these elements of artistic form means that every carefully written poem contains a purely artistic dimension in addition to the subject matter. This artistry is part of the beauty that every poem communicates.

With that as a foundation, the following format describes the best way to explicate a poem. The general principle is first to see the big picture—the overriding framework—and then look at the details within that big picture. This is a mental model that carries over to many other activities in life.

The content core of a poem. The content core consists of the broadest possible things that we can say about a poem, including the following: (1) the topic or human experience that forms the basic content of the poem; (2) the theme, or interpretive slant—what the poem as a whole says *about* its subject or experience; (3) the occasion in life that gave rise to the poem and/or an implied situation within the poem (e.g., a speaker addressing God in prayer); (4) the specific genre of the poem, such as meditative lyric, sonnet, prayer, and such like. We do not know these things before we master the poem, which is a way of saying that we may discover them late rather than early in the process of mastering a poem.

Sequential structure. This refers to the organization of the poem as it progresses from beginning to end. Every poem has its own unique topical or imagistic units as it unfolds. The task of explication is to isolate the successive units and give them a name or label. In effect this is composing an outline of the poem

(though not in a mechanical way). With a carefully constructed poem, the formula of theme-and-variation is extremely useful as we divide the poem into its constituent parts. *Theme* here means controlling idea/feeling/motif. Every variation needs to be answerable to that theme. For example, in John Donne's poem "Death, Be Not Proud," the poet lists a series of reasons why death should not be proud. These are the variations on the central theme of why death should not be proud.

Contrast as structural principle. In addition to sequential structure—the organization of the poem from start to finish—poems are almost always based on one or more underlying contrasts that organize the poem throughout or in localized parts. This is the poem's "spatial structure" as contrasted to linear structure. Identifying the underlying contrast(s) works wonders in enabling us to see how a poem is organized.

Poetic texture. Having laid out the content and structure of a poem, we are ready to name and unpack the meanings of the images and figures of speech that embody the thoughts and feelings. The normal way to proceed is to start at the beginning of the poem and work our way forward. Here are the things that make up poetic texture:

- Image: a word naming a concrete thing or action.
- Imagery: the term that covers the images in a poem as a whole, or a pattern of images in a poem.
- Simile: a comparison between two phenomena, using the formula *like* or *as* ("He is like a tree planted by streams of water," Ps. 1:3).
- Metaphor: like the simile, a comparison, but it is implied, not stated by the explicit formula *like* or *as* ("The Lord is my shepherd," Ps. 23:1).
- Allusion: a reference to past history or literature.
- Symbol: an image or event having, in addition to its literal meaning, one or more conceptual meanings (e.g., light as a symbol of illumination).
- Paradox: an apparent contradiction that upon reflection is seen to express a truth. A reader must resolve the apparent contradiction.
- Oxymoron: a genuine contradiction.
- Hyperbole: conscious exaggeration for the sake of effect; a standard way of expressing strong feeling.
- Personification: attributing human qualities to something nonhuman.
- Apostrophe: addressing someone or something absent as if present.
- Connotations: the feelings, associations, or overtones that a word or image carries in addition to its denotative meaning. For example, the word *home* denotes a place of residence, but it connotes security, refuge, warmth, and family.

The goal of explication is not so much to label a figure of speech accurately (which is of very limited usefulness) but to explore and unpack the meanings embodied in the figures of speech.

The Sonnet as a Verse Form

A verse form known as the sonnet is so important to the three poets covered in this guide that it needs to be explained here at the outset. Two chief types of sonnets exist, but before we note their differences from each other, we need to define what they have in common. A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem with an intricate and fixed rhyme scheme. In English, moreover, sonnets are written in a prevailing meter consisting of ten syllables per line (called pentameter), arranged into five poetic feet, each of which consists of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable (called an iamb).

The Italian or Petrarchan sonnet. An Italian sonnet (also called Petrarchan sonnet, after the Italian poet Petrarch, who popularized it) consists of two units. The first eight lines have the fixed rhyme scheme of *abba abba*. This unit is called an octave and consists of such things as stating a doubt, asking a question, or delineating a problem—establishing something unsettling that requires a solution. The last six lines, called the sestet, resolve the doubt, answer the question, or solve the problem. The rhyme scheme of the sestet is less fixed than that of the octave; examples might be *cdcdcd* or *cdecde*. An Italian sonnet rarely ends with a couplet (consecutive lines with a common rhyming sound), though John Donne is an exception to that general rule. There is ordinarily a distinct shift or turn in the flow of thought at the beginning of line 9 called a *volta*.

The English or Shakespearean sonnet. The English sonnet (also called the Shakespearean sonnet, after Shakespeare, who popularized it) has more rhyming sounds than the Italian sonnet does and is packaged as three quatrains and a concluding couplet. The rhyme scheme is *abab cdcd efef gg*. While poets are not obligated to make the content fit those four units, usually they do. Nonetheless, sometimes the first two quatrains have the same subject matter, and sometimes the first twelve lines are a single ongoing movement. The concluding couplet aims to be aphoristic or epigrammatic (snappy, memorable), and it typically either sums up the preceding twelve lines or states a conclusion or application based on those twelve lines.

The appeal of the sonnet. The sonnet is an intricate and demanding form, and for that very reason many English poets have written some of their best poems in this format. Sonnets possess an abundance of artistry, and their brevity and formal tightness result in packed content as well.

How Metaphor, Simile, and Allusion Work

The most basic figure of speech is the image. Narrowly defined, an image is any word that names a concrete object or action. But the term is used more loosely than that, and most of the figures of speech are sometimes referred to by literary critics as images or imagery. Next in importance to the straight image are metaphor, simile, and allusion.

Metaphor and simile. Metaphor and simile are both based on the principle of analogy. They both assert that A is like B. The only difference between metaphor and simile is that a simile uses the formula *like* or *as* ("He is like a tree planted by streams of water," Ps. 1:3), while metaphor omits that formula ("The LORD is my shepherd," Ps. 23:1). In every other respect, metaphor and simile function in the same way and require the same methods of analysis. Here is a brief primer on these two figures of speech:

- The basic principle underlying metaphor and simile is correspondence, as one thing is said to be like another thing. A is declared to be like B.
- A metaphor or simile is an image first of all (level A). The first task of the reader/interpreter is to experience the metaphor or simile as an image. Before we can understand how B is like A, we need to be clear about A.
- The next step is to determine how A is like B. Most of the time the correspondences are multiple, not just single. The word *metaphor* is based on two Greek words that mean "to carry over." This is what we need to do in interpreting a metaphor or simile—we need to carry over the meaning(s) from level A to level B. If God is a shepherd, having explored the image of the shepherd, we need to ascertain the ways in which God is like a shepherd in his provision for those who follow him.
- Why do poets use so many comparisons? They use them to achieve compression and clarification. They use one area of experience to illuminate another area of experience.
- Metaphor and simile require interpretation. They are an invitation to discover the poet's meaning. The poet simply puts the comparison before the reader and trusts the reader to determine how A is like B.

Allusion. An allusion is a reference to past literature or history. Interpreting an allusion often requires the same bifocal methodology that interpreting a metaphor or simile does. For example, Milton wrote a sonnet praising a virtuous young woman in which he compares her to Mary the sister of Martha and to the Old Testament heroine Ruth. To make sense of these allusions, we first need to become familiar with the two women with whom the young woman of the poem is linked. Then we need to ascertain what aspects of Mary and Ruth fit the situation of the virtuous young woman.

The Content and Format of This Guide

This guide takes devotional poetry as its subject, and this genre needs to be defined. Devotional poetry is not in any sense to be equated with so-called inspirational verse that appears on greeting cards. The devotional poetry of the seventeenth century is poetry of the very highest standard, packed with meaning and artistry.

The adjective *devotional* refers to the content of this intricately devised poetry. Devotional poetry takes Christian experience and doctrine as its subject matter. That subject matter is then handled within the poem in such a way as to lead to a deeper understanding of God and his truth and a richer feeling toward it. Devotional poetry is also definable by its effect on the reader, which is to increase one's commitment to God and the godly life. Devotional poetry uses the resources of high art to achieve the same goals that we have in our daily devotions. A devotional poem guides us in a process of thinking and feeling that increases our devotion to God and Christian truth.

The genre of devotional poetry has required a different format for this guide than is used in the other guides in this series. First, the poems themselves have been printed, making this book a selective anthology of seventeenth-century devotional poetry. Second, there is no "Plot Summary" of the type that appears in the guides devoted to narratives. Instead, each poem is preceded by a section of tips for reading, such as a summary of the content core of the poem and its structure. Third, a partial explication of the poetic texture follows each poem. This corresponds to the customary section of interpretation in the other guides. The marginal notes that characterize other guides are limited to defining difficult or archaic words that appear in a given line of a poem. Finally, there is the usual "For Reflection or Discussion" section for each poem.

Another modification is that whereas other guides in this series have a single "fact sheet" for the masterwork being studied, plus a page "The Author and His Faith," this guide devotes introductory pages to each of the three poets at the beginning of their sections.

The punctuation and spelling of the poems have been modernized by this guide's author to make them more accessible.

John Donne and His Poetry

Life. John Donne (1572–1631) was born in London into a devout Roman Catholic household. At a time of intense Protestant conviction and feeling, being a Catholic made Donne an outsider within his culture. Donne studied at Oxford University but as a Catholic could not receive a degree. Donne also attended law school in London, again without earning a degree. He led a wild and unsettled youth, climaxed by his elopement with the seventeen-year-old niece of his employer. The elopement ruined Donne's professional life, and he lived much of his life in poverty. In 1615 Donne converted to Anglicanism and under pressure from King James I became a clergyman.

Ecclesiastical career. Donne became one of the most famous preachers in English ecclesiastical history. He was a preacher at court, a "reader" at Lincoln's Inn (a law school in London), and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. Donne preached ostentatious, highly literary sermons to the intellectual elite of London society—to members of the court, to lawyers and politicians, and to merchants and financiers. Over 150 of Donne's sermons survive.

Literary career. Like virtually all writers of the time, Donne did not write for a living. His writing was an avocation. Only a few of Donne's poems were published in his lifetime. Most were published posthumously in 1633. This means that Donne's poems circulated in the form of handwritten manuscripts among a coterie of like-minded poets and sophisticated readers. The two big categories of Donne's poetry are love poetry (written in the 1590s) and devotional poetry (written approximately in the 1610s). Within Donne's complete *Poems,* the devotional poems are in a section entitled "Divine Poems," and within that collection are nineteen *Holy Sonnets*. As a writer of literary prose, Donne wrote (in addition to his sermons) a series of devotional pieces entitled *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* during the course of a serious illness in 1623.

Literary style. In both his poetry and his prose, Donne wrote in an obscure and difficult style. He had a flair for the original and unconventional. The quality toward which he aspired in his writing was what the age called *wit*—the creative, the unusual, the farfetched, the esoteric, and the shocking. Part of this wit was a love of intellectual complexity. The poems by Donne that appear in this guide accordingly require the exercise of a very active mind on the part of the reader.

HOLY SONNET 1

Thou Hast Made Me

Donne began his collection of nineteen devotional sonnets with a prayer addressed to God. The content of the prayer is twofold: (1) a request to God to rescue the speaker from Satan and hell and draw the speaker to himself (lines 1–2, 13–14); (2) the speaker's expression of despair over his spiritual unworthiness (lines 3–11). Donne loves to reverse his line of thought within a poem, and we can see it when we come to lines 9–10. Line 9 begins in such a way as to make us think that we have reached the conventional turn of thought at the beginning of the sestet of this Italian sonnet. But the reversal is only apparent and momentary, because by line 11 the speaker has reverted to his defeatist attitude of being totally without resources before God.

1	Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?	**decay:** fall into destruction
2	Repair me now, for now mine end doth haste;	
3	I run to death, and death meets me as fast,	
4	And all my pleasures are like yesterday.	**like yesterday:** fleeting; gone
5	I dare not move my dim eyes any way;	
6	Despair behind, and death before doth cast	
7	Such terror, and my feeble flesh doth waste	**waste:** waste away
8	By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh.	**weigh:** weigh down; incline
9	Only thou art above, and when towards thee	**only:** but
10	By Thy leave I can look, I rise again;	
11	But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,	**old subtle foe:** Satan
12	That not one hour myself I can sustain.	
13	Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art	**prevent:** thwart or defeat
14	And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart.	**adamant:** magnetic lodestone

Commentary

This poem is primarily a declaration of the speaker's spiritual unworthiness. We can think of it as a penitential poem, modeled on the penitential

psalms of the Old Testament. Donne's religious temperament included a strong element of self-laceration and strain, and this poem illustrates it. We can discern two aspects to the speaker's desperate plight—a drift toward death and an overwhelming sense of personal sin.

Throughout the poem, though, we can see the seeds of the speaker's recovery. This counterpoint is established at the beginning, middle, and end of the poem. The first line and a half appeal to God to stop the process of decay; lines 9–10 paint a picture of God as a transcendent being who can raise the speaker; and the last two lines again assert God's power to raise the speaker above Satan's temptation (line 13) and to draw the speaker's iron heart to God (line 14). The line of thought and feeling is thus a back-and-forth rhythm between hope and despair and between divine strength and human weakness.

For Reflection or Discussion

A good avenue for looking closely at this poem is to find words that fit into the following image patterns: (1) images of decay or decline, as signaled by the word *decay* in the opening line; (2) images of height or ascent, associated with God; (3) words related to time and fleetingness, which accentuate the dire state of the speaker; (4) words naming the positive acts of grace that God is able to perform (starting with the word *repair* in line 2).

With those word/image patterns in front of us, we can move to a second level of analysis. Poems are usually organized as a system of contrasts. The speaker in this poem portrays himself as being in the middle of a single combat against various foes. Who or what are these foes?

The poem also has a sequential structure that unfolds as we move through it. It is an ever-expanding picture of the speaker's predicament, as we keep learning more and more about his situation. As we move through the poem, what things are progressively added to the speaker's burden?

HOLY SONNET 14

Batter My Heart

This is one of Donne's most famous poems. Its subject is bondage to sin. Its theme is that only God can deliver a person from bondage to sin. The poem is accordingly cast as a prayer to the triune God to enter the speaker's battle against Satan and deliver him. At a certain point, it appears that the speaker is talking about conversion and at another point about sanctification. But the umbrella concept of deliverance from sin and Satan is large enough to cover both. The poem expresses a longing to be free from sin.

1	Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you	
2	As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;	
3	That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend	
4	Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.	
5	I, like an usurped town, to another due,	**usurped:** i.e., by Satan; **another:** God
6	Labor to admit you, but O, to no end.	**to no end:** without success
7	Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,	**viceroy:** governor of a region or ruler
8	But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.	**untrue:** disloyal
9	Yet dearly I love you, and would be lovéd fain,	**fain:** gladly
10	But am betrothed unto your enemy;	**betrothed:** engaged
11	Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,	**knot:** marriage bond
12	Take me to you, imprison me, for I,	
13	Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,	**enthrall:** enslave
14	Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.	**ravish:** seize or rape

Commentary

This is a vintage Donne poem in the energy of its actions and the fireworks of its figurative language. Donne loved the more intellectual figures of speech like the far-fetched comparison between two ostensibly

dissimilar things and paradox (which requires a reader to find truth in an apparent contradiction).

The thought pattern in this sonnet falls into three parts, which largely supersede the units of the sonnet form. Lines 1–4 are a petitionary prayer for God to remake the speaker (encapsulated in the final petition of line 4—"make me new"). Lines 5–10 drop the petitionary mode and declare the speaker's current state of spiritual bondage; the simile "like an usurped town" (line 5) sums up this movement of the poem. In lines 11–14, the speaker returns to the petitionary mode, with the prayer "take me to you" (line 12) being a summary of these lines.

The image patterns in the poem also override the units of the sonnet format and only partly correspond to the topical units noted above. The images (verbs, specifically) in the first four lines come from the work of a metal tinker as he mends pots and pans. The frame of reference in lines 5–8 is military and political, with references to a besieged town, "viceroy," defending, being captive, "weak," and "untrue" (a transition word to the next unit dealing with love relationships). Lines 9 to the middle of line 12 use the imagery of a love relationship: "Dearly I love," "Would be lovéd," "Betrothed," "Divorce," "Untie, or break that knot," and "Take me to you." The next line and a half take their frame of reference from imprisonment, and the last line is sexual in its imagery. It is in the nature of poetry to speak a language of comparison (metaphor and simile), and as always Donne throws himself into the enterprise with zest.

Paradox figures prominently in the poem. To stand, the speaker needs to be overthrown (line 3). He cannot be free unless God imprisons him (lines 12–13). He will never be pure ("chaste") in his loyalty to God unless he is seized or raped (lines 14). Of course it is the task of the reader to resolve the apparent contradiction in these paradoxes.

The model on which Donne builds his striking poem is the biblical psalm of lament. As in the psalms of lament, the speaker complains that God is not doing enough in the current crisis (e.g., he is trying to mend a pan that needs to be completely recast). The main part of a psalm of lament is the poet's painting an extended picture of the crisis, and this is what Donne does in this poem. The overall thrust of a lament psalm is to appeal to God to solve a problem that the speaker cannot solve.

Lines 9 through 11 require unpacking. The speaker loves God but against his will finds himself married to Satan (the "enemy" of line 10). The speaker asks God to divorce him from Satan and break the marriage "knot" (as in our metaphor of "tying the knot" in marriage).

For Reflection or Discussion

One line of application is to analyze the spiritual experience around which the poem is constructed; the apostle Paul's classic account in Romans 7:15–25 is a helpful passage. Then we can reflect on our own experiences of this struggle. On a literary level, we can analyze how Donne's specific images and comparisons (i.e., metaphors and similes) are good vehicles for embodying the experiences about which he writes. Some of Donne's images have biblical counterparts, and these can be explored, such as God as potter (Jer. 18:1–4) and the relationship between God and people compared to sexual faithfulness (a marriage) and unfaithfulness (whoredom and related terms, ESV).

CHRISTIAN GUIDES TO THE CLASSICS
BY LELAND RYKEN

Encounter the classics of Western literature with literary expert Leland Ryken and learn to evaluate the text from a Christian worldview.

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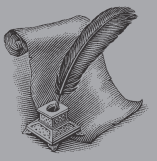

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