

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning



by John Donne

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A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Introduction

"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" shows many features associated with seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry in general, and with Donne's work in particular. Donne's contemporary, the English writer Izaak Walton, tells us the poem dates from 1611, when Donne, about to travel to France and Germany, wrote for his wife this valediction, or farewell speech. Like most poetry of Donne's time, it did not appear in print during the poet's lifetime. The poem was first published in 1633, two years after Donne's death, in a collection of his poems called *Songs and Sonnets*. Even during his life, however, Donne's poetry became well known because it circulated privately in manuscript and handwritten copies among literate Londoners.

The poem tenderly comforts the speaker's lover at their temporary parting, asking that they separate calmly and quietly, without tears or protests. The speaker justifies the desirability of such calmness by developing the ways in which the two share a holy love, both sexual and spiritual in nature. Donne's celebration of earthly love in this way has often been referred to as the "religion of love," a key feature of many other famous Donne poems, such as "The Canonization" and *The Ecstasy*. Donne treats their love as sacred, elevated above that of ordinary earthly lovers. He argues that because of the confidence their love gives them, they are strong enough to endure a temporary separation. In fact, he discovers ways of suggesting, through metaphysical conceit, that the two of them either possess a single soul and so can never really be divided, or have twin souls permanently connected to each other. A metaphysical conceit is an extended metaphor or simile in which the poet draws an ingenious comparison between two very unlike objects. "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" ends with one of Donne's most famous metaphysical conceits, in which he argues for the lovers' closeness by comparing their two souls to the feet of a drawing compass—a simile that would not typically occur to a poet writing about his love!

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Text of the Poem

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
ourselves know not what it is,
Inter-assurèd 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 fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' 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.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: John Donne Biography

Donne was born in London in 1572. His family was of Roman Catholic faith (his mother was a relative of the Catholic martyr Sir Thomas More), and he grew up experiencing the religious discrimination of the Anglican majority in England against Catholics. It has been speculated that it was this very discrimination that prevented Donne from completing his studies at Oxford University. After leaving Oxford, he studied law in London and received his degree in 1596. Seeking adventure, Donne sailed with the English expeditions against the Spanish, and his experiences inspired the poems "The Storm," "The Calm," and "The Burnt Ship." The following year, Donne returned to London and became secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton. In December, 1601, he clandestinely married Egerton's sixteen-year-old niece Ann More. When the news became public, More's father unsuccessfully endeavored to annul the marriage, but did succeed in imprisoning Donne for a short period of time. In 1602 Donne was released and, now unemployed, spent the next thirteen years trying to gain financial security for his family. Eventually, he converted from Roman Catholicism to Anglicism, and was enlisted by Sir Thomas Morton to aid him in writing anti-Catholic pamphlets. In 1610 he published his first work, *Pseudo-Martyr*, which attempted to induce English Catholics to repudiate their allegiance to Rome (home of the Catholic Church) and take an oath of allegiance to the British crown. From 1611 to 1612 Donne accompanied Sir Robert Drury to France on a long diplomatic mission, during which he composed some of his most acclaimed verse letters, funeral poems, holy sonnets and love poems, in particular "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." Returning to England in 1612, Donne considered becoming an Anglican minister, but hesitated because of self-doubt. He was finally ordained in early 1615 and quickly became one of the most respected clergymen of his time. He was elected dean of St. Paul's in 1621 and devoted the majority of his life to writing sermons and other religious works until his death in 1631.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Summary

Lines 1-6 Summary

Lines 1-4: The beginning of the poem causes some readers difficulty because the first two stanzas consist of a metaphysical conceit, but we do not know that until the second stanza. We should not read the word "as," which begins the poem, to mean "while," although that might be our instinct. Instead, "as" here means "in the way that"; it introduces an extended simile comparing the death of virtuous men to the separation of the two lovers. This first stanza describes how virtuous men die. Because they have led good lives, death does not terrify them, and so they die "mildly," even encouraging their souls to depart their bodies. In fact their death is so quiet that their friends gathered around the deathbed disagree on whether they are still alive and breathing.

Lines 5-6: The speaker now reveals that he is addressing his love, from whom he must separate. The poem itself will prove to be the "Valediction"—the farewell—of the title. He also reveals that he has been using a simile, and that the lovers' separation should resemble the quiet way virtuous men die. This example of metaphysical conceit might seem a bizarre comparison to make—dying men with the separation of lovers—but

the key comparison is the quietness of the two events. He might also be suggesting that their separation, though only temporary, will be like a small death to him. Still, he asks his love that they part quietly and "melt" instead of split: the image of melting together suggests they might still be connected in liquified form, an idea the poem returns to later. He also asks her not to indulge in the overdramatic and clichéd anguish of conventional separating lovers.

Lines 7-12 Summary

Lines 7-8: These lines suggest why he wants a quiet separation: the joys the two of them share, both spiritual and sexual, are holy to him. To complain loudly with tears or sighs would be to broadcast their love to those he calls the "laity." Through this metaphor, he suggests that ordinary people resemble "laypeople" who do not understand the holiness and mystery of their love. The speaker thus implies that the two of them are like priests in a "religion of love." Therefore, for her to make loud protests about his departure would be to "profane" the joy of their holy union by revealing it to the uninitiated and unworthy. The wish to be let alone, to be able to love privately, is especially characteristic of Donne. Several other of his poems similarly covet privacy, such as "The Canonization" and "*The Sun Rising*." This celebration of the private world of two lovers contrasts strongly with the conventions of Renaissance love poetry, in which the lover wishes to broadcast his love to the world.

Lines 9-12: This stanza contrasts dramatic upheavals on earth with those in heaven. Earthquakes cause great destruction and create great wonder and confusion among human beings. In contrast, "trepidation of the spheres," a trembling or vibration of the whole universe, is far more significant in its scope, but also "innocent"—we cannot see or feel it because it is a heavenly event. Donne here uses the old-fashioned Ptolemaic model of the cosmos, in which each planet, the sun, the fixed stars, and a *primum mobile*, or "prime mover," occupied a crystalline sphere surrounding the earth, at the center. The contrast between heavenly and earthly vibrations anticipates a contrast to be developed in lines 13-20, between earthly lovers directed by sex and lovers who, like them, depend on their spiritual union.

Lines 11-16 Summary

Line 11: In ancient and medieval astronomy, trepidation of the spheres referred to the vibration of the outermost sphere of the Ptolemaic universe, causing each sphere within to move accordingly.

Lines 13-16: The speaker moves from his contrast of earthly with heavenly events to a contrast of earthly love with the experience he and his lover share. In this stanza he develops why earthly lovers cannot endure separation from each other. The "soul" or essence of such ordinary, "sublunary" lovers is "sense": that is, their love is based on the five senses and so consists of sexual attraction. Therefore, when such lovers separate, they remove from each other the very basis of their love, which changes and fades like the moon.

Lines 17-24 Summary

Lines 17-20: The speaker continues to reassure his love by developing the qualities that make the love they share capable of enduring a separation. In contrast with sublunary lovers, their love is not based solely on sensual gratification. In fact, it is a love so pure that even they themselves cannot define it. But because they feel confident in each's feelings for the other, their physical separation—the absence of eyes, lips, and hands—causes them less anxiety.

Lines 21-24: The speaker begins drawing conclusions about the relationship between his soul and his love's. The "therefore" sounds like the conclusion of a logical argument, and he has in fact been attempting to

persuade his love not to mourn during his absence. Because they are "inter-assured of the mind," he suggests their closeness by saying their two souls actually have combined to form one soul. When he leaves on his journey, that one soul will not tear in two; instead, it is flexible enough that it will actually expand. He uses gold as a simile to clarify this expansion. Although the preciousness of gold suggests the preciousness of their love, the key property of gold here is its malleability. Gold can be made to expand greatly because it can be hammered into an extraordinarily thin, "airy" sheet. Donne therefore uses a simile that works emotionally, since gold is valuable, but also scientifically, since the malleability of gold corresponds to the flexibility and expansiveness of their love. Their love will not snap but expand, keeping them bound together during their separation.

Lines 25-32 Summary

Lines 25-28: The speaker now admits that he and his love may have two separate souls rather than one. He then develops the connectedness of their two souls in one of Donne's most famous and most ingenious metaphysical conceits, an extended simile in which the speaker compares the lovers' two souls to the feet of a drafting compass. He compares her soul to the compass' "fixed foot" and his to the other foot. Like the compass, their two souls are joined at the top, reminding us that their love is a spiritual union "interassured of the mind."

Lines 29-32: The speaker now develops the compass conceit. Although his love's soul is the fixed foot and his soul will roam in his travels, her soul will continually incline faithfully towards him, since their two souls are joined, and will return to its proper, upright position when his foot of the compass returns home to her. At this point in the poem, Donne engages in a number of puns that suggest the completeness of the love of these two people. Although the speaker has been emphasizing the spiritual purity of their love, his assertion that the compass "grows erect" reminds us that their union is important and satisfying to them sexually as well as spiritually. Line 26, with its earlier description of the "stiff twin compasses," may also hint at the man's erection. The speaker may be indulging in further punning by describing how the compass, when closing, "comes home," a common expression for "reaching the target," which might suggest sexual intercourse.

Lines 33-36 Summary

Lines 33-36: The speaker concludes the conceit—and the poem—by reasserting that his love's fidelity and spiritual firmness will allow him to carry out his journey and return home happily. His running "obliquely" literally describes the angle of the open compass and also suggests the indirect, circuitous route of his journeys. In this final stanza, Donne may have included additional sexual puns to underscore the happy future reunion of the lovers. In the spiritual terms of the compass conceit her firmness enables him to complete his circle, or journey; in sexual terms, his firmness would make her circle just. And in making the speaker "end where I begun," Donne may be suggesting that the speaker will finish his journey by returning to her womb as her lover, just as he originally began his life by leaving his mother's womb. The possibility of Donne's having included these sexual puns shows the richness of his language and the multiplicity of meanings available to readers of his work. It also suggests a vision of human love as healthily integrating both the spiritual and sexual aspects of our nature.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Themes

Death

Death, a theme not uncommon to Donne's writing, is a significant theme in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." In the poem's opening stanza, Donne makes mention of "virtuous men pass[ing] mildly away." He uses this notion of death as a metaphor for his impending departure on a journey that will take him away from

his wife for an extended period of time.

Love

Known for his love poetry, it is not unusual that love is an integral theme to "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." After likening his departure to death, Donne reminds his wife that an outpouring of sadness and emotion over his leaving would profane their love for one another. He uses the love of "dull sublunary lovers' love," or love that is decidedly ordinary and even immature, to contrast the "refined" love that Donne and his wife share. Their love goes beyond the physical; it is a spiritual love that transcends the material world and the limitations of their own bodies. Donne goes on to say that his love for his wife can only expand over distance, and that it is her love that will hearken his return to her.

Religious Faith

Piety is almost always present in the poetry of Donne, and "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is no exception. In likening his departure to the deaths of "virtuous men," he is making reference to the fact that pious men who are secure in their faith do not fear death. Rather, they embrace it, because they know that eternal life awaits them, and they will be welcomed by the arm of their Lord. The "sad friends" that surround these dying men are upset at their loss, but they too are aware that this passing isn't an entirely sad situation, as the men are going to a better place, heaven. Further, the men's security in their faith is also used as a metaphor for Donne's security in his relationship with his beloved wife.

Science

Science is a theme that is prevalent throughout Donne's valediction, whether it be present in references to mathematical tools, such as a drawing compass, which was invented by Galileo only two years earlier, or to a circle and its infinite, perfect qualities. Science, too, is present as he references the "moving of th' earth," and that such movements, i.e., earthquakes, strike fear into the hearts of men. He also uses science to the spheres, meaning the Ptolemaic spheres in which the celestial bodies moved. Science plays a role, too, as Donne mentions that his love will expand "like gold to airy thinness beat," referencing both a precious metal and its physical properties.

Donne constructs "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" in nine four-line stanzas, called quatrains, using a four-beat, iambic tetrameter line. The rhyme scheme for each stanza is an alternating *abab*, and each stanza is grammatically self-contained. This simple form is uncharacteristic for Donne, who often invented elaborate stanzaic forms and rhyme schemes. Its simplicity, however, permits the reader more readily to follow the speaker's complicated argument.

The first two stanzas argue that the speaker and his love should separate quietly—as quietly as righteous men go to their deaths—because their love is sacred and should not be profaned by public emotional displays. The next three stanzas consider the holy nature of their love, contrasting it with ordinary lovers who base their relationship solely on sexual attraction. The final four stanzas imaginatively consider the ways in which the lovers' souls will remain joined even during their physical separation.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Style

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A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Historical Context

King James I of England

James I ruled England from 1603 to 1625. His mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, was forced to abdicate the throne of Scotland in 1567, and James, born just a year earlier in 1566, was named king in her place. Too young to rule, he didn't formally act as king until 1581. At the time, there was much strife between the Catholics and the Protestants in Scotland, and, in fact, James was kidnapped in 1582 by a group of Protestant nobles and gained his freedom a year later by escaping.

He went on to form an alliance with his cousin Queen Elizabeth I of England, and upon her death, he inherited the English throne, thus uniting the crowns of England and Scotland. During his reign, relations with the Roman Catholics in England were strained at best, leading to the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, which was a plot on behalf of Roman Catholics to blow up Parliament due to the government's harsh penal laws enacted against Roman Catholics. In spite of efforts to quell the tensions, James wound up escalating the feud between Catholics and Protestants by forming an alliance with France and going to war against Spain, a Catholic nation.

Donne soon became involved in the monarch's life after James I read Donne's prose work of 1610, *Pseudo-Martyr*, in which Donne stated that Catholics could pledge their allegiance to the king without breaching their religious loyalty. This won Donne the attention and favor of James I, who believed Donne would be a strong addition to his church. Thus he put considerable pressure on Donne to become an Anglican priest. James I even went so far as to seeing that Donne received no further offers of patronage in order to force the financially unstable poet to acquiesce. In 1615, James I got his wish when Donne took holy orders and went on to become a prosperous emissary of the Church of England. James I conferred the dean-ship of Saint Paul's on Donne in 1621. Famous for his King James version of the Bible, James I died in 1625 and was succeeded by his son, Charles I.

Metaphysical Poetry

Metaphysical poetry was borne in large part out of the works of Donne. Marked by metaphor and conceit—juxtaposing unrelated thoughts in a manner that spurs a reader to consider the poem's thesis—metaphysical poetry is more concerned with analyzing feeling as opposed to its predecessor, Elizabethan poetry, which was much more literal and focused more on the physicality of its subject rather than emotion and thought. Other Metaphysical poets include Abraham Cowley, Richard Crashaw, and Andrew Marvell. Although Metaphysical poetry fell out of favor by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it enjoyed a revival in appreciation in the early part of the twentieth century, in great part due to poets Rupert Brooke and T. S. Eliot, the latter of whom penned a very influential essay in 1921 titled "The Metaphysical Poets."

Baroque

Baroque was the predominant influence in the seventeenth century, during which Donne wrote. Baroque encompasses styles of architecture and art as well as literature. Baroque art is often marked by strong contrasts of light and dark (known as *chiaroscuro*) as well as an air of realism and religious influences. Although Donne falls within the boundaries of the late Renaissance, which overlap with the dawn of the Baroque era, he is more often viewed as a Baroque poet, because the nature of his poetry differs sharply from that of his immediate predecessors and several contemporaries. Baroque writers as other artists were strongly influenced

by recent scientific discoveries, such as Copernicus's discovery that Earth was not, in fact, the center of the universe. The literature of the times, then, specifically drama and poetry, became less literal and more dramatic, imaginative, and metaphorical as well somewhat rhetorical in nature.

Science and the Age of Discovery

The Renaissance ushered in an age of discovery that was marked by an increase in interest not only in man but also in the world around him. Explorers such as Christopher Columbus and Ponce de Leon explored the Americas and ushered in an era of colonization that was to last for hundreds of years. Scientists also made great discoveries in the latter part of the Renaissance, including Copernicus's monumental discovery that the Sun, not the Earth, was at the universe's center.

Later, Italian physicist and astronomer Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) invented the mathematical compass (which figures centrally in Donne's "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning") and built a telescope of twenty-times magnification that allowed him to view mountains and craters on the moon. His work marked a turn in scientific method: precise measurement would begin to prevail over popular belief. Galileo's work was done at almost the same time as that of Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), a German astronomer and natural philosopher, who formulated his now-famous laws about planetary motion. Kepler also created a system of infinitesimals that was the forerunner to calculus. Interestingly, although it cannot be confirmed wholly by scholars and historians, Donne is said to have visited Kepler in 1619 during a trip to the Austrian town of Linz.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Essays and Criticism

Spiritual Connection in A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," a poem written upon the occasion of Donne parting from his wife for an extended period, is a shining example of the mature, spiritual relationship that Donne had with his wife. Certainly, sexual love was often a theme in Donne's poetry and Donne had had a reputation as being something of a rake before falling in love with his wife, Ann More. In reading this selection it seems that it was because of his love relationship with Ann, that Donne experienced a love that knew no bounds; physical separation could not quell it. While certain scholars believe that Donne's poems do not actually document his personal experience, this work, which was written for a genuine occasion and was never published in his lifetime, might be interpreted as a personal testimony to not only Donne's sadness over his departure but to the depth of his feelings for and faith in his wife.

In the poem's opening lines, Donne likens his faith in his and his wife's connection to that of virtuous men's confidence in their relationship to God. While others may fear death, the truly pious will journey to the hereafter with quiet resignation and even a bit of optimism. Likening religious devotion and faith to love, especially romantic or sexual love, is a theme that is often seen in other works of the era, particularly in Gianlorenzo Bernini's marble sculpture *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*, in which St. Theresa is overwhelmed with ecstasy because of her devotion to her lord. Religious faith, then, is more often than not unshakable, and this conceit on Donne's part in comparing the sanctity of his marriage to deep-rooted, religious faith exalts his and Ann's bond to something even beyond the romantic or the sexual; it is exemplary of the true, spiritual bond that existed between them.

Donne asserts that shedding tears over their parting would profane the sanctity of their love. Whereas Donne's poetic predecessors often wrote of the physicality of a lover or the urgency with which one desires to see one's lover (i.e., William Shakespeare's famous line from *Romeo and Juliet*: "Parting is such sweet sorrow"), Donne insists that public displays would be vulgar and inappropriate in light of the unique tie he and Ann share. Further, he insists the such actions would "tell the laity our love," thus making public their sorrows to the

laypeople would be inconsistent with the private nature of their mature association and would fly in the face of its sacred nature.

As Donne continues on, he speaks further of the calm that should surround his taking leave of his beloved, insisting that it should be as unapparent as the planets revolving in the skies. This movement of the planets, he points out, is certainly more powerful than something ordinary, such as an earthquake, an image that he likens to an obvious outpouring of emotion. In associating his and his wife's love to a heavenly yet silent act, Donne is once more elevating their relationship to a supraearthly status. The use of such a metaphor casts the relationship in a light that makes it appear that few could truly grasp the gravity of Donne and Ann's entire relationship, as they would not be fully aware of all its machinations. This air of privacy is not dissimilar to the private nature of deep religious devotion. Faith and some of its more important activities, such as confession and prayer, are highly intimate acts; faith itself is also an internal process, and the truly pious are not always obvious about the depth of their beliefs.

This elevated state to which he ascribes his and Ann's bond is contrasted in the next stanza with the love of "dull sublunary lovers," meaning the love of ordinary lovers in most of society. This common love, "whose soul is sense," cannot withstand absence, as physicality is the very thing upon which such precarious, immature love is cemented. By contrast, Donne posits that he and his wife share a "refined" love that is almost indefinable. It is "inter-assured of the mind," which again points to an affection that is much more spiritual in nature rather than being dependent upon proximity of an individual's beloved. Donne insists that he "care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss." His flesh doesn't burn for his wife; his heart and mind do, and so does his soul.

Donne has found in his wife his soul-mate. He reminds her that their two souls "are one." This proclamation is again indicative of the divine connection the two share. And, again, flying in the face of the constraints of ordinary love that demands closeness and abhors absence, Donne makes another grand statement, urging his wife to "endure not yet / a breach, but an expansion, / like gold to airy thinness beat." This statement calls to mind the adage, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Donne is telling Ann that their love will grow to cover whatever physical distance separates them. The distance will not cause a rift in their love; rather, their devotion will actually increase in area as a result of the division. The reference to gold, a precious metal, also belies his view of their relationship as something precious and rare.

The last three stanzas of the poem contain one of Donne's most famous metaphysical conceits. He likens himself and his wife to the two feet of a mathematical compass. The compass in itself calls to mind sturdiness (because of its composition) as well as accuracy, precision, and certainty. It is also an instrument whose function depends on two parts working in tandem. Confidence and teamwork are clearly the hallmarks of a mature love relationship. Fiery feeling alone will not accomplish anything. A mature relationship requires strength too. Ann, as the "fixed foot," provides strength to Donne who, as the other foot that moves about, must roam far. He points out though, that it is Ann who "leans and hearkens" after him. This supports his claim that their love will expand to fill the space between them. Donne references Ann's "firmness," which belies, again, his confidence in her feelings toward him. It is this firmness, he states, that "makes [his] circle just." Circles are an image not uncommon to Donne's poetry and symbolize not only perfection but infinity. The notion of the infinite, something that is without end, cements the notion of Donne's elevated affection for his wife. The mature tone of this poem is in sharp contrast to some of Donne's other works, written presumably in his younger days. In "Song," for example, Donne writes of the impossibility of finding a woman who is both beautiful and faithful. He likens the task to catching a falling star or impregnating a plant. This cynicism can be taken as evidence of the fact that Donne had not yet experienced love that transformed his soul and his poetry.

Even though Donne wrote of a deep love that transcends physical proximity, he did believe in the physical side of romance. In fact, many of Donne's poems are actually quite suggestive in nature. His poem "The

Ecstasy" discusses the commingling of two lovers' souls, leading to the formation of one perfect soul. Despite this, though, the poem ends on a note in which Donne acknowledges that the cerebral is still ideally manifested in the physical.

The sacred nature of Donne's relationship may also be contrasted with the poetry of his contemporary Andrew Marvell. Marvell's famous poem "To His Coy Mistress" is a thinly veiled seduction from a suitor urging his intended that they haven't the time to indulge in forming a deep-rooted bond; he believes they should act on their physical urges rather than form an alliance of the mind and soul. For Donne and Ann, however, physical possession, while the reward of the relationship, is not necessarily a factor integral to the immediate viability of the relationship.

There is a certain degree of irony surrounding "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" in that Donne's beloved wife Ann died after giving birth to the couple's twelfth child while Donne was on one of his many business excursions. Legend has it that Donne was dining with friends while an apparition of his wife appeared to him. Shortly thereafter he was notified that she had fallen desperately ill. Certainly, this is evidence of their devotion and the exceptional connection that they shared, even to critics who may claim that his poetry is not a direct reflection of his personal emotional experiences.

Source: Caroline M. Levchuck, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

An Overview of Imagery in Donne's Poem

John Donne wrote "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" in 1611 as he was preparing for one of his frequent journeys away from his wife, Ann. Donne's deep love for his wife is evident in the poem, which explains that the couple should not be sorrowful when they are apart from each other because their love binds them together, regardless of distance.

Donne and his young wife had been married for ten years at the time the poem was written. She was the niece of Donne's employer; when he eloped with her in 1601, he ruined his career prospects. As a result, Donne had considerable difficulty finding work, and the couple struggled to provide for their ever-growing family. (Ann died in 1617 while giving birth to their twelfth child.) The background to this poem is significant because it gives the reader an understanding of the kind of love Donne and his wife shared; it was a love that kept the marriage strong and vibrant in the face of hardship.

As a Metaphysical poet, Donne expressed love in a particular way. Many of the characteristics typical of Metaphysical poetry are found in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." These include intellectual descriptions of emotions; unusual and often startling comparisons; a preoccupation with love, death, and religion; simple diction; images taken from everyday life; and the formulation of an argument.

Besides being a beautiful love poem, "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" endures because it contains classic illustrations of the *metaphysical conceit*. This term refers to a technique used by metaphysical poets in which commonplace objects or ideas are used to create analogies, offering insight into something important or profound. Modern students are sometimes misled by the word conceit, because in contemporary language it means "arrogance"; but at the time the term was coined, it meant "concept." The metaphysical conceit is especially effective when the reader is almost immediately able to identify with the poet's meaning, despite the unexpected nature of the comparison. Today, discussion of the metaphysical conceit inevitably refers to "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" because of Donne's skilled use of unexpected imagery. In fact, of all the imagery in the poem, only one example does not represent the metaphysical conceit.

The poem addresses the moment when the lovers are preparing to bid each other farewell. Although the separation will be only temporary, it is a potentially emotional scene, and the speaker is explaining why there is no need for tears or sorrow. The speaker's task is a difficult one, and his argument is carried by the poem's unusual imagery. With the very first word of the poem, "as," Donne conveys the importance of simile and analogy in the poem. To some readers, the opening word, "as," is confusing because it can be read as meaning "while," when it actually means "like." The stanza compares the dying of virtuous men to the speaker's upcoming separation from his beloved. This is an odd analogy (and is, therefore, an example of the metaphysical conceit), but Donne's purpose is to explain that the virtuous accept both death and separation calmly and without fear ("As virtuous men pass mildly' away, / And whisper to their souls to go.") To emphasize the quietude of virtuous men's deaths, Donne adds that death comes so imperceptibly that friends cannot tell if the last breath has actually gone ("Whilst some of their sad friends do say / The breath goes now, and some say, No.") This stanza's serene tone contrasts with much of Donne's poetry, which often opens with great drama and passion. A few examples include: "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love," "Kind pity chokes my spleen; brave scorn forbids," and "Batter my heart, three-personed God." Readers familiar with Donne's work as a whole will make special note that the calm entrance into this poem in itself has meaning, as Donne is setting the tone for his argument as well as for the lovers' parting.

In the second stanza, Donne introduces imagery of molten gold ("So let us melt, and make no noise"), to which he will later return. He then draws on extreme weather conditions as imagery for emotional outpouring. The analogy is not flattering because he is discouraging this behavior; the poet suggests that dramatic "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests" are profane and unfitting for these lovers. He adds that onlookers ("the laity") are unworthy of witnessing the lovers' expressions of their feelings. Donne's mention of onlookers recalls the first stanza, where the poet comments that the dying men's friends are assessing him. In both images, the persons experiencing the events possess understanding that outsiders do not. The grieving friends do not know that the dying man is unafraid and tranquil about death, nor do they know if he has yet died. The public will not know what the lovers are feeling nor the depths of their love, as they face separation.

In the third stanza, Donne introduces one of the classic images of the metaphysical conceit—the Ptolemaic universe. He begins by extending the weather imagery from the previous stanza: "Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears, / Men reckon what it did and meant." Referring to dramatic thunderstorms and natural disasters, Donne observes that these forces are destructive and terrifying, and they leave people confused about their meaning. The next lines indirectly compare the couple's love to a force greater than natural disasters, and yet harmless, by introducing Ptolemy's astronomical theories. (The comparison is indirect because the poet does not allude to the lovers at all in this stanza.) Donne writes, "But trepidation of the spheres, / Though greater far, is innocent." Ptolemy theorized that the earth was the center of the universe, and that the other celestial bodies orbited it. What his complex mathematical "proof of his theory could not explain, Ptolemy accounted for by describing heavenly trembling that supposedly brought about unexplained phenomena of celestial events, such as equinoxes. Donne's phrase "trepidation of the spheres" is a reference to Ptolemy's "trembling." Donne notes that these mighty tremblings in the universe do not harm anyone, despite their magnitude and force. The indirect parallel is that the inner trembling that the lovers feel at the prospect of being apart is powerful yet causes no real harm. Another element of the Ptolemaic universe is astrology, a belief that the stars foretell the future of individuals and nations. By extension, the speaker may be suggesting that his love is destined, as it is "written in the stars."

Donne uses gold imagery in the sixth stanza, which carries meaning on many levels. This image is the only one in the poem that is not an example of the metaphysical conceit because it is not unexpected. Poets (especially in the Renaissance) had long used gold imagery in their verse. Donne writes, "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." Being bright, luminous, durable, and valuable, gold is obviously analogous to the type of love the poet describes in this poem. Donne, however, takes the imagery a step further. Describing the malleability of gold, the poet compares gold's ability to change shape and to extend with the lovers' ability to bend to

circumstance yet keep each other spiritually close by virtue of their deep bond. Gold's qualities are expressed in two ways: it can be melted and merged, as suggested in line twenty-one, and it can be hammered and elongated. This analogy is well crafted because it works from every angle: both gold and love can be melted and merged; both can be "hammered" and yet remain strong and essentially unchanged.

In the seventh, eighth, and ninth stanzas, Donne develops the compass imagery that has become almost synonymous with the term "metaphysical conceit" in contemporary literary discourse. The image is first presented in the seventh stanza: "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 th' other do." Here Donne is referring to a compass used in geometry (not a directional compass) and explains that his beloved is the stationary leg in the center, while he is the outer leg that must travel. This idea is carried into the eighth stanza, where the poet adds, "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." With his depiction of the lovers as two legs of a compass, the poet seems to contradict the earlier claim that their souls have become one ("Our two souls therefore, which are one.") The separate analogies maintain their integrity, however, because the compass is a unit, and its two legs only represent physical separation; they are not structurally separate. The compass' behavior (leaning, straightening) conveys that the two legs are connected.

If the reader pictures a compass being used to draw a circle, Donne's imagery makes perfect sense. The center leg remains still, but leans toward the moving leg, and when the outside leg is brought back in to the center, they both stand up straight again. The poet's lover is the one left behind, like the compass leg in the center, while the speaker is traveling, like the outer leg. The beloved left behind will certainly miss the other, as Donne acknowledges when he notes, "Yet when the other far doth roam, / It leans and hearkens after it." When the travels come to an end, and the lovers are reunited, they both stand tall and remain steadfastly side by side, as the two legs of a closed compass.

In the final stanza, Donne concludes, "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." Making full use of the compass metaphor, the speaker explains that while he is away, the steadfastness of his distant lover keeps him true. The image of the circle in line thirty-five carries multiple meanings and is particularly appropriate with the compass metaphor. Circles traditionally symbolize infinity, perfection, balance, symmetry, and cycles. This is the reason that rings are important in wedding ceremonies. In addition, the circle with a dot in the center (like the one left by the center leg after a circle has been drawn with a compass) was the alchemist's symbol for gold. Again, Donne establishes unity and integration by tying the various images together throughout the poem. The allusion to the circle signifies that the lovers will be together forever in perfect love. Since compasses create circles, the image of the compass legs separating, drawing a circle (where the beginning meets the end), and then coming back together thoroughly illustrates the lover's journey that "makes me end where I begun."

Through the progression of the poem, the poet has built a complex, yet flowing and beautiful, argument for why the lovers should not be saddened or worried about their upcoming separation. Donne's method is unique and a wonderful tool for understanding the Metaphysical poets. The poem, though intricate, is accessible precisely because of the array of interconnected images presented throughout. Although the images may not at first seem to be related, Donne's poetic genius becomes apparent as the thoughtful reader pieces the images together.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Simile and Metaphysical Wit in A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

A valediction is a speech or a poem of farewell, one that often carries with it some sense of foreboding or uncertainty about the events to come. Although the title "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" might seem to suggest a dark, brooding theme, John Donne's poem is actually a love poem, and as such it is a fine example of sixteenth-century Metaphysical wit. The Metaphysical school of poets (whose members included Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell, among others) were formally given this name by the critic and essayist Samuel Johnson (perhaps best known for his *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1775), who criticized them for introducing metaphysics or a kind of abstract logic into their poetry.

The term *wit* originally meant intelligence, but in the hands of the Metaphysical poets, wit came to signify a clever or ingenious use of reason to compare and contrast highly dissimilar things in order to develop a persuasive argument. In "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," for example, Donne is speaking to his wife, Anne, before leaving on a long journey, and he attempts to comfort her by drawing an unlikely comparison between their love for each other and the way that virtuous men behave at the moment of death.

The first stanza describes a deathbed scene, but it is important to notice that the opening word "as" establishes a conditional statement that is dependent upon the second stanza to complete its meaning. The first two stanzas should be read as a single sentence. "As" is a clue that this poem is really not about the way that "virtuos men passe mildly away," but is concerned with using this image as simile for something else. A simile is a type of metaphor in which a writer makes the reader look at something differently by comparing it to something else. In this opening stanza, Donne describes how virtuous men, who have led good and honest lives on earth, do not put up a struggle on their deathbeds. In fact, a virtuous man allows his soul to depart so quietly that the friends gathered around the bed disagree over whether the man has actually died. A man of virtue has no reason to fear death or the departure of his soul, because he can be certain of his soul's reward in the afterlife. Donne uses this scene of spiritual confidence and composure as an example of how he wants his wife to behave when he leaves for his journey.

Donne urges his wife to remain silent about their love, especially at this particular moment of his departure. "Melt" is a popular image for physical love, and the speaker elevates this love to a spiritual level by suggesting that speaking about this love and their "joyes" would profane it. The final line further elevates their love to a religious experience and refers to those who do not know of their love as the "layetie," in other words, the people who are unordained in the sacrament of their love. It is important to remember that marriage also functions as a type of sacrament, and therefore only a husband and wife can truly know and understand the love that they themselves feel for each other. Donne argues that any attempt to display this love to the "layetie" through "tears" or "sighs" would be an insult to the sacrament itself.

Once he has elevated his physical love to a spiritual level, Donne uses the third and fourth stanza to compare this love to those mundane love affairs that are only physical and therefore at the mercy of earthly change. His logical argument is that only "dull" lovers mourn the physical absence of each other, because their love is sublunary (literally beneath the moon or earth-bound). "Elemented" refers to physical objects that are composed of any or all of the four elements (earth, air, water, fire). As a result, lovers who cannot "admit" (or tolerate) the physical absence or departure, cannot do so precisely because physical proximity is all that their love was based on in the first place. Such an earthly love is made only of physical elements and when any of these elements are absent, that love is in danger. But Donne argues that his love is not dependent on such elements. His own love is of a far superior kind, a spiritual love, and there is no reason for his wife to be upset over his physical departure.

In the sixth stanza, Donne clarifies this argument, stating that "our two soules ... are one" and he expands his argument in this stanza by introducing the first of two new similes to describe how his leaving is actually a good thing. Using the kind of logic for which the metaphysical poets are famous, Donne argues that if their souls are one, then his leaving does not signify a "breach" or division, but rather an expansion or a stretching. The simile that he uses here is that of a piece of gold that has been hammered into a thin sheet in order to be used to decorate a much larger surface area than it ever could have as a solid lump.

In addition to comparing their love to a thin sheet of gold that becomes more beautiful and brilliant as its ends are spread farther apart, Donne also develops a more complicated comparison in the final three stanzas, and this simile is one of his most well-known. He offers his wife an alternative to thinking about their souls as one and the same. Basically, in stanza seven he is telling her that if she wants to think about their souls as two separate entities, then here is how she should consider them. "If they be two," he says, then his soul and his wife's soul are like the two legs of a compass, permanently fixed by a pivot at one end. (The kind of compass to which Donne is referring here is the two-legged device used for drawing circles and, appropriately for this poem, for measuring distances on a map.) Though the bottom of the legs can move far apart, they cannot be separated at the top.

Just as a compass has a fixed point, one leg that rotates on the same spot, so does Donne's soul have a fixed point: his wife. When Donne travels (when his soul "far doth rome") his wife remains fixed in place, but like the center leg of a compass, she "leans" in the direction of his travels and "hearkens" after him. In other words, her thoughts, affections, and, perhaps, letters are directed toward him wherever he might be, and it is this that defines his course and draws him back to her. And just like the two legs of a compass, when he returns home they stand together, straight and upright.

In the final stanza, the concluding image that Donne offers to his wife is one of reassurance. He underscores and clarifies the simile of the compass by saying outright: "such wilt thou be to me." No matter how far he roams, the path of his travels will always lead him back to where he started, just as a compass, anchored by the center foot, completes the circle it is drawing by returning to the point where it began.

It is important to recognize that Donne employs his metaphysical wit to develop not just one but a series of arguments to console his wife on the eve of his departure. He tries to convince her first that spiritual love cannot be affected by physical distance. Then he tries to show her that since their souls are one, distance will only increase their love and make it more beautiful, like gold that is hammered and spread out into a thin sheet. And finally, if these first two arguments are unsatisfying, Donne argues that he and his wife, though separate, function like the legs of a compass. In each case, the similes Donne uses force the reader to see the logic behind comparisons that may at first seem unlikely or far-fetched.

Source: John Pipkin, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Topics for Further Study

Read William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming." What would the speaker of Yeats' poem say about the images that Donne uses?

Compare the ideas expressed in this poem to those expressed in William Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up." What do the two poems tell you about youth? About nature? Does the fact that they were published 175 years apart affect how you understand their meaning, or not?

Do you agree with the ideas in the fourth stanza? Explain what you think of those who "cannot admit absence."

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Media Adaptations

An audiocassette titled *The Love Poems of John Donne* (narrated by Richard Burton) was released in June 1998 by Caedmon Audio Cassette.

Penguin Audiobooks published the audiocassette *John Donne Poems* in April 1999.

Vanessa and Corin Redgrave narrate Hod-der/Headline Audiobooks' June 1999 release of the audiocassette *John Donne: Poets for Pleasure*.

An audiocassette titled *John Donne: Selected Poems* was released by Blackstone Audio Books in August 1997.

In 1987, Spoken Arts released an audiocassette of Donne's works titled *Treasury of John Donne*.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: What Do I Read Next?

Andre Marvell's "*To His Coy Mistress*," published first in 1650, is a poem of seduction in which a man attempts to persuade a woman to go to bed with him as they are racing against time and haven't the luxury of falling in love at a leisureed pace. The suitor argues persuasively to the object of his lusty affections.

John Donne's "The Ecstasy," published in 1633, describes two lovers lying next to one another and gazing deep into each other's eyes while their souls move out of their bodies and intertwine to become one, more-perfect, soul. The narrator of the poem also admits, though, that such a union of souls should also be expressed physically, thus pointing out that their bodies are actually somewhat necessary to their love.

George Herbert's famous religious poem "Easter Wings" (1634) is written in such a manner that its lines, rich with metaphysical imagery, mimic the form about which he writes.

Richard Crashaw's "*Epitaph upon Husband and Wife, who died and were buried together*" (c. 1646) speaks of the eternal bond that a married couple will share in death. He refers to the bond as everlasting now that it has been sealed by their departure from this world.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: Bibliography and Further Reading

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Carey, John, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art*, Oxford University Press, 1981.

A study of Donne's works that takes into consideration the poet's life and his religious beliefs, with an emphasis on his Catholic roots.

Ferry, Anne, *All in War with Time: Love Poetry of Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Marvell*, Harvard University Press, 1975.

A study of the love poetry of Donne and several of his contemporaries.