Away, Melancholy

SUMMARY

The speaker tries to cast their deep sadness away, telling themselves to let it go (all through the poem, they'll repeat this refrain).

Looking for consolation, the speaker reflects that the world keeps going on: trees and the earth are green, the wind blows, fire jumps up and rivers run. The speaker repeats their refrain, telling their sadness to go away.

The ant busily looks for food, and just like all the other animals, it lives its life either eating or being eaten. The speaker again tells their sadness to go away.

Humanity, the speaker goes on, also bustles around like an ant, eating, reproducing, and dying; humans are animals too. The speaker again tells themselves to let their sadness go.

Of all animals, the speaker says, humanity is the best. (In an aside, the speaker tells their sadness to go away.) Humans are the only animals that set up a sacred stone, pour all their own goodness into it, and call it God.

Therefore, the speaker says, don't even talk about cruelty, disease, and war; don't bother asking whether the image people call God can possibly be good and loving.

Instead, reflect that it's astonishing that people go on believing in the ideal of goodness that they call God. The speaker tells themselves to let their sadness go.

Humanity, the speaker says, tries to be good, and sighs longingly for love.

Battered, beaten down, dying in a pool of blood, humanity still looks to the heavens and cries out, "Love!" This is astonishing, the speaker says: humanity's *goodness* is what's incomprehensible, not humanity's failings.

One last time, the speaker cries: go away, melancholy. Let it go.

THEMES

DESPAIR AND HOPE

"Away, Melancholy" depicts the struggle to find hope and beauty in an often terrible world. Trying to banish their "melancholy" (or heavy, persistent sorrow), the poem's speaker takes comfort in the thought that, even in the worst circumstances, humanity somehow manages to believe in the ideals of goodness and love. Rather than asking why the world is so awful, the speaker concludes, people should marvel at the fact that humanity's faith in "virtue" and "love" persists in spite of it all.

The poem's speaker suffers from a dreadful melancholy, a sorrow that seems to permeate the whole world. Doing their best to cast this sadness away, they try to cheer up by looking out at nature: "Are not the trees green / The earth as green? Does not the wind blow [...]?" In other words: *Doesn't nature keep on going no matter what, and isn't that beautiful?*

But in this speaker's painful state, these traditional consolations aren't enough. Sure, nature's eternal cycles might be beautiful, but they also remind the speaker that "All things hurry / To be eaten or eat." In other words, life is just a meaningless struggle for survival, in which people and "ant[s]" alike bustle around "eat[ing]" and "coupl[ing]" (or having sex) until it's time for them to be "bur[ied]." This speaker is clearly so deep in their sadness that even the idea that the world goes on in *spite* of their sadness can't do them much good.

This grim predicament, however, lets hope in the back door. It's easy to feel that life is nasty, brutish, and short, the speaker reflects, but somehow, people *still* manage to find meaning, and that in itself is miraculous. Even in a world full of "tyranny," "pox" (or disease), and "wars," people believe in goodness—so much so that they learn to call their ideal of goodness "God" and worship it. It's "enough," the speaker says, to know that people go on believing in the love and goodness they call God even when they're "beaten, corrupted, dying." This capacity for belief in the face of horror is so beautiful and astonishing that the mere thought of it should itself give people hope.

Alas, melancholy can't be banished so easily. The poem's constant refrain of "Away, melancholy" suggests that the speaker needs to push their sadness back over and over; marveling at humanity's persistent belief in the good isn't a cure-all. But then, that's exactly the poem's point. Reaching out for hope and love even in the depths of "melancholy," trying to "let it go," the speaker practices what they preach, making just the leap of faith the poem describes. Hope, this poem suggests, doesn't mean pretending the world's sorrows don't exist or don't matter, but confronting them—and believing in goodness anyway.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-48

HUMANITY VS. NATURE

Humanity, this poem suggests, is both part of nature and separate from it, and that paradox is what makes people special, wonderful, and awe-inspiring.

This poem's "melancholy" (or deeply sorrowful) speaker reflects that human beings and animals are basically the same:

they live out their little lives waiting either "to be eaten or eat." There's no difference in the way that a human being and an animal "eats, couples, buries" (eats, reproduces, and dies, that is). People are subject to just the same urges and cycles as the rest of nature—and their lives, in this way, aren't any more meaningful than an ant's.

However, there's a clear *difference* between animals and human beings, too: the ability to *reflect* on this predicament and get "melancholy" about it in the first place! In fact, the speaker's melancholy sits right next to what they feel makes humanity "superlative" (or superior, best of all): the ability to *imagine* and *aspire to* something better, richer, and more meaningful than eat-or-be-eaten brutality. Humanity, the speaker observes with wonder, is the only animal that could come up with the concept of "goodness," let alone believe in it.

Being human, in this poem, thus means being at once an animal and something more than an animal. Self-awareness and the capacity to reflect are what make people "melancholy" (who ever saw a melancholy ant?) and what makes them "superlative," miraculous creatures.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 8-27

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-7

Away, melancholy, ...
... Away melancholy.

"Away, Melancholy" begins by painting a portrait of its speaker's sadness:

> Away, melancholy,
> Away with it, let it go.

This speaker, readers gather, must have been struggling with melancholy—a profound, enduring sadness, even a depression—for a long time. They're ready to be done with it now. But melancholy can't be turfed out so easily as all that. Even the speaker's anaphora on the word "away" makes it clear that this sorrow is hard to budge: one "away" won't do it.

For that matter, the speaker isn't just pushing melancholy away, but telling themselves to "let it go," words that suggest the speaker may find melancholy as hard to resist as it is to endure. The world, after all, is full of things to despair about.

Written in flexible free verse (with no set rhyme scheme or meter), the poem will shift its shape just as the speaker's thoughts do. Within this ever-changing shape, the words of the first stanza will become a refrain: the poem's backbone and its reason for being.

The speaker begins the second stanza of their quest to escape melancholy by doing what poets have often done: turning to the natural world for comfort. After all:

> Are not the trees **green**,
> The earth as **green**?

The speaker's diacope on the word "green" paints a picture of a lush landscape, verdant as far as the eye can see. In the face of such loveliness, the speaker's rhetorical question seems to ask, who could despair? For that matter, as long as "the wind blow[s], / Fire leap[s] and the rivers flow," who could doubt that the world's beauty and the cycles of nature are bigger and more enduring than any one person's sadness?

The cry of "Away, melancholy" that ends the stanza seems to say, *That ought to do it*. But as the next stanza will show, this particular speaker's melancholy doesn't surrender to natural beauty as readily as, say, Mary Oliver's does.

LINES 8-12

The ant is ...
... Away, melancholy.

In the second stanza, the speaker turned to nature for comfort, like many poets before and since. But their melancholy doesn't seem to have responded to this treatment. Instead, the speaker's gloom makes them see even nature as rather depressing.

Turning from the natural world to its creatures, the speaker observes "the ant" as it bustles around, remarking on how "he carrieth his meat." Here, the poem's language takes on the tone of a biblical proverb: the elevated, old-fashioned "carrieth" (which just means "carries") suggests that the speaker is once again observing a part of nature that is always the same and will always be the same.

That "always and forever" tone makes the next two lines feel all the grimmer:

> All things hurry
> To be eaten or eat.

Looking for consolation in nature, the speaker manages to find only a reminder that this is an ant-eat-ant world and that no matter how any creature bustles around, it's always on its way to either eating or being eaten. All "hurry[ing]" is only a hurry toward the grave.

In that light, the refrain takes on a different tone. The last time the speaker cried "Away, melancholy," it might have sounded as if they were saying, "Take that, melancholy! The world is beautiful!" Now it feels more as if they're batting back a resurgence of despair: "Oh no, that made it worse! Get away!"

LINES 13-17

Man, too, hurries, ...
... let it go.

As the fourth stanza begins, the speaker's effort to find beauty and meaning in nature seems to have backfired. Looking deeply into the natural world teaches the speaker only that the circle of life drags everything toward death. Humanity is in no way exempt from this fate.

In fact, human beings are "animal[s] also," just like the ant of the third stanza. The speaker underscores that point with a moment of polyptoton: just as "all things **hurry** / To be eaten or eat," "Man, too, **hurries**." Rushing to eat and reproduce, the speaker warns, humanity is also just bustling around killing time, until at last they're "burie[d]." The slant rhyme between "hurries" and "buries" insists that all hurry only hurries you closer to death.

Looking at nature, in other words, doesn't give the speaker some peaceful sense that they're part of something bigger. Rather, their melancholy makes them see the circle of life itself as just a lot of pointless, doomed activity.

Perhaps that accounts for the little change in the refrain this time around:

> With a hey ho melancholy,
> Away with it, let it go.

Here, the speaker isn't just throwing in a resigned "hey ho," but alluding to another poem: the Fool's song at the end of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. That song has its own refrain: "With hey, ho, the wind and the rain." "For the rain it raineth every day," the Fool goes on: *it's always like this*.

This allusion suggests that the speaker might be trying to face up to a world that feels empty. The "let it go" here could even hint that the speaker is trying to let go of being *disappointed* or *surprised* that the world runs the way it runs, that human beings are just animals living out essentially meaningless lives.

This, however, is not the end of the story.

LINES 18-27

Man of all ...
... let it go.

The speaker has just been despairing that human beings are animals among animals, creatures whose fate it is to meaninglessly eat, reproduce, and die. But this idea contains the seeds of its own undoing. In order for the speaker to be melancholy about the idea that life is empty, they need to have something that other animals don't: the capacity to imagine that life *could* have a meaning, the capacity to conceive of "meaning" at all.

The next stanza thus changes tack with an inspired suddenness. Humanity is in fact "superlative," the speaker declares; in other words, humanity is the best, the greatest, the paragon of animals. Why? Because humanity can imagine not just meaning, but goodness. More than that, humanity can *value* goodness.

The speaker explores this idea through the dreamlike image of humanity raising a sacred "stone" and worshiping it as a god. Here, the speaker's repetitions trace the growth of something divine:

> Into the stone, the **god**
> Pours what he knows of **good**
> Calling, **good**, **God**.

The first "god," the speaker argues, is humanity itself. By "pour[ing] what he knows of good" into that sacred stone, humanity *creates* God as God is said to have created humanity. "Calling, good, God"—in other words, turning goodness itself into a God who can be worshiped and loved—humanity treats its own best qualities as holy.

People, in other words, are different from animals because they can both *imagine* and *love* the ideal of goodness.

This idea, unlike general thoughts of nature's loveliness, is something the speaker can sink their teeth into. The refrain "Away, melancholy" repeats three times across this stanza—but now, it's sometimes in parentheses, no longer the main course.

LINES 28-36

Speak not to ...
... let it go.

The speaker is starting to get excited now, reflecting on the idea that there *is* something special, good, and valuable about humanity: the fact that human beings are able to conceive of specialness, goodness, and value! More astonishing yet, they love goodness so much that they call it God, believing it to be the very creator of the universe, the biggest and most powerful force there is. This idea is the first that's seemed at all effective against the speaker's melancholy.

The speaker is old and wise enough, though, to know that their melancholy will push back with a familiar counterargument. It's all well and good that humanity likes goodness, the speaker's melancholy side might respond—but look, the world is still full of suffering. So "Can God / Stone of man's thoughts, be good?" In other words, don't all the "tears" and "wars" in the world cast this belief in goodness into doubt?

The speaker rejects this line of questioning outright. Listen to the triumphant flow of sounds as they turn doubt away:

> Speak not to me of **tear**s,
> **Ty**ranny, pox, **war**s,

The assonance and alliteration of "**tear**s" and "**ty**ranny" and the

slant rhyme of *tears / wars* give the speaker's voice a new music even as they list terrible things.

The mere existence of evil and sorrow in the world, the speaker goes on, can't undo what they've seen:

> [...] it is enough
> That the stuffed
> Stone of man's good, growing,
> By man's called God.

In other words, people's enduring faith in goodness is a sufficient answer to doubt in itself. So long as people keep believing that goodness is the ultimate power, the world isn't utterly hopeless, and melancholy can't prevail.

There's more to see in these words, too. Notice that the speaker sees the stone that represents God not just as "stuffed" with human goodness, but "growing," expanding *beyond* human goodness. Part of what's so lovely about people, then, is their ability not just to believe, but to imagine. Imagining God means imagining a goodness greater than any on earth, then putting one's faith in it.

LINES 37-46

Man aspires ...
... Not his failing.

The last stanzas of the poem sum up everything the speaker has seen about sorrow and goodness with a vivid object lesson. It begins with a four-line stanza only seven words long, forming a chiasmus:

> Man aspires
> To good,
> To love
> Sighs;

This "there and back again" structure introduces a new kind of cycle, a counter to the mindless, animalistic "hurry[ing]" the speaker sorrowed over earlier in the poem. Rather than just "eat[ing], coupl[ing]," and finally dying, people also just keep trying to reach goodness, longing for love even when it feels distant.

With this prologue, the speaker faces up to a sad, beautiful mystery. "Beaten, corrupted, dying," lying in pools of their "own blood," humanity still:

> [...] heaves up an eye above
> Cries, Love, love.

The touching epizeuxis of "Love, love" here is an argument in itself. Calling out for love not once but twice, the imagined everyman reveals an unbreakable commitment to the *idea* of love, even when there's little love to be seen on earth. This picture of a tormented man crying out to God also can't help but summon up images of the Crucifixion, an allusion that suggests that suffering, too, can be absorbed and transformed by a faith in goodness.

Such faith is far from easy; the image of the poor battered figure "heav[ing] up" his eyes toward God makes it clear that this is a feat of serious emotional strength. But that, the speaker concludes, is just what's astonishing about people. It's precisely because the world can seem so empty, meaningless, and cruel that the human capacity for belief should wash melancholy clear away. The speaker sums up their wonder in a last slant-rhymed couplet :

> It is his virtue needs explaining,
> Not his failing.

This is a direct rejoinder to the doubtful voice that would ask: "Can God, / Stone of man's thoughts, be good?" It's no wonder, the speaker says, that people are often cruel: this is a tough world, there's no mystery there. What melancholics need to remember is that, in a world that's just as sad as they think it is, humanity's persistent belief in the ideal of goodness is an out-and-out miracle.

LINES 47-48

Away, melancholy, ...
... let it go.

The poem closes with exactly the same words it started with, the old refrain:

> Away, melancholy,
> Away with it, let it go.

By now, though, these words might sound a little different.

Melancholy, this poem suggests, might be agonizing, but it's also part of what's amazing and beautiful about human consciousness. (After all, who ever met a melancholy ant?) To have the capacity to feel sad that the world can be meaningless and cruel is also to have the capacity to imagine what meaning and goodness would look like—and to believe in them, and to love them. This capacity is itself a miracle.

This last repetition, though, suggests that understanding all this doesn't make melancholy itself any easier to bear or to banish. Even once the speaker has explored their new insight at poetic length, they still need to say their magic words yet again; their melancholy isn't gone for good.

And yet, in turning back to that refrain one more time, the speaker is doing just what the poem describes: faithfully reaching out toward goodness, love, and hope even from the depths of their pain. The mere existence of hope and faith, this poem says, is reason enough to have hope and faith.

POETIC DEVICES

REFRAIN

The poem's poignant refrain shows the speaker grappling with suffering and finding the courage to embrace life in a painful world.

The refrain first appears in the poem's two opening lines:

> Away, melancholy,
> Away with it, let it go.

Here, at the outset of the poem, readers get the sense that the speaker is tired to death of being so "melancholy," but also that they might feel as if it's difficult to "let it go." To this speaker, it seems, melancholy might feel like both a burden and a crutch.

Every time these words (or a variation on them) appear through the rest of the poem—and they do so in nearly every stanza—their meaning evolves a little bit:

- In the second stanza, for instance, the words "Away, melancholy" appears after a series of comforting ideas about how the beauties of the natural world just keep rolling on regardless of one's feelings: the "rivers flow" and "fire leaps" anyway. When these lines conclude with an "Away, melancholy," it sounds as if the speaker is saying: *Life goes on; therefore, go away, melancholy*.
- But in the third stanza, the speaker has some gloomier thoughts about natural cycles, reflecting that "All things hurry / To be eaten or eat"—that it's a dog-eat-dog world for every living thing, in other words. When *those* thoughts conclude with an "Away, melancholy," it feels more as if the speaker is saying: *Oh no, I've gone and made it worse—go* away, *melancholy!*

As the poem goes on and the speaker begins to develop the idea that the human capacity even to *imagine* goodness might be cause for hope, the refrain starts to sound defiant, like a battle cry. By the time the poem ends with exactly the same words it began with, the speaker has a real *reason* to let go of their melancholy: if nothing else, the speaker can find hope in the idea that people believe in good even in the worst of times.

All those repetitions, though, might also suggest that hanging on to such hope is no easy task.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Away, melancholy, / Away with it, let it go."
- **Line 7:** "Away melancholy."
- **Line 12:** "Away, melancholy."
- **Lines 16-17:** "With a hey ho melancholy, / Away with it, let it go."
- **Line 20:** "(Away melancholy)"
- **Line 23:** "(Away melancholy)"
- **Line 27:** "Away melancholy, let it go."
- **Line 36:** "Away, melancholy, let it go."
- **Lines 47-48:** "Away, melancholy, / Away with it, let it go."

REPETITION

Beyond the refrain that becomes the poem's backbone, repetitions of various flavors give the poem both style and substance, helping the speaker to develop a defense against despair.

The parallelism and diacope of the second stanza introduce one traditional way of fighting back against one's melancholy: turning to nature for consolation. Listen to the repetitions here:

> Are not the trees **green**,
> The earth as **green**?
> Does not the **wind blow**,
> **Fire leap** and the **rivers flow**?

The diacope on "green" emphasizes that greenness, evoking a lush, verdant landscape. Then, parallelism fills that landscape with life: the way the "wind blow[s]," "fire leap[s]," and the "rivers flow" helps the reader to remember that nature keeps on moving even when life feels frozen and bleak.

That thought alone, though, isn't enough to make the speaker feel better. On the contrary, it reminds them that, just as "**the ant is busy**," "**all things hurry**" to their inevitable deaths. (Notice the corresponding parallelism in those lines!) Since nature can't give the speaker much solid meaning to hold onto, the speaker instead has to turn inward, thinking about what it is that makes them want meaning at all.

As the speaker introduces the idea that humanity alone has the capacity both to imagine and to worship goodness, diacope compresses a complex argument into three short lines. First, the speaker says, humanity raises up a "stone"—a sacred rock, which might symbolically suggest anything from a standing stone to a cathedral. And then:

> Into the stone, the **god**
> Pours what he knows of **good**
> Calling, **good**, **God**.

Consider how the logic flows here:

- First, it's humanity who's the "god": a creator who "pours what he knows of good" into that stone.
- Then, humanity calls its own vision of goodness God

and worships it.

The repetitions here emphasize exactly what's so miraculous about humanity. In spite of life's cruelties, people both have an idea of what goodness is and love it so much that it becomes God. People, in other words, *create* the transcendent goodness they call God; that goodness is both part of them and an ideal that they can aspire to and call upon.

Dramatizing the consequences of this idea, the speaker uses a final repetition:

> Beaten, corrupted, dying
> In his own blood lying
> Yet heaves up an eye above
> Cries, Love, love.

This moving moment of epizeuxis suggests—more than a single cry of "love" would—that humanity can hang onto its belief in the goodness it calls God even in the most abysmal pain.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "green"
- **Line 4:** "green"
- **Line 5:** "wind blow"
- **Line 6:** "Fire leap," "rivers flow"
- **Line 8:** "The ant is busy"
- **Line 10:** "All things hurry"
- **Line 24:** "god"
- **Line 25:** "good"
- **Line 26:** "good, God."
- **Line 30:** "God"
- **Line 31:** "good"
- **Line 34:** "man's," "good"
- **Line 35:** "man's," "God"
- **Line 38:** "good"
- **Line 44:** "Love, love."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

A series of rhetorical questions in the second stanza helps the speaker to summon up some familiar old consolations for the melancholic soul—and to suggest that those consolations might not be all that consoling.

Trying to banish their sorrow, the speaker asks:

> Are not the trees green,
> The earth as green?
> Does not the wind blow,
> Fire leap and the rivers flow?

These questions imply their own answers: *"Why, yes, the natural world is fresh and beautiful, and it does keep moving along as always."* For that matter, they invite a conclusion: *"and I can take comfort in that."* If the speaker stopped there, they'd be doing what plenty of poets before and since have done: finding hope and relief in the idea that the world is a big, beautiful place, much bigger than one's sorrow.

On the other hand, presenting these ideas in the form of questions also leaves another possible answer open: *Yeah, trees are green and rivers flow. So?* Perhaps the thought of nature's eternal beauty simply isn't enough, sometimes; perhaps it could even be depressing in its own way. When the speaker reflects a few lines later that "All things hurry / To be eaten or eat," they point out that nature's cycles aren't all about new leaves and sparkling waters. There are plenty of teeth and claws in the equation, too.

The rhetorical questions here thus both help the speaker reach out to the beauty of the world and suggest that this might only be so helpful. This speaker might take *some* consolation in the loveliness of nature, but they'll have to look to humanity to find lasting hope.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-6:** "Are not the trees green, / The earth as green? / Does not the wind blow, / Fire leap and the rivers flow?"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton helps to evoke both the speaker's melancholic exhaustion and their gathering courage.

When the sorrowing speaker reflects on the ways in which humans are just another kind of animal, asyndeton suggests how gloomy the idea feels at first:

> Man, too, hurries, ||
> Eats, || couples, || buries,

The absence of a conclusive "and" between "couples" and "buries" here suggests that this cycle of life and death just keeps going on—and not in a way that the speaker finds pleasant to contemplate. All that animalistic eating, reproducing, and dying could spin out forever, the speaker fears, and it would never mean a thing.

The comparison between humanity and the animals ends up being oddly helpful, though, reminding the speaker that there *is* a difference between people and animals: people can imagine good and meaningful things even when they don't see any evidence of them in the world. This truth in itself, the speaker feels, is "good"—so good that the asyndeton in this next list feels inspired, not sad:

> Speak not to me of tears, ||
> Tyranny, || pox, || wars,

Here again, there's the sense that this not-quite-concluded list of life's horrors could go on *ad infinitum*. In a new mood, though, the speaker is also prepared to say that it's *because* one could keep listing miseries forever that people should be astonished at their own capacity for goodness. The phrasing here even parallels the language above, suggesting that the speaker is seeing their earlier sorrow in a new light.

Asyndeton then appears one last time in a new vision of the human condition:

> Beaten, || corrupted, || dying ||
> In his own blood lying
> Yet heaves up an eye above ||
> Cries, Love, love.

The absence of conjunctions here makes this image stark and beautiful. Stripped down, these lines suggest just how miraculous is the human capacity to leap from misery to hope, pain to love.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "hurries, / Eats, couples, buries,"
- **Lines 28-29:** "tears, / Tyranny, pox, wars,"
- **Lines 41-44:** "Beaten, corrupted, dying / In his own blood lying / Yet heaves up an eye above / Cries, Love, love."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration underscores a central idea in the poem: that humanity's ability to first conceive of "good" and then worship it in the form of "God" is in itself reason enough to live and hope.

Observing that humanity calls "good, God," the speaker invites readers to notice that the connection between "good" and "God" is right there in the sounds of the words—and not only in the /g/ alliteration but the /d/ consonance. The only thing that separates "good" and "God" is an O. Perhaps there's even a subtle joke there: that extra "O" might be the "O" of praise that transforms an abstract ideal of goodness into a figure to be worshiped. By crying "O!", in other words, people turn their own "good" into their "God."

Elsewhere, alliteration plays its familiar role, giving the poem emphasis and music. When the speaker says, "Speak not to me of tears, / Tyranny, pox, wars," for instance, the hard /t/ sound suggests both the sharp pain of the world's many miseries and the speaker's sharpening determination not to get bogged down in the thought of them.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Fire," "flow"
- **Line 24:** "god"
- **Line 25:** "good"
- **Line 26:** "good, God"
- **Line 28:** "tears"
- **Line 29:** "Tyranny"
- **Line 30:** "God"
- **Line 31:** "good"
- **Lines 33-34:** "stuffed / Stone"
- **Line 34:** "good, growing"
- **Line 35:** "God"

ASSONANCE

Assonance helps the poem to sound like what it is: a lament and a rallying cry at once.

Listen, for example, to the music of these lines, in which the speaker declares that humanity's ability to believe in goodness is itself enough to banish melancholy:

> Say rather it is enough
> That the stuffed
> Stone of man's good, growing,
> By man's called God.

Here, assonance creates a surprising, slant end rhyme between "enough" and "stuffed" that emphasizes just how much goodness humanity can cram into their idea of God. That idea echoes in the /o/ assonance of "stone" and "growing," which suggests a miracle: a stone coming to life and growing even *beyond* what humanity can imagine.

A similarly rich moment of assonance appears in the speaker's last big declaration. Think for long enough about what humankind has to go through, the speaker says, and there's only one conclusion:

> It is his virtue needs explaining,
> Not his failing.

The assonance here supports a moving idea. To a person in the depths of melancholy, the usual and obvious question is, "Why is the world so awful, and why are people so awful?" Through this poem, the speaker learns to reply, "The real question is, why are people so *good*?" The long /ay/ sound that links "explaining" and "failing" helps these brave words to hit even harder.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "trees green"
- **Line 4:** "green"
- **Line 6:** "leap"
- **Line 8:** "is busy"

- **Line 11:** "be eaten," "eat"
- **Line 15:** "also"
- **Line 16:** "ho"
- **Line 21:** "He," "creatures," "alone"
- **Line 22:** "stone"
- **Line 24:** "stone"
- **Line 25:** "knows"
- **Line 28:** "tears"
- **Line 29:** "Tyranny"
- **Line 30:** "God"
- **Line 31:** "thoughts"
- **Line 32:** "enough"
- **Line 33:** "stuffed"
- **Line 34:** "Stone," "growing"
- **Line 45:** "explaining"
- **Line 46:** "failing"

VOCABULARY

Melancholy (Line 1, Line 7, Line 12, Line 16, Line 20, Line 23, Line 27, Line 36, Line 47) - The "melancholy" the speaker sings of isn't any old sadness, but a deep, enduring, fundamental sorrow.

Carrieth his meat (Line 9) - "Carrieth" is just an old-fashioned word for "carries." The word "meat" here also means "food" generally, not "flesh" specifically.

Couples (Lines 13-14) - Has sex, procreates.

Superlative (Lines 18-19) - The absolute best, above all others.

Pox (Lines 28-29) - Disease.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Away, Melancholy" is written in free verse, without meter, a predictable stanza length, or a regular rhyme scheme. The short lines of its 10 irregular stanzas can sound weary, forceful, or full of hard-earned conviction. Moments of heightened, biblical language ("He carrieth his meat," "He of all creatures alone / Raiseth a stone") suggest that the speaker is delivering great and solemn truths.

Maybe the most distinctive formal choice here is the refrain introduced in the first stanza:

> Away, melancholy,
> Away with it, let it go.

These words, sometimes slightly changed or recombined, reappear all through the poem. As the speaker returns and returns to the refrain, its words begin to sound like a spell for banishing sadness—a spell that, judging by the speaker's repetitions, isn't as quick or as effective as one might hope.

METER

This poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't use a consistent meter. While no two stanzas use the same metrical patterns, there's still plenty of powerful rhythm here.

For instance, listen to the strong beat in this summation of the eat-or-be-eaten world:

> The ant is busy
> He carrieth his meat,
> All things hurry
> To be eaten or eat.

These lines, with their two stresses apiece, are in dimeter—a thumping rhythm like a drumbeat or a pounding heart, just the thing for a description of life's relentlessness.

RHYME SCHEME

While there's no steady rhyme scheme here, the poem is full of rhyme: end rhymes, internal rhymes, slant rhymes. All that music reflects the melancholy speaker's effort to see the beauty in an often sad and ugly world.

Listen, for instance, to the series of couplets in the poem's stark ninth stanza:

> Beaten, corrupted, dying
> In his own blood lying
> Yet heaves up an eye above
> Cries, Love, love.
> It is his virtue needs explaining,
> Not his failing.

The first four lines here are written in rhymed couplets: *dying* and *lying*, *above* and *love*. The last two lines are a couplet too, in a sense, but their rhyme is slant: *explaining* and *failing*. This movement from perfect to slant rhymes evokes the speaker's wonder and pain at humanity's nigh-miraculous capacity to keep believing in goodness: that last rhyme, breaking from perfection, sounds broken itself, like a sob.

SPEAKER

As the poem's title suggests, this speaker is a melancholic soul: a person who suffers from deep sadness and sees the world with an inspired, philosophical eye. (These qualities have long been thought to travel together.) Their constant refrain—"Away, melancholy"—suggests just how weary they are of their sorrow and how ready they feel to "let it go."

Perhaps, though, their melancholy has also given them gifts. It's

through being so very sad about the way the world works, the poem suggests, that people can also understand what makes human life special and miraculous: being sad about the world means being able to imagine a higher "good," and even to personify it as a loving "God."

Though the speaker never says much about themselves directly, then, the reader gets a clear picture of a person whose capacity for hope and despair aren't just equal, but intertwined.

SETTING

The setting of "Away, Melancholy" is the whole sad and beautiful world. Trying hard to let their melancholy go, the speaker casts an eye over everything there is, looking for comfort in the fact that the "wind blow[s], / Fire leap[s] and the rivers flow." The world might be full of "tyranny" and "wars," the speaker reflects, but it's also a place where people continue to believe in goodness and love in spite of their pain. Taking this broad view, the speaker concludes that the best answer to melancholy is to remember that continued human "virtue" in the face of the world's constant and terrible pain is practically miraculous.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Stevie Smith (1902-1971) was a British poet and novelist whose art mingled the light and the dark. Many of her poems unite bleak subject matter with a breezy tone. Her most famous poem, "Not Waving But Drowning," is a prime example (and gave its name to the 1957 book in which this poem was first collected). "Away, Melancholy" itself is a quintessential Smith poem, taking on the most desperate of questions in deceptively simple language.

Readers might trace Smith's artistic lineage back to Victorian poet Edward Lear. Like Lear, Smith wrote and illustrated melancholy poetry in the guise of light verse; like Lear, Smith suffered from persistent depressions. Both poets were odd ducks, a little out of step with the world around them, and both found inspiration and sorrow in that oddity. Critic David Smith once remarked that Smith's work was "so completely different from anyone else's that it is all but impossible to discuss her poems in relation to those of her contemporaries." By her own description, she was far more deeply influenced by Victorian poets like Tennyson and Robert Browning than by living writers.

It was only toward the end of her life that Smith's genius was more widely recognized. By the time she died in 1971, she had been awarded both the Cholmondeley Award for Poetry and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. More telling than any kind of public honor, though, is her anonymous afterlife in the English language. Some of her lines—"not waving but drowning" perhaps most notably—are so famous that they've floated free of her work and become proverbial.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Away, Melancholy" deals with universal concerns, but it's also clearly autobiographical. Stevie Smith suffered from serious depressions all her life; many of her poems deal with her emotional struggles and the wisdom she found in them. Smith's specific use of the word "melancholy" in this poem, in fact, might point readers toward the history of the idea that sorrow, wisdom, and creativity travel together.

Melancholy was once not just a mood, but a temperament. For centuries, people believed that the human body was governed by four fluids: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. These fluids were supposed to stay in balance; when they didn't, the theory ran, you ended up with all sorts of physical and emotional ailments. People with an excess of black bile were said to be "melancholic": gloomy and despairing.

However, this temperamental imbalance came with its compensations. Melancholic illnesses were said to disproportionately affect artists, philosophers, and other creative types, and were sometimes even associated with genius (though a serious fit of melancholy, as the great engraver Albrecht Dürer knew, could feel more paralyzing than inspiring). In Renaissance Europe, melancholy even became fashionable.

In linking a fit of melancholy with a creative vision of human goodness, Smith thus draws on the old wisdom that sorrow can inspire and educate, not just oppress.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/RtdaUsh0xzU)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Stevie Smith's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/stevie-smith)
- Smith's Influence — Read an appreciation of Smith's poetry that praises her knack for "uneasy verse." (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-uneasy-verse-of-stevie-smith)
- Smith on Melancholy — Listen to Smith discussing how sadness and struggle inspired her poetry. (https://youtu.be/FKHWEWOrL9s)
- Smith's Legacy — Read a 2021 article honoring the 50th anniversary of Smith's death.

(https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/07/stevie-smith-poems-suit-a-pandemic)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER STEVIE SMITH POEMS

- Not Waving but Drowning

HOW TO CITE

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