On the Day of Judgment

POEM TEXT

With a whirl of thought oppressed,
I sink from reverie to rest.
An horrid vision seized my head,
I saw the graves give up their dead.
Jove, armed with terrors, bursts the skies,
And thunder roars and light'ning flies!
Amazed, confused, its fate unknown,
The world stands trembling at his throne.
While each pale sinner hangs his head,
Jove, nodding, shook the heav'ns, and said:
"Offending race of human kind,
By nature, reason, learning, blind;
You who, through frailty, stepped aside,
And you, who never fell—through pride;
You who in different sects have shammed,
And come to see each other damned;
(So some folk told you, but they knew
No more of Jove's designs than you);
The world's mad business now is o'er,
And I resent these pranks no more.
I to such blockheads set my wit!
I damn such fools!—Go, go, you're bit."

SUMMARY

Filled with heavy, swirling thoughts, the speaker slips from daydreaming into sleep. The speaker is suddenly overtaken by a horrible vision of dead people rising from their graves. The speaker sees a heavily armed Jupiter (king of the ancient Roman gods) burst through the sky, accompanied by violent clashes of thunder and bolts of lightning. Shocked, dumbfounded, and unclear of its fate, humanity quivers in front of Jupiter's throne. Pasty sinners lower their heads while Jupiter makes the heavens tremble and speaks: "You humans insult me. You're foolish and deluded not just by your very nature, but even in your use of logic and knowledge. There are those of you who were weak and lost your way and those of you who were too prideful. You've tricked yourselves with all these different religious groups, hoping to see other groups condemned to hell. (Some people told you these things would happen, but they were just as ignorant about my plans as you were.) This utterly crazy behavior is now done, and I won't tolerate this tomfoolery a second longer. I'm declaring my judgment against you nitwits. I condemn you dolts! Now get out of sight—you're done."

THEMES

THE FOOLISHNESS OF RELIGIOUS INFIGHTING

Jonathan Swift's "On the Day of Judgment" is a biting satire that re-imagines the end of the world. Swift wrote the poem at a time of intense squabbling between different sects of Christianity. But when "Judgment Day" finally arrives in this poem, God (here taking the form of "Jove," the tempestuous king of the gods in ancient Rome) is furious with people for spending all their time bickering about which sect got things right. As such, Jove "damn[s]" *everyone* for being such foolish "blockheads." With this darkly comic twist, the poem portrays arguments over the right way to worship as naive, childish, spiteful, and just plain foolish.

The people in Swift's poem eagerly anticipate the day on which God will grant his true believers—living or dead—eternal life in the kingdom of Heaven while condemning everyone else to Hell. The "different sects" all think they've figured out God's plan and "come to see each other damned." The speaker makes it sound like these sects have prioritized and even delight in being correct rather than actually living by the tenets of their religion.

The speaker then imagines God dramatically bursting through the skies to bestow his judgement. All the world "stands trembling at his throne," each "sinner" waiting anxiously to hear their fate (and, ostensibly, be proven right).

But things don't go according to plan. For one thing, God turns about to be Jove, a.k.a. Jupiter, the king of gods in Roman praying to the wrong deity!

Note that it's *possible* that Swift is using "Jove" in a more colloquial sense and still talking about the Christian God; either way, this figure certainly doesn't act the way people hoped he would. Instead of joyously uplifting his true followers, he angrily yells at the whole human race for being so prideful and petty.

Humanity has offended him with its persistent ignorance. People might think they're intelligent, but, according to Jove, humanity is "By nature, reason, *learning*, blind." For all the hours put in by philosophers and theologians, their highbrow explanations have made humankind *less* able to perceive the truth and more divided than ever.

"Some folk," adds Jove, might have guessed what was going to happen, but in reality, no one has ever known anything of Jove's real "designs." Jove thus declares that humanity is weak, having "stepp'd aside" from its true course through all this infighting. Humanity has in fact tricked ("shamm'd") itself with all this warring between religious factions. These belief systems are supposed to be built around love, truth, and empathy, and yet they encourage one "sect" too long for the damnation of another (Swift was undoubtedly drawing inspiration from the fighting between Protestants vs. Catholics in his native Ireland).

Jove thus condemns all of humankind as "blockheads" and refuses to tolerate their "pranks" any longer. He damns *everyone* and then orders them out of his sight, as though human beings are foolish children he can't stand to even look at.

The poem thus takes a bleak view of humanity and organized religion, highlighting the ridiculousness of religious conflict between people who ultimately share the same (or very similar) beliefs. All this fighting, Jove declares, is "mad business."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

With a whirl of thought oppressed,
I sink from reverie to rest.
An horrid vision seized my head,
I saw the graves give up their dead.

The poem begins with a first-person speaker feeling "oppressed," or weighed down, by a "whirl of thought." While the poem doesn't specify what this "thought" relates to, it's tempting to envision the speaker lamenting the sorry state of the world.

The speaker "sink[s] from reverie to rest," slipping from daydreaming to sleep. The alliteration and assonance of "reverie" and "rest" smoothly link these words, evoking just how easy it is to doze off. Yet a "horrid vision" then "seize[s]" the speaker, interrupting that rest. "Seized" is a particularly active verb, signaling aggression and discomfort; the speaker seems to be overtaken by this vision against their will.

The speaker sees the dead spring up from the ground. Specifically, the speaker says that "graves give up their dead." This personification suggests that, upon recognizing the arrival of a greater power (God), the earth itself is relinquishing its control of the human beings buried within it. The lively /g/ alliteration here ("graves give") also makes this apocalyptic image all the more gruesome and vivid.

These four lines establish the poem's meter and rhyme scheme, both of which are typical of Swift and of the Augustan era during which he wrote. The poem uses iambic tetrameter, meaning each line has four iambs (poetic feet that follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, da-DUM).

The first line actually begins with an anapaest ("With a whirl"), however, a subtle variation that immediately conveys disruption and unrest:

With a whirl | of thought | oppressed,
I sink | from re- | verie | to rest.
An hor- | rid vi- | sion seized | my head,
I saw | the graves | give up | their dead.

The speaker also uses rhyming couplets (oppressed/rest, head/dead), which quicken the poem and make its wit seem all the more biting and comic.

LINES 5-10

Jove, armed with terrors, bursts the skies,
And thunder roars and light'ning flies!
Amazed, confused, its fate unknown,
The world stands trembling at his throne.
While each pale sinner hangs his head,
Jove, nodding, shook the heav'ns, and said:

The "Day of Judgment" has arrived, but the deity doing the judging isn't the one people have been expecting. Instead, Jove appears.

Jove is another name for Jupiter, the king of the Gods in Roman mythology (known as Zeus in Greek myth). It's possible that Swift is using the name "Jove" simply as another way of referring to the Abrahamic god, as in the case of the old-fashioned minced oath "by Jove" (wherein people use "Jove" to avoid taking the lord's name in vain).

The mention of thunder and lightning, however, makes this Jove sound a lot like the actual Roman god of myth (Jupiter was also the god of the sky and thunder)—clearly not the god people in Swift's day were praying to!

Jove puts on a suitably dramatic display. He's "armed with terrors," which is probably a reference to thunderbolts (with which Jove is traditionally equipped). That he "bursts the sies" suggests he tears the heavens themselves apart. The pounding da-*DUM*s of the poem's iambic meter add rousing rhythm to Jove's apocalyptic arrival, while growling consonance and assonance ramp up the intensity of the poem's language:

Jove, armed with terrors, bursts the skies,
And thunder roars and light'ning flies!

The "world" (by which the speaker means all of humanity)

stands before Jove's kingly "throne"—"Amazed," "confused," and, understandably, "trembling"—as they await judgment from a god they never believed in. Humanity's "fate" is in Jove's hands, and, for the moment, "unknown."

The speaker says that "each pale sinner" (likely pale in fear) "hangs his head," perhaps out of respect for Jove and shame for their sins. Of course, their heads might also be drooping from disappointment that they've been worshipping the wrong god this whole time.

Jove nods, as if insisting that the onlookers need to believe what they're seeing, and then shakes the heavens one more time. This line use caesurae to convey that shaking action:

> Jove, nodding, shook the heav'ns, and said:

These pauses create a shaky, stop-start motion that builds up the poem's tension before it hands the mic over to Jove. The rest of the poem's words belong to him, and the whole world stands ready to hear what he has to say.

LINES 11-14

> *"Offending race of human kind,*
> *By nature, reason, learning, blind;*
> *You who, through frailty, stepped aside,*
> *And you, who never fell—through*
>
> *pride;*

From line 11 onward, Jove becomes the speaker of the poem. Unfortunately for humanity, he's not pleased with what he's been seeing and starts outlining all the ways that humankind has disappointed him.

There is no affection in the way he addresses the world's inhabitants. Whereas the Christian God might have called these onlookers his children, Jove refers to them as the "Offending race of human kind." In other words, humanity sickens—*offends*—him.

He then says that humanity is "blind," meaning ignorant and foolish, unable to see the truth of things. This is partly human "nature," but it's also a consequence of "reason" and "learning." For all humankind's rich tradition of theology and philosophy, it hasn't brought human beings any closer to knowing God.

The asyndeton of this list (the lack of a conjunction word like "and") suggests these are just a few reasons among *many* that Jove could list out for why humankind is so offensive.

Jove then targets those people who "stepped aside" through weakness. (Notice how there is no main verb in Jove's words yet—he's just taking the time to enumerate all the different *types* of people that infuriate him.) Those who "through frailty, stepped aside" might refer to people who were too weak to stay on the right path. They allowed themselves to be led astray.

Next, Jove calls out "you, who never fell—through pride." This phrase is a bit ambiguous:

- It sounds like Jove is punning on the word "fell," alluding at once to the "Fall of Man" and the idea that "pride comes before the fall."
- Perhaps he's calling to those who never "fell" (from God's grace) but then amending the statement to address those who never managed to overcome the heights of their own arrogance.
- Basically, he's talking to people who were overcome by pride.
- It's worth noting that the poem text here has undergone multiple revisions, and it's unclear if these were done by Swift himself. An earlier version, for example, reads, "those who never err'd from pride."

LINES 15-18

> *You who in different sects have shammed,*
> *And come to see each other damned;*
> *(So some folk told you, but they knew*
> *No more of Jove's designs than you);*

Jove then relays one of the main gripes he has with humanity: its religious delusions. The grammar/syntax of lines 15 and 16 echoes that of lines 13 and 14, using anaphora in the repetition of "You who." This repetitive structure builds rhetorical power, like a great speech by a politician—which makes sense, given this is a deity speaking:

> You who, through frailty, stepped aside,
> And you, who never fell—through pride;
> You who in different sects have shammed,

Jove feels that people have tricked themselves with all these "different sects"—that is, religious groups. All these "sects" have "shammed" (or scammed) themselves; rather than following core religious principles like love, empathy, and devotion, they've focused on being right and "come to see each other damned."

This goes against the tenets of Christianity, which preaches that one should not judge others or risk being judged themselves. Yet that's exactly what the people in this poem have been doing: they think that they're right and that everyone else is wrong. And instead of feeling *compassion* towards those who've gotten it wrong, they relish the opportunity to see them condemned to hell.

In truth, Jove declares, they've *all* gotten it wrong.

Lines 17 to 18 expand on this sentiment. They're spoken as a kind of aside, chastising humanity for pretending to know God's designs. Preachers and religious authorities are reduced to "some folk" who "knew / No more of Jove's designs" than any of

their lowly followers. Jove's return, then, is a great leveler.

That said, it's worth noting that critics continue to debate the target of the poem's satire. It might be aimed at particular "sects" within Christianity (e.g., Nonconformists) or at organized religion in general (even though Swift was a church minister). In any case, the mention of "Jove's designs" dials up the poem's ironic humor—there *is* a divine plan at work, just not the plan that anybody predicted.

LINES 19-22

The world's mad business now is o'er,
And I resent these pranks no more.
I to such blockheads set my wit!
I damn such fools!—Go, go, you're bit."

Jove concludes his speech and delivers his final judgment on humanity. Needless to say, it's not what humanity was hoping for!

First, he declares:

> The world's mad business now is o'er,
> And I resent these pranks no more.

The whole rich, messy history of humankind is reduced here to "mad business," emphasizing the way civilization has effectively gone insane. Jove has had enough, and, like an angry parent, will put up with this behavior "no more."

His tone here is intentionally insulting. Humanity acts with such self-importance, yet to Jove, human behavior amounts to nothing more than "pranks." Humans are just misbehaving children to him.

The last two lines sound typically Augustan in the choice of vocabulary. Jove announces that he has made his decision—"set my wit"—against the "blockheads" (dolts, nincompoops) that comprise humankind. Notice how the bitey consonance in "set" and "wit" anticipates the rhyme with "bit" that ends the poem.

He damns "such fools" (the ones described in his speech, meaning practically everyone) and sends them to Hell. "Go, go, you're bit" is 18th-century slang for "get out of my sight, you're finished." The epizeuxis of "go" is, well, doubly dismissive! Jove really wants humanity to get out of his sight already.

The poem thus ends on a deeply ironic note: in its arrogant attempts to save itself, humanity has brought about its own demise.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds intensity to the poem's language and thus to Jove's forceful condemnation of humankind. At times, shared sounds also evoke the specific imagery being described.

In line 1, for example, the breathy /w/ sounds of "With a whirl" seem to convey the whoosh of thought that swirls around the speaker's mind. In the following line, alliteration and assonance link "reverie" and "rest": these words sound very similar, in turn evoking the smoothness with which the speaker "sink[s]" from daydreaming into full-on sleep.

In line 4, the guttural /g/ alliteration of "graves give up their dead" adds some forcefulness to this image of the earth relinquishing its power over the dead to God. And when the speaker later says that "each pale sinner hands his head" while awaiting Jove's judgment, the triple /h/ sounds call readers' attention to this image of people standing in shame/confusion/despair before Jove. These huffing /h/ sounds also create a weary, exasperated tone, as though humanity is letting out a collective sigh.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "With," "whirl"
- **Line 2:** "reverie," "rest"
- **Line 4:** "graves give"
- **Line 9:** "hangs," " his head"
- **Line 17:** "So some"
- **Lines 17-18:** "knew / No"

ASYNDETON

There are two examples of asyndeton in the poem, both of which add some frantic intensity to the "Day of Judgment" being described.

In line 7, for example, there's no coordinating conjunction to link all the different things that the "world" (i.e., all of humanity) is feeling while standing before Jove:

> Amazed, confused, its fate unknown,
> The world stands trembling at his throne.

Asyndeton speeds up this list, and in doing so it helps to convey the swirling, simultaneous awe, confusion, and anticipation that humanity feels at this moment.

The poem turns to asyndeton again as Jove delivers a scathing critique of humanity in line 12:

> "Offending race of human kind,
> By nature, reason, learning, blind;

Notice how Jove doesn't use any coordinating conjunction here (such as "and"). On the one hand, this simply maintains the poem's bouncing iambic tetrameter.

But this asyndeton also suggests two things about Jove himself. He doesn't use an "and" because this isn't an exhaustive list of what he hates about humankind—he could say much more! Nature, reason, and learning are just a few of the *many* ways in

which humanity proves its foolishness.

The lack of an "and" might also suggest that Jove feels impatient. He doesn't have time to spell everything out completely and—by the end of his brief speech—achieves his aim: condemning everyone to hell.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "Amazed, confused, its fate unknown,"
- **Line 12:** "By nature, reason, learning, blind;"

IMAGERY

The poem uses apocalyptic imagery to set the scene for Jove's epic speech.

The speaker sees "the graves give up their dead," which sounds like something straight out of a zombie movie. This image is, in fact, prophesied in numerous religions' versions of the end of the world. The dead, like the living, want their eternal place in heaven and have been waiting patiently for the "Day of Judgment" to come. The speaker also subtly personifies the earth here, granting it the ability to relinquish buried souls upon Jove's arrival. In this way, the image emphasizes Jove's omnipotence—his power over the entire world.

The imagery that follows in lines 5 and 6 reflects Jove's depiction in classical literature. Jove (like his Greek counterpart, Zeus) is the god of the sky and thunder, and his traditional weapon is a lightning bolt. The poem describes him as being "armed with terrors" and whipping the sky into a ferocious storm upon his arrival, which is accompanied by roaring thunder and flashes of lightning:

> Jove, armed with terrors, bursts the skies,
> And thunder roars and light'ning flies!

The imagery here is violent and frightening, which is fitting for a poem about the end of the world.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "I saw the graves give up their dead. / Jove, armed with terrors, bursts the skies, / And thunder roars and light'ning flies!"
- **Lines 8-10:** "The world stands trembling at his throne. / While each pale sinner hangs his head, / Jove, nodding, shook the heav'ns, and said:"

IRONY

"On the Day of Judgment" gets its humor from its irony: various "sects" have been furiously debating the details of God's plan, but they've all been thinking about the wrong god! Jove's violent appearance is a shock to everyone; people have been right about an imminent Judgment Day, but entirely wrong about *how* they would be judged and *who* would be doing the judging.

Even if readers take "Jove" to be a metaphorical/euphemistic title for the traditional Christian God (rather than actually referring to a deity from Roman myth), the poem remains deeply ironic.

For one thing, Jove declares that humanity's endless attempts to understand/explain God have ironically *distanced* people from him. Philosophers and theologians have tried to find answer's to life's deepest questions through "reason" and "learning," but, according to Jove, they've only made humanity more "blind" (that is, ignorant) to "Jove's designs."

Perhaps this is because people have focused too much on finding answers and arguing about who's right rather than following the actual tenets of their religion (presumably, to be good to one another). Instead of practicing love, humility, and empathy, the "different sects" of the world would like nothing more than to be proven right and to see others "damned" to Hell. People are vindictive and prideful rather than compassionate.

To Jove, these vicious religious debates are mere "pranks." People treat religious disagreements with deep, deadly seriousness, but Jove presents them as the mark of misbehaving children. No one came close to guessing his "designs," so this "mad business" of religious infighting has been a complete waste of time.

The ultimate irony is that humanity brings about its own demise by trying to save itself. People have been so concerned with their own, individual beliefs about what God wants that they've annoyed Jove, who then damns *everyone*.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-22

REPETITION

The repetition in "On the Day of Judgment" adds to the poem's drama.

Listen to the parallelism in line 6, for example, where the speaker describes a "horrid vision" of the apocalypse:

> And thunder roars and light'ning flies!

Here, the line is composed of two identical halves: "And + [noun] + [verb]." This creates a sudden, overwhelming sense of divine power; one moment ago the speaker was daydreaming, and now the skies are violently shaking with roaring thunder and lightning bolts.

The cadence here also evokes the language of the Bible. The King James Version in particular is full of similar constructions, particularly the consecutive use of "and" (a device known as

polysyndeton).

When Jove arrives, he's a grandiose, awe-inspiring figure—and his repetitive language make it clear that he's in charge. Listen to lines 13-15:

> You who, through frailty, stepped aside,
> And you, who never fell—through pride;
> You who in different sects have shammed,

Jove has a long list of reasons to hate humanity, which he enumerates one after another. The repetition hammers home the idea that humankind has made a fool of itself (and lost its way). As Jove singles out specific types of sinners, he sounds like an angry principal venting at students during detention.

Listen, too, to the repetition in the poem's final line:

> I damn such fools!—Go, go, you're bit."

Here, epizuexis evokes Jove's sheer exasperation. He dismisses humanity like he's batting away a fly, the repetition of "Go" making this *doubly* dismissive.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "And," "and"
- **Line 13:** "You who, through"
- **Line 14:** "And you, who," "through"
- **Line 15:** "You who"
- **Line 21:** "I"
- **Line 22:** "I," "Go, go"

VOCABULARY

Whirl (Line 1) - Swirl.

Reverie (Line 2) - Daydreaming.

Horrid (Line 3) - Ghastly.

Jove (Line 5) - The king of the gods in ancient Roman mythology, a.k.a. Jupiter (the Greek equivalent is Zeus). In myth, Jove is also the god of the skies, and his weapon of choice is a lightning bolt. "Jove" was sometimes used as a way of cursing without blaspheming, as in the phrase "by Jove," so it's possible the speaker is in fact referring to the Christian God and simply using the name Jove to convey God's tempestuousness.Either way, Judgment Day in the poem doesn't go how humanity expects.

Terrors (Line 5) - Weapons/threatening things.

Offending (Line 11) - Offensive, insulting, appalling.

Sects (Line 15) - Religious groups.

Shammed (Line 15) - Been tricked/tricked others.

Damned (Line 16) - Condemned to Hell.

Designs (Line 18) - Divine plans.

O'er (Line 19) - Over (elided to maintain the poem's iambic tetrameter).

Resent (Line 20) - Angrily tolerate.

Blockheads (Line 21) - Fools/idiots.

Set my wit (Line 21) - Make my decision.

You're bit (Line 22) - You're finished.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"On the Day of Judgment" consists of a single, 22-line stanza, which can be further broken down into 12 rhyming couplets. The poem also uses steady iambic tetrameter, a meter of four iambs (da-DUMs) per line.

The combination of frequent rhymes and a bouncy iambic rhythm adds some lighthearted music to the poem, which balances its apocalyptic imagery. The poem's form reminds readers that this is all meant to be ironic and tongue-in-cheek.

The lack of stanza breaks might also subtly evoke the way that the speaker "sink[s] from reverie to rest"—from daydream to sleeping vision. That is, there's a seamless transition between the poem's framing device (in which a first-person speaker describes having a "horrid vision") and the day of judgment as the speaker imagines it.

METER

"On the Day of Judgment" uses iambic tetrameter, a fairly typical meter of the Augustan period during which Swift was writing (more on this in the Context section of this guide). A line of iambic tetrameter contains four iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern (da-DUM).

Here's line 3 as an example of this meter at work:

> An hor- | rid vi- | sion seized | my head,

In general, this bouncy meter adds some predictable music and momentum to the poem. Steady iambs can sound quite authoritative too, and here they help to make Jove's speech seem all the more epic.

There are some variations on this meter that keep the poem sounding fresh and interesting. In fact, the poem actually *starts* with a variation in line 1:

> With a whirl | of thought | oppressed,

The first foot here is an anapest (da-da-DUM). This subtly adds a hiccup to the poem's opening, perhaps evoking the confusing,

confounding weight of that oppressive "whirl of thought."

Later, listen to the spondee (DUM-DUM) that begins line 5:

> Jove, armed | with ter- | rors, bursts | the skies,

That heavy double stress reflects Jove's terrifying might.

RHYME SCHEME

"On the Day of Judgment" uses the most popular rhyme scheme of the Augustan era: the rhyming couplet. In other words, rhymes come in pairs:

> AABBCCDDEEFF... and so on

All these quick, perfect end rhymes fill the poem with predictable music that adds some levity to its depiction of doomsday. Couplets push the poem forward: once the speaker introduces a new rhyme word, readers anticipate the satisfying click of its partner in the next line. In this way, couplets might subtly evoke a sense of *inevitability* that mirrors humanity's inescapable doom.

SPEAKER

"On the Day of Judgment" effectively has two speakers.

The poem begins with an anonymous first-person speaker who's feeling "oppressed," or weighed down, by "a whirl of thought" (perhaps the speaker has been thinking about various religious squabbles of their day). This speaker slips from a daydream into actual sleep and is then "seized" by a terrifying "vision" of Judgment Day. The poem's opening lines create a framing device, a setup for the main event, and this *it's-all-a-dream* trick also adds to the poem's humor; this could just be the product of a tired, troubled mind.

From line 11 onwards, the poem belongs to Jove, a.k.a Jupiter, the king of the gods in ancient Roman mythology (his counterpart in Greek myth is Zeus). This new speaker creates an element of surprise and drama: this isn't the God that people were expecting to show up on Judgment day!

It's also possible that the speaker isn't *literally* referring to a mythological figure and is just using the name "Jove" to convey God's grumpiness and rage. Jove is a notoriously tempestuous ruler, and, in this poem, clearly has a low opinion of humanity. He's fed up with people's religious infighting, pridefulness, and ignorant attempts to divine his "designs." Soon enough, Jove dismisses humanity as an annoying irrelevance, clearly exasperated with what he's been seeing.

SETTING

Technically, the poem takes place within the speaker's dream. This person slips "from reverie to rest" in the poem's opening lines, at which point they're "seized" by a "horrid vision" of Judgment Day: the day when God will judge all of humanity, offering the righteous salvation and condemning everyone else to hell. As line 4 reveals, this judgment extends even to those who are already dead; they'll rise up from their graves to face God.

The rest of the poem takes place before the "throne" of Jove, the king of the gods in Roman mythology. Jove's arrival is dramatic, accompanied by terrifying cracks of thunder and bolts of lightning. The scene sounds, appropriately, like the end of the world. All of humanity "stands trembling" before Jove, "confused" and unsure of its fate.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Irish writer and clergyman Jonathan Swift (1667 to 1745) is best known for his works of satirical prose, including *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*. Swift was also a poet and political pamphleteer who, along with his friend Alexander Pope, was one of the most famous literary figures of the Augustan era.

Swift, like other writers of this era, was deeply influenced by the literature of ancient Rome and took his satirical cues from poets like Horace and Juvenal. Though a church leader, Swift also had notoriously little patience for humanity's shortcomings. In a letter to Pope, he defined a human being as an animal *rationis capax*—that is, as a creature *capable* of reason but not guaranteed to actually use it.

Swift combined his technical skill with biting wit to critique what he saw as the hypocrisies of his day; here, his target is religious infighting. There's some debate about the true origins of "On the Day of Judgment," however. The first mention of the poem appears in a letter from Lord Chesterfield to the French philosopher Voltaire in 1752, but this wasn't written in Swift's hand. While scholars now generally agree that Swift did indeed write "On the Day of Judgment," numerous versions of the poem exist (the one included in this guide is the most recent and is known as the *St. James Chronicle* version).

Critics also disagree on the exact *target* of the poem's satire: it might take aim specifically at Nonconformists (Protestant Christians who took issue with the rule of the Church of England) or the world's religions in a more general sense (e.g., Christianity, Islam, and Judaism).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Jonathan Swift attended Trinity College, Dublin, received a Master of Arts degree from Oxford, and was eventually ordained as an Anglican priest. He served as the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin and is sometimes referred to as "Dean Swift."

The 18th century was a time of considerable religious upheaval in England and Ireland. England had become a Protestant country under Henry VIII in the 16th century, while the majority of Ireland remained Roman Catholic. A series of "penal laws," which were meant to encourage the Catholic Irish to convert to Protestantism, rendered much of the Irish population disenfranchised and destitute.

Swift, for his part, was a member of the Church of Ireland (which was tied to the Church of England) and feared the influence of the Catholic Church. That said, his satire did at times target the harsh treatment of his native Ireland under English rule.

The Anglican Church (a.k.a. the Church of England) was not without its Protestant critics, either. Referred to collectively as "Dissenters," these Protestant groups might be the "sects" referred to in line 15.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Swift's Life and Work — Learn more about Jonathan Swift in this biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jonathan-swift)
- Religions on the End of the World — Check out an article exploring how different major religions conceive of the end times. (https://www.history.com/topics/religion/religions-on-the-end-of-the-world)
- Swift and Religion — A brief overview of Swift's political and religious leanings. (https://victorianweb.org/previctorian/swift/religion1.html)
- The Augustan Era — Watch a documentary about the literature of the 18th-century Augustan age, with particular focus on Swift and Alexander Pope. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p003k9cm)
- A Man of Letters — Read Swift's correspondence, including with Pope. (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Author:Jonathan_Swift/Letters)

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