Redemption

POEM TEXT

Having been tenant long to a rich lord,
Not thriving, I resolvèd to be bold,
And make a suit unto him, to afford
A new small-rented lease, and cancel th' old.
In heaven at his manor I him sought;
They told me there that he was lately gone
About some land, which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possessiòn.
I straight returned, and knowing his great birth,
Sought him accordingly in great resorts—
In cities, theaters, gardens, parks, and courts:
At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied,
Who straight, *Your suit is granted,* said, and died.

SUMMARY

I'd been renting farmland from a rich lord for some time but hadn't had much success. So I decided to be brave and go ask my landlord if he'd rent me a new parcel of land and release me from my contract on the old one. I went to look for him at his mansion in heaven, but when I got there, his people told me he had just gone to see about some land he'd bought (at great cost) down on earth a long time ago so that he could officially take on ownership of it. So I hurried right back to earth. Knowing that my landlord was an aristocratic, powerful guy, I went looking for him only in the fanciest places. I checked great cities, theaters, gardens, parks, and royal courts without success. Finally, I heard the ugly noise of a laughing crowd of lowlifes and saw my lord among them. Right away, he said, "You may have what you came to ask for," and died.

THEMES

GOD'S HUMBLE AND STUNNING GENEROSITY

"Redemption" tells the tale of a struggling tenant farmer seeking a new lease from his landlord. Rather than having to beg for or earn this favor, however, the speaker is astonished to find that this "lord" readily sacrifices himself to pay for the speaker's new beginning. The landlord here is really a metaphor for God, who the poem implies offers followers "redemption" (or forgiveness and new life) not from a comfortable, lordly perch in the clouds but through generous and loving sacrifice.

God, the poem suggests, doesn't behave as people might expect an almighty being to behave. When the speaker decides to give up on his old land and start a "new lease" (here a metaphor for a "new lease" on life itself, a fresh start), he goes to ask this favor from his "lord" in "heaven at his manor." Yet this lord isn't there, nor is he in any of earth's "great resorts"—the fanciest "gardens, parks and courts" the world has to offer. The speaker finally finds his lord living among lowly "thieves and murderers," about to be put to death. His last words to the speaker are simply, "Your suit is granted."

Again, the speaker's landlord represents God—a figure who doesn't appear only in show-offy, elegant places or grant favors like a condescending billionaire, but who instead offers people the "redemption" they long for through an act of self-sacrifice. The image of the speaker's lord allowing himself to be executed like a criminal represents Christ's death on the cross. And the poem suggests that it's *through* Christ's sacrifice that the speaker gets the "new lease," the fresh start, he was hoping for.

Christ's terrible death, strangely enough, earns the "redemption" that the speaker expected God to grant or deny through plain old almighty power. What's more, that "redemption" is boundless: God offers it to everyone, the poem implies—"thieves and murderers" included.

In this poem's view, then, Christian redemption simply doesn't work the way that earthly power does. Christ is stunningly generous: he demands no payment from his followers in exchange for redemption. Instead, he pays *for* them with his own suffering and death.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Having been tenant long to a rich lord,
Not thriving, I resolvèd to be bold,
And make a suit unto him, to afford
A new small-rented lease, and cancel th' old.

"Redemption" begins by setting up what sounds like an ordinary 17th-century anecdote. The speaker, a tenant farmer, hasn't been doing so well: the land he's been trying to work isn't

"thriving." He decides that he's going to go to the "rich lord" he rents from and ask him to "cancel" his old contract in exchange for "a new small-rented lease" instead—that is, a fresh, humble, affordable plot of land.

So far, so businesslike. But notice how the language here characterizes the speaker and his situation. He doesn't just speak of renting from a landlord, but from a "rich lord," a notably wealthy and powerful guy. Such a person, the poem suggests, isn't someone you can just casually ask a favor from: the speaker has to "resolv[e] to be bold," working up his courage before he can go make his request.

In other words, there's already a question of power here. The tenant relies on the landlord and his goodwill for his livelihood; the landlord makes the decisions. And the tenant seems rather nervous about what's going to happen when he makes his "suit" (that is, his formal request).

Even in this prosaic beginning, readers might smell a metaphor. There's a big hint that this poem is about more than a literal tenant-landlord situation in the poem's punning title, "Redemption":

- On one level, the redemption in question is just the business transaction these lines describe: the speaker wants to "redeem" his old land for new, the way one might speak of redeeming a coupon.
- Readers might, however, be more familiar with the word from its Christian context. "Redemption," in Christianity, means being forgiven for one's sins—and, more specifically, being forgiven for one's sins through Christ's death on the cross.
- Christ's sacrifice, the Christian story goes, pays for all humanity's sins, giving everyone the opportunity for a fresh start—a "new lease" on life, one might say.
- In this poem's conceit, then, God is the landlord, and the tenant a kind of Christian everyman, an ordinary guy seeking divine forgiveness.

This poem will thus tell the story of Christian redemption through a story of earthly redemption. Of course, the Christian story is an earthly one, too. Christ's death and resurrection, this poem will argue, didn't just *take place* on earth: they're also woven right into the fabric of everyone's daily life.

In many ways, this is a characteristic poem for George Herbert, a passionate and brilliant clergyman whose poetry explored his faith. In other ways, it's a little surprising. Many of the poems in Herbert's lone posthumous book, *The Temple*, experiment with form in innovative ways—but this poem, at first glance, looks like a plain old sonnet:

- It's written in 14 lines of iambic pentameter—that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this: "Not thri- | ving, I | resol- | vèd to | be bold." (Note that the accent over the "e" in "resolvèd" means that the word should be pronounced with three syllables: re-SOL-ved.)
- And it uses a set rhyme scheme that moves from three rhyming four-line quatrains (in the first stanza, for instance, lord / *bold* / afford / *old*) into one emphatic closing couplet.

But Herbert doesn't use this conventional form so conventionally! Toward the end, the speaker will break from the expected alternating rhyme scheme to do something surprising; keep an eye out for the moment when the rhymes change.

LINES 5-8

In heaven at his manor I him sought;
They told me there that he was lately gone
About some land, which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possessiòn.

In this sonnet's first quatrain, the speaker told the beginnings of a deceptively simple story, remembering when he went looking for his landlord to ask for a new lease on some farmland. Already, readers got the sense that this might be a metaphor for the relationship between humanity and God. As the second stanza begins, the speaker brings that conceit right out into the open. To find the "rich lord" he's looking for, he says, he had to go to his "manor"—which just so happens to be in "heaven."

There's something comical about how matter-of-factly the speaker describes going, cap in hand, to the Pearly Gates themselves—as if it were just a matter of strolling down the road to the fancy part of town. But Herbert is making a serious point with this gentle joke: God *isn't* out of reach. Readers might even interpret this visit as a metaphor for prayer.

There's a complication, though. As another poet once wrote, God's away on business:

> [..] he was lately gone
> About some land, which he had dearly bought
> Long since on earth, to take possessiòn.

Once more, the everyday and the divine collide. There would be no particular surprise in finding that one's landlord was out seeing to his affairs. If God has left "heaven" for "earth," though, then these lines refer to nothing less than the Incarnation: that is, the Christian belief that God took the form of Christ and lived on earth in order to redeem humanity.

The language the speaker uses here makes that analogy even more pointed:

- If the "lord" has "dearly bought" his property on earth, then he's paid an awful lot for it—an allusion to the Crucifixion, in which Christ sacrifices himself,

dying horribly in order to pay for humanity's sins.
- The word "dearly" might also subtly suggest that Christ makes this choice because the world is *dear* to him—in other words, because he *loves* humanity.

In other words, these lines make it clear that the speaker isn't just talking about the relationship between one soul and God, but about God's relationship to *all* souls. This sonnet, it seems, will be a pocket history of Christianity.

LINES 9-11

I straight returned, and knowing his great birth,
Sought him accordingly in great resorts—
In cities, theaters, gardens, parks, and courts:

Learning that his "lord" is not in his heavenly mansion, but seeing to business down on earth, the speaker does what only seems reasonable: he scurries back to earth himself and starts searching all the places that one would expect a "rich lord" to hang out.

Take a look at the way the speaker uses repetition here:

> I straight returned, and knowing his **great** birth,
> Sought him accordingly in **great** resorts—

That diacope of "great" underscores the speaker's thought process. Any lord so "great" as this would obviously turn up only in "great" places—right? The musical, balanced sounds of these lines, with their long /ay/ and short /or/ assonance ("straight" and "great," "accordingly" and "resorts"), similarly suggest that the speaker is trying to follow a neat, harmonious pattern of logic: great attracts great.

But as it turns out, that logic just doesn't seem to apply here. In the space of a single line, the speaker travels across the whole world, visiting "cities, theaters, gardens, parks, and courts." But the lord he's seeking isn't in any of these fancy places.

Alongside this unexpected turn of events comes an unexpected turn in the rhyme scheme:

- So far, the poem's quatrains have used the traditional alternating rhymes of an English sonnet (like this one): ABAB CDCD.
- Here, though, the speaker switches to a pattern more often found in an Italian sonnet (like this one): rather than rhyming these lines EFEF, he goes for an EFFE (**birth** / *resorts* / *courts* / **mirth**).

This sudden change reflects what's happening in both the poem's action and the speaker's mind. The speaker thought he understood how his "lord" would think and what he would do—and discovers that he's got the wrong idea entirely. When Christ comes to the world, the poem suggests, everything changes: all the old structures, all the old beliefs, get shaken into a new shape.

LINES 12-13

At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied,

As it turns out, the speaker's "lord" isn't enjoying himself among the rich and powerful in the world's most elegant "cities, theaters, gardens, parks, and courts." Rather, he's in the last place the speaker would have expected to find him: amid a rabble of "thieves and murderers."

Take a look at the way the poem uses imagery to create a slow reveal here:

> At length **I heard a ragged noise and mirth**
> Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied,

First, the speaker *hears* a "**ragged noise** and mirth"—an image that suggests rough, rude, distinctly unlordly laughter. Then, he *sees* that this noise comes from a crowd of "thieves and murderers." The enjambment that runs these two lines together makes it feel as if the poem and the speaker simultaneously turn a corner to discover this crowd. Then, and only then, does the speaker "esp[y]" (or spot) his lord amid this sinister crew.

These dramatic choices help to create a moment of pure shock. The speaker here discovers that this heavenly lord doesn't behave at all like earthly lords do. He doesn't hang out with the powerful, enjoying himself in the world's "great resorts." Rather, he's down in the dirt with the world's worst sinners.

God might take on human form, the poem thus suggests, but God *isn't like people*, and God's power isn't like human power. An earthly "lord" might see himself as far too good to consort with "thieves and murderers," but that's not how *this* guy thinks. The image of this lord among a band of lowlifes underscores one of the major points about Christian redemption: it's for absolutely everyone.

The sheer surprise baked into the poem's structure here gets at just how *scandalous* this idea is to humanity—how difficult it is to imagine that an almighty God could exercise power in such a different manner than people do, or that a loving God could extend exactly the same redemption to a murderer and a saint. Christianity, this poem suggests, isn't just a cozy set of rituals and a vague idea that God is basically nice until you disappoint him. Rather, it's earthshakingly strange, and demands real imagination: it's not so easy to get past a limited mortal idea of what a lord should act like.

LINES 14-14

Who straight,
Your suit is granted,
said, and died.

The last two lines introduced a shock: the speaker finds his lord, not among the great and good in a fancy "theater" or "garden" somewhere, but hanging out in a crowd of "thieves and murderers." The poem's closing line caps that shock with an even greater one.

Before the speaker can even ask his "lord" for the favor he came about—that "new small-rented lease," remember—the lord preempts him:

> [...] there I him espied,
> Who straight, *Your suit is granted*, said, and died.

This lord, in other words, offers the speaker the redemption he seeks without the speaker even having had to ask. Even more astonishingly, the lord doesn't dole out that redemption like a grand favor, using generosity as an opportunity to revel in his own power. Rather, redemption comes through this lord's utterly humbling self-sacrifice: the poem's two closing words, "and died," allude to the Crucifixion itself.

Those last two words cast a new light over the previous lines' picture of the lord among "thieves and murderers." In the Bible stories of the Crucifixion, Christ was indeed said to have been executed between a pair of thieves; crucifixion, after all, was a humiliating and agonizing punishment reserved for criminals. Those "murderers," then, must be the Roman authorities who are murdering Christ himself.

God's humble generosity, the poem thus suggests, is so abundant that it flows out even to "murderers" in the very act of murdering God. What's more, God offers redemption even *before* anyone asks for it.

The speaker's journey, in other words, has been for the speaker's own edification. The "new lease" of redemption was his before he even set out. But he needed to make this journey in order to understand what he otherwise could not see: God's love, power, humility, and generosity are awe-inspiringly *strange*, beyond anything on earth.

That doesn't mean that God is remote. Rather, God's generosity weaves right through even the most ordinary things. Through the humble conceit of tenant and landlord, the poem suggests that God's love manifests down in the dirt of everyday life, not just behind heavenly gates—and it's for absolutely everyone. God's generous love transcends human judgment and human imagination.

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

This poem, like many that Herbert and his contemporaries wrote, is built around a conceit, an elaborate extended metaphor. Here, Herbert uses the tale of a tenant farmer asking his landlord for a favor to stand for the relationship between humanity and the Christian God.

Herbert's conceits were often gently funny and deadly serious at the same time, and this one is no exception. The speaker's tale of going to call at his landlord's "manor" and then finding that the guy is away on a business trip could sound totally ordinary, except for the fact that the "manor" is in "heaven" and the business trip stands in for the incarnation of Christ (that is, God taking on a human body and living on earth).

By matter-of-factly mixing the everyday and the divine, the poem both gives readers a nudge in the ribs—*this definitely isn't just about a tenant and a landlord!*—and makes the meaningful point that there *is* no separation between the everyday and the divine. The "redemption" the poem discusses is the stuff of daily life, and God offers it to everyone, farmers, lords, and "thieves" alike.

On a related note, the poem's conceit also helps to point out the difference between the way that *people* wield power and the way that *God* wields power. When the speaker, learning his landlord isn't at his heavenly "manor," goes to seek him on earth, he does what seems sensible based on how most "rich lord[s]" behave: he checks the fanciest places, the places where aristocrats of "great birth" hang out.

But this "lord" doesn't work like that. The speaker is shocked to find him among "thieves and murderers," and even more shocked when he answers the speaker's request before the speaker even asks him about it, immediately declaring, "Your suit is granted" (in other words, "You can have what you came to ask for"). With that, he promptly dies—on the cross, readers can assume—and it's through that death that the speaker's request is granted. God doesn't just *offer* people redemption, God *pays* for their redemption.

If Christ is a landlord, the poem's conceit thus suggests, he's a landlord unlike any on earth. Divine power, unlike human power, is humble, self-sacrificing, and boundlessly loving.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

ALLUSION

"Redemption" rests on a foundation of Christian theology. Besides metaphorically laying out the religion's central belief—that God came to earth in human form to offer "redemption" (or a clean, fresh, sinless new life) to humankind—the poem also alludes to the Bible.

For example, consider the speaker's hope that his landlord will agree to "a new small-rented lease" that will "cancel th' old." On one level, this is a straightforward image of the personal "redemption" the speaker hopes for: being forgiven for his sins and welcomed into a new life with God. But switching the "old"

for the "new" also suggests a broader Christian idea:

- Christian belief divides the Bible into two broad sections: the "Old Testament," which covers everything from the creation of the world up to the times just before Christ's birth, and the "New Testament," which covers the stories of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, as well as the works of his followers.
- The ideas of the New Testament, for Christians, both build on and transform the faith described in the pre-Christ parts of the Bible—for instance, by capping the justice-driven rulebook of the Ten Commandments with the additional idea that love is the central commandment, the one that both underlies and replaces all the others.
- Swapping the "old" for the "new" here thus suggests the beginnings of Christianity itself.

That idea gets even clearer when the speaker describes finding his "lord" isn't at home in "heaven," but has gone to "earth" to see about some land he's "dearly bought" (or paid a lot for) down there. These lines allude to the Incarnation: the idea that God took on human form and lived on earth as Christ in order to offer humanity salvation.

And that salvation, biblically speaking, is indeed "dearly bought": Christ has to undergo a tormenting death on the cross to win it. That's precisely what's happening at the end of the poem, when the speaker finds his "lord" among "thieves and murderers," on the verge of death.

Those "thieves and murderers" also have biblical significance in more ways than one:

- Christ was indeed said to have been crucified between two thieves; crucifixion was meant to be a humiliating, agonizing death sentence for criminals. And the "murderers" are the crucifiers themselves, the Roman authorities.
- But the poem doesn't spell this scene out right away; at first, it sounds as if this "lord" is just hanging out with a rabble of shady characters. This, too, is part of the point! Christ doesn't just offer love and redemption to people who are good, Christianity says, but to everyone—the greatest of sinners included.

In a mere 14 lines, then, this poem lays out not just the story of Christ from incarnation to crucifixion, but the very bedrock of Christian faith.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "to afford / A new small-rented lease, and cancel th' old."
- **Lines 6-8:** "he was lately gone / About some land, which he had dearly bought / Long since on earth, to take possessiòn."
- **Lines 12-14:** "I heard a ragged noise and mirth / Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied, / Who straight, / Your suit is granted, / said, and died."

IMAGERY

Most of this poem uses a matter-of-fact narrative voice: the speaker tells of his quest to find the "rich lord" who can grant (or deny) him a "new lease" using plain, almost reporter-like language. But when the speaker finally *finds* his lord, the poem uses a flash of imagery to show just how shocking the discovery feels.

The speaker has been searching for his lord in all the places one might expect to find a wealthy, powerful guy: the "cities, theaters, gardens, parks, and courts" where the well-to-do like to hang out. But, as he's about to discover, this particular lord doesn't behave the way that earthly lords do.

Take a look at the way this moment of imagery builds up to the speaker's discovery:

> At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
> Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied,

There's something almost cinematic going on here: it's as if the poem's camera slowly turns a corner while the "ragged noise" of "mirth" (or laughter) grows louder and louder. The speaker *hears* the company his lord keeps before he "espie[s]" him among the "thieves and murderers." And the sounds those unsavory characters make is "ragged," a word that suggests rough, rude laughter—and reminds readers that this "lord" is emphatically not partying with the rich and famous in a "great resort," but down in the dirt with the sinners of the world. For that matter, he's about to die on the cross, though the poem leaves the cross part implicit.

This moment of imagery thus underscores the sheer *strangeness* of Christian belief. A "lord" who offers "redemption" to the "thieves and murderers" of the world (even at the very moment they're murdering him!) just doesn't fit into an earthly tit-for-tat vision of justice.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth / Of thieves and murderers"

REPETITION

A set of subtle repetitions help to trace the speaker's path toward an encounter with his "lord."

Perhaps the most striking repetition here appears in lines 9-10:

> I straight returned, and knowing his **great** birth,
> Sought him accordingly in **great** resorts—

This moment of diacope neatly sums up the worldly perspective on "great[ness]": powerful people like to hang out in fancy, elegant places! As the speaker will soon discover, though, the heavenly logic is very different. God doesn't behave like a "rich lord," but like—well, an all-loving and all-forgiving God.

He won't find this out until he's done plenty of searching, though. The poem uses the word "sought" (or "looked for") twice: once in line 5, when the speaker looks for his lord at a "manor in heaven," and once in line 10 when he's checking those "great resorts." While this repetition happens over a wide enough space that it's not too attention-grabbing, it helps to make the poem feel like the story of a quest.

The final repetition also picks up on a word that appears in lines 9-10: "straight." Here, that word means "immediately" (as in "straight away"), and the two different places it appears once again reflect the difference between what it immediately occurs to people to do and what it immediately occurs to God to do. When the speaker learns that his lord is hanging out on earth, he "straight return[s]" to look for him in the world's "great resorts." When the word appears again in the poem's closing line, it's God who does something "straight":

> Who **straight**, *Your suit is granted*, said, and died.

In other words, unlike the kind of "rich lord" who luxuriates in the world's "gardens, parks, and courts," this God needs no convincing to offer immediate and generous "redemption."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "sought"
- **Line 9:** "straight," "great"
- **Line 10:** "Sought," "great"
- **Line 14:** "straight"

PUN

A subtle pun in the poem's title draws attention to the shocking difference between divine and human power.

This poem is called "Redemption," a word with more than one meaning:

- The more down-to-earth of those meanings suggests a plain old exchange, as in "redeeming" a coupon. On the literal level, that's what this poem is about: a tenant farmer going to his landlord to ask for a "new small-rented lease" in exchange for his old land, which isn't "thriving."
- But "redemption" also has a specifically Christian meaning. To be "redeemed," in Christianity, is to be forgiven for all one's transgressions and given a fresh, clean start. The idea is that Christ's willingness to sacrifice himself on the cross redeems every living person, washing away *everyone's* sin. Obviously, there's an exchange happening in this reading, too: Christ exchanges himself for all humanity.

The poem's title thus invites readers to compare these two flavors of redemption. A literal landlord may or may not grant a tenant's "suit" (or formal request) for a fresh start, depending on whether it's profitable for him. God, meanwhile, offers the speaker redemption before the speaker even asks for it. God's divine generosity, the poem suggests, goes far beyond what humanity can even dream.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

ASSONANCE

Moments of assonance give the poem music and drama.

For example, listen to the echoing vowel sounds in lines 7-8:

> About some land, which he had dearly b**ou**ght
> L**o**ng since on earth, to take possessi**ò**n.

In Herbert's 17th-century English, all of these words would have shared a long /aw/ vowel. (Note that the accent over the "o" in "possessiòn" means the word should be pronounced with four syllables: po-SESS-ee-awn.) Though subtle, that repeated /aw/ sound helps to draw attention to a significant moment. The idea that the lord has left a "manor" in "heaven" to take "possessiòn" of the earth suggests that the poem is metaphorically describing the incarnation of Christ here; the music of these words invites readers to feel that there's something powerful and important about this lord's business trip!

Assonance also helps to underline the difference between human and divine ways of thinking about power. When the speaker hears that the lord has headed to earth, here's what he does:

> I str**ai**ght returned, and knowing his gr**ea**t birth,
> Sought him acc**o**rdingly in great res**o**rts—

The paired vowel sounds here, two long /ay/ sounds and two short /or/ sounds, feel neat and tight, helping to underline the speaker's if-then logic: *if the lord is on earth, he must be hanging out where the fancy people go!* That logic, of course, will swiftly be disproven when the speaker finds the guy he's looking for

among "thieves and murderers."

Assonance gives *that* moment drama, too:

> At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
> Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied,

That dense /ur/ sound (underscored by the alliterative /m/ of "mirth" and "murderers") brings this moment to life. Readers can almost hear these dangerous people's guttural chuckles.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "suit unto"
- **Line 7:** "bought"
- **Line 8:** "Long," "possessiòn"
- **Line 9:** "straight," "great"
- **Line 10:** "accordingly," "resorts"
- **Line 11:** "gardens, parks"
- **Line 12:** "heard," "mirth"
- **Line 13:** "murderers," "I," "espied"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps to create music and meaning, much as assonance does.

Listen to the dramatic sounds in lines 12-13, for example:

> At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
> Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied,

The intense alliteration (and assonance!) in the "mirth" of "murderers" feels almost claustrophobic: there's no escaping that grim, overwhelming sound.

Contrast that with the sibilant /s/ alliteration in the next (and final) line:

> Who straight, *Your suit is granted*, said, and died.

God's power, these quiet /s/ sounds suggest, works subtly and gently. "Redemption" isn't a loud, flashy process, but soft as a whisper.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "long," "lord"
- **Line 2:** "be bold"
- **Line 6:** "lately"
- **Line 7:** "land"
- **Line 8:** "Long," "to take"
- **Line 12:** "mirth"
- **Line 13:** "murderers"
- **Line 14:** "straight," "suit," "said"

VOCABULARY

Resolvèd (Line 2) - Decided, made up one's mind to do something. The accent over the "e" here means that readers should pronounce the word with three syllables: re-SOL-ved.

Make a suit (Line 3) - Make a formal request.

Small-rented lease (Line 4) - A modest rental property—in this case, a humble piece of farmland.

Sought (Line 5, Line 10) - Looked for.

Lately (Line 6) - Recently.

Dearly (Line 7) - At great cost—though the other connotations of the word "dear" might also suggest that God "bought" the world by paying in love.

Possessiòn (Line 8) - The accent over the "o" here means that this word should here be pronounced with four syllables: po-SESS-ee-on. That also means it rhymes neatly with "gone" in line 6!

Straight (Line 9, Line 14) - Right away, promptly.

Great resorts (Line 10) - Here, "resorts" doesn't mean "fancy hotels," but "places to get away to" more generally.

Mirth (Line 12) - Laughter.

Espied (Line 13) - Saw, spotted.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Redemption" is an English sonnet: a 14-line poem with a set rhyme scheme, written in iambic pentameter (lines with a five-beat da-DUM rhythm: "In hea- | ven at | his man- | or I | him sought").

At first glance, this old form might seem surprisingly conventional for an innovative poet like Herbert, who wrote concrete poems in the shape of wings and altars and developed his own organic forms to suit his subjects. On a second look, though, readers will see that not only has Herbert chosen this form carefully, he's played around with it, too.

Like all English sonnets, this one is built from three quatrains and a closing couplet. This form allows a poem to build slowly toward a final one-two punch—precisely what Herbert does here with the dramatic moment in which Christ grants the speaker's request the very second before he dies.

But the tricksy, inventive rhyme scheme Herbert uses here means that readers can also interpret this poem as two quatrains and two tercets, with the last six lines divided up EFF / EGG. The possibility of the tercet reading introduces a pattern of threes into the poem, perhaps evoking the Trinity: the Christian godhead composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this, Herbert follows in the footsteps of fellow

Christian poets like Dante, who used weaving terza rima as a reminder of the trinitarian God in the *Divine Comedy*.

METER

Like most sonnets, "Redemption" is written in iambic pentameter. That means that each line is built from five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's an example from the beginning of the second stanza:

> In hea- | ven at | his man- | or I | him sought;

This steady, pulsing meter falls into the rhythm of footsteps or heartbeats, creating a meditative backdrop to the speaker's tale.

But as in much iambic poetry, the rhythm doesn't stay perfect throughout. The very first line, for example, does something different:

> Having | been ten- | ant long | to a | rich lord,

This line starts, not with an iamb, but its opposite: a trochee, a foot with a DUM-da rhythm. The end of the line does something even more striking, pushing the line's two remaining stresses into the last foot—a spondee, with an emphatic DUM-DUM rhythm.

These slight variations start the poem with some extra energy and tension, setting up a tale of surprise. After all, few tenant farmers expect to meet with much generosity from the "rich lord[s]" who own the land—let alone acts of astonishing self-sacrifice.

RHYME SCHEME

At first, it seems as if "Redemption" will use the classic rhyme scheme of an English sonnet: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. But listen to what happens instead:

> ABAB CDCD EFFE GG

Rather than sticking to alternating rhymes all the way through, the poem introduces an unexpected EFFE sequence—just at the moment when the speaker is shocked to discover that Christ is being executed among the "ragged mirth" (or rude laughter) of "thieves and murderers," not luxuriating with the mighty in the world's "great resorts." Christ's sacrifice, this change suggests, shakes the whole world into a new shape.

Some critics note that the rhyme scheme at the end of the poem can also be read, not as a traditional four-line quatrain and two-line couplet, but as two three-line tercets: EFF EGG. This three-line reading bakes the three-part shape of the Holy Trinity (the Christian godhead, composed of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) right into the poem.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a struggling tenant farmer who longs for a "new [...] lease"—and, in this poem's metaphorical world, that's not just a new lease on land but on *life*. In other words, this farmer seeks "redemption," the exchange of an old way of life for a blank slate and a fresh start. Searching for the "lord" who can grant his wish, the speaker is shocked to finally discover him, not enjoying a powerful man's pleasures in "gardens, parks, and courts," but in the humble form of Christ, living and dying among "thieves and murderers."

In a sense, this speaker is a Christian everyman, discovering God's infinite generosity with awe and astonishment. But as in much of Herbert's poetry, this speaker can also be read as a voice for Herbert himself—a passionately religious man who gave up what could have been a glittering career in politics to serve as a humble country parson.

SETTING

Readers might reasonably interpret this poem's setting as the whole universe. Through the conceit of a tenant farmer asking a favor from his landlord, the poem concisely lays out the story of Christianity—a story that Herbert saw as universal and eternal. The speaker's journey spans time and space: he quests from God's "manor" in "heaven" to all the "cities, theaters, gardens, parks, and courts" of the world, and finally ends up at the Crucifixion itself. The sheer scale of this quest suggests that God and God's love are the same everywhere and always.

But the conceit here also grounds the poem in Herbert's own world. A tenant farmer asking a landlord for a new lease would have been a normal transaction in the 17th-century English countryside where Herbert worked and wrote. By planting a cosmic journey on English soil, the poem reminds readers that the divine weaves right through the everyday.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

A passionate, poetic soul, George Herbert (1593-1633) lived a humble life as a country priest, serving a small English parish that bore the exuberant name of Fuggleston-cum-Bemerton. Herbert, born a nobleman and raised a scholar, often struggled with the limitations his calling imposed on his life; he could easily have made a splash in a royal court, but he felt inexorably drawn to the priesthood.

While he never found public poetic success during his short lifetime, Herbert is now remembered as one of the foremost of the "Metaphysical Poets." This group of 17th-century writers, which included poets like John Donne and Andrew Marvell,

shared a combination of brilliant intellect, passionate feeling, and religious fervor. Herbert was not the only one of these poets to work as a clergyman or to explore his relationship with God in poems that sometimes sound more like love songs than hymns.

The Temple (1633), in which "Redemption" first appeared, was Herbert's only poetry collection, and it might never have seen the light of day. Dying at the age of only 39, Herbert left the book's manuscript to his friend Nicholas Farrar, telling him to publish it if he felt it would do some "dejected poor soul" some good. Farrar, suspecting it would, brought to press what would become one of the world's best-known and best-loved books of poetry. *The Temple* went on to influence poets from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to T.S. Eliot to Wendy Cope.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

George Herbert lived and wrote during an unsettled period of British history. During Herbert's childhood, Britain was enjoying a golden age. The powerful Elizabeth I was on the throne, and Britain was both a formidable military power and a literary treasure house, boasting writers like Shakespeare, Spenser, and Marlowe. But the great "Virgin Queen" died without children in 1603, and her successor, James VI and I of Scotland and England, was not quite such a unifying figure. Many of his people were either skeptical of him or downright hostile to his rule. (The infamous Guy Fawkes, who was executed for trying to blow up James's Parliament, is one vivid example.)

The anti-monarchist plots James grappled with would eventually feed into an unprecedented uprising. By the time Herbert died in 1633, James's son Charles I was on the throne—but he wouldn't stay there for long. In 1649, a rebellion led by Oliver Cromwell would depose Charles and publicly behead him, a world-shaking event that upended old certainties about monarchy, hierarchy, and even God's will.

Though Herbert didn't live to see Charles's fall, he was still one of a generation of writers grappling with dramatic change and loss, reaching out to God for strength. This poem's reflections on God's awe-inspiring generosity express Herbert's deep, consoling faith in an ultimately benevolent universe.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation to learn more about Herbert's short, brilliant life. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/george-herbert)
- Herbert's Influence — Read contemporary poet Wendy Cope's essay on what Herbert means to her. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/dec/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview31)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/Zrz-5cSLRjI)
- The George Herbert Group — Learn more about Herbert's life and work at the website of a society dedicated to his legacy. (https://www.georgeherbert.org.uk/)
- The Temple — Read about the important posthumous collection in which this poem first appeared. (https://special-collections.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2015/05/06/reading-the-collections-week-14-george-herbert-the-temple-cambridge-thomas-buck-and-roger-daniel-1633/)
- A Short Documentary — Watch a brief video about Herbert, including images of his church. (https://youtu.be/rhGoIdKgfU0)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GEORGE HERBERT POEMS

- Easter Wings
- The Collar
- The Flower
- The Pulley

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Redemption.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 11 Mar 2022. Web. 18 Mar 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Redemption.*" LitCharts LLC, March 11, 2022. Retrieved March 18, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/george-herbert/redemption.