The Ecstasy

POEM TEXT

Where, like a pillow on a bed
A pregnant bank swell'd up, to rest
The violet's reclining head,
Sat we two, one another's best.

Our hands were firmly cemented
With a fast balm, which thence did spring;
Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
Our eyes upon one double string;

So to'intergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the means to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation.

As, 'twixt two equal armies, Fate
Suspends uncertain victory,
Our souls (which to advance their state
Were gone out) hung 'twixt her, and me.

And whilst our souls negotiate there,
We like sepulchral statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And we said nothing, all the day.

If any, so by love refin'd
That he soul's language understood,
And by good love were grown all mind,
Within convenient distance stood,

He (though he knew not which soul spake,
Because both meant, both spake the same)
Might thence a new concoction take,
And part far purer than he came.

"This ecstasy doth unperplex,"
We said, "and tell us what we love;
We see by this it was not sex,
We see we saw not what did move:

"But as all several souls contain
Mixture of things, they know not what,
Love these mix'd souls doth mix again
And makes both one, each this and that.

"A single violet transplant,—
The strength, the colour, and the size,
All which before was poor, and scant,
Redoubles still, and multiplies.

"When love, with one another so
Interinanimates two souls,
That abler soul, which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controls.

"We then, who are this new soul, know
Of what we are compos'd and made,
For th' atomies of which we grow
Are souls, whom no change can invade.

"But oh alas, so long, so far,
Our bodies why do we forbear?
They'are ours, though they'are not we; we are
The intelligences, they the spheres.

"We owe them thanks, because they thus
Did us, to us, at first convey,
Yielded their forces, sense, to us,
Nor are dross to us, but allay.

"On man heaven's influence works not so,
But that it first imprints the air;
So soul into the soul may flow,
Though it to body first repair.

"As our blood labours to beget
Spirits, as like souls as it can,
Because such fingers need, to knit
That subtle knot, which makes us man:

"So must pure lovers' souls descend
T' affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies.

"To'our bodies turn we then, that so

Weak men on love reveal'd may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book:

"And if some lover, such as we,
Have heard this Dialogue of One,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
Small change, when we'are to bodies gone."

SUMMARY

At a spot beside a river where a fertile hill of grass rose up like a pillow for a violet to rest its head on, my beloved and I (each other's dearest) sat together.

Our hands were glued together with the sweat that sprung from our palms. Our gazes twisted around each other to make one thread, stringing our eyes together like beads.

So far, the sweaty fusion of our hands was as close as we'd come to conjoining ourselves physically—and the only children we'd conceived were our tiny little reflections in each other's eyes.

Just as Fate holds up the prize of victory between two equally matched armies, waiting to see who wins, our souls (which had left our bodies in order to improve their circumstances) were suspended between us.

While our souls engaged with each other in this way, we lay there like stone statues on tombs. We didn't move a muscle all day, and we didn't say a word.

If anyone who has been purified and exalted by love—so that he has learned the language of the soul and has gained a perfect intellectual understanding of love—happened to be nearby to witness us;

If such a person were nearby (even if he didn't know which of our souls was speaking, because both of our souls had the same intentions and the same words), he would have gained a new and better understanding of love from our fused souls, and left even purer than he was when he arrived.

Here's what our souls would say to him: "Our ecstasy enlightens us and teaches us what it is that we love in each other. Through our fusion, we understand that our love didn't merely come from sexual passion; we understand that we *didn't* understand what actually moved us to love each other.

"We came to understand this: every individual soul contains a mysterious mixture of components. Love mixes up two already-mixed souls *again*, creating a new whole out of these two separate things.

"This works just like transplanting a single violet. Even if the violet was weak, pale, and small at first, once it's been transplanted, it doubles in strength and brightness and size, and grows more flowers.

"When love intertwines two souls and brings them to life as one new soul, the new stronger soul has none of the weaknesses that lone souls have.

"The two of us who go to make up this one new soul thus understand what we're made of. The separate particles of our souls, woven together into this new soul, are now beyond all change.

"But oh, why do we leave our bodies aside for so long? They're ours, though they're not *us*; if we're the angels, they're the celestial spheres through which the angels steer the planets.

"We owe a lot to our bodies, because they first revealed us to each other. Our bodies gave us power and sensation; they're not useless waste, they're part of a strong alloy.

"The powers of the planets and stars can't work on humanity unless they leave their mark on the air first. In just that way, two souls can only meet and become one if they first pass through the body.

"Just as our blood works to produce spiritual fluids that allow our bodies to match and enact our souls' wishes (because we need these kinds of careful metaphorical fingers to tie the delicate knot that links body and soul, and thus makes us human):

"In just that way, lovers' souls must use lowly bodily things like emotions and action—things that the senses can perceive and understand—or else Love, a powerful prince, languishes in prison.

"And so we must return to our bodies, so that weak, limited humanity can see love embodied in the world. The mysteries of love develop in the soul—but it's through the body that we can read them.

"And if some lover like us is overhearing this conversation of our single fused soul, he should keep watching us: he'll see that everything we've said remains just as true when we return to our bodies."

THEMES

THE UNIFYING POWER OF LOVE

"The Ecstasy" describes a pair of lovers sharing a moment of transcendent bliss. As they lie together on a flowery bank, holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes, their souls leave their bodies, wind around each other, and fuse into one new soul. Their "ecstasy" (a word that can mean both "a transcendent, out-of-body spiritual experience" and "intense pleasure") demonstrates love's special power: to *improve* by *fusing* and *combining*. By uniting two different

people, this poem suggests, love creates a new and better whole.

As they intermingle with each other, the lovers' souls speak as one, informing the reader that "this ecstasy doth unperplex" them. In other words, their ecstatic union does away with their confusion and enlightens them. Love makes them wiser, allowing them to see more clearly. Enlightened, they can speak a "Dialogue of One," saying and meaning exactly the same thing at exactly the same time, and trusting that everyone who hears their wisdom will learn something valuable about love from them.

However, the word "unperplex" offers a bit of a paradox. To be "perplexed" can mean to be confused, yes, but it can also mean to be tangled up or interwoven. And tangling and interweaving two souls is exactly what love does.

The reason that their souls can speak their wise, harmonious "Dialogue of One," the lovers declare, is because love "mix[es]" their separate souls and "makes both one." In other words, love creates a single, better, "abler" soul by combining them. Such a mixture does away with the "defects of loneliness," the flaws of a single soul on its own.

This power doesn't just work on the soul, either. The lovers' bodies intermingle just as their souls do. They don't merely hold hands, they find their palms "firmly cemented / By a fast balm, which thence did spring": in other words, their hands are fused together with amorous sweat. They don't merely gaze into each other's eyes, but feel that their "eye-beams" (the rays of their vision) become "twisted" and form "one double string" that "thread[s]" their eyes together like beads. And while they haven't had sex "as yet," the poem hints that "propagation" (or baby-making) is in their future. ("Propagation" itself, of course, is yet another way that love makes one new thing out of two parts: two people come together to create one new person!) Their bodies ecstatically mingle just as their souls do.

Both the lovers' bodies and their souls, then, show that love's great power is to *combine*, creating something new out of two parts. What's more, the experience of such unity is truly "ecstasy," transcendent pleasure. By removing the boundaries between two souls and two bodies, love allows true lovers to experience the bliss of oneness.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-76

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BODY AND SOUL

"The Ecstasy" celebrates a spiritual union between two lovers' souls. But it also makes a strong case for the importance of the body to their love. Without their bodies, Donne suggests, these lovers' souls could never have come together, and their love could never have manifested on Earth. The body therefore isn't some lowly wad of matter that the lofty soul should strive to escape, but the soul's partner, an essential and beautiful part of love and life.

The fusion of the lovers' souls is a glorious thing, making a single new, stronger, better soul out of their two incomplete souls. But this spiritual marriage, Donne points out, had to begin with the lovers' bodies. As the intertwined souls put it, they "owe [their bodies] thanks," because they "did us, to us, at first convey": in other words, there was no way for them to *meet* each other except through the "forces" (the power to act) and "sense" (the power to perceive and feel) that the body offers. Human souls, in other words, simply can't come together on Earth unless the bodies that they inhabit meet first.

Therefore, the body isn't "dross," waste material to be cast aside, but "allay"—an alloy, a mixed metal. In other words, the mixture of body and soul produces a single stronger and more capable whole (much in the same way that the mixture of the lovers' souls produces one new stronger soul).

For that matter, bodies allow "weak men"—frail mortals—to look on "love revealed" and learn from it. At the end of the poem, the lovers' souls invite anyone who happens to be listening to them (like the reader, for instance) to watch as they return to their bodies and *prove* that their physical love is just like their spiritual love. And indeed, their bodily embraces mirror their souls' embraces. Across the poem, Donne stresses that the lovers' bodies fuse, much as their souls do: their palms are "firmly cemented" together with sweat, their eyes are threaded together like beads on "one double string" made of their adoring gazes.

The descriptions of the lovers' fused bodies suggest that their physical union mirrors, matches, and *allows* their spiritual union. Donne thus makes a case that the body isn't a lesser being than the soul, a lowly beast whose desires must be controlled (as certain branches of thought would have it). Rather, the body expresses and conveys the soul, and thus makes love between human beings possible.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-12
- Lines 31-32
- Lines 49-76

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Where, like a pillow on a bed
A pregnant bank swell'd up, to rest
The violet's reclining head,
Sat we two, one another's best.

"The Ecstasy" begins by rooting its readers in one particular spot. "Where" is the poem's first word: physical location is going to matter.

Characteristically, John Donne—a 17th-century Metaphysical poet and a master of elaborate figurative language—sets his scene through a flurry of similes and metaphors. This poem, he says, is happening at a place where a metaphorically "pregnant bank"—a grassy hummock as round as a pregnant belly—swells up "like a pillow on a bed."

Already, these words summon up sexuality and fertility. The very earth is pregnant here, and its pregnancy turns it into a pillowy bed, a place where more pregnancies might come about. This is a romantic setting in other ways, too. Personified "violet[s]" rest their "reclining head[s]" upon this bank; the scene is all delicious flowery ease. The blooming violets let readers know it's spring, a season traditionally associated with romance and birth. (Violets also had some relevant symbolic significance in Donne's time: they were associated with Venus, the classical goddess of love and beauty, and were often used as images of romantic fidelity.)

This pregnant bank is the perfect setting, then, for the poem's main characters: a pair of lovers who finally make their entrance in line four. The speaker appears to be one of these lovers—or perhaps both of them. The couple arrives as a "we," and a "we" who are profoundly in love. "We two," the speaker says, are "one another's best."

That richly ambiguous turn of phrase might suggest a couple of different things. The couple could be each other's best in the sense that they're each other's best-beloveds: in other words, each would say that the other is the best thing they have or the best thing they know. But there's another possibility here, too. Perhaps each lover somehow manifests what's best in the *other* one. Looking at each other, they see their own best selves embodied. Love, in this reading, blurs the boundaries between this pair.

Across this heady poem, John Donne will explore the way that love unites human souls. But in its spiritual explorations, the poem will never forget about the role of the body, the thing that gives love a "where," a physical place in the world.

"The Ecstasy" explores its complex themes in a simple form. Donne often experimented with strange stanza shapes and unpredictable rhythms. But here, he keeps things straightforward:

- The poem is written in simple quatrains (four-line stanzas) of steady iambic tetrameter.
- That means its lines each use four iambs—metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "Sat we | two, one | anoth- | er's best."

The poem's form thus feels as steady and regular as a heartbeat—or, as readers will see, as constant as the lovers' adoring gazes.

LINES 5-6

Our hands were firmly cemented
With a fast balm, which thence did spring;

Sitting together on their "pregnant bank," the lovers are completely wrapped up in each other. Donne depicts their embrace in images that are as strange as they are intimate.

Here, for starters, is how he imagines the couple holding hands:

> Our hands were firmly cemented
> With a fast balm, which thence did spring;

In other words, the lovers' hands are tightly glued together with a "fast balm" (a sticky substance) that "spring[s]" from their palms. Not to put too fine a point on it, that fast balm is sweat. Excitement, desire, nerves, the warmth of the other's palm: something has made these two lovers' hands amorously clammy. (And notice the way that the word "balm" raises the ghost of the word "palm," creating a kind of figurative cement between the hands and what seeps out of them.)

Sweaty palms are not the commonest image in love poetry. But this poem's speaker will not gloss over or prettify the fleshy realities of love. Remember, "The Ecstasy" began by telling readers *where* the lovers are, locating them in space. To be located in space, you need to be in a body. The sweat-cemented palms here stress the idea that the love this couple shares is matched, enduring—and very, very physical.

This love is also notably *unembarrassed*. Think of young lovers with sweaty palms, and you might be tempted to imagine kids on their first date desperately wiping their hands on the seats of their pants. These lovers, however, let their sweat mingle and unite them. There's no shame and no hiding in this sweating.

In fact, there's something healing about the lovers' sweat. A "balm" isn't just any liquid, but a soothing *medicinal* cream in particular. Even as these balmy palms cement the lovers together, they offer healing and restoration.

A playful change in the meter draws special attention to Donne's startling, comic, intimate imagery. The poem, remember, is written in iambic tetrameter: lines of four iambs, four da-DUMs, as in "A preg- | nant bank | swell'd up, | to rest." But line 6 scans a little differently:

> With a | fast balm, | which thence | did spring;

Donne rearranges the first two metrical feet here to make a spondee (a foot with a bold DUM-DUM rhythm) out of the words "fast balm." There's no dodging that emphasis. These lovers have sweaty palms, and the poem won't let the reader look away from them.

LINES 7-8

Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
Our eyes upon one double string;

A sense of intense, almost shocking physical intimacy only deepens as the speaker introduces this unforgettable metaphor:

> Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
> Our eyes upon one double string;

The image here is of sight made tangible. As the lovers stare into each other's eyes, their gazes—their "eye-beams"—become threads that interweave and string their eyeballs together like beads. There's a startling *penetration* implied in this metaphor: the lovers' gazes must pierce each other's eyes in order to "thread" them, to create the "twisted," intertwined "double string" of looking that connects them.

Donne is drawing on a genuine 17th-century theory of optics here. Many thinkers of Donne's era believed that vision was indeed a kind of beam, a ray that shot out from one's eyes and touched what one looked at. Donne embraces the possibilities of that idea, exploring the way that a look can feel as physical and as intimate as a touch.

For, just as in the case of their cemented palms, the lovers are conjoining themselves here. And they're perfectly matched. All their parts are, in a sense, identical: a palm meets and fuses with a palm, eyes meet and fuse with eyes. They're also enjoyably different: the thrill here is in *two* pairs of eyes meeting, *two* hands joining.

Donne gets at the paradoxical feeling of simultaneous sameness and difference with the description of the eye-beams becoming "one double string." The lovers' united gazes are *one* thing and *two* things at the same time. That the eye-beams *twist* to form this string makes the connection feel even more intimate. The lovers' gazes don't merely connect their two pairs of eyes: they wind around and embrace each other.

LINES 9-12

So to'intergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the means to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation.

In the third stanza, Donne rather abruptly spells out an answer to a question that might be forming in readers' minds, here at the end of two stanzas about lovers' body parts fusing with each other on a fertile "pregnant bank." So far, his speaker informs readers, the only "means" the couple have used to become "one" is "intergraft[ing]" their hands with sweat. To put it less delicately, they haven't had sex—"as yet." Holding each other's sweaty palms is as close as they've gotten.

Similarly, they haven't gotten around to anything that might lead to reproduction, to "propagation" (pronounced, in this case, with five syllables, PROP-ah-GAY-see-on). The closest they've come to that is making "pictures in [their] eyes." In other words, the little reflections of each other in their eyes are their only children—so far. (Donne liked the images of eyes as mirrors and reflections as babies, and used them more than once in his verse. In fact, the English language likes the reflection-baby idea, too: the word "pupil," in the sense of the round black dot in the middle of an eyeball, comes from the Latin word *pupilla*, which means "little doll," referring to the tiny figure of oneself one can see reflected in other people's eyes.)

The lovers, then, are quivering on the brink of a different sort of union. Their hand-holding and eye-gazing is already intensely sexual: these chaste embraces are still a kind of physical union that "cement[s]" them together, binds them with "one double string," and produces tiny people. But there's still an extra step to take, another way to unite their bodies. Perhaps their palms are sweaty from *anticipation* as much as anything.

Donne's anaphora winks at the reader here. Holding hands "was all the means to make us one," and gazing into each other's eyes "was all our propagation": the repetition simultaneously stresses the idea that *nothing sexual has happened* and the idea that nothing sexual has happened *yet*, at the time of this story. That "was," after all, places this tale in the past tense.

LINES 13-16

As, 'twixt two equal armies, Fate
Suspends uncertain victory,
Our souls (which to advance their state
Were gone out) hung 'twixt her, and me.

The lovers' bodies, the speaker has insisted, have so far mingled only through sweat-cemented palms and twisting eye-beams. But in this stanza, he suggests that the lovers are nonetheless intimately intertwined in a different way. Their very souls are engaged with each other.

He introduces this idea through a complex and curious simile:

> As, 'twixt two equal armies, Fate
> Suspends uncertain victory,

He's describing a scene in which a personified Fate, the force of destiny, hovers over the middle of a battlefield where two equally strong armies prepare to fight. Readers might imagine Fate dangling "victory" over the scene like a medal, ready to be snatched—or like a scale, ready to tip in one direction or the other. The image is mythic, violent, tense, uncertain.

But what this simile *describes* doesn't feel so combative. The lovers' souls, the speaker says, have "gone out" of their bodies in order to "advance their state"—that is, to make something more of themselves, to become greater. Now their souls "h[a]ng" between their bodies, like "victory" hanging between

those two armies.

Or *is* it that suspended "victory" that the disembodied souls are being compared to? The language here is complex. The image of the souls hanging suspended between the lovers' bodies puts the souls in the position of the "victory" hanging between the two armies, yes—but the shape of these lines offers other possibilities, too:

- The grammar here might equally suggest that the souls take on the role of Fate: "As [...] Fate" does this, so "our souls" do that.
- The image of the souls "go[ing] out" to "advance their state," meanwhile, seems to cast them as the two opposing armies.

In this image, then, the lovers' souls can be Fate, the armies, and the victory all at once. This simile is elaborate and even dizzying, but it makes emotional sense: engaged in this intimate battle, the lovers' souls become their own victory in a contest they have somehow destined themselves for.

But as in the case of the sweaty palms and the beam-strung eyes, there's something startling going on in this image. So far, the poem's lovers have seemed "firmly cemented" by mutual adoration as much as palm-sweat: they're holding hands, gazing into etach other's eyes, sitting among the violets. Now comes this image of battle and "uncertain[ty]." Yet, at the same time, the souls' engagement in this battle feels mutual, a shared project. *Both* their souls have gone out to "advance their state," after all: they're each trying to become better through leaving their bodies and meeting in the space between them.

And the image of souls leaving the body is critically important here. It's in this moment that the poem's title comes into focus. Modern-day readers most likely know the word "ecstasy" to mean "intense pleasure." At its deepest etymological roots, however, the word means "to stand outside oneself." For Donne and his contemporaries, an "ecstasy" could be a transcendent, out-of-body experience—typically a religious experience—as well as a rapturous bodily pleasure. Plenty of 17th-century artists explored the idea that a spiritual ecstasy might also be an ecstasy of pleasure, and vice-versa. (Just ask Bernini.)

For Donne's lovers, these two possibilities seem as tightly interwoven as their eye-beams. The first three stanzas of the poem have insisted on the physicality of the lovers' bodies; even their gazes have been able to touch. But out of this physicality arises these souls' ability to *leave* their bodies and meet in the middle—an ecstatic meeting that Donne implies might be dangerous, but also a potentially glorious "victory" that will "advance" them both. Such an ecstasy takes courage.

LINES 17-20

And whilst our souls negotiate there,
We like sepulchral statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And we said nothing, all the day.

The lovers' two souls have left their bodies to engage in an ecstatic "negotiat[ion]," to meet and relate in the space between them. But their bodies are still present. While their souls are busy in this way, the speaker goes on, he and his beloved lie "like sepulchral statues": that is, their bodies lie there like the stone figures you might find on an old tomb. (They seem to have reclined since the first stanza, when they merely "sat" on the flowery bank.)

This simile invites readers to consider all the ways in which two reclining bodies might be like "sepulchral statues." They must be *still*: as the speaker says, their "postures" stayed the same "all day." They must be *silent*: "we said nothing," the speaker confirms.

And if they're "like sepulchral statues," they must also be like *representations* of bodies—bodies the soul has left behind. A tomb statue commemorates and preserves the way a person looked in life; it also guards that person's remains, resting atop their bones. Some funerary monuments, known as transi tombs, even point out this tension, including both a life portrait and an image of the occupant's corpse. (Readers might be interested to know that Donne's own funeral monument is a transi tomb, and one whose design he was involved in: knowing he was dying, he posed for the sculpture himself, wrapped in a shroud.)

By making the lovers' bodies into sepulchral statues, Donne thus both raises and wards off the idea of death. The image of two bodies whose souls have left them might easily plant the idea of two corpses in the reader's mind. But the "sepulchral statues" hold a space in which the lovers' bodies can be *preserved*, even *immortal*, while their souls go on their great adventure. They don't lie on the bank like corpses, they lie on the bank like images of living people. (They also lie there like images of *married* people, husband and wife, side by side.)

Still, there's no tomb without a corpse, and no corpse without a body. The simile of the "sepulchral statues," in reminding readers that the lovers are mortals, also insists once more that they're creatures of flesh and blood.

So far, not one image in this poem of ecstasy has been easy or rote. Readers have encountered sweaty palms, eyeball-beads, warring armies, and stony tombs. Yet the poem's tone remains seductive, delicious, hypnotic—and this stanza offers one particularly lovely example of how Donne makes that happen. Listen to the epanalepsis in these lines:

> All day, the same our postures were,
> And we said nothing, all the day.

Lying perfectly still and silent all day might feel like a chilly, stiff, uncomfortable proposition—if one weren't profoundly in love.

But the movement of the language here suggests that the two lovers are so caught up in each other, so lost in the meeting of their hands and eyes and souls, that they don't even feel time passing. The circular shape of these lines—the departure from "all day" and the return to "all the day"—creates a little loop of timelessness.

To the extent that this pair *are* aware of time passing, they feel it only as pleasure. Readers can feel the speaker's delight in the *change* in this repetition: the movement from the shorter phrase "all day" to the drawn-out relish of "all the day."

LINES 21-24

If any, so by love refin'd
That he soul's language understood,
And by good love were grown all mind,
Within convenient distance stood,

Having painted his strange, evocative pictures of two lovers' souls communing while their bodies lie perfectly still on a bank, the speaker introduces a surprise. He imagines an onlooker, a hypothetical third party: a person standing at "convenient distance," handily (and comically) nearby at just the right moment to witness this love scene.

Strikingly, there's no hint of shame or alarm when this voyeur appears. The lovers, the reader has already been told, lie like "sepulchral statues" all day long; even a hypothetical watcher won't disturb their stillness. This imagined man's observation of the lovers doesn't feel prurient, but *instructive*. That's because this observer has a perfect intellectual understanding of love:

- He understands the "soul's language": he can comprehend what the lovers' ecstastic, disembodied souls are saying, and he can understand the principle that love *means* the meeting of two souls.
- His knowledge of love has "refin'd" him. In other words, knowing about love has made him purer: one "refines" something by removing its impurities and inconsistencies.
- Through his knowledge of love, he has "grown all mind": love has made him a *thinker*, altering how he intellectually understands the world.

Through this onlooker, Donne outlines love's effects on the mind. Readers have so far seen plenty of what love does to the body and the soul. But love, this onlooker suggests, is also an intellectual process, and one that can give the mind a special kind of power and purity, a "refin'd" understanding. This person understands: he has seen enough of love to be able to comprehend what's happening between the lovers on the bank, and he's seen enough of love to understand that this meeting of souls is something sacred.

The watcher might also invite readers to consider their own position relative to the lovers. At first, there's something startling about the idea that an onlooker is suddenly standing at a "convenient distance," watching this intensely intimate scene play out. But then, that's exactly what readers have been doing all along.

Readers are invited to step into the shoes of this watcher. They're also invited to assume his intellectual grasp of what love is and how it works. Rather than inviting shame, secrecy, or even simple embarrassment into this picture of pure love, the "refin'd," understanding observer raises these possibilities—then soothes them, at least partly.

LINES 25-28

He (though he knew not which soul spake,
Because both meant, both spake the same)
Might thence a new concoction take,
And part far purer than he came.

If a thoughtful, understanding observer should happen to show up on the "pregnant bank," the poem continues, there would be no shame in his onlooking. In fact, he might "part far purer than he came": in other words, he might leave the scene even more "refin'd" than he was when he arrived, purified by a deeper understanding of love.

He'll be able to achieve this purification not merely through watching the lovers' motionless bodies, but through listening to the speech of their intertwined souls. (Remember, he has enough of a grasp of love that he understands "soul's language," meaning he can comprehend what the souls are saying.)

A clue to what he might be about to learn comes through these elegantly echoing words:

> He (though he knew not which soul spake,
> Because both meant, both spake the same)

The parallelism here stresses the idea that the lovers' souls are profoundly unified, to the extent that it has become impossible to tell one soul from the other. The lovers' souls have the same feelings, they say the same words. The perfectly matched repetition also suggests that there's no difference between what the lovers *mean* and what they *speak*: their language is crystal-clear and truthful. Love "refin[es]" their communication to utmost purity, just as it "refin'd" the onlooker's understanding.

By mingling, in other words, the lovers' souls have not become mixed-up or diluted. They've been clarified, purified, and unified. And it's exactly this paradoxical process of mixture and clarification that they offer to the onlooker. In listening to these souls' unified words, the speaker says, the onlooker will be able to take a "new concoction" away with him:

- In modern English, we tend to use the word "concoction" to mean "something made of a mixture

of different ingredients." That meaning was relevant for Donne, too.
- But for Donne, the word could also have meant the purification of metals in a furnace.
- In other words, to gain a "new concoction" might at once be to gain a new *mixture* and a new *purity*.

The onlooker, then, will come to understand that, in love, to *mix separate things* is to create *one purer thing*. Watching, listening, and learning from the purified lovers, he will himself become purified. The reader, invited to step into the onlooker's shoes, might equally hope to "part" from this poem "far purer than [they] came." These past two stanzas make a promise that observing and deeply understanding love might allow the reader to be moved and reshaped by love themselves.

Readers might notice a quiet conceit developing here, an extended metaphor that Donne will return to across the poem. Love's powers are described in the language of metalworking: refining, concocting. Such images subtly introduces some radiant *heat* to the scene. There's no refinement and no concoction without passionate fire.

LINES 29-32

"This ecstasy doth unperplex,"
We said, "and tell us what we love;
We see by this it was not sex,
We see we saw not what did move:

Over the past two stanzas, the speaker has introduced the idea of a hypothetical onlooker who might refine and purify himself through watching the lovers together—and, more importantly, through listening to their mutual speech. All at once, that idea gets less hypothetical. The lovers' souls begin to speak as one. The poem reports this speech, not as what they *would* have said if observed, but as something that simply *happened:*

"This ecstasy doth unperplex,"
We said, "and tell us what we love;

The reader becomes the onlooker, hearing and understanding "soul's language," ready to let this mutual speech refine them.

By now, readers may not be surprised to discover that the two souls' speech begins with a twisty, paradoxical idea. They begin by saying that their "ecstasy"—the transcendent, blissful out-of-body experience they're sharing—has "unperplex[ed]" them. The word "unperplex" (which Donne appears to have coined for this very occasion) here means two things at once:

- The lovers are unperplexed in that they were once confused ("perplexed") and now see clearly. Their ecstasy has set them right.
- They're also unperplexed in that their ecstatic souls have separated from their bodies. To be "perplexed" originally meant to be tangled up, twisted, braided. Now, two strands of their beings, body and soul, are combed out and separated from each other.

But there's a paradox here. Even as the lovers are unperplexed, they're also *newly* and *differently* perplexed than they were before their ecstasy. Their souls have met, intermingled, and now speak as one. Their bodies have started to fuse: think back to the images of the "twisted" eye-beams and the "cemented" hands earlier in the poem. As in the image of the "new concoction," the idea here is that ecstatic love purifies souls *by* mingling them.

Through their ecstasy, the interwoven lovers have come to understand "what [they] love" in a new way: in other words, they understand their love for each other differently and thus understand love itself differently. Donne introduces this revelation in perplexed language. Listen to the repetitions here:

We see by this it was not sex,
We see we saw not what did move:

A paraphrase of these lines might run: "We see, through our ecstasy, that it wasn't just sexual passion that made us fall in love. We see that we weren't able to see what moved us about each other before." The echoing language here stresses and enriches the importance of seeing—an idea that suggests sexual attraction was certainly the gateway to this new ecstatic love. At first, what the lovers *saw* was each other's beauty. Now they *see* with a different kind of sight, and they understand what has happened between them in a new way.

Readers might also take a moment here simply to relish the music of these lines. A sibilant hush falls over the souls' speech. "Ecstasy," "unperplex," "see," "sex," "we see we saw": there's a whispery quality to the souls' revelations, like quiet breathing.

LINES 33-36

"But as all several souls contain
Mixture of things, they know not what,
Love these mix'd souls doth mix again
And makes both one, each this and that.

The souls now go on to unfold what it is that *really* made them love each other—though they were initially under the illusion that it was just each other's sexual beauty that drew them together.

They explain that "all several souls" (that is, all separate souls) are made up of a "mixture of things." The exact nature of that mixture might be obscure to the soul itself, which "know[s] not what" it's made of, really. The soul, in other words, isn't a coherent and unified thing. It's a hodgepodge of mysterious components.

Love's power is to take these inherently "mix'd souls" and "mix [them] again," recombining them into "one." Again, there's a

paradoxical image of mixture and unification here. Once the lovers' two souls have become one, they're also "each this and that." That is, the different elements of their two souls are evenly mixed, so that all the muddled parts of their separate souls go to form this new being between them.

The language here draws a veil over what, precisely, a soul is made of. The souls are made of "they know not what"; when they're recombined into one soul, they form a unity that's "each this and that." These vague phrasings suggest that, while the lovers have a new understanding of what has drawn them together, there's still a profound mystery at the root of that understanding.

LINES 37-44

"A single violet transplant,—
The strength, the colour, and the size,
All which before was poor, and scant,
Redoubles still, and multiplies.
"When love, with one another so
Interinanimates two souls,
That abler soul, which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controls.

To further explore how the fusion of souls works, the lovers turn back to the place where their bodies lie on the "pregnant bank." From this landscape, they pluck a simile: an image of a "violet," a flower that first appeared back in line 3.

If one takes a "single violet" and "transplant[s]" it to new soil, the souls explain, it grows stronger. Its "strength," "colour," and "size" might before have been "poor, and scant" (pitiful and little). But when the violet is transplanted, all that was weak in it before "multiplies," becoming exponentially greater. It gets stronger, brighter, bigger.

The transplanted violet becomes an image of what happens when souls join together—or, as the speakers put it, when love "interinanimates two souls." That mouthful of a word, another Donne coinage, suggests both:

- intertwining (that's the "inter-" part, a prefix which means "between" or "among")
- and new life (that's the "animates" part: to "animate" is to give life to something)

Notice, too, that love doesn't just "interanimate," but "interinanimate," the second twist of an "in" suggesting an even more convoluted and intimate joining of souls. Love, then, interweaves two souls to create one new living soul from them—a soul that "flow[s]" forth abundantly, like a river.

That new soul is "abler," stronger and better, than either of the original souls were. Brought together, the two souls overcome the "defects of loneliness"—the handicaps and drawbacks of being one lonely soul. The "mix[ing]" of two souls into one creates a single more perfect being.

Critics have noted that the simile here seems a little bit askew. Certainly there's a process of growth and improvement for both the transplanted violet and the intertwining souls. But the souls unite and become one new thing in the space between the lovers, whereas the violet gets moved from one soil to another and "multiplies," becoming more than one thing. It's possible that readers are meant to imagine the lovers' souls as both violet and soil. Or perhaps both souls are the single violet, and their transplantation is the "ecstasy" that takes them from their bodies.

LINES 45-48

"We then, who are this new soul, know
Of what we are compos'd and made,
For th' atomies of which we grow
Are souls, whom no change can invade.

Having explained how they came to be united, the lovers' shared "new soul" makes a triumphant final pronouncement on its own nature. The intertwined double soul first declares:

> "We then, who are this new soul, know
> Of what we are compos'd and made,

In a sense, these lines cap and summarize the last four stanzas. The souls are saying: "We thus understand how our two separate souls make up the parts of our new shared soul."

Through understanding this, they also understand that:

> [...] th' atomies of which we grow
> Are souls, whom no change can invade.

In other words, the separate particles ("atomies," or atoms) of their individual souls, now that they're brought together in this one new soul, will never change. Their fusion is permanent, their new soul is everlasting. This is a declaration of eternal love.

In the context of all that has come before, such a declaration might seem a bit strange. So far, change has been a force for great good in the poem. It's a change, certainly, to feel one's soul leaving one's body and joining with another soul in rapturous ecstasy. But here, change becomes an "invade[r]," something that would intrude upon the souls in their delight. Having come together, these souls can't imagine ever being parted. But perhaps they also don't *want* to imagine being parted.

Or perhaps this moment captures the way a moment of romantic ecstasy *feels*, or a truth that ecstasy gives one a glimpse of. Remember the circling words of the fifth stanza:

> All day, the same our postures were,
> And we said nothing, all the day.

Absorbed in each other in more senses than one, these lovers seemed unaware of time passing. Their souls might be in a similar transcendent state, feeling as if they're suspended somewhere past time and past change.

To the passionately religious Donne and his Christian contemporaries, a description of a changeless ecstasy that transcends time would sound an awful lot like a description of Heaven itself. Perhaps, then, the souls' ecstatic, changeless perspective is part of what might leave an onlooker "purer" for having witnessed it.

LINES 49-52

"But oh alas, so long, so far,
Our bodies why do we forbear?
They'are ours, though they'are not we; we are
The intelligences, they the spheres.

Having explained how they came to be one, the lovers' fused souls suddenly change tack. There's something they've forgotten, they realize: the body. They remember their physical beings with a cry of remorse:

> "But oh alas, so long, so far,
> Our bodies why do we forbear?

In other words: "But, oh no! Why have we refrained from using our bodies for such a long time?" In their ecstasy, they suggest, they've neglected their physical beings—and their physical beings are *important*.

This is a big turn in a poem that has just spent nine stanzas exploring an exalted spiritual communion. But it's a turn that Donne has prepared readers for from the start. Remember, this poem started with the word "where"—and that "where" was a place where two bodies lay side by side, holding each other's sweaty hands.

The body, the souls say, *belongs* to the soul. Donne makes this point through a metaphor: if the souls are the "intelligences," then their bodies are the "spheres." He's alluding to a Renaissance belief about the ordering of the universe:

- The "intelligences" are the angels, which Donne and his contemporaries understood to be beings of pure thought.
- The "spheres" are the crystalline orbs once believed to contain the planets. The idea was that the universe was a sort of nesting doll of such orbs, each holding a planet in its course. (Readers might have encountered this idea before in the turn of phrase "the music of the spheres": the spheres were imagined to make an ethereal harmony as they spun around.)
- The angels were said to be in charge of the spheres, conducting their movement. (See Dante's *Paradiso* for a famous and beautiful literary vision of the angels and the spheres.)

If the soul is to the body as an angel is to a sphere, then it's the guardian, custodian, and (importantly) the *mover* of the body. This relationship, the angelic metaphor suggests, is a solemn and a sacred one.

LINES 53-56

"We owe them thanks, because they thus
Did us, to us, at first convey,
Yielded their forces, sense, to us,
Nor are dross to us, but allay.

The souls launch into a sincere and humble appreciation of everything their bodies have done for them. "We owe [our bodies] thanks," they say, because their bodies "did us, to us, at first convey": in other words, their bodies brought them together. The souls found each other because their bodies allowed them to do so.

Here, readers might think back to the earlier moment when the souls declared that they were at first mistaken about what made them love each other. "We see [...] it was not sex," they proclaimed back in line 31: it wasn't *really* sexual beauty or sexual passion that moved them, though that's what they might have been tempted to think. But their gratitude to their bodies in this stanza suggest that, even if their their initial bodily experience of each other didn't give them the whole picture, it was nonetheless indispensible. Their true, soul-deep love isn't about their bodies—and yet they couldn't have reached this ecstasy *without* their bodies.

That's not simply because they find each other's bodies beautiful, but because their bodies "yielded their forces, sense, to us." Their bodies, that is, gave them the ability to feel, see, perceive each other; their bodies carried them into each other's lives.

And thus, their bodies are not "dross," but "allay" to them. Here, Donne draws a metaphor from metalworking:

- "Dross" is the waste product that floats to the surface of molten metal and gets skimmed off. (It's also a more general term for useless rubbish.)
- "Allay" is Donne's spelling of "alloy"—a term meaning a mixture of metals, combined to produce a new, stronger material with the good properties of all its different ingredients. (Bronze, for instance, is an alloy of copper and tin.)

The body, then, isn't some useless excrescence that the souls can happily leave behind in their pursuit of ecstatic union. It's a necessary part of their ecstasy, their love, and their joy.

This metaphor of strengthening and improvement through fusion might feel familiar at this stage. The relationship

between body and soul, here, seems to have more than a little in common with the relationship between the lovers' two souls. Just as the souls join together to become a single, better "mix'd" soul, the body and soul work together to produce a single powerful "allay."

LINES 57-60

"On man heaven's influence works not so,
But that it first imprints the air;
So soul into the soul may flow,
Though it to body first repair.

The souls now clarify the role their bodies played in bringing them together, using a starry analogy to make their point. Looking to the skies, they reflect on "heaven's influence": the powers of the planets and stars, which Donne's contemporaries believed shaped people's personalities and destinies. These heavenly powers couldn't have any effect on the earthly people far below then, the souls observe, if they didn't first "imprint[] the air": if they didn't leave a mark on the airy space between planet and person.

The air, in other words, physically transmits the influence of the heavens because it's *marked* by that influence. The word "imprint," literally meaning "press into," suggests that the air is embossed with the planets' powers—or perhaps printed with those powers as a page is printed with text. In other words, it's a physical *medium* (albeit a pretty refined one) through which heavenly influence gets communicated.

The soul is to the body, then, as the influence of the heavens is to the air. The soul is something immaterial, spiritual, and refined—and it can't *act* unless it's transmitted through the physical medium of flesh. "Soul into the soul may flow," the souls say, but in order to do so, soul must first "repair" (or go into) a body. Again, this idea stresses the point that the lovers' souls couldn't meet and become one if they weren't first embodied.

In this image, the air and the body work something like a written poem. In the same way that the words of "The Ecstasy" transmit an immaterial vision from the long-dead brain of John Donne to the living reader, the air transmits heaven's influence to human beings, and the body transmits one soul to another.

LINES 61-64

"As our blood labours to beget
Spirits, as like souls as it can,
Because such fingers need, to knit
That subtle knot, which makes us man:

Further exploring exactly how their union has come about, the souls find yet another image of a *medium*, a physical go-between that allows the transmission of something immaterial. Here, they draw their image from a complex Renaissance idea about how the soul interacts with the body: through "spirits."

"Spirit" isn't just another word for "soul" here. Rather, "spirits" were a hypothesized physiological middleman between body and soul: a kind of thin ethereal fluid generated by the blood. These spirits, Donne's contemporaries believed, worked like a medium and like a messenger:

- They transmitted sensation and feeling from the body to the soul, allowing the soul to perceive the world.
- They also transmitted direction and movement from the soul to the body, allowing the soul to steer the body's actions.

Here, the souls say that the blood "labours to beget / Spirits, as like souls as it can." In other words, the blood strives to produce spirits that will communicate with the soul as perfectly as possible, manifesting the soul's desires through the body.

Note the loaded language in those lines, too. The blood "labours to beget" spirits:

- The word "labours" calls up *labor*, or childbirth.
- To "beget" can mean "to father a baby."
- Last but not least, "spirit," as well as referring to the messenger-fluid in the blood, could also mean "semen." (See Shakespeare for a famous example of this Renaissance-era euphemism.)

The blood takes on both a maternal and paternal role, then. And through these subtle allusions to sex, pregnancy, and childbirth, the poem raises yet another image of the way that two separate bodies and souls may mingle to produce one new body and soul. There's an echo of that "pregnant bank" from the first stanza here, as well as a reminder that the lovers know that "propagation" (or baby-making) might be in the cards for them, though it hasn't happened "as yet."

The spirits, the speakers go on, are the delicate metaphorical "fingers" that tie a "subtle knot" between body and soul—and that "subtle knot" is what "makes us man." To be a human being, in other words, is to be made of separate parts that are wondrously woven together. To be *just* a body or *just* a soul would mean to be less or other than human.

At this stage, readers might begin to feel a little dizzy. Donne's figurative language keeps shifting its terms. Through this passage on the "spirits," Donne is using the internal relationship between one individual person's body and soul as an image of how two separate souls relate to each other. Mind-stretchingly, the "subtle knot" between body and soul here mirrors the "subtle knot" between the two lovers' souls: the "spirits," which are the messengers of the body, become a metaphor for the body itself.

The lovers' ecstasy gives them an intense, intelligent clarity about how love works and about the relationship between their

bodies and their souls. But even as it explores the distinct roles of body and soul, it also makes the boundaries between the two feel rather porous.

The poem's language starts to build to a climax here. The music of the words "Because such fingers need, to knit / That subtle knot, which makes us man"—with its ringing consonance and alliteration—prepare readers for the unfolding of a big idea in the next stanza. For this stanza has just been an introduction, the first part of an analogy that hasn't come to a conclusion yet: "As our blood labors..."

LINES 65-68

"So must pure lovers' souls descend
T' affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies.

The analogy of the blood and the spirits that started in the previous stanza now reaches its payoff. "As our blood" creates spirits, the souls declare, "So must pure lovers' souls descend" into "affections" and "faculties"—that is, into emotions and into the power to act. ("Affections" aren't just loving emotions here, but emotions in general.) Souls, in other words, have to "descend" into bodies (which have the power to feel and act) so that "sense may reach and apprehend" them—so that they're perceptible and comprehensible to the senses.

Otherwise, the souls continue—balancing a metaphor on a simile—a "great Prince in prison lies." If the soul isn't embodied, then this powerful prince is trapped. The prince might personify a couple of different things:

- He might simply represent the soul, helpless and unable to act if it can't work through the forces and senses of the body.
- But he might also represent love itself. Love, in this reading, is a power that can't be expressed or understood in the human world unless it's transmitted through the body.

In Donne's context, this latter image of love as a prince has Christian connotations. The idea of love as a "great Prince" can't help but call up the Incarnation, the Christian belief that God (who "is love," according to John's Gospel), was embodied as Jesus ("king of kings," according to Revelations) and lived in the world as a human being. The Incarnation, here, is perhaps the loftiest proof of the souls' idea that love needs to take on a body to complete its work in this world.

This isn't the only time that Donne's verse draws a connection between the workings of mortal love and the workings of God. The lovers of "The Canonization," for instance, "die and rise" in bed (or have an orgasm, then become aroused again), just as the phoenix (a symbol of Jesus) dies and rises again from its own ashes. Donne intends this apparently irreverent metaphor not unseriously. To this poet's mind, mortal love—even in those moments that some more prudish minds might see as purely bodily, purely earthly—mimics the workings of the divine, just as "heaven's influence [...] imprints the air."

LINES 69-72

"To'our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love reveal'd may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book:

Over the past five stanzas, the lovers' souls have made an elaborate case for the value of the body, drawing their illustrative metaphors from the finest theology and science of their day. The shape of their metaphors has suggested that:

- The body is sacred: it's an indispensible part of what "makes us man," what makes people human. The soul couldn't act without it.
- The body and the soul have a relationship not unlike two lovers might have: just as lovers' souls are "mix'd" to produce one stronger soul, body and soul combine to make one complete human being.
- The body works as a *medium*, allowing love to be read and transmitted in the world, just as a printed page is a medium for transmitting thought. (And no lesser example than the Incarnation of Christ proves it.)

After all these gorgeous, knotty explanations, it's no wonder that the lovers' ecstatic souls at last turn back to their bodies. Their motivations for returning to their bodies, they claim, are as much about enlightening their onlookers as satisfying their own desire. They have to go back into their bodies so that "weak men on love reveal'd may look."

Frail mortal eyes, in other words, need to see how *bodies* love if they're going to understand love. The soul's love is invisible and immaterial, but the body's sure isn't.

The souls sum that point up in a final and emphatically alliterative metaphor. While "Love's mysteries in souls do grow," they say, "the body is his book."

The personification of Love in these lines lends weight to the idea that the "great Prince" of the previous stanza is love itself. These lines also return to the image of the body as a medium, a "book" in which love can be read. "Weak men"—like the imagined onlooker, like the reader, like the lovers themselves—need the help of such a book to understand how love works.

This image of physical love as a book once again invites readers to think about how they're participating in this scene and what they're learning from it. This poem is itself an attempt to give a physical body to love, to capture what love is like in text on a page. If readers have allowed the lovers' words to work on

them, they have participated in a kind of love relationship: the poem's "body" communicates love to them. *Reading*, here, transmits an experience of love between the lovers and the reader. (And, one might note, between the reader and John Donne.)

LINES 73-76

"And if some lover, such as we,
Have heard this Dialogue of One,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
Small change, when we'are to bodies gone."

As the poem comes to its conclusion, the lovers do something unexpected: they practically *wink* at the reader. "[I]f some lover, such as we, / Have heard this Dialogue of One," they begin. Though the lovers don't speak directly to the reader here, they certainly cheekily imply their awareness that an onlooker is watching them.

This, then, is the lovers' final and most direct communication with the reader (standing in the place of the imagined onlooker). Readers know themselves to be the audience of the souls' "Dialogue of One." (And notice that twisty-turny paradoxical phrasing: a "dialogue" is by definition a conversation between two or more people. Only by being one thing made out of two things—like "one double string"—can the intertwined souls perform a "Dialogue of One.")

If an onlooker happens to be around, the souls go on, then "Let him still mark us"—that is, "let him keep on watching us as we return to our bodies." The proof of their arguments about the body's role in love will be in what their bodies do together. The enlightened observer will observe "small change," little difference, between how the souls *explain* their love and how their bodies *act out* their love.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the lovers are encouraging the onlooker to stick around and watch their embraces, and perhaps even to watch them finally having sex. What their bodies do—blissfully *combine*—will mirror what their souls have done. Perhaps the interweaving of their bodies will even create yet another "concoction," a mixture of the two of them: a baby. And that hypothetical baby will *itself* embody love. The "subtle knot" that ties its new little body and soul together will follow the same principles as the love that brought its parents together.

These closing lines thus create a gorgeous, sparkling hall of mirrors. Love ties subtle knots between two souls, between body and soul, between two bodies. And in watching these complex interweavings play out on the page, the onlooker's mind also interweaves with the mind of John Donne in a subtle love-knot: the body of the poem transmits love to the reader as the bodies of the lovers transmit love to each other.

All this is sacred, "The Ecstasy" suggests. The onlooker will "part far purer" for having witnessed this scene, their understanding of love deeper and more refined than it was. Perhaps most of all, they will depart with a deeper understanding of the sacredness of the body. After all, the lovers here unabashedly encourage readers to watch as they embrace. They do so in the utmost confidence that such watching can only leave the reader better than they were when they happened upon the pregnant bank.

SYMBOLS

THE VIOLET

"The Ecstasy" uses violets as a symbol of new (but sturdy) love. The violets that grow all over the "pregnant bank" where the blissful couple lies are a spring flower, and they suggest a season of new life and growth. This love, then, might be in its freshest, earliest days. However, violets were also a traditional symbol of fidelity and constancy in love. The appearance of violets right at the beginning of the poem subtly hints that, while the poem's lovers might still be in the honeymoon phase, theirs is also a true, constant, and lasting love—not a mere fling.

An image of violets also returns in the complex simile at lines 37-44, where Donne imagines the lovers' soul as a violet transplanted to new soil, growing stronger and brighter. Here, the lovers seem to be plucking their figurative language right out of the landscape around them. The symbolic use of violets also subtly hearkens back to the "propagation" of the lovers' reflections in each other's eyes in lines 11-12—to propagate is to grow a new plant (like a violet) from the cutting or seed of another.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "A pregnant bank swell'd up, to rest / The violet's reclining head,"
- **Lines 37-40:** "'"A single violet transplant,— / The strength, the colour, and the size, / All which before was poor, and scant, / Redoubles still, and multiplies."

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

This poem's metaphors work like the bodies of the poem's lovers: they give physical form to spiritual experience, and they elevate physical experiences to spiritual ones.

Two of the most arresting and vivid of these metaphors arrive early on, in the second stanza. Here, the speaker depicts himself and his lover holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes with these words:

Our hands were firmly cemented
With a fast balm, which thence did spring;
Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
Our eyes upon one double string;

In the first part of this image, the lovers' hands are glued together with a "fast balm." In literal terms, this "balm"—a word usually meaning a soothing cream or ointment—is palm sweat, sticking the couples' hands "fast" (or firmly) together. This surprising image stresses the fleshy physicality of this love early on. Love, this poem will argue, *needs* bodies and sex to come to its full fruition. And bodies sweat. By calling sweat a "balm" here, Donne makes something potentially sticky and embarrassing into something gracious and healing. These sweetly sweaty palms also hint that the lovers might be feeling pretty worked up, even if all they've done so far is gaze at each other and hold hands.

The second image draws on 17th-century beliefs about the nature of sight. One theory held that the eyes emitted vision-beams that touched what they saw. Here, these beams become physical strings, threading the lovers' eyes together as if they were beads.

The metaphor evokes a mutual gaze of piercing intensity: the lovers' eye-beams must penetrate each other's eyes to string them together. The intimate *twisting* of these eye-beams, like the fusion of the lovers' palms, also prefigures the interweaving of the lovers' souls. This unforgettable metaphor suggests that these lovers can wrap each other in an intimate embrace without doing more than *look* at each other. Their connection is so deep that even their gaze is tangible, fusing them together.

Related images of fusion and intertwining also appear later in the poem, illuminating the connection between the body and the soul. As the poem puts it, the lovers "owe [their bodies] thanks," because without them, the couple could never have known each other. Bodies are thus not "dross to us, but allay," Donne suggests, in a metaphor drawn from metalworking. "Dross" is waste material; "allay," here, is another spelling of "alloy," a stronger metal made from the fusion of two weaker components. The relationship between body and soul, in this image, is thus not unlike the relationship between the lovers. In both instances, a combination of two unlike things produces one stronger and more complete whole.

This fusion between soul and body is also, in line 64, the "subtle knot, which makes us man"—a metaphor that hearkens back to the intertwined eye-beams of the second stanza. The interwoven images here begin to suggest that the relationship between body and soul might also be a lot like the relationship between two lovers. In both relationships, two different things—whether body and soul or two people—join together to create one richer and more powerful whole.

These related fusions release "a great Prince"—a personification of love itself—from "prison." Presenting love as a powerful prince here, the speaker suggests that love is a governing, guiding, noble force. However, it's also one that can't act alone. Without the meeting of soul and body, and without the meetings of separate souls and bodies, this "great Prince" is helpless on Earth.

Similarly, "Love's mysteries" might grow in the "soul"—"but yet the body is his book." Again, "love" is a person here, a "he." But his "book," the means by which he communicates with human beings, is the body. In this image, the body becomes a holy text, love's Bible, the only place where love can be *expressed* and *interpreted*.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread / Our eyes upon one double string;"
- **Lines 51-52:** "we are / The intelligences, they the spheres."
- **Line 56:** "Nor are dross to us, but allay."
- **Lines 63-64:** "Because such fingers need, to knit / That subtle knot, which makes us man:"
- **Line 68:** "Else a great Prince in prison lies."
- **Lines 71-72:** "Love's mysteries in souls do grow, / But yet the body is his book:"

SIMILE

Donne's rich, elaborate similes help to capture the complexities of love in concrete images.

In typical Donne fashion, the speaker starts the poem with a simile, then speedily piles further metaphors atop it. The speaker describes the place where he and his lover sit gazing at each other: on a riverbank that "swell[s] up" like a "pillow on a bed." That simile feels luxuriously cushy and gentle, setting a blissful scene. It also foreshadows the speaker's hopes for where he and his beloved will end up: in a *real* bed together.

The metaphors around this simile enrich that picture further:

- The speaker describes the swelling bank as "pregnant," foreshadowing his musings on the beauty and importance of sex (and of the body in general). Though he and his beloved haven't gotten around to any "propagation" (or baby-making) just yet, the pregnant bank hints that they're heading in that direction.
- The image of pregnancy also prefigures the speaker's spiritual ideas about love intertwining two souls and making them into one new soul (just as a baby gets made through the combination of male and female elements).
- The personified "violet" that "reclin[es its] head" on this bank, meanwhile, might suggest the flower-like beauty of the speaker's beloved as she lies back to

gaze at him. Perhaps they also speak to the purity of the lovers' feelings: violets, in Donne's time, symbolized faithful love, among other things.

The metaphors surrounding the introductory simile, then, elevate and purify the grassy "pillow" the lovers lie on, suggesting that this won't simply be a poem about getting a lady into bed (though that's certainly part of the intent, as it is in not a few of Donne's poems).

The poem's second simile is just as complex. At the critical moment when the speaker first describes his and his lovers' souls leaving their bodies and meeting in the space between the two of them, he starts with this image:

> As, 'twixt two equal armies, Fate
> Suspends uncertain victory,

Here, in other words, a personified Fate leaves victory hanging between two equally matched forces. It's as if victory is a physical prize, like a medal, dangling over the exact middle of the battlefield, waiting to descend into the hands of the winner.

The speaker then completes his simile with these lines:

> Our souls (which to advance their state
> Were gone out) hung 'twixt her, and me.

There's something confusing going on here. The speaker seems equally to be comparing his and his lover's souls to Fate, to the armies, and to victory:

- The grammar here suggests that the souls are playing the role of fate: "As Fate" does this, so "our souls" do that.
- The image of the souls "go[ing] out" to "advance their state" (to better their conditions, that is) seems to cast them as the two opposing armies.
- And the actual image of the souls hanging suspended between the lovers' bodies puts them in the position of the "victory" hanging uncertainly *between* two armies.

This incredibly knotty image makes *emotional* sense, even if it boggles the intellect. By casting his and his lover's souls as Fate, armies, and victory all at once, the speaker makes them *both* the winners in a fated battle. They're their own victory, and they were destined to be so.

The next simile, in line 18, is simpler but still rich. While the speaker's and his beloved's souls hang between the two of them, their bodies lie there "like sepulchral statues"—that is, like the statues one might find on top of a stone tomb:

- In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, married couples' tombs often depicted them lying side by side, sometimes holding hands—exactly what the speaker and his beloved are doing all day here. (Here's an example—one that features in another famous poem, in fact.)
- The image here thus touchingly suggests a love that will transcend death. It also reminds readers that the lovers' souls are no longer in their bodies here. With their souls in "ecstasy" (which could mean a transcendent, out-of-body religious experience as well as intense pleasure), the lovers' bodies might as well be stone images (or the lifeless bodies beneath those images).

These aren't all of the poem's similes! For a closer look at the complex theological similes Donne uses in lines 57-68 (also highlighted here for clarity), see the "Allusion" section of this guide.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "like a pillow on a bed / A pregnant bank swell'd up, to rest / The violet's reclining head,"
- **Lines 13-16:** "As, 'twixt two equal armies, Fate / Suspends uncertain victory, / Our souls (which to advance their state / Were gone out) hung 'twixt her, and me."
- **Line 18:** "We like sepulchral statues lay"
- **Lines 57-68:** "'"On man heaven's influence works not so, / But that it first imprints the air; / So soul into the soul may flow, / Though it to body first repair. / "As our blood labours to beget / Spirits, as like souls as it can, / Because such fingers need, to knit / That subtle knot, which makes us man: / "So must pure lovers' souls descend / T' affections, and to faculties, / Which sense may reach and apprehend, / Else a great Prince in prison lies."

ANAPHORA

Moments of anaphora give "The Ecstasy" emphasis and energy. The device first shows up in the second stanza, where the speaker describes the embrace he and his beloved share:

> Our hands were firmly cemented
> With a fast balm, which thence did spring;
> Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
> Our eyes upon one double string;

This repeated phrasing supports a feeling of total mutual absorption. Over and over, these two lovers' separate beings get fused or woven into one thing: their two hands are "cemented" by amorous sweat, their two pairs of eyes are "thread[ed]" like beads upon the "double string" of their gaze. By launching into these ideas with the repeated word "our,"

Donne suggests that the two are having a fully shared experience here. They're no longer a separate "you and I," they're an "us."

The next stanza, by contrast, uses anaphora to point out the way in which the lovers *aren't* completely fused with each other yet:

> So to'intergraft our hands, as yet
> **Was all** the means to make us one,
> And pictures in our eyes to get
> **Was all** our propagation.

By stressing that holding hands and gazing at each other "was all" the lovers did, the speaker points out that one of the most potent ways lovers bring their bodies together—sex—is still to come. By the same token, though, that "was all" suggests that holding hands and gazing *is* a kind of near-sexual union, and one that even produces children of a sort: the tiny reflections of the lovers in each others' eyes.

In line 26, meanwhile, anaphora highlights the new wisdom of the lovers' fused souls:

> He (though he knew not which soul spake,
> Because **both** meant, **both** spake the same)

The doubled "both" here stresses the lovers' perfect harmony. Perhaps the repetition also helps to suggest that in their new shared life as a single, mingled soul, the lovers can easily and simply speak the truth: what they *mean* is what they *speak*.

As the lovers' interwoven souls begin to explain what they've discovered through their union, they use one last intent moment of anaphora:

> **We see** by this it was not sex,
> **We see we saw** not what did move:

Again, a plural pronoun takes center stage here: it's by being a "we" that these lovers can "see" something new and revelatory about the nature of love.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Our hands"
- **Line 7:** "Our eye-beams"
- **Line 8:** "Our eyes"
- **Line 10:** "Was all"
- **Line 12:** "Was all"
- **Line 26:** "both meant, both spake"
- **Line 31:** "We see"
- **Line 32:** "We see we saw"

REPETITION

Donne uses artful repetitions to highlight the lovers' complete mutual adoration. Words reflect across lines like the "pictures" in the lover's eyes reflect each other's faces.

Take, for example, the strange and wonderful moment in lines 7-8:

> Our **eye**-beams twisted, and did thread
> Our **eyes** upon one double string;

Here, the polyptoton between "**eye**-beams" and "**eyes**" threads the lines together—exactly as the eye-beams thread the lovers' eyes together. There's a double *mirroring* here: the lovers' committed mutual gazes mirror each other, and they're mirrored in turn by the shape of the poem's language.

In lines 19-20, another repetition stresses the lovers' absorption and constancy:

> **All day**, the same our postures were,
> And we said nothing, **all the day**.

This moment of epanalepsis subtly suggests eternity: these lines end where they began, creating a circle. This language, like the vision of the doubled eye-beams, supports the feeling that the lovers are safe in a self-contained world of their own.

As the lovers' interwoven souls begin to speak as one in the eighth stanza, their repetitions take on a new kind of energy:

> We **see** by this it was not sex,
> We **see** we **saw** not what did move:

Alongside the anaphora on "we" here, the polyptoton on "see" and "saw" draws attention to the relationship of *seeing* (and perhaps soulfully gazing in particular) to *understanding*. What the lovers "see" now is not what they "saw" before their souls became one.

And speaking of becoming one, more polyptoton helps to reveal exactly what has happened to the two lovers in lines 33-35:

> "But as all several souls contain
> **Mixture** of things, they know not what,
> Love these **mix'd** souls doth **mix** again

All those variations on mixing stress the idea of souls as complex concoctions: the mixed souls of the lovers get "mix[ed] again" through love, recombined like paint colors. The lovers will use diacope to stress a similar idea in line 59, where they declare that "**soul** into the **soul** may flow"—the identical word suggesting the way that two souls recombine to make another.

One of the poem's tenderest sequences of repetition turns up in lines 53-56, where the lovers's souls reflect on everything

they owe to their bodies:

> "We owe them thanks, because they thus
> Did us, to us, at first convey,
> Yielded their forces, sense, to us,
> Nor are dross to us, but allay.

This return to the word "us" plays up one of the beautiful paradoxes at the poem's heart. The lovers become one through being two. Being an "us" means being a single unit made of diverse parts. Considering the lovers' *souls* are thanking their *bodies* here, there's also a hint that there's a love-match going on inside individual people: body and soul are themselves lovers, in a sense.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "eye-beams"
- **Line 8:** "eyes"
- **Line 19:** "All day"
- **Line 20:** "all the day"
- **Line 21:** "love"
- **Line 23:** "love"
- **Line 31:** "We see"
- **Line 32:** " We see we saw"
- **Line 34:** "Mixture"
- **Line 35:** "mix'd," "mix"
- **Line 54:** "Did us, to us"
- **Line 55:** "to us"
- **Line 56:** "to us"
- **Line 59:** "soul," "soul"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration heightens important moments in the poem, giving major images and ideas a little extra gleam. The poem's first lines, for example, use interweaving /p/ and /b/ sounds:

> Where, like a pillow on a bed
> A pregnant bank swell'd up, [...]

These alliterative sounds subtly strengthen the association between the fertile "pregnant bank" and the "pillow" it resembles, highlighting the intimacy (and sexuality) in this image. On a more literal level, the alliteration just sounds pleasant: these round sounds feel as plump and soft as the green turf that cushions the speaker and his beloved.

Alliteration similarly creates music and meaning as the poem approaches a climax in lines 61-64:

> "As our blood labours to beget
> Spirits, as like souls as it can,
> Because such fingers need, to knit
> That subtle knot, which makes us man:

As the poem describes the interrelation of the body and the soul, dense alliterative sounds mirror its meaning. The flurry of repeated sounds suits a theme of harmonious *matching* here: the match between a body and a soul, the match between two lovers. The consonant chime between "knit" and "knot" feels especially potent. The words themselves are closely knitted and knotted together.

All those sounds lead up to a couple of dramatic (and alliterative) declarations in lines 68 and 72. If souls don't find their expression in bodies, the speaker says, a "great Prince in prison lies." Or, to put it another way, Love needs bodies to be fully expressed—for the "body is [Love's] book." In both of these cases, alliteration highlights a big climactic metaphor, making it shine out all the more brightly.

These are only a few examples of the alliteration in the poem; there's much more to find.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "pillow," "bed"
- **Line 2:** "pregnant," "bank"
- **Line 4:** "best"
- **Line 5:** "firmly"
- **Line 6:** "fast"
- **Line 10:** "means," "make"
- **Line 11:** "pictures"
- **Line 12:** "propagation"
- **Line 18:** "sepulchral statues"
- **Line 28:** "part," "purer"
- **Line 31:** "see," "sex"
- **Line 32:** "see," "saw"
- **Line 33:** "several souls"
- **Line 37:** "single"
- **Line 38:** "strength," "size"
- **Line 39:** "scant"
- **Line 53:** "them thanks," "they thus"
- **Line 59:** "So soul"
- **Line 61:** "blood," "beget"
- **Line 62:** "Spirits," "souls"
- **Line 63:** "need," "knit"
- **Line 64:** "knot," "makes," "man"
- **Line 68:** "Prince," "prison"
- **Line 72:** "body," "book"

ALLUSION

As well as being a poet, John Donne was a passionate Christian, a theologian, a clergyman, and a voracious scholar. This poem's allusions to Renaissance-era ideas about the shape of the cosmos show how all these aspects of his life's work enriched one another.

The first of these allusions appears when the lovers' intertwined souls begin to praise their bodies in lines 49-52.

Though the souls have left their bodies behind for a little while to enjoy a purely spiritual ecstasy, they're adamant that their bodies remain critically important to their love. To sum up the nature of the relationship between body and soul, they declare:

> They'are ours, though they'are not we; we are
> The intelligences, they the spheres.

Here, Donne alludes to the Renaissance model of the universe:

- The "intelligences" are the angels, heavenly creatures that Donne and his contemporaries believed to be disembodied beings made of pure thought.
- The "spheres" are the vast, transparent, nested globes that were said to contain the planets in their orbits.
- The angels were said to be in charge of the spheres, spinning them round. (For context, take a look at Dante, who includes a vision of the movement of the spheres in his *Paradiso*.)

The movements of the heavens also turn up in lines 57-59, where Donne's lovers describe how "heaven's influence" works on human beings. This is an allusion to astrological theories about how the movements of the stars and planets shape personalities, lives, and world events. In order to create these effects, the lovers say, the heavens must "imprint the air": that is, they can't affect people without leaving a mark on the air first. Again, spiritual or ethereal things *must* be transmitted through the physical world.

A final allusion to Renaissance theology and Renaissance science appears in the complex metaphor in lines 61-64. Donne begins this passage with the idea that "our blood labours to beget / Spirits, as like souls as it can." The "spirits" he refers to were, in a Renaissance theory, an intermediary between the body and the soul:

- Blood was said to produce a delicate, thin, rarified substance—sometimes imagined as a gas, sometimes as a liquid—called "spirit."
- This spirit-fluid worked in two directions: it transmitted sensation from the body to the soul, and transmitted action from the soul to the body. In other words, spirit was what allowed a person's soul to perceive bodily experiences and also what allowed a person's soul to give their body directions in response to its experiences.
- This wafting intermediary spirit, Donne suggests, works as the metaphorical "fingers" that "knit / That subtle knot, which makes us man." In other words, people couldn't be fully human if they didn't embody this delicate back-and-forth relationship between the spiritual and the physical.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 51-52:** "They'are ours, though they'are not we; we are / The intelligences, they the spheres."
- **Lines 57-60:** ""On man heaven's influence works not so, / But that it first imprints the air; / So soul into the soul may flow, / Though it to body first repair."
- **Lines 61-64:** ""As our blood labours to beget / Spirits, as like souls as it can, / Because such fingers need, to knit / That subtle knot, which makes us man:"

VOCABULARY

Cemented (Line 5) - Stuck together. Pronounced with the stress on the first syllable, SEH-men-ted.

Fast balm (Line 6) - A strongly adhesive substance. The "fast balm" Donne describes here is the sweat of the lovers' palms

Thence (Line 6) - From there (that is, from the lovers' hands).

Eye-beams (Line 7) - The lovers' gazes—imagined here both as "beams" of light and as intertwining threads.

Intergraft (Line 9) - Combine two things into one. The lovers' hands, in other words, seem to have fused together, bonded by their amorous palm-sweat.

Propagation (Line 12) - Baby-making. The speaker suggests that the only "children" the lovers have conceived so far are the miniature copies of each other reflecting as "pictures in [their] eyes."

'Twixt (Line 13, Line 16) - Between.

Sepulchral statues (Line 18) - The reclining stone portraits of the dead that one might find on a sepulchre, a tomb.

Refin'd (Line 21) - Purified.

Spake (Line 25, Line 26) - Spoke.

Concoction (Line 27) - A potion made of mixed elements: in this instance, a metaphor for the new soul created when the lovers' two souls fuse.

Ecstasy (Line 29) - The word has two meanings, both relevant here. Aside from the more familiar modern sense of "extreme physical pleasure," an "ecstasy" could be a transcendent, out-of-body religious experience. The lovers are having the latter here. Soon, the poem suggests, they'll have the former, too.

Unperplex (Line 29) - Unravel or separate one thing from another. Also, with the implication of enlightenment, revelation: making clear what was once perplexing, confusing. (A paradoxical word here, considering the lovers' souls are also in some sense being tied in a knot, combined into one new thing.)

Several (Line 33) - Separate.

Redoubles (Line 40) - Grows much more numerous.

Interinanimates (Line 42) - A coinage of Donne's, this word suggests that love simultaneously animates (gives life to) and interweaves the lovers' two souls, creating one new compound life.

Abler (Line 43) - Stronger, more capable. (In other words, the lovers' fused souls together have more power than they did individually.)

Thence (Line 43) - From there.

Defects of loneliness (Line 44) - That is, "the weaknesses of isolation"—the flaws in the two individual souls before they were united.

Atomies (Line 47) - Atoms.

No change can invade (Line 48) - Can't be changed.

Forbear (Line 50) - Set aside, refrain from using.

They'are (Line 51) - A contraction of "they are," just like the modern-day "they're."

Intelligences and spheres (Lines 51-52) - An allusion to the theological astronomy of Donne's time:

- The "intelligences" are the angels.
- The "spheres" are the transparent spheres once believed to hold the planets in their orbits. People of Donne's time imagined the universe as a kind of nesting doll of spheres containing spheres.
- The angels were said to control and move these celestial spheres.

When Donne describes the human body as a "sphere" and the soul as its "intelligence," then, he's saying that the body is a physical thing moved by a transcendent immaterial power.

Did us, to us, at first convey (Line 54) - In other words, "our bodies are what first allowed us to perceive each other."

Yielded their forces, sense, to us (Line 55) - That is, "Gave us their powers, including the ability to feel and perceive"

Dross and allay (Line 56) - Metaphors taken from metalworking:

- "Dross" is the useless waste substance that gets skimmed off the top of molten metal (as well as a word often used to describe garbage or waste in general)
- "Allay" is another term for "alloy"—a stronger metal made by combining two different kinds of metal. Here, Donne imagines the body as a strong substance combined with the soul to give it the power to experience life on Earth.

Heaven's influence (Line 57) - That is, the powers of the stars and planets (believed, in Donne's day, to influence personalities and events).

Imprints (Line 58) - Leaves a mark on.

Repair (Line 60) - To "repair" somewhere is to go there. The soul, in other words, has to go into a body before it can intermingle with another soul.

Beget (Line 61) - Produce, create. A word often used to describe impregnation in particular.

Spirits (Line 62) - In this context, subtle fluids that were believed to run in the bloodstream and serve as the point of connection between the body and the soul. The soul, the Renaissance theory held, needed these spirits in order to receive sensation from the body and to direct the body's actions.

Affections and faculties (Line 66) - Two powers of the soul and body working together:

- "Affections" are emotions, feelings (not just feelings of love and tenderness).
- "Faculties" are the power to act.

Which sense may reach and apprehend (Line 67) - That is, "the senses can experience love through the physical body."

A great Prince (Line 68) - Scholars don't all agree about this metaphor:

- Some believe that the "great Prince" is the soul itself: the use of the body, in other words, is needed to set the princely soul free through love.
- Some, meanwhile, imagine the "great Prince" *as* Love, which is imprisoned unless it can be expressed through the body.

Dialogue of One (Line 74) - That is, the speech made by the two lovers' souls after they have fused into one. A "dialogue" is usually a conversation between two people—so a "Dialogue of One" is a paradox.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This heady poem of love and transcendence takes a deceptively simple form. The poem is written in 19 quatrains (or four-line stanzas—though some editors choose to print it as one long stanza). Each quatrain uses a singsong ABAB rhyme scheme and steady iambic tetrameter (lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "That sub- | tle knot, | which makes | us man").

This simplicity makes the poem stand out among Donne's longer works. When he wasn't writing sonnets, Donne was inclined to invent elaborate new shapes for his verse, playing with unusual stanza forms and surprising rhythms. (The English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge remarked that Donne's poetic muse seems to ride on a "dromedary"—that is, Donne's rhythms are as wild and bumpy as a ride on a camel.) Here, however, Donne chooses a form of the purest simplicity and sticks to it for 76 lines.

This calm stability suits the poem's mood. With their souls intertwined and "interinanimate[d]" (woven into one new soul),

the poem's lovers rest in perfect equilibrium, able to wisely declaim on the true nature of love from their ecstatic, transcendent new perspective. There's no *rush* in this poem (where the lovers can spend "all the day" lying on a flowery bank and gazing into each other's eyes). There's also no doubt. The form here is as stable and constant as the perfect mutual love the poem describes.

METER

John Donne often played elaborate games with meter, concocting complex patterns of rhythm to suit complex patterns of thought. In "The Ecstasy," however, his meter holds steady: the whole poem is written in iambic tetrameter. That means its lines all use four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in lines 7-8:

> Our eye- | beams twist- | ed, and | did thread
> Our eyes | upon | one doub- | le string;

This consistent meter gives the poem a steady, untroubled pulse, fitting for its image of two lovers' souls fusing seamlessly into one new and glorious whole.

Without disturbing that pulse too much, Donne sometimes introduces a little variation in the meter for emphasis. Lines 5-6 offer a good example:

> Our hands | were firm- | ly ce- | mented
> With a | fast balm, | which thence | did spring;

(Note that Donne would have pronounced "cemented" with its stress on the first syllable: SEH-men-ted.) Line 6 pushes its first two stresses together into a spondee, a foot with a powerful DUM-DUM rhythm: the unforgettable image of palm sweat as a "fast balm" (or sticky substance) lands all the harder because of that extra bit of emphasis.

To keep his meter pulsing away, Donne often uses contractions—often ones that might look a little odd to a modern-day reader, though they *sound* perfectly natural read aloud:

- Donne's "They'are" in line 51, for instance, can just be pronounced "they're."
- And "to'intergraft" in line 9, "t' affections" in line 66, and "to'our" in line 69 simply invite readers to skim over the word "to" with a quick "tuh," just as they might in ordinary conversation.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem's thought is complex, but its rhymes are simple. Each stanza uses this straightforward rhyme scheme:

> ABAB

On one level, these rhymes feel unobtrusive. On another, they're rich with meaning. A back-and-forth interplay between two sounds mimics what this poem describes: a back-and-forth interplay between two lovers' souls. Just as the couple's souls fuse and create one new soul between them, the alternating rhymes fuse into melodious verse.

And while the pattern of the rhymes isn't too complicated, the *language* of the rhymes is often rich and surprising. Donne finds exuberant chimes between "one" and "propagation" (pronounced with five syllables, PROP-ah-GAY-see-un), "unperplex" and "sex," "forbear" and "spheres" (probably pronounced more like "sphares" in Donne's 17th-century London accent, and therefore a true rhyme, not a slant rhyme, though it may seem like a slant rhyme to modern readers).

SPEAKER

This poem's speaker is a man so deeply in love that he feels as if his and his lover's souls have left their bodies, wound around each other, and fused into one new soul. For much of the poem, this new soul *becomes* the speaker: all the lines enclosed in quotation marks (line 29 onward) are this soul's "Dialogue of One" (a paradoxical kind of speech, considering a dialogue typically requires at least two participants).

This fusion of souls is one of the kinds of "ecstasy" the poem's title refers to. An ecstasy, etymologically, was originally a transcendent, out-of-body religious experience. But as the fused soul explains at length, souls can't experience love *only* in an out-of-body way. Souls need bodies in order to meet and love each other in the first place. Embodiment—and *physical* ecstasy in the sense of "overwhelming pleasure"—will thus be a necessary part of these souls' joy, too.

The fused soul's learned explanation of these principles reveal it to be a balanced, wise, witty, and joyful entity, a being whose own nature proves its thesis: love does away with the "defects of loneliness," the limits and failings of one lonely soul on its own.

Love raises the speaker and his beloved to new and glorious heights of delight, then, but also new heights of understanding. For this speaker, the joy of the intellect is as much a part of love as the joy of the soul and of the body.

It's difficult not to read the first speaker of "The Ecstasy," the man who says the first 28 lines of the poem, as a voice for John Donne himself. At once a passionate lover and a theoretician, a man who invests his description of love with heady Renaissance philosophies about the nature of the connection between body and soul, this poem's lover is at the very least a lot *like* John Donne.

SETTING

"The Ecstasy" is, in one sense, almost placeless. The speaker tells readers that he and his beloved sat together on a "pregnant bank" (a grassy riverside hillock as round as a belly) where violets grow, suggesting it's spring or summer. But that bank could be anywhere, and this poem could take place in any era. The speaker's description of the workings of love transcends time and space.

The violet-strewn "pregnant bank," however, does seem like a fitting symbolic place for this love song to unfold. In its fertility, the flowery bank suggests creation and new life. Though the speaker and his beloved haven't gotten around to any literal "propagation" (or baby-making) just yet, the fusion of their souls is itself a kind of birth: combined by the force of love, they make one new soul out of their two.

Eventually, such a love might also create new bodies, literal babies—a glorious thing, in this poem's view, since even the highest, purest, most spiritual human love must always pass through bodies. The poem's fertile, flowery setting thus celebrates the lovers' ecstasy while also reaching out to the ecstasies of the future: this love, the poem hints, will beget more love by one day producing future generations of lovers.

Though the setting is more archetypal than specific, the poem's language and its heady thought ground the poem in Donne's own time and place: 17th-century England. For instance, allusions to the "intelligences" who move the "spheres" refer to a piece of antique theology. Angels ("intelligences," beings of pure thought) were once said to spin the "spheres," the concentric crystalline globes that people once believed held the universe in shape.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne (1572–1631) is remembered as one of the foremost of the "Metaphysical poets"—though he never called himself one. The later writer Samuel Johnson coined the term, using it to describe a set of 17th-century English poets who wrote witty, passionate, intricate, cerebral verse about love and God. (George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Thomas Traherne were some others.)

Donne was the quintessential Metaphysical poet: a master of elaborate conceits and complex sentences, and a great writer of love poems that mingle sacred images with cheeky puns. But during his lifetime, he was mostly a poet in private. In public life, he was an important clergyman, rising to become Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

Donne's mixture of wit, passion, and mysticism fell out of literary favor after his 17th-century heyday. For instance, when Johnson (a leading figure of the 18th-century Enlightenment) coined the term "Metaphysical poet," he did not mean it as a compliment. Johnson saw Donne and his contemporaries as irrational and obscure. But 19th-century Romantic poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge were stirred by Donne's mixture of philosophy and emotion, and their enthusiasm slowly resurrected Donne's reputation. Donne is now remembered as one of the most powerful and influential of poets, and he inspired later writers from T. S. Eliot to A. S. Byatt.

Like the vast majority of Donne's poetry, "The Ecstasy" didn't appear in print until several years after his death. (Many poets of Donne's time didn't widely publish their work, instead circulating it in manuscript among a few friends. See "The Triple Fool" for some of Donne's thoughts on the perils of poetic publication!) "The Ecstasy" was first collected in the posthumous book *Poems* (1633).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much of John Donne's earlier verse draws on his youthful days as a notorious ladies' man. His sometimes foolhardy decision-making around women came to a head in an oddly touching way: when he fell deeply in love with Anne More, an important official's daughter, he eloped with her without getting her family's permission. This romantic leap of faith backfired on him when his wife's furious father had him thrown in prison. Donne famously jotted down a little epigram about this personal disaster: "John Donne, Anne Donne, Undone." (The rhyme lets us know how the poet pronounced his name: DUNN, not DAWN.)

While Donne was eventually reconciled with his father-in-law, this was a rocky beginning to a marriage that would see a lot of difficulties. The Donnes and their many children lived in relative poverty. In order to stay financially afloat, Donne was forced to be literally afloat: he sailed on endless business trips all over Europe and was often away from home for long stretches of time. Many of his passionate love poems tell the stories of tearful farewells.

It was while Donne was away on one of his trips that tragedy struck back home: Anne Donne died giving birth to a stillborn child in 1617. The heartbroken Donne turned to his religious faith for consolation—and to support his 10 surviving children. Under the patronage of King James I, Donne became a prominent and successful Anglican clergyman, the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. In that capacity, he wrote devotional verse every bit as passionate as his love poetry.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Portrait of Donne — Admire a famous portrait of Donne (in which he poses as the ideal melancholic lover).

(https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw111844/John-Donne)

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the actor Richard Burton reading the poem aloud. (https://youtu.be/ZACpBeKRQtQ?si=RP7zwyqqK5mXwpZc)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Donne's life and work via the Poetry Foundation's biography. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne)
- A Donne Manuscript — Read an article discussing a rediscovered manuscript of Donne's poems (and learn more about his hesitation to publish his work during his lifetime). (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/dec/06/the-book-of-love-400-year-old-tome-of-john-donnes-poems-is-unveiled)
- An Appreciation of Donne — Read the contemporary poet Linda Gregerson's reflections on what Donne means to her. (https://poetrysociety.org/poems-essays/old-school/on-john-donne)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Hymn to God the Father
- Air and Angels
- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- A Valediction: Of Weeping
- Elegy V: His Picture
- Holy Sonnet 10: Death, be not proud
- Holy Sonnet 14: Batter my heart, three-person'd God
- Holy Sonnet 1: Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?
- Holy Sonnet 6: This is my play's last scene
- Holy Sonnet 7: At the round earth's imagined corners
- Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness
- No Man Is an Island
- Song: Go and catch a falling star
- The Apparition
- The Canonization
- The Dream
- The Flea
- The Good-Morrow
- The Relic
- The Sun Rising
- The Triple Fool
- To His Mistress Going to Bed

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