The Relic

POEM TEXT

When my grave is broke up again
Some second guest to entertain,
(For graves have learn'd that woman-head,
To be to more than one a bed)
And he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,
Will he not let'us alone,
And think that there a loving couple lies,
Who thought that this device might be some way
To make their souls, at the last busy day,
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?

If this fall in a time, or land,
Where mis-devotion doth command,
Then he, that digs us up, will bring
Us to the bishop, and the king,
To make us relics; then
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby;
All women shall adore us, and some men;
And since at such time miracles are sought,
I would have that age by this paper taught
What miracles we harmless lovers wrought.

First, we lov'd well and faithfully,
Yet knew not what we lov'd, nor why;
Difference of sex no more we knew
Than our guardian angels do;
Coming and going, we
Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;
Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals
Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free;
These miracles we did, but now alas,
All measure, and all language, I should pass,
Should I tell what a miracle she was.

SUMMARY

When my grave gets dug up so another body can be put in (for graves have learned from women to embrace more than one person) and the gravedigger sees a bracelet made of shining hair around my bony wrist, perhaps he'll leave my and my lady's remains alone. He'll think that this grave holds a loving pair who hoped that keeping parts of their bodies together after death might allow them to meet at this grave on Judgement Day and spend just a little more time together.

If my grave gets dug up in a time or place dominated by flawed religious beliefs, then whoever digs up my bones and that bracelet of hair will take us to the bishop and the king, presenting our remains as the holy bodies of saints. Then you, my love, will be declared Mary Magdalen, and I'll be called—well, whoever Mary Magdalen was meant to have loved, if you get my drift. Women (and a few men) will worship us. If this happens and the people of the future are inclined to make something miraculous of our bodies, I'll leave behind this poem to tell them the *real* miracles we blameless lovers performed.

First of all, we loved each other truly and faithfully—though so innocently it was almost as if we didn't know what we were doing. We didn't sleep together, so we didn't know that our bodies were different, any more than androgynous angels do. We'd maybe kiss each other when we met and when we said goodbye, but not at any other time. We never touched the private places that nature (though recently held back by the legalities of marriage) liberates. All these miraculous feats, we really *did* perform—but ah, I'd have to go beyond my limited powers of speech to describe what a miracle my beloved herself was.

THEMES

THE MIRACULOUS, ENDURING POWER OF LOVE

The speaker of "The Relic" presents love as a kind of miracle—one that has the power to transcend even the grave.

Some years after his death, the speaker imagines, a person who dug up his grave for reuse (a common practice for many centuries in space-poor cities) might be struck by "a bracelet of bright hair about the bone"—that is, a woven hair bracelet around the speaker's skeletal wrist, a token of a sweet affair between long-dead lovers. Moved by that sign of devotion, such a gravedigger might even take the speaker (and the lady who provided that bright bracelet of hair) for saints. The two of them were no such thing, the speaker scoffs. That doesn't mean, however, that there was nothing miraculous about his love affair with this lady: to him, she was a "miracle" in herself, lovely and lovable beyond words.

More than that, the couple's love has the miraculous power to

survive beyond death. That "bracelet of bright hair," the speaker suggests, is a token of a love that will last into eternity: the point of wearing this secular "relic" isn't just to keep a bit of his lady close to him, but to ensure that he and she will meet again on Judgement Day. The idea (based on real Renaissance theology) is that, when everyone rises from the dead, the lady will have to pick up that bit of hair. The couple can then "make a little stay" at the graveside, reunited at last.

For that matter, the couple's love can outwit death by inspiring the speaker to write this very poem! Instructing the people of the future on what real "miracles we harmless lovers wrought," the poem itself is proof that death is not the end of love. Like the saint's relics the poem alludes to, this couple's love is *incorruptible*: that is, miraculously, it will never decay.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-11
- Lines 20-22
- Lines 31-33

THE FOOLISHNESS OF WORSHIPPING RELICS

Alongside its fervent and sincere declaration of love, "The Relic" finds space to make a few jabs at Catholicism. John Donne, born into a Catholic family, gradually moved away from the tradition of his childhood and became a noted Protestant priest. Here, his speaker hints at the reasons one might do so. One of them is that the Catholic practice of venerating saints' relics (that is, their preserved body parts or possessions) might lend itself to superstition, falsehood, and a strangely irreligious "mis-devotion" to things not worth worshiping.

A person who dug his grave up many years from now, the poem's speaker imagines, might be tempted to present both his skeleton and the love token buried with it (a "bracelet of bright hair" around its wrist) as saints' relics. This, the speaker says, would be untrue—but such misidentifications happen often. There's a whole procedure to go through to make a relic official, the speaker notes; one must apply to "the bishop, and the king." But that process is apparently, shall we say, less than watertight, and plenty of unholy bones end up being worshiped in gilded reliquaries (special cases).

Even if his body truly *were* a saint's, the speaker suggests, it would still be a "mis-devotion" to bother honoring it. Here he alludes to a very Protestant suspicion of religious traditions not explicitly laid out in Christian scripture—and a very Protestant worry that worshiping bits of saints might be a distraction from more straightforwardly contemplating God.

In its contemplation of a love worth honoring, then, this poem also ponders how easy it is for "mis-devotion" to take root—and how poorly credulous relic-hunting reflects on those who get caught up in it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 12-19

SPIRITUAL LOVE VS. PHYSICAL LOVE

John Donne's love poetry often weds sexual passion to religious passion, suggesting that sex can bring lovers close to the divine. In "The Relic," however, Donne takes a different tack. This poem's speaker describes a love so intense that it doesn't *need* to be expressed physically, suggesting that the deepest love can leap right over the hunger for sex to reach pure spiritual heights.

In the first stanza, the speaker jokes that a grave holding more than one body has learned the trick from women: it's part of "woman-head," femininity, to be willing to "be to more than one a bed." That is: women, in his eyes, are generally promiscuous (a common Renaissance worry that Donne explores at grouchy, paranoid length in many other poems).

That's part of what makes the speaker's love affair so very miraculous. In a world where promiscuous sex is common, the speaker and his love perform the "miracle" of being "harmless lovers," faithfully adoring each other *without* sex. Their love is utterly sweet and chaste: all they ever do, the speaker says, is kiss, and that sparingly. They might as well be androgynous, sexless "angels," unaware of any "difference of sex" between them.

In this, they're following not the order of "nature" (in which sex just sort of *happens*), but the "late law," the more recently developed code of sexual ethics that governs when and how sex should occur (e.g., only in marriage). While the speaker sees such tacked-on codes as an "injur[y]" to nature, he also feels that he and his beloved have done each other an honor by refraining from having sex. Perhaps that's in part because they certainly *wanted* to (it's human nature!), but managed to restrain themselves—and kept on loving each other deeply anyway.

In fact, both the couple's sexual self-restraint and their continued mutual love in *spite* of that self-restraint suggests that their relationship has reached a transcendent, spiritual height. By looking above and beyond sex, this poem's speaker feels, he and his beloved have performed a romantic miracle.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-4
- Lines 23-31

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When my grave is broke up again
Some second guest to entertain,
(For graves have learn'd that woman-head,
To be to more than one a bed)

"The Relic" begins with a disinterment (that is, the opening of a grave)—or, to be precise, an *imagined* disinterment. Somewhere down the line, the speaker imagines, somebody will dig up his grave to bury someone else in there.

This idea might sound startling to a modern reader, but to a contemporary of John Donne's, it would be pretty run-of-the-mill. In a crowded Renaissance-era city, burial space was at a premium; some communities even buried bodies for just long enough to deflesh them, then stacked the resultant dry bones in ossuaries.

In fact, multiple burial was sufficiently ordinary that Donne can make a little joke about it:

> (For graves have learn'd that woman-head,
> To be to more than one a bed)

If graves have learned "woman-head," womanhood, then they're like ladies: they'll always make room in bed for a new person! In this aside, Donne is drawing on a Renaissance idea that (again) might surprise a modern reader: that *women* are the more promiscuous and lustful of the sexes. (Donne worried about this a decent amount in other poems.)

Considering these macabre and cynical beginnings, readers might be surprised (once again!) to learn that "The Relic" will become a tender love poem. Imagined gravedigging and sexual joking, oddly enough, prepare the way for a tale of chaste love that miraculously transcends death.

If readers spend a moment with the speaker's little joke now, they might already see the seeds of this richer poem sprouting. The idea that women might "be to more than one a bed," while certainly a dirty joke, might also be an oddly lovely allusion not to sex but to *pregnancy*. A woman who sleeps with a man and conceives a child has bedfellows both beside her and inside her.

Read this way, the metaphor hints that the grave might also be a *womb*, a place of birth. That idea will become important later on in this complex and witty poem, which—like much of Donne's work—will explore the places where human love touches the divine.

LINES 5-8

And he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,
Will he not let 'us alone,
And think that there a loving couple lies,

When someone digs up his future grave, the speaker goes on, he knows to a certainty what they'll see. The reader sees it too, in a piercing moment of imagery:

> A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,

That "bracelet of bright hair" gleams out against the imagined mud-grey of the grave—and especially against the bare and grimy "bone" that wears it. The alliterative /br/ of "bracelet" and "bright" sharpens the image through sound, trilling out as brightly as the hair shines. The bracelet seems untarnished by its time under the earth; it's as lively and shining now as it was when the living speaker put it on.

The gravedigger, like the reader, should be wise enough to know what this bracelet means: "here a loving couple lies." The bracelet is a love token, a present from the speaker's shining-haired beloved. More than that, it seems to mean that the speaker *already* has a grave-mate. Though the rest of his lady's body lies elsewhere, her hair, in the speaker's eyes, makes her fully present there with him, one of a "couple" buried together.

This bracelet, in other words, both *marks* and *creates* a lasting unity beyond the grave. With that in mind, the gravedigger should rightly "let'us alone": that is, he should see that this grave already *has* two people in it and leave them be, filling the grave up again to give this "loving couple" their privacy. And what's more—this is a preview!—he *certainly* shouldn't haul their body parts out of their grave for his own purposes.

Take a moment here to observe how the poem's shape has evolved in these first few lines:

- Lines 1-4 are written in iambic tetrameter—that is, lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "Some sec- | ond guest | to en- | tertain." They rhyme in neat, regular couplets: *again / entertain*, *woman-head / bed*.
- In these lines, however, Donne alternates between lines of iambic trimeter (three iambs, as in "And he | that digs | it spies") and iambic pentameter (five iambs, as in "And think | that there | a lov- | ing cou- | ple lies"). The rhymes, meanwhile, turns to an enfolding CDDC, framing the intimate *bone / alone* rhyme with *spies* and *lies*.
- Looking forward, the three closing lines of the stanza will all use iambic pentameter and all rhyme with each other in an EEE triplet.

There's a development here: from the straightforward sounds of the first four lines, to the more thoughtful, varied music of the next four, to meditative rhythm and emphatic rhyme in the final three. The *mood* of the poem's 11-line stanzas will follow that pattern, too, developing from blunt and jokey

introductions toward passionate romantic sincerity.

LINES 9-11

Who thought that this device might be some way
To make their souls, at the last busy day,
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?

If the gravedigger understands what he's seeing, the speaker concludes, he'll correctly guess that the "loving couple" he has unearthed had a plan in mind, and it rested on the bracelet the skeleton is wearing. Through this "device," this strategy, the couple hoped to find:

> [...] some way
> To make their souls, at the last busy day,
> Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?

Donne is alluding to a Renaissance Christian belief about what might happen on what he drolly calls that "last busy day": Judgement Day, the end of the world, when all the dead rise from their graves and go to face God. The speaker's earlier hint that a grave might be a womb comes into focus here. When you're born, you emerge from a bodily womb; when you're *reborn*, you emerge from an earthy one.

Some Renaissance theologians, in trying to puzzle out the logistics of Judgment Day, imagined that people whose body parts had been scattered would need to reunite with their lost members in order to be resurrected whole. In other words, if your leg was amputated or your head was chopped off, the rest of you might need to go looking for your missing bits.

If that were the case, then the lady, wherever her body is buried, would have to come and meet the speaker at graveside to get her hair back. And if *that* were the case, then the two of them could "make a little stay" there, spending just a few more moments together before going to their judgment.

In this tender image, the couple's love persists both *in* death and *beyond* death. What's more, if they're going to "make a little stay" at graveside, they're delaying a meeting with no lesser man than Jesus himself, just to see each other one more time.

The same speaker who began this poem with a joke about women's inconstancy, then, is also a guy who feels he's found an utterly constant and even transcendent love.

LINES 12-16

If this fall in a time, or land,
Where mis-devotion doth command,
Then he, that digs us up, will bring
Us to the bishop, and the king,
To make us relics;

The first stanza ended with a moment of poignant tenderness: a vision of the speaker and his beloved reuniting graveside on Judgement Day, brought together by the "bracelet of bright hair" that links them. As the second stanza begins, the poem hops back in the imagined future, returning to that gravedigger standing over the speaker's braceleted skeleton.

If this guy happens to dig the grave up in a time or place "where mis-devotion doth command," the speaker says—that is, where misguided religious beliefs hold sway—then there's every chance he *won't* leave this romantic skeleton alone. Instead, impressed by the bracelet, he might haul the speaker and his beloved out of the grave and present them to "the bishop" and "the king" as "relics." The poem has come, then, to the reason for its title—and to a moment of pointed religious criticism.

In these lines, Donne alludes to the Catholic practice of venerating the relics (the body parts or possessions) of saints. In Catholic tradition, a saint's physical remains, especially if they're "incorruptible" or well-preserved, are both worthy of worship and *powerful*. Some Catholics believed (and still believe) that a saint's relic might offer healing or blessings.

Donne, born into a Catholic family not long after the major religious schisms of the English Reformation, was beginning to question his tradition's beliefs and practices when he wrote this poem. (He would eventually become a famous Protestant priest—more on that, and on the Reformation, in the Context section of this guide.)

In questioning the "mis-devotion" of venerating relics, he was certainly not alone:

- As many Renaissance theologians pointed out, if you counted up all the supposed teeth of St. Andrew (say) floating around in churches, you'd find that old Andy was apparently as toothy as a shark. Relics were both easy and lucrative to fake.
- What's more, *Protestant* theologians in particular worried that a) the Bible, which they saw as the ultimate religious authority, had nothing to say about relics, and that b) getting too attached to body parts also meant getting too attached to the things of this world, losing focus on God and the afterlife. The practice might even start to smell a bit pagan.

In this poem, all of these concerns come into play. So does a general Renaissance anxiety about the vagaries of religious fortune. Donne's speaker simply can't guess what religious practices might hold sway when he's dug up; while Protestantism was England's official state religion during Donne's lifetime, religious wars across Europe had made it clear that such institutions were far from stable.

The speaker's weary observation that the gravedigger will likely haul his bones before "the bishop, and the king" also underscores the point that church and state were not at all separate in Donne's time. "Mis-devotion" might be both a religious and a political concern.

LINES 16-22

then
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby;
All women shall adore us, and some men;
And since at such time miracles are sought,
I would have that age by this paper taught
What miracles we harmless lovers wrought.

If the gravedigger takes his skeleton and its bracelet for "relics," the speaker goes on:

> [...] then
> Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
> A something else thereby;

Before getting into the allusions here, take a moment to note that the speaker is talking, not to a general audience, but directly to his beloved. In these lines, she's in on the joke with him, finding this vision of her future undeserved "sainthood" as silly as he does. This warm, direct address suggests the couple are on the same wavelength, the same intellectual level. This is a far cry from the kind of Renaissance love poem that merely tells a lady what a mirror could.

Now onto those allusions:

- It would be natural for the gravedigger to read that "bracelet of bright hair" as a relic of Mary Magdalen, one of Jesus's most important disciples. In Christian art, Mary Magdalen was traditionally depicted with long, flowing, golden hair.
- And if the bracelet is Mary Magdalen, then the skeleton wearing it must be... well, "a something else thereby." The speaker is deliberately vague here because he's alluding to a common blasphemy: the folk tradition that held Mary Magdalen was Jesus's lover.
- Who, then, would be wearing a lover's token from Mary Magdalen but Jesus himself?

Readers even the slightest bit familiar with Christian belief will see the problem here. All that earlier talk of Judgement Day is a reminder that Christianity places a lot of stock in the resurrection: the idea that Jesus rose from the dead and that everyone else will too. It's *pretty important* to this central Christian doctrine that Jesus's skeleton isn't lying buried somewhere; he took it with him.

False relic-worship, in this moment, doesn't just make fools of the imagined gravedigger and those who credulously agree with his skeletal ID. It makes blasphemers of them.

They won't know it, though. They'll be too caught up in venerating the bodies:

> All women shall adore us, and some men;

This little throwaway joke suggests that there might be something particularly appealing about these bodies to ladies—who, the speaker hints, might adore the idea of enduring romantic love more than the idea of saintliness (or even divinity).

But then, as the last lines of the stanza will show, the speaker himself believes there's something worth honoring in a deep, romantic love:

> And since at such time miracles are sought,
> I would have that age by this paper taught
> What miracles we harmless lovers wrought.

Here, the speaker plans to rebut the imagined worshipers of the future. If credulous people are going to look everywhere for miracles, he says, he'll *give* them miracles. But they won't be the ones these mis-devoted relic worshipers expect. No, he'll write this very poem, this little "paper," to teach future ages what miracles he and his beloved really performed.

In a classic Donne conceit (that is, a central, organizing metaphor) the poem *itself* will become a kind of relic: an enduring physical object that preserves a miraculous love. Incorruptible as a saint's fingerbone, the poem, like the "harmless love" that unites the speaker and his bright-haired lady, will survive beyond the grave. (The reader approaching this poem in the 21st century might note: it did!)

What exactly makes that love so miraculous and so "harmless," the speaker will unfold in the closing stanza.

LINES 23-30

First, we lov'd well and faithfully,
Yet knew not what we lov'd, nor why;
Difference of sex no more we knew
Than our guardian angels do;
Coming and going, we
Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;
Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals
Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free;

The poem's final stanza lays out a catalogue of the miracles the speaker and his beloved performed. Their "harmless love," it transpires, was harmless because it was *chaste*. The two never consummated their affair—yet "lov'd well and faithfully" nonetheless. This, the speaker seems to suggest, is a miracle in itself. In an unchaste world (think of all the ladies who are "to more than one a bed"), a sexless *and* constant love is a wonder.

The speaker describes this astonishing relationship in a series of metaphors:

> Difference of sex no more we knew

Than our guardian angels do;
Coming and going, we
Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;

If the pair was no more aware of "difference of sex" than their "guardian angels" are, then they never saw each other's naked bodies; they might as well have been angels, traditionally depicted as androgynous or sexless. This simile suggests that their love was a meeting of the minds and souls that transcended earthy physical pleasure.

They would kiss only at "coming and going," to greet each other and to part from each other—"but not between these meals." This metaphor presents those sparing kisses as little feasts in themselves, completely satisfying: no need for snacks between them. It also suggests that these kisses were as wholesome and lawful as eating, not at all transgressive.

The final metaphor in the queue is a more complex one:

Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals
Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free;

Here, the speaker suggests that he and his beloved stayed well within the bounds of sexual propriety through the metaphor of unbroken seals—that is, wax seals, which in the Renaissance were used both to close letters and to put an official stamp on contracts and legal documents, as we'd use a signature now. The legalistic image suggests that the pair treated each other's sexualities as private, sealed like a letter—and perhaps that there was a binding agreement between them to do so.

That formal agreement was also between the lovers and *society*. In "nature," the speaker says, there's no prohibition on sex; nature "sets free" what the "late law"—that is, more recent conventions about sexual morality—seals off. In other words, the lovers didn't step one bit outside societal strictures against, say, unwed sex.

The speaker sounds a little ambivalent about this. Nature is "injur'd" by these "late laws," he says; it's simply human nature to desire sex with one's beloved, and interloping law interferes with that. For that matter, much of Donne's other poetry champions sexuality as a path to the divine, a way of transcending human limits and reaching toward God.

Here, though, the speaker's sense that sexual restrictions do nature an injury is also a great compliment to his beloved. The two of them, he's suggesting, managed to love "well and faithfully" even *without* sex. This, in his eyes, is an out-and-out miracle, a triumph of human love.

Perhaps this idea ties back into the speaker's vision of Judgement Day, too. Renaissance theologians believed that resurrected bodies would have no fleshly urges, sex drive included. It's as if this couple has already gotten there, then: they're able to love each other fully, eternally, and sexlessly, as the spirits of the blessed might.

LINES 31-33

These miracles we did, but now alas,
All measure, and all language, I should pass,
Should I tell what a miracle she was.

The speaker has described a love so full and pure that it transcended the lovers' bodies and went straight to their souls. This love, his poem informs the people of the future, is miraculous not just because of its chastity but also because of its endurance: it has the power to conquer the grave, enduring until the very crack of doom.

The poem describing this love thus becomes both a relic itself—the physical trace of something miraculous—and a reliquary, a *container* for a relic, preserving the traces of this long-ago love. Like the "bracelet of bright hair," the "paper" of this poem is a touchstone that keeps the lovers together eternally.

Now, in his closing lines, the speaker outlines yet another miracle:

These miracles we did, but now alas,
All measure, and all language, I should pass,
Should I tell what a miracle she was.

The diacope there underscores the speaker's inability to capture this lady on paper: like a vision of the divine, she evades description. Lost for words, the speaker can only repeat that she herself was the miracle of all miracles. A miraculous love requires a miraculous beloved.

These two aren't saints, then, no matter what a future gravedigger might want to believe. Nonetheless, their deep, faithful, and astoundingly chaste love is a miracle, an achievement both human and transcendent. Ordinary mortals, they know they'll have to die; extraordinary lovers, they know their love will rise bright from the grave.

POETIC DEVICES

CONCEIT

"The Relic," like many of Donne's poems, uses a central conceit, a governing extended metaphor. Here, relics (the sacred remains of saints) provide that conceit—though no true relics in the traditional sense appear in the poem.

Rather, the speaker imagines that his bones, adorned with his lover's "bracelet of bright hair," might someday be *misread* as saints' relics, seized on by a gravedigger whose "mis-devotion" (or misguided religious fervor) makes him see saintly bones where there are none.

The conceit enters when the speaker imagines what "relics"

worthy of veneration he and his beloved might actually leave behind:

- The obvious one is the "bracelet of bright hair about the bone" in the speaker's imagined grave: a relic, not of a saint, but of a beautiful and altogether earthly love.
- The other is the poem itself! On this unassuming "paper," the speaker says, he's preserving a trace of something *truly* miraculous—which, after all, is what relics are meant to do.

If the poem is a relic, it's because it records a sacred love. Perhaps most miraculous of all, the speaker hints, is the fact that though he and his beloved adored each other, they never consummated their love: the most they did was kiss, and that only sparingly. Unusually for Donne's (often passionately sexual) love poetry, this restraint bespeaks a *more* powerful love, not an incomplete one.

Touchingly, the poem is also a relic of the speaker's beloved herself—though he admits that his words can't capture "what a miracle she was." The poem thus becomes both a relic and a reliquary (that is, a case for a relic): it preserves a miraculous love and a miraculous beloved. Even more intricately, it also preserves a different *kind* of relic than the one the gravedigger is looking for: that "bright hair," enduring beyond both lovers' deaths, just as the speaker imagined it might.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,"
- **Lines 20-22:** "And since at such time miracles are sought, / I would have that age by this paper taught / What miracles we harmless lovers wrought."
- **Lines 31-33:** "These miracles we did, but now alas, / All measure, and all language, I should pass, / Should I tell what a miracle she was."

ALLUSION

Through its allusions to contemporary religious controversies, this poem becomes not just a love song, but a jab at some of the wilder reaches of Catholic tradition.

This poem's speaker is wearily certain that, if his bones and the "bracelet of bright hair" they wear get unearthed during a time when "mis-devotion" is as common as it is now, then his gravedigger will be sure to think them a saint's relics (or to really *want* to think that, anyway). He's alluding to the Catholic practice of venerating saints' body parts (a practice that continues to this day). This tradition lent itself to certain abuses:

- If you happened to have a spare tooth lying around, for instance—or lived near a not-very-well-guarded graveyard—you might be able to pass off some bits and pieces as St. Peter's and make a little quick cash.
- Many Renaissance writers thus poured scorn on relics, observing that, if you tallied up all the supposed saint bits being honored in churches, you'd find that the saints all had 800 fingers and 75 legs.
- Protestant-leaning thinkers also worried that paying this much attention to the earthly remains of saints might distract people from contemplating God in a more airy, spiritual way—and that the Bible, whose authority Protestantism favored over any cultural tradition, didn't say anything about relics.

Donne, born into a Catholic family, likely wrote this poem when he was just starting to question the faith he was brought up in. (He would eventually become a noted Protestant clergyman.) His speaker's dubiousness about "mis-devotion" here reflects the poet's sincere ambivalence about Catholic tradition.

This ambivalence also makes for some pretty spicy jokes. One such comes when the speaker imagines that the people of the future will:

> [...] make us relics; then
> Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
> A something else thereby;

- The beloved whose hair bracelet he wears, in other words, will be dubbed Mary Magdalen—one of Jesus's most important disciples, usually depicted with long flowing golden hair.
- And if his skeleton is wearing Mary Magdalen's hair, well then, *he* must be—and here the speaker turns discreetly vague.
- A contemporary reader would easily guess that he was alluding to the (blasphemous) idea that Mary Magdalen was Jesus's lover—and thus to the even *more* blasphemous idea that a skeleton wearing her hair as a love token might be Jesus himself, in spite of the fact that it's *pretty important* to the Christian faith that Jesus rose from the dead, bringing all his bones with him.

These lines thus suggest that the "mis-devotion" of relic-lovers, worse than just making them dupes, might make them blasphemers, too.

Another allusion also draws on a colorful religious idea:

> [...] this device might be some way
> To make their souls, at the last busy day,
> Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?

Here, the speaker imagines that the "bracelet of bright hair"

that he'll wear to his grave might be the ticket to the loving couple's reunion. On what he drolly calls the world's "last busy day"—that is, Judgement Day, when Christians believe the dead will rise from their graves and face God—he and his lady love will be able to reunite for a moment before going on to judgement.

That's because, if he has a bit of her hair, then she'll have to come get it, wherever the rest of her might be buried. Some Renaissance (and earlier) theology about the Last Judgement indeed posited that bodies that had been scattered or divided would have to reassemble themselves for resurrection—an amputated leg hopping across the countryside to reunite with its former owner, for instance.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-11:** "there a loving couple lies, / Who thought that this device might be some way / To make their souls, at the last busy day, / Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?"
- **Lines 12-16:** " If this fall in a time, or land, / Where mis-devotion doth command, / Then he, that digs us up, will bring / Us to the bishop, and the king, / To make us relics;"
- **Lines 16-18:** "then / Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I / A something else thereby;"

METAPHOR

Alongside the poem's larger conceit of the relic, little metaphors reveal the shape of the speaker's thought.

Listen, for instance, to his aside in the first stanza:

> (For graves have learn'd that woman-head,
> To be to more than one a bed)

The speaker is alluding to the old practice of digging up graves for reuse—not uncommon in crowded Renaissance cities. But he's also suggesting that graves, in being a metaphorical "bed" for more than one person, are like women:

- There's an obvious dirty joke here, a slight on women's proverbial promiscuity and infidelity (a theme on which Donne did a decent amount of bitter fretting).
- There's also a gentler and more mysterious possibility, though: a woman might be a "bed" to more than one person in that she might sleep with a man and conceive a child: one person in bed beside her, one person in bed inside her.
- This metaphor thus unites sex, birth, and death in a single moment—and anticipates the poem's later allusion to Judgement Day, when the grave will turn out to have been a womb of rebirth.

Another run of complex and meaningful metaphors appears in the poem's final stanza, where the speaker catalogues the miracles of his love:

> Difference of sex no more we knew
> Than our guardian angels do;
> Coming and going, we
> Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;
> Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals
> Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free;

To take these one by one:

- When the speaker suggests that he and his beloved were as innocent of the "difference of sex" as their guardian angels, he's referring to the tradition that held that angels had no sexual distinctions. Beings of intellect, they were meant to be sexless and androgynous. This simile suggests that there was something purer, higher, more *angelic* about this love than many.
- When he describes kissing his lover at meetings and partings, but not "between those meals," he suggests that these sparing kisses were feasts, fully satisfying on their own—and also that they were part of the good and wholesome rhythm of the day, as "lawful as eating" (to borrow a phrase).
- Finally, when he describes the "seals" that he and his lover never broke, he's again referring to sexual restraint: the pair never went beyond first base, in short. By presenting further sexual activity as fragile wax seals, the speaker suggests that, in their restraint, he and his lover were preserving a kind of purity that couldn't be restored once broken.
    - He also hints that there was something of a mutual *contract* about that choice. In the Renaissance, a wax seal wasn't just a way of keeping a letter closed, but a signature, a mark of identity and a formal agreement. The lovers, in other words, kept a chaste faith with each other—and didn't need to break it to prove their devotion.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** " (For graves have learn'd that woman-head, / To be to more than one a bed)"
- **Lines 25-26:** " Difference of sex no more we knew / Than our guardian angels do;"
- **Line 28:** "but not between those meals;"
- **Lines 29-30:** "Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals / Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free;"

ALLITERATION

Moments of alliteration highlight some of the poem's most beautiful images. Listen, for instance, to the alliterative sounds in this memorable line:

> A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,

The sharp /br/ of "bright" and "bracelet" links the words, quietly suggesting that the bracelet's intrinsic brightness is striking even after years in a moldy coffin. The /b/ alliteration between "bracelet," "bright," and "bone," meanwhile (alongside the consonance in "about"), gives the line a musical unity—and suggests that the bracelet could be nowhere *but* that bony wrist, so closely are the two lovers connected, even in death.

The music continues in the next lines:

> Will he not let us alone,
> And think that there a loving couple lies,

The gentle /l/ alliteration (and consonance, again, in "alone") makes these lines feel as quiet and calm as the speaker wishes his grave might remain: he wants that imagined gravedigger to leave him and his beloved in peace until Judgement Day rolls around.

And talking of the end of the world, listen to the sounds the speaker uses as he pictures what might happen on that "last busy day." If he's wearing a bit of his beloved's hair, he says, he and his lover hope they might:

> [...] make their souls, at the last busy day,
> Meet at this grave, and make a little stay [...]

The back-and-forth swing of /m/ and /s/ sounds here accompanies a tender image of reunion with poignant music.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Some second"
- **Line 6:** "bracelet," "bright," "bone"
- **Line 7:** "let's"
- **Line 8:** "loving," "lies"
- **Line 10:** "make," "souls"
- **Line 11:** "Meet," "make," "stay"
- **Line 13:** "devotion doth"
- **Line 17:** "Mary Magdalen"
- **Line 20:** "since," "such," "sought"
- **Line 25:** "Difference"
- **Line 26:** "do"
- **Line 30:** "late law"

REPETITION

Though "The Relic" is spiced with droll jokes and barbed religious critiques, it's also a sincere love poem. In those moments when the speaker describes his love, he often heightens his language with a fervent repetition.

For instance, listen to the way he uses the unassuming little word "make" at the end of the first stanza:

> [...] there a loving couple lies,
> Who thought that this device might be some way
> To make their souls, at the last busy day,
> Meet at this grave, and make a little stay [...]

The word means something a little different each time. In the first instance, it's a declaration of will: the speaker and his beloved will *make* their Judgment Day reunion happen, if they can. In the second, it marks a gentler moment: the two will *make* a little time for each other on "that last busy day," lingering for a graveside embrace before they have to march off and face God. Through this poignant repetition, the speaker suggests that their love is the most important thing to this pair, whether in this world or the next. Jesus will have to wait his turn.

Another meaningful repetition appears in both the second and third stanzas. Take lines 20-22 to start:

> And since at such time miracles are sought,
> I would have that age by this paper taught
> What miracles we harmless lovers wrought.

Here, the speaker's diacope on "miracles" corrects those whose "mis-devotion" leads them to see saints' relics where there are only humble everyday bones. The "miracles" such mis-devotees are looking for, he says, his skeleton cannot provide. The relic that is this *poem*, however, can show them a different kind of miracle.

That's the miracle of the pure love he and his lady shared:

> These miracles we did, but now alas,
> All measure, and all language, I should pass,
> Should I tell what a miracle she was.

Here, the speaker has just finished describing how miraculous it was that he and his lady loved each other so fully and deeply—without ever engaging in a physical relationship, even! When he returns to the word one last time, though, it's to declare his lady *herself* the miracle of all miracles, wondrous beyond his powers of description.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "make"
- **Line 11:** "make"
- **Line 20:** "miracles"
- **Line 22:** "miracles"

- **Line 31:** “miracles”
- **Line 33:** “miracle”

VOCABULARY

Entertain (Line 2) - Host.

Woman-head (Line 3) - Womanhood, womanliness.

Let's (Line 7) - This text of the poem makes a contraction of the words "let us" to suggest how Donne would have pronounced it: something like "let's," just one syllable. To "let us alone" just means to "*leave* us alone."

Device (Line 9) - Trick, strategy.

The last busy day (Line 10) - That is, Judgement Day, when Christians believe the dead will rise from their graves to be judged by God.

Make a little stay (Line 11) - Linger for a little while.

Mis-devotion (Line 13) - Misguided religious beliefs or practices.

Relics (Line 16) - The body parts (or sometimes possessions) of dead saints, which some Christian believers (particularly Catholics) feel hold special holy power.

Mary Magdalen (Line 17) - One of Christ's most important disciples, often depicted with beautiful long golden hair.

A something else thereby (Line 18) - Donne's speaker is here slyly alluding to the (definitely not church-sanctioned) belief that Mary Magdalen wasn't just Christ's follower, but his lover or wife. If whoever digs up the speaker's body thinks the bracelet of hair must have belonged to Mary Magdalen, then, they might also blasphemously guess that the bones could be Christ's—in spite of the fact that Christian doctrine holds that Christ was resurrected. This moment suggests that the overheated veneration of saints can lead people not just into error, but into outright heresy.

Sought (Line 20) - Looked for, wanted.

This paper (Line 21) - That is, the poem itself.

Perchance (Line 28) - Perhaps, maybe.

Seals (Line 29) - Here, a droll, discreet way of alluding to those parts of the body that are "sealed off" or private.

Injur'd by late law (Line 30) - That is, damaged or held back by the legal convention of marriage.

Pass (Line 32) - Surpass, transcend, go beyond.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Relic" is written in a form of Donne's own invention: three stanzas of eleven lines apiece. Those lines vary in length, but follow the same rhythmic pattern stanza to stanza, a mixture of iambic trimeter (lines of three iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in "Our hands | ne'er touched | the seals"), iambic tetrameter (four iambs), and iambic pentameter (five iambs).

The resulting shape is as intricate and elegant as the speaker's thought. This form's combination of gusto and rigor suits a poem whose speaker skims effortlessly from the sacredness of love to the excesses of Catholicism.

Donne relished inventing his own complex forms: take a look at "The Triple Fool" or "The Canonization" for more examples of how Donne's intricate verse mirrored an intricate mind.

METER

“The Relic” is written in iambs—metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, as in “perchance.” The lines vary between trimeter (three feet), tetrameter (four feet), and pentameter (five feet), in a regular pattern:

- The first four lines of each stanza use tetrameter, as in “Some sec- | ond guest | to en- | tertain.”
- The fifth and seventh lines use trimeter, as in “A some- | thing else | thereby.”
- And the rest of the lines use pentameter, as in “And think | that there | a lov- | ing cou- | ple lies.”

In tandem with the rhyme scheme, this rhythm shapes the poem’s mood and thought:

- The stanzas introduce a theme in regular tetrameter: the digging-up of the speaker's future grave, the "mis-devotion" of those who venerate relics, the chaste love between the speaker and his lady.
- Then, they break into that pattern with short sharp trimeter lines framing a particularly striking pentameter line—the “bracelet of bright hair” in line 6; the tongue-in-cheek idea of the beloved as a false Mary Magdalen in line 17; the droll, sweet image of the lovers sharing hello and goodbye kisses as they’d share breakfast and dinner in line 28.
- The closing stretch of long pentameter lines returns, over and over, to a meditative depiction of the speaker's intense love.

This pattern of meter, in other words, reflects (and shapes!) a pattern of thought.

Iambic meters are flexible, too, easily tweaked for dramatic effect. Listen, for instance, to the rhythm of line 6:

A brace- | let of | bright hair | about | the bone,

Donne shifts stresses around here to illuminate that "bright hair" with a powerful spondee (two stresses in a row, DUM-DUM).

RHYME SCHEME

Each of the poem's 11-line stanzas uses the same intricate rhyme scheme:

AABB CDDC EEE

Moving from AABB couplets to an enfolding CDDC to that final emphatic EEE, the rhymes follow (and shape) the development of the speaker's thoughts, dividing each stanza into three movements:

- The AABB couplet section introduces an idea or a scene.
- The CDDC section highlights a particularly vivid image in that scene (like the joke that the relic-hunters of the future will decide that the beloved's hair must have belonged to Mary Magdalen herself).
- The closing EEE section returns to the speaker's passionate devotion to his lady love, its three rhymes in a row mirroring his constant heart.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Relic" is a young lover. An educated, clever man, he's sardonic about the Catholic fondness for venerating body parts (and for occasionally overlooking the evidence about whether those parts actually belonged to the saints they were attributed to).

He's also passionately and sincerely in love. He's sure that he'll go to his grave with his beloved's hair wound round his wrist. Such a talisman, he hopes, will allow him to reunite with his lover on Judgement Day, when (according to Christian belief) the dead will rise again; wherever the rest of her body is, she'll have to swing by and pick up her hair, after all.

Leave aside religious relics, this speaker says: he and his beloved have performed a secular "miracle" through their chaste, constant, and virtuous love, devoting themselves fully to each other without exchanging anything more than kisses and hair. For that matter, in his eyes, his lady is herself a miracle beyond words.

In his skepticism about the more macabre aspects of Catholicism, his adoration of his lady love, and his wit, the speaker sounds a lot like the young John Donne himself, and readers have reasonable grounds to interpret this speaker as the poet's self-portrait.

SETTING

The only clear physical setting in this poem is the speaker's imagined grave. But the religious politics here imply that this is a poem of Donne's own time and place.

Donne was born into a Catholic family during an era when Protestantism was the British state religion. Known Catholics might be persecuted, imprisoned, or killed; Donne's own brother spent time in jail for hiding a Catholic priest.

Always fervently religious, Donne came to question—and at length reject—the tradition he grew up in. He would become a famous Protestant priest renowned for his eloquent sermons, a major figure in establishment religion, and even a favorite minister of King James's.

This speaker's ridicule of "mis-devotion" in the form of credulous relic-hunting marks a phase in Donne's movement away from Catholic tradition—in particular, his dubiousness over the earthy practice of venerating saints' body parts (or their supposed body parts, at least).

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 writers who wrote witty, passionate, intricate, cerebral poetry about love and God. George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Thomas Traherne were some others.

Donne was the prototypical metaphysical poet: a master of elaborate conceits and complex sentences and a great writer of love poems (like this one) that mingle images of holiness with intense human passion. 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. Like the vast majority of his poetry, "The Relic" didn't appear in print until several years after his death in 1633, when his collection *Poems* was posthumously published.

Donne's mixture of cynicism, passion, and mysticism fell out of literary favor after his 17th-century heyday. Johnson, for instance, a leading figure of the 18th-century Enlightenment, did not mean "metaphysical poet" as a compliment, seeing Donne and his contemporaries as obscure and irrational. 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's inspired later writers from T. S. Eliot to Yeats to A. S. Byatt.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem's disapproving allusions to the practice of venerating saints' relics draw on a major religious schism in Donne's time: the conflict between Protestants and Catholics.

Donne lived in a time when Protestantism had become Britain's state religion. English Catholics were often persecuted and killed. Donne himself was born into a Catholic family; his own brother went to prison for hiding a priest in his home. (The priest, not so fortunate, was tortured and executed.)

All this violence emerged from the schism between English Catholics and Protestants that began during the reign of Henry VIII, who died about 30 years before Donne was born. Wishing to divorce his first wife and marry a second—unacceptable under Catholicism—Henry split from the Pope and founded his own national Church of England (also known as the Anglican church). This break led to generations of conflict and bloodshed between Anglican Protestants and Catholic loyalists.

Donne himself would eventually renounce Catholicism in order to become an important Anglican clergyman under the patronage of King James I. In this poem as in others, he makes a few jabs at Catholicism's fondness for venerating the body parts of dead saints—and not checking too carefully whose body parts those "relics" actually are.

This poem might also reflect a moment in Donne's love life. In his youth, Donne was a notorious ladies' man with plenty of experience both breaking hearts and having his heart broken. 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 against her family's wishes. This romantic leap of faith backfired on him when his wife's angry father had him thrown in prison. (Luckily for English literary history, Donne got out and reconciled with his in-laws eventually.)

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Portrait of Donne — See a portrait of Donne made when he (like this poem's speaker) was a dashing young lover. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw111844/John-Donne)
- Donne's Poems — See images from the 1633 first edition of Donne's Poems, the posthumous collection in which "The Relic" was first published. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-john-donnes-poems-1633)
- Donne's Legacy — Read a review of a recent Donne biography that discusses his continuing influence. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/apr/10/super-infinite-the-transformations-of-john-donne-review-masterly-study)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Donne's life and work via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-donne)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/SedZvPwJykY)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Hymn to God the Father
- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- A Valediction: Of Weeping
- Holy Sonnet 10: Death, be not proud
- Holy Sonnet 14: Batter my heart, three-person'd God
- 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 Flea
- The Good-Morrow
- The Sun Rising
- The Triple Fool
- To His Mistress Going to Bed

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