Holy Sonnet 1: Thou hast made me, and shall

POEM TEXT

1 Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?
2 Repair me now, for now mine end doth haste,
3 I run to death, and death meets me as fast,
4 And all my pleasures are like yesterday;
5 I dare not move my dim eyes any way,
6 Despair behind, and death before doth cast
7 Such terror, and my feebled flesh doth waste
8 By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh.
9 Only thou art above, and when towards thee
10 By thy leave I can look, I rise again;
11 But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,
12 That not one hour I can myself sustain;
13 Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art,
14 And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart.

SUMMARY

God, you created me. Will I, your creation, fall to ruin? Restore me to my former goodness quickly, because soon I will die. Death and I speed toward each other, and all the enjoyable parts of life are past. I am terrified to look in any direction, because sorrow lies behind me and death lies ahead. My sickly body weakens because of my sins, which drag me down toward hell. But God, you are in heaven, and when you allow me to look toward you I rise out of my sinfulness. Still, the devil's temptation is impossible to resist for long without your help. Your grace gives me wings that allow me to escape sin. Like a magnet, you pull my heart toward you.

THEMES

HUMANITY'S RELIANCE ON GOD'S GRACE

"Thou hast made me" is the first of *The Holy Sonnets*, a series of poems by John Donne that examines religious devotion and doubt. This poem's speaker, who has lived a sinful life and is now approaching death, wishes to be a better person and asks for God's help. The speaker claims that no matter how hard they try to resist temptation, only God's intervention can protect them from the devil. In this way, the poem argues that humans are incapable of resisting sin under their own steam and must look toward God for the divine grace necessary to be saved.

The poem emphasizes that the speaker was created by God and in doing so suggests that God bears some responsibility for preserving the speaker's soul. The speaker begins the poem by asking, "Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?" By addressing this rhetorical question directly to God, the speaker implies that their spiritual fate is in God's control and not their own. "Repair me now," the speaker then demands, urging their creator to care for rather than abandon them. Thus, the poem suggests that there is a unique relationship between God and humankind, not unlike that between builder and building. All goodness belongs to God, so humanity relies on God's grace for salvation, just as a building relies on its builder for upkeep and repair.

God's help is so important to the speaker because without it the temptation of sin is impossible to resist. The poem draws attention to God's great distance from the speaker: "Only thou art above," the speaker says, in contrast with "death" and "sin" which exist at the speaker's level, down on earth. Only by God's "leave" can the speaker "look" and "rise" upward, closing the distance between God and themselves. In other words, God must allow the speaker to be a good, holy person. Without this willing aid from God, the devil, "our old subtle foe," drags the speaker back toward a life of sin.

The poem thus argues that only through God's grace can humanity choose good over evil. While humans may have been created with free will, the devil is a constant, active presence in their lives. God's assistance is necessary to overcome this presence. Without God, humans would not exist, and without God's grace, human goodness would not exist, either.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 9-14

THE MORTAL BODY VS. THE IMMORTAL SOUL

"Thou hast made me" presents sin as the "decay" of the soul and death as the "decay" of the body. While the speaker sees both forms of decay as sources of "terror," the poem suggests that bodily decay must be accepted, while spiritual decay can be headed off through God's grace.

From the beginning of the poem, the speaker is well aware of death's rapid approach. "Mine end doth haste," the speaker states, recognizing that the end of their life is close at hand. Meanwhile, in the line, "I run to death, and death meets me as fast," the speaker emphasizes that mortality is unavoidable.

Even though death frightens the speaker, they have no choice but to run directly toward it. As death and the speaker near each other, the speaker experiences physical decay. "My feebled flesh doth waste," the speaker says, looking in horror upon the deterioration of their mortal body.

The speaker is less worried about the decay of their body, however, than the decay of their soul. Without a pure, intact soul, the speaker believes they won't make it to heaven. The speaker claims that sin acts as a moral weight dragging them down "towards hell." In this way, the poem argues that when the body dies, the soul continues to live, either with the devil in hell or with God in paradise. The speaker then asks for God's "grace" to "prevent" the devil's "art" of temptation. If sin drags the speaker toward hell, the poem implies, then divine goodness helps the speaker "rise" toward God and heaven.

Therefore, when the speaker asks God to "repair" them at the beginning of the poem, they are praying for an end to spiritual rather than physical decay. The body is impermanent and will inevitably be destroyed, but the soul lives on eternally and can be healed and restored with help from God.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-3
- Lines 6-10
- Line 13

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?

"Holy Sonnet 1" begins with a rhetorical question addressed as an apostrophe to God: "Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?" In other words, *"You made me God, and will you let your creation fall to ruin?"*

The speaker does not expect an answer to this question but rather poses it in order to highlight God's responsibility to care for all creation. By characterizing themselves as God's "work," the speaker likens their relationship with God to that of a building and its builder, or a painting and its artist. The speaker has been created by God and is therefore inherently dependent upon divine grace to thrive—to keep from "decay[ing]."

It's worth noting the unusual meter of this opening line. True to sonnet form, "Holy Sonnet 1" is written primarily in iambic pentameter: a meter in which each line has five iambs, poetic feet containing two syllables arranged in an unstressed-stressed rhythm. However, the poem's opening line departs from iambic pentameter by beginning with two trochees, which follow a stressed-unstressed pattern:

Thou hast | made me, | and shall | thy work | decay?

This use of trochees draws attention to God ("Thou") and God's power (God has "made" the speaker). That is, the poem's rhythms emphasize that the speaker is talking to God directly and that the speaker is God's creation.

LINES 2-4

Repair me now, for now mine end doth haste,
I run to death, and death meets me as fast,
And all my pleasures are like yesterday;

The rest of the poem's opening quatrain (four-line stanza) complicates the exact nature of the "decay" referenced in line 1.

First, the speaker asks God to quickly "repair," or restore, them because they will die soon (their "end" is near). For the moment, at least, the word "decay" thus seems to refer to the deterioration of the speaker's physical body. It sounds like the speaker is asking God to "repair" them so they can escape their own mortality, and the anadiplosis of "now" adds urgency to the speaker's request:

Repair me now, for now mine end doth haste,

Those two "now"s emphasize that the end is approaching *at this very moment*, and thus God must "Repair" the speaker right away.

The next line essentially repeats the idea that the speaker is barrelling toward death. The speaker also subtly personifies death in line 3 by granting it the ability to move toward and "meet" the speaker. The speaker thus seems to accept that death is inescapable: even if they were to stop rushing ahead, death would come for them anyway. There's more anadiplosis in this line as well, which visually evokes what the speaker describes as the two "death"s essentially "meet" in the middle of the line:

I run to death, and death meets me as fast,

As such, the "repair" they ask for must be of some kind *other* than physical. That is, the speaker understands that their body *must* "decay"; in asking for God to "Repair" them, they probably aren't asking God to stop physical death itself, because they understand that death is inevitable. What they *are* asking God to do will become apparent in the following lines.

"Thou has made me" combines the structures of the Italian sonnet and the English sonnet. Again, the poem uses iambic pentameter throughout, which is the standard meter for sonnets and lends the poem a steady, familiar rhythm. The first two quatrains follow the rhyme scheme of an Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet: ABBA ABBA. Here, "decay" rhymes with "yesterday" while "haste" forms a slant rhyme with "fast." Sandwiching these B rhymes perhaps evokes the convergence

of the speaker and death.

LINES 5-8

I dare not move my dim eyes any way,
Despair behind, and death before doth cast
Such terror, and my feebled flesh doth waste
By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh.

The speaker feels frozen between the sorrows of their past and their impending death. No matter which direction they cast their "dim eyes," they are met with "terror," because "despair" lies "behind" them and "death" lies "before."

The adjective "dim" evokes the physical "decay" brought on by age, illness, and proximity to death. "Dim" may also point toward a spiritual shortcoming. That is, the speaker is *literally* dim-eyed because they are nearing death, but *metaphorically* dim-eyed because they lack clarity of spiritual vision. Stuck at a crossroads between sin and death, the speaker calls upon God to help them *see* a better way forward.

In lines 7-8, the physical decay described in the first half of the poem gets even more explicitly linked to a sense of *spiritual* decay: "my feebled flesh doth waste," the speaker says, "By sin in it." The alliteration of the soft /f/ sound in "feebled flesh" reflects the softening and deterioration of the speaker's body. The adjective "feebled," meanwhile, refers to weakness brought on not only by illness and old age but also "By sin." That is, the speaker's sins make their body grow weak.

The speaker is thus unwell not only in their body but also, perhaps more importantly, in their *soul*. Indeed, the poem presents spiritual decay as even *more* serious than physical decay. While the latter leads to death, the former leads to eternal damnation: the speaker's sin drags them down "towards hell."

It's worth noting this quatrain's use of enjambment, which signifies a departure from the opening quatrain's consistently end-stopped lines:

> Despair behind, and death before doth cast
> Such terror, and my feebled flesh doth waste
> By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh.

Here, enjambment changes the pace of the poem. These lines, which comprise a single sentence, seem to stumble forward and barrel into one another, heightening the poem's anxious tone while mirroring the speaker's relentless movement toward death. The heaving alliteration of "despair," "death," and "doth" produce a similar effect, the repetition of that hard /d/ sound mimicking the percussive rhythm of beating, galloping, or running feet.

Thus ends the poem's second quatrain, which develops the problem set forth in the beginning of the poem: physical decay and death are paralleled by the more pressing concerns of spiritual decay and the fate of the soul.

LINES 9-12

Only thou art above, and when towards thee
By thy leave I can look, I rise again;
But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,
That not one hour I can myself sustain;

The speaker once again directly addresses God. "Only thou art above," the speaker states, emphasizing God's distance from the "sin" and "decay" that drag the speaker down toward hell. (Note that "Only" here means something like "But" here: the speaker is presenting God's presence as something that counters the weight of the "sin" that would otherwise pull the speaker down.)

The speaker is thus caught not just between the backward pull of sin and the forward pull of death, but also between the upward pull of heaven and the downward pull of hell. And the speaker now makes their wish to choose the upward path clear: while in line 5 they were afraid to point their "dim eyes any way," in line 10 they express a desire to "look" toward God, to "rise" up toward heaven and holiness.

However, they can do so only by God's "leave," or with God's permission. In other words, the speaker is dependent upon God's assistance in order to be saved. This becomes increasingly clear in lines 11-12, in which the speaker claims that without God's help, they cannot "sustain" themself against the devil, "our old subtle foe," for even "one hour." Here, "sustain" refers to the speaker's ability to remain strong and true in the face of temptation, while the use of the collective pronoun "our" aligns the speaker's cause with God's.

Note how the poem's form shifts in this quatrain. Again, this poem combines elements of both an English and Italian sonnet:

- While the poem is organized into three quatrains and a couplet, similar to an English sonnet, the first two quatrains use the ABBA rhyme scheme typical of an Italian sonnet. In lines 9-12, however, that ABBA pattern gets replaced by a CDCD rhyme scheme: "thee" rhymes with "me," while "again" rhymes with "sustain."
- This change in rhyme scheme divides the poem into an opening "octave" and a concluding "sestet," as in an Italian sonnet. The transition between these two sections is called the poem's turn, or *volta*: the moment in a sonnet when the tone shifts: while the first two quatrains of "Thou have made me" are marked by a sense of unrelenting despair which the third quatrain counters with a glimmer of hope, a path up and out of spiritual decay through God's grace.

LINES 13-14

Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art,
And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart.

Like an English sonnet, "Thou hast made me" concludes with a rhyming couplet. These final two lines boost the argument laid forth by the three preceding quatrains.

Continuing the poem's use of apostrophe, the speaker expresses their desperate need for God's help. In line 13, the speaker claims that divine grace can "wing" them to prevent the devil's "art." The poem uses "wing" in its archaic sense, meaning to enable someone or something to fly or move quickly. In other words, God's grace allows the speaker to move swiftly to escape the devil's temptation. More literally, "wing" can also refer to God's ability to bestow wings upon the speaker, to make them into a pure, holy angel after death.

The final line of the poem then uses a simile to compare God to "adamant," which refers to a legendary rock or mineral related to diamond and possessing remarkable hardness and magnetism. In short, God exerts a magnetic force that attracts the speaker's "iron heart" toward heaven. This image reinforces the idea that God and humans possess a unique relationship to each other, as suggested in the poem's opening line. Like adamant and iron, God's grace and the human soul are naturally drawn together.

Note, too, that both line 13 and line 14 offer images of ascension, either through flight or through magnetic force. In this way, God's grace offers the directionless speaker an upward path, away from the sins of the past and the fires of hell. In a sense, God's assistance even offers salvation from death, because, while the decay of the mortal body has been accepted by the speaker as inevitable, through divine grace the immortal soul can ascend to heaven and live eternally with God in paradise.

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe appears throughout "Thou hast made me," increasing the poem's sense of urgency and desperation. The speaker is a sinner whose death is rapidly approaching. Horrified by their past wrongdoings and by the desolation that lies ahead of them, they are compelled to appeal directly to God for guidance and help.

In the poem's opening line, the speaker uses the second person pronoun "thou" to call out to God: "Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?" By addressing this rhetorical question directly to God, the speaker suggests that, as their creator, God bears some responsibility for the speaker's spiritual fate. To question God in this way is an undeniably bold act, one informed by the speaker's wretched situation. Likewise, the second-person command "Repair me now" in line 2 implies a sense of anguish so great that the speaker feels they have no choice but to call upon God directly, unabashedly requesting divine assistance.

Apostrophe returns in the final six lines of the poem, in which the despairing speaker turns again to God. In lines 9 and 10, however, this apostrophe feels a bit humbler, more reserved than the speaker's earlier calls to God: "Only thou art above," the speaker says in reverent recognition of God's unique power and utter holiness, "and when towards thee / by thy leave I can look, I rise again." Here, as in the last couplet of the poem in which the speaker asks for "Thy grace," apostrophe allows the speaker to express their total vulnerability and dependence upon God for salvation.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay? / Repair me now,"
- **Lines 9-14:** "Only thou art above, and when towards thee / By thy leave I can look, I rise again; / But our old subtle foe so tempteth me, / That not one hour I can myself sustain; / Thy grace may wing me to prevent his art, / And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Holy Sonnet 1" begins with a rhetorical question addressed directly to God: "Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?" The speaker does not expect God to respond to this question but rather poses it in order to make a point about the speaker and God's relationship as creation and creator. Through this question, the speaker implies that because God created them, God bears some responsibility for the speaker's well-being. Indeed, right after posing this question, the speaker demands that God "Repair" them "now."

In referring to themselves as "work," the speaker suggests that their relationship with God is similar to that between a building and its builder. The speaker is reliant upon God for divine guidance and grace, just as a building is reliant upon its builder for upkeep and repair.

Note, too, that sonnets typically introduce a question or problem in their opening lines. Here, the use of a rhetorical question tells readers that "decay" will be the central issue of "Thou hast made me." Indeed, as the poem develops, the parallel deterioration of the speaker's mortal body and the speaker's immortal soul is the driving force behind their continual appeals for God's help.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?"

CAESURA

Caesurae appear throughout "Thou hast made me," always in the form of a comma separating two clauses. Caesurae change the pace of the lines in which they appear, interrupting the steady forward march of the sonnet's iambic pentameter and adding drama to certain moments. For example, take the poem's first line:

> Thou hast made me, || and shall thy work decay?

The caesura between "me" and "and" creates a pause after the opening clause "Thou hast made me." In doing so, the caesura pushes the reader to stop and more deeply consider this phrase's impact on the question that follows. The caesura here emphasizes the cause-and-effect relationship between the line's first and second clauses: *because* God created the speaker, God bears some responsibility in preventing the speaker's "decay." The caesura in line 2 works in much the same way, marking the relationship between the first and second halves of the line:

> Repair me now, || for now mine end doth haste,

The comma between "now" and "for" emphasizes that the speaker's approaching death is the *cause* of their desperate need for "repair."

In other instances, caesurae overlap with and help call attention to dramatic, emphatic repetition. For example, in lines 2 and 3, caesurae highlight the use of anadiplosis, slowing the line down and allowing the reader to take in those two "now"s and "death"s:

> Repair me **now**, || for **now** mine end doth haste,
> I run to **death**, || and **death** meets me as fast

"Now" and "death" are repeated on either side of a caesura, creating a mirroring effect that mimics the mutual movement of the speaker and death toward one another. The words themselves "meet[]" in the middle of the line. Similarly, in line 6, caesura draws attention to the parallelism (and antithesis) of "Despair **behind**" and "death **before**" and thus formally mimics what the speaker is describing: being perilously suspended between a sinful past and a deadly future.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "me, and"
- **Line 2:** "now, for"
- **Line 3:** "death, and"
- **Line 6:** "behind, and"
- **Line 7:** "terror, and"
- **Line 8:** "it, which"
- **Line 9:** "above, and"
- **Line 10:** "look, I"

ALLITERATION

In "Thou hast made me," alliteration adds to the poem's urgency and drama by heightening the poem's language. Take lines 5 and 6 as an example:

> I **d**are not move my **d**im eyes any way,
> **D**espair **b**ehind, and **d**eath **b**efore **d**oth cast

Here, the speaker describes feeling frozen between their sinful past and their rapidly approaching death. The repetition of hard /d/ and /b/ sounds is nearly percussive, mimicking the rapid beating of the speaker's anxious heart, or the pound of their footsteps as they "run to death."

Note, too, how the alliterative sounds here are mirrored on either side of the caesura in line 6: "**D**espair **b**ehind" and "**d**eath **b**efore." The repetition of /d/ and /b/ sounds in the same order hammers home the idea that the speaker is trapped. Despair, death: it all amounts to the fact that whichever way the speaker turns, they find only ruin.

In line 7, meanwhile, the soft /f/ sounds of the alliterative phrase "**f**eebled **f**lesh" (as well as the mushy /sh/ sound) sonically mimic the physical weakening and deterioration of the speaker's ailing body.

In lines 11 and 12, sibilant alliteration fills the poem with an ominous hiss:

> But our old **s**ubtle foe **s**o tempteth me,
> That not one hour I can myself **s**ustain;

The consonance of "myself" and "sustain" adds to the effect, making the poem sound distinctly threatening at this moment. All this sibilance feels especially appropriate given that the "old subtle foe" referenced here is the devil, who is often represented throughout art and literature as a snake.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "dare," "dim"
- **Line 6:** "Despair," "behind," "death," "before," "doth"
- **Line 7:** "feebled," "flesh," "doth"
- **Line 10:** "leave," "look"
- **Line 11:** "subtle," "so"
- **Line 12:** "sustain"

SIMILE

The final line of "Thou hast made me" uses a unique simile to describe the effect of divine grace on humankind: "And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart," the speaker says to God.

This simile compares God to "adamant," which in its archaic usage is a legendary mineral or rock related to diamonds and characterized by extreme hardness and magnetism. Thus, the speaker is remarking on God's unbreakable strength, particularly in comparison to the speaker's "feebled flesh" and spiritual weakness. The simile also highlights the powerful pull of God's grace, which, like a magnet, draws the speaker upward toward heaven. In comparing both God and themselves to metal, the simile echoes the suggestion in the poem's opening line that there is a special relationship between God and humankind: divine grace is naturally adept at attracting humans toward holiness.

The metaphorical phrase "iron heart" also implies that the speaker feels hard, rigid, and unyielding. Only adamant-like God has the power to move the iron-like speaker; only through divine grace can humanity achieve the goodness necessary for salvation.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart."

VOCABULARY

Thou/Thee/Thy (Line 1, Line 9, Line 10, Line 13, Line 14) - Old-fashioned second-person pronouns. "Thou" and "thee" mean "you." "Thou" is used as the subject of a sentence, and "thee" is used as the object. "Thy" means "your."

Doth (Line 2, Line 6, Line 7, Line 8) - An old-fashioned way of saying "does."

Feebled (Line 7) - Made weak by age or illness.

Leave (Line 10) - Permission.

Subtle (Line 11) - Crafty or cunning. "Old subtle foe" refers specifically to the devil, whom the speaker characterizes as sneaky and clever (and thus difficult to resist without God's help).

Sustain (Line 12) - To strengthen or support, or to maintain for a long period of time. In this instance, both definitions are applicable. When it comes to resisting temptation, the speaker cannot maintain their strength for long without God's help.

Wing (Line 13) - To enable someone or something to fly or move quickly. Here, the speaker is referring to how God's grace allows them to escape the devil.

Adamant (Line 14) - A legendary rock or mineral often associated with diamond, with properties including extreme strength, hardness, and magnetism. In comparing God to adamant, the speaker conveys God's strength and power to move the iron-hearted speaker.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Thou hast made me" combines the conventions of the English and Italian sonnet. As is traditional of both forms, the poem contains 14 lines. Like an English sonnet, these lines are broken into three quatrains and a concluding couplet:

- Quatrain
- Quatrain
- Quatrain
- Couplet

However, the rhyme scheme of the poem's first eight lines follows that of an Italian sonnet (ABBA ABBA), while the rhyme scheme of the last six lines follows that of an English sonnet (CDCD EE). In this way, the poem's first eight lines are set apart from the final six, such that the overall structure also faintly echoes the opening octave and concluding sestet traditionally used in an Italian sonnet.

As is also typical of an Italian sonnet, a tonal shift occurs between lines 8 and 9. This is called the poem's turn or *volta*. The speaker spends the first two quatrains (the octave) in despair over their state of physical and spiritual decay, but in line 9 turns back toward God with newfound hope for salvation.

However, as in an English sonnet, the poem's central problem continues to develop until its last two lines, where what essentially amounts to a second volta appears. In the third quatrain, the speaker introduces the devil's temptation as an impossible-to-resist force, an issue resolved, finally, in the last couplet, in which the speaker recognizes God's grace as the sole source of human salvation.

METER

As is traditional of a sonnet, the primary meter used in "Thou hast made me" is iambic pentameter. The majority of the poem's lines follow this meter perfectly: they each contain five iambs, poetic feet consisting of two syllables arranged in an unstressed-stressed pattern (for a total of ten syllables per line). Take, for example, lines 2 and 3:

> Repair | me now, | for now | mine end | doth haste,
> I run | to death, | and death | meets me | as fast,

The steady succession of iambs, which mimic the beating of a heart or marching feet, lends the poem a sense of forward momentum, mirroring the speaker's sense of urgency as they rapidly approach death.

However, there are a few moments in which the poet varies the meter for dramatic effect. This usually involves swapping in

trochees, or poetic feet whose two syllables follow a stressed-unstressed pattern. For example, take the poem's opening line:

Thou hast | made me, | and shall | thy work | decay?

There's another example of a trochaic substitution in line 9:

Only | thou art | above, | and when | towards thee

Such breaks in the poem's meter draw the reader's attention to key moments. In line 1, for instance, the stress on "Thou" makes the speaker's direct appeal to God feel more forceful and urgent. The stress on "Only" also marks the poem's volta and again is a moment when the speaker directly appeals to God for divine assistance.

There's another departure from iambic pentameter in the poem's final line:

And thou | like ad- | amant draw | mine ir- | on heart.

Here, what should be line's third iamb is replaced by an anapest (unstressed-unstressed-stressed). Though subtle, this deviation from the primary meter slows the poem's pace, drawing out the last line while attracting attention to the word "adamant," upon which the poem's concluding analogy hinges.

RHYME SCHEME

The first eight lines of "Thou hast made me" follow the traditional rhyme scheme of an Italian sonnet, while the concluding six lines follow that of an English sonnet. Overall, the rhyme scheme looks like this:

ABBA ABBA CDCD EE

While the poem is technically organized into three quatrains and a couplet as in a typical English sonnet, its hybrid rhyme scheme differentiates the opening eight lines from the concluding six. In this way, the poem is *also* subtly organized into an octave and sestet.

This mixture of the English and Italian sonnet forms allows the poem to have two turning points, or voltas. One occurs, as is typical of the Italian sonnet, between lines 8 and 9, when the despairing speaker turns back toward God. The other occurs, as is typical of the English sonnet, between lines 12 and 13, when the speaker recognizes, once and for all, that only divine grace can save them from the seemingly inescapable temptation of the devil.

SPEAKER

While it's easy to assume that "Thou hast made me" is written from the perspective of John Donne, the poem's speaker remains anonymous and genderless within the text itself. What is clear, however, is that this speaker is ailing both physically and spiritually and is desperate for God's help.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker seems primarily concerned with their bodily well-being. In lines 2 and 3, for example, the speaker asks God in a demanding tone to "repair" them because their death is rapidly approaching. It seems, for a moment, as though the speaker is asking to be made physically healthy so that they can continue living.

However, as the poem goes on, it becomes clear that the speaker's primary concern is not their body but their soul. The speaker has lived a sinful life and feels directionless, terrified that the wrongdoings of their past will result in them being sent to hell after their inevitable death.

In line 9, the despairing speaker turns with newfound vigor back to God, hoping their soul can yet be saved. The speaker realizes that while on their own the devil's temptation is impossible to resist, through God's grace they can choose good over evil and can go to heaven rather than hell. Thus, over the course of the poem the speaker transitions from hopeless desperation to total faith in God's ability to help them overcome their spiritual shortcomings and achieve eternal life.

SETTING

"Thou hast made me" doesn't have a particular setting, beyond taking place towards the end of the speaker's life on earth. The speaker repeatedly points out that death is fast approaching and they also emphasize the great distance between themselves and God "above." The poem also depicts the ailing speaker as occupying a kind of in-between space, suspended, briefly, between "despair" and "death" as well as between heaven above and hell below.

While the poem's subject—sinfulness and fear of death—transcends time, its ideology, specifically the belief that human beings are dependent upon God for goodness and salvation, is consistent with much of 17th-century Christianity. Similarly, the word "adamant" ties the poem to 17th-century alchemy, in which adamant was a legendary stone known for its hardness and sometimes believed to be magnetic.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne (1572-1631) is considered by many to be the foremost of the "metaphysical poets," a term disparagingly coined by English critic Samuel Johnson to describe a loosely connected group of 17th-century poets who used wit, irony, and elaborate poetic conceits to examine subjects including religion, morality, and love. Other well-known poets from this

movement include George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughan.

Donne's poetry stood out among his contemporaries thanks to its direct, dramatic language, ideological ambiguity, and unusual imagery. "Thou hast made me" embodies all these qualities, with its bold second-person appeal to God and its complex examination of the connection between physical and spiritual health.

"Thou hast made me" is the first of Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, a series believed to have been written between 1609 and 1610 and published posthumously in 1633. While Donne's earlier work consists primarily of satires, elegies, and love poems, the *Holy Sonnets* turn toward more serious questions of religious devotion and uncertainty.

Donne's poems were not widely circulated during his lifetime but were increasingly read and published in the years following his death. Although his readership and praise wained during much of the 18th and 19th centuries, his place in the English canon was cemented during the first few decades of the 20th century, when poets like William Butler Yeats and T.S. Eliot derived great inspiration from the combination of passionate emotion and intellectual rigor that characterize his work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Donne lived during a time of great religious upheaval in England. Around 40 years before his birth, King Henry VIII replaced the Catholic Pope, who refused to annul Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, as head of the Church of England. Donne's family remained Catholic after England's transition to Protestantism, a decision that was illegal at the time. In fact, Donne's brother was at one point arrested for harboring a Catholic priest and later died in prison of the bubonic plague.

Unlike many of his family members, Donne eventually converted to Anglicanism and went on to become one of the most celebrated English clerics of the 17th century. It is remarkable, then, that Donne's youth was marked not by great piety and virtue, but rather by a reckless fondness for women and adventure. It is easy to imagine that Donne's transition from a worldly man to a devout one may have influenced "Thou hast made me," in which an ailing sinner turns toward God.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Read Aloud — Listen to a recitation of "Holy Sonnet 1." (https://youtu.be/0yOQoRNU1Rg)
- John Donne Biography — Read a brief summary of Donne's life and work, courtesy of the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne)
- The Holy Sonnets — Check out all 19 of Donne's Holy Sonnets. (http://triggs.djvu.org/djvu-editions.com/DONNE/SONNETS/Donne.HolySonnets.pdf)
- The Metaphysical Poets — Learn more about the metaphysical poets from this short reference entry in Encyclopedia Britannica. (https://www.britannica.com/art/Metaphysical-poets)
- An Early Manuscript of Donne's Poems — Browse a 1632 handwritten manuscript of Donne's poems, including "Thou hast made me" on page 25. Courtesy of Harvard's Houghton Library. (https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:12201527$40i)

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 Relic
- The Sun Rising
- The Triple Fool
- To His Mistress Going to Bed

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Leonardi, Roey. "*Holy Sonnet 1: Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Jun 2023. Web. 21 Jun 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Leonardi, Roey. "*Holy Sonnet 1: Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?.*" LitCharts LLC, June 8, 2023. Retrieved June 21, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/john-donne/holy-sonnet-1-thou-hast-made-me-and-shall-thy-work-decay.