

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

A Poem by John Donne (1572-1631)

A Study Guide

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Summary With an Explanation of the Title

In 1611, John Donne wrote "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" to his wife, Anne More Donne, to comfort her while he was in France conducting government business and she remained home in Mitcham, England, about seven miles from London. The title says, in essence, "When we part, we must not mourn." *Valediction* is derived from the Latin



verb *valedicere*, meaning *to say farewell*. (Another English word derived from the same Latin verb is *valedictorian*, referring to a student scholar who delivers a farewell address at a graduation ceremony.) The poem then explains that a maudlin show of emotion would cheapen their love, reduce it to the level of the ordinary and mundane. Their love, after all, is transcendent, heavenly. Other husbands and wives who know only physical,

earthly love, weep and sob when they separate for a time because they dread the loss of physical closeness. But because Donne and his wife have a spiritual, as well as physical, dimension to their love, they will never really be apart, he says, for their souls will remain united—even though their bodies are separated—until he returns to England.

John and Anne More Donne

John Donne (1572-1631) was one of England's greatest and most innovative poets. He worked for a time as secretary to Sir Thomas Edgerton, the Keeper of the Great Seal of England. When he fell in love with Anne More (1584-1617), the niece of Edgerton's second wife, he knew Edgerton and Ann's father—Sir George More, Chancellor of the Garter—would disapprove of their marriage. Nevertheless, he married her anyway, in 1601, the year she turned 17. As a result, he lost his job and was jailed for a brief time. Life was hard for them over the next decade, but in 1611 Sir Robert Drury befriended him and took Donne on a diplomatic mission with him to France and other countries. Donne's separation from his wife at this time provided him the occasion for writing "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." Anne bore him twelve children—five of whom died very young or at birth—before she died in 1617.

"Valediction" as a Metaphysical Poem

Some scholars classify "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" as a metaphysical poem; Donne himself did not use that term. Among the characteristics of a metaphysical poem are the following:

- Startling comparisons or contrasts of a metaphysical (spiritual, transcendent, abstract) quality to a concrete (physical, tangible, sensible) object. In "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," Donne compares the love he shares with his wife to a compass. (See [Stanza 7](#) of the poem).
- Mockery of idealized, sentimental romantic poetry, as in [Stanza 2](#) of the poem.
- Gross exaggeration (hyperbole).
- Presentation of a logical argument. Donne argues that he and his wife will remain together spiritually even though they are apart physically.
- Expression of personal, private feelings, such as those Donne expresses in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning."

Publication Information

"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" was first published in 1633, two years after Donne died, in a poetry collection entitled *Songs and Sonnets*.

Figures of Speech

Donne relies primarily on extended [metaphors](#) to convey his message. First, he compares his separation from his wife to the separation of a man's soul from his body when he dies (Stanza 1). The body represents physical love; the soul represents spiritual or intellectual love. While Donne and his wife are apart, they cannot express physical love; thus, they are like the body of the dead man. However, Donne says, they remain united spiritually and intellectually because their souls are one. So, Donne continues, he and his wife should let their physical bond "melt" when they part (Line 5). He follows that metaphor with others, saying they should not cry sentimental "tear-floods" or indulge in "sigh-tempests" (Line 6) when they say farewell. Such base sentimentality would cheapen their relationship. He also compares himself and his wife to celestial spheres, such as the sun and other stars, for their love is so profound that it exists in a higher plane than the love of the laity (Line 8), husbands and wives whose love centers solely on physical pleasures which, to be enjoyed, require that the man and woman always remain together, physically. Finally, Donne compares his relationship with his wife to that of the two legs of a drawing compass. Although the legs are separate components of the compass, they are both part of the same object. The legs operate in unison. If the outer leg traces a circle, the inner leg—though its point is fixed at the center—must pivot in the direction of the outer leg. Thus, Donne says, though he and his wife are separated, like the legs of the compass, they remain united because they are part of the same soul.

Alliteration (Line 3): Whilst some of their sad friends do say

Alliteration (Lines): Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end where I begun.

Simile (Stanza 6): Observation that the "expansion" of their spiritual unity is "like gold to aery thinness beat."

Theme

Real, complete love unites not only the bodies of a husband and wife but also their souls. Such spiritual love is transcendent, metaphysical, keeping the lovers together intellectually and spiritually even though the circumstances of everyday life may separate their bodies.

Rhyme Scheme and Meter

The last syllable in the first and third lines of each stanza rhyme, as do the second and fourth lines of each stanza. The meter is [iambic tetrameter](#), with eight syllables (four feet) per line. Each foot, or pair of syllables, consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The first two lines of the second stanza demonstrate this metric pattern:

....1..... ..2..... ..3.....4
 So **LET** | us **MELT** | and **MAKE** | no **NOISE**
1..... ..2..... ..3.....4
 No **TEAR-** | floods **NOR** | sigh-**TEMP** | ests-**MOVE**

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

By John Donne

Text of the Poem	Explanation
<p>1 As virtuous men pass mildly away, And whisper to their souls to go, Whilst some of their sad friends do say The breath goes now, and some say, No:</p>	<p>.....Good men die peacefully because they lived a life that pleased God. They accept death without complaining, saying it is time for their souls to move on to eternity. Meanwhile, some of their sad friends at the bedside acknowledge death as imminent, and some say, no, he may live awhile longer. Well, Anne, because I will be in France and other countries for a time while you remain home in England, we must accept our separation in the same way that virtuous dying men quietly accept the separation of their souls from their bodies. While the physical bond that unites us melts, we must not cry storms of tears. To do so would be to debase our love, making it depend entirely on flesh, as does the love of so many ordinary people (laity) for whom love does not extend beyond physical attraction.</p>
<p>2 So let us melt, and make no noise, No tear- floods, nor sigh-tempests move,</p>	

'Twere
profanation
of our joys
 To tell the
laity our
 love.

3
Moving of th'
earth brings
 harms and
 fears,
 Men reckon
 what it did and
 meant,
 But
trepidation of
the spheres,
 Though
 greater far, is
innocent.

4
 Dull
sublunary
 lovers' love
 (Whose
 soul is sense)
 cannot admit
 Absence,
 because it
 doth remove
 Those
 things which
 elemented it.

5
 But we by a
 love so much
 refined
 That our
 selves know
 not what it is,

Inter-assurèd
 of the mind,
 Care less,
 eyes, lips, and

.....**Earthquakes (moving of th' earth)** frighten people, who wonder at the cause and the meaning of them. However, the **movements of the sun and other heavenly bodies (trepidation of the spheres)** cause no fear, for such movements are **natural and harmless**. They bring about the changes of the seasons.

.....You and I are like the heavenly bodies; our movements—our temporary separations—cause no excitement. On the other hand, those who unite themselves solely through the senses and not also through the soul are not like the heavenly bodies. They inhabit regions that are **sublunary (below the moon)** and cannot endure movements that separate. By contrast, our love is so refined, so otherworldly, that it can still survive without the closeness of eyes, lips, and hands.

hands to miss.

6
Our two souls
therefore,
which are
one,

 Though I
must go,
endure not
yet
A breach, but
an expansion,

 Like gold to
aery thinness
beat.

7
If they be two,
they are two
so

 As stiff twin
compasses
are two;
Thy soul, the
fixed foot,
makes no
show

 To move,
but doth, if th'
other do.

8
And though it
in the centre
sit,
 Yet when
the other far
doth roam,
It leans and
hearkens after
it,

 And grows
erect, as that
comes home.

9
Such wilt thou
be to me, who

.....The point is this: Even though our bodies become separated and must live apart for a time in different parts of the world, our souls remain united. In fact, the spiritual bond that unites us actually expands; it is like gold which, when beaten with a hammer, widens and lengthens.

.....Anne, you and I are like the pointed legs of a compass (pictured at right in a photograph provided courtesy of *Wikipedia*), used to draw circles and arcs. One pointed leg, yours, remains fixed at the center. But when the other pointed leg, mine, moves in a circle or an arc, your leg also turns even though the point of it remains fixed at the center of my circle. Your position there helps me complete my circle so that I end up where I began.



must
Like th'
other foot,
obliquely run;

Thy firmness
makes my
circle just,
And makes
me end where
I begun.



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