



A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

John Donne
Songs and Sonnets
(1633)

Donne wrote this poem to his wife, Anne More Donne, in 1611 to comfort her while he was in France on government business. The word 'valediction' comes from the Latin verb valedicere, which means to say farewell. The title invites those who are parting not to mourn.

- As virtuous men pass mildly away¹,
And whisper² to their souls, to go,
Whilst³ some of their sad friends do say,
'The breath goes now,' and some say, 'No:'
- 5 So let us melt⁴, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move⁵;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity⁶ our love.
- Moving of th' earth brings harms⁷ and fears;
10 Men reckon⁸ what it did, and meant;
But trepidation⁹ of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.
- Dull sublunary¹⁰ lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
15 Absence, because it doth¹¹ remove
Those things which elemented¹² it.
- But we by a love so much refin'd,
That ourselves know not what it is,
Inter-assured¹² of the mind,
20 Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.
- Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet¹³
A breach¹⁴, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat¹⁵.
- 25 If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses¹⁶ are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.
- And though it in the centre sit,
30 Yet when the other far doth roam¹⁷,
It leans, and hearkens after it¹⁸,
And grows¹⁹ erect, as that comes home.
- Such wilt thou be to me, who must
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
35 Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begun.

- 1 pass mildly away. Muoiono dolcemente.
2 whisper. Sussurrano.
3 Whilst. While.
4 let us melt. Sciogliamoci.
5 No ... move. Non muoviamo fiumi di lacrime né tempeste di sospiri.
6 laity. Profani, inesperti.
7 harms. Danni.
8 reckon. Valutano.
9 trepidation. Vibrazione.
10 Dull sublunary. Ottusi, sublunari (che seguono l'amore fisico).
11 doth. Does.
12 Inter-assured. Vicendevolmente sicuri.
13 endure not yet. Non soffrono ancora.
14 breach. Separazione.
15 gold ... beat. Oro battuto fino a divenire sottilissimo.
16 stiff twin compasses. Aste gemelle del compasso.
17 doth roam. Si muove.
18 It ... after it. Si piega e si protende verso di lui e ascolta.
19 grows. Diventa.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

> VOCABULARY

1 READ the poem and match the highlighted words with their Italian translation.

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 fermezza | 8 che mancano |
| 2 devono essere | 9 lamento |
| 3 commiato | 10 hanno generato |
| 4 raffinato | 11 di gran lunga più grande |
| 5 importa | 12 tu sarai |
| 6 sta | 13 vietato |
| 7 perfetto | |



➤ **COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT**

2 READ the poem again and answer the following questions.

- 1 The lovers are saying goodbye to each other. What does Donne compare this to in the first three stanzas?
- 2 In the fourth stanza he describes an inferior sort of love with the first two adjectives. What are they? Explain their meaning.
- 3 The poet and his lover share a different kind of love. How is it described in the fifth stanza?
- 4 What is the expression Donne uses for the paradox of their separation in the sixth stanza? It is not a, but an
- 5 Which tool of geometry does Donne make an image with in the last three stanzas? What is this instrument used for?
- 6 What shape is described in the last stanza?

➤ **COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**

3 DESCRIBE the rhythm and the rhyme scheme of the poem.

4 FOCUS on the two famous and complex conceits.

- 1 The first is about a piece of gold. What characteristics does gold have to represent their love?
- 2 The second is about the compasses. How does this figure represent both lovers? And how does it keep them together?

5 RECOGNISE how the shape which you have found in question 2.6 symbolises the lovers.

6 CONCENTRATE on the tone of the poem. At the beginning it is quiet and sad. How would you describe the tone by the time the poet has finished his argument?

7 CONCENTRATE on the words 'souls' (line 2) and 'laity' (line 8), which are unusual in a love poem. In what context do you normally find such vocabulary?

8 EXPLAIN whether this is a passionate love poem.

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE AGE**

9 REMEMBER that the early 17th century was a period on the border between medieval ideas and modern ones. Read the poem again and find evidence of

- 1 an acceptance of astrology and its influence on man;
- 2 an interest in mathematics and geometry which had made navigation to the New World of America possible.