

## John Donne: A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

**As virtuous men pass mildly away,**  
In the way that good men die quietly,  
**And whisper to their souls to go,**  
And whisper to their souls to leave,  
**Whilst some of their sad friends do say**  
While some of their sad friends say  
**The breath goes now, and some say, No:**  
The breath is ending now, and some say not,

**So let us melt, and make no noise,**  
Let us part gently and quietly like this,  
**No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,**  
Without floods of tears or storms of sighs,  
**'Twere profanation of our joys**  
It would devalue our joys  
**To tell the laity our love.**  
To tell ordinary people about our love.

**Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,**  
Earthquakes bring trouble and fear,  
**Men reckon what it did and meant,**  
Men assess what happened and what it meant,  
**But trepidation of the spheres,**  
But the movement of the planets  
**Though greater far, is innocent.**  
Though much greater, is harmless.

**Dull sublunary lovers' love**  
Foolish earthly lovers' love  
**(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit**  
(Which is based on the senses) cannot bear  
**Absence, because it doth remove**  
Absence, because it takes away  
**Those things which elemented it.**  
The things it is made of and started it.

**But we by a love so much refined**  
But we, with a love so much refined  
**That our selves know not what it is,**  
That we ourselves don't know what it is,  
**Inter-assur'd of the mind,**  
Self-contained and blended by the mind,  
**Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.**  
Don't miss eyes, lips and hands so much.



**Our two souls therefore, which are one,**  
Therefore our two souls, which are one soul,  
**Though I must go, endure not yet**  
Although I must go, will not suffer  
**A breach, but an expansion,**  
A parting, but an expansion,  
**Like gold to aery thinness beat.**  
Like gold beaten as thin as air.

**If they be two, they are two so**  
If our souls are two, they are two in the way  
**As stiff twin compasses are two;**  
That a stiff pair of compasses are two;  
**Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show**  
Your soul, the fixed foot, doesn't seem likely  
**To move, but doth, if th' other do.**  
To move, but it does when the other part does.

**And though it in the centre sit,**  
And though it sits in the center,  
**Yet when the other far doth roam,**  
When the other part goes far away,  
**It leans and hearkens after it,**  
It leans towards and listens for it  
**And grows erect, as that comes home**  
And grows erect, as it comes home.

**Such wilt thou be to me, who must**  
This is what your connection will be to me, who must,  
**Like th' other foot, obliquely run;**  
Like the other foot, run at an angle,  
**Thy firmness makes my circle just,**  
Your steadiness makes my circle a perfect one,  
**And makes me end where I begun.**  
And makes me end where I began.

## Notes

**Valediction** - a farewell, of an important kind : Valedictions for people are read at funerals, for example.

**Prophanation** - sacrilege

**Layette** - common people, as compared with officers of the church

**Trepidation** - movement. Implies cautious, silent movement. Also implies an irregularity of movement.

**Elemented** - instigated, started, constructed.

It is possible that this poem was written by Donne to his wife, before he went away on a long holiday with his friends.

## The Argument

Donne's basic argument is that most people's relationships are built on purely sensual things but the love between him and his lover is different - it is something deeper, a "love of the mind" rather than a "love of the body". This love, he says, can endure even though the lovers cannot be physically close to each other at all times.

First of all, the parting of these two lovers is likened to the death of a virtuous man. As a virtuous man dies, he knows that he will be accepted into heaven. Thus he dies in peace and calm, and the people surrounding him at his deathbed are sad, but not despairing. In the same way, when true lovers part, there is no pain. The people surrounding the dying man are respectfully quiet. Similarly, it would be wrong for him and his lover to display the sighs and tears of "ordinary" lovers on parting.

The lovers are then likened to planetary bodies. In such a way, Donne places them above the "mortal earth". Unlike earthly disasters, which are unpredictable and chaotic, the movement of the planets is peaceful and calm, even though the planets' movement is greater and more significant.

Donne's most famous conceit\* is then introduced. The two lovers are likened to the two points of a compass, with one part fixed and the other moving.

\***Conceit** : An elaborate, usually clever poetic comparison. (Conceit is an old word for concept.)

## Imagery

The imagery of weather associated with ordinary lovers, 'tear-floods' and 'sigh tempests', leads into the motion of the Earth and the 'trepidation of the spheres'; the scientific and astrological imagery grows until we reach the central word of the poem, 'refined'.

'Refined' suggests to Donne the practice of alchemy (the changing of ordinary metal into pure gold), which in turn leads to the picture of beaten gold; when a ring is heated, there is no breach (break), only an expansion. The ideas of 'breach' and 'gold' then combine to form one of the most famous comparisons in English poetry, that of the compasses.

The compass and the circle together formed the Renaissance symbol for eternal perfection. There is also the suggestion of the gold circle of a wedding ring.

### Form and language

There are many "double meanings" . *And grows erect, as it comes home...* - not only does this tie in with the imagery of the compass closing and the two points coming together, but also implies the emotional buildup of expectation and joy when the two lovers are together again. Also, *Thy firmness makes my circle just,/ And makes me end, where I begun.* Here the compass is doing two different things, and both have significance. "End where I begun" implies the completion of a circle as drawn by a compass; only through his wife's stability in the centre, Donne argues, can his circle be drawn correctly. However "End where I begunne" also implies the closing of the compass - and Donne coming home to be with his wife.

The ballad-like four-line stanzas help to create the slow and calmly moving "feel" of the poem. The first stanza contains a lot of sibilants [words beginning with "s"] to create a soft, gentle atmosphere. E.g. *some of their sad friends, whisper to their soules.*

The rhyme scheme is consistent and predictable all the way through, as well. Although the construction of the poem seems logical, in truth it is not; Donne merely uses the idea of logic to tie together the complexities of his emotion. The poem as a whole is a flood of ideas and associations, complex and intellectual; at the same time, it is, fundamentally, a love poem.

Throughout the poem, disturbances appear on the calm surface of his language, revealing that his own true emotions are suppressed only with difficulty, that there is a strong undercurrent of physical yearning for the woman: sad friends (3); melt (5); eyes, lips, hands, (20); roam (30); leans and hearkens (31); grows erect, comes home (32) - very physical terms. In the end, the conceits also highlight separation, even as he argues against this. It might be said that the poem expresses, rather than conquers, the pain of parting.



An ideogram from the seventeenth century representing the *art of alchemy*. This symbol shows the influence of **Pythagorean** geometry mysticism. It can also be **perceived** as a symbol for the *four elements* combined with **water** as the small inner circle, *earth* as the square, *fire* as the triangle, and *air* as the outer circle.