

Detailed analysis of poem Virtue by George Herbert

Lines 1-4

Herbert begins "Virtue" with an apostrophe, or invocation. That is, here, he starts with a direct rhetorical address to a personified thing: as if speaking to the day, the narrator says, "Sweet day" and then characterizes the day as "cool," "calm," and "bright." Thus, for one noun, "day," he provides four adjectives. The rest of the line is made up of the adverbial "so," signifying intensity, repeated three times. Herbert is presenting a fairly generic image, without any action, as no verb appears among these eight words. Nor can a verb be found in the next line, which is a kind of appositive, or a noun phrase placed beside the noun that it describes. "The bridal of the earth and sky," which describes the "day," indicates no action, instead merely illustrating and amplifying the conditions depicted in the first line. That is, the "sweet day" is the bridal — the marriage, conjunction, or union — of the earth and the sky. In sum, Herbert presents a serene yet invigorating day and locates the reader in the celestial and terrestrial

realms simultaneously, for the day in its loveliness brings them together.

Day, however, gives way to night, just as life gives way to death: "The dew shall weep thy fall tonight," the narrator asserts, turning a daily natural event, nightfall, into a metaphor. Beyond death, the line also suggests grief at the loss of paradise on Earth, the Fall, which is the original cause of death in the Judeo-Christian story of the Creation. The evening dew, invested with emotion and made to represent grief, is equated with tears, which are shed at nightfall over the Fall, the sin that brought death into the world.

Lines 5-8

In beginning the second quatrain with the word "sweet," Herbert continues to connect the beauty of nature with impermanence, as any "sweet" thing must, over time, lose its sweetness. Like the day, the rose is an emblem of earthly splendor. It is "sweet" like the day, saturated with color, and graced with magnificence. (Angry and brave are complex words in Herbert's usage, as aspects of their meanings have all but passed from English. Angry, in the seventeenth century, could signify "inflamed," while

brave could signify "having a fine or splendid appearance." The suggestions of wrath and courage carried by these words also reinforce the rose's magnificence, as it is characterized thus as standing knowingly in the prospect of doom.) So magnificent is the rose that Herbert calls one who looks at it a "rash gazer." Here, "rash" suggests a lack of necessary caution in taking in a sight so dazzling that the gazer is moved to "wipe," or rub, "his eye," as one does in wonder. Also, a warning may be understood to be present in the word "rash": one who beholds the rose is in danger of desiring its seductive but transitory beauty over the sweetness of what endures in eternity, the soul itself.

As with the day, so with the rose: despite its living splendor, death awaits. "Thy root," buried in the earth, as it must be if the rose is to flourish, "is ever in its grave." Thus, life and death are entwined, and death is an ever-present aspect of life. Indeed, by emphasizing the common ground shared by the root, the source of life, and the grave, the receptacle for death, Herbert evokes two Christian lessons: first, that life contains elements of death and must inevitably give way to death and, second, that death

is not finality but part of the continuum of existence. In awareness of death, one realizes the true meaning and purpose of life and will thus prepare his or her soul, through the exercise of virtue, for eternity.

Lines 9-12

The word "sweet" begins the third quatrain as well, now describing the spring, which is subsequently characterized as "full of sweet days and roses." As such, the delights presented in the first two quatrains are contained in the third, and the narrator solidifies his suggestion of the earth's rich bounty. In the second line of the quatrain, spring is likened to "a box where sweets compacted lie." Then, as in the previous quatrains, the third line iterates the transience of earthly delights: "My music shows ye have your close." Through this line, the narrator offers the poem itself as proof of his argument regarding the impermanence of things. By "my music," the narrator refers to the very verse being read, this poem. "Close" is a technical term in music indicating the resolution of a musical phrase. Thus, the poetic verse, like everything else the narrator

has so far depicted, must come to an end, as it temporarily does with the four stressed and conclusive beats of the twelfth line: "And all must die."

Lines 13-16

Breaking the pattern established in the previous three quatrains, the final quatrain begins not with the word "sweet" but with a limiting expression: "Only a." The reader has been told that the "sweet day," the "sweet rose," and the "sweet spring" all "must die." In contrast to them is the soul: "Only a sweet and virtuous soul / never gives." "Sweet" is no longer used to denote an aesthetic quality, nor is the word sufficient to stand alone anymore; in fact, in being yoked with "virtuous," it is invested with a moral and spiritual dimension. The soul that is sweet and virtuous, unlike the spring, the rose, and the day, "never gives," that is, it never gives way to death, instead ever enduring. Such a sweet soul, disciplined by virtue like wood that has been seasoned, is fully strengthened. Lumber that has been seasoned, aged, and dried is more suitable for use in construction than is fresh lumber; "seasoned

"timber" is sturdy and enduring. The conflagration suggested in line 15 by the image of "the whole world turn[ing] to coal" alludes to chapter 3, verse 10, of 2 Peter, in the New Testament, where Peter speaks of "the day of the Lord," the judgment day when "the elements shall melt with fervent heat" and "the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up."

Thus, the first three quatrains present images of earthly beauty, but each ends with the word "die." The last quatrain presents images of an eternal soul and of a conflagration that turns the whole world, except that virtuous soul, to blackened coal, and its last line ends with the word "live." As such, the entire poem, which all along warned of death, shows the way in which Herbert believes that he and his readers may achieve eternal life: by shunning transient glory and humbly embracing virtue.