

“Song: Go and catch a falling star” Summary

The speaker directs a listener to do a number of impossible things: to catch a falling star, to impregnate a mandrake root, to find what happens to time that has passed, to discover who divided the devil's hoof into two parts, to teach him to hear the songs of mermaids or to avoid ever feeling envy, and, finally, to discover the favourable wind that might push a truthful and faithful person onward.

If the listener was born with the power to see mysterious and invisible things, the speaker continues, then he should go on an impossible long quest of ten thousand days, until he has become an old man and his hair has gone white. When he comes back from this journey, he will have all kinds of stories about the magical things he saw, but he will swear that among them all, he never saw a woman who was both faithful and beautiful.

If the listener does find such a woman, he should tell the speaker: it would be a wonderful journey for the speaker to meet her. But the speaker changes his mind immediately and says, he would not go to meet this imaginary woman even if she lived next door. If she were faithful when the listener met her, and stayed faithful long enough for the listener to write a letter describing her, she would inevitably have cheated two or three lovers by the time the speaker got to her.

Women's Infidelity

The poem explores a traditional (and misogynistic) literary theme of Donne's era: women's romantic infidelity. Using vivid images of magic and mystery, the speaker insists that a faithful woman is so hard to find, she might as well be the stuff of legends!

The speaker begins by commanding his listener to perform a series of impossible tasks, with the implication being that female honesty (or faithfulness) is in the same realm of impossibility. Some of the speaker's tasks sound like they are right out of a fairy tale: impregnating a mandrake root (a tuber whose roots vaguely resemble a human and are often granted magical qualities in folklore), listening to mermaids, and investigating the devil's cloven foot. All these images have transgressive and/or sexual connotations: mermaids were meant to lure sailors to their deaths, impregnating a root would take black magic, and the devil's foot— it belongs to the deceitful devil.

The other tasks the speaker commands are more abstract and wistful. Seeking “past years” suggests a longing for lost time, while preventing “envy's stinging” makes the reader suspect that the speaker might have had some painful romantic disappointments lurking in those vanished years. The final lines, asking the listener to “find / What wind / Serves to advance an honest mind” punches the point home: rewards for the faithful are as hard to find as any legendary creature.

Expanding on this idea, the speaker says that even if his listener spends an entire lifetime searching for a faithful woman, he wouldn't find her. He imagines the listener on a visionary quest, creating a sense that the impossibilities of the first stanza might just be found somewhere. The speaker also imagines that his listener has the power to see “strange sights”: a magical gift that might allow him to discover the

impossibilities of the first stanza. But even if such a seer were to spend his whole life looking, he would never find "a woman true, and fair."

Here, the magical things of the first stanza are presented as just within the realm of possibility: a gifted person might be able to find them. However, he will never be able to find a faithful woman. This makes women's fidelity even more legendary than a mermaid

The speaker concludes by imagining that, even if his listener did find a faithful woman, that woman's faithfulness would never last. The speaker would not bother going to see this hypothetical woman even if she were "next door," because while she might have been faithful when the friend met her, she would be unfaithful before the speaker could reach her. The final stanza thus moves from the magical uncertainty of the earlier part of the poem—when, after all, there's some chance that one might see the invisible—to an earthly cynicism. The wistful romance of pilgrimages, falling stars, and magical quests is broken by the speaker's grim belief: no one will ever find a woman "true, and fair."

The Blessed Damozel

"The Blessed Damozel" is about a woman who has died and yearns to be reunited with her lover, who is still on Earth, in Heaven. In Stanza I, the speaker describes the damozel's body position, as she leans out over the edge of Heaven. She is very beautiful, her eyes are as deep as still waters, she holds three lilies in her hands, and she has seven stars in her hair. In Stanza II, the speaker describes how the damozel is dressed: her robe is unclasped and loose around her body, and it is unadorned with anything other than a single white flower which was a gift from the Virgin Mary. The speaker also describes the damozel's hair, which is "yellow like ripe corn." In Stanza III, the speaker notes that to the damozel, it feels like scarcely a day that she has been in Heaven. However, to her loved ones on Earth, it feels like she has been gone for ten years.

In Stanza IV, the damozel's lover yearns for her and imagines her leaning over him so that he can feel her hair on her face. It turns out that instead of being his lover's hair, he felt a falling leaf, which also signals the passing of time. In Stanza V, the speaker describes the damozel as standing on the "rampart" of Heaven, which is so high above the universe that the damozel can barely see the Sun. In Stanza VI, the speaker describes Heaven further, stating that the rampart acts as a bridge between space and Heaven. The damozel can see the "tides of day and night" beneath her as time passes, and she sees the Earth, which looks like an anxious insect. In Stanza VII, the damozel is surrounded by newly reuniting lovers as souls ascend to heaven. She can also see more souls ascend to heaven, which look like "thin flames." In

Stanza VIII, despite the commotion surrounding her, the damozel looks downwards towards the Earth and longs for her lover. The speaker notes that her body heat must have warmed up the "gold bar" of Heaven.

In Stanza IX, the damozel watches as Time moves on and "shakes" the world. The damozel remains rooted with her gaze towards the Earth, waiting for her lover. In Stanza X, it is nighttime and the sun has set; a crescent moon has risen in the sky. The damozel begins to speak, and her voice sounds like all the stars in the sky singing together. In Stanza XI, the damozel's lover thinks that he can hear his beloved's voice in birdsong and hear her footsteps in the chimes of bells. In Stanza XII, the damozel wishes that her lover would come to her. She asks whether she has not prayed hard enough, or whether he has not prayed enough. She wonders whether the strength of their combined prayers is enough to bring them together, and whether she should feel afraid.

In Stanza XIII, the damozel muses that once her lover ascends to heaven, dressed all in white and wearing a halo, she will take his hand and go with him to bask in the glory of God. In Stanza XIV, the damozel also muses that she and her lover will lie in a sacred temple in Heaven that collects the prayers from Earth. Since her and her lover's prayers will have been answered, they will watch their old prayers melt away like clouds. In Stanza XV, the damozel says that she and her lover will lie in the shadow of the Tree of Life, where the Holy Ghost resides in the form of a dove and each leaf of the tree sings his name. In Stanza XVI, the damozel plans on teaching him the songs that he sings, and presumes that he will learn the songs slowly, taking lots of breaks so that he can soak up as much knowledge as possible.

In Stanza XVII, the lover wonders whether his prayers will be strong enough to convince God to unite him with his lover forever. In Stanzas XVIII-XX, the damozel plans on going to the groves where Mary weaves with her lover and telling Mary about their love. In Stanza XXI, the damozel hopes that Mary will bring her and her lover hand-in-hand to kneel before God and listen to angels play music. In Stanza XXII, the damozel plans on asking Christ if she and her lover can stay together for eternity in Heaven. However, in Stanza XXIII, once she has stopped musing, the damozel realizes that her lover still has not ascended. She smiles. In Stanza XXIV, the final stanza of the poem, the lover watches as the damozel smiles and then realizes that her lover has not arrived yet in Heaven. The damozel begins to weep, and her lover watches: "I heard her tears."

Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard Summary

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is a Restoration Period poem by Thomas Gray. An elegy, by strict definition, is usually a lament for the dead. Gray's version of an elegy is slightly different—he writes about the inevitability and hollowness of death in general, instead of mourning one person. At first, the poem reflects on death in a mostly detached way, as someone who is resigned to death's outcome. Yet, the epitaph he writes for himself at the end of the poem, reflects a fear of death. Elegy is a renowned English poem, regarded as one of the best of the time, and arguably of all time. It was popular when it was first written and was reprinted many times.

The speaker begins the poem by saying he is in a churchyard with a bell tolling for the end of the day, he uses this image as a metaphor for life and death. He describes the scenery around him, speaking of the sun setting, the church tower covered in ivy, and an owl hooting. He then focuses on the graveyard around him. He speaks of the men who are in the graves and how they were probably simple village folk. They're dead and nothing will wake these villagers, not a rooster's call in the morning, not twittering birds, and not the smell of the morning breeze. The speaker also laments that life's pleasures will no longer be felt by those buried in the graveyard, especially emphasizing the joys of family life.

The dead villagers probably were farmers, and the speaker discusses how they probably enjoyed farming. He warns that although it sounds like a simple life, no one should mock a good honest working life as these men once had. No one should mock these men because in death, these arbitrary ideas of being wealthy or high-born do not matter. Fancy grave markers will not bring someone back to life, and neither will the honor of being well born.

The speaker then wonders about those in the graveyard who are buried in unmarked graves. He wonders if they were full of passion, or if they were potential world leaders who left the world too soon. He wonders if one was a beautiful lyre player, whose music could bring the lyre to life—literally. He laments for the poor villagers, as they were never able to learn much about the world. He uses metaphors to describe their lack of education, that knowledge as a book was never open to them, and that poverty froze their souls.

He speaks of those in the graveyard as unsung heroes, comparing them to gems that are never found, or flowers that bloom and are never seen. He wonders if some of the residents of the graveyard could have been historically relevant, but unable to shine. One could have been a mute Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost*; or one could have been like John Hampden, a politician who openly opposed the policies of King Charles. Alas, the speaker mourns again that these villagers were poor and unable to make their mark on the world.

They were poor and innocent. They were not capable of regicide or being merciless. They were also incapable of hiding the truth, meaning they were honest with the world. The speaker notes that these people, being poor, will not even be remembered negatively. They lived far from cities and lived in the quiet. At least their graves are protected by simple grave markers, so people do not desecrate their burial places. And the graves have enough meaning to the speaker that he will stop and reflect on their lives. The speaker wonders who leaves earth in death without wondering what they are leaving behind. Even the poor leave behind loved ones, and they need someone in their life who is pious to close their eyes upon death.

The speaker begins to wonder about himself in relation to these graveyard inhabitants. Even if these deceased villagers were poor, at least the speaker is elegizing them now. The speaker wonders who will elegize him. Maybe it will be someone like him, a kindred spirit, who wandered into the same graveyard. Possibly some grey-haired farmer, who would remark on having seen the speaker rush through the dew covered grass to watch the sun set on the meadow. The speaker continues to think of the imagined farmer, who would remember the speaker luxuriating on the strangely grown roots of a tree, while he watched the babbling brook. Maybe the farmer would think of how the speaker wandered through the woods looking pale with scorn and sorrow. Possibly the speaker was anxious, or was a victim of unrequited love. The speaker wonders if the farmer will notice he's gone one day, that the farmer did not see him by his favorite tree, near the meadow, or by the woods. He speaks of his own funeral dirges and finally of his own epitaph.

In the speaker's own epitaph, he remarks that he has died, unknown to both fame and fortune, as in he never became famous and was not well-born. But at least he was full of knowledge—he was a scholar and a poet. Yet oftentimes, the speaker could become depressed. But he was bighearted and sincere, so heaven paid him back for his good qualities by giving him a friend. His other good and bad qualities do not matter anymore, so he instructs people not to go looking for them since he hopes for a good life in heaven with God.

“A Poison Tree” Summary

The speaker recounts being angry at a friend. He told the friend about this anger, which subsequently went away. By contrast, when the speaker was angry with an enemy, he kept quiet. The anger then increased.

The speaker cultivated this anger as if it were something planted in a garden, metaphorically nourishing it with fears and tears, both day and night. The speaker's smiles and other gentle deceptions used to hide the anger, in fact only fed the anger further.

The anger grew constantly until it became a tree, which bore a bright apple. The speaker's enemy saw this apple shining and knew it belonged to the speaker.

The enemy snuck into the speaker's garden during the dead of night. The next morning, the speaker is happy to see this enemy lying dead beneath the tree.

“A Poison Tree” Themes

Anger and Suppressed Emotion

In "A Poison Tree" the speaker presents a powerful argument against the suppression of anger. By clearly laying out the benefits of talking about anger, and the consequences of keeping negative emotions within, the poem implies to the reader that the suppression of anger is morally dangerous, leading only to more anger or even violence.

The speaker presents two distinct scenarios to illustrate the danger of suppressing anger. In the first two lines of the poem, the speaker describes admitting his or her "wrath" to a friend; as soon as the speaker does so, this "wrath" ends. Honesty and frankness, the speaker makes clear, causes anger to disappear.

By contrast, the poem details the negative consequences of suppressed anger. The speaker does not open up about being angry. Instead, the speaker actively tends to his or her wrath as if it were a garden, watering it with "fears" and "tears," and "sunning" it with "smiles" and cunning deceit in a way that indicates a kind of morbid pleasure. The speaker's careful cultivation of this rage-garden implies an inability to move on from whatever made the speaker angry in the first place, as well as the self-perpetuating nature of negative emotions; anger encourages fear, despair, and deceit—which, in turn, simply nourish more anger. The suppression of emotion thus begins a cycle of festering negativity that eventually takes on a life of its own. Through the growth of the tree and its poisonous apple, the repression of anger is shown to cause a chain reaction that makes the problem far worse than it would have been had the speaker and the "foe" just talked through their issues.

This poisonous growth contrasts with the simple way in which the anger was eliminated in the first scenario—when it was "told." Through this contrast, the poem makes clear a moral choice: either talk and find solutions, or keep quiet and enable the far-reaching, poisonous effects that come when people hold their angry emotions too close to the chest. Implicit in the poem, then, is the idea that the root of human conflict grows from the inability to find common ground through meaningful communication. The fact that, at the end of the poem, the speaker is "glad" to find the enemy lying dead beneath the tree shows the way in which, in the second scenario, the anger increasingly dominates the way the speaker sees other human beings—the speaker becomes a host for the growth of anger, which feeds on others' pain. The poem, then, suggests and warns against the fact that anger is an all-consuming emotion when allowed to grow unchecked.

The simplicity of the lines and the use of extended metaphor—the growth of the tree reflects the growth of the anger—also makes the message of the poem applicable well beyond the immediate conflict between the speaker and the foe. In fact, these two figures can be read as allegorical representations of different parts of humanity itself, showing the way that war and hatred develop from misplaced anger. This more general reading of the poem's moral message is further amplified by the clear allusion between the poison tree of the poem to the tree in the garden of Eden. The poem can therefore be read as an argument against the psychological suppression of anger on both the personal and even the societal level.

"A Poison Tree" ultimately makes a powerful argument in favour of opening up and trusting in the human capacity for empathy and understanding. The alternative, the poem argues, is far more dangerous.