

Death and afterlife
are notions found in
the verses of at the
round's earth corne...

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John Donne's metaphysical poem, "At the round earth's imagined corners...", is based upon an extract from the Book of Revelation. It is written in the form of a Petrarchan sonnet, and it contains a variety of literary techniques designed to portray attitudes to death.

The opening four lines of the sonnet represent Judgement Day, a section combining complete technical accuracy with traditional ideas. For example, in "souls...to your scattered bodies go", Donne's image of souls being reunited with their respective bodies implies an understanding of death as a dual action: the body must remain a physical entity on Earth and keep a state of anonymity after death ("numberless infinities"), whilst the soul has a temporary period of freedom from its counterpart.

The opening line itself is another example of a desire to maintain traditional visions and ideals. The Book of Revelation contains many mystical beings and has provoked Christian imagination for centuries, hence the notion of the world's "imagined" corners. The orthodox belief of the time was that the Earth was flat, yet the Church still maintained that it was spherical, implying a particular strength and trust in the speaker's religious faith. However, it is also important to note the uneasy tone in this stanza, a certain need for order and a controlled state; uncertainties such as the uncontrollable "numberless infinities" are combated with the idealistic yet illogical "imagination" shown in the opening line.

The final four lines of this stanza maintain a feeling of disease whilst keeping within the guidelines of sonnet form, helping to emphasize the vast numbers of dead to raise. The anaphora used in lines six and seven also adds to this;

by slightly altering the rhythm within the line, Donne generates a linguistic style similar to that of a list.

The final section of the poem shows a recognisable shift in tone and speaker, returning to the concerns of the poet himself, almost in a paradoxical fashion. The desperate request, “ Teach me how to repent...” is paired with imagery from the crucifixion of Christ. However, there is uncertainty placed over whether or not Christ truly “ seal’d [the] pardon” of Christians with his own blood at the crucifixion by Donne’s insertion of “ as if” into his statement, “ as if though had seal’d my pardon with thy blood”. This deliberate doubt over whether Christ’s death actually held redeeming properties for humanity could imply that Donne truly believes he must personally repent before achieving pardon, or alternatively that his repentance will only result in his pardoning due to Christ’s own act.

Finally, the use of auxiliary verbs in the final stanza could represent differing attitudes to religion. The verbs “ did” and “ shall” are used, signifying both future and past tenses, but never the present. This could portray the socio-religious conflict taking place at the time Donne was writing: the traditional Christian ideas exemplified within the Bible, juxtaposed by the new scientific thinking emerging.