

"a hymn to god the father": john donne's rediscovery of faith



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In his poem "A Hymn to God the Father," John Donne addresses God directly through a series of questions intended to reaffirm his faith. He prays for forgiveness for his transgressions in an inquisitive and almost intimate tone; it seems that he is searching for reassurance about his connection with God. The evolution of his inner conflict is emphasized by the increasing gravity of his sins, from the mildest in the first stanza to the most severe in the third stanza. It is only after he has confronted all of his sins that he is finally able to reestablish his faith. The order of the sins for which Donne asks to be forgiven is significant to the progression of the poem. In the first stanza, he addresses the sins inherent to all mankind by using a Biblical allusion to Adam and Eve. Donne refers to it as "that sin where I begun, / Which is my sin, though it were done before?" (Lines 1-2). By beginning his poem with the sins for which he is least responsible, Donne establishes a clear pattern of transition through each stanza to mirror his struggle with his faith; that pattern is augmented by the recurring structure that begins in the first stanza. The first two stanzas are nearly identical in structure: both begin with the line, "Wilt thou forgive that sin" (1, 7). This repetition creates a continuous flow of questions through the two stanzas. The question of forgiveness for the sins Donne has committed can be interpreted in different ways: he might literally be asking for forgiveness, but he might also be asking rhetorically how much God will forgive him for in a lifetime. Donne leaves both stanzas open-ended with a combination of repetition and a pun on his own name: "When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more" (5-6, 11-12). The two meanings ascribed to the word "done" is just one of many examples of the layers of complexity in the poem. The severity of Donne's corruption increases in the second stanza, when the poet admits <https://assignbuster.com/a-hymn-to-god-the-father-john-donnes-rediscovery-of-faith/>

to sins that are more destructive to his faith. The diction emphasizes his responsibility for his defiant actions. For instance, the use of "wallowed" in line ten implies that he enjoyed his sins almost as a pig enjoys wallowing in the mud; he too becomes dirty in a figurative sense as a result his immoral actions. He also blames himself for being the "door" (8) that leads others to sin; this metaphor could indicate the shame that he feels for not preventing others from committing acts similar to his. Since this poem lacks the underlying sexual theme present in so many of Donne's previous works, it is possible that the inner conflict stems from the contempt he has for his actions. The third and final stanza reveals the worst of all Donne's sins: "I have a sin of fear" (13). He has finally come to the ultimate sin that is affecting his faith so seriously. By admitting his progression of sins, his questions of faith, and his doubts of himself, Donne has finally found his answer and regained his confidence. To illustrate that, he employs another pun that conflates Christ with the sun: "at my death thy Son / Shall shine as he shines now" (15-16). With this line the transition is complete; the poem has finished Donne's usual process of working through his ideas and integrating complex meaning below the surface of the text. Although the tone of this stanza differs from that of the previous two, the repetition in the last two lines reuses the pun on Donne's name. Now, however, it is invoked to prove the absolute faith he puts into God: "And, having done that, thou hast done, / I fear no more" (17-18). Rather than doubting himself, he leaves himself to God. The form of the three stanzas also contributes to the cohesive nature of the poem. The appealing sound of the poem when read aloud can be attributed to the identical format of each stanza; all three stanzas consist of six lines with an ABABAB rhyme scheme. The meter is <https://assignbuster.com/a-hymn-to-god-the-father-john-donnes-rediscovery-of-faith/>

iambic pentameter through the first four lines of each stanza, but the last two lines deviate to a tetrameter. This form also increases the anticipation for Donne's eventual conclusion and the restoration of his faith. The three stanzas are very similar, and yet they also serve as important individual steps in his process. "A Hymn to God the Father" therefore represents the process that John Donne uses to labor through his uncertainties about faith. The techniques that Donne employs give the poem several layers of meaning that reiterate the multifaceted nature of faith. It is not a topic to be dealt with frivolously, and Donne underscores that point by using the complexity of his poem to mirror the complexity of his inner struggles with faith.