

**“Song”**  
by John Donne

Isaak Walton, who published a biography of John Donne in 1640, claimed that this poem is addressed to Donne’s wife, written when he was leaving for a voyage to the continent in 1611. Bear in mind that at the time travel anywhere, especially overseas, was a difficult and dangerous enterprise, quite likely to involve acts of mugging, piracy, and imprisonment for espionage. In that light, it seems perfectly natural that his wife might be a bit upset about his trip.

Sweetest love, I do not go,  
    For weariness of thee,  
Nor in hope the world can show  
    A fitter love for me;  
    But since that I  
Must die at last, 'tis best  
To use<sup>1</sup> myself in jest  
    Thus by feign'd<sup>2</sup> deaths to die.

Yesternight the sun went hence,  
    And yet is here today;  
He hath no desire nor sense,  
    Nor half so short a way:  
    Then fear not me,  
But believe that I shall make  
Speedier journeys, since I take  
    More wings and spurs than he.

O how feeble is man's power,  
    That if good fortune fall,  
Cannot add another hour,  
    Nor a lost hour recall!  
    But come bad chance,  
And we join to't our strength,  
And we teach it art and length,  
    Itself o'er us to'advance.

When thou sigh'st, thou sigh'st not wind,  
    But sigh'st my soul away;  
When thou weep'st, unkindly kind,  
    My life's blood doth decay.  
    It cannot be  
That thou lov'st me, as thou say'st,

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<sup>1</sup> use: condition

<sup>2</sup> feigned: imagined

If in thine my life thou waste,  
That art the best of me.

Let not thy divining heart  
Forethink me any ill;  
Destiny may take thy part,  
And may thy fears fulfil;  
But think that we  
Are but turn'd aside to sleep;  
They who one another keep  
Alive, ne'er parted be.

### Questions

1. What is the central conceit in this poem?
2. What do the opening four lines suggest about the lover's attitude to the speaker? How does this shape your attitude to the speaker?
3. In this poem, we see a male figure empowered with "wings and spurs" venturing out into the real world beyond what is created by his love. How is this similar to the relationship in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"?
4. The female figure sighs and weeps, initially suggesting a passive victim stereotype of femininity. She also has a "divining heart," the stereotypical "woman's intuition." However, this impression is undercut by images of women's power. Where do you see these images? What effect is created by this tension?
5. In this poem, a loving relationship is seen within the contexts of death, time, fortune, wasting away, and fear. Yet all of this is dismissed in the final four lines. These could be interpreted as an assertion of love's power over life's adversity; they could be interpreted as an assertion of the mind's power over reality. To what extent do you agree with each of these views?