At the round earth’s imagined corners

At the round earth’s imagined corners, blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go;
All whom the flood did, and fire shall o’erthrow,
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despair, law, chance, hath slain, and you whose eyes
Shall behold God and never taste death’s woe.
But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,
For if above all these my sins abound,
’Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace
When we are there; here on this lowly ground
Teach me how to repent; for that’s as good
As if thou hadst sealed my pardon with thy blood.

The description of the angels at the earth’s ‘corners’ comes from the Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, which contains an account of how the world will end: ‘And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth’

- **fire**: the fire that will accompany the world’s end
- **dearth**: famine; poverty
- **agues**: fevers or illnesses
- **tyrannies**: cruel, oppressive regimes
- **hath slain**: has killed
- **and never taste death’s woe**: those who are free of sin and still alive when God appears on the Day of Judgement. These people will go straight to heaven without dying
- **a space**: for a short time
- **my sins abound**: my sins are even more plentiful
- **abundance of thy grace**: God’s generous blessing or forgiveness
- **sealed my pardon**: guaranteed my forgiveness
Pre-Reading

1. How does the Bible describe the end of the world? What does it say will happen on the day the world ends?
2. The day on which the world will end is called ‘Judgement Day’ in the Bible. Why do you think it is called this? Who will judge and who will be judged on this day?

Comprehension

Lines 1 to 4
1. The poet calls upon the world to end. What does he imagine happening when this occurs?
2. Where will the angels be positioned when the world ends? What will they do? What will happen when they do this?
3. The poet imagines the souls of the dead arising ‘From death’. Why do you think he considers them to be ‘numberless infinities’?
4. Class Discussion: In the opening line of the poem the poet mentions the ‘imagined corners’ of the earth. What do you think these corners might be a reference to? Why are they ‘imagined’?
5. Why do you think the poet describes the bodies of the dead as ‘scatter’d’?

Lines 5 to 8
6. In these lines the poet lists different causes of death. List and explain what each one is.
7. The poet mentions a ‘flood’ that occurred and speaks about a ‘fire’ that will occur. To what do you think these are a reference?
8. Donne says that the ‘flood’ and the ‘fire’ did and will ‘o’erthrow’ certain people. What sort of people do you think he has in mind here? What do you think he means by the word ‘o’erthrow’?
9. Certain people will ‘behold God and never taste death’s woe’. Who do you think these people are? When and where will they ‘behold God’? Why will they not ‘taste death’s woe’?

Lines 9 to 14
10. The poet suddenly seems to change his mind and asks God to hold off a while on ending the world. Why does he do this?
11. The poet is concerned that his ‘sins’ might ‘abound’ above all these. Who are ‘these’ people that he has in mind? What does it mean to say that his sins might ‘abound’ above all these?

Personal Response

1. Class Discussion: The poet never makes it clear why he wishes the world to suddenly end. Why do you think he might want this to happen?
2. Consider the poet’s use of punctuation, especially in the first eight lines. Read the poem aloud and comment on how this contributes to the atmosphere and mood of the poem.
3. Comment on the change in mood and tone that occurs at line 9.
4. Do you think that the poet is being genuine when he worries that his sins might exceed those of anyone else: ‘if above all these my sins abound’? Give reasons for your answer.
5. Do you think that the poet paints an effective picture of the world ending in lines 1 to 8? What phrases and images contributed most strongly to this?
6. How would you characterise the poet’s relationship with God? Does he treat him with reverence and awe? Is he fearful of God? Does the poem present God in a favourable light?

In Context

‘Donne’s awareness of sin and great fear of damnation is at the heart of the sonnets on the course.’ Discuss this statement based on your reading of the three Holy Sonnets you have studied.
BACKGROUND
The poet is in a state of extreme mental anguish; gripped by doubt, confusion and despair. He is also physically ill. (At this time Hopkins suffered from a staggering list of different ailments). Furthermore, he suffers from severe insomnia. He wakes in the middle of the night and lies there awake for hours suffering in the darkness.

BLACK HOURS
In the poet’s distressed state the darkness seems almost solid or tangible. When he wakes on such a night he can almost ‘feel’ it brushing or pushing against him. He compares it to the ‘fell’ or hide of an animal: ‘I wake and feel the fell of dark’.

Hopkins wonderfully captures how when we experience insomnia, time seems to stretch on and on, each hour of wakefulness seeming like an eternity. He feels like he’s been lying there in misery for an incredibly long time; that the morning has ‘delayed’ itself in arriving for hour after hour. (Indeed this is reinforced by the repetition of the word ‘hours’ in line 2). But daytime is still far off. He must suffer ‘more’ as the light delays ‘yet longer’ in arriving: ‘and more must in yet longer light’s delay’.

The poet, then, spends ‘black hours’ lying awake through the night. The word ‘black’, of course, suggests not only the literal blackness of the nighttime but also the poet’s despairing state of mind. Hopkins uses the metaphor of the

Hopkins was fond of using words that have more than one meaning. Fell can also mean evil or wickedness, suggesting that Hopkins experiences the darkness as something sinister or menacing. Fell is also an old word for bitterness, which makes sense given Hopkins’ mentions of ‘gall’ and ‘heartburn’ later in the poem. Finally, ‘fell’ is a dialect word for vale or valley, suggesting how Hopkins’ mind has been in a bad place, has wandered through some valley of darkness.
journey to emphasise his mental suffering. He declares that he’s travelled down roads or ‘ways’ so terrible he can hardly bear to mention them. He’s witnessed sights so terrible they defy description: ‘What sights you, heart, saw, ways you went’. This metaphor of a journey through some bleak and frightening landscape powerfully captures the poet’s tortured mental state.

The poet is keen to point out that he speaks with ‘witness’, from deep and intense personal experience: ‘With witness I speak this’. This kind of anguish isn’t just something he’s imagining or has heard about second hand. He’s been suffering and surviving bouts of anguish throughout his entire life: ‘But where I say/ Hours I mean years, mean life’.

We can take this literally. Like many sick people the poet probably does experience these bitter tastes rising in his mouth. However ‘gall’ and ‘heartburn’ also serve as metaphors for his situation in general, powerfully symbolising how painful and bitter his life has become. The poet feels that God must intend him to suffer in this way. It must be God’s will, His solemn or ‘deep’ decree that the poet experience such misery: ‘God’s most deep decree/ Bitter would have me taste’.

**THE BODY AS BURDEN**

The poet’s physical body seems a burden to him. He views it as a ‘curse’ or instrument of torture. He imagines the different stages of his body’s construction, almost as if he visualises his accursed body forming in the womb. Firstly its foundations were assembled out of bone: ‘Bones built [the curse] in me’. This basic structure was filled out with flesh: ‘flesh filled [the curse]’. Finally, blood was introduced to this construct, filling it to the brim: ‘Blood brimmed the curse’.

It is as if his body was assembled around his soul, trapping it and confining it in a torturous structure of bone and flesh. The poet’s ‘spirit’ or soul is naturally inclined to rise towards heaven. He compares it to yeast, the cooking agent that causes bread to rise: ‘Selfyeast of spirit’. But his physical body prevents his soul from rising toward heaven, trapping it in this earthly realm. He compares his body to an especially ‘dull’ or heavy dough that envelops the yeast, spoils or sours it, and prevents it from rising: ‘a dull dough sours’.

The poet compares himself to the ‘lost’ souls, those unbelievers who live outside the church’s teachings: ‘The lost are like this’. They, too, are ‘scourged’ or tortured by having a body. Like the poet they must be their ‘sweating selves’, their souls trapped within flesh and blood constructs that sweat and suffer as they age and sicken. However the lost are in a ‘worse’ situation than the poet, for they lack the consolation of religious belief. Furthermore, they will presumably not get to heaven when their cursed bodies finally give up.
The poem describes the terrible mental anguish that Hopkins endured, especially toward the end of his life. He powerfully captures the ‘black hours’ of misery, comparing his mental anguish to a terrible unending journey of dark ‘ways’ and awful ‘sights’. Furthermore, we get a sense that the poet has been living with such despair to some extent for all his life: ‘But where I say/ Hours I mean years, mean life’. The poem is also wonderful on the misery of insomnia, capturing how for an insomniac the night seems to stretch on and on as the light delays in arriving.

The poem also describes intense physical discomfort, reflecting the various illnesses Hopkins suffered from at this time. The poet’s mouth is filled with bitter tastes – indeed it seems to him that his entire physical system is composed of ‘gall’ and ‘heartburn’. He thinks of his body as little more than a ‘scourge’ or instrument of torture. He thinks of his flesh, bones and blood as part of a terrible ‘curse’. Ultimately, he regards his body as little more than an impediment to his soul reaching heaven.

Once again, Hopkins speaks of the difficult relationship he has with God. The poet feels isolated from God, abandoned and alone. His ‘countless’ prayers to God for help are like cries that go unheeded, or like ‘dead letters’ destined to never reach their intended recipients. Jesus, who he considers his dearest friend, seems very far away indeed.

There’s even a sense in which the poet thinks that God wants him to suffer. It’s as if God willed or ‘decreed’ that the poet should experience this intensely bitter mental and physical suffering. Furthermore, he resents that God decided to trap his soul in the scourge of a ‘sick’ and ‘sweating’ physical body. In a very real sense the poet seems angry with God for causing him to be born.

**PHYSICAL AND MENTAL SUFFERING**

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**Doubting God’s Goodness**

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**Form**

The poem is composed in the form of a Petrarchan sonnet. It has the typical Petrarchan rhyme scheme: ABBAABBA CDCDCD. It is divided into an octet (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). There is a shift in focus between the octet and the sestet.

**Syntax**

A signature feature of many of Hopkins’ poems is the unusual syntax that he deploys. For example, in the second line he says ‘what sights you, heart, saw’ where we might normally say ‘What sights you saw, heart’. The following line features what we might call Hopkins’ shorthand technique, where he omits certain words that we would use if we were expressing the same sentiment in everyday speech: ‘And more must, in yet longer light’s delay’. If we fill in the gaps we end up with a line such as ‘And you must endure more sights such as this as the light’s arrival is set to be delayed even longer’. Unusual syntax is also a feature of line 12 where the poet says ‘Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours’. Converted into ‘normal’ language the line might go something like this: ‘A dull dough sours the selfyeast of the spirit’.

**Vocabulary**

Hopkins is renowned for his invention of new words. Sometimes he would coin or create a new word by combing two existing words. We see this in line 12 when he combines the words ‘self’ and ‘yeast’ to create the word ‘Selfyeast’. The word conveys the way in which the spirit naturally rises without any agent acting upon it.
Like several of Plath’s poems, ‘Mirror’ gives voice to an inanimate object. The mirror is silver. (This may refer to a silver frame around its reflective surface. Alternatively the reflective surface itself may be made from polished silver.) It is square or rectangular in shape, ‘being four-cornered’.

It hangs opposite a pink speckled wall. The mirror claims to stare continuously at this wall, ‘meditating’ upon it: ‘I have looked at it so long’. Every night, it becomes too dark for it to see the wall opposite. Furthermore, people regularly check their reflections in the mirror’s surface, blocking its view of the wall: ‘faces and darkness separate us over and over’.

The mirror has spent so long ‘meditating’ in this way that it now believes the pink wall is part of itself: ‘I have looked at it so long/ I think it is a part of my heart’. These lines are oddly touching. We get the impression that the mirror has somehow fallen in love with the speckled wall opposite it.

The mirror claims to ‘swallow’ all it sees. This is a metaphor for how mirrors create the illusion of depth. The reflection of a given object seems to be inside a double of the room we’re standing in, as if it’s been ‘swallowed’ or taken inside the mirror’s world.

The mirror claims to have no feelings whatsoever toward those who examine themselves in its surface. It neither ‘loves’ nor ‘dislikes’ them, and has no biases or prejudices toward them: ‘I have no preconceptions’. It doesn’t blur or alter reflections in order to flatter those it likes or hurt the feelings of those it hates. Everything it shows is ‘unmisted by love or dislike’.

Very often, people are disappointed by what they see when they look in the mirror. Most people want to look younger, thinner and sexier. The mirror, however, refuses to be blamed for any dismay or disappointment people might feel when they examine themselves in its surface. It is not ‘cruel’, having no interest in making them feel bad about themselves. It is simply being ‘truthful’, doing its job of reflecting the world as it really is: ‘I am not cruel, only truthful’.

Stanza 2 describes the relationship between the mirror and the woman who owns it. This woman seems to be mentally anguished. She is regularly gripped by fits of loneliness and
despair that involve ‘tears and an agitation of hands’. She spends a great deal of time staring in the mirror, gazing at her reflection in an attempt to understand herself.

We get the impression that the mirror looks forward to her daily visits, and would be lonely without them: ‘Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness’. The mirror acts almost like the woman’s faithful servant, loyally continuing to reflect her back even when she turns away from it: ‘I see her back, and reflect it faithfully’.

The woman also needs the mirror: ‘I am important to her’. The mirror is important to the woman in a casual, everyday sense. (How else could she check her appearance before going out?) Yet it is also important to her in a psychological sense. She returns to the mirror again and again, gazing into it in an attempt to reach self-understanding – to find out ‘what she really is’.

AN UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIP

We get a sense, however, that the relationship between the mirror and the woman is an unequal one. While the mirror is confined to one place, the woman enjoys the freedom to move around: ‘She comes and goes’.

The mirror describes the woman sitting in candlelight or gazing out of her window at the moon: ‘Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon’. There is a sense in these lines that it is jealous of the candles and the moon, resentful of the fact that the woman is looking at them instead of into its own reflective glass. The mirror, it seems, feels hurt and betrayed when the woman turns away from it. Yet even when she does so, it remains faithful to her, loyally reflecting her back: ‘I see her back and reflect it faithfully’.

All the mirror gets in return for this loyalty is the opportunity to witness the woman’s distress: ‘She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands’. According to several critics, the tone here is one of bitterness and sarcasm, as if the mirror feels the sight of the woman’s tears isn’t much of a ‘reward’ for its faithful service.

A TERRIBLE FISH

The mirror compares itself to a lake. The comparison between the mirror and a lake is obvious. Like a lake, the mirror has a flat, reflective surface. It is possible, on a calm day, to study one’s reflection in a lake just as it is in a mirror.

The mirror has recorded the slow ageing of the woman. When the woman looks at herself in the mirror, she can see traces of the child she once was. Those traces, however, become fainter and fainter as time goes on. The mirror uses a striking metaphor to describe this process, saying that the woman ‘has drowned a young girl’ in its depths.

Every day, the woman wakes up and looks in the mirror, and every day an older version of herself looks back. With each passing day she sees that the old woman she will one day become is closer and closer. Another powerful metaphor is used to depict this process, the mirror declaring that old age is a fish swimming out of the lake’s depths and rising up toward her: ‘in me an old woman/ Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish’.

FEELINGS OF INADEQUACY AND WORTHLESSNESS

Feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness are also explored in ‘Mirror’, where the speaker looks at her reflection with ‘tears and an agitation of hands’. She turns away to the soft glow of candles and the moon, as if she does not like what she sees in the mirror. Perhaps she feels inadequate about her appearance, her personality or the way she is living her life.

MENTAL ANGUISH

The woman in the poem is gripped by a fit of loneliness or despair, examining herself in the looking glass as she cries and wrings her hands: ‘She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hand’. We get a sense that much of the woman’s turmoil stems from the fact that she has lost her way in life, has lost her sense of her own identity. She gazes into the mirror in an attempt to locate and reconnect with her true self. It’s as if staring at her own reflection allows her to explore the depths of her own psyche and discover what really makes her who she is: ‘Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,/ Searching my reaches’.

The mirror depicts itself as a kind of god: ‘I am . . . the eye of a little god, four-cornered’. This comparison is not as strange as it might first sound – people, after all, pay an almost religious devotion to their reflections. We spend a great deal of time and energy in an effort to keep ourselves young and beautiful, to make sure the mirror is kind to us when we stare into it. This description brings to mind the other meaning of the word ‘exact’, which is to demand payment. The mirror is a kind of god that exacts tribute or payment from those who worship it. The poem suggests that we are willing to pay a high price in sweat and money in order that the mirror will show us what we want to see: ‘I am silver and exact’.

THEMES