

George Herbert's poem "Virtue" is a profound exploration of virtue and its enduring significance. It was composed in the early 17th century during the metaphysical poetry movement. Spiritual depth and elaborate language use shine through this popular poem's lines.

## **Introduction to the Poem:**

"Virtue" by George Herbert, composed in the early 17th century, is a quintessential example of metaphysical poetry. Through vivid imagery and intricate language, Herbert reflects on the fleeting beauty of the natural world juxtaposed with the timeless qualities of virtue. The poem delves into themes of mortality, virtue, and spiritual resilience. It highlights the true essence of goodness and its ability to transcend time limitations. Herbert's masterful use of metaphor and allegory elevates "Virtue" to a timeless work of English literature, offering readers a glimpse into the eternal truths of the human experience.

## **About the Poet:**

George Herbert (1593-1633) was an English poet and clergyman born into a wealthy family in Wales. He attended Trinity College, Cambridge, where he excelled academically and became a college Fellow. Herbert served as a Member of Parliament and held various ecclesiastical appointments, including the position of rector in Bemerton. He is best known for his collection of religious poetry, "The Temple," published posthumously in 1633, which explores themes of faith, divine love, and spiritual devotion. Herbert's poetry exhibits intricate metaphysical conceits, rich imagery, and profound exploration of Christian themes. His work has had a lasting influence on English literature. It continues to be studied and admired for its depth and spiritual insight.

In this article, we will explore the poem "Virtue" by George Herbert. The focus will be on critically analysing the poem, highlighting the literary qualities and underlining important aspects.

## **Quick Summary of the Poem Virtue by George Herbert:**

In "Virtue," Herbert reflects on the nature of true virtue and its resilience in the face of mortality. The poem consists of five quatrains, each containing a profound insight into the essence of virtue. The poet begins by describing a serene and harmonious day, illustrating the beauty and tranquillity of the natural world.

However, this peaceful imagery is juxtaposed with the stark reality of mortality, symbolised by night's inevitable fall. Herbert then turns his attention to the image of a rose destined to wither and decay despite its vibrant and captivating appearance. The short-living rose and its beauty serves as a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of earthly beauty and pleasure. In the subsequent stanzas, Herbert explores the transient nature of spring, with its fleeting days of sunshine and blooming flowers. Despite the abundance of sweetness and joy, all things must eventually end, as indicated by the closing of musical notes. The final stanza offers a profound meditation on the nature of true virtue.

Unlike perishable beauty, a virtuous soul, like seasoned timber, withstands the ravages of time and remains steadfast amidst the changing world. Herbert suggests that genuine virtue transcends the limitations of mortality and is the trustworthy source of enduring life.

To quickly sum up, George Herbert's "Virtue" is a reflective and profoundly philosophical poem that

To quickly sum up, George Herbert's "Virtue" is a reflective and profoundly philosophical poem that explores the timeless qualities of virtue and its ability to withstand the passage of time. Herbert demands that readers contemplate the significance of true goodness in a transient world through rich imagery and profound insights.

## **Structure, Rhyme Scheme and Literary Devices used in the Poem Virtue by George Herbert:**

"Virtue" by George Herbert is a sonnet comprising 16 lines, structured into four quatrains. Each quatrain presents a distinct image or concept, exploring the theme of mortality and the enduring nature of virtue. The rhyme scheme follows the pattern ABAB, with alternating end rhymes throughout. Herbert employs various literary devices, including metaphor, personification, and paradox, to convey his philosophical reflections on the nature of virtue and its significance in the face of mortality. The poem's concise form and rich imagery contribute to its timeless appeal, inviting readers to contemplate the deeper truths inherent in the fleeting beauty of the natural world and the enduring qualities of virtue.

## **The Refrain: Everything “must die”:**

In “Virtue,” the refrain “must die” emphasises the inevitability of death throughout the poem. This refrain is repeated at the end of each stanza, serving as a poignant reminder of the transient nature of life and the certainty of mortality. By incorporating this refrain, Herbert underscores the overarching theme of impermanence. He highlights the contrast between the natural world’s fleeting beauty and the virtue’s enduring quality. The repetition of the refrain imbues the poem with a sense of inevitability, reinforcing the poet’s meditative reflection on the fragility of existence and the enduring significance of moral goodness in the face of mortality. Moreover, the poem’s last line introduces the antithesis – ‘then chiefly lives’.

## **Stanza by Stanza Summary and Critical Analysis of the Poem Virtue by Herbert:**

### **Stanza 1:**

*“Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky;  
The dew shall weep thy fall to-night,  
For thou must die.”*

The first stanza of “Virtue” by George Herbert paints a serene and idyllic picture of nature, describing a beautiful day characterised by its coolness, calmness,

beautiful day characterised by its coolness, calmness, and brightness. The imagery evokes a sense of tranquillity and harmony, portraying the day as a union between the earth and the sky, likened to a bridal ceremony. However, amidst this serene scene, there is an underlying sense of melancholy, as the dew is depicted as weeping for the inevitable fall of the day, symbolising the transient nature of life and the certainty of death.

Critically analysing this stanza, Herbert adeptly uses vivid imagery and personification to convey deeper philosophical themes. The juxtaposition of the day's beauty with the inevitability of its demise creates a sense of tension and poignancy, inviting readers to contemplate the fleeting nature of existence. The personification of the dew weeping for the day's end adds a vibrant layer to the stanza, evoking a sense of sadness and loss. Through this imagery, Herbert explores the theme of mortality and the cyclical nature of life, prompting readers to reflect on the transient beauty of the world and the enduring significance of virtue amidst impermanence.

This stanza's subject matter and style resemble the works of other English poets, particularly John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale." Both poems employ rich sensory imagery to evoke a vivid natural landscape imbued with beauty, transience, and mortality themes. Additionally, both poets use personification to imbue elements of nature with human-like qualities, adding

depth and emotional resonance to their respective works. However, while Keats' ode explores the theme of immortality through the nightingale's song, Herbert's "Virtue" delves into the enduring significance of moral goodness in the face of mortality, subtly reflecting the human condition.

## **Stanza 2:**

*"Sweet rose, whose hue angry and brave  
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye;  
Thy root is ever in its grave,  
And thou must die."*

The second stanza of "Virtue" by George Herbert shifts the focus to the image of a rose, described as possessing a hue that is both "angry and brave." This evocative language suggests a striking and intense beauty that commands attention and elicits an emotional response from the viewer. The stanza continues by personifying the rose, attributing it with the power to compel the "rash gazer" to wipe his eye, implying that the rose's beauty is so overwhelming that it brings tears to the eyes of those who behold it. However, amidst this beauty, Herbert introduces the theme of mortality again, reminding the reader that despite its captivating appearance, the rose's root remains in its grave, and like all living beings, it is subject to the inevitability of death.

Critically analysing this stanza, Herbert employs vivid imagery and personification to explore earthly beauty's transient nature and mortality's inevitability. The juxtaposition of the rose's beauty with the sobering reminder of its eventual decay creates a sense of tension and poignancy, asking readers to contemplate the transient nature of life and the impermanence of physical beauty. Through personification, Herbert ingrains the rose with a sense of agency, portraying it as a powerful and commanding presence that elicits admiration and sorrow from those who gaze upon it. This duality of beauty and mortality underscores the poem's central theme, highlighting earthly existence's fragile and temporary nature.

In terms of parallels with other English poets, this stanza shares thematic similarities with John Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn." Keats' and Herbert's poems explore the same thing – beauty and its relationship to mortality, using vivid imagery and personification to convey the transient nature of earthly existence.

However, while Keats celebrates the eternal beauty captured on the urn, Herbert confronts the inevitability of decay and mortality, offering a more sombre meditation on the fleeting nature of physical beauty and the enduring significance of virtue.



### Stanza 3:

*“Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,  
A box where sweets compacted lie;  
My music shows ye have your closes,  
And all must die.”*

In the third stanza of “Virtue” by George Herbert, the poet turns his attention to the image of spring, portraying it as a season filled with sweetness and abundance. Herbert describes spring as replete with “sweet days and roses,” evoking a sense of joy and vitality associated with the season’s blossoming beauty. The imagery of spring as a “box where sweets compacted lie” suggests a treasure trove of delights waiting to be discovered, further enhancing the sense of richness and abundance. However, amidst this celebration of spring’s sweetness, Herbert introduces a note of solemnity by reminding the reader of the inevitability of death. The stanza concludes with the assertion that even spring, with all its sweetness and beauty, must end, reinforcing the theme of mortality and impermanence.

Critically analysing this stanza, Herbert employs rich sensory imagery and metaphor to convey spring’s vibrancy and transient beauty. The juxtaposition of sweetness and mortality creates a sense of tension and depth, inviting readers to contemplate the cyclical nature of life and the passage of time. Using metaphor, Herbert portrays spring as a metaphorical “box”

containing life's fleeting pleasures, suggesting that even the most joyful moments are tinged with the awareness of their eventual end. This interplay of imagery and thematic exploration underscores the poem's meditation on the ephemeral nature of earthly existence and the enduring significance of virtue in the face of mortality.

In terms of parallels with other English poets, this stanza shares thematic similarities with William Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, often referred to as "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Both poems celebrate the beauty and vitality of the natural world while acknowledging the transience of life and the inevitability of mortality. However, while Shakespeare's sonnet focuses on the eternal nature of poetic verse to preserve beauty, Herbert's "Virtue" directly confronts the reality of death, offering a sad reflection on the temporary nature of worldly existence and the enduring significance of moral goodness.

#### **Stanza 4:**

*"Only a sweet and virtuous soul,  
Like season'd timber, never gives;  
But though the whole world turn to coal,  
Then chiefly lives."*

In the final stanza of "Virtue" by George Herbert, the poet reflects profoundly on the nature of virtue and its

In the final stanza of "Virtue" by George Herbert, the poet reflects profoundly on the nature of virtue and its enduring significance. Herbert asserts that only a "sweet and virtuous soul" possesses the quality of enduring like seasoned timber, which remains steadfast and resilient despite time. Through this metaphor, Herbert suggests that true virtue, like seasoned timber, is incorruptible and enduring, capable of withstanding the trials and tribulations of life. The stanza concludes with a striking paradox. Herbert asserts that even if the entire world were to turn to coal, it is the virtuous soul that "chiefly lives." This assertion highlights the transformative power of virtue, suggesting that it is the essence of true life and vitality, transcending the limitations of earthly existence.

Critically analysing this stanza, Herbert employs metaphor and paradox to convey virtue's timeless and transformative nature. The comparison of virtue to seasoned timber underscores its resilience and enduring quality. In contrast, the paradoxical assertion that virtue "chiefly lives" amidst a world turned to coal emphasises its priority and significance in adversity. Through these literary devices, Herbert offers a profound meditation on the nature of moral goodness and its ability to imbue life with meaning and purpose, even amid darkness and despair.

In terms of parallels with other English poets, this stanza shares thematic similarities with John Milton's "Paradise Lost." Both poets explore the concept of

In terms of parallels with other English poets, this stanza shares thematic similarities with John Milton's "Paradise Lost." Both poets explore the concept of virtue and its relationship to the human condition, employing rich imagery and philosophical reflection to convey profound truths about the nature of good and evil. However, while Milton's epic poem delves into the cosmic struggle between good and evil, Herbert's "Virtue" offers a more intimate and reflective exploration of the enduring significance of moral goodness in the individual soul.

## **Poetic Devices used in the Poem Virtue by George Herbert:**

"Virtue" by George Herbert employs several major poetic devices to convey themes and evoke imagery, creating a rich and profound poetic experience.

**1. Imagery:** Throughout the poem, Herbert uses vivid imagery to evoke the beauty of nature and the inevitability of mortality. For example, in the first stanza, he describes the day as "cool, calm, so bright," painting a serene picture of nature. Similarly, in the second stanza, he portrays the rose's hue as "angry and brave," creating a striking image of its boldness and intensity.

**2. Personification:** Herbert personifies elements of nature to imbue them with human-like qualities and emotions. In the first stanza, the dew is depicted as weeping for the day's end, personifying it as though it feels sadness at the passing of time. This personification adds depth to the poem's exploration of mortality and impermanence.

**3. Symbolism:** The poem is rich in symbolic imagery that conveys deeper meanings. For instance, the rose symbolises earthly beauty and pleasure while also serving as a metaphor for the transient nature of life. Similarly, spring symbolises renewal and vitality, yet Herbert reminds us of its inevitable end, reinforcing the theme of mortality.

**4. Repetition:** The refrain "And thou must die" is repeated at the end of each stanza as a stark reminder of the poem's central theme. This repetition creates a sense of certainty and reinforces the poem's message about the transience of life.

**5. Paradox:** Herbert employs paradoxical language to convey complex ideas and insights. For example, in the final stanza, he asserts that a virtuous soul "chiefly lives" even amidst a world turned to coal. This paradox challenges conventional notions of life and death, suggesting that actual vitality lies in moral goodness rather than mere existence.