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An Analysis of "Divination by a Daffodil"

In "Divination by a Daffodil," Robert Herrick compares himself, in his mortality, to a transient natural object:

When a daffodil I see,
Hanging down his head towards me;
Guess I may, what I must be:
First, I shall decline my head;
Secondly, I shall be dead;
Lastly, safely buried.

Many poems have drawn similar analogies between human mortality and death in the natural world. What has Herrick done to turn this conventional idea into an original poem? How has he newly imagined this theme?

He has, first of all, made the commonplace act of seeing a flower into an act of "divination." In classical times, priests "divined" the future by examining the entrails of a sacrificed animal. Herrick transfers this bloody act to something light and beautiful and glancing when he chooses, as his symbolic object, the daffodil, with its characteristic drooping head.

Second, Herrick doesn't begin with the comparison of his fate to that of the daffodil. He might have said, "When a daffodil I spy, / I know that I, like it, shall die." Instead, he divides the

poem into two parts. He reserves the comparison to the second half of this single-sentence poem, leaving us to guess, as we read the first half, what he might be going to divine from his daffodil.

When we note the general metrical scheme of the poem — “**strong** weak / **strong** weak / **strong** weak / **strong**” — we can see that the author wanted the first word of each line to bear emphasis. But the metrical emphasis is not crucial in the first half of the poem. The first three lines could equally well have read “weak **strong** / weak **strong** / weak **strong** / weak **strong**”: “A daffodil appears to me; / His head is hanging down, and we / Can guess from that what we must be.” The real purpose of the meter becomes clear when we arrive at the second half of the poem. The rhythm gives weight to “*First . . . / Secondly . . . / Lastly,*” which ring with inexorable emphasis in summoning up the last stages of life: illness, death, and burial. When we examine the rhyme scheme (*aaabbb*) we see that it possesses the same inevitability in the second half. Instead of the relatively uninteresting rhymes of the first half (*see, me, be*), we hear the death-knell of *head, dead, buried*.

Herrick has made his theme—man’s mortality—into a poem by imaging that one can divine one’s fate from a flower, by arranging a perfect spacial symmetry of three lines each to flower and man, and by letting us hear, after the inoffensive first three lines, the heavy tread of his own death announcement.