

## "The Pulley" George Herbert

### Themes and Meanings

"The Pulley" is both a myth of origins and a moral and spiritual fable; these two genres overlap because, for Herbert, one's devotional responsibilities are perfectly consistent with and flow inevitably from who one is. Despite the brevity and simplicity of the poem, several key facts are affirmed. For example, this version of the Creation myth emphasizes the dignity of humankind, bestowed by a God who is thoughtful, generous, and kind. The story of Creation in the Book of Genesis is astonishing: A spiritual breath raises dusty clay to life in the form of Adam. In Herbert's poem, the Creation seems even more splendid, as humankind is described as the sum and epitome of all the world's riches, and God is a being who communicates easily and cordially with His creation.

Simultaneous with this emphasis on the dignity of humankind, however, is a carefully drawn distinction: Strength, beauty, wisdom, honor, and pleasure are necessary and vital components of humankind, but they are not sufficient to guarantee spiritual health. For this humans need rest, the one quality held back by God. Human independence, then, is qualified, but not undermined completely. "The Pulley" does not suggest that humankind is disastrously flawed and impotent, or that life in the world of Nature is insignificant and useless: Life can, after all, be "rich." It does show the limits of human powers and the liabilities of earthly existence: The inevitable human fate is restlessness and weariness.

Perpetual desire serves two extremely important purposes. First, it is an important devotional corrective, saving one from an undue concentration on Nature, the things of this world, and what is in fact only the illusion of human independence. It is all too easy to be distracted and "adore" the gifts rather than the giver, Nature rather than "the God of Nature." Since the former provide no lasting peace, however, one is thereby always redirected to the latter.

Life may thus be a series of postponed gratifications, even afflictions, but this will ultimately take one to God, the second purpose served by perpetual desire. "The Pulley" is not a poem of advice about how to change the focus of one's devotion from the things of the world to God, the author of those things. It is rather a dramatic, even magical poem that envisions a climactic union of humanity and God accomplished not by human intellectual power or will but simply by desire. Much like the poem "Love" (III), which concludes Herbert's sequence of lyrics in *The Temple*, "goodness" is somewhat beside the point when it comes to intimacy between humankind and God: Not worthiness but "weariness" tosses one to God's breast and secures rest.

What is a summary of "The Pulley" by George Herbert?

George Herbert's "The Pulley" is a fable consisting of twenty lines with alternating rhyming. It blends elements from myth, like Pandora's box, and the Book of Genesis to narrate the story of how God created the world and mankind.

George Herbert's twenty-line spiritual fable of alternating rhyme narrates the creation of man that borrows from the myth of Pandora's box and the Book of Genesis. The Creator delves into His jar of blessings that contains virtues and attributes, bestowing strength, beauty, wisdom, honor, and pleasure upon man. However, the Creator restrains Himself and keeps man restless so that he will not become complacent and remain content within the confines of Nature. For, as the poet Robert Browning writes,

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,

Or what's a heaven for?

Wishing that man reach for heaven for his peace rather than being complacent with nature, the Creator uses the metaphorical "pulley" of restlessness which will draw man to reach for heaven and attain spiritual perfection, rather than being satisfied on earth with Nature.

Let him be rich and weary, that at least,

If goodness lead him not, yet weariness

May toss him to my breast."

It is in his weariness, then, that man will realize his imperfections and his need for God and the spiritual life. Then, he will reach for God's "pulley" and seek heaven.