



READING 3 Evaluate the changes in sound, form, and figurative language in poetry across literary time periods.

On My First Son Song: To Celia

Poetry by Ben Jonson

Meet the Author

Ben Jonson 1572–1637

In his day, Ben Johnson was a literary giant who knew most of London's important writers, including John Donne and William Shakespeare. In fact, Elizabethans considered him a more important literary figure than Shakespeare. But part of Jonson's fame resulted from his controversial life.

Stage Call Like Shakespeare, Jonson has been remembered chiefly as a great playwright. His route to the theater was indirect. Jonson's father, a minister, died about a month before Ben was born, and his mother then married a bricklayer. Although Jonson gained a strong early education, he did not have the money to attend college, so he joined his stepfather in bricklaying. Jonson hated the job, ran away to enlist in the British army, and fought in the Netherlands. After returning to London, he joined a group of touring actors and began to write plays. The production of his first play landed him in prison, because it offended government officials.

Success . . . and Near

Death Jonson's second play, *Every Man in His Humor*, was a huge success. Shakespeare's company performed the comedy, and Shakespeare himself played one of the roles.

The success was immediately followed by trouble,

however. The temperamental Jonson got into an argument with an actor in the company and killed him in a duel. Jonson escaped hanging by reading a passage from the Latin Bible, which allowed him to be tried by a church court rather than a harsher criminal court. At the time, knowledge of Latin was largely confined to clergymen. Jonson kept his life but was branded on the thumb as a convicted felon and had his property taken away.

A Literary Reformer Jonson considered himself a pioneer in drama, especially comedy, and set out to rid it of clichés, stale jokes, and improbable plots. He gained fame for his satiric comedies, which poked fun at the human vices and follies of his day. In 1616, he published a volume of his plays under the title *The Works of Ben Jonson*. At that time, scholars considered only such literary forms as poetry, historical writing, and sermons worthy of being called "works." Jonson challenged that notion, paving the way for the acceptance of plays as literature.

Jonson also wrote some of the finest poetry of his time. "On My First Son" is the poet's response to the death of his son, Benjamin. Like John Donne and other Elizabethans, Jonson experienced the anguish of the untimely death of a loved one more than once. Both of his children died at young ages, his son at the age of seven, a victim of the plague, and his daughter, Mary, in infancy.

Author Online



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DID YOU KNOW?

Ben Jonson . . .

- had a fan club of young writers called "the sons of Ben."
- converted to Catholicism while in prison for murder.
- continued to write plays from his bed after suffering a stroke.



● POETIC FORM: EPITAPH

An **epitaph** is an inscription placed on a tomb or monument to honor the memory of the person buried there. The term *epitaph* has also been used more loosely to describe a poem, such as “On My First Son,” which commemorates someone who has died. Notice the serious tone and somber mood of the following lines:

*Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy*

As you read “On My First Son,” determine which lines are characteristic of an epitaph.

● LITERARY ANALYSIS: RHYME

The rhymes in Jonson’s poems help give them a musical quality. **Rhyme** occurs when the sounds of the accented vowels in words and all the succeeding sounds in the words are identical. Rhyme at the end of verse lines is called **end rhyme** (*joy* and *boy* in the two lines above). The pattern of a poem’s end rhymes is its **rhyme scheme**. There are two basic types of rhymes.

- An **exact rhyme** occurs when two words sound exactly alike except for their consonant sounds, as in *joy* and *boy*.
- A **slant rhyme**, or off rhyme, occurs when the rhyme is approximate, as in *come* and *doom*. Although rhymes normally fall on accented syllables, slant rhymes may pair an accented and an unaccented syllable, as in *though* and *fellow*.

As you read each poem, identify the rhyme scheme and notice where Jonson uses slant rhymes rather than exact ones.

● READING SKILL: COMPARE SPEAKERS

Though a poet may speak with his or her own voice in a poem, the **speaker** is often a voice or character made up by the writer. Two poems by the same writer may therefore have very different speakers. As you read the following poems by Jonson, record the images and words that directly express or imply the speaker’s feelings toward the poem’s subject. Notice how these images and words allow Jonson to create distinct speakers in the poems.

<i>“On My First Son”</i>	<i>“Song: To Celia”</i>
<i>“O could I lose all father now!”</i>	



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Is love a BLESSING or a CURSE?

There’s no doubt that strong attachment—whether between lovers, family members, or friends—can bring both great pleasure and intense pain. Ben Jonson explored the different aspects of attachment in the selections that follow. Sometimes it’s hard to know which feeling predominates.

DISCUSS How do you think most people would answer the question “Is love a blessing or a curse?” With a classmate, discuss the times when attachment to someone can be painful and when it brings joy.



On My First Son

Ben Jonson

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy:
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
5 O could I lose all father now! for why
Will man lament the state he should envy,
To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage,
And, if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and asked, say, "Here doth lie
10 Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such
As what he loves may never like too much. **A**

1 child of my right hand: Jonson's son was also named Benjamin, which literally means "son of my right hand" in Hebrew.

4 just: required; exact.

5 lose all father: lose all of the feeling or hope of being a father.

A EPITAPH
What **mood** does Jonson convey in lines 11–12?

Analyze Visuals ►

What elements of this painting help convey the subject's vulnerability?

Literary Analysis

- 1. Clarify** Reread lines 1–2. What is the speaker's "sin"?
- 2. Interpret** How do you interpret the statement in lines 9–10, "Here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry"?

Portrait of Master Bunbury (1780), Sir Joshua Reynolds.
Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{8}$ " × 25 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". The John Howard McFadden Collection,
1928. © The Philadelphia Museum of Art/Art Resource, New York.



Song: To Celia

Ben Jonson



Portrait of Lady Brownlow (1600s),
William Wissing. Oil on canvas, 127 cm × 103.2 cm.
Private collection. © Bridgeman Art Library.

Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
And I'll not look for wine. **B**
5 The thirst that from the soul doth rise
Doth ask a drink divine:
But might I of Jove's nectar sup,
I would not change for thine.
I sent thee late a rosy wreath,
10 Not so much honoring thee,
As giving it a hope that there
It could not withered be.
But thou thereon didst only breathe,
And sent'st it back to me;
15 Since when it grows and smells, I swear,
Not of itself, but thee. **C**

B COMPARE SPEAKERS

Reread lines 1–4. What emotion does the speaker express?

7 Jove's nectar: the special drink of the Greek and Roman gods. Jove is another name for Jupiter, chief of the Roman gods.

C RHYME

Which end rhyme in the poem is an example of **slant rhyme**?



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Comprehension

1. **Paraphrase** Restate in your own words lines 1–2 of “Song: To Celia.”
2. **Clarify** In “Song: To Celia,” what happens when the speaker sends a wreath to his beloved?

Literary Analysis

3. **Examine Epitaph** Which lines from the poem “On My First Son” would be the best inscription on a gravestone for Jonson’s son? Why?
4. **Interpret Theme** What is the speaker’s message about loss in the following passages of “On My First Son”?
 - lines 1–2 (“Farewell, thou child . . . thee, loved boy”)
 - lines 3–4 (“Seven years thou . . . on the just day.”)
 - lines 11–12 (“For whose sake . . . never like too much.”)
5. **Analyze Figurative Language** An **extended metaphor** compares two unlike things at length. Identify the extended metaphor in “Song: To Celia.” What is its relevancy to the subject of the poem?
6. **Analyze Rhyme** Reread the two poems, noting Jonson’s use of **exact** and **slant rhyme**. Study the following **rhyme schemes**, and decide which one matches each poem:
 - *aabbcdcecdff*
 - *abcbabcbdefedefe*
7. **Compare Speakers** Review the chart you filled in as you read the poems. How does each speaker feel about the person addressed in each poem? What is the main difference between the two speakers?
8. **Compare Author’s Perspectives** Reread lines 5–8 of “On My First Son.” Then compare Jonson’s attitude toward death with that of John Donne in “Holy Sonnet 10” on page 521. Use evidence from the poems to explain the similarities and differences.

Literary Criticism

9. **Different Perspectives** The English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, wrote, “’Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all.” How might Jonson have responded to Tennyson’s statement? Explain your answer.

*Is love a **BLESSING** or a **CURSE**?*

Sometimes attachment can be one-sided. Unrequited love is rarely considered a blessing, but are there any advantages to a painful or disappointing experience in love?