Huswifery

POEM TEXT

Make me, O Lord, thy Spining Wheele compleate.
Thy Holy Worde my Distaff make for mee.
Make mine Affections thy Swift Flyers neate
And make my Soule thy holy Spoole to bee.
My Conversation make to be thy Reele
And reele the yarn thereon spun of thy Wheele.

Make me thy Loome then, knit therein this Twine:
And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:
Then weave the Web thyselfe. The yarn is fine.
Thine Ordinances make my Fulling Mills.
Then dy the same in Heavenly Colours Choice,
All pinkt with Varnisht Flowers of Paradise.

Then cloath therewith mine Understanding, Will,
Affections, Judgment, Conscience, Memory
My Words, and Actions, that their shine may fill
My wayes with glory and thee glorify.
Then mine apparell shall display before yee
That I am Cloathd in Holy robes for glory.

SUMMARY

Dear God, make me your fully functioning spinning wheel. Make your words the rod on which the raw wool is held in place. Make my thoughts and feelings into the spinning wheel's flyers, and my soul into its holy spool. Let my interactions with other people increase the reach of your words and bring more followers to you, like yarn winding around a reel.

Let me be your loom on which you knit this twine, and may you wind the loom's quills with your spirit. Once the delicate yarn is ready, weave it into cloth yourself. Your instructions will purify and cleanse this cloth. Then dye the cloth in the best colors of heaven, and fleck it with pink flowers of paradise.

With this cloth, cover every aspect of my mental and physical being, including all my words and actions. Doing so will make my life shine with your glory, and will also glorify you. When this happens, you will see that I am dressed in holy Robes, ready for glory.

THEMES

GOD AND HUMANKIND

"Huswifery," written by the devout Puritan pastor Edward Taylor, is a deeply religious poem that reflects on humanity's relationship with God. Using an extended metaphor related to weaving cloth, the speaker implores God to help him be a good Christian. The poem feels like a kind of desperate preacher's speech, arguing that people should give themselves entirely to God—and, only in doing so, will people receive the full extent of God's love, glory, and majesty.

In essence the poem is a prayer asking for God's help, while at the same time a kind of vow in which the speaker promises God his total submission, loyalty, and humility. The speaker asks to be metaphorically transformed by God into a "Spining Wheele," the machine used to make cloth at the time of the poem's writing. Framing the speaker's relationship to God within a household chore of the era—which was work done primarily by women—is a gesture of humility itself, showing how the speaker bows down to God's superior greatness.

The poem then develops this metaphor by pairing different parts of the machine with different aspects of God (and the ways that people can serve God). For example, the speaker pairs God's "Holy Worde" (that is, the Bible) with a "Distaff" (a stick that holds unspun fibers); the speaker's religious "Affections" with "Flyers" (arms used for twisting wool); the speaker's soul with the machine's "Spoole"; and the speaker's "Conversation" (Taylor was a pastor for most of his life, so this likely refers to his preaching) with the machine's "Reele." In each of these comparisons, God is the cloth-maker—the creator—while the speaker is simply a tool for God's work. The speaker presents obedience and total trust in God's will as the way of best doing that work—and, in turn, of being part of God's glory.

The second stanza develops this idea further, though now the cloth-making moves on to the next stage of the process. Whereas the first stanza was about making *thread*, this one is about *turning* that thread into *cloth* (so that, ultimately, it can be turned into a garment). The speaker asks God to power the loom (the machine used to make cloth) with the "Holy Spirit," and says that God's instructions ("Ordinances") will then cleanse the cloth (they will be the "Fulling Mills"). Again, then, God is the creator in this scenario—the one with authority and will—and the speaker is simply God's humble servant. At the same time, the intimacy of this metaphor speaks to a close relationship between humankind and God, one which requires

work, dedication, and attentiveness.

This cloth will then be dyed—the next stage of the process—in the best "Heavenly Colours," decorated with "Varnisht Flowers of Paradise." This indicates that people will be rewarded through serving God: the world will be made beautiful (and, of course, God's followers will go to heaven).

It's not until the final stanza that the poem reveals the full purpose behind this extended metaphor. Cloth is made, of course, for *clothing*. Accordingly, the speaker's dedication and submission to God will result in a kind of spiritual warmth and comfort, what the speaker describes as "glory and glor[ification]." The speaker asks for every aspect of his life—"mine Understanding, Will, Affections, Judgment, Conscience, Memory My Words, and Actions"—to be clothed in God's "Holy robes." In other words, this is an argument for total dedication to religious life (not surprising, perhaps, for a Puritan pastor!). This, argues the poem, is the way to be a good Christian, and, by implication, the way to be rewarded by God.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

Make me, O Lord, thy Spining Wheele compleate.
Thy Holy Worde my Distaff make for mee.
Make mine Affections thy Swift Flyers neate
And make my Soule thy holy Spoole to bee.
My Conversation make to be thy Reele
And reele the yarn thereon spun of thy Wheele.

The poem opens with a moment of apostrophe—a direct appeal to God. The speaker asks God to make him "thy Spining Wheele compleate." (Note that the unfamiliar spellings throughout the poem are just a product of the time period in which the poem was written, the 1600s.) Right away, the poem launches into its extended metaphor (which can also be thought of as the poem's conceit). A spinning wheel is a tool used to transform raw fibers into thread. Essentially, then, in asking to be *God's* spinning wheel, the speaker is saying that he wants to be a *tool* for God.

Specifically, he wants to be the machine on which God makes "Holy robes for glory." The overall implication is that a good Christian should obey the word of God, be submissive to God, and see their religion as a kind of unending daily work on behalf of God.

It's worth noting that this chosen conceit implies that people should also be humble—the making of garments was largely the work of poor women at the time of the poem's writing (a "huswife" is a married woman who takes care of the daily domestic chores and family affairs). The word "compleate," meanwhile, signals that the poem is about spiritual fulfillment.

The first two words of the poem, "Make me," alliterate. This draws attention to the force of the speaker's plea to God. It also subtly draws the reader's attention to the *construction* of the poem itself—that is, the immediate use of poetic language reminds readers that this is, well, a *poem*, a carefully crafted piece of writing. This, in turn, mirrors the way that humankind is part of *God's* creation, the way that the whole world is a kind of poem written by God. This alliteration is then repeated in lines 2, 3, and 4, reinforcing this effect.

After the first line, the rest of the stanza breaks down the various parts of the spinning wheel. A "Distaff" holds raw wool or flax in place. The speaker links this to God's "Holy Worde"—an allusion to the Bible. Essentially, the speaker is promising to use the Bible as a way of regulating and guiding his life, of holding his life in place just as the "Distaff" holds the raw materials for the spinning wheel in place.

Similarly, the speaker asks for his "affections" to be the machine's "Flyers" and his "Soul [God's] holy Spoole." These are again references to various mechanical parts of the spinning wheel. Consonance through /f/ sounds tie the first pair together ("affections" and "Flyers"), while alliterating /s/ sounds make a pair of the latter ("Soul" and "Spoole"). These shared sounds convey the speaker's desire to have a deep and strong bond with God, with God as a metaphorical weaver and the speaker as God's machinery.

The stanza's closing couplet likens the speaker's "Conversation" to God's "Reele." A reel is a small device around which yarn or thread is wound; the word can also be used as a verb in reference to turning that reel, or more generally in reference to winding something up or drawing something in (think of the phrase "to reel a fish"). The speaker wants to *be* that reel and also *to reel* on behalf of God. The use of "reele" in lines 5 and 6 is thus an example of the poetic device antanaclasis.

This part of the metaphor relates to Taylor's role in Puritan society. As a pastor, Taylor was tasked with advising and giving counsel to his community—and, accordingly, he wishes in this poem for his social interactions to be an accurate and strong interpretation of God's will. He wants to bring other people into God's service, to *reel* them in.

LINES 7-9

Make me thy Loome then, knit therein this Twine:
And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:
Then weave the Web thyselfe. The yarn is fine.

The first stanza focuses on a spinning wheel—used for turning wool into yarn or thread—while the second stanza centers around a loom, the machine used for turning that yarn into *cloth*. A loom overlays different pieces of thread, weaving them into cloth that can then be turned into clothing.

This stanza opens with the same words as the first—"Make me"—emphasizing God's role as the ultimate Creator and continuing the poem's mode of address (apostrophe). Having offered himself as God's "Spinning Wheele" in the first stanza, the speaker notes in line 7 that he now wants to be the *loom* on which God will "knit" the yarn (a.k.a. "Twine") created in the previous stanza.

The speaker then asks the "Holy Spirit" to "winde" the loom's "quills." The Holy Spirit is part of the Holy Trinity (the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost/Spirit), and "quills" refer to small devices around which yarn is wound. All this weaving terminology might be confusing, but what's important here is that the speaker is basically asking God to power the loom and help it run smoothly and efficiently. Indeed, the speaker can't actually "weave" *himself*; he is just the *tool* for *God* to weave. That's why he says in line 9, "Then weave the Web thyselfe." The speaker is but a humble servant, *not* a creator.

The sound of lines 7 to 9 support this idea of God as the creator. The assonance of these lines weaves similar vowel sounds together (both the long and short /i/ vowels) while there is consonance of the /w/ sound:

> Make me thy Loome then, knit therein this Twine:
> And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:
> Then weave the Web thyselfe. The yarn is fine.

The poem itself feels carefully constructed, carefully woven—perhaps in tribute to God's creation.

LINES 10-12

> *Thine Ordinances make my Fulling Mills.*
> *Then dy the same in Heavenly Colours Choice,*
> *All pinkt with Varnisht Flowers of Paradise.*

The second half of the second stanza introduces another stage to the poem's extended metaphor of cloth-making. "Fulling Mills" were used to cleanse cloth of impurities and to eliminate oil and dirt. Within the poem's conceit, these mills are aligned with the "Ordinances" of God. These are God's orders and the religious rites of the Christian tradition. The implication, therefore, is that being a good Christian represents a kind of purification of the soul (setting someone up for heaven, rather than hell). This stage also brings the metaphorical garment one step close to completion (ultimately leading up to the speaker's "Holy robes for glory" in the last stanza).

The speaker then asks God to dye this cloth in "Heavenly Colours Choice." This again speaks to God's role as the ultimate creator. In creating the world, of course, God is also the source of all color (especially as color depends on light). The fact that these colors are "Heavenly" also hints at the rewards that, in the speaker's mind, await those who submit fully to God. The last line of the stanza then asks that the cloth be:

> All pinkt with Varnisht Flowers of Paradise.

The consonance and assonance (in bold above) in this line conveys a sense of beauty and delicate meticulousness. The mention of "Paradise" alludes to the Garden of Eden, which itself was full of the "Flowers of Paradise." This hints that, through the correct relationship with God, mankind can be restored from their *postlapsarian* state (this just means after the Fall of Man, when Eve ate the forbidden fruit).

LINES 13-16

> *Then cloath therewith mine Understanding, Will,*
> *Affections, Judgment, Conscience, Memory*
> *My Words, and Actions, that their shine may fill*
> *My wayes with glory and thee glorify.*

The final stanza works primarily to explain the purpose behind poem's extended metaphor. Having talked through the metaphorical process of cloth-making—with God as the cloth-maker and the speaker as God's faithful machine—the speaker now asks to be "cloath[ed]" by God. Specifically, the speaker asks for God to clothe the speaker's "Understanding, Will, / Affections, Judgment, Conscience, Memory, / My Words, and Actions." Alternatively, this could be read as the speaker saying that these qualities of his will in themselves *be* that cloth of God; that is, not only the speaker God's thread and loom, he is also now the cloth created by that thread and loom.

In either case, the first six nouns here all relate to aspects of the mind, and the speaker is basically asking God to grant him guidance and imbue him with wisdom. The delicate /th/ consonance sounds in "Then cloath therewith" are gentle, suggesting the caring and paternal relationship between humankind and God—particularly as, in this instance, God is metaphorically clothing the speaker.

The speaker's "Words" are particularly significant if the poem is interpreted as the words of Taylor himself. As a pastor, he was an integral part of his Puritan community, and so his words carried significant weight. The poem sees Taylor asking his God to grant him the psychological and social tools to fulfill his duties toward God. That said, the poem also makes sense as a more general prayer/plea to God—the speaker doesn't *have* to be interpreted as Taylor himself!

Line 15 also adds "Actions" into the mix, meaning that pretty much every aspect of the speaker's life is covered. And after the caesura that follows "Actions," the poem reveals the reasoning behind the cloth-making metaphor. The speaker wants to be clothed in metaphorical robes that shine with such heavenly light that his ways will be filled with "glory" and, in being filled with glory, everything he does will "glorify" God. The glorification of God is not exactly an easy thing to define, but it means something like doing justice to the majesty of God's creation—and living in a way that is in full accordance with God's will.

LINES 17-18

Then mine apparell shall display before yee
That I am Cloathd in Holy robes for glory.

The closing couplet neatly encapsulates the thinking behind the poem's extended metaphor. The speaker wants to be clothed in the metaphorical "apparell" that is weaved out of a close relationship between him and his God. The poem has listed all the different aspects of life which the speaker feels require God's guidance—and if the speaker can follow God's guidance (found in things like the Bible and God's "ordinances") then he will be dressed in "Holy robes for glory."

Clothing, of course, provides a kind of bodily protection, shelter and warmth—and these are the qualities that the speaker asks of God. The sounds of this couplet are intentionally beautiful and soft, sonically representing the completion of the metaphorical garment:

Then mine apparell shall display before yee
That I am Cloathd in Holy robes for glory.

Sound-wise, these lines are like the final flourish of the garment, and the point at which the speaker spells out the purpose of their intentions. The speaker, through the correct behavior in life, can be *part* of God's glory. The assonant /o/ sounds at the end of the poem are long, flowing vowels, conveying the metaphorical flow of the speaker's spiritual and emotional garment. They also end the poem on a note of confidence, the speaker having made his argument as to the correct nature of the relationship between humankind and God.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used prominently throughout "Huswifery." For example, it pops in a recurring phrase throughout the first two stanzas: "Make me"/"Make mine." The shared /m/ sounds here draw readers' attention to these words, adding emphasis to the speaker's plea to God. Later, in line 4, alliteration is used to underscore the connection between the speaker and God: the speaker wants his "Soule" to be God's "holy Spoole." There's also quite a bit of alliteration on the /th/ sound throughout the poem, though much of this is just a byproduct of the time period in which the poem was written, when words like "thy" and "thine" were common.

A more evocative example is found in lines 8 to 9:

And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:
Then weave the Web thyselfe. The yarn is fine.

The /w/ sound here affirms God's creative power. It connects God's agency—God's ability to "winde" and "weave"—to parts of a part of the metaphorical loom as well as to the products of that loom. The speaker wants to be both a tool for God and part of the raw materials that God uses to create—but only *God* can "winde" the loom's "quills" (note that "qu" creates a /w/ sound when read out loud), and only God can "weave the Web."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "M," "m"
- **Line 2:** "m," "m," "m"
- **Line 3:** "M," "m"
- **Line 4:** "m," "m," "S," "S"
- **Line 5:** "R"
- **Line 6:** "r," "th," "th," "th"
- **Line 7:** "M," "m," "th," "th," "th," "th"
- **Line 8:** "th," "w," "qu"
- **Line 9:** "Th," "w," "th," "W," "th," "Th"
- **Line 10:** "Th," "m," "m"
- **Line 12:** "p," "P"
- **Line 14:** "M"
- **Line 15:** "M," "th," "th"
- **Line 16:** "w," "w," "g," "g"

APOSTROPHE

The entire poem can be considered an example of apostrophe. It's clear from the beginning to whom his poem is addressed: God (and, specifically given the poem's context, the Christian God). Indeed most of the sentences involve an imperative verb—such as the poem's first word, "Make"—followed by a kind of plea to God. This poem is, ultimately, a prayer that requests God's help in living a proper religious life. The speaker offers himself up as a tool for God, a machine to express God's will.

Of course, in keeping with the poem's use of apostrophe, God never actually responds to the speaker. To include a response from God would make it seem like the speaker is overstepping, granting himself too much importance. To that end, the poem strikes a delicate balance between familiarity with and distance from God. The speaker certainly has a confident tone, petitioning God to make him a certain way. But the poem is full to the brim with reverence too, the speaker showing no signs of having ideas above his station. In fact, he practically offers every aspect of his existence over to the guidance of God. So, although God-as-cloth-maker is an unusual metaphor, it's the speaker's way of humbling himself before his divine master.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

ALLUSION

"Huswifery" is steeped in the Christian tradition. Taylor was a devout Puritan, and the poem fittingly contains many allusions

to different aspects of the Christian faith. For example, the "Holy Worde" mentioned in line 2 is, of course, the instructions given to humankind through the Bible. A "dystaff" (or "distaff") is a tool used in spinning that holds the unspun fibers and keeps them from getting tangled up. As such, the speaker is saying that he wants to use the Bible, the word of God, to keep his own life steady and on course.

The "Holy Spirit" mentioned in line 8 is part of the Christian Holy Trinity. This is the theological theory that God is three beings in one: the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost/Spirit. In asking God to "make thy Holy Spirit ... winde quills," the speaker is basically asking God to power the loom, to set it to work. This underscores the fact that even though the speaker is a tool of God, the speaker himself cannot *use* this metaphorical loom, the speaker himself cannot create. Only God can "winde quills" and "weave" the "Web" of cloth.

Finally, the mention of "Flowers of Paradise" in line 12 is probably an allusion to the Garden of Eden—the biblical paradise in which Adam and Eve lived before the Fall.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Holy Worde"
- **Line 8:** "Holy Spirit"
- **Line 12:** "Flowers of Paradise"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout "Huswifery," starting with the very first line:

> Make me, O Lord, thy Spining Wheele compleate.

The long /ee/ assonance has a consistency to it, mirroring the poem's overall argument that the relationship between humankind and God is one that requires daily work and commitment. Indeed, this sound echoes throughout the entire first stanza, both within lines and at their ends (as end rhymes): "mee," "bee," "be," "holy," "reele," etc. The insistence on this /ee/ sound evokes that "Spining Wheele compleate" throughout the stanza, and in doing so emphasizes the speaker's devotion to God (as God's "Spining wheele") and the fulfillment the speaker hopes this devotion will bring him (suggested by the word "compleate").

Another interesting moment of assonance comes in line 4, with the shared long /oh/ and /i/ sounds in "my Soule thy holy Spoole." Combined with the /s/ alliteration here, the shared sounds of this phrase emphasize the connection between the speaker and God—between "my Soule" and "thy holy Spoole."

Lines 7 and 8 uses long and short /i/ sounds to similar effect:

> Make me thy Loome then, knit therein this Twine:
> And make thy Holy Spirit, Lord, winde quills:

On one level, similar vowel sounds feel as though they are "knitted" or "woven" throughout the line itself, bringing the poem's extended metaphor to life through sound. The shared /i/ sounds here also subtly emphasize that it is God (the recipient of that "thy") doing all this knitting and winding, that God is the ultimate creator even if the speaker wants to be a *tool* of God.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "e," "i," "i," "ee," "ea"
- **Line 2:** "ee"
- **Line 3:** "i," "y," "y," "ea"
- **Line 4:** "y," "o," "y," "o," "y," "ee"
- **Line 5:** "e," "ee"
- **Line 6:** "ee," "ee"
- **Line 7:** "y," "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 8:** "y," "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 9:** "e," "y," "e," "i"
- **Line 10:** "i," "i," "y," "i," "i"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i"
- **Line 16:** "o," "y," "ee," "o," "y"
- **Line 17:** "ee"
- **Line 18:** "oa," "o," "o," "o," "o," "y"

CAESURA

Caesura is used throughout "Huswifery." The first example in line 1 is just part of the poem's opening address to God. But it's significant that the rest of the stanza *doesn't* use caesura—instead, the lines flow pretty smoothly. This section of the poem's extended metaphor deals with the process of turning raw wool into yarn, which can then be woven into cloth (and eventually be turned into clothing). The lack of caesura here makes this stanza almost like the raw material of the poem, awaiting further refinement.

In the second stanza, then, the speaker shifts the metaphor onto its next stage. Now, the speaker discusses weaving the *yarn* created in the first stanza into *cloth*. This essentially involves laying one thread over another repeatedly (and methodically) until they form a piece of cloth. The caesuras here make the lines themselves feel a little more methodical than they were in the first stanza, but the most meaningful moment comes with the full stop that pops up right in the middle of line 9:

> Then weave the Web thyselfe. The yarn is fine.

The period here adds a sense of finality to this statement, which is basically an assertion of God's power and authority. The speaker wants to be a tool for God, to help get all these raw materials together, but ultimately only *God* can "weave the Web." The strong caesura in this line reflects the speaker's humility, as he insists that, however *useful* he may want to be,

God remains the *creator* in this scenario.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “,” “,”
- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 8:** “,” “,”
- **Line 9:** “.”
- **Line 13:** “,”
- **Line 14:** “,” “,” “,”
- **Line 15:** “,” “,”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout "Huswifery." Much of it takes the form of alliteration, which is covered in the respective section of this guide. The first significant example of consonance in particular is in lines 2 and 3. Soft-sound /f/ sounds occur throughout the lines:

> ... my Distaff make for mee.
> Make mine Affections thy Swift Flyers neate

On the one hand, this simply creates a delicate tone, suggesting the tenderness of the relationship between the speaker and God. The consonance of line 3 in particular also creates a connection between an aspect of the *speaker's* life ("Affections") with a component of *God's* metaphorical cloth-making machine ("Swift Flyers"). This also mirrors the consonant pair in the next line (the speaker's "Soule" and God's "Spoole").

Later, in line 6, /n/ sounds repeat through the line:

> And reele the yarn thereon spun of thy Wheele.

Here, the speaker is describing the gathering together of the yarn spun on the wheel (a metaphor for establishing a religious way of life by following God's instructions). The repeated /n/ sounds themselves gather together in this line, mimicking the way that the yarn winds around the reel. The consonance of line 7 has a similar effect:

> Make me thy Loome then, knit therein this Twine:

The delicate consonance of line 12, which describes adding color and pattern to the metaphorical cloth, feels almost decorative. The popping /p/ and /t/ sounds ring out particularly strongly as they're flecked throughout the line, as though the speaker is deliberately adding just a splash of color here and there to bring out the beauty of the words:

> All pinkt with Varnisht Flowers of Paradise.

The third stanza shifts the poem into the final stages of the extended metaphor. As the speaker talks of his longing to be “cloath[ed]” in “Holy robes,” line 13 uses gentle /th/ sounds to suggest the softness of "the cloth therewith."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “M,” “m,” “p,” “n,” “n,” “l,” “pl”
- **Line 2:** “ff,” “m,” “f,” “m”
- **Line 3:** “M,” “m,” “n,” “ff,” “n,” “s,” “S,” “f,” “t,” “F,” “t”
- **Line 4:** “m,” “m,” “S,” “l,” “l,” “S,” “l”
- **Line 5:** “C,” “n,” “n,” “k,” “R”
- **Line 6:** “r,” “l,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “l”
- **Line 7:** “M,” “m,” “m,” “n,” “n,” “th,” “n,” “th,” “w,” “n”
- **Line 8:** “w,” “qu”
- **Line 9:** “Th,” “w,” “th,” “W,” “th,” “Th,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 10:** “Th,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “m,” “m,” “ll,” “M,” “ll”
- **Line 11:** “l,” “l,” “s,” “c”
- **Line 12:** “ p,” “n,” “t,” “n,” “t,” “s,” “P,” “is”
- **Line 13:** “th,” “th,” “th,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 14:** “n,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “M,” “m”
- **Line 15:** “s,” “n,” “n,” “s,” “th,” “th,” “n”
- **Line 16:** “w,” “w,” “gl,” “r,” “gl,” “r”
- **Line 17:** “n,” “n,” “pp,” “ll,” “ll,” “pl”
- **Line 18:** “l,” “l,” “l”

EXTENDED METAPHOR

“Huswifery” can be thought of as a one long extended metaphor in which God is a cloth maker and the speaker is both God's raw materials and tools. The metaphor itself might a little complicated and confusing to modern readers because it goes into such detail regarding the various machinery and processes involved in 17th-century cloth making. But the main idea behind the metaphor is clear enough: God is the great creator and humankind is the set of tools through which God’s “glory” can be realized. This requires individuals to be faithful to God and to work daily to fulfill God's instructions (received through the Bible, etc.).

In other words, the various parts of human existence—such as those listed in the third stanza—all need to be in good working order in accordance with the Christian faith in order for the relationship between people and God to function at its best.

It’s also worth noting that cloth making was an activity conducted almost entirely by women in the 17th century. This, in a way, represents the speaker humbling himself before God. In other words, the speaker has turned to the extended metaphor of cloth making to show his humility, his readiness to do whatever it takes to serve God.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

VOCABULARY

Thy / Thyselfe (Line 1, Line 2, Line 3, Line 4, Line 5, Line 6, Line 7, Line 8, Line 9) - An archaic form of "you." "Thyselfe," accordingly, means "yourself."

Spining Wheele (Line 1) - A machine for turning raw wool into yarn (which, in turn, can be woven into cloth).

Compleate (Line 1) - Archaic spelling of "complete."

Distaff (Line 2) - A stick around which unspun or raw fibers are wound. It's meant to keep the fibers from getting tangled before being spun into yarn or thread. It's also spelled "distaff").

Mine (Line 3, Line 17) - Archaic form of "my."

Swift Flyers (Line 3) - A cloth making tool. This specifically refers to the part of the spinning wheel that twists the yarn.

Spool (Line 4) - A part of the cloth making machinery that twists yarn into even cords.

Reele (Line 5, Line 6) - Part of the cloth making machinery around which the yarn being spun is wrapped. Reel (the modern spelling) can also be used as a verb meaning to wind something up or draw something in (as in the phrase "to reel a fish").

Yarn (Line 6) - Yarn is a continuous length of interconnect fibre, probably wool or cotton in this case.

Thereon / Therein (Line 6, Line 7) - Archaic forms of "on" and "in."

Loome (Line 7) - A loom is a machine for weaving cloth out of yarn.

Twine (Line 7) - A twist of one or more strings or threads.

Holy Spirit (Line 8) - Part of the Holy Trinity of the Christian faith: the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

Winde Quills (Line 8) - "Winde" is an archaic spelling of the verb "to wind." "Quills" relates to a part of the loom around which yarn is spun.

Thine (Line 10) - Archaic spelling of "your."

Ordinances (Line 10) - Religious instructions or rites.

Fulling Mills (Line 10) - Fulling Mills help to clean cloth of oils and impurities.

Pinkt (Line 12) - Cut with a scalloped or zigzag edge.

Varnisht (Line 12) - Varnished.

Therewith (Line 13) - This can mean either "within" or "immediately following."

Apparell (Line 17) - Clothing.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Huswifery" is made up of three stanzas with six lines apiece. The first four lines of each stanza follow an ABAB rhyme scheme, while the final two lines of each stanza form rhyming couplets.

The poem is one long extended metaphor related to the relationship between people and God (an important subject for Taylor, who was a Puritan minister). Essentially, the three stanzas divide into three key stages in this metaphor. The first deals with the way raw wool is turned into thread, conveying the way that people should (in the speaker's opinion) treat life as a kind of raw material ready to be transformed in the service of God.

The second stanza takes this metaphorical thread and weaves it into cloth, deepening the metaphorical connection between humankind and God (or, more specifically, between the speaker and God). This cloth should then be made beautiful by God, characterized by heavenly colors and flowery decoration. In the final stanza, the poem makes the purpose of the metaphor clear. The speaker wants to be *clothed* in God's cloth, to serve God and express God's will in everyday life. Achieving this will bring glory to the speaker, and in turn glorify God too.

METER

"Huswifery" is written in iambic pentameter. This means that most lines consist of five poetic feet, with each foot made of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed (da-DUM). The sound of this meter is important to the poem. It lends the words an air of authority, the controlled pattern of the stresses conveying God's control of the metaphorical cloth-making process. The iambs also convey the alternating process required for the weaving of fabric, which involves repeatedly layering one thread over another. The poem alternates between a stressed and then a stressed syllable, mimicking this process.

A typical example of this pattern can be found in the very first line:

> Make me, | O Lord, | thy Spin- | ing Wheele | compleate

Of course, the initial foot here can be read as a regular iamb, placing the emphasis on "me," *or* as a spondee (as we've done here), meaning both "Make" and "me" are stressed; this latter reading emphasizes the urgency of the speaker's *request*, while the former suggests how ready the speaker is *himself* to do God's bidding.

There are a handful of other moments in which the poem varies its steady iambic pattern. Line 3, for example, places two unstressed syllables side-by-side before then compensating

with two stresses. This quickens the line, echoing the "swift[ness]" of God's metaphorical "Flyers":

> Make mine | Affec- | tions thy | Swift Fly- |ers neate

The last two lines also offer up some important variation. Both lines add an extra unstressed syllable at the end of the line:

> Then mine | appa- | rell shall | display | before | yee
> That I | am Cloathd | in Ho- | ly robes | for glo- | ry.

These two extra syllables are like the poem's final flourish, functioning like a decorative element added to clothing just for aesthetic beauty.

RHYME SCHEME

"Huswifery" has a tight-knit rhyme scheme that matches with a number of Taylor's other poems. Each stanza runs:

ABABCC

As this poem is all about the creation of fabric (as a metaphor for how to live a properly religious life), a well-structured rhyme scheme makes sense. This foregrounds the poem's own construction as a kind of object made out of text, which in turn helps bring the poem's metaphor to life. In other words, the poem itself didn't just appear out of thin air, but rather it was created—just as God creates using the spinning wheel and cloth—and its careful rhyme scheme underscores its "poetic," or *created*, nature.

To that end, the rhymes are almost perfect throughout: compleate/neate, me/be, will/fill etc.; the only two slant rhymes are Choice/Paradise in lines 11 and 12 and Memory/glorify in lines 14 and 16. Overall, the steadiness of the poem's rhymes embodies a kind of perfection, the pleasant ringing-out of the rhyme words conveying God's skill and command of beauty.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Huswifery" is someone trying to talk directly to God through apostrophe. No specifics are offered about who this speaker is, but it's clear that this person longs for a close and fulfilling relationship with God. Given that Taylor was a Puritan minister, his poetry is generally taken to reflect his own thoughts about this relationship between human beings and God. Indeed, the Calvinist beliefs that informed the Puritan movement argue for a close *personal* relationship between individuals and God (as opposed to the Catholic approach which emphasized intermediaries such as the Pope). Accordingly, it makes sense that the reader is a kind of intruder here—this is an intimate poem that portrays the speaker's deepest thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and wishes about religion.

Because the poem is so closely associated with Taylor's own beliefs, we've chosen to use masculine pronouns throughout this guide. Do note that it's entirely possible to read the poem as being from a woman's perspective.

SETTING

Because "Huswifery" consists of an extended metaphor, it doesn't really have a particular setting. That is, the poem is figurative rather than literal. Ultimately, the poem is set in the speaker's mind, offering the speaker's take on the relationship between humankind and God. Like a prayer, the poem can also be thought of existing in the space between an individual and God. The poem is an attempt to bridge that divide and to communicate with God in order to offer loyalty and ask for a certain kind of spiritual help and nourishment.

The extended metaphor itself, though, is grounded in the daily reality of 17th century Puritan life. "Huswifery"—*housewifery*—is a world of daily repetitive chores, such as the one discussed in the poem: the making of cloth/garments.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Edward Taylor was Puritan minister and poet who lived from 1642 to 1729. He was born in England around the time of the English Civil War, and may have been employed in the local weaving trade as a young man (which might partly explain the detailed knowledge of cloth-making on display in this poem). He grew up on a farm in Leicestershire and like his father was a Protestant dissenter (people who refused to ally themselves to the official Church of England). Taylor was working as a teacher in 1662 when he refused to sign the Act of Uniformity, a piece of legislation which dictated the prayers, sacraments, and rites for the English to use in their religious practice. Taylor subsequently emigrated to America where, after studying at Harvard, he became a Puritan minister in Westfield, Massachusetts, a role he maintained for nearly 60 years.

It was during this time that Taylor wrote most of his poetry (as well his religious services). Taylor was highly disciplined with his writing, composing 217 "Meditations" each Saturday for 43 years (Saturday being the Eve of the Lord's Supper). His poems were explorations and expressions of his deeply held religious beliefs, reflecting the Calvinist idea that spiritual salvation requires a close personal relationship between individuals and God.

Critics have noted the similarity of Taylor's output to the English Metaphysical poets of the Elizabethan era. As displayed in this poem, Taylor's writing shares a commitment to inventive and extended metaphor (also known as conceit) with poets like

John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and George Herbert. Donne's *Holy Sonnets* in particular (including "Death, be not proud" and "Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God") make for interesting comparison, also addressed directly from the speaker to his God.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Taylor's life story takes place on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. During his lifetime, both England and the American settlements were deeply religious environments. Religion in England was a divisive subject during the 16th and 17th century, to say the least. The Puritan movement took exception to certain elements of the official Church of England, believing it to require further reform away from its Catholic roots. Some Puritans advocated for separating from the official Church, while others wanted to stay within its institution.

In 1620, a number of separatists travelled from England to New England, U.S.A. Known as Pilgrims, they sailed on the famous *Mayflower* and are an important part of the (white) American origin story and folklore. Around a hundred passengers undertook the arduous crossing over the Atlantic, with around half of them surviving to establish a colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Taylor himself moved to Massachusetts in 1668.

The poem's subject matter (and title) relate to a form of labor mostly undertaken by women. This is probably an attempt to lend the poem an air of humility. Well before the era of mass manufacture of clothes, spinning and weaving were a regular chore, part of the fabric of the daily existence of a housewife.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Edward Taylor's Life and Work — A valuable resource on Taylor's biography and output from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edward-taylor)
- Edward Taylor's Sermons — A collection of Taylor's religious sermons. (http://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=category&cid=598)
- A Lecture on Taylor — Interesting thoughts on Edward Taylor's output from a university lecturer. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_JIT-s6I7E)
- Puritan Poetry — Poems by other writers from the same era. (http://faculty.wiu.edu/M-Cole/PuritanPoems.pdf)
- Taylor's Place — An article about Taylor's place in American (and English) poetry. (https://lewisturco.typepad.com/poetics/2009/12/edward-taylors-sampler.html)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Huswifery*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Oct 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Huswifery*." LitCharts LLC, October 28, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/edward-taylor/huswifery.