

Two Poems

by C.S. Lewis

A Reading Guide

for

“Break, Sun, My Crusted Earth”

and

“The Planets”

Lewis uses this medieval concept as the central image in this poem. The poem is the poet's prayer to the Sun, a planet that causes humans to be wise and generous and causes the Earth to produce gold. Notice how Lewis combines both the sun's influence on humans and its influence on soil to develop this poem.

Reading Questions for "Break, Sun, My Crusted Earth"

1. What does Lewis mean by "my crusted earth" in line 1? What does he want the Sun to do to him in the first stanza?
2. What is the Sun's "chemic beam" (l. 6)? What does Lewis ask the Sun to do with this beam?
3. What is the "self I know not" (l. 7)? Is it good or bad? What is the "surface dream" (l. 8)? Is it good or bad?
4. If the "mother" in line 11 refers to the Earth, how does the Earth grow metal inside her without helping or hindering? If the mother doesn't cause the metal to grow, who does?
5. In the last stanza of the poem, what is Lewis saying about the relationship between his human nature ("mother") and God's grace (the sun's "life in secret")? How does Lewis's image of the Sun's influence on the Earth make this theological truth clearer?

Poem 1 - "The Planets"

Lady LUNA, in light canoe,
By friths and shallows of fretted cloudland
Cruises monthly; with chrism of dew
And drench of dream, a drizzling glamour,
Enchants us—the cheat! changing sometime 5
A mind to madness, melancholy pale,
Bleached with gazing on her blank count'nance
Orb'd and ageless. In earth's bosom
The shower of her rays, sharp-feathered light
Reaching downward, ripens silver, 10
Forming and fashioning female brightness,
—Metal maidenlike. Her moist circle
Is nearest earth. Next beyond her
MERCURY marches;—madcap rover,
Patron of pilf'ners. Pert quicksilver 15
His gaze begets, goblin mineral,
Merry multitude of meeting selves,
Same but sundered. From the soul's darkness,
With wreathèd wand, words he marshals,
Guides and gathers them—gay bellwether 20
Of flocking fancies. His flint has struck
The spark of speech from spirit's tinder,
Lord of language! He leads forever
The spangle and splendour, sport that mingles
Sound with senses, in subtle pattern, 25
Words in wedlock, and wedding also
Of thing with thought. In the third region
VENUS voyages...but my voice falters;
Rude rime-making wrongs her beauty,
Whose breasts and brow, and her breath's sweetness 30
Bewitch the worlds. Wide-spread the reign
Of her secret sceptre, in the sea's caverns,
In grass growing, and grain bursting,
Flower unfolding, and flesh longing,
And shower falling sharp in April. 35
The metal copper in the mine reddens
With muffled brightness, like muted gold,
By her fingers form'd. Far beyond her
The heaven's highway hums and trembles,
Drums and dindles, to the driv'n thunder 40
Of SOL's chariot, whose sword of light
Hurts and humbles; beheld only

Of eagle's eye. When his arrow glances
 Through mortal mind, mists are parted
 And mild as morning the mellow wisdom 45
 Breathes o'er the breast, broadening eastward
 Clear and cloudless. In a clos'd garden
 (Unbound her burden) his beams foster
 Soul in secret, where the soil puts forth
 Paradisal palm, and pure fountains 50
 Turn and re-temper, touching coolly
 The uncomely common to cordial gold;
 Whose ore also, in earth's matrix,
 Is print and pressure of his proud signet
 On the wax of the world. He is the worshipp'd male, 55
 The earth's husband, all-beholding,
 Arch-chemic eye. But other country
 Dark with discord dins beyond him,
 With noise of nakers, neighing of horses,
 Hammering of harness. A haughty god 60
 MARS mercenary, makes there his camp
 And flies his flag; flaunts laughingly
 The graceless beauty, grey-eyed and keen,
 —Blond insolence—of his blithe visage
 Which is hard and happy. He hews the act, 65
 The indifferent deed with dint of his mallet
 And his chisel of choice; achievement comes not
 Unhelped by him; —hired gladiator
 Of evil and good. All's one to Mars,
 The wrong righted, rescued meekness, 70
 Or trouble in trenches, with trees splintered
 And birds banished, banks fill'd with gold
 And the liar made lord. Like handiwork
 He offers to all—earns his wages
 And whistles the while. White-feathered dread 75
 Mars has mastered. His metal's iron
 That was hammered through hands into holy cross,
 Cruel carpentry. He is cold and strong,
 Necessity's song. Soft breathes the air
 Mild, and meadowy, as we mount further 80
 Where rippled radiance rolls about us
 Moved with music – measureless the waves'
 Joy and jubilee. It is JOVE's orbit,
 Filled and festal, faster turning
 With arc ampler. From the Isles of Tin 85

Tyrian traders, in trouble steering
 Came with his cargoes; the Cornish treasure
 That his ray ripens. Of wrath ended
 And woes mended, of winter passed
 And guilt forgiven, and good fortune 90
 Jove is master; and of jocund revel,
 Laughter of ladies. The lion-hearted,
 The myriad-minded, men like the gods,
 Helps and heroes, helms of nations
 Just and gentle, are Jove's children, 95
 Work his wonders. On his white forehead
 Calm and kingly, no care darkens
 Nor wrath wrinkles: but righteous power
 And leisure and largess their loose splendours
 Have wrapped around him—a rich mantle 100
 Of ease and empire. Up far beyond
 Goes SATURN silent in the seventh region,
 The skirts of the sky. Scant grows the light,
 Sickly, uncertain (the Sun's finger
 Daunted with darkness). Distance hurts us, 105
 And the vault severe of vast silence;
 Where fancy fails us, and fair language,
 And love leaves us, and light fails us
 And Mars fails us, and the mirth of Jove
 Is as tin tinkling. In tattered garment, 110
 Weak with winters, he walks forever
 A weary way, wide round the heav'n,
 Stoop'd and stumbling, with staff groping,
 The lord of lead. He is the last planet
 Old and ugly. His eye fathers 115
 Pale pestilence, pain of envy,
 Remorse and murder. Melancholy drink
 (For bane or blessing) of bitter wisdom
 He pours for his people, a perilous draught
 That the lip loves not. We leave all things 120
 To reach the rim of the round welkin,
 Heaven's hermitage, high and lonely.

Commentary

In this poem, Lewis takes us on a quick tour of the medieval cosmos. We ascend through the heavens, traveling from the Moon (Luna) to Saturn. As we ascend, Lewis describes the nature and influences of each planet. His description focuses especially on the metals the planets create

and how they influence human beings. Before you read, you may find it helpful to draw a line to separate the different sections of the poem (read carefully when you do this).

As a side note, this poem comes from Lewis's essay titled "The Alliterative Metre." After you've finished the questions below, read this poem one more time. Notice how each line of the poem emphasizes a particular sound by repeating it—a poetic technique called "alliteration." For instance, line four reads "And drench of dream, a drizzling glamour". This is a very fine, masterful poem from C.S. Lewis.

Reading Questions for "The Planets"

Luna

1. List the names of the seven planets in order. What other names do we have for Luna and Sol?
2. Lewis uses a lot of water imagery in his description of Luna. Why would Luna be connected to water?
3. Why does Lewis call Luna "the cheat" (l. 5)? How does Luna both enchant us and cheat us?
4. What tragic influence does Luna sometimes have on humans? What metal does Luna create?

Mercury

5. What is Mercury known for if Lewis can call him "madcap rover" (l. 14) and "patron of pilfers" (l. 15)?

6. What metal does Mercury create? What does Mercury marshal from “the soul’s darkness” (l. 18)?

Venus

7. What aspect of Venus does Lewis say he cannot describe? What does Venus’s “breath’s sweetness” (l. 30) do to the world?
8. What does Venus’s “secret septré” (l. 32) bring forth on the Earth? What metal does Venus create?

Sol

9. What two things does Sol’s “sword of light” (l. 41) do? What are the only creatures that can behold Sol with their naked eye?
10. What influence does Sol have on the “mortal mind” (l. 44)? What else do his “beams foster” (l. 48)? How does this help explain Lewis’s prayer in the first poem, “Break, Sun, My Crusted Earth”?

Mars

11. What two adjectives does Lewis use to describe Mars' "blithe visage" (l. 64)? What is ironic about these two adjectives being used to describe the same thing?

12. According to Lewis's description, is Mars good or bad? Does he cause evil or good on Earth?

13. What metal does Mars create? To what historical event does Lewis tie this metal?

Jove

14. How does the air change as we move from Mars to Jupiter (another name for Jove)?

15. What metal does Jove create?

16. List all of the things of which "Jove is master" (l. 91). What kind of people are "Jove's children" (l. 95)?

17. What does not darken Jove's "white forehead" (l. 96)? Why not?

Saturn

18. What kind of light is found in Saturn? Lewis lists several things that fail in Saturn's realm (ll. 107-110). List these failing things.

19. How is Saturn dressed? How does he walk?

20. What metal does Saturn create? How does he influence humans (ll. 115-117)?

21. What kind of "wisdom" (l. 118) does Saturn give? What are the two possible outcomes of the "melancholy drink" (l.117) of Saturn's wisdom?

Application for Lewis's Poems

In "Break, Sun, My Crusted Earth" Lewis contrasts his "surface dream" with the "self I know not." He prays that God would search every last part of him and transform him into a good man—that God would transform his dust into gold.

1. Do you pray the way that Lewis does? Do you pray that God would search you and transform you, that he would break your "crusted earth"?
2. Do you know that your image of yourself is only a "surface dream"? Do you know that the person you are right now is *not the person God made you to be*?
3. How do you become the person God made you to be, then? How does Lewis's third stanza answer this question and give us hope?