

Holy Sonnet # 9 (by John Donne, 1572-1631)

If poisonous minerals, and if that tree //
Whose fruit threw death on else immortal us, //
If lecherous goats, if serpents envious //
Cannot be damned, alas, why should I be? //
Why should intent or reason, born in me, (5) //
Make sins, else equal, in me more heinous? //
And mercy being easy and glorious //
To God, in his stern wrath why threatens he? //
But who am I, that dare dispute with thee, //
O God? Oh! of thine only worthy blood, (10) //
And my tears, make a heavenly Lethean flood, //
And drown in it my sins' black memory. //
That thou remember them, some claim as debt; //
I think it mercy if thou wilt forget. //

1. **All Lines.** Which of the following does the speaker finally ask of God?

- a. forgetfulness
- b. justice
- c. death

2. **All Lines.** Which of the following introduces the main shift or transition in the poem?

- a. "That thou remember"
- b. " ... O God? Oh!"
- c. "And mercy being"

d. "But who am I"

3. **All Lines.** Which of the following names is right for this poem?

a. sonnet

b. Spenserian sonnet

c. villanelle

d. ode

4. **Lines 1-2.** The speaker begins with the lines: "If poisonous minerals, and if that tree / Whose fruit threw death on else immortal us" These lines include an allusion to which of the following?

a. John the Baptist

b. Calvary (the place of Christ's crucifixion)

c. the Last Supper

d. the Garden of Eden

5. **Line 1.** In speaking the opening line ("If poisonous minerals, and if that tree ..."), how many syllables should a reader give to the word "minerals"?

a. two syllables

b. three syllables

c. four syllables

6. **Line 2.** The speaker refers to fruit that "threw death on else immortal us." What does he mean by "on else immortal us"?

a. on us who were immortal in all else

b. on us who wished to be immortal

c. on us who would otherwise have been immortal

7. **Line 3.** The speaker refers to "serpents envious." Which of the following best describes the word "envious"?

a. familiar word with an unfamiliar meaning

b. word used as an element in personification

c. word used metaphorically

d. familiar word with a familiar meaning

8. **Line 4.** When he speaks of minerals, a tree, goats, and a serpent that "Cannot be damned," what does the speaker mean by "damned"?

a. killed

b. rejected by God

c. corrupted

d. subjected to pain

9. **Lines 3-4.** The speaker asks: "If lecherous goats, if serpents envious / Cannot be damned, alas, why should I be?" Which of the following is true?

a. the speaker uses alliteration

b. the speaker uses an antithesis

c. the speaker uses onomatopoeia

d. the speaker omits a word that a hearer must supply mentally in order to make sense of the question

e. the speaker arranges words in a peculiar way

10. **Line 5.** The speaker asks: "Why should intent or reason, born in me, / Make sins, else equal, in me more heinous?" What does he mean by "born in me"?

a. first present in me

b. part of me from birth

c. borne or carried by me

11. **Lines 7-8.** The speaker asks: "And mercy being easy and glorious / To God, in his stern wrath why threatens he?" When you give the words of this question an ordinary, colloquial order, which word comes last?

a. "glorious"

b. "threatens"

c. "wrath"

12. **Line 7.** In presenting the line, "And mercy being easy and glorious," a reader should give how many syllables to "glorious"?

a. two syllables

b. three syllables

c. four syllables

13. **Line 8.** What does the speaker mean by "in his stern wrath"?

a. while moved by his severe wrath

b. by means of his gloomy wrath

c. as a result of his pitiless wrath

14. **Lines 9-12.** The speaker says:

But who am I, that dare dispute with thee,

O God? Oh! of thine only worthy blood,

And my tears, make a heavenly Lethean flood,

And drown in it my sins' black memory.

Which of these four lines has two stressed syllables placed together?

a. the first line

b. the second line

c. the third line

d. the fourth line

15. **Line 10.** What does the speaker mean by "thine only worthy blood"?

a. thy heritage, which alone is excellent

b. thy best blood

c. thy blood shed on the cross, which blood alone is excellent

16. **Line 11.** The speaker asks that God make "a heavenly Lethean flood." Why does he include the adjective "heavenly"?

a. the original Lethe exists in the underworld

b. the original Lethe causes evil thoughts

c. the original Lethe is for animals, not humans

17. **Line 12.** What word comes last when you give an ordinary, colloquial arrangement to the line, "And drown in it my sins' black memory"?

a. "drown"

b. "it"

c. "sins"

18. **Line 12.** What does the speaker mean by "sins' black memory"?

a. the black memories you have of my sins

b. the black memory my sins possess

c. the blackened memories my sins create in me

19. **Line 13.** In the line, "That thou remember them, some claim as debt ... ," what does the speaker mean by "debt"?

a. the debt you, God, must pay me

b. the debt I must pay to you, God

c. the debt Christ has already paid

20. **Lines 1-14.** Which of the following accurately summarizes the rhyme scheme of this poem?

a. abab, cdcd, efefg

b. abba, cdcd, efef, ee

c. abba, abba, acca, dd