

## Prayer (I) Summary and Analysis of Prayer (I)

### Summary

Prayer (I) is a 14-line sonnet in iambic pentameter with an ABABCDCEFFEGG rhyme scheme. Written in the tradition of the systophe, the poem elaborates multiple definitions for a single word, “prayer.” Each line provides one or two potential definitions or understandings of Christian prayer.

### Analysis

The first four lines of the poem (which, in some editions of the poem, appear as a quatrain) produce six definitions of prayer. Prayer is “the church’s banquet,” or the food and sustenance that sustains the church. It is also “angel’s age,” something that goes back as far as the creation of angels. But prayer is not just reserved for angels; when men pray, they return “God’s breath” to its source—God and their own spiritual birth. Moreover, this line emphasizes prayer as a reciprocal exchange between man and God. The next two lines provide yet more definitions, suggesting prayer is the soul’s “paraphrase,” or the shorthand summary of man’s very soul. However, prayer is not just a summary, but a tool for understanding: it is a “plummet,” a measuring device that gives knowledge of heaven and earth. The rhyme between “earth” and “birth” in these four lines emphasizes that both mankind and the earth itself are the results of divine creation.

The next four lines of the poem continue to expand on the definition of prayer, shifting in tone to express not its celebratory aspects but its sheer power. The speaker uses a metaphor to describe prayer as an “engine” or weapon that allows Christians to confront and wage war against the “sinner’s tow’r,” in this case, the infamous tower of Babel. In addition, prayer is, metaphorically, the “reverse of thunder.” In another image of reciprocity, mankind sends thunder back to its source—God. It is the spear that pierced Christ’s side, one of his five wounds; scholar Helen Wilcox writes that this wound offered direct access to God’s grace (177). Continuing with Biblical references, [the speaker](#) compares an hour of prayer to God’s six-day-long creation of the world (as God rested on the seventh day). In prayer, man reproduces the act of creation, honoring God. Next, he compares prayer to music, calling it a “tune” that is both heard and, interestingly, feared. The power of prayer, as noted in these other lines, is forceful, which may be the cause of fear, especially for unbelievers.

The next four lines continue to define prayer, emphasizing not its power but its joy and beauty. Line 9 enumerates many of the positive aspects of prayer: “Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,” notably using the conjunction “and” several times to emphasize that all of these are aspects of prayer; it cannot be boiled down to a single word or feeling (as the whole poem in fact shows). Continuing in this vein, prayer is metaphorically compared to “manna,” a miraculous food that nourishes, and to what the ordinary, every-day experience of heaven would be like. The next three metaphors feature dramatic changes in scale: prayer is compared to “a man well-drest,” suggesting that prayer is proper and attractive, and then compared to the entire milky way galaxy, before being compared to an imaginary bird, the bird of paradise. These changes between man and animal, living being and entire universe, suggest that prayer is at once everywhere, as well as rare. These paradoxes, however, make up the heart of prayer.

The final couplet continues to elaborate on the definition of prayer. Prayer is once again loud and powerful, audible from beyond the stars, as well as nourishing, as it is the soul's blood. This might be viewed as another paradox, as prayer is both vital to earthly, human existence, yet powerful well beyond the human sphere. The final line settles on the final two definitions of prayer: "The land of spices; something understood." The land of spices may refer to heaven, or perhaps to exotic spices from the colonial world: it hearkens an unknowable, distant world. At the same time, it is something understood and taken to heart.

This poem, then, refuses to settle on one definition for prayer. It both seeks to define and understand prayer, as well as acknowledging it as something that defies easy paraphrase. Some critics have read the poem as arriving at an understanding and definition, as prayer is "understood," but others, like Virginia Mollkenkott, have argued that it reaches an "anticlimax," refusing to settle on a single definition and instead describing prayer as ineffable.

## Prayer (I) Themes

### The Nature of Prayer

The poem “Prayer (I)” seeks chiefly to describe the nature of prayer. The poem simply lists attributes that apply to prayer, without including a verb (such as “prayer is...”), and this ambiguity opens the poem out to reflect not just on what prayer is, but also on what it does—what effect it has. Indeed, the poem implies that prayer is beyond definition. It is something that is essential to the life of the Christian church, and to the life of the individual human soul, but it is also so much more: it reveals the correspondences between heaven and earth, between God and mankind. As such, it is an essential tool for understanding man’s place in the universe.

### The Nourishment of the Soul

This poem is not just *about* prayer; it also functions *as* a prayer. What, then, is [the speaker](#) praying for? In this poem, there are several hints. Prayer is “manna,” that is to say, it nourishes. In addition, it is “the soul’s blood,” the very life force that keeps the spiritual body alive. Seeking to define prayer in this poem, then, is a kind of prayer in and of itself, an attempt to seek out spiritual nourishment.

## Prayer (I) Symbols, Allegory and Motifs

### music (Motif)

Several of the poem's metaphors compare prayer to music. The poem states that, in prayer, the six-day creation of the world is transposed in an hour. In the musical sense, transposing means shifting to a different key, therefore implying that prayer musically recreates or replays the act of creation. In addition, prayer is a "tune," and it is compared to church-bells. reciprocity between God and man (Motif)

Several of the poem's metaphors stress that prayer is a kind of exchange between God and man. In prayer, man returns "God's breath" back to him. Furthermore, in prayer, man returns the thunder that God sends down from the heavens. Finally, he recreates or replays the creation of the world. Overall, prayer allows for a direct relationship with God.