

John donne's "the
flea": the flea as
metaphor of virginity's
unimportance



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MARK but this flea, and mark in this, How little that which thou deniest me is; It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee, And in this flea our two bloods mingled be. Thou know'st that this cannot be said A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead; Yet this enjoys before it woo, And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two; And this, alas! is more than we would do. O stay, three lives in one flea spare, Where we almost, yea, more than married are. This flea is you and I, and this Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is. Though parents grudge, and you, we're met, And cloister'd in these living walls of jet. Though use make you apt to kill me, Let not to that self-murder added be, And sacrilege, three sins in killing three. Cruel and sudden, hast thou since Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence? Wherein could this flea guilty be, Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee? Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now. 'Tis true; then learn how false fears be; Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me, Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee. This poem exhibits John Donne's skill for turning the least likely images into elaborate metaphysical symbols of love, lust, and romance. "The Flea" uses the image of a flea that has just bitten the speaker and his beloved to describe a conflict over whether the two will have sex. The speaker wants to but his beloved does not, and so he uses the flea as an argument and metaphor to show how innocuous sex can be. He reasons that if their blood mingling in the flea is harmless and innocent, sexual mingling would be equally innocuous. The speaker tells his beloved to look at the flea and to note "how little" that "thing" that she denies him is, thus trivialising sex. Their blood mingling cannot be called "sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead"; rather, the flea has joined them together in a way that, "alas, is more than we would do." His <https://assignbuster.com/john-donnes-the-flea-the-flea-as-metaphor-of-virginitys-unimportance/>

arguments go far beyond this preliminary idea, and are even turned on their heads when his beloved kills the flea. This paper examines the core idea that the flea is a metaphor used to trivialise sex, and ultimately to convey the unimportance of virginity. The opening line " mark but this flea, and mark in this, how little that which deniest me is" shows that the flea is small and inconsequential, and reveals that the speaker's lady is denying him sex. The metaphor of the flea develops as it relates to the other symbols. For example, blood is used more than once as a symbol in the poem. The speaker talks of blood reverently and equates it to honor: blood symbolises life and soul. The flea has bitten him and his lady, hence the speaker remarks that in the flea his blood and his lady's blood are mixed. Likewise, during sex their souls are " mingled" and become one. The speaker initially seems to have a respectful attitude about sex, holding that it can be spiritual and important. But this is eventually revealed to be only a ploy to prove that sex should not be taken so seriously. As his beloved moves to kill the flea, the speaker " stays" her hand, asking her to spare the trinity of three lives in the flea: his life, her life, and the flea's life. In the flea where their blood is mingled, they are almost " married," even more than married, and the flea is their " marriage bed" and " marriage temple." Though their parents " grudge" and disapprove of their romance and though she does not want to have sex with him, they are nevertheless united and " cloister'd" in the living walls of the flea's body. He asks that she not kill herself by killing the flea that contains her blood; he says that to kill the flea would be sacrilege, " three sins in killing three," suggesting a holy trinity. Here, he is using the flea to convince his lady of his high-minded and apparently sophisticated argument. However, when his beloved kills the flea despite his protestations

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(and probably as a deliberate move to destroy his argument), the speaker turns his argument on its head and claims that despite the high-minded ideals he has been invoking, killing the flea did not impugn his beloved's honour - nor will consenting to sex. Donne's speaker seems to adapt his argument as it progresses, sometimes in contradictory ways - a feature that perhaps challenges that image of the metaphysical conceit of the flea as a single, consistent, unified, confident metaphor. The speaker calls his lover "cruel" and speaks of how she is "purpling" her fingernail with the "blood of innocence," suggesting that the flea was "innocent" and that his ideas were entirely noble. The speaker asks his lover what the flea's sin was, other than having "suck'd" from each of them a drop of blood. His lover apparently replies that neither of them is less noble for having killed the flea, and he agrees that this true, and it is this that proves that her fears regarding honor are false: if she were to "yield to" him and have sex, she would lose no more honor than she lost when she killed the flea. Here, the speaker is suggesting that sex does not have the power to take away innocence. There is more to it than just that. The "murder" of the flea also adds to the poem. As we have seen, the exchange of lifeblood during sex forms a "marriage" between the partners, and the narrator asks his lady not to kill the flea, which is symbolic of the end of sex, or orgasm. It was common thinking during that period that every time a man had sex his life was shortened, and thus it is reasonable to say that the speaker is likening the murder of the flea to the shortening of his own life. The speaker states that the flea has not taken anything from either of them, and therefore the act of sex will not diminish their lives. Thus the speaker reasons with his lady by lessening the importance of virginity. In this clever poem, Donne uses a flea, blood, and the murder of the flea as <https://assignbuster.com/john-donnes-the-flea-the-flea-as-metaphor-of-virginitys-unimportance/>

analogies for the oldest exchange: sex. The speaker in this poem hopes to convince his lady to sleep with him by trivializing sex. Donne not only questions the validity of coveting virginity, but also the importance of sex. This poem is one of many clever love poems that use the flea as an erotic image; it is an idea that goes as far back as Ovid. Donne's skill of hinting at the erotic without ever explicitly referring to sex is remarkable: the idea that being bitten by a flea would represent " sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead" conveys his point with a clarity that more literal representations might have undermined. Bibliography Donne, John. Poems of John Donne. vol I. E. K. Chambers, ed. London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1896 pp. 1-2.