

What are the characteristics of donne's love poetry?

[Life](#), [Love](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Introduction

Metaphysical poetry is characterized by many aspects and as one of the leading metaphysical poets, John Donne's work employs wit, paradox, abstract images and use of conceits to create poetry that was "inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence" (Grier son 1921). However, at the time, the metaphysical poets had a great many critics and they were attacked on several grounds, most notably from Dr Johnson in his *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81). Johnson believed the metaphysical poets did not deserve the title of poet as their wit contained 'a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough'. In order to come to a conclusion as to whether his poetry was therefore aggressive due to his tone, I will examine two of his poems; 'The Flea', 'Holy Sonnet 14'. In analyzing these poems I expect to find that although on the surface Donne could be said to be aggressive, it is in fact the unexpectedness of his approach to matters such as love that has this effect. Historically, Donne and the metaphysical poets seemed to renounce traditions of courtly love, however by resisting in following these well respected customs, Donne's poetry has kept an originality to the experience of love. Love, as a subject in poetry risks becoming banal and only through Donne's wit does this age old subject stay fresh to the reader.

Upon first reading 'The Flea' and 'Holy Sonnet 14', the poems seem to have very little in common and the themes do indeed oppose one another in

content as one deal with physical love and the other spiritual. The poem 'The Flea' shows the speaker as a man who lacks morals and who has little concern for the moral stance of the young lady he wishes to bed, and instead seems wholly concerned with his own lust. On the other hand, 'Holy Sonnet 14' seems to reflect more of Donne's spirituality as a minister of the Anglican church, the speaker is shown to be righteous in his beliefs and concerned with how he can do his utmost to please God. Wit, of course, is very apparent in 'The Flea', however does this make it more aggressive than 'Holy Sonnet 14'?

"His Maker is more powerfully present to the imagination in his divine poems than any mistress is in his love poems" (Gardner, 1978, Pg-2) is a statement made by writer Helen Gardner. However, I believe that Donne's use of wit as well as complex conceits are used to complicate the subject matter in both poems in order to draw questions from the readers. Many different levels of meaning are at play in these poems and the rhyme scheme varies from iambic tetrameter and pentameter to the Petrarchan sonnet form. In doing so, Donne presents his mistress in the poem 'The Flea' just 'as powerfully present' as God in 'Holy Sonnet 14'. As he shows physical love through spiritual expression in 'The Flea' and divine love through sexual expression on 'Holy Sonnet 14', Donne excellent shows how wit is used to throw doubt at the reader who simply sees everything in black and white.

Wit could be said to be, a sense of the fantastic and originality of thought. This seems to perfectly define the love poem "The Flea", whose humor is used to explore the notions of sex before marriage in an argument that, if it

did not woo the addressee to give up on her sacred ideals may well have amused her and caused her to question the reasons behind them. The flea itself in the poem represents and symbolizes physical love and pleasure and the opening lines leave no doubt that this is the case. "Mark but this flea, and mark in this / How little that which thou densest me is / Me it suck's first, and now sucks thee / And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be" ("The Flea," L-1-4). The simplistic language engages the reader with clarity and wit in its subtle allusions to sex and pleasure that truly show the intentions of the speaker. Arguing with his love, he expresses that the act of love is as safe as being bit by a flea, as "...[it] cannot be said / A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead" ("The Flea," L-5-6). Donne's abstract idea that the mixing of his and his mistress's blood in the flea is no different to having sex without physical contact, engages the reader in a dialogue which makes interested in the outcome for the lustful young speaker. Does this relentless wit and persistence with his mistress show aggression I believe not. Although aggressive in his lust, Donne's neat and concise approach to the subject saves it from being aggressive to the reader, something feminists would surely disagree with.

The very idea that the flea represents their marriage and that the speaker wishes to stop his mistress from killing it because of this, adds softness to its tone. "Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare / Where we almost, nay more than married are / This flea is you and I, and this / Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is / Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met / And cloistered in these living walls of jet" ("The Flea," L-10-15). Although a certain level of arrogance is shown by the speaker in his approach to women,

I feel this much more refreshing through its humour compared to the traditional courtly love poems where the women were seen to objects to own. However, in saying this, the speaker does not seem to respect this mistress's choice and Helen Gardner argues in Donne's love poems "the love poet [creates] an image of himself in love..." but does not wish to deny himself any pleasure. Although this view seems to be taken by many, David Novarr seems to defend the poem stating; ...[it] [seems] [the] [speaker] has somehow compromised the integrity of his...belief [in] love...[however] it is frequently the committed man who dares to explore and exploit alternatives that in no way [undercut] [his] integrity if he chooses to be witty about a subject that matters to him (The Disinterred Muse, Pg-24-25). In exploring these alternatives, Donne does indeed employ an originality of thought that seems to characterize not just metaphysical poets but Renaissance man. Continuing in his pushy and arrogant nature to persuade his mistress, the speaker uses power and drive. However, this is not just forceful, but also shows a persuasive argument and tells his mistress that "Though use make you apt to kill me / Let not to that, self murder added be / And sacrilege, three sins in killing three" ("The Flea," L-16-18). Ending his argument, the young lady does kill the flea and in this shows her commitment in her decision to stay chaste. This is illustrated beautifully when the speaker queries his mistress's actions, asking "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 sucked from thee/ Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou / Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now ("The Flea," L-19-24). By killing the flea the mistress reinforces her quest for virtuousness

at any cost. This is when the speaker backtracks on his argument and compares his mistress losing her virginity to the inconsequential death of the flea. Ending the poem, the speaker states “Tis true, then learn how false, fears be; / Just so much honor, when thou yield’st to me / Will waste, as this flea’s death took life from thee” (“The Flea,” L-25-27). The humour with which Donne approaches this subject is what releases it from holding any aggression. The whimsical way in which the speaker admits his own satisfaction is his sole concern creates the source of the poem’s humour. Donne’s attitude to love changes from carnal to humble and spiritual in “Holy Sonnet 14”, however if wit is defined as originality of thought then the serious tone set in this poem certainly lacks any aggression in its relentlessness. Confliction in soul and nature of man is shown through a speaker who lacks concern in pleasing himself and only concern in pleasing God.

In the opening passage of the sonnet, the speaker offers God all power, control and authority, asking, “Batter my heart, three person’d God; for you / As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend; / That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend / Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new” (“Holy Sonnet 14,” L-1-4). The speaker wishes to be made ‘new’, suggesting that they have possessed a lack of control over themselves and now wish to offer God that control to save them from sin. In offering God their body and soul, the speaker appears desperate to be made pure again and seem to see themselves as helpless, as if they know that they can only God can save through wrath and violence. “I, like an usurped town, to another due, / Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end, / Reason your viceroy

in me, me should defend, / But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue, / Yet dearly do I love you, and would be lov'd fain, / But am betroth'd unto your enemy (" Holy Sonnet 14," L-5-10). This is in complete contrast to the fanciful nature of ' The Flea', where Donne's wordplay humours the reader. Here, a different side of Donne's wit is seen through his use of dramatic metaphor in which he ponders mans ability to save himself. " Divorceme, untie, or break that knot again, / Take me to you, imprison me, for I / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me (" Holy Sonnet 14." L-11-14). Here, the speaker is using forceful verbs and paradoxes, symbolising God as all powerful and all knowing, giving him total influence over the speaker.

Using paradox, in the final passage Donne gives God sage, the speaker uses paradoxes to give God importance and shows that the only way the speaker believes that he will ultimately be free of sin, and pure is when God takes complete control and rapes him.

This poem seems to express purity in its divine love for God, suggesting that this spiritual bond with God is more pure than any love experienced between man and woman. In being concerned with ' thought' itself, Donne asks questions about life, love and his purpose in the universe. Donne places himself and his love at the centre of the universe which is surely showing wittiness that is not aggressive, but that each person who has been in love has believed themselves. There is a distinct contrast between how submissive Donne's speaker in ' Holy Sonnet 14' is to God, compared with how dominant the speaker in ' The Flea' tries to be over his mistress. It is easy to dismiss the wit and humour in ' The Flea' as being puerile and selfish

however in this, the reader sees the true nature of the speaker in all his multi-faceted attempts in trying to seduce his mistress. In the same way, Donne has stripped bare the speaker in 'Holy Sonnet 14', allowing the reader to see his need for God to save him through his language. If this unremitting wit is seen as aggressive, I believe the reader is missing the point of Donne's wit. It is unashamed and refuses to be diluted to suit the needs of the reader, instead Donne has stayed true to his artistic and poetic beliefs.

Bibliography

Alvarez, A. The School of Donne.

New York: Pantheon Books, 1961.

Gardner, Helen. The Divine Poems

London: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Grierson, Herbert J. C., ed. Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the 17th

Oxford, The Clarendon press, 1921

Novarr, David. The Disinterred Muse.

London: Cornell University Press, 1980.