

# The bait – poem analysis essay sample

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The Bait, a poem written by metaphysical poet, John Donne, during the early seventeenth century, tells the story of a woman whose physical attractiveness and coquettish behaviour prove destructive as they succeed in ruining her chances of finding a pure and meaningful relationship. This poem is recounted from the point of view of a man whom, amongst many other men, has pursued this woman and become emotionally hurt in the process as he finds her actions, in response to his affections, to be heartless and insensitive. Throughout this poem, Donne uses elevated diction, contrasting imagery, influential details, metaphysical conceit, both figurative and seditious language, and elongated sentence structure in order to carry out the many shifts in tone throughout the poem, as well as to amplify its overall tone of seduction and sexuality.

Within the first stanza of The Bait, Donne makes use of a metaphysical conceit, comparing the act of making and seeking love to fishing. This conceit is employed through the image “...we will some new pleasures prove Of golden sands, and crystal brooks, With silken lines and silver hooks.” This particular conceit is both crucial and instrumental, for it introduces the idea upon which the poem is principally based; that this woman views the manipulation of men’s fate as a mere jest. The image, through which this conceit is employed, helps to set the light and pleasant tone of the first and second stanzas by causing the reader to imagine the beautifully picturesque scenery with which the speaker is tempting his mistress. This image also adds to the overall tone of seductiveness throughout the poem, for within it are made references to objects of finery such as gold, “ crystal”, silk, and “ silver”. The mention of these objects is instrumental, for, although they are

being used as descriptors, it is as if the speaker were using the adjectives themselves as physical trinkets with which he might seductively bribe his mistress. Donne also makes use of persuasive diction within the first stanza through the use of the word “ pleasures”. This word adds to the overall tone of seduction present throughout the first half of the poem, for it could be used as an allusion to sexual acts and has a more powerful connotative effect than would have had the words “ enjoyments”, “ delights”, etc.

Donne also uses personification to enhance the light and pleasant tone of the first and second stanzas. In the first line of the second stanza, the speaker refers to the river as “ whisp’ring”, giving the river human-like characteristics and causing the reader to image the pleasant sound of its quiet lull as it is warmed by the eyes of the woman. Donne also uses a hyperbole within this stanza, saying that the river is warmed more by the woman’s eyes than by the rays of the sun. This is an exaggeration, for the speaker does not mean to say that his mistress’ eyes possess the power to radiate heat, but rather that they are powerful enough to bewitch both the river and the fish that swim within it. By mentioning the relationship between the swimming fish and the woman, Donne again makes use of a metaphysical conceit, comparing men in pursuit of the woman to fish that swim in a river. He then goes on to use denotative diction in the last two lines of the second stanza in order to add to the overall tone of seduction present throughout the first half of the poem. Through the use of the words “ enamour’d” and “ begging” the speaker expresses the sentiments of passion and desperation that sense the men upon encountering this woman. Donne

also uses an abundance of caesura and enjambment, within the phrases of the first two stanzas, to enhance their pleasant flow and light tone.

In the third stanza of *The Bait*, a shift in tone gradually takes place as the poem moves from a light and pleasant tone to one that is slightly more foreboding. Donne begins the third stanza with the image of the river in the form of a “live bath”. This image causes the reader to imagine an abundance of life swimming within the river, keeping the tone of beginning of the third stanza pleasant and light before the shift in tone occurs. This image also adds to the seductive tone of the poem, for the words “live bath” contain a sexual connotation, alluding to the river as an area of great fertility. Donne then goes on, within the second line of the third stanza, to convey an important detail, in the form of a metaphysical conceit, comparing other competing women to “channels”. Within this line, the speaker states that the many fish in the pond which swim towards the lady “every channel hath.” This detail indicates that the men, or fish, that are in pursuit of the speaker’s mistress, have many other woman at their disposal upon which they might choose to bestow their affections.

This detail, therefore, increases the value of the speaker’s mistress, for it indicates that her physical beauty has succeeded in causing men to pursue her instead of her lesser valued competitors. This adds to the foreboding tone of the third stanza, for it shows the reader the danger of the degree of power which possesses the speaker’s mistress over the souls of these men. To complete the shift in tone within the third stanza, Donne uses the last line of the stanza to convey important detail in regards to the consequences of

the woman's seductive power over her lovers' minds. Within this line, the speaker refers the men, or rather fish, as " Gladder to catch thee, than thou him". Through this phrase, the speaker wishes to indicate that, once she has caught each fish, she might not actually enjoy the relationship that she finds herself caught in the middle of with these men. This detail adds to the foreboding tone of the third stanza, for it serves as the speaker's warning to his mistress as he is forced to watch her behave flirtatiously with several other men. Furthermore, Donne continues to use an abundance of both caesura and enjambment, within this stanza, to enhance the smooth and seductive flow of the poem.

The tone of the poem then shifts from foreboding to romantic, within the fourth stanza, as the speaker begins to take a more personal stance whilst describing the relationship between himself and his mistress. Donne begins the first stanza with a detail stating that he intends to respect the wishes of his lady, even if they might infringe upon the pleasure which he wishes to pursue with her. Within the first two lines of this stanza, the speaker says " If thou, to be so seen, be'st loth, By sun or moon, though dark'est both".

Through this detail, the speaker wishes to communicate to his mistress that, if she does not appreciate being gazed upon so enthusiastically by the fish in the pond whilst she is nude; he will, therefore, not gaze upon her at. This detail adds to the romantic tone of the stanza, for it demonstrates the respect with which the speaker most willingly treats his mistress. The speaker then goes on to imagine himself being given special privileges with the woman as he states " And if myself have leave to see, I need not their light, having thee. This detail conveys to the reader that the speaker does

not wish himself to be viewed as simply another fish in the eyes of his mistress.

He wishes the woman to know that, even if she did permit him to gaze upon her in her nudity, he would choose not to, for to only feel the curves and textures of her body as they carried out acts of intimacy would be enough for him. This adds to the romantic tone of the first stanza, for it shows that, although he does sexually desire this woman, the speaker also cares a great deal about the manner in which she views their relationship and intends to pursue her not only in a sexual manner, but emotionally as well. Donne's mention of the sun and moon also add the romantic tone of the fourth stanza, for elements of nature are often used within medieval literature to compliment events occurring between people on earth. In this case, the beauty of both the sun and moon are indirectly used, by Donne, to accentuate the awe that the speaker feels in the presence of his mistress and the power that she possesses over his soul. As in the three previous stanzas, Donne again uses an abundance of caesura and enjambment in order to enhance the smooth flow as well as the romantic and, overall, seductive tone that is present within the first half of the poem.

With the commencement of its fifth stanza, the poem then takes on a completely different nature as the tone shifts from romantic to malevolent. Within this stanza, the speaker uses harsh imagery in order to convey, to the reader, his hatred for the men that attempt to physically penetrate his mistress. Within the first half of the stanza, the speaker says, " Let others freeze with angling reeds, And cut their legs with shells and weeds". This

image causes the reader to imagine men experiencing physical and, perhaps, emotional pain as they pursue the object of their sexual desire. This image adds therefore, to the tone of malevolence within the fifth stanza, for it causes the speaker's dislike towards the other fish in the river to become obvious. Within the next line of the fifth stanza, the speaker uses a metaphysical conceit, referring to the other men in pursuit of this woman, himself consistently excluded from these descriptions, as "treacherously poor fish". Through this conceit, the speaker, for only a moment, is able to sympathize with these men, for he feels that he too, in the form of neglect, has received harsh treatment from this particular woman.

However, his sympathy quickly subsides as his feelings of jealousy become more prominent. Donne's use of the word "treacherously" within the conceit serves, also, as a detail, informing the reader that the speaker believes some of these men to have already succeeded in penetrating his mistress. This detail adds to the tone of malevolence present within the fifth stanza, for it greatly enhances both the speaker's hatred and jealousy towards his competitors. Within the last line of the fifth stanza, Donne makes use of another metaphysical conceit, comparing the woman's sex organs to both a "strangling snare" and a "windowy net". This contrast is used to convey the speaker's ill wishes towards his competitors, as he hopes that their sexual experience with his lady will be both unpleasant and dissatisfying. This comparison is both grotesque and unappetizing, causing the poem to completely lose the tone of seduction present within the previous stanzas, becoming purely sexual.

Within the sixth stanza of *The Bait*, the tone then becomes completely bitter and increasingly grotesque. Donne begins the stanza with the image “ Let course bold hands from slimy nest The bedded fish in banks out-wrest”. This image contains a metaphysical conceit, comparing the sex organs of the female to “ a slimy nest” and, therefore, enhances both the grotesque tone of sixth stanza and the overall tone of sexuality present throughout the poem. Within this image, the speaker also mentions that the hands of the woman he desires are both coarse and bold. This description of his mistress’ hands serves as an important detail, for it allows the reader the knowledge that her physical attractiveness has faded in the eyes of his eyes, due to her pursuit of intercourse with other men, and that he now wishes only to possess her romantically, rather than sexually. Donne then employs additional imagery, through the form of another metaphysical conceit, comparing women, in general, to both “ curious traitors” and “ sleeve-silk flies”.

This comparison adds to the tone of bitterness present within the sixth stanza, for it shows that the reader has been hurt by his mistress and is no longer able to view women of her kind in a positive light. Within the last line of the sixth stanza, Donne then employs connotative diction, through the use of the word “ bewitch”. In this line, the speaker accuses women of bewitching the eyes of all the world’s men, still referring to them in the form of fish. The effect of the word “ bewitch” in this line is stronger than would have been the effect of the word “ captivate”, although the two words possess the same denotative meaning, and possesses a far more negative tone, adding therefore, to the bitter tone present within the stanza. Donne



then uses another metaphysical conceit, again comparing the men that are in pursuit of the speaker's mistress to fish that swim in a pond.

However, he now refers to them as "poor fishes" instead of merely fish, indicating to the reader that the speaker is again sympathising with the other men that have enjoyed and been hurt by his mistress. This detail adds to the tone of bitterness present within the sixth stanza, for it indicates, to the reader, that the speaker is not able to get past the sentiments of hurt that his mistress has caused him, and that, consequently, he is now beginning to drift over to the side of the other fish, now viewing his mistress as an enemy rather than a lover. Lastly, as in all the previous stanzas, Donne uses an abundance of both caesura and enjambment in order to enhance the overall tones of seductiveness and, now, sexuality present throughout the poem as the reader's eyes are drawn both swiftly and flowingly across the phrases printed on the page.

In the seventh and final stanza of *The Bait*, the tone of the poem shifts once again from one of bitterness and grotesqueness, to a tone of both lamentation and regret. In the second line of the seventh stanza, Donne employs another metaphysical conceit, comparing the speaker's mistress to bait for a fish, however, at this point in the poem, that fish being herself. Through the use of this conceit, Donne wishes to illustrate, to the reader, that the woman has now become caught in her own trap, for the power of her physical beauty in combination with the frigidity of her behaviour and insensitivity towards her lovers has now frightened away all of the good men, ruining her chance with both the speaker and any other honest man

that wishes to possess her. This detail adds, therefore, to the lamentable tone of the seventh stanza, for it demonstrates that, although he is reluctant to do so, the speaker feels he must sever his relationship with his mistress. Donne also uses elevated diction within the seventh stanza of the poem through the employment of the word “ alas”.

Poetry This word, used to mark a conclusion, possesses a negative undertone and, therefore adds to the lamentable tone of the last stanza as the speaker confirms his decision to leave his mistress. Donne then finishes the poem with the phrase “ That fish that is not catch’d thereby. Alas ! is wiser far than I.” This detail adds to the tone of regret within the final stanza of the poem, for it demonstrates the regret of the speaker upon ever having become involved with his mistress, due to the emotional pain that she has caused him. This last line also indicates, to the reader, that the speaker feels he is partly to blame for having fallen for his mistress’s beauty without initially inspecting the traits of her internal character.

Within the poem, The Bait, John Donne makes effective use of many literary techniques and components, such as elevated diction, contrasting imagery, influential details, metaphysical conceit, both figurative and seditious language, and elongated sentence structure in order to carry out the many shifts in tone throughout the poem, as well as to amplify its overall tone of seduction and sexuality. Through this poem, Donne successfully tells the story of two lovers, who, as a result of both their actions and decisions, are forced, ultimately, to separate and to continue on separate paths, deeply regretting the existence of what was once their relationship. This poem

serves, not only, as a tale of a lover and his mistress, but also as a warning to any man who allows himself to fall in love with a woman by way of her physical attractiveness, without first having carefully observed the nature of her character.