

Inconvenience to indifference in "love's diet"



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The speaker in John Donne's poem "Love's Diet" distances himself from his current relationship as his attitude towards love shifts from inconvenience to indifference with intermediary steps of defensive attacks. The speaker Donne presents does not have complete control over his emotions, and even shows subtle signs of fear at emotions like rejection. The lack of control, however, leads to feelings of annoyance because the speaker has become so consumed by love that he no longer has the ability to concentrate on other activities. The speaker then begins to distance himself from his lover by metaphorically placing his love on a diet in order to attain a state of indifference towards love and avoid the pain of rejection at the hands of an unfaithful mistress. Giving no indication of the reason for his annoyance with love, the speaker still clearly establishes his emotions. In the opening lines of the poem, he uses verbose language to describe love as "a cumbersome unwieldiness / And burdenous corpulence" (Donne 104, 1-2) to indicate that the relationship has become troublesome for him. In the following lines the speaker sees a need to lessen his love "and keep it in proportion" (Donne 104, 4), suggesting that corpulent love consumes the speaker so much that he cannot carry on other activities. With four lines of background information the speaker then introduces the metaphor of the diet for his love. The use of this metaphor works effectively for the speaker because as the personified version of excessive love diminishes physically on the diet, the speaker achieves greater emotional distance from his lover and nears a state of indifference. The speaker distances himself from his current relationship by both curtailing his own responses to love and by refusing to accept his mistress' signs of affection. The second, third, and fourth stanzas of "Love's Diet" all follow a set pattern that shows the speaker struggling to keep his

love on the diet in the first three lines of the stanza before assuring himself that his mistress does not actually show favor to him alone. In the second stanza, the speaker proclaims that he does not allow his love to have more than one sigh a day (Donne 104, 7). Though love is still present, the speaker begins to exert more control over love, especially when he interacts with the mistress. When the mistress sighs and love would go against the diet to feast on her displays, the speaker "let him see / 'Twas neither very sound, nor meant for me" (Donne 104, 11-12). The speaker, having already devised a way to diminish his emotions, must confront those of his lady. He convinces himself that her sigh, which previously would have been fodder for love, was not even directed to him. The speaker distances himself from the traditional activities associated with love as the pattern of denial continues in the third and fourth stanzas. The speaker claims that if love provoked weeping he "brin'd [the tear] so / With scorn and shame, that him it nourish'd not" (Donne 104, 13-14). The excessively salty tears would keep love on a strict diet, though the attitude toward love shows that the speaker is becoming pompous in his method of distancing himself from the relationship. The speaker also asserts his control over love by sustaining an attitude of contempt towards his lady's actions. When she cries the speaker attacks her fidelity because her "eyes which roll towards all, weep not, but sweat" (Donne 104, 18). The strike against his lover's fidelity is a new element to the poem. In the second stanza the speaker makes no mention of to whom the sighs were directed, but here the speaker includes another collective group of men with whom his lady presumably has relationships as well. The speaker includes an element of defensiveness in his attempts to distance himself from love. The defensive measures of the speaker extend into the

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fourth stanza. According to the parameters of the speaker's pattern, he begins by boldly stating that he burnt the letters that love had him write (Donne 104, 20). Though he has prevented contact by burning the letters, the speaker still wrote them in the first place. Even in previous stanzas, the speaker has continued performing the actions associated with love despite his claims that his love is on a diet. The speaker has also continued to scrutinize his lady's responses against the original intent of distancing himself from her. The defensive measures he employs as he denies his mistress' affections culminate in the question he asks at the end of the fourth stanza, " what doth it avail / To be the fortieth name in an entail (Donne 105, 23-24)? According to the speaker, his lover writes to many people, and of them he is at the bottom of the list. The reference to " an entail" points to the process of inheriting land, which the speaker uses in the poem as the non-existent chance he has for being with his lady because his name is fortieth on the list. The question, while not an outright attack as seen earlier, echoes the lover's infidelity and the speaker's attempts to distance himself. Though the speaker tries to distance himself from his relationship, he still pays a great amount of attention to his mistress throughout the poem. He describes love as a burden (Donne 104, 1) but for a span of three stanzas watches for his lady's sighs, tears, and letters. Interaction continues despite the debate of her fidelity because the speaker refuses to actually end the relationship. The concept of a diet implies that the speaker only distances himself but has no intention to depart because the diet is not meant to lead to death. The speaker cannot destroy his emotions, but in the question of the fourth stanza, his defensive measures of attack shift to the realization that caring too much does him no good (Donne <https://assignbuster.com/inconvenience-to-indifference-in-loves-diet/>

104, 23-24). The answer to his question lies in acquiring an attitude of indifference. Though the speaker has proven in previous stanzas that he cannot effectively end the relationship because he still pays attention to his mistress; despite his assertions that love inconveniences him, the speaker develops an attitude of indifference. The speaker opens the last stanza with a birding metaphor. He asserts that " Thus I reclaim'd my buzzard love to fly / At what, and when, and how, and where I choose" (Donne 105, 25-26). His love, once incapable of direction and precision, now resembles the tame falcon that hunts with keen observation. The speaker, however, claims to resemble the owner of the falcon who can carry out the actions of love as a hunter might behave on a hunt. Love, which once inconvenienced the speaker, now does not consume him and keep him from other activities because the speaker says that he can, " spring a mistress, swear, write, sigh, and weep: / And the game kill'd, or lost, go talk and sleep" (Donne 105, 29-30). Whether the speaker is successful or not in acquiring a mistress, it makes no difference to him because he has reached the point where love is an isolated activity that has no bearing on the rest of his life. The birding metaphor allows the speaker to transition from a person still controlled by love to a person capable of an existence outside of it. At the beginning of " Love's Diet" the speaker devised a goal of keeping his love in proportion, but by the end of the poem he claims to be completely indifferent. Not only does the speaker take control of his emotions, he finally regards love as a type of sport. This transition comes suddenly after the speaker devotes so much time to his mistress and his own emotional responses to her. The speaker resorts to distancing himself emotionally so that he does not get hurt by his mistress' assumed infidelity and the amount of himself that he has placed in

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the "burdenous corpulence" (Donne 104, 2) of his love. Though the speaker would assert that he is a master of love, his transformation into the hunter cannot be admired because instead of just ending the relationship he continues it. The speaker successfully distances himself and eliminates the possible pain of rejection through indifference, but his difficult transition and attention to her actions suggests that he cares more for his mistress than he cares to admit. Work Cited Donne, John. "Love's Diet". John Donne's Poetry. Ed. Donald R. Dickson. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007. 104-5.