Metaphysical conceit in "the flea”

In the poem " The Flea," John Donne uses a metaphysical conceit between a simple flea and the complexities of young romance to develop the narrator's argument for a young woman to forfeit her chastity. By giving the flea a dual meaning, Donne manages to tell a story that is both simple and complex. The metaphysical conceit deals with a flea that has just bitten the speaker and his female companion. The speaker claims that the flea bite joins them as does sexual intercourse, and therefore her chastity should no longer be an issue between them. The flea furthers the speaker's argument in that sexual intercourse unites their souls like the bite of the flea. The narrator tells the woman that she need feel no more guilty for having sex with him than having the flea unite their blood with a bite. Sex to him is a small pleasure – " Mark but this flea, and mark in this/ how little that which deniest me is" (1-2) – and one he believes his lover takes too seriously. Donne uses the flea, the blood it extracts, and its final murder as various symbols of love. In the past it was commonly believed that one's blood was representative of her soul. In this particular work, the blood taken from the couple symbolizes their two souls: " In this flea our two bloods mingled be" (4), writes Donne, and " pamper'd swells with one blood made of two" (8). From these two lines one may infer that the flea bite involves a mingling of there souls – the equivalent to them having sexual intercourse. They have already experienced something of the same magnitude as sex, the speaker argues, so they may as well engage in the physical act. Donne uses the death of the flea to reinforce the ongoing metaphysical conceit as it relates to love and sexual intercourse. The speaker's companion threatens that she will kill the flea, then does so. The action represents her determination to retain her virginity and remain in control. The killing also reinforces the difference of

opinion between the couple. The narrator claims that the woman would have lost as little from sex as from killing the flea: " Just so much honor when thou yield'st to me, will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee" (27). Trying to soothe his companion, he says she " purpled her nail in the blood of innocence" (21). Killing a flea engenders no shame; the narrator argues that the same would hold true for a sexual relationship. The flea's importance diminishes through the poem. In the middle portion of the poem the speaker refers to the flea with high esteem: " This flea is you and I, and this our marriage bed, and marriage temple is" (14). Later in the poem the speaker emphasizes what little the flea actually means after it is dead. The flea is a metaphysical conceit in which is expressed in whatever way is convenient at the time. The narrator changes his metaphor based on what he believes will be most persuasive. Donne's metaphysical conceit is a clever metaphor that relates a flea's bite and killing to a young couple in disagreement about the meaning of sex. Perhaps one reason the poem has withstood the test of time is its continued relevance today – those who believe sex is a frivolous act and those who hold more firmly to its importance.