

Evaluate the ways in which poets manage to create profound significance between a...

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



“ The Wife of Bath’s Tale” is a deceptively simple poem.

The single narrator, using colloquial language to recall a linear story bases both the prologue and tale on two simple points, experience being more important than authority and women’s dominance. Similarly John Dunn’s “ The Flea” has a simple three stanza structure, is recounted by a single narrator, making a simple argument, that there is no reason why the narrator and his partner should not have sex. Yet, within the metaphor and the argument of “ The Flea”, much like the arguments of “ The Wife”, there is a web of thought which touches on women, society, relationships and religion. I will now evaluate the ways in which Chaucer and Dunn use such a simple form for such significant, and even taboo themes and subjects.

Perhaps most significant to the simple feel of “ The Wife of Bath’s Tale” is very simplistic in its structure. It is a prologue, followed by a tale. Her prologue consists of a woman talking of her view of experience being more authority, with her idea of evidence to support this, and then a brief, if rambling, linear summary of her marriages. Following this is her tale, which is simply a fairytale. Furthermore Chaucer’s “ General Prologue” for all of the Canterbury Tales establishes “ the Wife’s” character.

Most thoroughly established is her sexual promiscuity, with such physical attributes as “ Hir hosen...of fyn scarleet reed” and being “ Gat-tothed” which was at the time, seen as a sign of ones sexuality. Having established her as a raunchy character before her prologue even begins – sex being a much frowned upon subject at the time – Chaucer has managed to weave

the significant imagery into his simple structure, affecting how we think of her from the very beginning. In a similar way, Dunn's "The Flea" is set out in three separate stanzas, based on a separate action of the linear chain of events. The narrator, points out the flea as his metaphor and reasoning for them to have sex, the flea is squished by his partner, they move on. As Chaucer introduces the Wife's sexual drive early on, by the second line of the first stanza, it is clear that there is a more complex drive than the simple layout may suggest.

"How little that which thou deny'st me is;", the line shows a clear desire for something, but he will not say it out loud, suggesting that it is a taboo, and creating a pressure on the lady he is talking to. This pressure he is creating on the woman for a desire which they cannot talk about, as does the account of the gapped tooth and five "Housbondes" immediately introduces the significant themes of women's power in relationships, and in society. The idea of the taboo in "The Flea", could furthermore be interpreted to be introducing the theme of religion, as could the first lines of the Wife's prologue, "Experience, though noon auctoritee Were in this world, is right ynough for me" this is an incredibly bold statement in a time when everybody was a devout Christian and Christianity's teachings were seen as fact. Weaved into a simple rhyming couplet at the very start of "The Wife's" prologue it is a striking start to the poem which immediately lets the reader know how risky the narrator is going to be, and creates the significant image of somebody rating anything more important than the bible. The simple structure of "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is complementary to the very one way

speech. "The Wife" repeats her points of view countless times in her prologue, and even appears to forget the story and repeat them in her tale too.

In her prologue, following talk of how one must live in chastity to be a saint, the wife states, "I nil envye no virginitee," With this quote "The Wife" is essentially saying, if that's what you want, then fair enough, but I don't envy you. In medieval England sex was already frowned upon, so to say that one would give up the chance of sainthood for the pleasure of sex was truly profound to the pre-renaissance audience. The theme of her sexual prowess is seen before and after this quote such as line 87, "Al nis but counseil to virginitee."

In essence "The Wife" is saying that chastity is only really 'advice', her use of "but" belittles the widespread belief of the teaching of The Bible, and so all of those who follow it. A woman daring to belittle so many people is certainly a profound image, the man who wrote The Vulgate was also "the ultimate authority over women" so to suggest what he saw as a commandment from God was "but conseil" is extremely shocking to the social order, and so profoundly significant. The idea of anybody talking so boldly about sex in Medieval England was shocking, so Chaucer having a woman repeat such phrases is a brave challenge of the dogma of the time. Furthermore "The Wife" becomes more forceful with her arguments. She talks using comedic hyperbole about how "oure both thinges smale" are seen by some as just a way "to knowe a femele from a male," and proceeds

ot elaborate on previous quotes that virginity is not for her, stating, “ The experience woot well is noht so. Here “ The Wife” uses experience, one of the key themes through out the poem, to prove the socially accepted ideas wrong.

Chaucer’s repetition of her point, as well as building up the delivery of what she’s saying, by mocking the other ideas and with the use of rhetoric questions show her being strong and growing stronger, a very significant image in Medieval England. It could alternately be interpreted as representing the intolerable stubbornness of women, however, at the time; most women would have been submissive to men, so this is less likely. The image Chaucer creates of “ The Wife” as a strong lady is all the more significant when considering it would have been heard by the men and women of the courts, the people who set and followed most strictly the social standards which she is strongly standing against. Similarly to “ The Wife Of Bath’s Tale” repetition if a one sided argument works in John Dunn’s “ The Flea” to show a man’s persistence in his attempt to seduce his unmarried partner. The narrator begins early in the first stanza telling his partner, “ marke in this, How little that which thou deny’st me is. ” The irony of the narrator’s argument is that he spends a whole poem trying to get something, showing it must be important, by arguing that it is insignificant, this hypocrisy gives a sense of unorganised desperation. His use of imperative gives a sense of dominance, however what he’s saying makes it clear that the narrator is currently subservient to the morals of the strong woman.

This was perhaps a testimony to the idea that Christianity can even keep a woman strong against a determined man if you stay firm to what The Bible teaches, this would have been very well received by the audience of the time. Interestingly the woman seems just as strong in her morals as “ The Wife of Bath” who claims that her husbands should “ paye” their “ dette,” but in the completely opposite direction, in a direction which ironically supports the idea of men being stronger and better than women. The woman stays admirably strong in the second stanza when the narrator still trying to persuade her of the insignificance of premarital sex.

“ The flea is you and I, and this Our marriage bed,” The thought behind these lines is that as the flea has sucked from both of them, so mixed their blood – which is what people believed happened when people had sex – the two were now one, and married, so should have sex. The idea of a man trying to corrupt a virtuous woman (GREAT POEM eh Mr pickles! would be somewhat disturbing and perverse if it were not for the light hearted dismissal of his previous arguments in the third stanza. “’Tis true, then learne how false, feares bee,” was perhaps Dunn’s way of winning over the reader of the time’s affection in the hope that the mildly iconoclastic ideas will then be forgiven, or maybe given more time to be understood, as the reader would not be so angry that they would simply throw the poem away. Another simple technique employed to create significantly profound imagery is the biblical quotes used in both poems. Medieval England would have been of far greater knowledge of The Bible than today’s society, particularly the people of the court’s who would be expected to know and follow it’s teachings as an

example to the rest of society. To argue against, or manipulate The Bible could have angered many people, it would also, however, raise a lot of attention to the point which "The Wife" and perceivably Chaucer, was trying to make.

Furthermore the questions she asks of the bible can't really be answered in a way which proves her wrong. Early in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" she uses the bible to support her argument, "God bad us for to wexe and multiplie;" given that The Bible was taken as fact in Medieval England, this was a seemingly simple technique, essentially an appeal to authority, The apparent simplicity of this is lost when one sees the hypocrisy that in her first lines she slated "auctoritee" and is now appealing to it, showing a similar desperation to prove her point as we see through the hypocrisy in "The Flea". The technique of quoting The Bible becomes more profound as Chaucer develops the Wife's use of The Bible into the exposing and manipulation of a hole in the teachings of the bible. "But no nombre mencion made he, Of bigamie, or octagamie;" At this point The Wife's use of The Bible becomes profound, advocating the idea of multiple sexual partners in a time when the Vulgate was the main interpretation of The Bible, teaching that "Bet tis to be wedded than to brinne." "The Wife" quite this also, pointing out how wrong it seems to her, this abuse of the holy text would outrage many medieval men and women. The narrator of "The Flea" is also using Christianity, to try and persuade virtuous wife to come round to his side of view. Both Dunn's character, much like Chaucer's "The Wife" is trying to use what society follows, against them, or rather their current

beliefs. After establishing, though, seemingly only in his own mind that the flea is “you and I”, when she threatens to kill it he appeals to her strict religious values, “Let not this, selfe murder added bee And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Three here implies the flea, the narrator and his partner, it is very manipulative to a taken a small idea, and then grow it into a truth, which makes it a sin to kill a flea. This could perhaps be a comment by Dunn on religions way of inventing truths, but it is unlikely that in the 1600s somebody would be so bold, or even aware as to criticise religion in this way. Regardless of religiously critical connotations the lines present a disturbing image of a man trying to corrupt a woman by using the religion which has kept her so adamantly and sternly virtuous against her. Again, this significantly radical image is portrayed through simple methods, simply paraphrasing the teachings of The Bible.

“The Wife” quotes The Bible having just talked about Jesus feeding the five thousand with brown bread, a very weak supporting of her metaphor that she would rather be brown bread than white and pure bread, which again displays her desperation to prove her point, though, furthermore her creativity with the links she will use. She says “Mark telle kan,” referring to the man who wrote about the feeding of the five thousand, but in actual fact it was St. John who wrote about this. In three words Chaucer has taken “The Wife” from simply manipulating The Bible to convince people chastitee is not so important, to a social comment on how little people actually know of the



book which dictates their lives. The Vulgate was not in English so for “The Wife” being able to quote any of the teachings would have perhaps impressed people of the day, so in these three words Chaucer also develops the reader’s interpretation of the independence, intelligence and self-motivation of the narrator, which effects our interpretation of the entire story. The image of a non-royal woman being this well educated, or the comment of how poorly people know The Bible when they follow it so trustingly is an impressively profound image to have raised by simply having the narrator misquote The Bible.

In conclusion both poets employ multiple techniques to use seemingly simple poetic forms to create profoundly significant images. It seems the most important technique both poets used was to use a simple structure so that people could believe it was merely a simple poem, making the imagery all the more profoundly significant to those who pick up on it. It also appears that to talk about the most commonly believed and loved social values, in the case of both of these poets Christianity, is an incredibly effective way of creating significant imagery that could be missed as simple speculation or discussion.