

Death be not proud
by john donne



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John Donne's poem *Death Be Not Proud* is typical of the religious/metaphysical genre employed by the poet. All human beings have a lurking fear of death. As we get older, this fear increases and ultimately dominates our thoughts. But contrary to the negative connotations attached to the event of death, Donne presents to the readers an interesting alternative understanding of this all too common aspect of life. While on surface the poem seems to dismiss the threat and fear of death, reading between the lines one can see the religious implication. The other striking aspect of the poem is its archaic spelling and phrase usage. Since John Donne was a contemporary of Shakespeare, his verses carry elements of early-modern English usage. As for its stylistic elements, the poet follows conventional metrics of sonnets, with a total of 14 lines, which in turn is broken down into three stanzas of 4 lines each followed by a concluding couplet (Diyanni, 2007). Although the language might come across as archaic, the modern reader will be able to relate to the content and meaning of the poem, as it deals with the universal human experience of death. The universality of its theme is further reinforced by the persistence of the poem's lines in contemporary usage. For example, author John Gunther uses the opening lines of the poem *Death Be Not Proud* as the title for his memoir, wherein he delves into the shortened life of his beloved son Johnny Gunther. Further, John Gunther employs the literary technique of allegory to apply Donne's interpretation of death to that of his son's premature death (Gunther, 1993).

Consistent with John Donne's image as a religious poet (and a decidedly Christian one at that), the poet seems to suggest that those who do not live

their lives according to Christian doctrine might have to face eternal damnation, while at the same time true believers have little to fear. The poet also alludes to the Christian belief in the after-life, stating that death is just a short sleep toward eternal existence. While the Christian overtones might sound a little hyperbolic, the poem does succeed in providing consoling thoughts to the readers (Holy Sonnet 10, 1998). Further, the poet employs the notion of ‘paradox’ to good effect in dismantling the traditional view of death as a morbid and catastrophic event. To the contrary, John Donne suggests that

“ Rather than being a fearful experience, death brings greater release and pleasure than rest and sleep, which people use to restore their energy. Death not only provides “ Rest of...bones” but also “ soul’s delivery,” a release into a peaceful eternity. Moreover, death is not the tyrant that it imagines itself to be; rather, it is a slave to the arbitrary dictates of fate and chance and to the whims of capricious monarchs and murderers.” (Donne, 2002)

It is important to understand the historical context of the poem in order to fully appreciate its merits. The poem (usually referred to as Sonnet 10) was composed during the early seventeenth century. It was a time of rapid political and social transformation in England. In the two centuries before this era, England was going through the ‘dark ages’ along with the rest of continental Europe. There were epidemic diseases, political turmoil, military coup de tats and overall decadence. This socio-historical context was most conducive to the resurgence of Christian values and virtues, which have seen a decline during the ‘dark ages’. The dreaded Bubonic plague that first

struck England in the 13th century made reappearance during this period, further causing death and destruction to the English society. Hence, the optimism and brand new perspectives presented by John Donne's poems had captured the imagination of 17th century English public. The popularity of the poem in question should be credited to two important factors. Firstly, the universal theme of death and the Christian idea of an eternal life were very appealing to the poverty and chaos stricken English masses. Secondly, the prominence of the written word as a mode of communication helped the poem reach all sections of society (Holy Sonnet 10, 1998).

Another facet of the poem that merits mention is the personal religious beliefs of the author himself. Having been born to a devout Roman Catholic couple, John Donne faced religious challenges growing up. His adherence to the Roman Catholic interpretation of Christianity was constantly challenged by the more dominant Anglican Church that also had more followers in England. But instead of weakening his view of Christianity and its divinity, Donne's involvement with the Catholic doctrine only got strengthened. Even in *Death Be Not Proud*, one could see this element of loyalty and devotion to his personal religious faith. To this extent, the poem can be said to arise from personal religious experiences of the author. But its appeal is unmitigated by this fact due to the lack of didacticism and self-righteousness in the tone of the poem (Donne, 2002).

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