

# Study of a sonnet

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The greatest aspect of a sonnet is that it reflects hard work and vigour. It also displays some of the characteristics that the sonneteer may possess. For example, Shakespeare has given himself a wealth of characteristics throughout his works, but what struck me most, was his power to fulfil what he wanted to say and would take up innumerable roles in which to display his message. I believe that this unveils a new side of Shakespeare every time he writes. I feel that my main aim in this essay is to look at the differences, both subtle and outright that make some of the greatest sonnets and sonneteers so very contrasting from one another.

Firstly, it is very important to explore a sonnet. The first sonnet is called, "Batter My Heart" by John Donne. This is a classic English sonnet written at the beginning of the Seventeenth century where Donne unravels his negativity towards himself, and how he demands to be freed from his evil and cast back to God's side. The second sonnet is called, "Death Be Not Proud" by John Donne. This is a sort of argument against the rights of Death, exploring why Death does not, in fact, have any power over anything. In the two sonnets we see Donne as a man who desperately needed God in his life.

He felt separated from God because of his sins and shortcomings. Steir, a critic known for his views on Donne states that he could not see himself free from sin: "Donne finds it difficult to accept being saved as a sinner and he cannot convincingly imagine being free from sin. In the absence of the capacity to imagine or feel either of these, Donne's deepest prayer must be either to be ravished into chastity, or to escape from God's attention". Of these sonnets, many differences occurred. The exploration of these is just as

important. For example, in both sonnets, Donne wanted God to interfere directly into his life and bring Donne to him.

Donne could not bring himself directly to God because he felt that he was unworthy of God. The examination of William Shakespeare's 18th sonnet gives us a perspective into one side of Shakespeare's character. This particular sonnet discovers why the life of his mistress is more than the beauty of any flower, any countryside, or any season. His character in this poem can be very persuasive and canny at times, but as the mood swiftly changes, he shows that he has a loving and far more tender side to himself. " Shall I compare thee" has been an inspiration to many budding sonneteers and poets for a long time now.

On the surface, the poem is simply a statement of praise about the beauty of his Mistress. Summer tends to go to unpleasant extremes of windiness and heat, but his mistress is always mild and temperate. Summer is incidentally personified as the " eye of heaven" with its " gold complexion"; the imagery throughout is simple and unaffected, with the " darling buds of May" giving way to the " eternal summer", which Shakespeare promises his mistress.

The language is not heavy with alliteration and nearly every line is its own self-contained clause, almost every line ends with some punctuation, which creates pause. "Batter my heart" reveals the relationship Donne desired to have with God. In this sonnet a theme of violence and sexual conquest is present. The speaker is asking God to violently possess him. It's as if God is a male and Donne is a subordinate female. In describing the opening and closing of the poem, Steir states: " They rely on the conception of total

spiritual dependence on God, on the need for man to be utterly regenerated by God-'made new'-not merely aided and assisted by him".

The poem opens by asking God to "Batter my heart". The word "heart" in Donne's time had a sexual connotation. According to Craig Payne, "heart" was originally slang for Vagina. As Payne points out this is to give much of the imagery of the poem in just one line. He is asking God to "break" him in order to make him "new" which shows that he is torn by his evil side and needs to be made new, so he can start again. Donne seems to be playing "hard to get" which can be analysed as if Donne is hard to also turn from his "evil side".

Donne goes on to use alliteration in, "breake, blowe, burn" like the sound of a blacksmith's hammer against his anvil. He wants to be taken by God, yet his defences are strong. The image of a "usurped town" reveals this. Like a town that is being held at siege, Donne has defences. Just as a town must be won over by force so Donne. Phrasing like this contributes to an attitude which tells us that Donne is incarcerated in the Devil's lair and needs force to break his bars of some kind that hold him back. However, a town is usually not as strong as it appears to be from the outside.

The nature of the line "labour to admit you" shows that Donne felt he should forcefully tell God to change his evil ways incessantly. Donne writes, "Reason your Viceroy in mee" so that, even if God is unable to help Donne, then Donne will settle for God's second in command. This can be read as if Donne is ordering for an angel to help him. Donne decides to go on to describe his strengths as "weake or untrue" to show a form of deception in

the devil and his utter powerlessness over his sinful attitude. Donne then states, " Yet dearly I love you" and a complication arises.

Donne up until now was demanding God to do something about his situation, yet now Donne is behaving differently and is pleading. This is to show he is still " betrothed" unto God's " enemy". By the enemy, Donne creates this evil figure, which is seen as the devil in a sinful and competitive nature. Like someone trapped in a bad marriage he must be " divorced" or " untied". He cannot break away alone though he must have God's help. In order for him to be free from his sinful ways he calls on God to fight for him to be free and then, he can marry God.

He states, " take me to you, imprison me" as if Donne can never escape to bad ways ever again. In the most shocking request of all, Donne asks God to ravish him so that he can be " free" and " chaste. " It is being ravished or raped that will free Donne from his sin and his bond with the devil. Craig Payne states that it can be interpreted to be spiritual, " That which is humanly imperfect and even exploitative becomes divinely perfect and fulfilling. The rape preserves, rather than destroys chastity. God builds up as he tears down, possesses as he frees".

The next sonnet, " Death, be not proud" is about how Donne challenges the footing of Death instead of challenging the footing of himself in God's eye's, as in " Batter my Heart". Donne was always seeking to rival what would normally just be passed by because people didn't care to challenge that what is, is. Donne seemed to be obsessed with death; he supposedly preached his own funeral sermon shortly before his death for example. He

had a portrait painted of himself in his shroud and he wrote of the subject often. The main point at issue here is Death's power, and Donne clearly sets about showing that Death's power is non-existent.

It is not a conversation of any kind, nor is it a debate, as the sonnet is totally one-sided and it is passing a judgment on Death, a verdict and the sentence is death itself, but more on that later. This, compared to "Batter my Heart" where Donne is pleading, is totally different, because Donne is arguing. The first two lines give clarity to the rest of the sonnet. In the first line, "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee" starts making it clear that Donne is addressing Death, personified. Thus, it is merely, on one hand, one person addressing another.

Death is therefore made an equal. This makes quite a lowering in the overall stature of Death. The main point at issue here is Death's power, and Donne clearly sets about showing that Death's power is non-existent. It is not a conversation of any kind, nor is it a debate, as the sonnet is totally one-sided and it is passing a judgment on Death, a verdict and the sentence is death itself, but more on that later. Donne is forceful and defiant when he states, "Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so" which seems to ridicule Death.

Donne underlines the dispute over, Death is not "mighty and dreadful" as some have thought. Certainly, the speech delivered in the sonnet has its aim on the fear of Death; unlike "Batter my Heart" which was proclaiming his own fear under God's eyes; which is wrong under the circumstances and the reassurance that Death isn't what it seems. There is a great logic in the next two lines, "For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow, Die not, poor

death; nor yet canst thou kill me. " as Death challenges the very statement that when he kills people, they live on in heaven therefore Donne himself cannot die.

The key word here must be " think'st"; it is unreal, untrue that Death is mighty. Moving to the next quatrain, Death is, through comparison, to be viewed as a short rest and sleep, from which pleasure comes, " From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be, Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow" you wake up the next morning and Heaven awaits. Yet, in " Batter my Heart" Donne was pleading with God that the next day he wants to be with God and now, Donne is telling Death/the devil that he never had any power over Donne in the first place.

From the sonnet lines, we can surmise that Death must be pleasurable. It is only a temporary state, for it leads to life in heaven, therefore it is not as it appears once again. For Death, the audience in the poem, this negation of his power and situation would surely cause great torment and, we would assume, have tremendous emotional impact. The next two lines, " And soonest our best men with thee do go-, Rest of their bones and souls' delivery! " enter a whole verse of argument. They mean, our 'best' men die, 'with thee do go', but their souls live on in heaven, 'souls' delivery! '

Add to that the reference to Death being merely a 'slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,' which implies that Death is just a slave to God and kills in fate or chance, Kings, or men who simply want to commit suicide. Donne suggests in 'desperate men' that Death isn't forcefully killing them, they have chosen to die therefore Death is belittled to have no power

whatsoever. But moving on, 'And dost with poison, war and sickness dwell,' implying that Death is housed in the scum of the Earth; poison is used to kill others, war is killing other people massively and where sickness inhabits, such as Hospitals or 3rd world countries.

This brings new meaning to, " And poppy charms can make us sleep as well," where Death is being compared to Opium, " sleep as well," and the poppies, 'poppy charms' that lie where men at war were killed. This leads on to the next line, 'And better than thy stroke. ' The use of 'And' at the start of the above three lines creates an affect of points in an argument, or simple statements. There is an accusation in the next line, Death has been proud, has " swell'st" but with no justification.

Death is made to look powerless in preventing life. However, the Octave could be a scene of sorrow and mourning, a funeral service for, possibly, one of 'our best men. ' This ceremony is designed to blame and dishonour Death but also to lower him to the status of 'desperate men' earlier in the sonnet. In " Batter my Heart" Donne was acting as a desperate man to be freed from the devil, who is now being compared to a desperate man. Donne probably thought that anything related to the Devil must have a part of the Devil within it.

There is a second audience in the poem; besides Death himself, and Donne seems to be addressing all those who fear Death in, " One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And Death shall be no more" He seems to ridicule Death, to make Death's power look smaller, comparing it with mere rest and sleep and where Donne uses all the evidence he can find, as well as emotional



appeal, to persuade this audience that Death is neither to be feared nor dreaded and that Death is, ultimately, nothing, for it is through Death that we find a new kind of life in heaven.

This is a kind of reassurance to readers, as if he is also preaching the goodness of God which can be compared to Donne's other sonnet "Batter my Heart" where Donne is showing that he cannot preach God's will, because he is bound by the Devil. The arguments' which would appear to Death as insulting, can appear to the reader as shocking, since Death has always been assumed a fearful. But Donne takes the role of making Death seem harmless. It is, of course, this very surprise and shock that the speaker uses as a powerful emotional ploy, along with a list of arguments, to persuade.

We might almost imagine a courtroom scene with Death as the accused and all of humanity as the spectators and Donne as a sort of judge, for he not only presents the evidence, but also passes judgment, "Death, thou shalt Die" at the end of the sonnet. But this last line is the best of all, because it is the ultimate paradox and the ultimate irony that Death should in fact die! These reasons and appeals are contained and arranged within the traditional sonnet form: fourteen lines with the usual octave and sestet.

Donne intended a strong break between the octave and sestet is reinforced by the period at the end of line 8, one of few in the sonnet. Donne has stated his thesis that Death is not mighty or powerful and cannot kill or destroy life. And he has supported it through dramatic arguments to a shocking conclusion. Death is the one who dies, not those whom he thinks to

overthrow. The balanced and parallel structures of the opening of line 1 and the closing of line 14 serve to reinforce and emphasize the argument splendidly, " Death, be not proud ...

Death, thou shalt die. " This is comparatively different to lines 1 and 14 of " Batter my Heart", " Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you ... Nor even chaste, except you ravish me", for these two lines are still to do with his involvement with the Devil Shakespeare's " Shall I compare thee" sonnet is all to do with his Mistress. In the first line, " Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? " we start to see the development of a thought that Shakespeare is having. This line is taken usually to mean, what if I were to compare you to a summers day.

The comparisons of the loved one to all the beautiful things in nature hover in a background throughout. Such thoughts have recurring words like " summer", " days", " song", " sweet". The second line, " Thou art more lovely and more temperate", the mistresses' beauty is more perfect than the beauty of a summer day " more temperate" - more gentle, more restrained, whereas the summer's day might have violent excesses in store, such as are about to be described. May was a summer month in Shakespeare's time, because the calendar in use, lagged behind our calendar by at least a fortnight.

As the last line is made to lead onto the next line, " Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May", so that it is set out like an argument in point form, why she isn't like a summer's day. " Darling buds of May", the beautiful, much loved buds of the early summer and favourite flowers. The last line of

the first quatrain, " And summer's lease hath all too short a date" means that summer holds a lease on part of the year, so summer is too short and has an early finish.

The next quatrain holds yet another opening to another round of points in his argument, which can be compared to " Batter my heart" in which Donne is constantly begging, or demanding his freedom from the Devil. Yet, " Death, be not proud" is more of an argument, just like this one. " Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines," which links us to the sun and how some days are just too hot. In the first line of reasoning after the argument's main point, we see 'And often is his gold complexion dimmed,' which means that sometimes the sun is too cold as well. The part 'his gold complexion' means the sun's golden face.

It would be dimmed by clouds and on overcast days generally. The next line carries the load once more, 'And every fair from fair sometime declines,' which can be broken down to mean that all beautiful things " every fair" occasionally become inferior in comparison with their previous state of beauty " from fair". They all decline from perfection. The last line of this second quatrain, 'By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;' what Shakespeare really means is that by chance accidents, or by the constant changes of nature, which are not subject to control, nature's 'changing' look is 'untrimm'd'.

Untrimmed can refer to the ballast (trimming) on a ship which keeps it stable; or to a lack of ornaments or decorations. Therefore, does it refer to nature, or chance, or every fair in the line above, or to the effect of nature's

changing course? As one critic, Katherine Duncan-Jones states, " Nature's changing course could refer to women's monthly courses, or menstruation", in which case every fair in the previous line would refer to every fair woman, " with the implication that the youth is free of this cyclical curse", and is therefore more perfect.

The first line of the third quatrain gives yet another overview of the next three points that we come across as readers, and we can see yet another similarity with " Death, be not proud" because this also uses the bullet point technique to underlie the argument. " Batter my heart" starts its begging part in its third quatrain, instead of keeping a solid foundation like " Death, be not proud" and " Shall I compare thee". " But thy eternal summer shall not fade".

This tells us that Shakespeare is trying to get across the issue that his Mistresses' " summer", like beauty, will never go away. Nor shall it " your eternal summer" lose its hold on that power which she so richly possesses, " Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;" as in possession. The third line of the third quatrain, " Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade," comments on how the lines are undying. This use of Nor is very effective, for it enforces this idea of setting down a point formed argument.

The last line before the couplet, " When in eternal lines to time thou growest;" underlines that even if her lines grow wrinkly, the lines of this sonnet will not, which surely leads to the final couplet so that the whole argument is enforced in just two lines. The final couplet, " So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee"

tells us that, She keeps in pace with time, she grows as time grows and as long as humans live and breathe on earth, for as long as there are seeing eyes on the earth then that is how long these verses will live, celebrating her, and continually renewing her life.