Holy Sonnet 10: Death, be not proud

POEM TEXT

1 Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
2 Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
3 For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
4 Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
5 From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
6 Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
7 And soonest our best men with thee do go,
8 Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
9 Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
10 And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
11 And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
12 And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
13 One short sleep past, we wake eternally
14 And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

SUMMARY

The speaker directly addresses a personified death, telling it not to be arrogant just because some people find death scary and intimidating. In fact, death is neither of these things because people don't really die when death—whom the speaker pities—comes to them; nor will the speaker truly die when death arrives for him.

Comparing death to rest and sleep—which are like images of death—the speaker anticipates death to be even more pleasurable than these activities. Furthermore, it's often the best people who go with death—which represents nothing more than the resting of the body and the arrival of the soul in the afterlife.

Death is fully controlled by fate and luck, and often administered by rulers or people acting desperately. The speaker points out that death is also associated with poison, war, and illness. Drugs and magic spells are more effective than death when it comes to rest. With all this in mind, what possible reason could death have for being so puffed up with pride?

Death is nothing but a mere sleep in between people's earthly lives and the eternal afterlife, in which death can visit them no more. It is instead death—or a certain idea of death as something to be scared of—that is going to die.

THEMES

THE POWERLESSNESS OF DEATH

In this sonnet, often referred to by its first line or as "Holy Sonnet 10," the speaker argues that death doesn't have the final say over human beings. Personifying "Death" as a vain, prideful figure, the speaker tries to deflate death's arrogance by declaring that death is really nothing more than a rest. Following this rest comes the afterlife, which represents humanity's ultimate triumph over death.

Death, in the poem, is a boastful figure that proudly trades on its reputation as "mighty and dreadful." Yet the speaker sees death as petty and weak and confronts it directly, insisting that death can't "kill" him—or anyone, for that matter.

That's because death isn't the frightening end that people think it is. Really, the speaker argues, death is just like a more intense version of "sleep." People generally feel good after getting some rest, the speaker reasons, so it follows that they'll feel even more "pleasure" after dying. Death is simply a welcome reprieve for people's "bones," their physical selves, while their souls move on to the afterlife.

The speaker deflates death's ego further by calling it a "slave" to earthly things. Death, in the speaker's estimation, isn't the master of anything; it's beholden to "fate, chance, kings, and desperate men" and hangs out with lowly, despicable things like "poison, war, and sickness." Even as a form of rest, the speaker continues, death isn't all that impressive: "poppy" (opiate drugs) and "charms" (magic and spells) are far better sleep aids!

As such, death has no reason to puff out its chest (to "swell" with pride). As nothing more than a restful passage between life on earth and in heaven, death is nothing to be afraid of. In fact, the speaker dramatically concludes, the only thing that "die[s]" in the end is death itself: in waking "eternally" in heaven, people overcome death's supposed finality.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

As with many of Donne's poems, "Death, be not proud" starts boldly. The speaker addresses "Death" itself, an example of apostrophe.

The speaker personifies death as a figure with an inflated sense of self-importance that trades on its reputation as something fearsome and final. Yet "thou art not so," the speaker continues: death is neither "mighty" nor "dreadful," and the speaker will spend the rest of the poem explaining why.

For one thing, death wrongly thinks that it can "overthrow" life—that is, "kill" people, even though nobody ever *really* dies. The speaker even pities death, calling it "poor Death," for its foolish belief that it can end human existence.

The enjambment between lines 3 and 4 adds urgency to the speaker's argument:

> For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
> Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

That "overthrow" is immediately undermined, as the poem doesn't grant any space for a pause. This, in turn, reflects the speaker's belief that death isn't any sort of *final* end.

LINES 5-8

> *From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,*
> *Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,*
> *And soonest our best men with thee do go,*
> *Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.*

While the first quatrain established the poem's main point—that death shouldn't be proud because it isn't mighty or dreadful—the next few lines deal specifically with the evidence that supports this claim.

The speaker compares death to rest and sleep, which are "pictures," or imitations/reflections, of death. Rest and sleep are entirely harmless activities. In fact, they're restorative. Accordingly, the speaker equates them with pleasure; rest and sleep make people feel good. If death is just a heightened version of rest and sleep, then death must be even *more* pleasurable.

Lines 7 and 8 then suggest that it is the best people on earth who often die earliest, perhaps hinting that they have been chosen by God for their reward of eternal life in heaven. Indeed, their "bones" get to "rest" when they die, while their "soul[s]" are "deliver[ed]" to the afterlife.

People's *bodies* are what die; bones are the inanimate leftovers of life on earth, the speaker says, but life on earth is not what's important to this poem. It is the "soul's delivery"—the arrival in the afterlife—that matters. Death is really a form of transition from temporary, earthly life to eternal, heavenly life. The poem plays on this idea with the word "delivery," which hints at a kind of rebirth.

LINES 9-10

> *Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,*
> *And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,*

The third quatrain further demonstrates death's weakness, robbing death of its fearsome and intimidating qualities.

Though death is often thought of as something powerful, line 9 argues that it is actually weak, easily dominated by other elements or people. It's a "slave" to fate and chance, beholden to "kings" and "desperate men." Both of these are, of course, human beings—precisely the target of death's work!

Kings have authority over their subjects, the power to declare who lives and who dies. The "desperate men" can be read as referring to people who commit murder or to those who take their own lives out of desperation. Either way, the poem implies that death isn't the one making the decisions here; it's a consequence of human actions or random bad luck.

The speaker then accuses death of hanging out with "poison, war and sickness." The speaker presents these as ugly and undesirable things to be associated with. Essentially, death has nothing better to do than hang out with the worst elements of human life.

LINES 11-12

> *And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well*
> *And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?*

Lines 11 and 12 return to the speaker's comparison of death with sleep. Once again, the argument seeks to deny death any authority. Both lines begin with the word "And," creating anaphora. This creates a sense of building momentum and power, the speaker's argument growing more enthusiastic.

Death might be like "rest and sleep," but now the speaker says that it's actually not the best sleep aid around. "Poppy," which is a reference to the kind of opiate drugs that were popular in Donne's day, is more effective. Ditto "charms," which refers to magic spells and incantations.

These things make "us sleep" too, and, in fact, they do it "better than thy stroke." The word "stroke" functions in two slightly paradoxical ways. First of all, it acknowledges the idea of death as a powerful figure: death is often personified as being able to administer death to the living without any difficulty. But a stroke is also a gentle motion, even an act of affection. The word makes death seem meek and mild.

In light of all the evidence that has been presented, the speaker asks how can death still "swell" up with pride. It has nothing to boast about.

Lines 13 and 14 then bring the poem to its conclusion. Death is nothing but a "short sleep," a transition from earthly living—with all its miseries and pains—to the heavenly afterlife.

When people "wake eternally," they will be out of death's reach. Death, as a concept, will be as good as dead to them. Death

itself "shalt die": be defeated for good.

This doesn't mean that death doesn't exist; death remains a constant presence in the world. But death, viewed in the bright light of Donne's Christian faith, is ultimately impermanent and nothing to be afraid of.

SYMBOLS

SLEEP

As part of the argument against the power of death, the speaker repeatedly refers to sleep and rest. These activities symbolize the impermanent, even restorative nature of death.

When someone is asleep they are unconscious and thereby separated from their interactions with the world and other people (just as they will be in death). But sleep is also a kind of restorative retreat—good for the mind and body—that everybody needs. It follows that if death is a kind of sleep, it is nothing to be feared; sleep is a *good* thing. In fact, if death is a kind of "super-sleep" it is even something to be looked forward to.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "rest and sleep"
- **Line 8:** "Rest"
- **Line 11:** "sleep"
- **Line 13:** "sleep," "wake"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

This poem is not just an argument *against* death but an argument *with* death. To make this argument work, the speaker uses apostrophe throughout the entire poem, directly addressing death as if it were a person. Essentially, the speaker is trying to deflate the sense of death's power by tackling it head-on. The speaker isn't afraid to confront, and, indeed, antagonize, death.

Apostrophe is also closely linked with personification. The speaker personifies death as a prideful, misguided individual who has got the completely wrong idea about their role in the lives of humankind. Personification and apostrophe create a clear enemy in the poem, a distinct figure against which the speaker can level his arguments.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-7
- Lines 9-12
- Line 14

ALLITERATION

Alliteration makes the speaker's argument sound more urgent and emphatic. For example, the sharp /k/ sounds of line 4 in "canst" and "kill" add a biting sharpness to the speaker's declaration that death has no real power over him. The plosive /b/ and /p/ sounds of lines 5-6 work similarly, as though the speaker is spitting out words in pity and disgust:

> From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
> Much pleasure; [...]

The triple alliteration of "much more must" in line 6 conveys a sense of abundance, reflecting the speaker's argument that death must be even more pleasurable than "rest and sleep."

Finally, the thudding /d/ sounds that appear throughout the poem add weighty, booming intensity to the speaker's verse (note that some of these sounds as the result of the polyptoton of "die" and "death").

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Die," "Death," "canst," "kill"
- **Line 5:** "but," "pictures," "be"
- **Line 6:** "pleasure," "much more must"
- **Line 9:** "desperate"
- **Line 10:** "dost"
- **Line 12:** "thou then"
- **Line 13:** "we wake"
- **Line 14:** "Death," "die"

ANAPHORA

Five out of the poem's 14 lines begin in the same way: with an "and." This use of anaphora builds the momentum of the speaker's argument, adding reason upon reason why death shouldn't be feared. Essentially, this technique is about creating a cumulative effect that makes its logic seem undeniable and ultimately results in the question directed at death: "why swell'st thou then?" The build-up of "ands" works to make it seem absurd that death would even consider "swelling" with pride at its place in the world.

It's no coincidence that the last line modifies the beginning of the first by using anaphora. Death is strongly announced as the subject at the start of the poem, but by the end is dominated by "and," which has come to represent the numerous reasons why death is powerless in view of the afterlife to come.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 14:** "And"

ENJAMBMENT

"Death, be not proud" uses enjambment between lines 1-2, 3-4, 11-12, and 13-14. While end-stopped lines grant the poem a steady, controlled pace (one that evokes the speaker's confidence in the poem's argument), enjambment creates moments of suspense, drama, and excitement.

The enjambment between lines 1 and 2 undermines the idea of death as a powerful figure. There's no time to pause on the word "thee"; the speaker moves swiftly across the line break—and swiftly across the idea that death is "Mighty and dreadful," easily tossing such characterizations aside.

Similarly, the enjambment between lines 3 and 4 undermines death's power. Death thinks that it can "overthrow" people, but the enjambment smoothly pushes the reader past the line break into the phrase "Die not."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "thee / Mighty"
- **Lines 3-4:** "overthrow / Die"
- **Lines 11-12:** "well / And"
- **Lines 13-14:** "eternally / And"

PARADOX

The poem's final line contains a paradox: the speaker declares that "death" itself "shall be no more—that death itself "shalt die." If death is "no more," how can death *die*?

Remember, the speaker's beliefs about death stem from their Christian faith. Death doesn't "die" in the sense that it no longer exists; people on earth will continue to physically perish. The speaker is arguing that this death doesn't constitute any kind of meaningful *ending*, however, because people's souls will "wake eternally" in heaven. Paradoxically, then, death is a kind *rebirth* into the afterlife. In rising again, people defeat, or kill, the *idea* of death itself.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies death from the start of the poem all the way through to the end. Sonnets were often written as an address to a lover, but Donne subverts this by addressing death as if it were a person. The speaker treats death as mistakenly prideful—a human characteristic—in line 1 and even a figure of sympathy in line 4: "poor Death." That is, death has such a misguided view of itself that it deserves to be pitied.

This adds drama to the poem as the speaker has a direct enemy to fight against. Personification also simply makes the speaker's argument about death's powerlessness easier to follow, turning a philosophical idea into a kind of battle.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Death, be not proud"
- **Line 3:** "thou think'st"
- **Line 4:** "Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, / And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,"
- **Line 12:** "why swell'st thou then?"
- **Line 14:** "Death, thou shalt die."

VOCABULARY

Thee (Line 1, Line 6, Line 7) - An archaic form of "you."

Thou (Line 2, Line 3, Line 4, Line 9, Line 12, Line 14) - An archaic form of "you."

Art (Line 2, Line 9) - An archaic form of "are."

Think'st (Line 3) - An abbreviated form of "thinkest," which is a 17th century rendering of "think."

Dost (Line 3, Line 10) - The archaic second person singular present form of "do." The usage here in line 2, for instance, simply emphasizes that Death thinks he really *does* "overthrow" (i.e. kill) people, an assumption the speaker counters in the following line.

Canst (Line 4) - The archaic second person singular present form of "can."

Thy (Line 5, Line 12) - The archaic form of "your."

Pictures (Line 5) - Pictures here simply means images, with possible connotations of paintings/artworks. Essentially, a dead person looks like someone resting or asleep.

Bones (Line 8) - Bones refers to the bones left behind after someone dies, and to the body more generally.

Poppy (Line 11) - Poppy is a reference to drugs, particularly those of the opioid family, which are derived from the poppy plant. Opium was a popular drug in the 17th century and induces a sleepy, dream-like state.

Charms (Line 11) - Charms is a reference to magic and spells.

Stroke (Line 12) - Stroke means touch, referring to the moment when Death comes to someone.

Swell'st (Line 12) - Swell'st is an abbreviation of "swellest,"

which is an archaic version of "swell up."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Death, not be proud" is a sonnet. It has two main sections: the octave and the sestet. This makes it look most like a Petrarchan sonnet. Based on its rhyme scheme, however, it can also be broken into three quatrains and a concluding couplet—which is more akin to the *English* sonnet.

Sonnets lend themselves well to arguments: usually, the octave presents an argument or point to which the sestet then responds. The moment this response begins is called the poem's turn, or volta. The turn in this poem is subtle: the speaker simply intensifies the argument against death's power, declaring that it's a "slave" to random chance and human whims.

The rhyme scheme shifts in line 9, signaling this turn: whereas lines 1-8 followed the scheme ABBA ABBA, line 9 introduces a new rhyme sound. The *pattern* remains the same—CDDC—but the *sounds* are new.

Donne then ends the poem with a couplet, adding a burst of lyrical intensity. This final couplet allows for a further shift in the poem, this time to state, as clearly as possible, the reason why death is powerless: the eternal afterlife.

METER

The meter in "death, be not proud" is iambic pentameter. Modern readers might struggle to hear the iambic pentameter clearly because of changes in the way certain words are pronounced. For example, "called" in Donne's era would have been said with 2 syllables: "call-ed." Line 5 gives an example of perfect iambic pentameter:

> From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,

The poem uses its steady meter to reinforce the argument that death is powerless.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of the first 8 lines (the octave) is:

ABBAABBA

This is the typical scheme found in Petrarchan sonnets.

But the sestet diverges from the Petrarchan set-up. It rhymes:

CDDCEE

In terms of rhyme, then, the poem can be divided into three quatrains (two of which form the octet) and an ending couplet. The development towards the couplet at the end lends force to the conclusion, which is making the bold claim that Death itself will die (because of the afterlife).

SPEAKER

The speaker in "death, be not proud" is anonymous, though critics often take the Holy Sonnets to be an expression of John Donne's own struggles with his Christian faith (particularly as Donne had converted from Catholicism to Anglicanism a few years prior). However, nothing in the poem definitively proves Donne to be the speaker.

In fact, as the poem is essentially a logical battle with death, it's reasonable to think of the speaker as representing humanity itself. Specifically, the poem's speaker chastises death from a standpoint of certainty—they believe in the eternal afterlife, and for them, this sole fact undoes everything that is usually terrifying or intimidating about the thought of death.

The speaker talks widely about the world, and particularly humankind's role in it as opposed to death's. This supports the idea that the speaker positions themselves as a kind of defender of humanity, taking on death through a series of unfolding logical propositions. But, of course, it's up to the reader to decide if the speaker's standpoint is convincing.

SETTING

The setting of "Death, be not proud" is non-specific. In general, the poem is set on earth (as opposed to heaven). It is a poem that makes its argument in broad strokes, taking a look at death's role on earth and arguing against the fear of dying.

That said, there are one or two moments that seem to tie the poem to the 17th century and to Europe (or possibly England) more specifically. The first 8 lines give little away in terms of setting, but lines 9-11 provide some interesting clues. Line 9 accuses death of being "slave" to "kings," referencing the role of monarchs in the doling out of death among subjects. War was not uncommon at the time of the poem's writing in 1610, which was not long after the end of the Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604). This conflict, as with many others, was ultimately presided over by monarchs. Likewise, the religious turmoil in Europe was also closely linked with its monarchies.

In line 11, "poppy" links the poem to 17th-century Europe as well. The word is a euphemism for opium, a relatively popular drug in England at the time.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne is generally grouped together with Andrew Marvell, George Herbert, and others as part of the "Metaphysical" Poets, though in truth he is a singular talent in the English canon. This poem comes from the "Holy Sonnet" series, a group of Donne's poems that mostly deals with issues

of faith, mortality, and religious anxiety. Of those poems, this is perhaps the most sure-footed; others present more of a challenge to God, and worry about man's relationship to his maker. But this was not always Donne's subject—as a younger man, Donne wrote marvelously constructed and extremely witty poems that tended to be more interested in love and sex than God and penance. The early poems—in fact, all of Donne's poems—were not published widely during his lifetime, but circulated in small number amongst an exclusive group of people in the know.

The "metaphysical" poets was a description coined by the critic Samuel Johnson, who saw in Donne and his contemporaries a reliance on conceit—which is, in essence, an ingenious and sustained metaphor—and an emphasis on the spoken quality of their work. In fact, Donne was often criticized by his contemporaries for not being stricter with his meter and form. Ben Jonson quipped that Donne deserved "hanging ... for not keeping accents."

Now, Donne is considered one of the foremost poets in the English language. Those qualities that made him seem inferior to some of his fellow poets and critics—his linguistic dexterity and his taste for the daringly imaginative—are those that make him endure so strongly. He remains widely influential, and often quoted (the 1999 play *Wit*, for example, makes frequent reference to this particular poem). Bizarrely, J. Robert Oppenheimer named the first atomic test site "Trinity" in reference to Donne's Sonnet 14—which famously begins, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem was written in 17th-century England, a time of considerable religious turmoil and the expansion of British reach across the globe. Donne was a Catholic, born during a time of great anti-Catholic sentiment. In 1593, Donne's brother, Henry, was imprisoned for his Catholicism and died soon after. Critics disagree as to the exact reasoning behind Donne's decision, but he subsequently changed his religious allegiance by converting to Anglicanism. Later, he became a cleric, delivering passionate sermons in Saint Paul's—including one in which the phrase "no man is an island" originates.

The tension between the two different forms of Christianity played on Donne's conscience, and the Holy Sonnets portray an individual desperate for confirmation that they have chosen the right faith, and that in turn they will be granted access to the afterlife.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Clip from Wit — A clip from the film version of Wit, a play by Margaret Edson. The two lead characters discuss the punctuation of Donne's sonnet. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS-m0UAB3uQ)
- A Reading by John Gielgud — A reading by the influential actor and theater director, John Gielgud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-A8mojwHjzU)
- Britten's "Death, be not proud" — English composer Benjamin Britten set a number of Donne's "Holy Sonnets" to music. Here is a performance of "Death, be not proud." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZPnuf2i7RU)
- The Holy Sonnets — A link to the entire "Holy Sonnets" series (based on the Westmoreland manuscript). (http://triggs.djvu.org/djvu-editions.com/DONNE/SONNETS/Download.pdf)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- A Hymn to God the Father
- A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
- A Valediction: Of Weeping
- Holy Sonnet 14: Batter my heart, three-person'd God
- Holy Sonnet 7: At the round earth's imagined corners
- Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness
- No Man Is an Island
- Song: Go and catch a falling star
- The Canonization
- The Flea
- The Good-Morrow
- The Sun Rising
- The Triple Fool
- To His Mistress Going to Bed

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