The Flea by John Donne

The Flea

by John Donne (1574-1631)

MARK but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is ;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead ;
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two ;
And this, alas ! is more than we would do.

O stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, yea, more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.
Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now.
'Tis true ; then learn how false fears be ;
Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

The Flea by John Donne is a metaphysical love poem which takes the form of an erotic humorous narrative. The predominant theme in this poem is seduction which is illustrated using a persuasive conceit of a humble flea. The strikingly original figure of the flea is used to unconventionally demonstrate that the two lovers are already conjoined in the eyes of God and the Church, as the flea has bitten both their bodies and intermingled their blood.

The speaker contends that the flea has effectively made their two fleshes into one, alluding to the sacrament of marriage whereupon 'a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall be cleaved unto his wife and they shall be one flesh' (Gensis 2:24). Drawing on this biblical reference, the wooer attempts to lend authoritative substance

to his argument. As compelling as the speaker's assertions are, his motives are completely transparent as he is attempting to convince his lady that surrendering her virginity would be no shame under the sanctified circumstances provided by the flea.

The tone of the poem is highly ironic, dramatic and absurdly amusing. Extravagant declarations of devotion and eternal fidelity which are typical found in love poetry are absent. Instead, the unorthodox and creative speaker offers philosophical and theological arguments that rest in the absurd authority that their union has already been consummated within the flea's little body.

The direct address narrative of the poem alters in tempo over the three stanzas. The first stanza is contemplative and whimsical, moving slowly in a rhythm that might be likened to sexual foreplay. Donne uses words such as 'sucked' and 'swell' giving a strong impression of the speaker's sexual desires even though it is only the flea whose desires are satisfied. The sexual references are particularly evident if one considers during this period a written 's' closely resembled the letter 'f', rendering the line, 'It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,' positively obscene.

The second stanza is even more delightfully ludicrous as the lady moves to strike the flea and the speaker attempts convince her of the heinous nature of this action. He declares that in killing the flea she will also be guilty of killing him, guilty of self murder as well as guilty of 'sacrilege' in destroying the holy union or marriage bond that he argues is embodied in the flea. As the reductio ad absurdum of his argument builds, so too does the pace of the poem in imitation of the sex act. Undeterred, the lady kills the insect in a climactic strike and the 'cruel and sudden' death of the flea parallels sexual release often euphemised in the Renaissance as 'the little death' or 'la petite mort'.

The third stanza slows again, the tempo similar to a post-coital quietude, as the speaker reflects on the fate of the flea and during which he completely reverses his argument. Undeterred by the 'death' of their union, himself and his lover, the speaker observes that the flea's untimely demise was of no great matter after all and he 'Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now'. As such, he extrapolates that surely this means that should she surrender her virginity, they would likewise find it of no greater consequence than the death of the flea.

The Flea is a wonderful example of Donne's confident and finely skilled application of an audacious metaphor that imbues a flea, the least likely of romantic figures, with such importance and high ideals. Donne's ability to embody sexual desire, sin, sacred love and holy marriage in a simple flea before ultimately turning the argument on it's head and declaring the flea means naught after all, is as concise as it is humorous. The exuberant absurdity of the conceit compliments the energetic theme of ardent and persistent seduction making this a sublimely enjoyable and unusual poem.