

The Flea By John Donne

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This poem was first published in 1633, but it is unknown when it was exactly composed by the poet [John Donne](#). It is an erotic poem that uses the flea as a sexual innuendo. The poet employs the logic that if the mixing of their blood in a flea after it has bitten them is innocent, then sharing a bed is also not a sin. This poem was written at a time when religion was followed more strictly, resulting in a very conservative society. This poem is extremely explicit, considering the time it was written. This paper will analyze the poem and discuss it in detail.

The poem has three stanzas with nine verses in each stanza. The flea is used as a sexual metaphor, allowing the poet to communicate his desires to the lady he is interested in. The first stanza of the poem solely focuses on the flea and its actions. In the second stanza, ironically, the poet tries to use religious and theological references to make his argument. By the third stanza, the lady has killed the flea, and the poet seems to have given up in his pursuit (Donne).

The first verse of the poem, "Mark but this flea, and mark in this", urges the lady to take notice of a flea, which is a small and insignificant insect. The poet says, "Look at this flea and observe its insignificance; what I ask of you is also equally insignificant". The flea may be insignificant. However, the poet's desire to seduce the lady outside of marriage is not as adultery was taboo in the 17th century. The poet continues by stating, "It sucked me first, and now sucks thee", which means that the flea had bitten him, then it had bitten her; with that, their blood was now combined in the body of that flea. Building upon his argument, he says, "A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead," After the flea bit them both, there was no sin involved on the flea's part; therefore, there will not be any sin on them as well. Nothing will be lost as it is not a sin, nor is it shameful. Her maidenhood was not lost, and yet the flea enjoyed its meal.

"And pampered swells with one blood made of two,

And this, alas, is more than we would do."

The poet claims that the flea performed the ritual, and it was more than what they had done. It was lucky in its venture as it has accomplished more than the poet. It has not put any effort into wooing her and has just taken their blood as it pleased. The poet almost seems jealous of the flea. The first stanza of the poem almost feels like the poet is luring the woman into a trap. A web that he is weaving with his words as the logic he is presenting is illogical. It almost feels like the wolf is luring the Red Riding Hood to devour her. There is no sincerity or affection in his words, but there is a presence of lust that becomes evident when he portrays premarital intercourse as a holy union. This couldn't be further from the truth, as premarital relationships were publicly punished by the church. Even after marriage, it was a very private activity, and openly talking about it was frowned upon.

The first verse of the second stanza, "Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare," is extremely interesting as the poet tries to stop the woman from killing the flea, saying that the man and woman have already been unified by the flea.

"Where we almost, nay more than married are.

This flea is you and I, and this

Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;"

They were now more than married as the flea represents both the man and woman united as one, so now their union was holy. The flea is no longer a flea but its temple and its bed within the four walls of the room. He states further that her parents may frown upon this union, but it is not a shameful act as they were married, and marriage is a holy act. In the last triplet of the second stanza, the poet writes that if she kills the flea, she will be taking three lives: the flea's, the poet's and her own life; however, this act will be sacrilegious.

"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 sucked from thee?"

By the third stanza, the lady has killed the flea as she is not falling for the poet's words. The poet says that she is cruel as she has taken the life of an innocent flea that had done nothing to her. He seems to give up on her by the end of the poem, but the last verse leaves the readers puzzled as the poet says that the maiden's honour will be lost, just like the flea lost its life. This sentence makes the reader wonder if the woman was seduced by the man or if he was just stating that he was not giving up on her yet. This open ending leaves the reader interested in it, even if the poem is over.

The poem overall lacks any romantic notion from the poet as he focuses solely on seduction. His words are conceited, as there is no affection in them. The woman seems to be least interested in him as she kills the flea around which he had built a whole argument of seduction. The most interesting is the use of religious imagery in a sinful pursuit. The poet claims that the mingling of their blood in the flea has unified them in marriage, and as marriage is a holy act, killing the flea will be going against this holy union, which will be a sin. The sheer irony of the second stanza is overwhelming as the poet is trying to mask a sin as a holy act. Another interesting aspect of the poem is the woman's resolve to not fall for the poet, and in her resolve, she kills the flea. This makes the poem an interesting read.

In the 17th century, religion had a very tight hold over the lives of the people and any "sin" was punished severely. If this poem is seen through the lens of modern society, then it will be nothing more than a failed flirtatious attempt, but seeing it according to the time it was written changes the

whole perspective. The outcome of such an affair would have had a devastating impact on the life of the woman involved and would have ruined her prospects. The poem is considered a classic for its time, and it is indeed a bold attempt to try to seduce someone in such a manner; however, the words of the poet are shallow and weightless, which is the reason the woman kills the flea to show her rejection.

Works Cited

Donne, John. *The Flea*. Renaissance Poetry. Ed., Vermillion Press, 1962.