

**Critically evaluate John Donne's sonnet "Death, Be Not Proud".**

**( B.A.English Hons. Part-1.Paper-2)**

**"Death, Be Not Proud"** is one of the best poems of John Donne which is holy Sonnet 10. It was written in 1610 and was published in 1633. The title of the poem comes from its first line. Donne highlights his Christian belief taking reference from Bible Corinthians 15:26, where Paul writes 'the final enemy to be destroyed is death'.

The death is personified and the speaker brings forth an argument; the argument is that Death is not all powerful as we are forced to think. Finally, Death gives us the way to the eternal life, a kind of freedom from this worldly sorrow. Death is just a sound sleep from which we will awake at the Day of Judgment. From that day, there will not be death. On that very day, Death dies. So, there is no reasoning in fearing of Death and Death too does not have any logical reason to be proud of.

At the beginning of the poem, Death is shown as mighty and dreadful as it has the power to take the lives of all. But, the speaker denies its power immediately saying 'poor' death and

announces that it will not kill him. He presents his idea of afterlife and says that death is just a way to the never ending world of pleasure and life. He strongly says people never die. The age old characterization of the Death is turned upside down by the speaker. The speaker criticizes the Death for its illusionary pride. Actually, for the speaker, Death is a slave to other unseen forces of the universe like destiny, coincidences, kings and desperate men. Death becomes a passage from worldly weariness, pain, failure to the eternal pleasure and happiness. Death is more peaceful than the rest and sleep, which ultimately restores energy.

The speaker proves that the Death is only connected to the negative and destructive forces of the life such as, poison, battle, sickness, accidents et cetera. Opium and other drugs can bring sound sleep better than the Death. Because of the servile nature of the Death and its connection with the evil events of the life of a human being, Death should not be proud. Death itself has finality and end on the Day of Judgment, but human beings have life after death which is eternal.

Donne applies his characteristic metaphysical wit in the choice of structure, poetic techniques, language, irony, and paradox. This Sonnet follows Shakespearean form of three quatrains and a concluding line, but the rhyming pattern is that of Petrarchan: abba for the first two quatrains, forming an octet. The assured tone of the speaker in Death, be not Proud, and the straight verbal clash to the Death delivers an ironic sense of security to

the readers by indirectly suggesting that Death is not to be feared at all, and it too has to face the end by the greater force in the Day of Judgment.

The poem is a Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnet. It is composed of 14 total lines. The first eight lines have an ABBA ABBA rhyme scheme. The final six lines have a CDDC EE rhyme scheme. However, it is worth taking noting the EE scheme of the final two lines are made with off rhymes.

‘Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;

The poem opens with a bold statement directed at a personified Death. It is not only the capitalization of the letter ‘D’ that shows the personification but also the way the entity is addressed. The speaker (henceforth referred to with male pronouns) makes a speech to Death as if he were speaking to a person. He tells Death not to feel proud; it is not as powerful as most assert it to be. By doing so, the speaker demonstrates the opposite of the fear most feel toward Death.

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

The speaker claims those who Death takes, or believes to have taken, do not die in actuality. The deceased are not defeated or overthrown, indicating he is assigning a more spiritual belief to what truly dying means. It can be presumed the speaker feels strength in his spirituality based of his assertion that Death

cannot kill him either, hinting the reader will learn more about the speaker's spiritual view on dying as the poem progresses.

'From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,'

Resting and sleeping are merely impressions of Death and not the real thing. People typically enjoy resting and sleeping, which once again undermines the frightful importance ordinarily assigned to Death. The speaker tells Death it must have more to offer given these are but small likenesses of it.

'And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.'

In these two lines, further insight to the spiritual nature of dying is revealed to the reader. The speaker says the "best men" go with Death rather than telling it as Death taking the men, reiterating the notion that Death is not as mighty as it is made out to be. The idea of an afterlife is suggested when the speaker mentions the delivered souls of the best men. Their physical bodies will be laid to rest while their souls will rejoice in eternal glory. Neither of those are devastating prospects, not only rendering what Death believes it brings insubstantial but actually contradicting what is believed to be its intention.

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

The speaker continued to take all power away from Death, now being knocked down from being in charge to being a slave.



Death does not choose who to take or when to take them, but is at the mercy of "fate, chance, kings and desperate men."

Death can only take those who are meant to die, are in accidents, are in a war, or perhaps even take their own life due to desperation. Death is not able to pick and choose whom to take, reaffirmed in the following line claiming Death only resides with "poison, war, and sickness."

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

Death has long been referred to as an "eternal sleep." In this way, the speaker has used another method of denying Death's potency. The speaker mentioned earlier that sleep is a picture of Death. Here, he extends this notion that even its own picture has external causes. Poppies are seeds that can aid in falling asleep. Even "charms" are mentioned, most likely alluding to magic. This indicates the speaker thinks even magic has greater power than Death. The speaker's question "why swell'st thou then?" begs of Death to answer why it is so full of pride.

'One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.'

Though the final two lines may be slightly more confusing to the reader at first glance, they are in keeping with the overall message and tone of the poem. In the line "One short sleep past, we wake eternally" the speaker again alludes to the idea of an eternal afterlife. The "short sleep past" is passing beyond just sleeping to physical death. However, physical death may

come but spiritual life is eternal. The speaker is letting Death know it cannot overpower that. "Death, thou shalt die" denotes the end of Death's supposed reign and the impression people have of it. The perception of Death that strikes fear in the hearts of people will cease to exist.

This poem suits the metaphysical label of Donne's work in the subject matter it tackles, particularly the way in which it is approached. The speaker is witty, the imagery is strange and complex, and the poem presents many of what appear to be contradictions. The speaker of the poem personifies Death and goes on to depreciate the might of Death. The speaker details the way in which Death is not in control and the reasons it is not altogether frightening. By poem's end, the speaker has established a very clear point and presented a well thought out explanation. He ends it by directly telling Death it will "die," meaning no longer exist.

The prominent theme of the poem is mortality. It is worth noting there is also a theme of spirituality, or even specifically religion. The speaker addresses Death throughout the poem making it clear to the reader mortality is being discussed. Many of the views presented on dying and the afterlife are very centered on Christian fundamental beliefs.

Overall, John Donne's poem 'Death Be Not Proud' is a masterful argument against the power of Death. The theme, or the message, of the poem is that Death is not some all-powerful

being that humans should fear. Instead, Death is actually a slave to the human race and has no power over our souls.

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