
Donne's Impacts on The Bible

There are several levels in literary criticism. The first - and most superficial - level examines the work in search of sounds and images that might contribute to the overall meaning of the piece. This type of analysis is an excellent starting point, but if one seeks to understand the full meaning of the piece, he or she must take into account the author's life and the circumstances in which the work was composed. Familiarity with the author's background and culture can help the critic draw out the full implications contained within the work. The general consensus on "Holy Sonnets #14" is that Donne's poem is both highly original and overtly sexual; in the poem, the traditional view holds, the narrator hopes to be raped by God so that he may achieve salvation. According to this perspective, all of the images in the poem are explicit allusions to rape. While the rape imagery is certainly present, it serves only as a vehicle for Donne to evoke biblical allusions that, once understood, inform readers as to the true meaning of the work. Without comprehending the biblical foundation of the poem, the reader cannot achieve a proper understanding of Donne's deep religiosity.

The first instruction of the poem, "batter my heart", contains two separate allusions. On a historical level, the tribe of Israel used battering rams when laying siege to a city. Since the Israelis were following God's orders, there is a historical connection between God battering down the walls of cities in the Old Testament, and God battering down the speaker's heart in "Holy Sonnets #14". The second allusion is contained in the idea of God breaking the narrator's heart. Psalm 51:17 says that "the sacrifices of God are...a broken and a contrite heart." If God were to batter down the speaker's heart, he would become a sacrificial, deified entity.

When the speaker says that God "knock[s]", he is alluding to Luke 11:9, where Jesus says that salvation is free to the seeker: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." This is an ironic reversal of action, because in the poem it is God who is knocking, yet Jesus says that it is we who must knock at His door. This reversal of action shows us the speaker's true nature: he knows what he wants - salvation - but he is either unwilling or unable to attain it, so he asks God to act in his stead. He asks God to make him fit to become a sacrificial creature, because he is not capable of doing it himself. The speaker also asks God to "breathe" into him the same life that God first breathed into Adam when He "breathed into [Adam's] nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (King James Bible, Gen. 2:7).

Lines four and five are deeply steeped in allusion. In the Bible, salvation is found through destruction and rebirth: God destroys the world with a flood so that Noah and his family might start a new life; the Israelis are sent into captivity by the Babylonians so that they might be

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saved and redeemed; Jesus is crucified and resurrected so that he might offer eternal salvation to mankind. Christian teachings hold that a believer's former life ends when he is saved; in other words, when he is "reborn" as a Christian. With this in mind, the speaker is theologically accurate when he asks God to "o'erthrow me, and bend/ Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new." God orders Jeremiah "to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:10). The speaker directly links himself to the tribe of Israel when he asks God to "o'erthrow me...and make me new."

The second sestet outlines the speaker's desire to be with God, but he is "untrue" because he is so bogged down by the weight of his sins. The use of the word "captive" continues the analogy of a soul under siege, but also refers to Timothy 2:26, which describes those caught in "the snare of the devil" and "taken captive by him at his will." Sin and the devil have captured the speaker's soul, and try as he might, he cannot "labor to admit" God; he needs God to "imprison" him and "break that knot" that ties him to sin.

The third sestet generally restates what the speaker has already said while elaborating on his deeply sinful nature. The speaker says that he is "betrothed into your enemy," which contrasts with Jesus' belief that the Church (and all Christians) are "the bride, the Lamb's wife." While a good Christian is "betrothed" to God, the speaker sees himself as betrothed to the devil as a consequence of his sinful behavior.

As Royal Chaplain of the Anglican Church, Donne was a man deeply rooted in Christian traditions, and would certainly have been aware of the implications of the language that he used. Indeed, many of the same subjects arise in Donne's recorded sermons. In one sermon, "Preached upon the Penitentiall Psalmes", Donne speaks about Psalm 51, which reads: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." This message is the very foundation of "Holy Sonnet #14", thus revealing the deeply spiritual nature of the poem.

This, then, is the paradox of the sonnet: to "be free", the narrator must be "imprison[ed]"; to be chaste for God, he must first be ravished. The rape imagery in the poem is illusory because it gives the false impression that the work is focused on the sexual experience. The speaker wants to be spiritually chaste - not necessarily sexually chaste - but he can only achieve this with God's help.

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