

Sonnet 10: Death Be Not Proud

Nineteen of Donne's poems have been grouped together as the Divine Meditations. Instead of the usual subject of the speaker's love and lust for some beloved individual, this sequence focuses on Donne's religious experience, his relationship to God

Line 7. "Death be not proud"~ death should not be feared; you can not be killed because death is like sleeping. We are really at rest when we die.

Line 9. Death is controlled by fate, chance, kings, etc., which all cause death.

Line 10. Death keeps company with unsavory things like poison, war, etc.

Death be not proud: Some critics argue that Donne's speaker is trying to convince himself that death is not to be feared, and failing dismally; the poem's various arguments do not at all address the speaker's basic fears. For example, he argues on flimsy evidence that death must be better than sleep (5-6), then that sleep is better than death (11-12). The last 4 words of the poem, which should seal the argument, actually undermine it: if death is nothing to be afraid of, the speaker can hardly use it as a threat. As John Carey notes, "He stamps his foot with fine dramatic conclusiveness, and plummets straight through a trapdoor. It spoils the act, but improves the poem, for it shows how little its reasonings have impinged on the speaker's basic fears." Carey's insight into this poem is generalized by R.T Jones: it is frequently claimed that Donne's poetry shows a complete union of thought and feeling, but Jones argues that what we usually get is the exact opposite, a sense of **conflict** or **tension** between what the heart wants to be true or fears to be true and what the mind knows or can argue; a sense of the poet always trying to convince himself of something. We noted this possibility in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*. Jones cites D.H. Lawrence's statement that belief is a profound emotion that has the mind's connivance. On "Death be not proud", he points out that given his academic training, Donne must have known how bad the arguments are; that their very badness must be taken as part of the meaning of the poem. If we accept his contention that when Fate overwhelms you with a flood or chance directs lightning to your head, or a king has your head cut off or a desperate man cuts your throat, then death has no choice but to come to you (and hence is a slave to these things) then perhaps we will be less scared of Death as an abstraction, whatever that may mean, but simply transfer our terror, undiminished, to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men-leaving our predicament, if anything, somewhat worse. But we would not be thinking in terms of terror at all if we had taken seriously the earlier arguments, e.g., "from rest and sleep"-we don't take this seriously because **a**) we do not really accept that the relation between death and sleep is in all important respects the same as the relation between a picture and the thing depicted; and **b**) we cannot really believe that if a picture gives us pleasure the thing it depicts must necessarily give us more pleasure. We have been watching a conjuring trick: we don't believe the skull has been turned into a rabbit, but we admire the sleight-of-hand. Others argue that Donne's personification of death is a rhetorical device, aimed at cutting Death down to size, and the crisp cross-talk of quip and witticism

shows how well he knows he can't really get away with it. Even if there are moments of real conviction (7-8), a blustering sophistry dominates. Fear of death is paraded like a captive slave and publicly routed, but it is never met on the level where it really presses. Is this because **a)** the speaker is so thoroughly convinced of the Christian doctrine of the afterlife that he genuinely has no fear of death and just wishes to mock it? or **b)** the fear of death is so powerful within the speaker that none of the arguments, including the Christian one, actually convince him deep down?