

Can Death Die?

In “Death Rebuked,” John Donne masterfully challenges the fear and finality of death, using powerful imagery and religious allusions to argue that death is not the end, but rather a new beginning. Throughout the poem, Donne’s speaker emphasizes eschatological themes, stating that death is but a conduit, transporting dead souls to higher realms such as heaven. The speaker reproaches the idea that death is something mighty and fearful, instead suggesting that death is pleasurable and Death personified is weak and ironically, dead. Further, the speaker belittles Death’s ego even more by telling Death directly that it cannot truly kill them - which is Death’s one job. This Petrarchan sonnet’s unusual rhyme scheme, metaphorical language, and structure emphasizes Death’s weakness and highlights the cycle of life, which Death plays an insignificant role in as the being transcends the fleshy body, into the eternal soul. At the same time, those same poetic techniques are used to subtly counter the speaker’s argument.

“Death Rebuked” follows a subtly iambic pentameter and adopts a variation of the rhyme scheme used for a Petrarchan sonnet to reinforce its message. Using a meter that resembles iambic pentameter, the speaker conveys a sense of formality and structure while giving the poem a steady and consistent rhythm. This curates a sense of order and control, which emphasizes the idea that death, despite its finality, is not something to be feared. Similarly, the rhyme scheme aids in emphasizing the same themes. Typically, Petrarchan sonnets will use ABBA ABBA CDCDCD or CDECDE, however Donne explores a ABBA ABBA CDDC AE rhyme scheme, with the sestet rhymes differing. This atypical structure emphasizes the last two lines of the poem, “One short sleep past, we wake eternally,/ And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.” In particular, the audience is drawn to the last word of each line, “eternally” and “die”, because they stand alone in the rhyme scheme. Without doubt, these are two of the main ideas

which the sonnet revolves around. Literally, the speaker discusses how death leads souls to an eternity of peace in heaven, highlighting the pleasure it offers. Further, the structure of the sonnet connects the octave with the second to last line of the sonnet and the sestet with the final line, making that last couplet a reflection of the speaker's overall emotions. The octave focuses on the calming aspects of death and similarly, the first line of the last couplet is much more tranquil compared to the last line. It suggests that after death, one's soul wakes up for eternity in heaven, a place religious people seek out their entire lives. In contrast, the last line of the sonnet comprises a violent tone, stating that death will die, similar to the violent sestet. Finally, the difference in rhyme scheme in the last couplet separates itself from the sestet in order to illustrate a sense of finality as the speaker's last attack on Death.

In the octave of "Death Rebuked", the speaker employs various metaphors to convey the message that one should not fear death, but rather, one should see death as a minor, enjoyable part of the entire life cycle. In the first four lines of the sonnet, the speaker personifies Death, entering into a direct discourse with Death and subsequently humiliating them. The speaker's use of language such as "poor death" is saturated with sarcasm, as "those whom [Death] think'st [Death] dost overthrow/ Die not." Even though Death is traditionally seen as being "Mighty and dreadful," the speaker illustrates that Death lacks full control over their powers.

The second half of the octave shifts to discuss the joy that flows from Death. The speaker compares Death to sleep, which they say is simply a snapshot of death. Here, the speaker addresses death as being pleasurable, even more so than rest, and something that people should actively seek out. For example, the speaker suggests that the best of humankind get to go with Death the soonest, in order to rest their bodies and ignite their souls. This line also features Donne's use of synecdoche to represent the physical body with just the use of "bones." The

speaker implies another reference to religious themes that those who are closest to God and the most righteous will be granted eternal life first. In other words, Death emancipates these morally right people from the physical constraints of the material world. Finally, the speaker uses the word “delivery” to describe the soul moving to heaven in the last line of the octave. Delivery can elude the afterlife, but is also reminiscent of delivering a child. Thus, death does not only kill people, but is also a part of the rebirth process, acting in the full cycle of life. Ultimately, Death is subject to the power of God just as everything else is under God’s power, in the speaker's eyes. They emphasize that death is merely the separation of the soul from the physical body. In this way, the body is of little importance, and it is the soul that is truly eternal and independent to the cycle of life and thus, Death.

Moving from the octave to the sestet, the volta occurs as the speaker undergoes a shift in perspective. Compared to the octave, the sestet comprises a far more violent attack on Death. The speaker’s assault on Death immediately intensifies to emphasize the volta, employing words like “slave” and comparing death to “poison, war, and sickness.” This demonstrates a departure from the composed argument in the octave, as if the speaker has suddenly gained speed in their argument and is beginning to rant. Further, this invigoration clarifies the emotion in the octave which was alluded to in imagery such as, “poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.” In this sestet, the quality of the imagery heightens as the speaker evokes more concrete imagery. For example, the speaker aggressively relegates Death to a slave that can be harnessed by mankind itself, by “king[s] and desperate men.” In addition, the speaker compares Death to poppies, which “can make us sleep as well and better than [Death’s] stroke.” Poppies have long been associated with death, repose and eternal sleep, in Greek, Roman, and Egyptian mythology, thus dethroning Death on Earth. In fact, not only do poppies represent sleep, they also symbolize blood due to

their bright red color. As Death comes with rebirth, so do poppies, completely invalidating Death's power. In these lines, the speaker seems to be losing control of their argument, which culminates in an apparent fault in their argument in the final line of the sestet.

In the first line of the next couplet, the speaker argues that Death is but a short sleep that transforms body and life into soul and eternity. However, in a way, by declaring in the next and final line that "death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die,," the speaker actually unknowingly amplifies Death's power. If even death can overcome Death, someone that transcends the physical world and acts as the link between life and the afterlife, then Death must truly be the one commander of the movement of each and every soul.

Throughout this poem, there has only been one speaker that has been calling all of the shots, the single speaker. Through this example of apostrophe, Death, though adequately personified, cannot respond to the blunt accusations of the speaker. By examining the poem from Death's shoes, the power relationship between the speaker and Death becomes much more convoluted and leads readers to see the faults in the speaker's argument. For example, the speaker describes sleep and rest as images of Death, exemplifying the pervasive nature of death even throughout the day-to-day of human life. The speaker's previous taunts depict attempts to assert control over death, but Death is an unstoppable force and a fundamental part of the human experience. Say more about this contradiction or shortsightedness of the speaker...

Through a myriad of poetic techniques, the speaker attacks Death in the entirety of this sonnet, leaning on the implicit Christian belief of the soul's eternal presence, asserting that death has an expiry point just as human bodies do. However, the speaker fails to notice the futility in their argument to try and control death. Death may not be as spine-chilling as some have said,

but nevertheless, Death must be accepted as a natural part of life that still holds ultimate power over the soul. If Death dies, the river that delivers the soul runs dry and eternity vanishes.