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### False Monarch of Death

The dread of death has been ingrained into humans on a genetic level. This fear is challenged in “Death, be not proud,” written by John Donne. The sonnet suggests that death is not a ruler/king, but a mere peasant who is subject to the will of others. The work falls into a category known as the “Holy Sonnets,” written during the metaphysical period, which features topics related to faith and God, favorites of the devout John Donne are discussed in the series (Bloom 1999). The morality of humans is called into question in this specific text, which helps to further refute the power of death.

John Donne frequently provoked controversy in intellectual discussions of his time, as when he referred to women as “intelligent creatures,” (Bloom 1999) which was heavily criticized. He was one of the most prominent leaders of the metaphysical period, set during the 17th century, and filled with a loose array of authors (Schoenfeldt 2012). The school mainly focused on three different points— Using an intellectual rather than emotional argument, developing conceits, and exploring paradoxes. The intellectual arguments aided discussing spiritual/philosophical topics in a new way rather than the emotion filled disputes of the past (Schoenfeldt 2012). A conceit is defined as an unusual type of metaphor that compares two separate entities that are not alike in a unique approach. Readers, when confronted by this

unconventional comparison, are forced to devote more attention to the poem in order to understand it fully. A paradox is a contradiction within the statement itself and will often be confusing. Paradoxes act as an ending in most metaphysical poems, and they add more than a single interpretation to the poem. Paying attention to these main points furthers understanding of these metaphysical poems.

The complex nature of metaphysical poems leads to a variety of interpretations; John Donne's poems are infamous for its thought provoking content mixed with wit. A recent analysis by Joanne Woolway details her interpretations after analyzing the text. The main points detailed break down to— death is personified to weaken him, the author holds no fear of death, the poem doesn't have a decisive or joyful conclusion, and lastly the impossibility of avoiding death (Woolway). The cohesive arguments such as death's personification and the author's lack of fear are supported in the poem. However, the later points made as with the absence of a cheerful closure and the futile resistance of death, can be debated with a closer analysis.

Before we can agree/refute Woolway's points, we have to make our own interpretation of the poem.

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
 Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
 For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
 Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
 From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
 Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
 And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die. (Donne)

The poem follows the narrator degrading Death in order to show that he is not as powerful as he leads on. Before that, there is a distinction to be made between death as a character and an event. A conceit is used to compare death as an event to a living being as indicated by “Death”, almost as in a name/title. The event portion is illustrated as “death,” to show the textbook definition of death itself. Now that we have covered that confusing aspect, we can begin by taking a closer analysis of the lines.

The first sentence illustrates that Death has been called a powerful being even though he is not capable of overthrowing the narrator. This sets up the derogatory tone throughout the poem and depicts the narrator as a courageous person. It plays another factor by portraying the narrator as a being that not even Death can harm.

Immediately following the first sentence is an intellectually engaged argument of Death and opens up the philosophical side of the poem. The narrator states that Death, which is often compared to sleep should be much more pleasurable, this makes Death appear as more of a weaker being. The next argument that the narrator puts forth is that only the best people fall to

death, letting their souls finally reach the afterlife. Death is portrayed as a being that can't hurt us as even those that fall under Death, still live in the afterlife.

The third sentence argues three points— Death is a puppet and not a controller, Death dwells with lowly companions, and Death is less efficient than drugs/spells. The first point leads to a bit of controversy as it can either be interpreted as Death being a weakling, or that Death is an effect caused by humans. The later fits with the rest of the poem as it shows that humans are causing death with their sins as seen with the mention of desperate men. This fits with the aspect of God/faith playing a role in metaphysical poems as the only way to free yourself of sin is by salvation. Playing the card of Death hanging with disgusting comrades aids to depict him as something lowly himself. The third point states that Death is not useful as others can do his job for him, so then why is he so full of pride? All these points work together to fully demean Death as powerless and to further insult his pride.

The last two lines incorporates a paradox as it states that Death shall die. This is contradictory as even though Death is personified as a living being, it still represents the event. Death therefore can't die leading to it being classified as a paradox, and fitting into another characteristic of metaphysical poems as aforementioned. The main points mentioned by Woolway are supported and refuted by the analysis, however we will go more in depth into each of the points to further understand them.

The first two points (death is personified to weaken him and the author holds no fear of death) expressed by Woolway are supported in our own analysis. The first point with Death being personified as a character in order to make him vulnerable can be seen in the paradoxical ending. Death dying as a living being makes him susceptible to the event of death showcasing

how the author diminishes Death by making him into a character. The second point of the author not expressing fear is the most blatantly supported as seen with line 13: "One short sleep past, we wake eternally." The line showcases how death is a brief moment in life and then the afterlife will be eternal. Donne's religious background is relevant in this case with him believing that salvation will free us all and lead us to the next life. We have shown support for Woolway's points with our interpretation however there are still points that can be further investigated.

There is a conflict with Woolway's last two points (the poem doesn't have a decisive or joyful conclusion and lastly the impossibility of avoiding death) and our own interpretation. The last line: "And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die" expresses a conclusive and hopeful look on death itself. It states that death shall die because death is not the end but only the beginning for another life. Donne's belief in the afterlife allows him to conquer death as he believes that he will still be alive after. That in itself is a hopeful outlook as death will not our end. The last point can also be refuted with the support way as Donne defeats death by living after it. Death sets itself up as a prideful being but it fails to accomplish what it is set to do. We avoid death by living after it, therefore giving it no power over us.

Donne's poems have never been an easy subject to discuss or analyze however by looking deeper you will be able to truly understand it. We have looked at his past, the metaphysical period, gone over the poem, and analyzed Woolway's points. All these actions have allowed us to gain a profound knowledge on the poem and further this interpretation using logic.

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