Reagan Holley

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Contradictions and Turmoil in John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*

In 1615, John Donne was ordained in the Church of England despite his reluctance and hesitation about his own fallibility. His struggle with his sinful nature in the face of religion is embodied in his *Holy Sonnets*, in which his inner turmoil about his own salvation is evident throughout. This inner turmoil is demonstrated through Donne's somewhat contradictory beliefs about the nature of sin, the process to salvation, and the nature of death.

Donne saw sin as an inevitable and innate part of the human experience, and questions why his sins require damnation, while simultaneously begging for forgiveness. In sonnet 9, Donne asks if inanimate objects and animals, which are inherently sinful ["poisonous minerals" (1), "lecherous goats" (3)], "Cannot be damned, alas! why should I be? / Why should intent or reason, born in me, / Make sins, else equal, in me more heinous?" (4-6). Donne is saying that "intent or reason" separates humans from animals and objects, and since reason is innate, sins caused by reason are innate also. And since Donne cannot help having reason or sins, he questions why God is threatening him with damnation. However, in the same poem, Donne asks God to drown his "sin's black memory" (12), and to "forget" his sins (14), demonstrating Donne's deathly fear of damnation, no matter how much he tries to rationalize his sins.

This theme of repentance appears throughout the *Holy Sonnets*, and Donne portrays this process to salvation as rather violent. In sonnet 5, Donne invokes the image of Noah's ark and asks for a thorough cleanse so that he can repopulate himself with godliness: "Pour new seas in

mine eyes, that so I might / Drown my world with my weeping earnestly, / Or wash it if it must be drowned no more" (7-9). A flood is fairly violent, but the violence is escalated when he replaces the flood with fire: "burn me, O Lord, with a fiery zeal" (13). This violence is also seen in sonnet 14, in which Donne includes a lot of violent verbs when conversing with God: "Batter," "o'erthrow," "bend," "break," "blow," "burn," "usurped," "imprison," "ravish." Not only are these strong, violent verbs, but Donne uses alliteration with the strong "b" sound, using that sound to portray that violence. The idea in this poem, also seen in the overtly sexual imagery throughout, is that God entering into a person is a violent process, but necessary. Donne is saying "enslave me, or else I'll never be free; rape me, or I'll never be satisfied."

This violent, tumultous life during the process to salvation ultimately leads to peace in death, according to sonnet 10. In this poem, Donne uses an apostrophe to speak directly to Death, personifying death as a form of degradation, bringing an abstract concept down to but a fallible human. Donne juxtaposes Death's self-image: "Mighty and dreadful" (2) with the narrator's pitiful view of Death: a "poor" (4) "slave" (9). He compares Death to "rest and sleep" (5), which everyone draws pleasure from, and claims that people can draw pleasure from death as well. In the last line, Donne includes the only lower-case version of "death" (14). Thus, he contrasts death as an abstract concept to be feared to Death as a personified, degraded sister of sleep. And since "we wake eternally" (13) through the salvation of the soul, "death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die" (14). Donne is essentially saying that Death is the only entity that can actually die, and thus, death is ultimately defeated. Therefore, death is not something to be feared, and is actually a peaceful process.

Tracing Donne's somewhat contradictory statements reveals his inner turmoil and uncertainty about his own salvation. He believes that sins are innate and should be forgiven, but

he is afraid that God will not forgive his own. He believes that after a violent life, people are granted with a peaceful death, and death is nothing to fear as long as eternal salvation is at the end of it. However, he is uncertain about his own salvation, which makes sonnet 10 seem more of a reassurance rather than an actual solution to his turmoil.

Works Cited

Donne, John. *Holy Sonnets*. Stephen Greenblatt, editor. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*. 10th ed. Vol. B. W. W. Norton. 2018. pp. 689-698.