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Acts of Interpretation

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The Juxtaposition between Death and death in John Donne's "Death, be not proud"

John Donne's "Death, be not proud" is a sonnet that provides contradictory images of death. The poem portrays death as an abstract concept that is generally feared and Death (notice the capitalization) as the personified, degraded sister of sleep. According to the poem, Death as a conscious being is pitiful and erroneously arrogant, whereas death is the more esteemed version. Ultimately, death is defeatable, as humans continue to live through eternal wakefulness for the soul. The poem indicates that death is an inevitable transition into the unknown, but it also suggests that Death is powerless and is, paradoxically, the only entity that can actually die.

The sonnet starts with an apostrophe, directly addressing "Death," a concept which the poem personifies and thus degrades. The majority of the poem is addressed to Death, giving it a human quality and presenting it as something with which one can communicate. The sonnet lowers death as an abstract concept to nothing but a conscious being with human qualities. Consequently, this personification is a form of degradation because it humanizes death and makes it less imposing. This initial stripping of power serves as an impetus for further emasculation as the poem proves how ineffective Death really is.

The poem provides a tension between Death's self-image and the speaker's pitiful view of Death, which contrasts with death's reputation. Death seems to have reason to be proud, for people perceive him as "Mighty and dreadful" (2). The diction used to describe his actions

include words like “overthrow” and “thy stroke,” (i.e. stroke of a blade) which implies the image of Death as a fighter or a knight. In this scenario, he is both the sentencer and executioner; he imposes himself on others. However, the poem illustrates him as someone obligated to forever serve humans. He is referred to as “poor Death” (4) and the poem indicates Death is a “slave” (9), forever condemned to deliver souls to the afterlife. Death is related to “poison, war and sickness” (10), all words with negative connotations. The speaker continues to degrade Death by saying it is inferior to aspects of the physical world, like drugs or spells that produce sleep. Death is often compared to rest and sleep within the poem, and is considered to bring far more pleasure than either. Death is described as a path to prolonged sleep for the physical body, but an awakening of the soul. In line 8, the poem says, “Rest of their bones, and soul’s delivery.” This provides the imagery of Death as a mailman, delivering human souls to the afterlife. Instead of an active player in the drama of dying, Death is nothing more than a messenger. Furthermore, Death is but a short, insignificant transition into eternal life for the soul: “One short sleep past, we wake eternally” (13).

The first and only mention of death as an abstract concept is in line 14: “And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die,” which cements the difference between death and its conscious form as Death. This contrast places death on a higher level than Death and recognizes its real imposing quality, however undeserving of the fear humans associate with it. The reality of death is inevitable to the living being, but death is not present after the short restful transition into eternal life. Death is merely a projection of conceptual death and when human souls transition into the afterlife, Death cannot profit off of the power he imposes upon humans and he

dies along with the conceptual form. In contrast with humans who enjoy eternal life, there is an end to death and its self-aggrandizing projection, rendering it ultimately powerless.