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For B.A. Part 1(Hons) Student

## **Holy Sonnets: Death, be not proud**

**Text:**

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.

## **Line by Line Explanation:**

### **Lines 1-2**

*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;*

One think that he has the power ("might") to do terrible ("dreadful") things.(And, by the way, we're going to refer to Death as "he" because Donne talks to death as if it is a person – think of the hooded guy who carries around a sickle. Also, when poets address a person or thing that isn't there or can't respond, it's called an "apostrophe." This is one of the most famous examples of apostrophe in all of literature.)But, the speaker isn't afraid. He walks right up to Death and gives him a piece of his mind, just like your mother told you to do with grade-school bullies. It's downright gutsy for the speaker to be telling this guy – who frightens everyone – what to do. The speaker orders Death not to be proud, and then says that people are mistaken in treating Death as some fearsome being. Now, let's go off on a tangent for a second. We've got an important message from the people who study Donne and other Renaissance poets for a living, and that is: the poem you're reading is not exactly the same version as the one published in the 17th century. For one thing, you're probably reading a version with modern English spelling (except for the occasional "thee," "thou" or "art.").The original version has old-school spellings like "dreadfull" instead of "dreadful." That's no biggie. More

important are the changes in punctuation, of which the first line is a great example. In the original version from 1633, the sonnet begins "Death be not proud." What's the difference? There's no comma after "death" in the original. Now, we think it's perfectly cool for modern editors to change the punctuation to make it clearer that Donne addresses Death like a person. *But*, just keep in mind that it changes the meaning slightly. For one thing, in the modern version, we lose the possibility that the speaker could *describe* Death, as well as address it. That is, you could read "Death be not proud" to mean "Death is not proud," which means Death isn't trying to be a tough guy, after all. We think "Tough Guy Death" is more fun, but it's just something for you to think about.

## Lines 3-4

*For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.*

Death thinks that he has the power to kill people, but he actually doesn't. Donne uses the word "overthrow" instead of "kill" in line 3 – an interesting choice, because people usually use the word in the context of "overthrowing" a ruler and taking control of his territory. Notice how there's a nice dramatic pause created by the line break between "overthrow" and "die," as if the speaker lets Death savor the idea of killing people just before pulling the rug out from under him. To make things more humiliating, the speaker starts to show his pity by addressing "poor Death," as if Death just had his dreams crushed, and now needs some cheering up. But, hold on: it seems totally ridiculous to say that Death doesn't kill people. That's what makes Death Death! What gives? Donne uses the idea of Christian eternity to argue that death is something that people pass through on their way to a new, eternal life. A good Christian must experience death – the end of life on earth – but, in the long run, he or she can't be "killed."

## Lines 5-6

*From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,*

These two lines are a tangled knot of words, so read 'em slow, and then go back and read 'em again. He compares death to "rest" and "sleep," two things that give us "pleasure." Therefore, death should give us pleasure, too, when we finally meet it. He claims that rest and sleep are only "pictures" of death. The difference these two things and death is like the difference between a painting of an object and the real thing. They are watered-down versions of death, so if they give us some pleasure, then death will give "much more." The pleasure of death will "flow" like water or honey. Sounds nice – where do we sign up? The comparison of death to sleep or eternal rest is a classic metaphor in Christian writings – one that goes back a long time. The philosopher St. Augustine, for example, writes that he won't know what rest is really like, until he rests with God in Heaven. It is a way for people to talk themselves out of their fear of dying – compare it to an experience that they enjoy. Kind of like how you might persuade someone to go skydiving by comparing it to a super-fun rollercoaster ride.

## Lines 7-8

*And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.*

The "best men [...] soonest" follow this dude Death into the afterlife, thinking that he will give the "rest of their bones," and free or "deliver" their Christian souls from all the pain of earthly life. (Note that "deliver" can also refer to childbirth, which adds to the whole "new life" idea.) They are the hardest-working and bravest people in society, so they get to kick their feet back and enjoy eternal rest before everyone else. (We think that, if Donne lived today, he would include women in this group, as well.) The speaker almost certainly refers to people like soldiers and martyrs, who sacrifice themselves for the greater good. Is Donne being too cute here? After all, not that many soldiers are really thrilled to go off to war, and **few people go to war intending to die** – otherwise they wouldn't be very good soldiers. Donne makes it sound like the best men volunteer for death, when, in most cases, they only volunteer to *risk* death in order to achieve something else. It is worth keeping in mind how downright sneaky this poem can be. It almost makes you want to run out and take on one of the "World's Most Dangerous Jobs."

## Lines 9-10

*Thou'art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,*

In Petrarchan sonnets like this, it's standard for the poem to shift or "turn" at line 9. This shift can be slight, or it can be a total U-turn. We think this sonnet has more of a slight turn. The speaker raises his intensity in these lines, and becomes more hostile towards Death, calling him names and taunting him as a slave. With the metaphor of the slave, the speaker suggests that Death doesn't act on his own free will, and instead is controlled or manipulated by other things like "fate, chance, kings, and desperate men." Let's take these one by one. Like Death, Fate is often treated as a person in literature. Fate is thought to control everything that happens to people, including when they will die. So, Death doesn't decide when people will die; he just carries out orders from Fate. "Chance" is kind of the opposite of fate, so, again, it's sneaky of Donne to put them side-by-side. "Chance" is luck, the idea that things can happen for no particular rhyme or reason. If you die when a meteor crashes through your house in the middle of the night, that's sheer bad luck, and there's nothing you can do about it. "Kings" are different from fate and chance because they are real people, but they have a similar kind of control over when and how people die. A king can send soldiers to die in battle or sentence people to execution. "Desperate men," we think, refers to **people who commit suicide or do stupid and reckless stuff**, which might as well be suicide. If you decide to take your own life, it pretty much robs Death of the only card he has to play. In line 10, the speaker brings another accusation against **Death, claiming that he hangs out, or "dwells," with those notorious thugs, "poison, war, and sickness."** In other words, Death's friends are total losers. It might be obvious by now, but we'll

repeat it anyway: Donne treats these three things like people. What do poison, war, and sickness have in common? Easy: they all kill lots and lots of people. Moreover, they are all generally considered bad or painful ways to die.

## Lines 11-12

*And poppy'or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?*

In lines 5-6, the speaker argues that death will be just like sleep, except even better. But, now, he's all, "Who needs Death anyway? If I want to sleep really well, I can just use drugs and magic charms!" This seems to conflict with the idea that Death is supposed to be way more pleasurable than sleep, but who cares? The speaker's on a roll, and doesn't have time to think about whether his arguments make perfect sense. When you're trying to insult someone, it's more important to be clever and think on your feet. The "poppy" is a flower used to make opium, an old-fashioned drug that makes people really happy, but also turns their skin yellow. In fact, drugs and magic charms work even "better" than Death at bringing on sleep. (We're like: and you know this *how*?) And, "stroke" is another interesting word. It could refer to "stroking" someone, like one might stroke a child's head to put him to sleep. Or, it could refer to the "stroke" of a sword, which is obviously much more violent. Or, **it could imply the "stroke" of a clock at the exact moment of death.** Totally demolishing Death's claim to be the ultimate sleep aid, the speaker puts Death in his place, telling him not to "**swell" with pride.** This rhetorical question culminates the poem's entire argument up to this point.

## Lines 13-14

*One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

Donne, and the Metaphysical Poets in general, are masters of the surprise ending, and this one is no exception. First, he returns to the idea of death as "sleep," which gets a bit more complicated here because he gives a time-frame: it's a "short sleep." In traditional Christian theology, it is thought that, when people died, it is like they are asleep until the end of the world or Judgment Day. At this point, Jesus wakes everyone up to lead them to Heaven, where they will spend eternity. Therefore, when the Apocalypse happens and the world ends, there isn't any more death. All good Christians will have eternal life in Heaven. The poem's final words seal the deal: "Death, thou shalt die."

## Short Summary:

The poet John Donne uses the old fashioned Elizabethan English in his poems that type of English that is sometimes referred to as Shakespearean English. In his poem "death be not proud" he dwells on the subject of death and how to overcome it.

Of course no one has power over death therefore overcoming death seems to be a delusion. The poet says that death actually gives men and women a break from all the troubles of the world.

According to the Donne death has its masters and these are forces like chance, fate, kings together with desperate men. The victims of death now have the chance to finally rest while death actually thinks that it is eliminating supposed victims it is offering them relief.

Death is not in power because there are other forces that are responsible for taking lives. Drugs are superior to death in as much death brings relief. The poet then goes ahead to even to condemn death to death! 'Death, thou shalt die; this shows great irony.

The poet Donne has personified death and now death is like a character in the poem. The first stanza the poem centres on the subject of the poem death and the audience. In the first line the poet sends death a warning not to be proud and in line two he asks death to re-evaluate his stand as the 'mighty and dreadful' power.

The first stanza is concluded that even the victims of death who death claims to have eliminated do not die 'die not' and even the poet himself believes that death cannot strike him he says 'poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me'.

The second stanza is full of praise for death a big contrast to the first stanza which was only full of condemnation for death. Death is being praised for its good traits. Death is associated with pleasure the poet talks of 'much pleasure' from the 'rest and sleep'. The poet suggests that death is a source of relief from all the pain in the world. The victims of death get 'rest of their bones'.

Donne then goes back to condemning death again and accusing it having too much regard of itself. The poet suggests that death is not supreme and that there are forces that death is but a 'slave to fate, chance, kings and desperate men.

Desperate men are those who decide to take their own lives in order to flee from the world suffering. Death is still inferior because the rest it provides can be attained through 'charms' or 'poppy'. Drugs can offer similar rest to death.

At the end the poet condemns death to death because cannot actually kill anyone as it is a slave to greater forces. Death to the poet has its own fate death. Being that the Donne is a Christian and borrows from his Christian background that resurrection as the ultimate prize of believers he believes he will overcome death.