

The Flea



POEM TEXT

1 Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
 2 How little that which thou deniest me is;
 3 It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
 4 And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
 5 Thou know'st that this cannot be said
 6 A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,
 7 Yet this enjoys before it woo,
 8 And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
 9 And this, alas, is more than we would do.

 10 Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
 11 Where we almost, nay more than married are.
 12 This flea is you and I, and this
 13 Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
 14 Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,
 15 And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
 16 Though use make you apt to kill me,
 17 Let not to that, self-murder added be,
 18 And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

 19 Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
 20 Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
 21 Wherein could this flea guilty be,
 22 Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
 23 Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
 24 Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;
 25 'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be:
 26 Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
 27 Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.



SUMMARY

Look at this flea and you'll see how small the thing that you deny me really is. It bit me first and now it bites you. In the flea, our two bloods are mingled together. You know that this isn't sinful or shameful; it's not a loss of virginity. And yet the flea gets to enjoy your blood without courting you first, and it grows fat digesting our combined blood. And that is more than we are allowed to do.

Wait, don't kill the flea and kill us with it! In the flea's body, we are almost, no, more than, married. The flea is you and me. It is

our marriage bed, our wedding chapel. Though our parents' disapprove, we are safe within these dark, living walls. Though you may want to kill me, do not add suicide and sacrilege to your list of sins: three sins will come from killing the flea.

Cruel and unpredictable woman, have you stained your nails purple with the flea's innocent blood? The flea is guilty of nothing but sucking a drop of blood from you. Yet you exalt in your victory over the flea and say that neither you nor I are weaker for killing it. That's true enough and you should learn from that how false your fears are. You will lose as much honor when you give your virginity to me as this flea's death took from you.



THEMES



SEX AND MARRIAGE

"The Flea" is a poem of seduction, but the speaker takes an unusual approach to getting his lady into bed. Instead of praising her beauty or promising her happiness, he instead insists that virginity is unimportant and that its loss will not be a significant source of shame or dishonor. In doing so, he pushes against the values of his society, which prized female virginity and pressured women to preserve it until marriage. "The Flea" thus tries to create a space for sexual pleasure outside the boundaries of marriage.

The speaker begins the poem in frustration, even exasperation, with the implication that his mistress continuously refuses to have sex with him. Though she does not speak in the poem, the reader can guess at her reasons for refusing the speaker based on the arguments the speaker makes to change her mind: she wants to preserve her virginity, and she worries that losing it outside of marriage will result in sin, shame, and dishonor.

The speaker attempts to address these concerns. Playing on the Renaissance belief that during sex the blood of the two partners mingled together, the speaker notes that their blood also mingles in a flea which has bitten both of them. Since it's not a sin or shameful for their blood to meet in the body of the flea, he argues, it's not a sin for the same thing to happen during sex.

The speaker's argument is not entirely convincing: even for a Renaissance reader, it would be surprising, even silly, to think that the most important thing about sex is the mingling of blood between the partners. There is something juvenile and provocative about the poem: some readers may feel that comparing sex to getting bitten by a flea is intended to be funny and gross, rather than seductive.

But underlying the poem's bawdy humor, the speaker makes a surprising and potentially radical argument. Though he might have more success in seducing his mistress if he played along, promised to marry her and cherish her virginity, the speaker refuses to accept his mistress's and his society's values. Instead, he tries to *change* those values by downplaying the importance of virginity and of marriage itself. In the flea, he notes, he and his mistress are "more than married." What's more, he does not seem interested in reconciling their sexual adventures with social values: instead, he imagines that the flea itself offers a kind of refuge from angry "parents."

The speaker of "The Flea" is thus unusually ambitious. He seeks not only to seduce his mistress, but also to defy—and perhaps remake—social norms around sexuality. You might wonder how sincere the speaker is in advancing this proposal—it is awfully convenient that changing these mores would also fulfill his desires in this moment. Though "The Flea" makes radical proposals about sexuality, questions about the speaker's sincerity cut down the force of those proposals—and so too does the fact that the mistress kills the flea. She, at least, is unimpressed by the speaker's arguments.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27



SEX AND THE CHURCH

"The Flea" is a poem about illicit sex. It challenges social norms around sexuality and tries to create space for sexual pleasure beyond the boundaries of marriage. It's surprising, then, how often the poem references Christianity. Though the speaker challenges marriage as an institution, he also uses the authority of the Church to support his arguments. In this way, the poem subtly suggests that sex for pleasure isn't simply acceptable, but can even be thought of as a holy act.

"The Flea" often [alludes](#) to Christian traditions in both its content and form. For instance, the speaker describes the flea as "three lives in one." This is in reference to the fact that the flea contains the blood of the speaker, the mistress, and of the flea itself, but it's also an allusion to the Holy Trinity: the Father (God), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Ghost. The speaker also compares the mingling of his and his mistress's blood in the flea to marriage, which during Donne's lifetime would have been solely the province of the church. Though he suggests that they are "more than married," marriage remains his reference point for a meaningful union between people. Indeed, he compares the flea's body to a "marriage bed, and marriage temple," the word "temple" here again making the church's presence and authority felt in the poem.

The speaker once again uses distinctly religious language when

he declares that killing the flea, as the mistress, eventually does, is "sacrilege." In the phrase "three sins in killing three" the "three sins" are murder, suicide, and the destruction of marriage, while the "three" things being "killed" are the speaker, the mistress, and the flea. Once again, though, this emphasis on "three" evokes the Holy Trinity, adding yet another layer to the potential "sacrilege" (the mistress isn't just killing the flea, she's killing a symbol of God!). The speaker basically tries to convince his lover that letting the flea live—essentially consenting to sex—is the only course of action that's not sinful.

When she *does* kill the flea anyway, the speaker describes the blood on her nail as the "blood of innocence." Though the speaker attempts to push beyond Christian values around sexuality, his thinking remains bound up in Christian reference points. He keeps returning to categories like sin and innocence in order to make his points, which suggests that, for the speaker, there's no escaping them; he tries to work his vision of sex *into* these ideas of sin and holiness rather than skirt them altogether. Even the *structure* of the poem itself alludes to these Christian traditions: there are also *three* stanzas, each of which ends with a tercet (*three* rhyming lines).

The form and content thus suggest an underlying allegiance to Christian thinking, which lies in opposition to the speaker's bold attempts to separate sexual pleasure from marriage. Some readers may treat this as opportunistic: the speaker uses these references to impress his mistress and to try to break down her resistance. In this view, the speaker's beliefs are not particularly sincere; he grabs onto whatever he can find to seduce his mistress. Others may see a more serious claim implicit in these references. Perhaps the speaker is suggesting that, however it is currently interpreted, Christianity is not opposed to the illicit sexual pleasures he describes; in fact, those pleasures can be described in Christian terms.

The poem doesn't offer clear evidence either way, and it's up to the reader to decide how to interpret the speaker's arguments—determining whether they are silly, serious, or some strange combination of the two.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

*Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,*

The first six lines of “The Flea” establishes the poem’s [conceit](#). The speaker begins the poem in frustration: his mistress has denied him. She refuses to have sex before marriage. He makes a strange, surprising, and frankly pretty crude argument to try to overcome her opposition.

He begins this argument by asking his mistress to observe a flea, which has bitten both of them; as a result, their blood is “mingled” inside the flea. This, he argues, is just like having sex. It is not sinful or shameful, nor does it count as a loss of virginity, to have their blood mix together inside the flea. Neither, he implies, is sex itself sinful or shameful. In this way, the speaker argues against a prevailing set of cultural values and sexual mores: in the culture of the English Renaissance, a high premium was placed on female virginity and women were encouraged to maintain it until marriage.

However, to modern readers, the poem’s conceit will sound strange, since it relies on a widespread, but incorrect, medical belief. In the Renaissance, doctors believed that during sex the blood of the two partners came into contact with each other and mingled, becoming one blood.

However, even for people in the Renaissance, the mixing of blood was not the only or even the most important part of sex. The speaker wants his mistress to ignore this, to forget that there is anything to sex other than the mixing of bloods. As a result, his argument is likely unconvincing. However, the mistress does not directly speak in the poem. Though she is present, and though the speaker is directly addressing her, he treats her as though she is not there at all. He mostly does not engage with her ideas or objections; he simply tries to overpower her with his argument. In this respect, the poem feels more like [apostrophe](#) than conversation. This mistress seems to be excluded from her own seduction.

In lines 1-6, the poem’s complicated formal structure begins to come into view. These lines are all [rhyming couplets](#) and they alternate between [iambic tetrameter](#) (four poetic feet per line) and iambic [pentameter](#) (five feet per line). For example:

Mark but | this flea, | and mark | in this,
How lit- | tle that | which thou | deniest | me is;
It sucked | me first, | and now | sucks thee,
And in | this flea | our two | bloods ming- | led be;

The form of the poem suggests the intimacy between the speaker and the mistress: the adhesive force of the rhyme pulls the two lines of each couplet together, creating a sonic embrace. But the discrepancy between the two [meters](#) suggests that some discontent lingers in that intimacy: though they are close to each other, difference and resistance persists.

The poem is thus highly structured and highly suggestive: it carefully captures and reproduces the dynamics of the speaker’s relationship with his mistress. But the speaker does

not pay attention to the *details* of his poem’s structure. Throughout, the poem’s meter is rough and awkward; even in the first four lines it breaks from iambs, opening forcefully with the double stress of a [spondee](#) (“Mark but”), glossing over “deniest” as two syllables, and perhaps containing yet another spondee with “bloods ming-.” The speaker also uses weak rhymes, like “this” and “is” in the first two lines. The speaker focuses on the *overall* dynamics of the poem’s form: he is less interested in the details of those dynamics.

LINES 7-9

*Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.*

In the final three lines of the first [stanza](#), the speaker spells out the implication of the argument he made in the poem’s first six lines. The flea gets to suck the blood of both the speaker and his mistress. Indeed, it “swells” from feasting on their blood—a [pun](#) on male erection. But it doesn’t have to wait to do so until it has wooed and married the mistress. An insect enjoys greater freedom than the speaker and his mistress, who are bound by convention to wait until marriage before they mingle their bloods.

In these lines, the speaker [personifies](#) the flea, giving it human characteristics: it is pampered, it has the ability to woo (though it doesn’t have to). The flea seems as human as the people it feeds on, and in that way, it shows the speaker and his mistress an example of greater sexual freedom.

As the first stanza comes to a close, the poem’s complicated formal scheme comes fully into view. The first six lines of the stanza were [rhyming couplets](#); the final three are a rhyming [tercet](#) (all three lines rhyme on an /oo/ sound). For the first six lines, the [meter](#) of the stanza alternates between iambic [tetrameter](#) and iambic [pentameter](#). In the tercet, the meter changes: line 7 is in iambic tetrameter but the final two lines are in iambic pentameter (recall that we haven’t seen two lines with five feet each in a row yet in the poem).

The poem’s form is once again highly suggestive: the tercet, with its triple rhyme, seems to represent the union of mistress and speaker in the flea’s body. Yet, once again, the form also registers the mistress’s dissent and difference: the initial line of iambic tetrameter suggests that she is not fully assimilated to the unity of speaker, mistress, and flea.

Of course, the speaker continues to be sort of sloppy in his deployment of his form. For instance, line 8 contains an extra stress because of the [spondee](#) (stressed-stressed) in the line’s fourth foot, an awkward metrical substitution:

And pam- | pered swells | with one | blood made | of
two,

Looking at the first stanza as a whole, it also becomes clear that the speaker is not using [enjambment](#) and [end-stop](#) in any obvious pattern. The lines are heavily end-stopped, giving them a feeling of independence, as though each was its own proposition. The speaker then uses enjambment occasionally, but not according to any discernible pattern: rather, he seems to just do so when and where it suits him. This casual relationship with end-stop and enjambment will continue throughout the poem—though he does consistently end-stop each stanza.

LINES 10-15

*Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.*

In the space between the first and second [stanza](#), the mistress has registered her displeasure with the speaker's argument by threatening to kill the flea. This brings forth a renewed burst of energy from the speaker—and in this stanza he amplifies the stakes of his argument.

The speaker is no longer content to argue simply that virginity is unimportant. Instead, through a series of [allusions](#) to Christianity, he makes the flea itself into an embodiment of Christian values, traditions, and rituals. He begins by noting, in line 10, that there are “three lives” in the flea. This is an allusion to the Holy Trinity: in Christian faith, God is a single being who can be divided into three parts: God (“the Father”), Jesus (“the Son”), and the Holy Spirit. Just as God collects three beings in one, so too the flea contains three lives—the speaker's, his mistress's, and the flea's itself.

The flea is once again [personified](#), this time taking on the characteristics of a human institution. Finally, the speaker imagines the flea's body as a space of protection, like a cloister—the partially enclosed courtyard in a church or monastery. The flea's “living walls of jet”—the dark inside of its body—protects the lovers from their parents' judgment and even from the mistress's own displeasure. Do note that the parents seem at least partially [symbolic](#) here: though the mistress must have parents, and though they'd probably disapprove of the witty, obnoxious man courting their daughter, the speaker's invocation of these parents here more likely refers to the disapproval of parents more broadly; they stand in for the societal forces that constrain sexuality and insist it happen only within the confines of marriage.

These lines follow the pattern set out in the poem's first stanza: they are [rhyming couplets](#), alternating between iambic [tetrameter](#) and iambic [pentameter](#). As before, the speaker is casual about the details of his scheme: for example, lines 10 and 11 contain a grating [slant rhyme](#) between “spare” and “are”

(though the words may have sounded more similar in Donne's time) and he uses the weak rhyme between “this” and “is” again. The lines contain many [caesuras](#) and, as in line 12, these caesuras make it feel like the speaker is simply adding one thought to the next, without much foresight or planning.

This casualness might, at least in part, be in a sort of posturing—the speaker's attempt to seem more relaxed than he actually is, so that what he's proposing—i.e. sex—doesn't seem like a big deal. To that end, the poem is generally reserved in its use of [alliteration](#). Many of its most notable instances of alliteration involve repeating words, as in the repetition of “marriage” in line 13. This gives the poem a casual, conversational feel: it avoids sounding overly literary. But the poem does use other plays of sound to maintain a distinctive and pleasurable music. For instance, lines 14-15 contain no alliteration, but they do contain strong [assonance](#) on /a/ and /i/ sounds. The speaker manages to have it both ways at once: he sounds casual but maintains a strong underlying music, music that makes the poem seductive both in content and in sound.

LINES 16-18

*Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that, self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.*

In lines 16-18, the speaker once again pleads with his mistress not to kill the flea. Though she might want to ([metaphorically](#), because the flea contains both their blood) kill the speaker—even he seems to realize that he's a bit obnoxious—he doesn't want her to kill herself or destroy an image of the holy trinity (which would be “sacrilege”). His argument against killing the flea thus continues the poem's opening [conceit](#): that the flea not only contains a few drops of their blood, it contains *them*: killing it would be a kind of murder/suicide. This argument is very silly (and it does not convince the mistress: as the reader learns at the start of the next stanza, she disregards his argument and kills the flea).

But the speaker continues to employ the religious language he has used throughout the [stanza](#): killing the flea is a “sin.” This, in turn, transforms the meaning of the [tercet](#) at the end of the stanza. In the first stanza, the tercet seemed like an image of the union between mistress, speaker, and flea. Here, the three lines seem like another nod to the Holy Trinity. Even the form of the poem is taking on Christian characteristics.

This is potentially puzzling, since the speaker's argument is in opposition to the Christian doctrines of his day; the Church was very much opposed to extra- or pre-marital sex. Yet the speaker uses the Church's traditions and rituals to license his argument. Perhaps his reasons for doing so are opportunistic: he knows that religion is important to his mistress, so he tries to show her that what he proposes is not actually in opposition to Church doctrine. Perhaps he is simply poking fun at the Church and its regulations on sexuality. Perhaps he is

suggesting that sexuality itself is holy, regardless of whether the Church sanctions it or not. The reader will have to decide for him or herself how seriously to take the speaker's claims—indeed, whether to take the speaker seriously at all.

LINES 19-24

*Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;*

The speaker spends the second [stanza](#) urging his mistress not to kill the flea. She evidently disregards his advice, since the third stanza begins with her nail “purpled” with the “blood of innocence.” She has killed the flea, an act the speaker describes as “cruel and sudden,” and the blood inside it has squirted onto her nail.

The speaker protests against this killing—saying that the flea was guilty of nothing except sucking a drop of blood from her. But, he notes, the mistress does not feel guilty about her deed. Instead she “triumph[s]” in it and, according to the speaker, says that neither of them are weaker for what she's done.

This is the closet the mistress comes to speaking in the poem—but even here her speech comes through the speaker, still subject to his control and his authority. She does not speak on her own behalf. However, her comments suggests that she rejects the speaker's argument in the previous stanza. Killing the flea is not murder or suicide, in her mind. The flea is distinct from the two of them; though it has some of their blood, it is not the speaker or the mistress.

The third stanza follows the pattern set out in the previous stanzas: with three [rhyming couplets](#), alternating iambic [tetrameter](#) and iambic [pentameter](#). Once again, the speaker avoids [alliteration](#), keeping his verse casual and conversational. But he still employs a subtle underlying music. For example, line 20 contains a very weak alliteration, the /i/ sound in “in” and “innocence,” as well as a pattern of [consonance](#) with the /n/ sound that appears in “nail,” “in,” and “innocence.” The use of consonance gives the line a seductive, musical feel, while avoiding sounding forced and overly literary.

LINES 25-27

*'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be:
Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.*

In lines 19-24, the mistress seems to have won a significant victory: she has killed the flea, destroying the creature on which the speaker had staked his entire case for seducing her. But the speaker of “The Flea” is tireless and inventive: in the poem's final three lines he finds a way to turn this disaster to his advantage. Since the mistress doesn't accept his argument that

the flea is, in a sense, a sexual and religious union between the two of them—since she killed the flea without any fear of sin or sacrilege—she should apply the same boldness to her sex life. Having sex, he seems to be arguing, is no more important or consequential than killing a flea. She will lose as much honor when she loses her virginity as she did when she killed the flea—in other words, not much.

The speaker thus abandons the religious arguments and [allusions](#) that marked the second stanza and returns to his original argument: an argument which tries to diminish the importance of virginity, to make it seem less weighty and monumental. The speaker proposes that sexuality be uncoupled from marriage—a potentially radical proposal. Whether you take this seriously or not depends on your impression of the speaker. He may be arguing for new social norms around sexuality, or he may simply be making a self-serving argument. Certainly, it is convenient that these new sexual norms would suit his needs and desires in this exact moment.

Like the other [stanzas](#), the poem's third stanza ends with a [rhyming tercet](#), with its first line in [iambic tetrameter](#) and the final two in iambic [pentameter](#). In the previous stanzas, these three-line units have seemed suggestive, even symbolic. They seem less so here: in the absence of the flea, there is no third party. Indeed, if anything, they seem to mark the speaker's inability to move on: he returns to the same form even after it's lost its significance. The speaker, who has seemed so laidback and smooth, so endlessly verbose, loses his mojo at the end of the poem, and gets stuck in his own rhetorical power and excess.

Though it is not entirely clear—since the mistress does not speak on her own behalf in the poem—it seems likely that he has failed to seduce her and that the poem's ending marks a desperate search for a convincing argument. However, the total number of stanzas—three—once again refers to the trinity, very subtly. This suggests that perhaps the speaker has not entirely given up the religious ambitions of the previous stanza.



SYMBOLS



THE FLEA/BLOOD

Throughout the poem, the speaker obsessively meditates on the blood inside the flea—blood that started out in two separate bodies and is now “one blood made of two.” If the reader takes the [conceit](#) of the poem seriously, this is literally true: the flea does contain two people's blood. But the speaker is less interested in the literal contents of the flea's newly engorged body and more in its [symbolic](#) possibilities.

First, and most prominently, people in the Renaissance wrongly

believed that during sex, the blood of the two people involved mixed together. The blood inside the flea thus serves as a symbol for sex itself. Similarly, because the blood mixes within the flea, the bug itself could be said to be a symbol of sex. Further, since losing one's virginity often involves bleeding, the blood in the flea and later on the mistress's nail serves as a symbol for virginity itself.

Intimate relationships between people are also often described in terms of blood: family members, for instance, are often described as having blood ties. The blood that mixes in the flea's body thus serves as a symbol of the bond between the speaker and his mistress, justifying the speaker's assertion that they are "almost, nay more than married are."

Blood thus serves a range of symbolic roles in the poem, all of them associated with sexuality: it symbolizes sex itself, the loss of virginity, and the intimacy that sometimes accompanies sexuality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "bloods"
- **Line 8:** "blood"
- **Line 20:** "Purpled"
- **Line 22:** "drop"



MARRIAGE BED

When the speaker announces that the flea is a "marriage bed," he's not exactly being literal. He doesn't expect that he and his mistress will somehow shrink down, crawl inside of it, and spend the night after their wedding inside of a bug. Instead, he's thinking of the things that people do in their marriage beds—that is, they have sex.

In this instance, then, the marriage bed serves as a [symbol](#) for the activities that take place inside it: it is a symbol for sex itself (and in this way, is also an example of [metonymy](#)). But it is usually a symbol for a specific *kind* of sex: that which happens within the confines of marriage. This is a strange symbol for the speaker to use, since he is urging his mistress to sleep with him *before* or *outside* of marriage. By using the marriage bed as a symbol for sex outside of marriage, the speaker blurs the distinction between the two: he appropriates the authority of marriage (and the church that licenses it) to his own somewhat less pious project.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "marriage bed"



MARRIAGE TEMPLE

At the time that John Donne wrote "The Flea," all marriages happened in religious

institutions—churches, chapels, and temples. There were no civil services, administered by the government. When the speaker describes the flea's body as a "marriage temple," then, he is invoking the place where marriage happens, and through that place, the religious authorities that sanctioned marriages.

The "marriage temple" is a [symbol](#) for marriage itself, and for the power that licenses marriage. There is something intentionally surprising, even provocative in the speaker's choice of symbol: he seems to be saying that he and his mistress have no need for the traditional spaces where weddings take place and the powers that traditionally authorize them. Indeed he may even be making fun of those spaces and powers: they are superfluous, pretentious. So much so that even the body of a flea will do in their absence.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "marriage temple"



PARENTS GRUDGE

When the speaker acknowledges that his mistress' parents hold a "grudge" against him and his potential match with their daughter, he is likely being, in part, literal: the reader is invited to imagine those parents, and their grim disapproval of the showy, silly, and vulgar man courting their daughter. But there is also a [symbolic](#) component to the grudge. Since the reader does not learn anything else about these people—for example, the specific grounds for their grudge—they stand in for parental authority itself and, more broadly, for all of the authorities and powers that would constrain sexuality and keep it limited to something that happens only within marriage.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "parents grudge"



POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

"The Flea" uses [enjambment](#) irregularly, without a strong or regular pattern. The poem is more often [end-stopped](#), which lends it a meditative feel, whereas the enjambments don't seem to follow a particularly strong rhyme or reason. For instance, the first [stanza](#) contains two enjambments, in lines 1 and 5, while the third stanza contains four, in lines 19, 21, 23, and 26. (We've noted line 1 as being enjambed because its full thought spills over onto line 2; despite the comma, you can't grasp the entire meaning of line 1 without the line that follows. The same is true of line 21, and perhaps also line 26.)

The irregularity of the enjambments makes them hard to

predict—inserting moments of potential disruption into the speaker's otherwise plodding argument. Where the frequent end-stops make the speaker seem calm and collected—sure of his thoughts—the unpredictable enjambments may feel like cracks in his veneer, moments of him failing to maintain his nonchalance and rushing to convince his mistress of his argument. Note for example the particularly evocative enjambment of line 19: this is right after the mistress has killed the flea, and the speaker's words subsequently tumble out without regards to the line break, spilling over onto the next as the speaker rushes to convince the mistress that she's just sinned.

Of course, on a broader level, the lack of clear pattern in enjambment is not entirely surprising. Although each stanza of "The Flea" has an elaborate—and innovative—formal pattern, the poem is otherwise formally rather sloppy, full of strange and awkward [metrical](#) substitutions and arguably weak [rhymes](#). Indeed, during his lifetime, Donne was famous for his carelessness in formal matters: the *argument* of his poems was more important to him than strict meter or, in this case, a strict pattern of enjambment.

It seems like the speaker uses enjambment when and where it is convenient for him to do so; he does not trouble himself much about building a consistent or clear pattern. This has some advantages for the speaker: it keeps the poem feeling fresh and conversational. Though the poem has an underlying—and highly significant—formal architecture, the speaker is not overbearing or pedantic in his commitment to that form: he lets the reader discover it for him or herself.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "this, / How"
- **Lines 5-6:** "said / A"
- **Lines 12-13:** "this / Our"
- **Lines 19-20:** "since / Purpled"
- **Lines 21-22:** "be, / Except"
- **Lines 23-24:** "thou / Find'st"
- **Lines 26-27:** "me, / Wil"

END-STOPPED LINE

"The Flea" does not use [end-stop](#) or [enjambment](#) in a clear regular pattern, and instead it seems that the speaker uses enjambment and end-stop where and when it pleases him to do so. However, it's still important to note that the poem is heavily end-stopped, particularly in its first two stanzas. This gives the poem a meditative feel: though it has a strong [conceit](#), that runs through the poem linking its various parts together, many of its lines stand on their own. They are discrete, separate propositions which rely on the conceit to bind them up into a single poem.

This is true at the level of the line and at the level of the [stanza](#):

each stanza of "The Flea" closes with a clear end-stop. Though the speaker's over-all argument links the separate stanzas together, they thus feel independent, almost like set-pieces. And the gaps between the stanzas are often temporal as well as spatial: while the speaker gathers his thoughts between stanzas, the mistress does things, threatening to and eventually killing the flea. In these cases, the end-stops serve as narrative breaks in which the mistress intervenes in the poem. The mistress is able to intervene in the poem only in these gaps, these spaces between stanzas: otherwise, whether he uses end-stop or enjambment, the speaker dominates the conversation—and the poem.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "is;"
- **Line 3:** "thee,"
- **Line 4:** "be;"
- **Line 6:** "maidenhead,"
- **Line 7:** "woo,"
- **Line 8:** "two,"
- **Line 9:** "do."
- **Line 10:** "spare,"
- **Line 11:** "are."
- **Line 13:** "is;"
- **Line 14:** "met,"
- **Line 15:** "jet."
- **Line 16:** "me,"
- **Line 17:** "be,"
- **Line 18:** "three."
- **Line 20:** "innocence?"
- **Line 22:** "thee?"
- **Line 24:** "now,"
- **Line 25:** "be:"
- **Line 27:** "thee."

CAESURA

"The Flea" contains a rather large number of [caesuras](#), distributed throughout the poem. Not all of these caesuras are particularly emphatic or important—often, as in line 9, they simply separate a parenthetical phrase from the rest of the line. But often they *are* important. For instance, the first line of the poem contains a caesura: "Mark but this flea, and mark in this..." The caesura separates two separate commands, because the speaker wants his mistress to observe or pay attention to two separate things: the flea itself, and the lesson he draws from the flea. This corresponds to the way that the speaker treats the flea more generally: treating it as an insignificant, lowly form of life and at the same time, [personifying](#) it, linking it to the highest traditions of Christian faith. The caesura models the divisions in the speaker's thought.

The speaker's use of caesura models his thinking in other ways, too. Many times the speaker seems to simply add thoughts

reader. The poem continues to feel loose and natural, even as it deploys sophisticated and structured forms to reinforce its points. So too, the use of consonance and alliteration allows the poem to feel at once structured and casual: musical enough to be beautiful, but casual enough to feel conversational.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “M,” “rk,” “th,” “s,” “m,” “rk,” “th,” “s”
- **Line 2:** “w,” “tt,” “t,” “wh,” “s,” “t,” “s”
- **Line 3:** “t,” “s,” “ck,” “t,” “s,” “ck,” “s”
- **Line 4:** “n,” “n,” “b,” “l,” “d,” “n,” “l,” “d,” “b”
- **Line 5:** “Th,” “s,” “th,” “t,” “th,” “t,” “s”
- **Line 6:** “s,” “n,” “n,” “m,” “n,” “ss,” “m,” “d,” “n,” “d”
- **Line 8:** “d,” “p,” “m,” “p,” “d,” “ll,” “s,” “l,” “d,” “m,” “d”
- **Line 9:** “d,” “s,” “s,” “s,” “w,” “w,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 10:** “s,” “l,” “s,” “l,” “s”
- **Line 11:** “W,” “w,” “m,” “m,” “r,” “m,” “rr,” “r”
- **Line 12:** “s,” “s,” “nd,” “nd,” “s”
- **Line 13:** “r,” “m,” “r,” “g,” “m,” “rr,” “g,” “m”
- **Line 14:** “r,” “r,” “r,” “t”
- **Line 15:** “n,” “l,” “t,” “n,” “l,” “ll,” “t”
- **Line 16:** “m,” “t,” “t,” “ll,” “m”
- **Line 17:** “L,” “t,” “t,” “t,” “r,” “d,” “r,” “dd,” “d”
- **Line 18:** “s,” “r,” “l,” “r,” “s,” “n,” “s,” “ll,” “n,” “r”
- **Line 19:** “s,” “dd,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 20:** “P,” “p,” “l,” “n,” “b,” “l,” “nn,” “n”
- **Line 21:** “n,” “l,” “l,” “p”
- **Line 22:** “p,” “t,” “t,” “p,” “t,” “th”
- **Line 23:** “th,” “t,” “s,” “t,” “s,” “st,” “th,” “t,” “th”
- **Line 24:** “st,” “t,” “th,” “r,” “th,” “r”
- **Line 25:** “T,” “t,” “n,” “n,” “f,” “f”
- **Line 26:** “st,” “s,” “st,” “t,” “m”
- **Line 27:** “W,” “w,” “st,” “s,” “s,” “f,” “s,” “f,” “f,” “m”

PERSONIFICATION

Throughout the poem, the speaker tries to strike a difficult balance. On the one hand, he insists that the flea is just a flea: like any other flea, it sucks people’s blood. There’s nothing shameful or extraordinary about that. On the other hand, the speaker gives the flea human characteristics, [personifying](#) it as he attempts to show that being bitten by a flea is just like having sex.

For example, in line 8, he refers to the flea as “pampered,” as though it were a queen, lovingly attended to by her servant. Later in the poem, he describes the flea in terms of human religious spaces, comparing it to a cloister, a “marriage bed,” and a “marriage temple.” He even goes so far as to compare the flea to the Holy Trinity, noting that there are “three lives in one flea.” In each case, human attributes are transferred to the flea—whether it starts to seem like Christ himself or like the Churches that celebrate and worship him. The flea is thus two things at once throughout the poem: a simple flea and a

complex set of personifications. The speaker’s argument relies on maintaining both of these identities at once. The flea’s bite has to be insignificant and highly significant: nothing to worry about and a symbol for sex itself.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “Yet this enjoys before it woo,”
- **Line 8:** “And pampered swells with one blood made of two,”
- **Line 9:** “And this, alas, is more than we would do.”
- **Lines 10-15:** “Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare, / Where we almost, nay more than married are. / This flea is you and I, and this / Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is; / Though parents grudge, and you, w’are met, / And cloistered in these living walls of jet.”
- **Line 16:** “Though use make you apt to kill me,”
- **Line 17:** “Let not to that, self-murder added be,”
- **Line 18:** “And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.”

APOSTROPHE

“The Flea” is a poem of seduction: the speaker tries to convince his mistress to sleep with him, using an elaborate and (intentionally) absurd [conceit](#). The poem is thus directly addressed to the mistress throughout. It is reasonable to imagine that the poem is part of a conversation, or part a larger argument in which the mistress has an active voice. (Certainly she seems to have refused the speaker several times already—often enough that he has to resort to this strange argument to win her over). But the poem *itself* suppresses the mistress’s voice and objections: she does not directly speak in the poem at all, and even her “triumph” in lines 23-24 is reported by the speaker and filtered through his perspective.

In this way, the speaker’s direct address to his mistress becomes [apostrophe](#). Though she is present in the room for the poem (even killing the flea just before the final stanza), the speaker treats her as though she isn’t—as though he were speaking to a distant or unreal person. This use of apostrophe reveals something about the speaker’s attitude toward his mistress: rather than engaging with her, thinking through her ideas and objections, he seeks to *overpower* her with the force of his argument, ignoring her person and her personality in the process.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

CONCEIT

John Donne—and the group of poets he’s associated with, the [metaphysical poets](#)—is famous for his elaborate, sometimes intentionally absurd or comical, [conceits](#). The speaker’s argument in “The Flea” relies on such a conceit. He notes that a

flea has bitten both him and his mistress, and he argues that this is functionally the same thing as having sex (because, again, many at the time incorrectly believed that sex resulted in people's blood mingling)—and therefore that his mistress should sleep with him without waiting for marriage. The argument is counter-intuitive, even bizarre. This marks it as a distinctively metaphysical conceit. Where earlier poets often used conceits in pretty logical, predictable ways, the metaphysical poets sought to out-do each other with the extremity and strangeness of their conceits.

Part of the poem's pleasure, then, comes from the speaker's success: somehow he manages to make this strange and rather crude argument into an elaborate and effective poem! The speaker masterfully mixes highbrow and lowbrow concepts: the little flea becomes, over the course of the poem, an image of the Holy Trinity. The force of the speaker's rhetoric ties together the lowest form of life to the highest and most exalted entity in a Christian universe.

Whether or not the poem succeeds in seducing the speaker's mistress, it does succeed in both baffling and entrancing the reader. In this, it marks a significant break with earlier love poetry: the poem seems almost to be making fun of those earlier poems, their high seriousness. It replaces that seriousness with self-consciousness, irony, and satirical vigor.

Where Conceit appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-27

ALLUSION

"The Flea's" [conceit](#) is silly and grotesque. But as the speaker makes his argument, he [alludes](#) to a series of important traditions in Christian theology—allusions that give the poem unexpected weight and significance. Once the flea has sucked his blood and his mistress's blood, it becomes a three-fold being: "three lives in one." The number three is highly important in Christianity and appears in a number of crucial institutions and traditions. Most notably, the Christian God is both single and three-fold. Although Christianity is a monotheistic religion, its God can be divided into three separate figures: the Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit.

Similarly, in some Christian sects, the eucharist or holy communion is an important part of worship. This ritual has three parts: the altar, the sacramental bread (the body of Christ), and the sacramental wine (the blood of Christ). Since this sacrament involves consuming the body and blood of Christ—worshippers eat the bread and drink the wine—some scholars have seen the flea and its bites as an allusion to the eucharist. Similarly, the marriage involves the union of three separate entities: bride, groom, and Church. "The Flea" potentially alludes to all of these traditions and rites.

The poem also alludes to these traditions in its form: there are

three [stanzas](#), and each ends with a rhyming [tercet](#). Coming after three [couplets](#), the tercet might represent the union of man, woman, and flea—as well as the various religiously significant trinities. Even as it makes a potentially absurd argument, the poem thus returns both formally and conceptually to the trinity. It relies on religious traditions to make an argument that defies the judgment and the authority of the Church.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-9:** "Yet this enjoys before it woo, / And pampered swells with one blood made of two, / And this, alas, is more than we would do."
- **Line 10:** "three lives in one flea spare"
- **Lines 16-18:** "Though use make you apt to kill me, / Let not to that, self-murder added be, / And sacrilege, three sins in killing three."
- **Lines 25-27:** "'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be: / Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me, / Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee."

ASSONANCE

Though "The Flea" is relatively restrained in its use of [alliteration](#), it employs lots of [assonance](#) throughout. Indeed, the poem often uses assonance in places where it avoids the use of alliteration, as in lines 14 and 15, where there is a quiet but notable assonance on /a/ and /i/ sounds (which, though not always identical, are still similar enough in sound to produce a noticeable effect):

Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.

Here the assonance gives the line an underlying musicality, despite the lack of obvious, jangling alliteration. This allows the speaker to have it both ways. Though his lines do not come off as overly literary or showy, he nonetheless finds a way to give them musical richness. This, in turn, accounts for some of the poem's surprising effects. Though it makes an intentionally and obviously silly argument, it remains a moving and beautiful poem: the poem sneaks up on the reader, surprises him or her with its power. The speaker is able to seem casual even as he builds a sophisticated and well-organized literary document. In this respect, the use of assonance resembles the poem's broader formal practice. Just as the speaker employs a tightly organized and ornate form—while using sloppy [meter](#) and [rhyme](#)—so too he finds a relaxed, easy music without indulging in obvious, overbearing musicality.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "a," "i," "ea," "a," "a," "i," "i"

- **Line 2:** "o," "i," "i," "e," "e," "i"
- **Line 3:** "l," "u," "u," "ee"
- **Line 4:** "i," "i," "ea," "i," "e"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a"
- **Line 6:** "o," "a," "o," "o," "o," "ai," "ea"
- **Line 7:** "i," "i," "oo"
- **Line 8:** "A," "a," "o," "oo," "o"
- **Line 9:** "A," "i," "a," "i," "o," "a," "ou," "o"
- **Line 10:** "a," "ee," "ea," "a"
- **Line 11:** "e," "a," "a," "a," "ie," "a"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i," "a," "a," "i"
- **Line 13:** "a," "ia," "e," "a," "a," "ia," "e," "i"
- **Line 14:** "a," "e," "a," "a," "e"
- **Line 15:** "A," "i," "i," "i," "a," "e"
- **Line 16:** "ou," "u," "a," "ou," "a," "o," "e"
- **Line 17:** "e," "a," "e," "a," "e"
- **Line 18:** "A," "a," "ee," "i," "i," "i," "i," "ee"
- **Line 19:** "a," "u," "a"
- **Line 20:** "y," "ai," "oo," "o"
- **Line 21:** "i," "i," "ea," "i," "y," "e"
- **Line 22:** "E," "e," "i," "i," "i," "ee"
- **Line 23:** "ou," "a," "a," "ou"
- **Line 24:** "o," "o," "e," "ea," "o"
- **Line 25:** "o," "ea," "e"
- **Line 26:** "o," "o," "o," "ie," "e"
- **Line 27:** "i," "a," "a," "i," "ea," "ee"

Cloistered (Line 15) - Protected or sheltered. The word has religious undertones: a "cloister" was a part of a church or monastery—a semi-enclosed walkway with a garden at the center, where monks and priests could go to stroll, talk, and contemplate.

Jet (Line 15) - A very dark, semi-precious stone, often used in jewelry. In other words, the inside of the flea is pitch black.

Self-Murder (Line 17) - Suicide. Traditionally, suicide was considered a serious sin.

Sacrilege (Line 18) - A religious crime. In popular use, it generally refers to the act of stealing something that belongs to the Church—in this case, the lives of the speaker and his mistress.

Hast (Line 19) - An archaic way of saying "have."

Purpled (Line 20) - Bloodied. The mistress has crushed the flea with her nail and the blood inside it has squirted onto her.

Wherein (Line 21) - How, in what way.

Waste (Line 27) - To lose or to sacrifice. The speaker is saying that his mistress will lose as little honor giving up her virginity as she did when she killed the flea.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Flea" is made of three stanzas, each of which is nine lines long. The first six lines of each stanza are rhyming [couplets](#); the final three lines are rhyming [tercets](#).

In the first six lines of each stanza, the poem alternates between lines of iambic [tetrameter](#) and lines of iambic [pentameter](#). In the final tercet, the first line is in iambic tetrameter and the final two in iambic pentameter. This is an unusual form: 9 line stanzas are rare in English poetry, and the poem's alternating meters do not follow an established pattern.

Though the form of the poem is unusual, it closely mimics the speaker's argument. The couplets that open each stanza might be understood to symbolize the two lovers and their fraught, unconsummated bond: even as the rhyme pulls them together, the metrical difference between the lines (four feet in the first line vs. five feet in the second) pushes them apart. They both are and are not joined. From the dynamic push and pull of the couplets, a union appears in the tercet, with its single rhyme: it symbolizes the way speaker and mistress merge together in the flea. The tercet is thus a rich and potent symbol: of sex, of the Holy Trinity, the eucharist, and of marriage itself. (The total number of stanzas in the poem, three, once again echoes this [allusion](#) to the trinity).

METER

Each [stanza](#) of "The Flea" is 9 lines long. Within these stanzas,



VOCABULARY

Mark (Line 1) - Observe or examine. The verb is a command: the speaker is directly addressing his mistress here.

Thou (Line 2, Line 5, Line 19, Line 23, Line 26) - You. An informal (and now obsolete) way of addressing someone. Its use suggests that the speaker and his mistress know each other well and are comfortable talking to each other directly, without much ceremony.

Deniest (Line 2) - A now obsolete conjugation of the verb "to deny."

Mingled (Line 4) - Blended together. Where the speaker and his mistress's blood were originally separate, they are now indistinguishable, one substance.

Maidenhead (Line 6) - Virginity.

Pampered (Line 8) - Indulged or fattened. The flea has feasted on both the speaker and the mistress's blood and its body has become engorged with their blood. The word is thus also a pun on the male erection.

Alas (Line 9) - An expression of dismay or disappointment, now obsolete and highly formal, but fairly conversational during Donne's life.

the [meter](#) alternates between [iambic pentameter](#)—a dignified meter with a prestigious pedigree in English—and iambic [tetrameter](#)—a lighter, looser, more playful meter. (Recall that pentameter has five iambs—da DUM—per line, and tetrameter four.) In the first six lines of the stanza, the meters alternate every other line, a line of iambic tetrameter followed by a line of iambic pentameter. For example, look at lines 3 and 4 (though note that these aren't perfect, as there's a [spondee](#)—stressed stressed—in the fourth [foot](#) of line 4):

It sucked | me first, | and now | sucks thee,
And in | this flea | our two | bloods ming- | led be;

The stanzas then close with one line of iambic tetrameter and two lines of iambic pentameter. The metrical structure of the poem thus closely imitates its content. In the first six lines of the poem, the alternating meters seem to replicate the relationship between the speaker and his mistress: although they are closely bound together, they are slightly out of step. The changing, syncopated rhythm of the poem models both this intimacy and the distance that persists within it.

The final three lines of each stanza reproduce the poem's [conceit](#): the two become three, joined together in a single rhyming unit. (Though the single line of iambic tetrameter at the start of each [tercet](#) suggests that the speaker may have some lingering doubts about this trinity: the mistress's difference is not cancelled or assuaged, and instead it is simply overwhelmed by the two iambic pentameter lines that close the stanza). The poem's meter is thus unusually thematically rich, capturing and reproducing the sexual tensions and desires that mark the poem.

The poem's metrical scheme is highly structured overall, even fastidious. But its meter is somewhat less precise in execution. Though many of the lines are strongly iambic, many are marked by awkward substitutions. For example, line 8, like line 4, contains a spondee in its fourth foot:

And pamp- | ered swells | with one | blood made | of
two,

Usually in [iambic](#) meters, poets balance a spondee with a [pyrrhic](#) foot (unstressed-unstressed): this maintains the correct number of stresses in the line. But Donne doesn't do so here; instead, the line contains six stresses (and three in a row near the middle of the line). This is awkward and strange; it upsets the rhythm of the line. A similar variation occurs in line 10:

Oh stay, | three lives | in one | flea spare,

You can find other metrical problems all throughout the poem. Indeed, Donne is famous in English literature for his sloppy

meter. His contemporary, Ben Jonson noted, "Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging." The speaker does not seem particularly concerned with the details of his meter. Much more important is the overall scheme, the broad thematic *structure* of his poem's meter.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Flea" is divided into three 9-line stanzas, each of which has the same rhyme scheme. The first six lines of each stanza contain three rhyming [couplets](#); the final three lines are a single rhyming [tercet](#). The rhyme scheme for each stanza is thus:

AABBCCDDD

Like the poem's meter, the rhyme scheme closely echoes the poem's themes. The paired rhymes of the couplets symbolize the relationship between the speaker and his mistress, while the three-fold rhyme of the tercets echo the relationship between speaker, mistress, and the flea (while also referencing Christian symbols and rituals, like the Holy Trinity and the Eucharist).

In considering the form of the poem and the way it echoes the speaker's argument, it's perhaps best to read the meter and the rhyme together. For instance, the rhyming couplets might symbolize the closeness, the intimacy, between speaker and mistress, while the divergent *meters* in each line of the couplet (pentameter vs. tetrameter) marks the distance between them.

Like the poem's meter, its rhymes are casual, even sloppy. The speaker often uses weak rhymes, like "this" and "is" (which appears in lines 1-2 and 12-13). He also uses [slant rhyme](#), in the rhyme on "spare" and "are," in lines 10-11. In both its meter and its rhyme, then, the poem doesn't seem too concerned with the details—and much more interested in the broad, thematic implications of its form.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Flea" is an anonymous lover. Since this speaker is addressing a woman, trying to convince her to give up her virginity, most readers assume that the speaker is male, though it's certainly possible to read the poem otherwise. Given the poem's sometimes obscene or crass jokes, the speaker is also probably young and juvenile. It feels, at times, that the speaker is a kind of adolescent class-clown: more interested in acting out and amusing his friends with his wit and obscenity than in actually seducing someone.

Yet underneath the speaker's bluster and bravado, there are suggestions of a more serious set of concerns. The speaker, for instance, makes a number of sophisticated references to Christian religious doctrines and traditions. For instance, when the speaker notes in line 10 that there are "three lives in one flea" he seems to be referring to the Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. He also carefully adapts his poem's

form so that it echoes those theological references: the rhyming [tercet](#) that closes each [stanza](#) might be taken as another glancing allusion to the Trinity. The speaker is not simply an adolescent, juvenile figure: he is also someone who has thought seriously about his culture's beliefs—and is willing to challenge them.



SETTING

"The Flea" doesn't give its readers much explicit information about its setting. In the poem, the speaker directly addresses his mistress, trying to convince her to sleep with him. From this, it is reasonable to assume that "The Flea" is part of a larger conversation. There is history between the speaker and his mistress: he has tried before, and failed before, to convince her to sleep with him. In this sense, the poem takes place in the context of this relationship.

More broadly, it's set in the context of the social norms and taboos surrounding sexuality in Renaissance England. In this time period, women were strongly pressured to preserve their virginity until marriage; men felt no corresponding pressure. "The Flea" acknowledges this broader setting in a number of ways: the speaker, for instance, evidently does not worry that *his* honor will be damaged by having sex before marriage. Furthermore, he argues against the idea that virginity is important and that it should be preserved. In this sense, the forces that constrain women's sexuality haunt the poem and form its implicit back-drop.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Flea" was likely written in the 1590s, during an explosion of love poetry. Following the publication of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* in 1590—a [sonnet](#) sequence focusing on the unreciprocated love between a male figure (Astrophil) and his beloved (Stella)—similar sonnet sequences became very popular. Several dozen were published in the following years. Love poetry became the most prestigious and exciting kind of poetry for English poets to write. And poets competed with each other to develop more elaborate, more beautiful ways of expressing their love.

"The Flea" arguably emerges from exhaustion—or exasperation—with this kind of love poetry. It is a love poem, a poem of seduction. But it uses an intentionally grotesque [conceit](#) to make its case. (In doing so, it draws on a tradition of "flea" poems that stretch back to the Roman poet Ovid). It is almost as though the speaker is making fun of other poets, with their overly sincere, elaborate love poems. He is satirizing their work, pointing out how silly and strange it sounds by producing a poem which is itself self-consciously silly and strange.

However, the poem is not simply satire. Donne is a skilled and serious poet: even at his most playful, he is capable of infusing his poems with religious and intellectual complexity. Because of the poem's intellectual complexity and its jaded, satirical relationship with earlier love poems, "The Flea" is often counted as an early example of "metaphysical poetry," a highly artificial, witty, and self-conscious genre of poetry that developed in the 17th century. Like "The Flea" many metaphysical poems are marked by elaborate conceits and strange metaphors—metaphors that test the reader's credulity and taste.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Flea" was written during a relatively peaceful decade in English history. In 1589, Queen Elizabeth defeated the Spanish Armada, securing her country from the threat of foreign invasion. She was at the height of her power in the decade that followed—though she was unmarried and therefore had no direct heir, a circumstance that caused considerable political anxiety. However, Elizabeth's power and her status as an unmarried woman were closely linked together. Indeed, she often used her marital status as a way to license her position as the female ruler of a very patriarchal culture.

Virginity thus occupied an ambiguous position in English culture during the 1590s: it was a source of anxiety and, at the same time, a source of political power. In some ways, it was an obsession for the culture—which makes the speaker's argument in "The Flea" all the more perverse and playful. He argues that virginity is unimportant, inconsequential at a moment in English political history when virginity was arguably at its *most* important: not simply as a religious or familial matter, but as something integral to the sovereign's identity and her strategies for maintaining control.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- ["The Flea" Out Loud](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ef-kn3fvJu0) — A dramatic reading of the poem, complete with costumes. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ef-kn3fvJu0>)
- [A Close Reading of "The Flea"](https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/a-close-reading-of-the-flea) — Literary critic and poet Aviva Dautch close reads "The Flea" for the British Library. (<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/a-close-reading-of-the-flea>)
- [Biography of John Donne](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne) — A detailed biography of Donne, with a close attention to the development of his poetry, from the Poetry Foundation. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne>)
- [A Brief Guide to the Metaphysical Poets](#) — A brief guide to the group of 17th century poets known as the

"metaphysicals"—among whom Donne was a leading figure. (<https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-metaphysical-poets>)

- [John Donne and Metaphysical Poetry](#) — Michael Donkor explains why Donne is often counted among the metaphysical poets. (<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/john-donne-and-metaphysical-poetry>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- [A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning](#)
- [Death, be not proud](#)
- [The Good-Morrow](#)
- [The Sun Rising](#)
- [To His Mistress Going to Bed](#)



HOW TO CITE

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