

The Striving of a Poet-Preacher
Literary and Spiritual Tension in the Holy Sonnets of John Donne

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Abstract

During the Elizabethan era, England experienced religious turmoil that ripped apart its people and saw repercussions in every area of its society. John Donne lived, wrote, and preached during this tumultuous period, and his writing directly reflects the tension of the times. More so than historical commentary however, his poetry, and his Holy Sonnets in particular, bears witness to the far greater battle waging itself within Donne. Within a study of Donne's life, both professional and personal, and a parallel study of his works in light of the context of his life, a sense of overwhelming tension becomes apparent. The Holy Sonnets contain the clearest and most precise images of this tension between Donne's flesh and spirit.

The Striving of a Poet-Preacher

Literary and Spiritual Tension in the Holy Sonnets of John Donne

Within the realm of Elizabethan literature and the dawning era of metaphysical works and men, one unique figure stands who eludes any simplistic explanation of his life and his works. John Donne has been called many things, but has rarely been properly described in one word or idea. David Edwards's recent biography has titled him a man of "Flesh and Spirit." Horace Eaton calls him a figure of "extraordinary variety—a scholar of civil and canon law, a wit, a poet, a preacher" (51). Donne's work does not rest in one theme or one form, but spans his entire life and moves from his most sexual poetry to his lengthy volumes of sermons. Yet, as Eaton remarks, "John Donne remains a figure in English literature because of these fifty odd little poems" (52). He refers here to Donne's incredibly well known *Songs and Sonnets*, which contain his most anthologized works. William Giraldi describes these works by saying they are "fraught with contradiction and confusion" (32). This description is often ascribed to the whole of Donne's works, but more specifically to his 19 Holy Sonnets. The entirety of tone in Donne's works—from the erotic poetry to the highest sermons—can be condensed to these 19 sonnets, written at an intensely personal time of questioning and growth in Donne's life. R. V. Young identifies these sonnets as "an expression of the final crisis in the poet's conversion from Catholic recusancy to a Calvinist orientation consistent with Anglican orthodoxy" (375). Yet perhaps more accurate than these labels built on strict religious concepts is the idea that Donne's sonnets are the intimate struggles of a man with his God. The tense themes and language echo the tension Donne felt throughout his life, both within the realm of his religion and outside it as well. Of Donne Edwards remarks, "there were different periods

in his life, and within any period, perhaps within any day, there were different moods. He often watched himself, and he saw not a simple character but a whole little world, divided by civil war" (19). Donne's life and works show a distinct internal struggle, and this struggle is no more clearly seen than in his Holy Sonnets. The tension found within Donne's Holy Sonnets is a direct result of the religious climate in England during his life, his own life story and choice to become a preacher, and the constant pull he felt between his flesh and his spirit.

England's History and Donne's Heritage

John Donne was born in the midst of probably the largest religious upheaval in England's history. He was born to a Catholic family after Henry VIII had moved the country into Protestantism.¹ By the time Donne was born, the level of pressure to conform to Anglicanism had been well-established. Loyal Catholics were struggling simply to maintain anonymity and pay the appropriate fines. The time was one of subtle rebellion against the shift in state religion, with the more outright factions receiving harsher punishments.

Donne's family on his mother's side has a particularly martyr-filled history of Catholics willing to literally die for their religion. The most famous martyr of his family, and perhaps of the time, was Sir Thomas More, the author of *Utopia* and Donne's great-granduncle.² Donne certainly grew up in the shadow of his famous relative, particularly since More was hardly the last of Donne's ancestors to be persecuted for Catholicism. Another of Donne's relatives, his great-uncle, saw great success as both a lawyer and a publisher under the reign of Queen Mary, even putting out a new edition of Thomas More's writings. But with the ascension of Elizabeth to the English throne, he was exiled

and never returned to England. Donne's grandparents, John and Joan Heywood, were exiled as well. Heywood had been a target of Henry VIII and spent several years imprisoned in the Tower of London. Edwards asserts that Heywood had actually been "told that he was to be dragged through the streets to execution as a traitor, and fastened to a wicker hurdle for this grim purpose before being reprieved ... when Elizabeth I made England officially Protestant, John Heywood fled abroad" (47). Donne's mother grew up not knowing her own father, and she was fiercely dedicated to her family's Roman Catholic heritage as a result.

While Donne grew up hearing the various woes and horrors his family had faced over the last few generations, he was struck by none quite so personally as the fate of his own brother Henry. Henry was found to be harboring a Catholic priest in his quarters and, under the duress of torture, says Edwards, he admitted to having confessed his sins to him. The priest adamantly denied his own involvement, but was disemboweled and hanged two years later. Henry was sentenced to prison, and there he died from one of the many diseases haunting those cells (48). Whether or not Donne ever maintained any true passion for Catholicism is unknown, but it is clear that at this point he made a definite move away from his family's religion, saying later that he no longer wished to "bind [his] conscience to any local religion" (qtd. in Edwards 48). The faith his family had vigorously clung to would not be the one for Donne.

Donne's adolescence, both preceding and following the death of his brother, was a time that saw him withdrawing from staunch loyalty to Catholicism and venturing out in his own way. He attended both Oxford and Cambridge for three years, but never received a degree from either institution. He withdrew to avoid having to take the Oath of

Supremacy, but LeComte remarks that such a shift is understandable given Donne's penchant for knowledge and indecisiveness about his career as well as his "characteristic restlessness" (18). Even at a young age while seeking a wide array of knowledge, Donne experienced a mounting level of tension in his life.

Also during this time Donne began to write. LeComte asserts that quite a few of his *Songs and Sonnets* were being passed around amongst his friends, as well as his satires and elegies, though Donne did not take the thought of a writing career seriously (19). Yet the choice of a career did hang over his head more and more heavily the older he became. He basically had three choices of career path; he could leave England and become a Catholic priest, study medicine like others in his family before him, or take on the law. For Donne, the spirit of knowledge and desire to remain free pointed him in the direction of law, the most "non-committal" (20) of the three options. He studied quite fervently for two years, but his endeavors were cut short by the death of his brother. This event severed for Donne his lackadaisical spirit towards the law, as well as that towards Catholicism. Yet while he spurned his family's religion, he did not fully adhere to Protestantism. His transition was to be long and arduous while he wrestled with the pull between the spiritual and temporal in almost every sense, but especially through his writing.

The Writing of the Holy Sonnets

A proper understanding and study of the Holy Sonnets is only done with a clear comprehension of the context in which they were written. They form an important link to an understanding of Donne's secular life and his spiritual one. They specifically coincide chronologically as well as thematically with the time directly following his marriage,

when he was struggling financially, but before he took orders and became a preacher. His writing had left the blatantly erotic forms it had taken in his earlier years, and the Holy Sonnets are some of his most personal, intimate pieces that show how deep his spiritual struggle really went. Yet, as Harold Bloom declares in his collection of English poetry, Donne can sometimes seem as two separate poets through his secular and devotional work, but it is his profound wit throughout every piece that ties them all back to the same author (138). Perhaps it is best to say that the Holy Sonnets were born out of some of the quietest times in Donne's life on the surface, yet also the most turbulent times in his life personally and spiritually. The beginning of this time occurred with his break from the Catholic Church. There is a remarkable length of time between this separation and his more obvious move towards Protestantism as a preacher.

Donne's break from Catholicism led to an ultimate time of questioning of religion and his life in general, but not before he spent time in a truly apathetic mindset in regards to spirituality. Edwards indicates that "he conformed to the government's religion outwardly" (48), perhaps solely to avoid persecution. In 1594 he seems to have disappeared from the annals of history for a time. He withdrew from his studies of the law with only one course remaining before he would have been allowed to enter the profession. Later, some of his writings from these few lost years surfaced, but have been regarded as writing that is suitable for male readers only. Evidently though, as Edwards points out, he needed money and so reappeared when he joined a naval expedition that took him to the seas in 1596-97 (Edwards 50, Dickson 397). His writing during this time, both in verses and letters, indicates he was literally searching, but for what he did not know (LeComte 28, Edwards 51). After traveling to the colonies, as well as areas of

South America, Donne was relieved to return to England. He knew now that his heart preferred the art of love to the glories of battle, as he says, “Long voyages are long consumptions / And ships are carts for executions” (qtd. in Edwards 52). He was weary of his travels and his underlying search for some purpose and answers to his bothersome religious questions. This same exhausted spirit is also seen in the Holy Sonnets. LeComte writes of this time of Donne’s life that he was “a rather old young man...The flesh was weary, alas, and he had read all the books. He was neither a Catholic nor a Protestant, nor had he found a true woman, or a career” (37). He thus returned to England, having writing as his only valuable skill and his only remaining course of employment.

Donne’s poetic journey, through all of the *Songs and Sonnets* as well as the Holy Sonnets, mirrors his spiritual journey. His earliest poems are his love poems, and most are intensely sensual while some are blatantly erotic. He communicates his lack of inhibition and his insatiable desire to fulfill his flesh in such poems as “The Flea” and “Elegy XX: To His Mistress Going to Bed.” Yet the transition from poems such as these to his Holy Sonnets does not bring with it a change in tone, or at some points even a change in language. Donne’s passion does not wane with a change in topic or theme. Instead the passion and desire he felt for fleshly things shifted to an ardent passion and desire for God and salvation. But in the midst of this intensely personal journey as a writer and poet, Donne still had to seek a means of livelihood.

Due to the corrupt intertwining of the Church of England and politics, Donne was pushed into closer conformity with Anglicanism, though he had yet to grapple with the spiritual issues related to such a shift. His only hope for success in a career lay in finding a patron at court, and for that patron he must be a writer. Yet Donne had very little

published work to his name, and what had been published had received heavy handed criticism. So Donne was forced to take whatever work he could, and thus found himself employed in several less than desirable positions. His ultimate goal was to become a writer for politicians, dealing with major issues of the time, which chiefly involved the establishment of the state religion. So he was willing to tie himself to anyone who might get him closer to court.

One of Donne's first patrons who showed political promise was Sir Robert Drury, an ambitious man who had his sights set on King James' court as well. But Drury was never given a political position, and by extension neither was Donne. Instead Donne became the private poet for Drury and his wife after the tragic death of their only daughter, Elizabeth. Her parents wanted lines written that were traditionally befitting the most glorious of figures, yet Donne wrote them for a fourteen year old girl who was daughter to a mid-level aristocrat. While many of his lines were beautiful in form, the simple fact that Donne wrote thousands of them for an unknown girl in his two Anniversaries and his Funeral Elegy was condemned by his peers, particularly Ben Jonson, who told Donne that such phrases and flatteries as he had used to describe the young girl would only be truly appropriate when writing of the Virgin Mary (Edwards 86). Donne had sunk quite low in his search for satisfaction in his writing career, but he was to sink even further and encounter the dark sins of those around him.

Perhaps the blackest blemish on Donne's early career is his association and patronage of Robert Carr. Donne was commissioned to write a poem for the man's wedding; however, the circumstances surrounding the wedding made Donne at least hesitant, if not "very reluctant, and slow to obey" (Edwards 87). Carr at the time was the

lover of King James, but was bisexual. He had fallen in love with a married woman in James' court, and wanted desperately to marry her. James, fully intending to keep his lover happy, facilitated the divorce of the woman. In doing so James sparked a fiery storm between the archbishops of the church. Some agreed with James that, since the woman had violated the marriage through her relationship with Carr, it should be ended. Others held more tightly to the covenant and wanted the marriage to remain intact. But James' desires won out and the divorce was approved. Carr married his divorcee, and James kept his lover happy. In the midst of this repulsive mess, Donne, whom Carr had paid to keep his pen on reserve, begrudgingly wrote a poem for the marriage celebration. After such humiliating jobs, and in the midst of his own spiritual time of growth, Donne again considered the Church for his career, but he had seen into the dark depths of truly sinful lives and emphasizes this darkness in the Holy Sonnets.

Also during this time Donne began to write to work through his spiritual struggles. It was during this time that he produced the Holy Sonnets, as well as several long prose works dealing with various issues. The first of these works was a book entitled *Bianthanatos*, and in it Donne questions the sinfulness of suicide in every circumstance. Edwards remarks that the work was really "one long muddle, showing that its author did not know what he really thought" (74). Still it does show Donne's desire to work through some rather serious spiritual issues. The writing of *Bianthanatos*, whose title is a Greek phrase meaning 'violent death,' was partially due to Donne's lack of success in a career, as well as his detachment from both Catholicism and Protestantism. As Edwards writes, Donne later admitted that his thoughts of suicide had been personal but that he could

never fully justify the action and so never committed it (75). This issue was but one spiritual question Donne asked himself during this period of his life.

Another work Donne published during this time was his *Pseudo-Martyr*. This work in particular caught the attention of King James and prompted him to push Donne towards a career in the Church even though Donne “pleaded unworthiness and continued to hope for a political job” (Edwards 82). While *Pseudo-Martyr* had some limited success, its structure and poor argumentation still shows the confusion in Donne’s mind. The work endeavors to answer the question of authority in the church raised by the Oath of Supremacy. Donne realized that his arguments could hardly answer the question, but he does argue against the Catholic Church quite ardently, showing the dramatic shift from earlier in his life when he withdrew from both Oxford and Cambridge to avoid taking this same Oath. Donne’s argument rests on the right given to the crown to demand such an oath from its subjects. This point in particular caught James’ interest, but Donne was still unwilling to take on the Church as his profession.

Donne’s final publication before his ordination in 1615 is his *Essays in Divinity* which, though dry and dull, shows a growing emphasis in Donne’s beliefs in the supremacy of Christ and His sacrifice over all division in the Christian religion. This theme was to remain chief throughout the rest of his writings during his life, especially in his sermons. Edwards calls this a “book designed to sort out the ideas he had gained from his religious meditations and theological studies over the years,” yet at this time it is apparent that “his mind was still considerably confused” (93). The emphasis on the supremacy of Christ and the cross was far more important to Donne than the divisions between Catholicism and Protestantism. His desire to see unity was extraordinary given

the time as well as his background. Out of his meditations and struggles rose this firm foundation upon which his future poetry and sermons were decisively planted. Yet Donne still felt his humanity so closely that he wrote in the *Essays*, “Thou hast given me a desire of knowledge, and some means to it, and some possession of it; and I have arm’d myself with thy weapons against thee. Yet, O God, have mercy upon me...” (qtd. in Edwards 97). With this state of mind, being fully aware of his own humanity and his struggle to seek after God, Donne was ordained on January 23, 1615.

Between the years of 1608-1609 Donne penned his nineteen Holy Sonnets. These pieces represent “the most disturbed and anxious years” (Ruf n.pag.) of Donne’s life. They show his movement from fleshly passions to spiritual ones, and offer an intensely intimate perspective on Donne’s struggle. Yet the sonnets hardly proved a complete picture of Donne’s struggles, nor do they offer any decisive conclusion. Instead as Ruf points out, “Donne gives us nineteen slices, each highly terse: regret over past, false griefs, pleading for forgiveness, asking God for the grace to repent, bravado-tinged confidence concerning death, and several more” (n.pag.). These slices are an exploration of Donne’s seeking of answers, and they are most definitely the outcries of a man haunted by his sin. Edwards describes this time of Donne’s life and how these sonnets resulted:

Donne had been praying that God would act to reveal his love by his power. He had been genuinely and unwillingly disturbed, filled with anxiety and fear, brought face to face with death, made to picture himself being ultimately rejected by God as well as by his employers on earth. He had been to hell and back—and by the end of that crisis, he believed he

had not always been talking to himself: in his spiritual journey...love had been given to him and the seeker had been found. (199)

The Holy Sonnets are Donne's private efforts at conveying for himself his spiritual thoughts, fears, and hopes. One thing they are not intended to do is instruct theologically. Instead the sonnets show the spiritual journey and growth of Donne through these years that culminated in his taking orders and becoming a preacher. Yet the sonnets themselves do not contain this conclusion but remain ultimately unresolved in their tension.

One chief aspect of the Holy Sonnets is their tendency to explore, but not to conclude to the satisfaction of the reader. Critics agree that the sonnets do not represent Donne's thoughts and beliefs at the end of his life, after years of preaching and refining his own doctrines, but instead explore the questions he was seeking answers to much earlier in his life. Beaston notes that "most readers expect the poems of the Anglican priest...to progress toward spiritual health, faith, and a comforting sense of God's abiding presence, even though they frequently begin with a speaker in some spiritual distress" (n.pag.), while Grant calls the sonnets Donne's "effort to define himself" which was "most strenuous and most fiercely impassioned" (601). Donne sought definition, but his sonnets do not reveal his finding it. Instead, "the Holy Sonnets explore the paradoxical nature of the Christian's earthly life" (Wall 191) and "embody the sharp duality of the metaphysical poet's personality and the dilemma of existence in decay" (Gibaldi 32). Obviously then the seeking aspect of the sonnets is clearly seen by scholars and critics. John Stachniewski contributes this lack of finality to Donne's history in the Catholic Church; since the Catholic belief system offered little resolution on the matter of salvation, Donne's religious poems mirror that same confusion (677). Wall however

believes that no resolution is necessary, but that the poems simply move toward acceptance without complete resolution (203). Either way though, both critics agree that the focus of the work is not on coming to a conclusion, but simply on seeking one out. Indeed, the duality of the seeking and apparent lack of finding is a significant aspect of the sonnets that resounds mightily with readers. Donne felt this duality throughout his own life and pours it out in these sonnets; Giraldi asserts, "Affection and hatred, creation and destruction, irreverence and subjugation, flesh and spirit: All exist in one breath for Donne; all are products of the same damaged heart and magisterial mind" (33). Yet due to their exploratory nature, the sonnets contain neither a logical flow of argumentation nor a hard and fast conclusion. C.S. Lewis is incredibly critical of this aspect of Donne's writing. He writes that the violent moving from one dramatic situation to the next "develops in unexpected and even tormented fashion" (469). What Lewis's judgment fails to take into account however is that this same torment in reaching any sort of conclusion mirrors the spiritual journey of Donne. Therefore, a straightforward and well-defined conclusion can hardly be expected. Instead they should be seen just as they are: a set of heartfelt musings by a man who would be called to preach, but had not yet reached that point in his life.

Another important aspect of the writing of the Holy Sonnets is that they are private, introspective pieces that are not intended to instruct theologically. This aspect goes hand in hand with their being exploratory in nature. Some attempts have been made to categorize the theology of the sonnets, but such an action is nearly impossible due to the simple fact that their end points offer no decisive conclusions regarding doctrine but are, as Morris puts it, "very formal and very private as they depict the drama of a

religious individual working through a formal exercise in very personal ways. The poems are a record of a soul's quest to demonstrate and experience faith" (n.pag.). Wall succinctly points toward the tonal movement in the poems as being movement "not toward resolution but toward acceptance of the problem" (203). For the purposes of these sonnets the tone is a lyric one which shifts and moves the way an inner voice might that is speaking to itself, not as a voice speaking to an external audience or circumstance (Ruf n.pag.). And as a lyric voice, it seeks not to instruct in any particular theological matter or set of doctrines, but is an emotionally based "expression of Christian experience" (Young 383). Young also remarks that any attempt to categorize and define any theology within the sonnets "is likely to flatten out the wit and daring that are characteristic of Donne's poetry" (384). Donne never wrote the Holy Sonnets for any given audience. They were circulated amongst his friends long before catching the eye of any publisher (387), and were written for the poet, not for a reader. As such they cannot and do not offer any succinct or sound theological teaching, but contain the overflow of Donne's own tense reasoning about spiritual matters.

This lack of sound theological or doctrinal content within the sonnets is hardly unexpected, especially considering how Donne's preaching career was first highly controlled by King James. Though Donne had gained a certain level of spiritual maturity, which led him to be ordained, he was still very much enticed by political success. The beginning of his career as a preacher really saw him as something of a diplomat, used by James to keep a close eye on the undertone of religious issues within politics. His early preaching matches his role and he regularly emphasized the crown as the head of the Church over the pope in Rome. Yet while some scholars have delivered a harsh verdict

on Donne's career as a preacher, calling him a fraud and a pawn of James' (Edwards 98), the evidence points both to his practical need for a vocation for financial reasons as well as his own conviction that God had clearly called him to preach. As his financial burdens were gradually lifted, Donne was free to move out from under the thumb of political pressure and into a hard devotion to preaching Scripture courageously and without deviation. He quickly became dedicated to his new profession and was quite skilled at it within a short period of time, "as if he all his life he had been preparing for the pulpit" (Edwards 99). He often memorized his sermons as wholes in order to recreate them for the printer. He threw himself into his study of Scripture, spending hours in intense meditation and prayer on specific passages and, Edwards suggests, formulating his sermons around both the truths he found as well as a strong, logical structure that his listeners of lawyers and politicians could not argue against (98-9). Donne became passionate about his public work as a preacher just as he had been in his private life as a writer.

Within a few years of his ordination, Donne bore hardly any similarities to the younger man who had so desperately sought the adulations of men in James' court. This change might be in small part due to the passing of his wife, Anne in 1617 (Dickson 397). After her death he no longer concerned himself as heavily with financial security or with the praise of men. His sermons in the few years following her death show a departure from his discussion of politically tainted messages to those dealing more singularly with Christ's life and teachings. His passionate and ardent style however, remained the same as it had always been, even in his poetry. Edwards writes that "Dr. Donne the preacher had Jack Donne the poet inside him and he could not stop being

witty” (118), even in his sermons. He used his mind as skillfully as ever, both in the construction of his sermons as well as in the small witticisms he frequently used in his preaching and in his private communications. Before being installed as Dean of St. Paul’s in 1621, the position he would hold until his death, Donne was the “Reader in Divinity” in Lincoln’s Inn from 1616-1621. His sermons from this time, of which about twenty have survived, show an especially heavy emphasis on “sin, its power, its persistence, and its guilt” (Edwards 119). Donne obviously had yet to relinquish the heaviness he felt over the sinful lifestyle he had held as a young adult. Edwards remarks that “[h]e had known what it is to want money, to want a woman, to want a job, and he was not so hypocritical as to deny it—but he had also wanted God” (120), and he was now ardently seeking Him in every way he knew how.

Within a few years of becoming the Dean of St. Paul’s, Donne contracted a severe illness that brought him close to the brink of death. He was bedridden for almost a year between 1623-24. During that time he wrote his *Devotion upon Emergent Occasions*, a collection of meditations that show most clearly the result of Donne’s time of intense religious study and preaching. The emphasis he places on various issues regarding the Church reveals his truest convictions and beliefs. And while he does not offer conclusions or complex doctrines to answer the religious questions of his time, he does expose the innermost workings of his heart. At times he seems even to be preaching to himself as he faces what he thought was his time of death. Edwards summarizes the content of the *Devotions* saying they “include a meditation which is as beautiful as anything in his sermons and which is a reminder of other features to be found also in them: a vision of human unity in life and death, pride in the Catholic [universal] Church

of Christ, a love of learning in an international fellowship” (129). These meditations differ from the tone of his sermons in their personal, intimate nature, and resemble his Holy Sonnets of almost fifteen years before more than any of his other, more recent writings. They also contain Donne's most famous work of prose, a piece that inspired Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Yet few readers may realize the context of Donne's famous lines; he references the fellowship of man in relation to unity in the Church—his sole desire, as he lay on what he thought would be his death bed, was to gain a fuller realization of the ties mankind shares, being all God's creations:

And when she [the Church] buries a man, that action concerns me; All
mankind is of one Author, and is one volume...No Man is an Island, entire
unto itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the mainland; if
a Clod be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a
Promontory were, as well as if a Manor of thy friend's, or of thine were;
Any Man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And
therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.

(108-9)

This particular meditation has become one of Donne's most oft-quoted pieces, second only to a few of his *Songs and Sonnets*, including the Holy Sonnets. Although Donne wrote this piece several years before his actual death, these were truly the conclusions of his life. The text clearly indicates how deeply Donne felt his ties to humanity, as well as his ties to the universal Church. Donne's quest for answers and the tension he felt in various ways throughout his entire life was never fully resolved. His desire was to see unity, both in the lives outside of himself, and in his own life. He wanted to see

Christianity as a whole, not divided so maliciously into Catholics and Protestants. In a similar manner, he wanted to live fully in the Spirit while still in the flesh of the world. Neither resolution ever came for Donne, but his work throughout his entire life shows his constant struggle to find peace between his flesh and his God.

For the purposes of understanding Donne's life, the Holy Sonnets provide an important link in his history that shows his movement toward a more serious and contemplative level of spiritual thought, which then culminated in his taking orders a few years later. It was during this time, Grant notes, that Donne was struggling financially and felt the weight of providing for his family more acutely than during any other time (558). McIntosh calls the Holy Sonnets the "grave yet passionate reflections of Donne's own encounters with the God who called him to be a preacher" at the critical time of exploration that preludes his decision to follow that calling (n.pag.). This stage in his life is also important considering he had yet to fully align himself with the Anglican Church in any manner other than appearance. He had long since cut himself off from his Catholic roots, but had yet to fully embrace the Protestant style of faith and, as Young states, this put his conscience in a state of unrest as he wrote the sonnets (390). This confusion is clear throughout the sonnets, both in tone and in theme. The Holy Sonnets, when studied within the context of the poet's life and decisions, reveal an utterly intimate struggle between Donne and God, as Donne used his poetry to reflect the spiritual journey he was undertaking.

Thematic Tension in the Holy Sonnets

The nineteen Holy Sonnets contain numerous themes, some more obvious and others more subtle. But the chief threads running throughout the sonnets are all tied

together in the striving Donne is making to understand the work through the spiritual tension he feels. Some critics purport the ordering of the sonnets is vital in properly understanding their meaning (Beaston n.pag.). This chronological and ordered approach is usually undertaken when a critic is seeking a reasonable conclusion in the sonnets themselves, without looking at Donne's life. Indeed, taken individually the sonnets provide no resolution. However, for the purposes of a thematic study in keeping with a study of Donne's life, both preceding and following the writing of the sonnets, the sonnets are better studied in light of their common elements and not in any sort of chronological study. Many of the themes within the pieces overlap and repeat in various forms and fashions. And while each individual sonnet has a clear voice and concept, one often finds similar notes in others of the sonnets as well. Chiefly the themes of the Holy Sonnets deal with death, sin and the struggle against the flesh, a desire for grace and the seeking of sanctification, and wonderment at Christ's sacrifice.

Struggle with Death

The opening lines of Sonnet I contain a succinct representation of one of Donne's primary fears: the fast approaching reality of death and a subliminal fear of spiritual death. He writes, "I run to death, and death meets me as fast...death before doth cast / Such terror, and my feeble flesh doth waste / By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh" (3, 6-8). Donne is fully aware of his past sins and how they might affect his eternal security. He fears not only the physical death that all men experience, but the possibility of a spiritual death also weighs heavily on him. Beaston indicates that fear of spiritual death far outweighs his fear of physical death (n.pag.). Donne does not write of this fear as a theological matter but of a deeply emotional and spiritual reality. Giraldi

says of Donne's language that it makes it clear that "[h]is fear of the Lord is no metaphorical fancy; it is alive and pumping in his every line, in his very blood" (33). The theological issue of security of salvation is not being questioned or at all debated in this sonnet. Instead, Donne's intense fears indicate how deeply he felt the pull between the sin of his flesh and his desire to see God.

Sonnet IV also contains a strong theme of how Donne struggled with spiritual death. In dealing with physical illness, he is again confronted with spiritual death and he exclaims, "Oh my black soul! now thou art summoned / By sickness, death's herald, and champion" (1-2). Donne also saw physical sickness as a stark reminder of his own spiritual sickness and his failings in the flesh. Just as physical death comes through physical illness, so did his sin remind him of spiritual illness that might lead him to spiritual death. Giraldi goes so far to say that, for Donne, "his body's ill health corresponds to his soul's certain detachment from God's grace" (33). Donne references his soul again later in the sonnet, calling it a traitor and a thief (4, 5). His focus jumps to death as the ultimate consequence for the failings of his soul, indicating the deep feeling with which he contemplates death, both physical and spiritual.

Perhaps one of Donne's most famous sonnets is Sonnet X, which also deals with death but in an entirely different manner than some of his other pieces. This sonnet declares victory over death, drawing a parallel not between death and illness but between death and sleep, which Donne likens to peace and rest. The sonnet begins resoundingly, with the speaker declaring, "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so" (1-2) and ends in a similarly strong fashion with the straightforward exclamation that "Death thou shalt die" (14). Yet this sonnet does not

reference death in relation to spiritual death; it merely confronts any fear one might have of physical death. Still, it does so in keeping with an eternal connotation: "One short sleep past, we wake eternally / And death shall be no more" (13-14). Sonnet X stays within the bounds of one of Donne's favorite themes of death, but offers a glimpse of the voice of the preacher to come with its confident and eternally-minded tone.

Weight of Sin in the Flesh

Another theme closely tied to Donne's struggle with death is his intense awareness of the effects of sin in his flesh. He feels the weight of sin incredibly deeply, and many of his sonnets contain references to this feeling. Sonnet I is one piece that ties the theme of death and sin very closely. Donne fears death because of how weighty he feels his sin is. He writes, "death before doth cast / Such terror, and my feeble flesh doth waste / By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh" (6-8). For Donne, the weight of sin pulls him towards hell, sparking the fear of spiritual death he conveys through the rest of the sonnet. Morris writes that "the dominant note of the sonnets is fear and trembling, born of the poet's full and painful awareness of his own sinfulness, which causes him to doubt that his soul will ever attain heaven" (n.pag.). Donne is strongly aware of how his sin may affect his eternal state, and feels it with intensity in his sonnets.

Sonnet V also contains a distinct theme of Donne's awareness of sin. The verse references the effects of sin in both the flesh and spirit. But instead of just feeling his sin's weightiness, Donne sees his sin leading him to destruction, both physical and spiritual:

I am a little world made cunningly
Of elements, and an angelic sprite,

But black sin hath betrayed to endless night
 My world's both parts, and, oh, both parts must die.

* * * * *

But oh it must be burnt; alas the fire
 Of lust and envy have burnt it heretofore,
 And made it fouler. (1-4, 10-12)

Donne references here how his sin has caused tension between his flesh and spirit. His elements are tied irrevocably together, and when he sins in the flesh, that sin affects his spirit. Edwards claims of this sonnet that Donne "knew that the elements in his body, which the Creator had made cunningly, could drag body and soul down to endless night" (21). Donne has a full awareness of his sin, and, as Grant remarks, it is this awareness that brings with it a strong conviction as to the unworthiness of man in this sonnet in particular, and throughout the others as well (554). He has no illusions as to what he deserves because of this sin, and his awareness prompts his fears of death.

One other sonnet particularly references the emphasis Donne placed on his own sin and sense of being condemned by his flesh. Sonnet XI directly follows Sonnet X and echoes the speaker's strong tone of conviction. Here though the speaker addresses the Jews who crucified Christ and commands them saying, "pierce my side / Buffet, and scoff, scourge, and crucify me / For I have sinned, and sinned" (1-3). Morris points out that "the repetition of 'and sinned' reinforces the poet's sense of being damned, separated from God, and unworthy of God's grace" (n.pag.). Even more striking than Donne's realizations about sin in the sonnet is his conviction that he deserves the punishment Christ endured, so much so that he wants to die for his own sin in order to keep Christ

from it (4). Donne juxtaposes Christ with himself, saying that, though Christ died, he was sinless, and though full of sin, Donne continues to live: "but I / Crucify him daily, being now glorified" (8-9). Though the tone of this sonnet has shifted from the previous sonnets dealing with the weight of sin in his flesh, in it Donne is still convinced of his own hopelessness and condemnation.

Desire for Grace and Belonging

Many of the aspects of Donne's sonnets are built upon one another, including the theme of the speaker's desire for God's grace and a sense of belonging. Out of the desperation of the speaker's awareness of the weight of sin on both the flesh and the spirit comes a desire to be saved by the grace of God. Sonnet II contains just such a plea from the speaker to God:

Except thou rise and for thine own work fight,
Oh shall I soon despair, when I do see
That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not choose me,
And Satan hates me, but is loth to lose me. (11-14)

The speaker is perfectly aware of his need for salvation, but is also entirely incapable of moving toward it himself. Instead he is entirely dependent on the grace of God for his restitution and is desperate in his pleas. Morris explains that "time and again he finds himself at God's mercy, for he can do little more than pray and hope, ever conscious that sin has betrayed both his body and his soul" (n.pag.). This is yet another example of the tension in Donne's life coming through in his writing. Donne was overwhelmingly aware of his sin and his inability to do anything about it, which perhaps explains his hesitancy

in taking orders and becoming a preacher. Donne felt helplessly bound by his sin, held tight by Satan, but desiring only God.

Another aspect of this desire for salvation comes in Sonnet VII, when the speaker voices his need to repent, but does not know how. He says, "teach me how to repent; for that's as good / As if thou hadst sealed my pardon, with thy blood" (13-14). Donne simply wants the smallest hint at how to approach God and give some sort of penitence for his sins. If he could only have that, the speaker implies, it would be just as good as a full pardon. Donne desires to make an effort at seeking God, but has no idea how to go about it. He is simply desperate to pull out of his own sin and move closer to God, but still realizes that he has no ability to do so. Therefore, he must be taught by God what to do in order to make any progress.

Seeking Sanctification

Perhaps the most well-known piece of Donne's, prose or verse, secular or divine, is his Holy Sonnet XIV. This piece alone contains the epitome of the tension Donne felt throughout his life between his flesh and spirit. It builds upon knowledge of sin in the flesh and the desire for grace to an outright cry for salvation and sanctification through whatever means God deems necessary.

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like usurped town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,

Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captive, and proves weak or untrue,
Yet dearly 'I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy,
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me. (1-14)

Donne's desire is to receive redemption from God, no matter the process. Yet the tension within this particular sonnet is almost palpable, as is the struggle Donne faces. He recognizes that it is only through the actions of God, whether loving or violent, that he may gain sanctification from his sins. Elizabeth Tebeux writes that Donne "intentionally makes readers feel insecure about their ability to use rational instrument to articulate spiritual truth or to understand it because he never wants his hearers to forget human limitations" (211). He admits to loving God wholeheartedly, but being at the same tied to the "enemy," who could be either Satan or Donne's own sinful nature. Beaston supports the latter interpretation when he says, "the reader is left with the impression that the anger is really directed at the speaker himself" (n.pag.). This interpretation also supports the overall theme of tension between the flesh and the spirit; Donne is bound to his flesh and his past sins, but his heart belongs to God and his desire is to be given redemption. This desire to be rid of his sin and set free from his captivity is so strong that "he pleads for God to bring violence upon him in order to effect the reconciliation with God that he fervently desires but which he is unable to achieve of his own free will" (Beaston n.pag.).

Craig Payne writes of this sonnet that the “tinker’s object is broken and remade, the town is taken, the love affair is irresistibly consummated, even as the paradox of virtue and passion is glowingly resolved” (n.pag.). Each image speaks to a tense need for resolution. The sonnet points straight to the tension between Donne’s warring desires of the flesh and spirit and his overarching desire to be saved, not only from his sins, but also from the struggle he faces.

Wonder at Christ’s Cross

Deviating slightly from Donne’s seeming obsession with spiritual themes related solely to his own spiritual condition, some of the Holy Sonnets focus far more on God than on Donne, specifically the theme of wonder at Christ’s cross. Grant remarks this focus is present not only in Donne’s sonnets, but in his prose writings as well, including the *Devotion upon Emergent Occasions*. He writes, “a graphic awareness of the contribution of Christ’s blood sacrifice is one of the most distinctive themes of the *Holy Sonnets*, and for Donne, certainly, the cross is always close to the forefront of his awareness” (553), while McIntosh points out that, for Donne, the Christ figure is used “as a source, the very engine of human transformation, and Jesus’ story is for Donne never to be treated as a topic for edification but rather as an existential invitation” (n.pag.). Sonnet XV is one such piece which focuses on the cross. While Donne is still present within the sonnet, the phrasing focuses far more on a certain sense of awe at the sacrifice of Christ and the life of the believer. He writes, “digest / My soul, this wholesome meditation, / How God the Spirit...doth make his temple in thy breast” (1-2, 4). It is with wonderment that God would deign to house His Spirit with Donne that he continues that God “hath deigned to choose thee by adoption / Coheir to’ his glory” (7-8). Within the context of

Donne's life and his other Holy Sonnets, this sense of awe is even more profound. Donne has a full awareness of his sinful state and struggles throughout the sonnets to move past his flesh into unity with Christ. This awareness makes his devotional tone in this sonnet all the more striking. Eaton writes, "it is the love of a complete man, not of an angel" (70) that compels these words. Donne was years away from becoming a preacher and struggled heavily with his sin, yet still pens with awe the closing lines of this sonnet: "Twas much, that man was made like God before / But, that God should be made like man, much more" (13-14).

Sonnet XVI attempts to answer some of the questions raised in Donne's other sonnets as he remarks with wonder on how the sacrifice of Christ provides the atonement necessary for grace to be bestowed upon the lowly sinner:

This Lamb, whose death, with life the world hath blessed,
Was from the world's beginning slain...

* * * * *

Yet such are thy laws, that men argue yet
Whether a man those statues can fulfill;
None doth, but thy all-healing grace and Spirit
Revive again what law and letter kill. (5-6, 9-12)

Donne points out in these lines that man cannot keep God's laws and so save himself; he is in desperate need of the redemption which Christ's sacrifice provides. Grant comments on this point as something of a moment of theological teaching when he says, "meditation on the cross and consciousness of man's fallenness as its cause are themselves ineffective if they do not evoke a contritional response" (547). This

movement also defines how far Donne has come from his Catholic roots, since he fully realizes that man's actions are not determinate in salvation, and only the grace of God can provide true sanctification. Grant explains that the proper response to this particular sonnet is contrition and must be "the sort of contrition that throws emphasis on proper experience of sorrow based on love of God rather than the attrition satisfactory to the confessional" (552). This awe of Christ and His sacrifice is perhaps the closest the Holy Sonnets come to containing any sort of resolution. For Donne, at least in the sonnets, any sense of rest, literary or spiritual, can only be found in Christ.

Overwhelming Spiritual Struggle

Yet while there is definite movement through the sonnets from some of Donne's more debilitating fears to his wonder at Christ's sacrifice, the collection ends, remarkably, on a sonnet filled with tension. Sonnet XIX may not carry significance chronologically, but its placement at the end of the set is a reminder of the tension Donne carried throughout his life and the overarching theme uniting all nineteen poems. He speaks of himself when he writes, "contraries meet in one / Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot / A constant habit; that when I would not / I change" (1-4). He goes on to say that when he seeks repentance, he finds he sins, and when he tries to pray, he has nothing to say (5-8). He moves between "flattering speeches" to God (10) and "true fear of his rod" (11). Yet the tension summarized in this sonnet is not confined solely to the writings of Donne, nor is he an exception within spiritual writings. This sonnet in particular bears remarkable resemblance in tone and even language to a particular passage of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. He writes, "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin...For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I

hate...For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (ESV, Rom. 7.14, 15b, 18b-19). Of course, Paul wrote for the purpose of instruction and does conclude this particular topic with teaching to the Church. Donne however has no such purpose and simply concludes his sonnet with lines that summarize well the entire theme of the Holy Sonnets, and perhaps of his life as well: “So my devout fits come and go away / Like a fantastic ague: save that here / Those are my best days, when I shake with fear” (12-14). Donne may have found rest and peace in his wonder at Christ’s sacrifice, but the tension felt throughout his life pervades his sonnets, especially considering the time of their writing. Perhaps then it is quite fitting that the collection as a whole should end on such a note.

Conclusion

For the recreational reader of poetry, John Donne’s works, both secular and divine, will always offer a unique perspective on the inner man and his struggle between flesh and spirit. But for the studious individual the tension runs much deeper. It is not confined to his poetry, but actually occurs chiefly in his life and then overflows into his work. As Courthope summarizes, “he who examines historically the movement of imagination will find in Donne’s subtle analysis and refined paradoxes much that helps to throw light on the contradictions of human nature” (38). The tension between the sins of man and his desire for God do not begin and end with Donne. Instead Donne is merely an acutely specified example of the human condition. Flesh struggles with spirit not only in Donne, but in all mankind. Augustine himself, whose philosophies according to Grant, Donne echoes in his Holy Sonnets (545), said “Thou [God] awakes us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee”

(5). Donne's life and works epitomize this struggle to find rest in God. With an understanding of his life as a whole, the grand scheme of his works, and the Holy Sonnets in their finest details, this struggle is more poignantly revealed and understood.

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Notes

¹When Mary ascended to the throne after the death of Henry VIII, there was a quick rush to move the nation back to its Orthodox roots. In the process, 300 Protestant rebels were executed (LeComte 11). During Donne's early life, an equivalent number of rebelling Catholics were executed under Elizabeth. Elizabeth's reign saw a growing level of begrudging complicity towards the Catholics who remained loyal to Rome. The pressure to conform outwardly is what Elizabeth sought with her enforcement of the Supremacy Act, a law that required every English citizen to pledge allegiance to the crown as the head of the Church, not the pope in Rome (12). Before a man could earn his degree at a university, he had to take the oath of Supremacy and his attendance was required at Sunday Anglican services. The punishment for failing to conform varied on the degree of the rebellion. If one simply refused to attend services or to take the oath of Supremacy, a fine was levied. Donne's mother paid this fine for decades. If one participated in Catholic practices, such as attending or holding a Mass, or participating in confession to a priest, the punishment was imprisonment and, at times, execution (13).

²Thomas More was executed under Henry VIII after refusing to acknowledge the king as head of Church and maintaining his allegiance to Rome (LeComte 5). Commentators recognize a similar wit in Donne that was seen in More, saying also that, "like his great-grandnephew, he had a wit, right up to the end" (LeComte 5).