

## **And to Die is Gain**

Metaphor as a literary device is used to shed light on and understanding of concepts and theories that straightforward words cannot fully capture; it enables the author to paint a more detailed and accessible word picture for the audience. The problem arises in the fact that the metaphor is not the real thing and so, at some point, all metaphors break down. The line of similarity comes to an end and the audience can choose to glare at the differences between the two or embrace the meaning of the picture created, despite its lacking. In John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 14," Donne uses sexual allusions to paint the picture of his relationship and zeal for the Lord. It is not a matter of whether the speaker is literally having sex with God, as the simple words on the page may present, but the meaning behind the words that leads to the understanding of this sonnet – to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Michael Foucault presents the argument of how superiors exert power by means of death and sexuality in his book, *The History of Sexuality*. In a transition of what Foucault calls the symbolics of blood, the power that dominates a person's life has the power to "foster life or to disallow it to the point of death;" however, Foucault notes that "death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most 'private'" (138). Through the transition of power then seeking to mandate life, another shift occurred in history, one from a symbolics of blood to an analytics of sexuality. Under this system, the Church created a mandated discourse on sex through the regulation of confession. Through this discourse, the West became obsessed with knowing "the truth about sex." In this search for truth, Foucault discusses the Freudian principles of pleasure and the death drives. He concludes, "The Faustian pact, whose temptation has been instilled in us by the deployment of sexuality, is now as follows: to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and the sovereignty of sex.

Sex is worth dying for” (156). Amidst this connection to the death drive and the idea of “le petit mort” – the little death, or an orgasm, you literally die to yourself in an orgasm and experience sex for everything it is apart from yourself; you are one with your partner.

The notion of dying to oneself in order to gain truth, power and life is no novel concept. The apostle Paul writes in Philippians 1:21 “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (*ESV*). He further explains the concept of dying to self and sin in a spiritual sense in order to gain life and righteousness in Romans 6:11-14 and explains,

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness” (*ESV*).

What Paul depicts here is the image of giving your whole self – soul, mind and body – over to the Lord in order to gain life. Full surrender.

An individual is only meant to die to self once, and in that death, they gain all life through the moment of completely losing self. As presented through Paul, dying to self comes through giving your whole life to Jesus. Once again, the metaphor of marriage given to the Church arises for people to understand relationship with the Lord better. The image of marriage is given in Genesis 2:24: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (*ESV*). Through Foucault’s addition of “the little death” in an orgasm, the couple is dying to oneself through sex to be one. This becoming one in marriage and sex is metaphorical for the individual to understand better what it means to die to oneself as called to do in a relationship with the Lord. Fully knowing God is coming to a moment where the individual completely loses himself or herself in the Presence of the Lord. The reason man and woman become one and are married is to help foster the metaphor further through the notion that

just as Christ only died once for our sins and we died with Him in that death, we now have life and are not meant to die again. The intention for the Church and for the man and woman is to only die one time. The intention is not to die and resurrect and live life as one desires to die again to another (or even back to Christ). The individual is called to die once to their sin nature and join with Christ one time; man and woman are called to die to one self one time in marriage and become one through “the little death” (of what I argue occurs only in the first orgasm for argument and metaphor’s sake).

In his sonnet, Donne relates his hunger and zeal for the Lord through sexual metaphor; he desires to draw so near to God that it would be as if they were having sex and becoming one as man and woman do in marriage to become one. He first describes this sexual encounter through a very physical submission to the Lord. He asks for the Lord to be rougher than He has previously and submits himself to God saying, “That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend/ Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new” (Donne 3-4). His words create the illusion of a man being raped by being overthrown and then made to “bend” over to allow God to break and blow and burn him. The man requests to be taken by the subject in an overpowering way and therefore consents to be fully submitted to a strong and potentially orgasmic encounter where the speaker would die to himself or herself. Similarly, man and woman are given to each other in full submission to experience dying to themselves. In 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, Paul explains the submission of bodies to sexual encounters that is healthy and right for husband and wife so that they may remain both chaste and one. Neither the husband nor the wife has authority over their own body but must submit it to the other. The metaphor Donne creates in lines three and four clearly points to the strongest and most savage of sexual encounters, but the purpose behind the encounter is to die to himself in an attempt to gain more full knowledge of what, or in this

case, who, he is experiencing – in a literal reading and as Foucault would explain, it would be the truth about sex; in the metaphorical sense of what Donne is working to achieve, an orgasmic encounter with the Lord would render him deeper into who the Father is through fully submitting and dying to himself.

Donne continues his metaphor through the thrill of an affair that adds passion and zeal to his pursuit of the Lord. In lines five through ten, Donne illustrates the strain in lovers' relationships that comes from the inability to give oneself wholly to the other due to a betrothal. The speaker compares himself to a town that has been stolen but is due to another, and so because of his ownership by another, he cannot be fully his lover's. Once again, it is not in the mind where the speaker must submit alone but in every part of him, because "Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend, / But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue" (Donne 5-6). The speaker desires more than to give his mind or give his body but to submit everything to the subject of his poem. He even declares that not only is he betrothed to another, but the one who currently holds claim on him is the subject's enemy, further complicating and raising the amount of sexual tension between the speaker and the subject. The moments can never happen so long as the speaker is betrothed. In Romans 7, Paul depicts the spiritual tension of believers as they wrestle with their sin nature: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Romans 7:19-20, *ESV*). The struggle of the early Church and the speaker in "Holy Sonnet 14" is one in the same, the wrestling of who they want to belong to and be one with and the force to which they are currently obliged – the sin nature and the enemy, respectively. Sexual and spiritual tensions are brought into a single existence within Donne's poem so that the audience may more accessibly understand the desire and passion the speaker has towards his

love object, seemingly, God. The presentation of sexual tension exists, but the reason it exists within these lines about betrothal and desire works beyond the metaphor in creating a picture that human feelings can more readily understand.

Just after the turn of Donne's "Holy Sonnet 14," the speaker blatantly illustrates the metaphor as a sexual encounter. In the turn of the poem, the speaker divorces the power he was previously betrothed to and allows for the last three lines to cry for the long and strongly desired encounter to come. Without being taken as a slave to the subject, the speaker "never shall be free" (Donne 13); therefore, the speaker must be taken fully and submissively captive of God to receive the freedom He offers. Foucault describes how the demand of confession imprisoned society to constantly discuss sex but in doing so, created a freedom for society to discuss and discover the truth about sex. The speaker, likewise, explains that unless he becomes fully imprisoned in his search for freedom through sex, they will never have the freedom that will come through the knowledge of the encounter (Foucault 60). These lines that the metaphor follows come from within Romans 6 as Paul calls the audience to be slaves to righteousness: "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life" (*ESV*, Romans 6:22). Line 13 clearly indicates a complete submission of slavery as one succumbs to a sexual encounter and have a little death to self, but with the understanding of why the metaphor is there, the full picture of what Donne is looking to achieve comes to light in dying to self in order to gain eternal life and freedom in the Lord.

It is in the final line of the poem, however, where the fullness of the all three metaphors – the sonnet, man and wife, and dying to Christ – come into collision the best. The speaker of the poem declares that he shall never be chaste unless the subject ravishes, or rapes him, as it has

historically meant (Donne 14). The word chaste contains multiple meanings. While in the sexual sense it means sexually or morally untainted; in a spiritual sense chaste means pure and pure of heart. To desire to be pure for the speaker, as a spiritual man, brings the blessing of seeing God (*ESV*, Mt. 5:8). For the speaker to see God would be the epitome of encounters with the Lord. The marriage metaphor comes back to better explain the strength and understanding of dying to self in an encounter in order to know the truth through pure ravishment in Song of Solomon 4:9 “You have ravished my soul, my sister, my bride; you have ravished my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace” (*KJV*). Song of Solomon is a book that is known to demonstrate the pursuit and relationship between Jesus, the bridegroom, and the Church, the bride. The speaker of Song of Solomon demonstrates how ravishment and seeing their love come together in this verse. Through the Beatitudes and the chastity required to see God, alongside the ravishment that occurs through the opening of the speaker’s eyes to their lover, the speaker of “Holy Sonnet 14” makes sense in asking to be ravished by the subject in order that they may be pure. The metaphor of a man pursuing a woman helps a Biblical audience to understand the bride and bridegroom metaphor of the Bible, to better understand the greatest love story ever told through the entire Bible. The metaphor of sex then in the sonnet helps to connect back to the Biblical illustrations provided by marriage, which takes the reader back to the relationship with God that comes only through dying to oneself, just the one time, as the speaker dies with Jesus.

Although there are clearly sexual encounters illustrated within John Donne’s “Holy Sonnet 14,” the sex in itself has no meaning or purpose because it is a metaphor for an encounter with the Lord. Donne uses the metaphor because it opens up the depth to his longing for the Lord in a strength that goes beyond saying, “I want more of you, Lord.” It creates a picture for the audience to use to empathize with just how badly he wants to know the Lord – to know Him in

the most intimate of ways. If the question ends in simply if sex is occurring in the poem, then the meaning of the poem is lost unto the audience, and the beauty of really dying to oneself in order to inherit truth and encounter the Lord short changes itself for pure erotica.

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