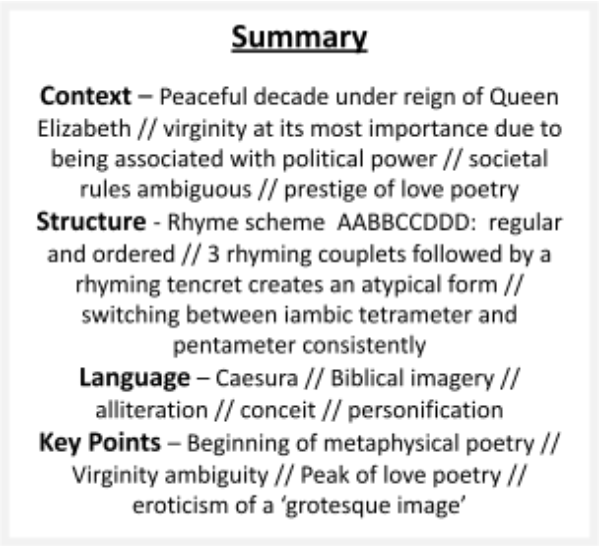
AQA English Literature A-level

Poetry: Love Through the Ages Anthology (Pre-1900)

John Donne: 'The Flea'

Brief Summary



'The Flea' is a **metaphysical** seduction poem in which the speaker tries to convince a woman to sleep with him, using the rather **grotesque image** of a flea sucking both their blood to persuade her that she has as good as done so already. The poem's argument is based on the Renaissance belief that during sex the blood of the two partners mingled.

The speaker **harnesses logic** in an attempt to fulfil his sensual desires, while **religious and theological imagery and language** are introduced in the second stanza. The speaker **downplays the importance of virginity and marriage** rather than going down the more conventional route of promising post-coital commitment and marriage.

Synopsis

- The poem begins with the speaker attempting to minimise the importance of sex **"mark in this,/ How little that which thou deniest me is"** (lines 1-2). He apparently gestures to a flea, swelled with the blood of both of them, and laments that the flea has done **"more than [they] would do"** (line 9)
- The speaker then pleads for the lady to spare the life of the flea, since killing it would be a triple homicide **"three lives"** (line 10); it contains three beings' blood. He also likens it, rather **sacrilegiously**, to their marriage bed and temple.
- In the final stanza, it becomes clear that the lady has **not listened to his protest** and has killed the flea. He asks in what way the flea was guilty, except for having sucked her blood.
- He **switches his argument** in the final part of the third stanza: responding to the lady's apparent assertion that neither she nor he are the weaker for having killed the flea, he argues that this shows how false how her fears are, and that sleeping with him will **deprive her of as little honor** as killing the flea deprived her of life.

Context

Historical and Literary Context - 1590s

While the exact date of writing is not certain, it is probable that 'The Flea' was written in the 1590s, a time when love poetry - and **sonnets** in particular - were extremely **popular**. The newfound popularity of love poetry can be perhaps attributed to the uncommon peacefulness of the age. This peacefulness would have allowed people to turn inwards and **attend to their hearts** after decades of political turmoil. While 'The Flea' is not a love poem, it deals with themes aligned with love: seduction and sex. It could also be argued that Donne is **satirising**

conventional love poetry with its overly elaborate and sincere modes of expression. He does this by creating a poem that is self-consciously **silly and strange**.

'The Flea' can be classed as a metaphysical poem. **Metaphysical poetry** was a style of poetry popular in late **16th- and 17th-century England**. The main metaphysical poets are John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan. 'Meta' means 'beyond' or 'after', so the literal meaning of metaphysical is 'beyond the physical' i.e. concerned with **the abstract or the philosophical**. Metaphysical poetry asks serious **questions about the nature of existence** and the universe, but it also has a number of other characteristics. These are:

- Use of strange **paradoxes and puns**, such as comparing lovers to a compass (Donne's 'A Valediction Forbidding Morning') or the soul to a drop of dew (Marvell's 'On a Drop of Dew'). These comparisons are called **conceits**.
- They are **original** and **witty**
- Touch on religion or use **religious imagery**, even if sacrilegiously
- **Carpe diem** themes or philosophies, e.g. Marvell's poem 'To His Coy Mistress'
- Contain complicated thought and are argumentative, intellectual and **rational**. Their complexity and subtlety can often make them **hard to understand** on first reading.
- Use of **scientific, medical or legal imagery** and language
- Use of **colloquial language**

'The Flea' was written under the rule of Queen Elizabeth I, often known as the 'Virgin Queen'. Elizabeth had supposedly vowed herself to a life of perpetual chastity, and was commonly considered to have **wed herself to the state**. Elizabeth's virginity was linked to England's political stability; her celibacy was **"converted into a powerful propagandistic claim that she sacrificed personal interests in the name of public interest"** (John King). At the same time, her occupation of the highest role in England as an unmarried woman created **great anxiety** in a **strongly patriarchal society**.

Authorial Context

John Donne was born in 1572 into a prosperous Roman Catholic family. He studied at the University of Oxford and then at Cambridge, though did not graduate from either; he could not swear the Oath of Allegiance to a Protestant queen. He then **studied law** in Thavies Inn and Lincoln's Inn. After unsuccessfully seeking public office, he **converted to Protestantism** and was eventually made the **Dean of St Paul's Cathedral.**
Donne was widely known for his eloquent and powerful sermons. His poetry, on the other hand, was not widely known of; it circulated almost exclusively in manuscript among a **select group of friends and patrons**. Donne **scorned the idea of making it publicly available**, as he considered it beneath his dignity as a gentleman.


https://tinyurl.com/john-donne-portrait

Donne's poetry **departs from many of the conventions of 16th century verse**, particularly that of Sidney and Spenser. He experimented with genre, form and imagery and his poems contain few descriptive passages. His poetic voices reflect emotional intensity and often speak directly; "For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love", begins his poem 'The Canonisation'. Donne, transformed the **conceit** into a vehicle for transmitting **multiple or contradictory feelings and ideas**. Furthermore, he altered the Renaissance love lyric - in which lovers confronted their feelings without facing their ladies - by adding in an addressee: the lady herself or some other listener. His poems were published posthumously in 1633 and 1635, but were judged to be **metrically irregular and indecorous**. It was only from the 19th century that his genius began to be recognised. Today he is considered one of the **foremost metaphysical poets.**

Analysis

'Mark' means look at; he commands he compares the flea to sex.

Monosyllabic first line not high-faluting language gives sense of it as an ordinary conversation

It cannot be considered a sin, a cause for shame, or the loss of virginity

Purposely indents the final three lines to make them stand out. They can be considered 'summary points', like those made by a barrister arguing a case (link to his law background)

Action happens between stanzas which prompts the second stanza - between 1st and 2nd stanza the lady has moved to kill the flea

Consistent marriage references refer to the fear of premarital sex. The speaker counters her fear saying the inside of the 'jet' or flea their blood is mingled. Hence, the flea represents their 'marriage temple'.

Despite their parents' objections, they are already married, albeit a reductionist, unofficial sense. Speaker perhaps appealing to her sentimental side: this flea represents the marriage they can't have, which might make her feel more kindly towards it (here she can indulge the fantasy of them getting married)..

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,

Yet this enjoys before it woo,

And pampered swells with one blood made of two,

And this, alas, is more than we would do.

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.

Though use make you apt to kill me,

Let not to that, self-murder added be,

'Thee' creates intimate tone - suggests familiarity with speaker. 'Sucks' could be a euphemism. Four monosyllables, caesura and four further monosyllables echoes first line, creating sense of regularity and of the reasonableness of the speaker.

The speaker states that the woman may as well have already lost her virginity as the flea has mixed their blood. At the time, it was believed that sexual intercourse involved blood mingling.

Possible double entendre

Envious of the flea, this links back to the physical union she has denied him. He argues that the flea has enjoyed her and is swollen with her blood, which is more than she will allow of him - despite their blood being intertwined within the flea.

Since their blood has mingled, killing the flea would be triple homicide. A bit of a ridiculous argument, an example of synecdoche - the drops of blood stand in for their whole person.

Sacrilegiously alludes to the Holy Trinity: three persons in one Godhead. Marriage is also considered a kind of trio: the joining together of (traditionally) a man or woman by God. Here, the flea takes the place of God.

The idea of a physical body being a temple appears in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 3:17).

This line may refer to her familiarity with him ('use') sometimes generating resentment/anger

Suddenness of her action emphasised by unexpected stress on first word in a poem that uses iambic meter.

Blood was commonly referred to as purple. The speaker states it is blood of innocence - slightly oxymoronic, as spilling blood is supposed to be a sin. Signals a turn in the poem - in last stanza he argues she would be committing murder and sacrilege by killing. Also allude to how she would be innocent if they were to have sex.

Alliteration of 'f', 'w' 't' sounds

In the Jacobean period, death was a euphemism for organism (e.g. *petit mort*)
Rhyming couplet end suggests finality of his argument.
Suggests that her 'honour' is as insignificant as the flea's death.

And sacrilege, in killing three.

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, and say'st that thou

Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;

'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.

'Cloistered' evokes images of a monastery or convent (cloisters were covered walks in monasteries or convents) - another reference to religion.

Committing suicide a mortal sin for which you could be denied a Christian burial.

Repeats his plea to not kill the flea expressed at the beginning of stanza.

Turn in argument emphasised by caesura

The woman now appears to believe she has won the argument because she feels no different for killing the flea. If she feels no different then perhaps the flea did not represent their marriage bed and the union was false.

In response the speaker alters his argument to state that fears are false therefore she should not worry about losing her honour when she has sex, since she will not lose it or find herself feeling sinful or guilty.

Perspective

We can assume the speaker is male due to his addressee's focus on 'virginity' and 'honor' and his reference to marriage (at that time, gay marriage was not allowed). While the woman is not directly quoted, it is clear she is in the same room as him. Donne does not use **apostrophe** here, as other poems in the anthology do, such as John Wilmot's 'Absent from Thee' and Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'.

The speaker displays his **quick wit** when he **retorts with a counterargument** in the third stanza. This recalls Donne's training in law; he would have been required to put together defenses. The speaker's **audacious comparison** of a flea to a marriage temple would have been considered sacrilegious by some, but reveals his **playful tone.** He manages to maintain a **lighthearted tone** throughout the poem, despite speaking of the sacraments and mortal sins. This seduction lyric would have been particularly entertaining to a **male audience**. In 'The Flea', Donne creates a blueprint for **metaphysical poetry** by combining intelligence, comedy and wit.

The Opening

Donne establishes the **conceit** (that the woman has as good as had sex with him already, through the flea) in the opening line: **"Mark but this flea"**. In the second line he reveals her refusal to have sex with him. This conceit or **extended metaphor** is outlandish and crude.

Flea were typically considered 'dirty' insects or creatures and were associated with disease. In defiance of this, the speaker elevates the flea to the status of a **minister** who joins them in marriage; his body is the **"temple"** (line 15) or the **"cloister"** (line 13) in which the sacrament is performed. Despite fleas' unhygienic associations, they were often used as **symbols of erotica** due to their free access to the female body (a character in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* creepily declares "I am like to Ovid's flea, I can creep into every corner of a wench.")

Structure

Rhyme Scheme and Form

'The Flea' is laid out with **3 stanzas**, each nine lines long. The stanzas are composed of three rhyming couplets (AABBCC) and a tercet (DDD) which is **set off** from the couplets. From this repetition of three, it could be argued that Donne focuses on the **union of the three** - the flea, the woman and himself - as well as the Holy Trinity. The regularity of the rhyme scheme seems to convey the **reasonableness of the speaker's argument**, as does the calm, plodding tone with which the poem begins.

Meter

Throughout the poem the meter alternates between **Iambic pentameter** and **Iambic tetrameter**, i.e. between five iambic feet and four iambic feet. The first line of the stanza is in

tetrameter, followed by a line in pentameter. This alternation continues until the end of the stanza, which closes with the **tercet, composed of one line of tetrameter and two lines of pentameter**.

The poem suggests that the speaker and his companion are close; he **addresses her familiarly**, sits by her in an intimate setting and **comments on their familiarity** **"Though use make you apt to kill me"** (line 16). Nevertheless, there is some **discontent** in their relationship; he wants her to have sex and she resists. This familiarity and discontent is **captured** by the meter. The full rhymes (e.g. **thee/ be, said/ maidenhead, me/ be/ three**) **knit the lines together**, creating a kind of sonic embrace. However, the discrepancy between the two metres suggests **friction** or dis-ease, mirroring the resistance the lady puts up.

The metre is filled with **anomalies**. It begins with a **spondee** (two stressed syllables, **"Mark but"**) and contains another spondee on line 4: **"bloods mingled".** The **roughness** of the metre suggest the **spontaneity** of the speech; he seems to be improvising.

Donne's used of a mixed metre is interesting. Iambic pentameter, particularly at this time, was conventionally used in **sonnets** and in **heroic verse**. Thus, it carries a prestige which iambic tetrameter lacks but makes up for in its **playfulness**. The use of the two very different metres - similar in their stresses but carrying different associations and histories - mirrors the gulf between the poem's heavy themes and the speaker's playful argument.

Enjambment and Caesura

The majority of the poem's lines and end-stopped and many contain caesura, often breaking the line into a perfect two e.g. **"Mark but this flea, and mark in this"** (line 1) **"It sucked me first, and now sucks thee"** (line 3). These slow down the poem and give it a **meditative** feel, as though the speaker is **pausing to consider** his argument. The caesura also give the poem a more **conversational** feel; it breaks as if a reply is due.

Enjambment also occurs, albeit sporadically. The first instance of enjambment occurs on line 8: **"And pampered swells with one blood/ made of two"**. The engorgement of the flea (or alternatively, of the speaker's penis, if you read the line as a *double entendre)* is mirrored by the elongated phrase. Enjambment also occurs after the mistress has just killed the flea. The speaker appears to be caught by surprise and so the structure momentarily breaks down, with the sentence running onto into the next line **"hast thou since/ Purpled thy nail** (lines 19-20). In general, the unexpected enjambment - which was characteristic of Donne, who was known for his **formal carelessness** - creates the impression of the speaker suddenly rushing in his eagerness to convince, which marks a contrast to the poem's **slow, plodding beginning**.

Language

Repetition

Repetition is commonly used in persuasive pieces such as speeches to ingrain an idea fully into someone's mind. It is a particularly effective **rhetorical device** that used is by Donne throughout the poem. Donne repeats his allusion to the Holy Trinity on lines 10, 12,and 18 to communicate the idea that the flea is a holy creature, capable of making their sex holy in its capacity to marry them. This idea is rather **far-fetched**, and its weakness is signalled by the imperfect half-rhyme of **"spare"** and **"are"** (lines 10 and 11). The repetition is significant in **naturalising** or **normalising** the idea so that it seems plausible. Donne also repeats **"sucks"** in line 3. The line can be interpreted as a **double entendre**, creating a **comedic tone**.

Conceit

The flea is potentially an extremely gross object to use as the basis of **conceit** on a poem about seduction and sex. The flea is almost **taboo** because it is a bodily parasite, just as sex was relatively taboo in Elizabethan times. Although it seems an unlikely object to use as the basis for a conceit, the poem exists within a long **European tradition of insects swarming the necks and bosoms and underskirts of ladies**, exciting the male observer who does not have access to such locations. One popular flea poem that preceded Donne's was **'Carmen de pulcis,'** erroneously attributed to Ovid. Later artists were to depict women catching fleas, such as Gerrit Van Honthorst ('The Flea Hunt', 1621), George de la Tour ('Woman Catching a Flea', 1638), Giovanni Battista Piazzetta ('Peasant Girl Catching a Flea', c.1715) and Giuseppe Maria Crespi ('Woman Looking for Fleas', 1719).

At the time, sex was believed to involve the mingling of blood and the **credibility** of the conceit hinges on this.

Synecdoche

Synecdoche is a device in which **part of something is made to represent the whole**. Donne uses synecdoche in stanza two, stating that **"This flea is you and I"** (line 12). Because the flea has sucked their blood, therefore it is them, too; the blood stands in for them. To kill the flea would be to kill the three of them. The **logic is rather strained** here, which is perhaps why the speaker repeats this idea of the flea containing three lives, as discussed in the Repetition subsection.

Allusion

The **allusion** to religion and the **Holy Trinity** is at odds with the image of the flea. The flea is a simple-minded, grotesque insect which causes disease. It contrasts with the sacred Holy Trinity and the **elevated** Holy Sacraments (e.g. marriage). The speaker states that killing the flea would be **"sacrilege"** (line 18). However, this is ironic as the actual sacrilege is the act of comparing a flea to a **"temple"** (line 15) The poem was likely written during Donne's law student days, before he took the position of Dean of St Paul's Cathedral.

Alliteration

Donne uses **alliteration** in line 13 **"Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is".** This places emphasis on the word marriage. The speaker uses the **determiner** "our" to stress that this is their own version of marriage - in reality, various obstacles stand in the way of their getting married, such as their parents' objections.

Alliteration also occurs on line 25: **"how false, fears be"**. The alliteration **sets the phrase off from the rest of the poem**, making it stand out. This is fitting as the deceptive nature of fear is his main argument is the final stanza, which could be summarised as 'Fears are false, your honour won't be compromised, so let's have sex'. **Sibilance** also occurs in this phrase, creating a **slithery, snakelike** sound. Sibilance aurally recalls the figure of the **Devil as snake** in the story of Adam and Eve, linking the speaker's attempt at persuasion to the Devil's.

Themes

Sex and Lust

Lust is the *raison d'etre* for the poem, which is a man's attempt at getting a lady to sleep with him. If we are to read the poem autobiographically, it is of note that Donne had the **reputation of being a ladies' man**; his contemporary Richard Baker noted he was a "a great visitor of Ladies". The *double entendres* such as **"sucked me"** (line 3) and **"swelled"** (line 8) perhaps gesture towards the speaker's **lewd mind**. Lust is not opposed to love in this poem, unlike some of the other poems in the anthology, such as the cold/ cruel 'The Scrutiny'. The speaker seems to be in a **stable relationship** with the lady he addresses, referencing their familiarity **"use"** (line 16) and hinting at the depth of their relationship through the reference to their **"parents[']grudge"** (line 14) which suggests that it is well developed enough that the couple are considering marrying. Nevertheless, any love the speaker has for the lady is not explicit.

Marriage and Religion

Donne was known to have many **conflicts with religion**. Born into a **Catholic** family, he was denied a degree at Oxford and Cambridge due to his refusal to take the Oath of Supremacy, which recognised the English monarch as supreme head of the English Church. Nevertheless, he later **converted to Protestantism** and took up the role of Dean at St Paul's Cathedral. The poem's speaker **does not openly endorse pre-marital sex** but instead insists through a twisted logic that they are already married. Nevertheless, the religious allusions can be interpreted as **sacrilegious** and thus **threatening the Church's authority.**

The speaker **challenges sexual mores,** insisting that no honour will **"waste"** (line 27) if they have sex. This can be interpreted as the speaker arguing that sex would be no loss of honour because they are married, or it could be interpreted as him arguing that **honour is overvalued** or simply **"false"** (line 25). He also insists that though they have as good as have had sex, though the flea, this is no **"sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead"** (line 6). Again, the speaker make be arguing that it would be ridiculous to feel shame over a flea sucking blood.

Alternatively, he may be arguing that **sex should not be interpreted as a sin or cause for shame**. Thus, he not only sacrilegiously compares a flea to a temple and to Holy Trinity, but he also **appears to challenge Christian values**.

Critical Responses

Amanda Boyd

"Donne's poetry does not demean women but in fact acknowledges and appreciates all of their capabilities. This interaction is one between equally intelligent persons, each one challenging the other playfully in the midst of their romance. Though there is only one speaker, her silent voice booms. She holds her own in this game and keeps him on his toes in a humorous competition between lovers. In her refusal to be swayed by his tactics she causes him to go back and rework the way he makes his argument."

While many critics of Donne have commented on the absence of women's voices or of their silence, Boyd maintains that in 'The Flea' the woman's silent voice paradoxically "booms". Nevertheless, a counter-critic might argue that the exchange is not equal; the man's voice dominates, although the woman's objection is reported.

Peter Rudnytsky

"Donne manipulates logic and metaphor"

Donne's manipulation of logic and metaphor works together. The **synecdochic statement** that the flea contains three lives in one (since it contains blood from three sources) is the basis for his claim that it is the temple that holds them together.

Comparisons

'The Flea' - 'The Scrutiny'

Similarities	• Selfish attitudes towards women - the speaker of 'The Flea' disregards his mistresses' fears in favour of his own pleasure, while the speaker of 'The Scrutiny' discards the woman he addresses after a single night • Both poems use **twisted logic** - the speaker of 'The Scrutiny' claims it is better that he pursues other women as he will come back "sated" while the speaker of 'The Flea' pushes logic to its limit by claiming a flea is a marriage temple. • Both try and make a case for something • Both poems deal with **lust**

	• Both are witty - 'The Scrutiny' was explicitly intended to entertain at court.
Differences	• The speaker in 'The Flea' is **trying to sleep with a woman** versus in 'The Scrutiny' the speaker **has slept with a woman** and is try to shake her off • The speaker in 'The Flea' seems to be in a relationship with the woman he addresses versus the speaker in 'The Scrutiny' seems to barely know his mistress • The woman in 'The Flea' asserts herself through her actions. The speaker reports her speech - she is not completely silent. In contrast, 'The Scrutiny' uses **apostrophe**; the woman is completely silent. • 'The Flea' deals with **heavy subjects** such as sin and religion whereas 'The Scrutiny' is lighter

'The Flea' - 'To His Coy Mistress"

Similarities	• Both are **metaphysical poems** in which a speaker aims to convince a woman to sleep with him • Both deal with **heavy/ profound subjects** such as time, sin and religion • Both use *double entendres* - in 'The Flea' **"sucked"** and **"swell"**, in 'To His Coy Mistress' **"vegetable love should grow"**.
Differences	• The **references** in 'To His Coy Mistress' are **wider ranging** - the Ganges, Greek mythology - whereas 'The Flea' sticks to the central conceit, adding in some references to religion. • The speaker in 'To His Coy Mistress' flatters whereas the speaker in 'The Flea' sticks to his argument without recourse to flattery • 'To His Coy Mistress' uses much **symbolism** • Faster pace of 'To His Coy Mistress' which mirrors a supposed lack of time