

Holy Sonnets: Batter my heart, three-person'd God

BY JOHN DONNE

Batter my heart, three-person'd 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 an usurp'd town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd 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.

About John Donne

[John Donne](#) was born in 1572 and died in 1631. He was an English poet, lawyer, and Cleric. John Donne is considered to be one of the main representatives of the metaphysical poets. His poems are known for their vibrant language, powerful images, abrupt openings and paradoxes. Donne's poetry introduced a more personal tone in the poems and a particular poetic metre, which resembles natural speech. Moreover, John Donne is considered to be the genius of metaphysical conceits and extended [metaphors](#), as his poems combine two concepts into one by using [imagery](#). Apart from poems, Donne also wrote translations, epigrams, elegies, satires, among others.

John Donne converted to Anglicanism later in his life. By 1615 he became a priest because King James I ordered him to do so. Donne was a member of Parliament in 1601 and in 1614. He also spent a short time in prison because he married his wife, Anne More, without permission. They had twelve children

Batter my Heart (Holy Sonnet 14) Analysis

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 an usurped town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.

The octet depicts the lyrical voice's demands towards God. The poem starts with the lyrical voice asking the "three-personed God" (God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost) to attack his/heart, as it were gates belonging to a fortress ("batter" comes from "battering ram" the element used in medieval times to break down the door of a fortress). The lyrical voice asks for this, as previously God had "knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend". This follows the scriptural idea that God "knocks" on a person's door and he/she must let him in. Nevertheless, this isn't working for the lyrical voice, as he/she wants to be taken by God's force: "That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend/Your force to break, blow, burn". Notice the [alliteration](#) on line 4 and the emphasis on this strong and violent verbs. The lyrical voice wants to go through all of this because he/she wants to be made "new". His/her soul is probably badly damaged, and, in order to take all the sin out of it, it must be recreated. The lyrical voice is, again, compared with a town; a town that is "usurped". He/she wants to let God in, but he/she has been unsuccessful: "Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end". The lyrical voice is having trouble showing his/her faith because his/her thoughts, reason, have turned on God ("Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,/But is captived, 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.

The sestet presents the volta, turn, and the [tone](#) of the poem shifts. The lyrical voice gets more sentimental and calm. The [simile](#) of the fortress ends, and the lyrical voice talks about his/ her feelings towards God: "Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain". Nevertheless, the

lyrical voice feels engaged to Satan, “But am betrothed unto your enemy”, and asks God to take him out of their arrangement, “Divorce me, untie or break that knot again”. The word “again” makes direct reference to *Genesis* and the fall of men. Once again, the lyrical voice asks God to take him/her: “Take me to you, imprison me, for I,/Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,/Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me”. Notice the emphasis and the intensity in the lyrical voice’s wish. He/she asks to be taken over by using violent verbs, such as “imprison” and “ravish”. These final lines depict the paradox of the faith.

Another Analysis of the Poem

Batter my Heart is one of the beautiful religious sonnets of Donne written in a Petrarchan verse with the rhyming scheme abbaabba known as octave followed by the rhyme scheme cdccdc known as sestet. The poet here is picturing an afflicted lover of the God who is hurt because he is deviated from the holy path to the sinful path. He urges God to ravish his body and make him chaste.



John Donne (1572-1631)

The poet prays to God in his threefold capacity as the **Father**, the **Son**, and the **Holy Ghost** to batter his heart and reshape it. He is sunk in the tank of sin and method of persuasion is not going to work on him. God has knocked at him, blown his breath through his bellows and lighted the fire of his love and mercy to purify him and reshape him. But all these methods ended without attaining the end (Objective). So God should overthrow the poet and bend his force to break, blow and make him new and free from sin.

He is like "an usurped town", whose duty is to serve God, but he is occupied by the devil. He labors to let the God enter into his body (town), but it turns out a vain effort. Viceroy of God, i.e. the reason which is residing inside the poet captive and he has succumbed to the devil. Yet 'I love you' says the poet and he anticipates love in return. But he has engaged with God's enemy. He wishes, divorce, to untie or break the nuptial knot and he requests God to take him with him, imprison him and never-never shall let him free. He would be purified if God ravishes him.

The poem is a plea for God to enter and take over the poet's life, thus saving him from the power of Satan. It develops through three main images. The first is that of a potter or craftsman repairing a damaged vessel, and has behind it the idea of God as the creator. The next two images both explain Donne's sinful nature by comparing him to the victim of a violent assault: first in military terms (he is like a town, which has been briefly captured and ruled by the enemy), and then in sexual terms (he is like a woman compelled to marry against her will). In each case Donne suggests that God must act in a similarly violent manner to save him, by retaking the town, or by ravishing the woman, and thus cancelling the wrong marriage.

The literalness with which these images of assault are developed is undoubtedly dramatic, but perhaps leaves the modern reader feeling uncomfortable. The idea that the Christian Church can be seen as the Bride of Christ comes from the Bible, but Donne's image makes Christ a ravisher, not just a husband. It is as if Donne feels that an image which is strong enough for other men and women is not powerful enough for him: others can be wooed into salvation, but Donne must be taken by force.

The **paradox** which drives the poem on is, however a profound one. On the one hand, Donne wishes to surrender himself entirely to God; on the other, he needs to feel that the self-claimed by God is still the unique Donne. The poem is both a total surrender to an all-powerful God, and — through its extraordinary verbal energy, as in the very first line — an assertion of Donne's personality. The same paradox is found in a later poem, 'A Hymne to God the Father'.

After the death of his wife in 1617 Donne felt more and more under the shadow of a terrible spiritual gloom. As his life drew near its close, Donne devoted his talent to carve religious sonnets. *Batter my Heart* is one of the products of this period of his life. Donne had put the world and the sensuous life completely behind him and was probing with fierce anxiety for the right relationship with the eternal. The poet is aware with his adulterated life and also with God's infinite greatness. He is conscious of his sinful nature, and he conveys his feelings in a language charged with sentimentality. Use of **metaphor** is extensive. He compares God with thinker and himself with a pot. He compares his soul with the town. This town, he confesses is inhabited by devils and he cannot be redeemed with ordinary mending so God should shatter him completely and re-shape him.

Donne's religious and his magnificent sermons reached astounding heights of subtlety and intensity. The searching of the soul and the horrified fascination with

which he contemplated and realized his awful sin in "Batter my Heart" with amazing sincerity, intensity and earnestness is, of course noteworthy in the poem. The language has the same intensity with mood and experience and Donne's grand style of expressing noble thought in this poem deserves admiration.

The speaker asks [God](#) to intensify the effort to restore the speaker's soul. Knocking at the door is not enough; God should overthrow him like a besieged town. His own reason has not been enough either, and he has engaged himself to God's enemy. He asks God to break the knots holding him back, imprisoning him in order to free him, and taking him by force in order to purify him.

In his holy sonnets, Donne blends elements of the Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet with the English (Shakespearean) sonnet. Here he begins in the Italian form *abba abba*, but his concluding idea in the third quatrain bleeds over into the rhyming couplet (*cdcd cc*) that completes the poem.

The poet begins by asking God to increase the strength of divine force to win over the poet's soul. He requests, "Batter my heart" (line 1), metaphorically indicating that he wants God to use force to assault his heart, like battering down a door. Thus far, God has only knocked, following the scriptural idea that God knocks and each person must let him in, yet this has not worked sufficiently for the poet. Simply to "mend" or "shine" him up is not drastic enough; instead God should take him by "force, to break, blow, burn" in order to help him "stand" and be made "new" (lines 3-4). This request indicates that the speaker considers his soul or heart too badly damaged or too sinful to be reparable; instead, God must re-create him to make him what he needs to be. The paradox is that he must be overthrown like a town in order to rise stronger.

Indeed, the second quatrain begins with that metaphor, with the speaker now an "usurp'd town" that owes its allegiance or "due" to someone else (line 5). He is frustrated that his reason, God's "viceroy" in the town of his soul, is captive to other forces (such as worldly desire) and is failing to persuade him to leave his sins behind.

The poet then moves from the political to the personal in the last six lines. He loves God, but he is "betroth'd unto [God's] enemy" (line 9), the Satanic desires of the selfish heart (if not the devil himself). He seeks God's help to achieve the "divorce" from his sinful nature and break the marriage "knot" (lines 10-11). In the final couplet, he gives voice to the paradox of faith: the speaker can only be free if he is enthralled by God (line 13), and he can only be chaste and pure if God ravishes him (line 14).

The poet uses this dissonance of ideas to point out just how holy—in this case, otherworldly and spiritual in a carnal world—God truly is. In other words, a relationship with God requires being reborn and rebuilt from the ground up, in but not of the world.

Finally, since the speaker here suggests being in the female role of betrothal and ravishment (a city too tends to be coded as female), we once again see that the speaker is putting himself in the position of the Christian church generally. In the New Testament, the church is metaphorically said to be married to God. Can it be that, in Donne's eyes, the church still needs to be utterly reformed, even after the Reformation?