

Batter My Heart (Holy Sonnet 14)

Summary & Analysis

In Short

John Donne's Holy Sonnet 14 (Batter My Heart) presents the speaker's personal crisis of faith.

The speaker thinks his soul is captured by the devil. But he wishes to come back to the religious path. So, he asks God to slam into his heart and take hold of it.

The speaker develops a number of metaphors to emphasize how he wants to break his connection with Satan and unite with the God instead.

Explanation

Lines 1 – 2

Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you

As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;

The poem begins with the speaker's demands towards God (God the Father, Christ the Son and the Holy Ghost make up the "three-personed God" – the Holy Trinity). He requests the God to batter his heart. The term 'batter' here suggests repeated blows. The speaker thus commands that all three in three-personed God attack his heart.

The lyrical voice (speaker) says that the God has previously attempted mild efforts to cleanse his heart. He has knocked, breathed, shined and tried to repair (mend) him. God's effort to purify his heart is compared to a tinker's effort to repair an old utensil. This series of verbs (in line 2) reflects on various Biblical characteristics. For instance, 'knock' represents a polite request to open the door. This follows the scriptural idea that God knocks on a person's door and he/she must let him in.

So, the speaker does not want his deity to hesitate at the door, but to slam into his heart. Here, the speaker associates God the Father with power as he knocks, the Holy Spirit with breath as he breathes and Christ the Son with light as he shines.

Lines 3 – 4

That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend

Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

Like the first two lines, here too the speaker asks the God to treat him violently. He explains that for him to 'rise and stand', God should overthrow him. It means in Christianity, one must endure the human or worldly life to be worthy of the after-life with God. The speaker wants to suffer by being beaten down in his present life so that he will be deserving of the everlasting salvation that is promised after death. He wants God to make him a new person by using his power (bend your force).

The verbs used in line 4 are used in contrast to those used in line 2. The speaker proposes that the Father ought to break him (instead of 'knock'), the Holy Spirit ought to blow him like a strong wind (instead of 'breathe') and the Son ought to burn him like fire (instead of 'shine'). He should be made new instead of being mended. Only then, God can make him free from sin.

By using the words "break, blow, burn and make me new", the speaker compares the cruel treatment he wants to receive to the work of a blacksmith. He wishes that his soul be melted down, cleansed of unclean things and then made afresh. His soul is probably damaged. In order to take all sin out of it, it must be recreated.

Lines 5 – 6

I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end.

The speaker here compares himself to a town that is captured or occupied (usurped) by some unwelcome force. Now it belongs to someone else (to another due), not God. His duty is to serve God but he is occupied by the devil.

The speaker tries hard (labour) to let the God enter into his soul (town), but it is a vain attempt. The word 'Oh' expresses the speaker's regret that he is unsuccessful to let God in.

Donne here creates a great metaphysical conceit by comparing one's soul to a town that can be occupied either by God or by the devil. If we go back to the previous lines now, we can see that even those lines can be connected to this conceit. The speaker asks God to forcefully enter into his heart or soul (town) which is now captured by evil forces.

Lines 7 – 8

Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.

In line 8, the speaker personifies reason. Reason is like the deputy (viceroy) of God guiding us in choosing which is good and which is bad. God gives us enough reason to protect and guard ourselves against Satan and temptation. So, reason should defend ourselves, helping us choose the right path.

But, for the speaker, Satan or devil has overtaken him, reason has failed. It is as if reason has been captivated by the devil or it is weak or unfaithful in his case and thus cannot defend him.

Lines 9 – 11

Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy:
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,

The speaker expresses his love for the God. This is the most straightforward line we have had so far. “Would be loved fain” suggests that he would love God to be loved. Actually, he anticipates love in return. But the problem is that he is engaged to marry God’s enemy, i.e., Satan.

The speaker, therefore, asks God to take him out of their engagement. He wants a divorce to untie or break the nuptial knot. The word ‘again’ perhaps suggests the reference to the moment in Genesis (Old Testament) when God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden because they follow Satan’s advice. So, the God will have to break the bond between Satan and the speaker, as He did before with Adam.

Lines 12 – 14

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

The speaker requests God to take him with Him, to imprison him so that the devil cannot reach him anymore. He wants to unite with the God.

Unless God enslaves (enthrall) him in love, he shall never be free from the hands of Satan. Similarly, he will never be pure (chaste) unless God 'ravishes' him. Now, the term 'ravage' can have different interpretations. It may mean "seize and carry off by force" or "sexually assault". Though both the meanings make sense here, a sexual undertone is most widely accepted here. If that meaning is taken, God's divine love is compared to an erotic seduction. And this erotic touch is indeed the hallmark of Donne's poems.

In these final lines, Donne presents paradoxical statements to present the contrast between God and Satan and how God can free him from his spiritual distress, from the hands of the devil.
