

The Flea's Defense of Literature

There are many critics of literature in the modern era who debate whether or not literature, be that poetry, short stories, novels, or even visual media like plays, shows, movies, or video games, is a worthless or dangerous art form that can corrupt the minds of those who consume this type of media. From worrying that they will corrupt children or young adults into obscene acts, to disregarding these media forms for being a waste of time for lying to the audience, the general ideas are easily expressed upon finding lists of banned books and media. This idea is not new; in fact, it's far from new. During the Elizabethan era of literature, the same arguments were being used to degrade literature of any kind, especially the sensationalist poetry of the time. In 1595, Sir Philip Sidney published an essay titled "An Apology for Poetry," which argued against these criticisms that disregard the entire point of literature. Utilizing the same critiques Sidney employed against the Puritan movement, this essay will show how poet John Donne's piece "The Flea" reinforces the ideas Sidney discussed and complicates the waters of literary cleanliness.

Sir Philip Sidney's essay contains many ideas that counter the Puritan Movement's criticisms of literature, many of which still hold weight today and provide insight into the true nature of writing poesy, as Sidney puts it. The broad-stroke ideas that he presents are how literature is designed to educate an audience about an idea, moral, or philosophy while also retaining the audience's enjoyment of the text to get the idea to cement itself in the reader's mind. Sidney explains, "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word μίμησις [mimesis]—that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight" (620). This idea of mimesis, μίμησις, becomes the cornerstone of Sidney's argument, where he continues into the

idea that for humans to learn, they must imitate the information from either an experience or from a fictional work in which an appropriate situation is presented to the audience. Humans learn through storytelling because the act allows the audience to mimic the concepts provided more easily through examples.

Literature aims to express complex ideas through imagery to show an audience how or why that idea is important. Sidney continues to express this idea through a comparison among three types of writers: philosophers, historians, and poets. He argues that philosophers will tell students how a concept is good or evil but will not show the students why; historians, on the other hand, will show data about a time period but will not interpret the actions made. Sidney continues his argument,

“For conclusion, I say the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him, he teacheth them that are already taught; but the poet is the food for the tenderest of stomachs, the poet is indeed the right popular philosopher, whereof Aesop’s tales give good proof: whose pretty allegories, stealing under the formal tales of beasts, make many, more beastly than beasts, begin to hear the sound of virtue from these dumb speakers” (625).

This argument states that, while yes, philosophers can help teach people complex ideas, the majority of people who will understand these higher levels of thought are already individuals who ponder that line of thinking in the first place. How could someone teach the general masses about the vices and virtues of the world if that teacher or scholar does not show examples of such concepts? This attitude is similar to the lesson from creative writing classes of showing versus

telling an idea. That is to say, providing a vivid example of the concept will more effectively deliver the intended message to an audience than simply explaining it.

Thus, there are many examples of poetry across the ages that aim to teach a complex concept in a less than straightforward way. Take John Donne's poem "The Flea" as an example of a complex lesson taught with humor. The poem is undeniably meant to convey delight to the audience through its racy imagery and rather absurd concept of a man courting a woman through the analogy of a flea. The speaker of "The Flea" starts with the introduction of his analogy, "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" (ll. 1-4). The speaker jumps right into the absurd idea of how this flea, carrying the blood of both the speaker and the woman he courts, equates to the idea of the two characters having sex. Already, readers can see how this poem is meant to delight them since such graphic images paired with the upper level of speaking can be quite humorous, if a bit crude to some. The humor makes the poem stick out in readers' minds as the concept of the poem grabs their attention as something unique.

The poem continues with the speaker building his argument further into the ridiculous with implications of his companion's reactions to his antics. In lines eight through eleven, the speaker states, "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, yea more than married are." The speaker is stating here that the flea is basking in its enjoyment of sampling the blood of the speaker and the woman he seeks to court, while neither gets any enjoyment out of the action. The speaker's reaction in line ten implies that the woman intends to kill the flea, even saying that the speaker is ridiculous. This style of playful poetry with an unseen second character brings

further delight to the audience as there is a reaction that mirrors the audience's own curiosity, confusion, and amusement.

However, the counterargument appears: how does this poem educate anyone at all? The poem makes a significant case for why it is delightful and entertaining to read, but to an individual who is more critical of the work, the poem proves to be a perfect example of why some literature should be banned. There does not appear to be a greater lesson to be learned from this poem, at least not in the beginning. Instead, it proves the idea that "The Flea" should be banned for openly talking about racy or, to some, taboo topics. This argument is where the poem becomes colored and complicated. Donne shows the value of this poem as it simply does not only aim to draw out enjoyment from the audience. There is a moral to this poetic story that gets lost if the reader only sees the surface-level details of the poem.

Towards the end of the poem, the speaker of "The Flea" implies that the woman he is courting kills the flea in question and goes on a dramatic tangent about killing the poor innocent creature before twisting the woman's triumph around into a light that benefits the speaker more by the end. Donne writes, "Yet thou triumph'st, 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" (23-27). The speaker of the poem has found a way to get the woman he is courting to agree that the analogy of the flea representing a sexual relationship is not that big of a deal through the ridiculousness of the notion. Furthermore, when the speaker mentions that she "Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now" (24), he compares the flea's murder earlier to murdering the woman, the speaker, and the flea. These roundabout ideas can make the poem much more humorous but also educate the audience upon learning how the speaker got the woman to say outright that a sexual relationship

between the two is not as dishonorable as many perceive, though she did not know the speaker would twist her words into that conclusion. Those final lines are where the educational value of this poem reveals itself. The moral of John Donne's "The Flea" is that people need to be aware of their words, especially when talking with someone who likely has an ulterior motive. The speaker's request by the end of the story is still played off as a joke, even with the woman he's courting being implied that she laughs at the end, but the fact remains that he still manipulated her words into a spear against her. This poem is a direct example that shows the audience what can happen when people are unaware of their words.

Yet, what is the importance of this poem? "The Flea" is one of many examples of how humans can learn from reading literature, and the judgment passed onto the poem for its sexual ideas in nature completely ignores the poem's moral in lieu of sensationalizing anger against the surface-level content. Such surface-level criticisms are a reaction still very prevalent in the present day, causing many books to be banned across the world due to overreacting to the baseline content. These individuals forget that literature is designed to both educate and delight, and if such a text does not delight the individual, said person could simply put it down in lieu of a different book to serve that purpose.

John Donne's poem, "The Flea," is a perfect example of demonstrating yet also contending against the ideas Sir Philip Sidney explained in his essay. The poem is designed to be humorous to the audience about a subject many would find crude. Donne uses that amusement to covertly educate the readers about the dangers of not paying attention to their speech and how it can be twisted in another's favor. The poem complicates the ideas as it buries the educational value until the very end and through heaps of ridiculous sexual innuendos. Nevertheless, the poem retains its cultural value through its delivery and presentation.

Works Cited

- Sidney, Philip. "The Apology for Poetry." *Masters of British Literature Volume A: The Middle Ages, The Early Modern Period, and The Restoration and The Eighteenth Century*, edited by Damrosch, David and Dettmar, Kevin J. H., Pearson Longman, 2008, pg 615-647.
- Donne, John. "The Flea." *Masters of British Literature Volume A: The Middle Ages, The Early Modern Period, and The Restoration and The Eighteenth Century*, edited by Damrosch, David and Dettmar, Kevin J. H., Pearson Longman, 2008, pgs 888-889.