‘BATTER MY HEART’: SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION

Written in direct address to God and employing violent and sexual imagery, it is one of Donne’s most dramatic devotional lyrics. This is one among those poems by Donne that are commonly referred as ‘*Divine Meditations’*, ‘*Divine Sonnets’*, or ‘*Holy Sonnets’*. In “*Holy Sonnets”*, John Donne writes his poems in the traditional Italian sonnet form. This traditional form and style, introduced by Petrarch, consists of an octave (eight lines, rhyming: abbaabba) and a [sestet](https://poemanalysis.com/glossary/sestet/) (six lines, rhyming: cdecde).

*‘Batter my Heart’* expresses the poet’s call upon God to take hold of him, while using deeply spiritual and physical arresting images. The main themes of the poem are love, religion, and violence.

As the poem starts, we hear a lyrical voice asking the “three-personed God” (God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost) to attack the poet’s heart. The reader here has an impression of a fortress. The gates of this fortress, as it were, is about to be ‘battered’! (“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 battering for he wants to breathe and shine anew in God’s hands, and consequently to mend himself. -This plea by the poet refers to the scriptural idea that God “knocks” on a person’s door and he/she must let Him in.

The poet in the above process wants that he should be taken by God’s force: “That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend/Your force to break, blow, burn”. The poet then goes to visualize his condition at such a (hypothetical) moment with the allusion of a “usurped” town;

It is the impure thoughts of the poet that have been trying to withstand the God’s access to the fortress of the town, he feels. Therefore, the poet beseeches the God to come by any means to overpower him! (“Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,/But is captived, and proves weak or untrue”).

Then in the sestet (last six lines), the [simile](https://poemanalysis.com/glossary/simile/) of the fortress ends, and the lyrical voice talks about his 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: “Take me to you, imprison me, for I,/Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,/Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me”. For the reason of untying himself from his engagement with Satan, he asks God into his heart. He wants to be God's prisoner and will never be free until God ravishes (rapes) him.

INTERPRETATION:

*Batter my Heart* expresses the poet’s call upon God to take hold of him, while using deeply spiritual and physical arresting images. The main themes of the poem are love, religion, and violence.

The octave depicts the poet’s demands towards God to make himself captivated by His glory. The sestet beseeches the god to empower him to divorce himself from the unwanted association, to be able to break the knot that binds him to the present miserable state. The words like ‘knocke’, ‘breathe’, ‘shine’ suggest the gentle and imperceptible working of God’s grace upon him and to reform his soul from all the sins.

In the poem, the poet acknowledges himself being feeble and reliant on God and demands from Him to help him refrain from temptation and abstain from sin. Here, the speaker employs a commanding and authoritative tone with God in an attempt to convince God to assist him. In his way to impress upon God for this, the poet implements metaphysical conceits in order to describe the relationship between God, man, and sin and to command God to save him from sin through the use of force. The conceit relates to the image of a usurped town, used by the poet. In this, he imagines a town in which power has illegally passed from a legitimate ruler to an invader. The poet imagines himself as a usurped town from the stance of his logic that he desires to have the grace of God to cure himself from all his sins and for this he must submit himself to the battering power of God. He thus invokes the God’s powers to ‘batter’ his heart. It is in this context that he makes an impassioned and desperate bid to God to:

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand,‘O’er throw mee’, and bend

Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.

The poem opens with the above dramatic exclamation and the impassioned spirit of the poet’s heart is maintained throughout the poem, right to the last line:

Nor ever chase, except you ravish mee.

It is a paradox in the poem that Donne is begging for a ‘violent’ action to be done against himself by God. The poet adopts this paradox indeed to imply the superiority of God and the intensity of his feelings. By doing so, he intends to impress upon the mind of the readers about how desperately he has been struggling to be at one with God. He in order to make an adequate representation of this desperate bid of himself adopts images of war and sex. These images prove how intense and personal his urge is. Expressions like ‘break, blow, burn’ and words like ‘imprison’, ‘enthrall’ and ‘ravish’ also effectively suggest the poet’s involvement with the divine. Donne believes that for realizing the divine one must start from the mundane or sensual. The image of God-man relationship is conceptualized upon the lover-beloved relationship in the poem. This sort of blend between the sensual and the divine is a typical feature of Donne’s religious poetry.

The balance executed by the poet between his plea for a violent physical stirring of his passion and his intellectual pleasure of theological pursuits, in the poem, has successfully validated upon the extraordinary nature of his divine love.