When exposed to the lens of psychoanalytic criticism, John Donne’s “The Flea” exposes Donne’s philosophies pertaining to love, death, and rebirth. Donne utilizes language rife with sexual meaning throughout the poem. By addressing principles of psychoanalytic theory in regards to language, this method reveals Donne’s deeply-rooted frustrations and sexual repression. The three archetypal concepts of love, death, and rebirth occur throughout the entirety of “The Flea,” and through an exploration of these aforementioned archetypes readers can gain a greater understanding of the poem. Aspects of Sigmund Freud’s psychological principles (the nature of sexuality and sexual desire, as well as the act of repressing said desires) along with the principles of Carl Jung (the archetypes) intermingle within Donne’s work to create a poem that contains several layers of meaning. Donne regards love as a cycle, a circle of life, death, and rebirth that, when unified, culminates in completion of the human psyche. By utilizing this cycle, Donne’s “The Flea” illustrates the duality of life and death at the core of love itself.

Before delving into the meat of the poem – that is, the inherent meaning within the poem as a whole – one must first look at the bones (i.e, language). In his book Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History, Norman Brown, utilizing and in turn analyzing the teachings of Sigmund Freud, remarks that language “is made out of love” and serves as a
substitution for repressed sexuality (69). As such, Brown sees language as a “playful activity” built on an “erotic base” (70). Language and sexuality connect seamlessly, and due to the repression of sexual desire or intent language serves as a conduit in which those repressed sexual feelings can be released. With this intermingling of language and love in mind, Donne’s language choices in “The Flea” serve to illuminate Donne’s sexual desires and subsequent repression. Of the titular flea, Donne remarks that “Me it suck’d first, and now sucks thee / And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be” (3-4). Though Donne speaks only of the flea’s act of sucking the blood from both himself and his paramour, the language he uses holds definite sexual undertones. The act of sucking blood – that is, bodily fluids – from both lovers equates to the act of sexual intercourse. The two bloods mingling within the flea serves as a metaphor for the act of unification that occurs in the midst of sexual gratification. As two lovers mingle and unite, so does the blood within the flea.

Another instance of language acting as a conduit for sexual desire occurs in a subsequent stanza of “The Flea.” As Donne’s paramour kills the flea, he quips, “Cruel and sudden, hast thou since / Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?” (19-20). Again, Donne uses language rife with sexual intent to describe a seemingly insignificant act. The “blood of innocence” could clearly signify the blood of a woman’s lost maidenhead. Lauding the act as “cruel and sudden” equates the sexual encounter to an act of violence. This inherent violence serves to emphasize the repression of Donne’s desires. He spends the entirety of “The Flea” attempting to persuade his paramour into indulging in premarital sex, and as such, Donne’s frustrations at the rigid society in which he lives – as well as the stigma attached to pre-marital sex during that time – manifests in the language Donne uses.
With the knowledge that language serves as a mirror reflecting sexuality, one must address the principles of repression generated by Freud. Brown pays particular attention to the act of repressing or denying oneself sexual release. “It is the human ego that carries the search for a world to love,” he says, “or rather this project, in the unconscious stratum of the ego, guides human consciousness in its restless search for an object that can satisfy its love” (46). To attain love is to achieve completion and a sense of unification. Humans unconsciously strive for that sense of completion, whether through the acquisition of a beloved “object” or through obtaining the love of another human being. Repression of this innate desire, according to Freud, causes damage to the psyche. To apply these beliefs to “The Flea,” one must take into account Donne’s views on repression: “Just so much honor, when thou yield’st to me / Will waste, as this flea’s death took life from me” (26-27). In Donne’s time, the act of premarital sex between a man and a woman carried a stigma attached to it. To engage in such an act tarnished the honor of the woman and could ruin her prospects for life. In some cases, the parties involved could face punishment or even death for the transgression. However, Donne tells his lover that the amount of honor lost in submitting to him would equal only that of the life taken from Donne when she killed the flea – that is, none. Donne’s innate desire to unite with his paramour – and, in essence, the repression of that desire the longer his lover denies him – forces Donne to disregard the social conventions he has followed all of his life. Engaging in premarital sex will harm the woman far more than the man, however, and so it becomes clear that Donne’s ego – and the repression of his sexual/romantic desires – serve to put himself and his paramour in harm’s way. In other words, repression damages Donne’s psyche.

Once the language of “The Flea” has been thoroughly explored, one can then turn to the “meat” of the poem (i.e, the themes of life and death and the duality of both within the construct
of love). These themes – life, death, and rebirth – are archetypes, “a figure… that repeats itself in the course of history whenever creative fantasy is fully manifested” (Dobie 62). These archetypes, a construct of Carl Jung and a staple of psychoanalytic criticism, are universal themes that can be found in literature throughout the ages, and “The Flea” is no exception. The theme of life – and in turn, rebirth – occur frequently throughout the poem. The act of the two bloods mingling within the flea serves as a “life” in itself: “And pamper’d swells with one blood made of two / And this, alas, is more than we would do” (8-9). The act of the flea “swelling” with blood mirrors the act of a woman swelling with pregnancy – new life. This new life (the blood mingling within the flea) comes about from the union that Donne desires with his paramour, and Brown calls this desire the “life instinct.” This instinct “…demands a union with others and with the world around us based not on anxiety and aggression but on narcissism and erotic exuberance” (307). Establishing a union with a lover or with the world at large establishes life itself, and this desire to unify stems from love of the self and sensual/sexual inclinations. Love itself serves as a form of life as it unifies two souls (establishing a new life for the parties involved) and can culminate in the ultimate form of life – offspring (a new soul). The act of love also serves as a form of rebirth in that it establishes a life separate from the one in which two lovers once roamed as entities separate from one another. When two lovers come together – as Donne so clearly wishes for himself and his paramour in “The Flea” – they begin life anew as a new, unified being, and so they experience a rebirth.

Death also receives its due course in “The Flea.” In his book The Rest is Silence, Robert Watson remarks that “Love and death make a familiar pairing, and a simple code of substitution or inversion is a familiar mode of psychological evasion” (167). Donne uses metaphysical conceits – the imagery of the flea, the mingling blood, and the ultimate murder of the flea – to
pair the themes of love and death and to unify them. Love and death are connected within “The Flea” through the literal sucking of the blood and the figurative sense of the blood sucking serving as the act of sexual intercourse. The most obvious instance of death occurs in the demise of the titular flea, and Donne equates this act to “self-murder” and “sacrilege” (17-18). By killing the flea, Donne’s paramour kills them both, and equating the killing to self-murder (suicide) demonstrates the negative ramifications of the act. Yet the reason Donne equates the flea with his marriage bed is to convince his lover that she would not lose any honor in submitting to his sexual advances. Death (of the flea and of the idea that premarital sex will besmirch the honor of Donne’s paramour) therefore culminates in life, the casting off of society’s stigma and indulging in the act of love.

Repression itself also serves as a kind of death in “The Flea.” Donne does not repress his desire by choice; the strict society in which he lives forces the act on him. As he laments to his paramour, “Though parents grudge, and you, w’are met / And cloistered in these living walls of jet” (14-15). Outside influences – society and the woman’s disapproving parents – force Donne and his paramour to repress their sexual desires. This act of conforming to the rigid stipulations of society and refraining from premarital sex serves only to weaken the love (and subsequently, the life) between Donne and his paramour. Refraining from love will leave both Donne and his lover incomplete and unfulfilled. It is human nature to seek completion. To remain incomplete is to be stagnant. Love therefore serves as a form of death whether one submits to it or not as repressing one’s desires serves only to leave one incomplete and the act of sexual intercourse equates to a loss (death) of innocence and the end of a pure, virginal existence.

Though life and death are prevalent themes in Donne’s “The Flea,” their strength lies in their unification. By uniting life and death, much as the flea unites the blood of Donne and his
lover, a human being can achieve completion. Brown reiterates this idea by saying that “… Life and Death coexist in some undifferentiated unity at the animal level and that they could be reunified into some higher harmony in man” (87). This unification of life and death – this “higher harmony” – is none other than the construct of love. Love serves as the ultimate unity between life and death. Life refers to a multitude of acts and concepts within the broad spectrum of love and sexual/romantic desires. A new romance equals a new start and thus new life for the couple involved. If the union culminates in a pregnancy, then this too is an act of new life. Love serves as a method of rebirth as well. For Donne and his lady love, their rebirth comes in the form of indulging in the act of love despite the threat of danger. By casting off their concerns, the two are reborn as complete, fulfilled human beings. As previously stated, love is death no matter which path a person takes, whether it be submitting to love or refraining from it. Each instance culminates in a type of death – one which leads to ruin (repressing desire) and one which leads to unity and completion (indulging in desire).

In conclusion, psychoanalytic criticism allows one to glean several layers of meaning from Donne’s “The Flea.” To understand the meaning behind Donne’s imagery and philosophical predilections, one must first study the language prevalent throughout the poem. After all, language is love and sexual desire itself, according to Freud. Language reflects the inner workings of a person’s deepest innermost desires, and Donne’s language reflects his beliefs about the three archetypal themes of love, rebirth, and death. Donne weaves a love letter of his own to the prevailing idea that love (and in turn desire) exists as a unification of life and death. This cycle, when broken or repressed, leaves a person unfulfilled. Only by submitting to love and the inherent unity between life and death can a person achieve completion.
Works Cited


