The Flea
What does the title Mean???

❖ The title plays against our expectations in the subtlest of ways.
❖ We think that the insect will be the main focus of the poem but its not. Its just an excuse for the speaker to “woo” his lady-friend.
❖ So in this way the title is not that relevant to the poem.
Lines 1-2
Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is,

> The flea is a metaphor for the women he loves.
> We don’t know if he loves her or not. She has denied him something either physical, emotional or both but we don’t know what this is yet.

Lines 3-4
It suck’d me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.

> The flea is sucking the blood of the speaker and his lady friend.
> The flea is now mixing “mingling” the bloods together.
Lines 5-6
Thou know'st that this cannot be said,
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,

> Many of Donne's poems take the form of a long, complex argument, and we can see him starting to weave such an argument here.

Lines 7-9
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two
And this, alas! is more than we would do.

> The speaker almost sounds jealous of the flea, as if it were a romantic rival
> And, of course, Donne doesn't fail to give us the nausea-inducing image of the flea swelling up with blood as it continues to suck. We imagine the flea gradually expanding with a glazed look of satisfaction in its eyes.
Lines 10-11
O stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, yea, more than married are.

> As the woman raises her hand to kill the flea that is still sucking her flesh, the speaker begs her to hold off.
> The flea, he says, contains three lives: his, hers, and the flea's.

Lines 12-13
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.

> The speaker's absurd argument continues on, as if he has dug himself in too deep of a hole to try climbing out now.

> The speaker pushes the religious envelope further by describing the flea's body as a "temple" in which their marriage is consecrated.
Lines 14-15
Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.

> The order of the words in these lines is confusing, but the meaning is clear enough.

> We get more back-story about their relationship: her parents do not approve of their union. Or maybe they just don't want this randy guy getting all friendly with their daughter.

Lines 16-18
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

> She *really* is not too pleased with the speaker. Even he will admit that her experience and habits would naturally lead her to want to "kill" him!

> But he says that if she kills the flea she will be committing murder.

> It's murder because his blood is in the flea.
Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?

> Oh no! She killed it!
> Nonetheless, the speaker is crestfallen. He calls her action cruel and hasty.
> Still, though he sounds shocked, we know that nothing too terrible has really happened.

Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it suck’d from thee?

> He asks how the flea could have been guilty of anything except taking one small, teensy drop of her blood.
> He expands on his notion of the flea's innocence.
Lines 23-24

Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now.

> The woman has triumphed over the flea, and she believes she has also triumphed over the speaker's argument.

Lines 25-27

Tis true; then learn how false fears be;
Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

> In this case, he readily admits that his earlier argument has fallen apart. He brushes aside her objection by simply conceding, "'Tis true."

> Just as she felt no less powerful after killing the flea, she will be no less of a maiden after she has been with the speaker.
Strong Images

- One of the main strong images in this poem is the flea but the flea is just an excuse for the poet to impress his lady friend.
- Another strong image is the poet and how he cares so much for a tiny insect. When his lady friend kills it he is ashamed.
This little poem is a marvel of form and rhythm. Donne makes the writing look so easy that you hardly notice everything going on beneath the surface.

Let's start with the rhyme scheme: AABBCCDDDD. These couplets (and one triplet at the end of the stanza) help you keep track of the speaker's argument, which generally proceeds in two-line units. So each time we get a new rhyme, we're also getting a new idea. The rhyme words are very simple, usually limited to one syllable: this/is, thou/now, met/jet. The most commonly used rhyme words are "thee" and "be." Notice, too, Donne's clever pairing of "me," "thee," and "be" at the end of the poem. He manages to unite the couple in rhyme, if not in real life.

The poem's main rhythmic unit is the iamb: a short, unaccented syllable followed by a long, accented syllable:
This *flea* is *you* and *I*, and *this*
Our *mar*riage *bed*, and *mar*riage *tem*ple is (lines 12-13)
Poetic Techniques

Imagery
Metaphor
Simile
Alliteration
Personification
Theme of the poem

Guilt and blame

This theme is shown when the poet is saying there is no shame in losing maidenhead but guilts the woman. As a result the poet tries again to seduce her by making her think twice about killing the flea and saying it would be a great crime. However the woman is not fooled by this and smacks down the flea, with it, the poets arguments.
Tone of the poem

Argumentative tone
Feelings of frustration