

THE METAPHYSICAL POET: JOHN DONNE AND HIS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to interpret John Donne's as a religious poet. His works are better understood through the optic of Biblical knowledge, the backdrop of God's revelation of Himself. A poet's heart is filled with sympathy by the Spirit of his Maker and mind is illumined by His Word recognizes a much deeper sense of inspiring reality. In his poems, Donne uses the most effective and intimate of words to express his relation with God. The metaphysical poetry not only explains the existence of earthly things, but also reveals the religious significance of unnoticed or hitherto unappreciated aspects of temporal things. He also portrays satire in his poetry that deal the problem of true religion and it is a matter of great importance to Donne. He argues that it is better to examine carefully one's religious beliefs than blindly to follow any established tradition.

Key words: John Donne, metaphysical poetry, religious, God.

1. INTRODUCTION

English metaphysical poetry is the richest and most widely ranging in the language. Its style was most enthusiastic in the seventeenth century and it not only brought the best devotional poetry but also the finest lyrics, satires, pastorals and visionary meditations of that era (Edwin Honig). The poets gave the signal to the readers to enter into a new empire of poetry with a sense of attachment and belonging between different objects of nature and human sentiments, feeling and passion. This philosophical structure of poetic skill is associated with the different aspects of nature and its element represents the basics of metaphysical poetry which has been made by the pioneer John Donne.

Donne, an English poet, minister of Church of England and a public speaker is ranked with John Milton, as one of the greatest English poets. He was also a gifted artist in sermons and devotional writing. He is not only considered as the most prominent member but regarded as both the pioneer and also the chief spokesperson of metaphysical poetry. Robert Browning rightly complemented on Donne's poetic creation by the words "Who was the Prince of wits, amongst whom he reign'd / High as a Prince, and as great State maintained"? Donne had a prosperous literary life, beautify with numerous love poems, songs, sonnets, elegies, satires, sermons, religious verse and treatises but a majority of Donne's poetical works were published posthumously, barring a few like *The Anniversaries* and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Sarkar, 2012).

John Donne was born in London in Roman Catholic family in 1572. His father was a prosperous ironmonger of Welsh ancestry and his mother, Elizabeth Heywood, belonged from a cultured and religious Roman Catholic family. He was the third of six children. His father, also named John Donne, died in 1576, when Donne was only four years old, leaving his mother with the

responsibility of raising the children alone. A few months after her husband's death, she married with Dr. John Syringes who was a wealthy widower with three children of his own. Donne thus acquired a stepfather.

Donne was educated at home by Roman Catholic tutors until he was twelve years old. When he was 11, John and his brother Henry were admitted at Hertford College Oxford and after three years, he was admitted to the University of Cambridge where he studied for another three years. In fact, his whole life and work were strongly affected by the circumstance of his childhood. He suffered significantly because as a Roman Catholic so he was disabled from taking a degree at Oxford. But, more important, his mind was cast in the mold of learned religion (Kermode, 1957). During and after his education, he spent much of his considerable inheritance on women, literature, pastimes and travel.

He had a complex personality, an unusual blend of passion, enthusiasm, and brilliance; God and women were his favorite themes, but his subject otherwise extended over the pagan and the religious, the familiar and the unclear, the sarcastic and the sincere, the wittily bright and the religiously wise. In 1593, when Donne's brother Henry died of a fever in prison after being arrested for giving shelter to a prohibited Catholic priest, Donne began to question his faith. During this period of residence in London, he wrote his first book of poems, *Satires*, which is considered as one of Donne's most important literary efforts. His satires dealt about corruption in the legal system, ordinary poets, pompous courtiers and a society populated by fools and dishonest men. It was also assumed that his love poems, *Songs and Sonnets*, to be written at about the same time (<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/metaphysical.htm>).

It is considered that Donne's numerous illnesses, financial strain, and the deaths of his friends all contributed to the development of a more serious and religious tone in his later poems. Towards the end of his life, Donne wrote poems and holy sonnet like *Death Be not Proud* that challenged death and the fear which inspired many people to belief that after death they are sent to Heaven to live eternally. Except that, at the time of his sickness, he also delivered the 'Death's Duel sermon', which was later described as his own funeral sermon. His works revealed that he was always a serious student and a seeker after truth; and there is no sound evidence to support the myth. Certainly after his ordination, he dedicated his remarkable genius wholeheartedly to the service of God and thus became one of the most brilliant stars of the Anglican priests, whose exceptional literary genius was dedicated to the glory of God and the welfare of man.

After some years at Oxford and possibly Cambridge, Donne studied law at Lincoln's Inn from 1592 to 1594. During his years at the Inns of Court, he read much besides law which he explored in many fields and many languages. But, in 1601, he ruined his own successful career by secretly marrying Lady Egerton's niece, Ann More, a union not approved by More's father. After that he was not only dismissed from his post but also imprisoned for a short time and due to this reason he and his growing family were largely dependent on relatives and patrons.

1.1 Church Career of Donne

Donne was officially installed as a member of the clergy in the church to carry out religious duties and services for the royal court in 1615. In the same year, he also received a doctor of divinity degree from Cambridge. He was a reader in divinity at Lincoln's Inn from 1616 to 1622 where he preached regularly. His style, full of elaborate metaphors and religious symbolism, his elegance for drama, his wide learning and his quick wit soon established him as one of the greatest preachers of the era. But just as his fortunes seemed to be improving, in 1617 his wife, Anne Donne died at the age of thirty-three, after giving birth to their twelfth child, a stillborn. Seven of their children survived their mother's death.

Struck by grief, he wrote the [seventeenth Holy Sonnet](#) and his sermons are often surprisingly personal due to the death of a daughter, a son missing in action, his own departure abroad in

1619 and his remorse for past sins. He continued to write poetry, notably his *Holy Sonnets* but the time for love songs was over. In 1618, Donne went as chaplain with Viscount Doncaster in his embassy to the German princes. He was an embassy chaplain in Germany in 1619 and in 1621; he became dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. He attracted huge worshippers with his brilliant public speaking. In 1623, due to a serious illness he was inspired to write his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, a series of religious meditations which are moving meditations on sickness, death, and salvation.

At the end, he left his sickbed and brought into the platform to deliver his last and most famous sermon, "Death's Duel" on February 25, 1631 and on March 31 he died. His statue is wrapped in funeral shrouds and preserved at St. Paul's Cathedral. The figure is that of an old, experienced man who has thought and suffered greatly but has achieved some peace of mind. This aspect of Donne has perhaps been overstressed; he and death are a little too closely associated. This can be corrected only by prolonged reading in the sermons, or perhaps by reminding oneself of his marked interest in life: his desire for success made him the dependent of his rich and varied friendships with many persons who were central to the intellectual life of their time. But it is still true that he was a serious man, a melancholic even and that at a time when this quality was associated with the highest kind of wit (Kermode, 1957).

Donne, who was brought up in the Catholic faith had terrible experiences within the Catholic Church. His uncle was sentenced to death because of being a Jesuit and his brother was put into prison for protecting a priest. He examined his religious standpoint in early years. Nevertheless, for a long time, he was also in a conflict between ambition and asceticism and between the prospects of civil service and the claims of a religious life. But after a number of years, Donne continued to retain a soft corner for Catholics. He became one of the greatest preachers and developed over the years into a man of deep spirituality and wrote some of the major poems in the period of metaphysical poets before his priesthood.

1.2 Donne and his poetry

It was Donne poetry that reflected the shifting sensibility of his age. There are two distinct hemispheres in Donne's life and these are reflected in the poetry that he wrote; one is love poetry and another is religious poetry. The earlier one dealt with love and later one was directed and pointed at God. Donne spoke to readers and writers from diverse stances as love poet, rebel, satirist, melancholic and priest. His feeling and thought were felt. When he felt, he made his readers feel in the peculiar excitement and pleasure of mental activity itself. It smells roses. It was also in the 1590s that he wrote many of his love poems. He also composed poetic letters, funeral songs, and witty remarks, which were published after his death as *Songs and Sonnets*.

Donne wrote about military experience in his poems *The Storm*. He left the Roman Catholic Church in 1598 when he was a secretary of Sir Thomas Egerton. After 1601, his poetry became more serious. The two *Anniversaries*—*An Anatomy of the World* (1611) and *Of the Progress of the Soul* (1612)—reveal that his faith in the medieval order of things had been disturbed by the growing political, scientific, and philosophic doubt of the times. He wrote prose on religious and moral subjects.

He continued to write poems and about 1609 or 1610, he produced a powerful series of *Holy Sonnets*, in which he reflected on sickness, sin, death and love of God. By his glorious poems, Donne helped the readers to taste the metaphysical flavor of his poetic expressions. In his major love lyrics like *The Sun Rising*, *The Canonization*, *The Good Morrow*, *The Anniversary*, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, *The Ecstasy*, *Lovers' Infiniteness*, *The Flea*, *The Indifferent*, *A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day*, *A Valediction: Of Weeping*, *The Undertaking*, *The Relic*, *The Apparition*, *Love's Growth*, *The Dream*, *The Triple Fool*, *Song: Go And Catch A Falling Star etc.*,

Donne critically sketched human love to differentiate it from the conventional concept of love given by others (Sarkar, 2012).

In *The Canonization*, Donne had mixed love's timeless fragrance with love's combining power, through the symbol of phoenix which proved his creative talent as a poet addressing on love. Jonson suggested such kind of poetry runs the risk of neglect, especially in periods that value clarity and Dryden thought him as a great wit, rather than as a poet but the late seventeenth-century writers expressed their view that Donne was a renowned poet. Coleridge, Lamb, Browning and George Eliot admired him. During this middle period, he wrote *Biathanatos*, which was published in 1646 by his son after his death. In his *Pseudo-Martyr*, he accused Roman Catholic of promoting false martyrdom for money and in *Ignatius His Conclave*, he mocked the Jesuits. But it is interesting today because it reflects the astronomy of Galileo and toys with the notion of colonizing the moon.

When Donne was recovering from a serious illness, his private meditations, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* were published in 1624. The most famous of these is Meditation 17, which includes the immortal lines "No man is an island" and "never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee." In 1624, Donne was made vicar of St Dunstan's-in-the-West and in 1625, when James I died, he preached his first sermon for Charles I. He had poor health and he was obsessed with the idea of death. He also preached what was called his own funeral sermon, *Death's Duel*, just a few weeks before he died in London on March 31, 1631. The last thing, he wrote just before his death was *Hymn to God, My God* and *In my Sickness* (<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/metaphysical.htm>).

He was considered the pre-eminent representative of the metaphysical poets. His works are noted for their strong, sensual style and include sonnets, love poems, religious poems, Latin translations, epigrams, elegies, songs, satires and sermons. His poetry is noted for its vivacity of language and inventiveness of metaphor, especially compared to that of his contemporaries. Donne's style was characterized by sudden openings and various contradiction, ironies and disturbance. His early career was marked by poetry that bore immense knowledge of English society and he met that knowledge with sharp criticism. Another important theme in Donne's poetry was the idea of true religion, something that he spent much time considering and about which he often theorized. He was particularly famous for his mastery of metaphysical.

2. METAPHYSICAL ERA AND DONNE

A group of seventeenth century's poets wrote different type of poetry which neither contained the Elizabethan love-theme nor the chivalrous adventures. It was very well appreciated by the Elizabethan writers and also the readers. For the poets of this group, their poetry became a media of their mental and spiritual exercise. Their poetry was marked by the presence of divinity and religiosity in it. They made attempts positively to make their poetry look different from the poetry of the previous age. They introduced certain literary features in their poetry which, far above the elaboration, came to be recognized for the special features (Sarkar).

They were characterized by the inventive use of conceits, and by speculation about topics such as love or religion. They were not formally associated and most of them did not even know or read each other. Almost all of them were men of learning and their major function was to make the manifestation of their learning through their poetry. If we consider poetry as an imitative art as mentioned by Plato then John Donne and his school do not deserve to be called poets. They imitated nothing, neither from nature nor from life. Dr Johnson puts them below the level of imitators. The thoughts that they produced in their poetry were new but not natural.

According to Dr Johnson, in his book *Life of Cowley*, the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers and almost all them were men of learning and their major function

was to make the manifestation of their learning through their poetry. Whatever they wrote proved to be an exercise of their finger rather than of the ear. They are highly rated for the wit which was nothing but a combination of unrelated images which look different on the outside (Johnson, p.12).

Johnson's criticism may look logical because their main interest was centered for achieving something unexpected from the people and also surprised them. They neglected the human sentiments while writing their poetry and wanted to prove their superiority by showing the contemporary literary world that they had begun an endeavor which none of their precursor could think of. He defined them by their faults, not by their qualities. But modern critical opinion does not wholly support Johnson's criticism of these poets (Douglas Bush).

In one side, Dr. Johnson was showing the weakness of the metaphysical poetry and on the other side; he did not forget to show the positive side of it. They were fond of manifesting their wit by bringing about different conceits in their poetry and sometimes they were successful in finding out the unexpected truth. They depicted their conceits from such areas which were quite unfamiliar to the readers of literature and lovers of poetry. H J C Grierson uttered that the metaphysical truly described the "peculiar quality of their poetry" which was less verbal and more intellectual and nice mixture of passion and thought. Their poetic works had been enriched by the varied aspects of human life like love, religion, death etc. by way of demonstrating their impact on human life in a lively manner with the help of unbelievable imagery. According to him, it is their "greatest achievement" (Herbert Grierson, p-108).

Some of the metaphysical, who tried to portray spiritual love in their poetry, gave great importance to the tears of lovers. They gave emphasis on intellect not only in selection but also in the treatment of the subject-matter. And their approach of society to religion was also purely intellectual. They tried to express their understanding of religion in their own way so they rejected to play the same tune of medieval concept of religion. According to J E Duncan, John Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Cowley and Crashaw all are the metaphysical poets and they significantly contributed to this new poetic and shifted the mode of expression from abstract to personal which made their poetry vague for the readers. Such quality of personal expression was not present in all the metaphysical but John Donne successfully expressed his personal views on love and religion in many of his sonnets and poems (Edwin Honig and Oscar Williams, *The Major Metaphysical Poets of the Seventeenth Century*, p122).

3. DONNE: A RELIGIOUS POET

The metaphysical were familiar with the human elements like thought, passion and affections. They wanted to express their love or faith in Christianity which can be located in the poetry of Donne. The poets of that period faced a problem about the likely mode of expression which may help highlight their religious and philosophical ideas effectively. So, they selected intellectual language to express the content of religion, philosophy and platonic love. And in this era, the concept of religion had totally changed. Religious experience arouses emotions like wonder, awe, consolation fear, hope, and love; all feelings that turn our minds to beauty, goodness or the magnificent. When we conceive nature as a whole we come as close as we possibly can to experiencing God (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p.89).

Donne was the first metaphysical poet and also the first religious poet of 17th century. He earned great fame as a writer of divine verses and became one of the most renowned and distinguished religious poets of England. He was also the innovator of a new type of religious poetry. At the end of his career, his life was full of darkness, despair and frustration then he changed his writing style as a religious poet. His poems were addressed to God, death, angels or to Christ. However, the main idea of his religious poems was the essence of guilt and sins, and

the request to God for His Mercy. The first theme, he expressed in his poetry was his religious view and his second theme was about man's temporary stay in this world. Fear of Death was the third major theme of his poems. He regretted for the sins he had committed and felt fear of God's punishment. And another major theme of his poetry was his firm belief of responsibility. He thought that everyone would be answerable to God for his good or bad deeds. The last and major element of Donne as divine poet was that his aim in writing divine poetry was not instructive or moral rather he wished to give voice to his own moods, his aspirations, his sins and his humiliation in the search of God. T.S. Eliot expressed that almost all metaphysical practiced in representing their devotion to Christianity in their poetry but Donne looked different from the main current with the sensibility and special style of writing poetry. His *The Holy Sonnets* presents religious experience carved in words and his divine poems had a great influence on the successors of his school. The first special element of his poetry was the devotee and not divinity. And, second was that he spoke as an individual to his readers, not as a priest. Due to this, his poetry was noticeable with a personal quality. Donne was conscious of his current life and composed the poems keeping his view and his time. This self-consciousness was a major feature of his poetry. His poems represented human soul with awareness that it was not valuable of salvation; it had to struggle for salvation. In Donne's concept rebelling against God was Sin (Edwin Honig and Oscar Williams, p.277). It is found that as a poet, he focused on conflict and doubt. He questioned the assumptions and beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. Even after converting, his mind was not at peace because he could not rectify his inner conflicts. He looked within himself to find and measure his devotion to God and awareness of his sins and remorse. He also mentioned about the fear of death and felt regret for his past mistakes. It seems that he wrote his poems to search his own heart, list his fears and agitations, and expressed his love for God. He often prayed to God for mercy so that he would be able to build a faith with a strong foundation. Donne addressed himself directly to God in his poems *Batter my Heart* and *A Hymn to God the Father*. Both are religious poems addressing to God in informal style. In *Batter my Heart*, the poet expressed an emotional, distressed request for God to make his presence felt and *A Hymn to God the Father* is a calm, peaceful, hymn requesting and expecting forgiveness. He portrayed that man is a humble inadequate sinner whose duty is to serve supreme God (Ian Mackean, *John Donne. Religious poetry*, March 2007). The poem begins with the speaker asking God to batter, in the sense of attacking, his heart to restore his soul in the following because he had engaged with the enemy. He wanted his Creator to free him from the evil side to secure his eternal salvation. Consequently, the poem is the speaker's request to God.

The Progress of the Soul which was written in 1601 inclines towards Catholicism and it records the doubts and longings of a troubled delicate soul. Ben Jonson called it "the concept of Donne's transformation." In *Divine Poems*, Donne searched for divine grace to crown his effort which included *La Corona* and six holy sonnets. The *Holy Sonnets* contains 19 sacred poems. They belong to the period of doubt and intense inner struggle which preceded Donne's entry into the Church of England. There was a mood of melancholy and despair. The *Hymn to God*, written during his serious illness in 1623, was a sincere prayer to God to receive him in His grace.

His religious poems also contained images borrowed from sensual love to illustrate his personal religious experiences. He was always aware of his environment, in which he was living. According to him, religion should be a man's deliberate choice. It should be taken after careful study and observation. As a result of his approach, he got ready to embrace the Church of England. His conversation with Anglicism also influenced his poetry. Even after this change, he was not satisfied and could not find adequate or perfect answers to the questions arising in mind. Between this conflict, between the old and the new, in *Holy Sonnet* he utters:

"Show me, dear Christ, Thy spouse so bright and clear."

Donne was a religious man who applied in the service of God and wrote about religiosity in their poems. Consequently, the meaning of religious elements in literature had a strong impact at that

time but over the years, the question of the real existence of religious poetry had risen from different sides. Dr Jonson, for instance, described the problem in the way that it was not the fault of the poets that religious literature failed. He rather made itself the problem. But T.S Eliot thought differently about that topic and account religious poetry not only present but also real and great. The period of the metaphysical poets was a religious age in which the Church played an important role in public as well as in private life so that it obviously also occurred in literature (*Selected Essays*, p.246).

Donne further mentioned that the topics of religious poetry were faith, thanks, regret and request which are human being conducts to the Maker and have nothing to do with poetry. To declare religious feelings, there is nothing more necessary than the simplest expression, which makes it so great. Poetry would only lose its power when it is used to express something that is more perfect than itself. Each of his poems made a vivid image of some experience or of a situation which gives rise to the argument. In *Batter my Heart*, he compared himself to a usurped town. There is an allusion to religion and holiness in *The Sun Rising* with the line "Thy beams so reverend, and strong." Donne was setting the sun's rays on a higher plane here, calling them adored in a sense. Metaphysical poetry often tackles the great questions in life through the avenue of religion and religious thought. It is common for metaphysical poetry to contemplate the supernatural.

He made proper use of words to express his sharp sense of sorrow and also regret. According to him, there was no importance of remembering past because the future had the bright hope of Christ. And he was sure that Christ would save him from the Original Sin. He had the courage to interrogate even Christ and he knew that God would have to surrender to his prayer. Donne did not spend his sighs, tears and words for the suffering of Christ, he felt regret that his condition was much more painful than that of the thieves, drunkards, immoral and proud people. Nothing was stored for him except pain and suffering. In brief, Donne's Holy Sonnets is an ideal example of the use of words for devotional purposes. He wrote all the Holy Sonnets keeping Man and his approach to Christ at the center (Edwin Honig and Oscar Williams, 278).

4. Conclusion

John Donne is one of the most genius and versatile English poets and he is admired for his immense contribution in metaphysical poetry. We can find out in his writings lots of witty approaches full of satire, passionate feelings, striking conceits etc. to highlight the nature and reality revolving around the lives of people. The metaphysical poetry attracted the readers through ages but many writers like Dryden, Dr. Johnson strongly discarded his writings. They thought Donne unnecessarily used metaphysical aspects to confuse about the natural fact. Donne shines amongst them like a luminous star for his stunning and unequalled genius in rationalizing his daring imagination. He is highly evaluated all over the globe for his fantastic intellectual ability in describing the varied states of emotion and action of human beings.

Donne included so many important themes in his religious poetry, not only the shortness of the world but also of physical joys and happiness, and the sufferings of the soul. Perhaps the most important theme is the threat of death which led him to turn to Jesus as his rescuer. Although Donne wrote about the sins of physical pleasure and earthly happiness, it appears that he was not always able to separate himself from these joys. This is most likely why he continued to write poems of apology to God. That being said, one cannot disprove his belief in God and his desire to please Him.

As a metaphysical poet, he finds the philosophical idea every day. Metaphysical poetry and its associated arts do not attempt to prove what is, or what might be or what must be. Rather they carry the mind to values by viewing the ordinary from differing perspectives, sometimes familiar and sometimes new. The religious element especially between the speaker and God

should be emphasized in Donne's poems so that there might be more clarity about the religious literature and its existence in metaphysical poetry.

We find out that he looked within himself to find and measure his devotion to God, his awareness of his sins, and his need for repentance. There are also many mentions of his fear of death which made him repent for his past mistakes. He wrote about the sins of physical pleasure and earthly happiness, it appears that he was not always able to separate himself from these joys. Donne never had the intent of preaching morality for men to turn to virtue, but it seems that he wrote his poems as a way to search his own heart, list his fears and agitations, and express his love for God. Perhaps the most important theme is the threat of death which leads him to turn to Jesus as his Savior.

To sum up, in religious poetry, we find a record of his inner conflicts, his doubts, his yearnings and the questions regarding religion arising in his mind. Whatever the subject be, Donne's craftsmanship is admirable. What we admire more than anything else is the projection of his personality and his mastery over diction, imagery and versification.

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