

The Love Philosophy of John Donne

'John Donne - The highest poet English Language can boast of'

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Abstract: John Donne, the seventeenth century English poet is considered as the pre-eminent representative of the metaphysical age. The kind of images, symbols, and metaphors he used were truly revolutionary in spirit and far ahead of his times. Donne's poetry is about sexual ecstasy; physicality is how one achieves the divine. For him, 'Sainthood' and 'Divine' had a sexual connotation. He had a mystical and Puritan thought, according to which the coming together of two people is a holy communion after which no earthly bifurcations matter and one goes beyond them. The route to divine is through pure, selfless love. Donne's theology was not traditional and he was a true love philosopher. Donne's vocabulary and imagery is far beyond the conventionally celebrated and ornamental. He merged love and physicality with the divine, which is actually true, pure love. The love philosophy of John Donne was truly magnificent which though was initially criticized by many but actually set a benchmark for other writers and poets of his age and the further generations to come.

Key Words: Love, Divine, Sexual Ecstasy, Metaphysical.

1. INTRODUCTION:

John Donne (1572-1631) was an English poet and cleric in the Church of England. He is considered as the pre-eminent representative of the metaphysical poets and a pioneer of metaphysical conceit. His works are noted for their strong, sensual style and includes sonnets, love poems, religious poems, sermons, and satires. His early career was marked by poetry that bore immense knowledge of the English society, about which he was deeply skeptical and met the issue with sharp criticism. Abrupt openings, various kinds of paradoxes, ironies, and dislocations characterize the poet's style.

Donne's frequent dramatic or everyday speech rhythms, tense syntax, and tough eloquence set him truly apart in the history of English Literature. For John Donne, love was the most important element in life whose actual discovery was not in what is to be seen, but what is to be felt. As Joan Bennett said, Donne's poetry is "the work of one who has tasted every fruit in love's orchard..." Donne always portrayed himself in relation to women and God – and, indeed does it in a very clever, creative style. "Donne's monarchy of wit" says Leishman, "was not a trick or fashion but one of the greatest achievements of poetic intelligence."

True love with the divine, according to Donne, could actually elevate humankind to the highest phase in life, and could actually make sure that man becomes one with the divine. The route to reach divine was through experiencing true, selfless love.

John Donne, a student in his younger years in Lincoln's Inn, instead of pouring upon repetitive reports, judgments, and stature books, worked hard and accomplished himself with the more genteel kind of learning, moderately enjoying the pleasures of the town. His sharpness of wit and gaiety of fancy were thought of as the most characteristic, of our favourite poet. This is the state of life in which he composed his more brisk and youthful poems, which are rather commended for the height of fancy and acuteness of conceit, (and back then) for the smoothness of verse.

At last by King James's command, or rather earnest persuasion, (setting himself to the study of Theology and entering into Holy Orders) he was first made Preacher of Lincoln's Inn, and afterwards advanced to be Dean of Paul's. As of an eminent poet, he became a much more eminent preacher, so he rather improved than relinquish his poetical fancy, and converted it from human and worldly to Divine and Heavenly subjects.

Donne, who in his youth first of all produced love poems and then satires and verse letters at length, turned to sacred and holy songs when his old age was approaching; in all of which he displayed a surpassing keenness of wit. In his last years he entered the life of priesthood, gaining the Deanship of St. Paul's (as mentioned above), and became a

celebrated preacher. Edward Philips (John Milton's nephew), too praised Donne for the philosophy of love and divine that he propagated through his writings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Anthony Wood gave a brief account of Donne in his biographical dictionary of Oxford writers and bishops, *Athenae Oxonienses*. Wood opens with Donne's general standing: "John Donne, a person somewhat noted for his divinity knowledge in several languages, and other learning...", further describing Donne's stay at Lincoln's Inn: "After he had continued there two years in exercising his poetical faculty, he began to survey the body of dignity..." He sums up Donne, drawing on Walton's *Panegyric*: "He was a person of great wit, virtue, and abilities, learned in several faculties, and religious and exemplary in his life and conversation. In all, which being eminent, he was therefore celebrated, and his memory had in great veneration by the wits and virtuosi of his time."

Dr. Samuel Johnson became the first ever writer in the history who clubbed a very loose group of seventeenth century writers and called them the 'Metaphysical Poets'. In this regard, the work *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* by Samuel Johnson proves to be of extreme importance. Secondly, and even more important was T.S. Eliot's analysis, who almost presented the poets in a modern sense of his contemporary day. His first endeavor in the field was a review he wrote of Herbert J. C. Grierson's *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, which almost enlightened him of the immense significance of the style in the progression of English poetry, presenting the group of writers, especially Donne for their modern appeal.

Modern analysis of the writers in works like *John Donne: The Critical Heritage series* by A. J. Smith and Joe Nutt's *John Donne: The Poems* present the works in a comprehensive way along with a modern and new perspective. Works like Dr. David Naugle's "John Donne's Poetic Philosophy of Love" and C. S. Lewis's "Donne and Love Poetry in the Seventeenth Century" in Julian Lovelock's edited work, *Songs and Sonnets: A Casebook* gives interesting insights to readers. Thus, one could conclude that Donne belongs to the group of poets who was not only famous in his contemporary era, but is also one of the most loved in the modern age, that is the twenty-first century, too.

3. MATERIALS and METHOD:

Donne's poetry that enmeshes sublimity with ecstasy and the divine was clearly revolutionary. As William Wash put it, "...never was there a more copious fancy or greater reach of wit, than what appears in Donne." A historical analysis, that is, studying Donne's works and critical sources in a chronological order, has been adopted in this research article, however with a new outlook, a New Historicist approach.

Seeking an instance of the above, one could look at Donne's life. The first thing to remember about Donne is that he was a Catholic, the second, that he converted. And many people believed that he betrayed his faith. This too, greatly influenced his later poetry. The poetic evidence of this crisis is *Satire III, On Religion* – the great, crucial poem of Donne's early manhood. For most of its length it is not a satire at all, but a self-lacerating record of that moment which comes in the lives of almost all thinking people, when the beliefs of youth, unquestioningly assimilated and bound up with our closest personal attachments, come into conflict with the skepticism of the mature intellect.

His sonnets like *Holy Sonnet I, Holy Sonnet XIII* and *Sonnet XIV* and poems like *Twickenham Garden* and *Man to God's Image, Eve, to Man's was made* too trace Donne's journey from the 'secular to divine'. John Donne was born to danger. In such times, one becomes more stringent towards one's faith. Also, Donne converted. This produced a lot of chaos in his religious life, which is truly reflected in his divine poetry.

His divine poetry mainly deals with his love for God. The chaos is signified by themes like suffering of the soul and redemption of the soul, i.e., salvation. He also explores the theme of death and afterlife. He also glorifies Jesus as a savior, as in his poem, *A Hymn to God, the Father*.

Donne was an ambitious young man, restrained by his religion and his inside social circles he could not quite break until he turned his back on his Catholic faith and embraced the Church of England.

Ben Jonson declared that he was "the first poet of the world in some things" but likely to perish "for not being understood".

4. ANALYSIS and DISCUSSION – The Metaphysical Conceit:

Donne is considered the fountainhead of metaphysical poetry. Metaphysical conceits are extended, complex, far-fetched metaphors used chiefly during the seventeenth century. The comparisons used were startling, ingenious, intellectual and often taken to the point of absurdity. Donne's famous poem *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* talks about his idea of spiritual love. The poem uses some intellectual and startling conceits to highlight the relationship of a couple. He compares their souls to the two points on the architect's compass, which can never be separated.

(If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.)

Donne was an eristic to conventional thinking about love and physicality, chiefly with the divine. He gave a very vibrant touch to the language he used and there is a great vitality of mood characteristics, as in his poems, *The Sun Rising* and *The Canonization*.

The range of his imagery is far beyond the conventionally celebrated and the supreme love that he talks about is a very twisted kind of hyperbole. Donne has himself said about his work that- "Infinite work! Which doth so far extend, that none can study it to any end."

The Flea is one of his most popular erotic poems. He tells his beloved that she has no reason to deny him sexually as the flea has sucked blood from both of them and the blood has mingled in its gut (*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;*). So the flea has become their wedding bed though they are not married yet (*This flea is you and I, and this / Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;*).

Metaphysical poems are usually lyrics, short, musical and intense. It uses ordinary language, paradoxes, and puns. It propagates abstruse terminology and is characterized by wit, subtle argumentation and other surprising symbols. They fuse intellect and emotion and are often called an intellectual analysis of emotions. They are abrupt, colloquial and use unusual rhythms.

The images used are logical and sensuous, and that is what makes the poetry attractive and beautiful. As Samuel Johnson described metaphysical conceit as, "Wit...which is a combination of dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike...the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked together."

5. FINDINGS - A Comparison of his Earlier and Later Poems:

Donne has been, in deference to Pope's classification of poets, regarded as the father of the metaphysical, or fantastical school of English poets, which reached its height in the reign of King Charles I. His poetry divides itself into two distinctly marked divisions – 'Profane' and 'Sacred'. Most of Donne's earlier poems exhibit an uninhibited imaginative pursuit of sexual experience. His love poetry was written for a very limited coterie of friends. It would not have been written with any kind of publication in mind.

His poem *Elegy XVIII* has sexual love as its central concern, ending on a note of sententious advice for the 'who ever loves', who begins the poem. As Dr. David Naugle rightly states, "For the enormously complex and vexed John Donne, the one in whom all 'contraries meet', (*Holy Sonnet 18*), life was love – the love of women in his early life; then the love of his wife (Anne More), and finally the love of God...Love was the supreme concern of his mind, the preoccupation of his heart, the focus of his experience and the subject of his poetry...As a self appointed investigator, he examined love from every conceivable angle, tested its hypothesis, experienced its joys and embraced its sorrows."

Donne was not an accomplished philosopher of eroticism per se, but rather a psychological poet who philosophized about love, sometimes playfully, sometimes seriously. His earlier poetry is addressed to his beloved, mostly to his wife Anne More, like *The Flea* and *The Ecstasy*. His works have high-flown, deep concepts, and makes us think of him as a believer of the idea that the coming together of two souls was divine in itself. Donne's love poetry was written nearly four hundred years ago; yet one reason for its appeal is his 'love for love' and his 'love for ideas'.

For instance, a lover who is about to board a ship for a long voyage turns back to share a last intimacy with his mistress: "Here take my picture" (*Elegy 5*). Two lovers who have turned their backs upon a threatening world in *The Good Morrow*, celebrate their discovery of a new world in each other:

(Let sea-discoveries to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.)

The Flea and *To His Mistress Going to Bed* reveal some of Donne's sharpest insights into erotic experience, as his insights into social motives, follow out his sense of the bodily prompting of our most compelling urges, which are thus wholly subject to the momentary state of the physical organism itself. Some of Donne's finest love poems, such as *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, prescribe the condition of a mutual attachment, that time and distance cannot diminish.

C. S. Lewis traces three levels of sentiment in Donne's poetry. On the lowest level (in order of complexity), there is a celebration of simple appetite, as in *Elegy XIX*, 'very descriptive, intended to arouse the appetite it describes, to affect not only the imagination but the nervous system of the reader.' On the highest, or what Donne supposed to be the highest level we have the poems of 'ostentatiously virtuous love', *The Undertaking*, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* and *The Ecstasy*. Between these 'two extremes falls the great body of Donne's love poetry.' In "The Allegory

of Love”, Mr. Lewis writes, “...cynicism and idealism about women are twin fruits on the same branch – are the positive and negative poles of a single thing.”

His songs are full of the conceits criticized by Dr. Johnson: “...some of his ‘Epigrams’ are very good; his ‘Elegies’ are most offensively indecent; and the ‘Progress of the Soul’ is a disgusting burlesque of the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis.” The “Funeral Elegies” show the transition to sacred poetry; and it is on these and the “Holy Sonnets” that rests Donne’s claims to be called a religious-metaphysical poet.

Donne’s irregularity of versification in the “satires” was wholly undesigned. His lyrical poetry is fluent and easy; and the “Satires” of Hall, which preceded those of Donne by several years, show a comparative mastery over the heroic couplet, which could surely have been compassed by the later satirist. At a later point in his life, Donne mostly wrote divine poetry, his relationship with God, man’s relation with God and the route to reach divine.

Donne explores the idea of what is a sin and if love is a sin. He also talks about the nature of divine (whether loving, forgiving or not?) (*Will I be forgiven? - A Hymn to God, the Father*). In his sonnet, *Batter my Heart, Three Person’d God*, deals with doubt, which Donne actually faced in his life, i.e., his worthiness of being a Christian. His divine poetry includes, *Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward; Sonnet XVII, Sonnet XI, Sonnet VI*, the famous *Sonnet X (Death be Not Proud)* and *A Hymn to God, My Father in My Sickness*.

His poetry consists of his own private expressions, along with his satiric verses and poems (love and religious), which were never meant to be published. His works are fascinatingly honest, personal and straightforward, mostly dedicated to his beloved and to God. He has received much criticism over the years, but his paradoxes, puns and remarkable analogies about love, death, and religion, are still extremely loved among literature lovers.

6. TOWARDS DONNE’S LOVE PHILOSOPHY:

John Donne’s poetry is all about sexual ecstasy; physicality is how one achieves the divine. ‘Sainthood’ and ‘Divine’ have a sexual connotation. Sexual pleasure and religious enlightenment are very important in his poetry. The attitude of blasphemy towards religion, so evident in his poetry as Donne writing about physicality, was truly revolutionary, which gives a modern appeal to his poetry, also felt by critics like T. S. Eliot.

Donne uses a lot of hyperboles, litotes, and colloquial rhythms in his poetry. The rhetorical questions that he asks in the course of a poem truly reinforce what he is trying to convey. His poetry also has political connotations, which he very intelligently blends with love and religion, which is truly remarkable.

His idea about love is very earthly; according to him, love is a two-way process – ‘the merging of two and becoming one’. Love rewards a person, as in achieving sainthood (like in the poem, *The Canonization* – even if the Church will not grant sainthood, time, people and poetry will). According to the poet, physical consummation of love is how one expresses one’s love, i.e., religious ecstasy.

He explores the basic essence of love. The coming together of two people is a ‘Holy Communion’. Donne is not an ardent follower of true love, but the idea he takes along is that of a pure, platonic love. He has a mystical and Puritan thought; sex has a utilitarian approach. He mocked the idea of Elizabethan love and talked about the experiential part of love, the ‘love in totality’.

Donne propagated that the route to divine is through love. Love equates with the divine and God equates with love, because divinity cannot be contained in human creations. Also, when two people get together, no earthly bifurcations matter, one goes beyond them and differences fall apart. He explores the idea of rationality vs. irrationality of devotion (miracles and playfulness).

Donne’s theology is not traditional. ‘Christian Platonism’ constitutes the fundamental philosophy and outlook of his work. His writings are extremely complex and vexed. His poems include a lot of eroticism and psychological elements. He explores a lot of emotions – love of the body, soul, and physicality. There is an entire gamut of sublime and ecstasy. There is a union of religious, divine, sensuality and sexuality. His religious poems are experiential, very closely linked and intermeshed. He treats the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘physical’ together. Donne uses a lot of passionate vocabulary to retain the mood. When two people come together and become one – that is what Donne considered divine. Love transcends all worldly values, which is what he termed as ‘Absolute Bliss’.

There is a great vitality of mood characteristics in Donne’s writing while talking about the idea of supreme twisted love. His imagery, as said before, is far beyond the conventionally celebrated and ornamental. It is in the realm of the passionate, romantic ardor that he talked about merged love and physicality with the divine, and these are the very elements that have placed him in the list of the most loved poets in the history of English Literature.

7. CONCLUSION:

In 1921, T.S. Eliot wrote an essay called, *A Thought to Donne was an Experience*, in which he famously said that reading Donne modified his sensibility.

“His [Donne’s] writings are pungent and forcible, but exceedingly rugged and uncouth in their versification”, according to G. G. Cunningham.

Without being in the strictest sense of the word a sacred poet, Donne is one of those writers who have shown their reverence of religion, with the warmth and sincerity of genuine feeling. He is frequently rugged and obscure, yet he displays a depth of sentiment and an originality of thought, which contain the germs of true poetry.

His works, especially satires, though written in a measure inconceivably harsh, are models of strength and energy. An excellent poet and writer of verses dealing with the divinity of the seventeenth century, his writings show him to be a man of incomparable wit and learning, but his greatest excellence was and is still believed to be that of satire. He had a prodigious richness of fancy, but his thoughts were much debased by his versification. He was, however, highly celebrated by all the great men of that age and the following generations to come.

Donne is generally considered the most prominent member of the metaphysical poets. John Dryden had written of Donne in 1693: “He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softness of love”.

Donne’s poetry represents a shift from the strict, classical forms to more personal poetry, and though not critically much claimed but falling under the confessional genre of literature. He is noted for his poetic meter, which was structured with changing and jagged rhythms, to which Ben Johnson (the more classical minded) said, “Donne, for not keeping the accent, deserved hanging”.

Some scholars believe that Donne’s literary works reflect the changing trends of his life with love poetry and satires from his youth and religious sermons during his later years. Other scholars such as Helen Gardner, question the validity of this dating – most of his poems were published posthumously in 1633. The exception to these is his *Anniversaries*, which were published in 1612 and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, published in 1624. His sermons, too, are dated sometimes specifically by date and year. These kinds of exceptions and critical analysis of Donne as a poet and of his writings can be further researched upon.

None the less, the fact remains unchallenged (as said before) that he is one of the highest poet, English language can boast of, whose poetry was not only revolutionary in the seventeenth century, but clearly has a modern appeal to it. The nineteenth century scholars and critics regarded John Donne as, ‘An absolute and unique genius.’ No doubt about it, even in the twenty-first century, Donne remains one of the most loved poets in the history of English Literature.

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