

# John Donne: A Study of Love Themes and Metaphysical Concepts in 'Songs and Sonnets'

**Written By: - (First Author) Prithvi Raj, Lecturer in English, Govt. Sr. Sec. School, Gurera Distt Bhiwani (Haryana) and Ph.D Scholar of English under Enrolment No. 01409210087/09) Dravidian University, Kuppam (Andhra Pradesh)**

**Second Author : Dr. Radha Madhab Jha Associate Professor Of English B.K.Birla Institute Of Engineering & Technology, Pilani, Rajasthan, India.**

## Abstract

This research paper **highlights a study of love themes and metaphysical concepts in 'Songs and Sonnets'**. Really John Donne is **the pioneer poet to present diversity in his works regarding the love themes and metaphysical concepts**. This paper shows that really John Donne was a unique poet in his writing style of metaphysical and love poetry. As Donne's poems are concerned they do possess subtle metaphysical and love ideology with great intellect and genius. *The Flea* presents the subtle metaphysical ideology of a distressed lover when he stops his beloved holding her hand from slashing out a flea. *'Sweetest Love I do not go'* is a fine example of balance between intense love and longing for the beloved. *The Ecstasy* is an important Metaphysical poem in which Donne's idea of ecstasy drawn from Plotinus. *"Death be not proud"* presents an argument against the power of death. Addressing *'The Sun Rising'* has very colloquial opening. Donne addresses sun as 'busy old fool' sun which is the center of our existence the reason of life on earth such a careless regard.

John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* do not describe a single unchanging view of love; they express a wide variety of emotions and attitudes, as if Donne himself were trying to define his experience of love through his poetry. Love can be an experience of the body, the soul, or both; it can be a religious experience, or merely a sensual one, and it can give rise to emotions ranging from ecstasy to despair. Taking any one poem in isolation will give us a limited view of Donne's attitude to love, but treating each poem as part of a totality of experience, represented by all the *Songs and Sonnets*, it gives us an insight into the complex range of experiences that can be grouped under the single heading 'Love'.

In *'To His Mistress Going to Bed'* we see how highly Donne can praise sensual pleasure. He addresses the woman as:

Oh my America, my new found lande,  
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd, My  
myne of precious stones, my Empiree <sup>[1]</sup>

The images are of physical, material wealth, and anyone reading this poem alone would think Donne's interest in women was limited to the sexual level. He describes sex in terms of a religious experience; the woman is an 'Angel', she provides 'A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise', and the bed is 'loves hallow'd temple'. But although erotic, this is not a love poem; nowhere does he say that he loves the woman, or that sex is part of a deeper relationship.

In *The Extasie* Donne conveys a very different and more complex attitude to erotic pleasure, when it is just one part of the experience of love.

This Extasie doth unperplex

(We said) and tell us what we love, Wee

see by this, it was not sexe,

Wee see, we saw not what did move . . . Love's  
mysteries in soules doe grow, But yet the body  
is his booke.

The body and the soul are distinct, but related aspects of the totality of love. The uniting of souls is the purest and highest form of love, but this can only be attained through the uniting of bodies.

Soe soule into the soule may flow,  
Though it to body first repaire.

This focus on the soul leads Donne to express a condescending attitude towards physical love in this poem which is in marked contrast to the attitude he expressed in *To his Mistris Going to Bed*.

But O alas, so long, so farre  
Our bodies why doe wee forbear?  
They're ours, the though they're not wee. Wee are  
Th'intelligences, they the spheare.

But in reading Donne one soon learns that an attitude expressed in one poem is not to be taken as absolute and exclusive. One of Donne's characteristics is that he freely contradicts himself from one poem to another. The title of this poem, *The Extasie*, implies that love is a religious experience, just as the diction of *To his Mistris Going to Bed* conveyed sex as a religious experience. The religious metaphors give a hyperbolic intensity to his imagery, but the ideas expressed in *The Extasie* are firmly rooted in the scientific theories of his day.

Donne's view that spiritual love can be attained through physical love ties in with the contemporary theory of the 'chain of being'. Angels, presumably, could experience a totally spiritual love, unadulterated by the physical. But man, being part divine and part animal, can only reach the spiritual level through the sensual.

“So must pure lovers soules descend  
T'affections, and to faculties,  
That sense may reach and apprehend, Else a  
great Prince in prison lies”

The inherent superiority of the spiritual level, and the part love can play in refining man's nature towards the spiritual, is expressed in these lines:

“If any, so by love refin'd,  
That he soules language understood,  
And by good love were grown all minde” [2]

The scientific framework of Donne's view of love is also seen here: But as

all severall soules containe  
Mixture of things, they know not what, Love, these  
mixt soules, doth mixe againe, And makes both one,  
each this and that.

Just as the four elements, earth, air, fire, and water were supposed to combine to form new substances, so two souls mix to form a new unity. The strength and durability of this new unit is dependent upon how well the elements of the two souls are balanced, as we see from these lines from *The Good-Morrow*:

What ever dyes, was not mixt equally; It our  
two loves be one, or, thou and I  
Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.

A good example of this state, where two lovers' souls cannot be separated, even when they are physically far apart, is seen in *A Valediction: forbidding mourning*:

If they be two, they are two so  
As stiffe twin encompasses are two, Thy soule  
the fixt foot, makes no show To move, but  
doth, if th'other doe.

The idea of two coming together to form one is very important in Donne's view of love. When a couple find perfect love together they become all-sufficient to one another, forming a world of their own, which has no need of the outside world. This idea is expressed in these lines from *The Sunne Rising*:

She's all States, and all Princes, I, Nothing

else is.

Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere; This bed  
thy centre is, these walls, thy spheare.

And again it in *The Good-Morrow*:

For love, all love of other sights controules, And  
makes one little roome, an everywhere.

For Donne love transcends all worldly values. As we see in *The Canonization*, values such as wealth and glory have no place in the world of love.

With wealth your state, your minde with Arts improve, Take  
you a course, get you a place,  
Observe his honour, or his grace,  
Or the Kings reall, or his stamped face  
Contemplate; what you will, approve, So you  
will let me love.

Like love itself, the women to whom Donne's verses are addressed are usually praised in hyperbolic terms. In *The Sunne Rising* her eyes shine brighter than the sun. And in *The Dreame* she is praised as a being above the level of angels.

Yet I thought thee  
(For thou lov'st truth) an Angell, at first sight, But  
when I saw thou saw'st my heart,  
And knew'st my thoughts, beyond an Angels art,  
When thou knew'st what I dreamt, when thou knew'st when Excess of joy  
would wake me, and cam'st then,  
I do confesse, it could not chuse but bee Profane,  
to thinke thee anything but thee.

This reverence for woman sometimes leads Donne close to adopting the traditional attitude of the courtly lover, who suffers through being in love with a woman, usually already married, who scorns him. An example of this kind of love is suggested by the references to the symptoms of love in *The Canonization*:

“Alas, alas, who's injur'd by my love?  
What merchant ships have my sighs drown'd? Who saies  
my teares have overflow'd his ground? When did my  
colds a forward spring remove?

When did the heats which my veines fill Adde  
one man to the plagueie Bill” [3]

The courtly love ideal, however, is in conflict with Donne's ideal of two well-matched and well- balanced lovers whose souls unite to form one. In the poem *Loves Deitie* he expresses his contempt for the courtly ideal, which he sees as a corruption of the true nature of love.

I cannot thinke that hee, who then lov'd most, Sunke so  
low, as to love one which did scorne,  
. . . It cannot bee  
Love, till I love her, that loves mee.

In fact Donne is unusual, if not unique, for his era in that courtly love hardly appears in his poetry at all. Courtly love seems to depend on the lover being unsuccessful, whereas Donne rejoices in success at every level. And the courtly love poet always expresses the same experience of love, the range of situations and emotions dealt with being very limited.

In contrast Donne expresses an enormously wide range of feelings in his Songs and Sonnets, all relating to the experience of love, but varying from the heights of ecstasy to the depths of despair. This variety of feeling lends Donne's poetry much of its impact, for we seem to be reading an individual's personal experience of love, and not just a poet's contribution to a long-standing tradition of poetic love.

We have seen how in *The Extasie* Donne describes love as a sublime union of two souls. This perhaps is the highest form of love, but by no means the only one. *The Dreame* expresses a passionate mood of a more down-to-earth nature.

Enter these armes, for since thou thoughtst it best, Not to  
dreame all my dreame, let's do the rest.

*The Sunne Rising* expresses the reckless pride and satisfaction felt by the lover in bed with his mistress.

Busie old foole, unruly Sunne, Why  
dost thou thus,  
Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?

In *The Flea* Donne adopts a cynical and rather flippant tone towards his woman, using his wit to try to belittle and overcome her moral arguments, in favour of immediate pleasure.

Marke but this flea, and marke in this, How  
little that which thou deny'st me is

For Donne, love can lead to suffering and disillusionment as well as to ecstasy. *A Nocturnall upon S. Lucie's*



day, *Being the shortest day* is an extremely powerful evocation of the suffering caused by the death of a loved one, an experience which takes him beyond suffering to a state of absolute nothingness.

. . . Yea plants, yea stones detest  
And love; All, all some properties invest; If I an  
ordinary nothing were,  
As shadow, 'a light, and body must be here.

But I am none;

In *Twicknam Garden* Donne expresses extremes of disillusionment, his view of love here being totally opposed to his view in *The Extasie*:

The spider love, which transubstantiates all, And  
can convert Manna to gall,  
And his view of woman is totally opposed to the view expressed in most of his love poems:

Nor can you more judge womans thought by teares, Than  
by her shadow, her what she weares.  
O perverse sexe, where none is true but shee, Who's  
therefore true, because her truth kills mee.

Perhaps the most extreme anti-love poem of Donne's, and certainly the most un-courtly, is *The Apparition*. The bitterness expressed here is so intense that it is surely a hate poem; it opens:

When by thy scorne, O murther, I am dead,

And continues with the lover threatening to haunt his mistress after his death.

Finally, we ought to consider whether Donne's poetry expresses real love at all, or whether, as some critics suggest, he was merely a talented poet using his wit and ingenuity to create clever poems.

Johnson said of the Metaphysical poets: 'Their courtship was void of fondness and their lamentation of sorrow.' He did not feel that Donne's poetry moved the affections, or that Donne had necessarily felt the emotions in order to write the poems.

### Metaphysical Reality in The Poems

As Donne's poems are concerned they do possess subtle metaphysical ideology with great intellect and genius. Some profoundly written poems of John Donne have been selected to explore the metaphysical realities as such as: "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" the best example for metaphysical elements overflows in the lines:

*“As virtuous men passe mildly’ away, And whisper to their soules, to goe, Whilst some of their sad friends doe say, The breath goes now, and some say, no”*<sup>4</sup>

The poem begins by comparing the love between his beloved and himself with the passing away of virtuous men. Such men expire so peacefully that their friends cannot determine when they are truly dead. Indeed the separation merely adds to the distance covered by their love.

Another significant metaphysical feature prominently practiced by Donne is juxtaposing two different objects resembling with elements of conceit which takes the readers into passionate world. For example, the masterpiece of Donne, „The Flea“ presents the subtle metaphysical ideology of a distressed lover when he stops his beloved holding her hand from slashing out a flea. Donne compares himself and his beloved wife to the foot of the compass in which the one fixed foot i.e., his wife, remains fixed and the other i.e., Donne, goes way out and travels around. Though they apart, their souls are still one and such virtuous people never die.

*“And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be Confess it. This flea is you and I, and this Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.”*<sup>5</sup>

In the following poem, “Elegie: His Picture” Donne enunciates his metaphysical ideology as:

*“Here take my Picture; though I bid farewell,  
Thine, in my heart, where my soule dwels, shall dwel. ‘Tis like me now, but I dead, ‘twill be more When  
wee are shadowes both, than ‘twas before”*<sup>6</sup>

The picture resembles him both in life and in case he dies it would resemble closer and more intimate. He and the picture will both be mere shadows that will make his memory immortal even after death.

As far as his profound poem, “The Blossom”, Donne marvelously presents his metaphysical analysis as juxtaposing contrastive things. The poet tortures himself pointing that a woman never recognizes a true heart, because she herself has none, and decides to give his heart to one who would be glad to have it.

*“Little think’st thou, poore flower, whom I have watch’d sixe or seaven days,  
And seene thy birth, and seene what every houre Gave to thy growth, thee to this height to rise”*<sup>7</sup>

In another poem “Sweetest Love, I Do Not Go” which explores the sweet love of the poet towards his beloved as explains:

“ All kings, and their favourites, All glory’ of honors, beauties, wits,

.....But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day”

‘Sweetest Love I do not go’ is a fine example of balance between intense love and longing for the beloved. The first thing that appeals is the sincerity in love that Donne displays towards the beloved.

The plot speaks about the parting which is much against his wishes. Although it is known that death will separate them but he does not wish to accept that truth at least in the first stanza.

In next, two stanzas he sincerely wishes that she should avoid mourning his death because it is a very negative idea. Her sighs disturbs his soul and leave him agitated as if even thinking might, bring about the expected result. Even if death were to come between them, it is just a kind of sleep and when their souls awaken they would once again be united in after life.

The two lovers are so bound to each other that they do not exist as separate entities. An exquisite song, this love poetry by Donne belongs to conjugal love. It is considered less artificial, pure, and simple though intense it has feeling of those lyrics which in all probabilities were addressed to his wife.

“Sweetest love, I do not goe, For wearinesse of thee,

.....To use my selfe in jest Thus by fain’d deaths to dye.”

“A Hymn to God, The Father” is a religious hymn composed by the pioneering poet of the metaphysical school, John Donne. It begins with a simple question for God: will He forgive the sins that all humans are born into? Donne has reached his highest peak in metaphysical presentations. A good degree of development of sensibility expressed in the dramatic verse of later Elizabethan and early Jacobean poets is not found in any of the prose.

*The Ecstasy* is an important Metaphysical poem in which Donne’s idea of ecstasy drawn from Plotinus. Plotinus and Egyptian by birth live and studied under ammonias in Alexandria at a time when it was the center of the intellectual world, sitting with speculation and school, teachers of all kinds platonic and oriental, Egyptian and Christian. Donne, we may say share in common with Plotinus the metaphysical experience and the didactically analysis. We may get from his *Enneads* which explains the source of ecstasy.

“*Death be not proud*” presents an argument against the power of death. Addressing Death as a person, the speaker warns Death against pride in his power. Such power is merely an illusion, and the end Death thinks it brings to men and women is in fact a rest from world wariness for its alleged “victims”. The poet criticizes Death as a slave to other forces: fate, chance, kings and desperate men. Death is not in control, for a variety of other powers exercise their volition in taking lives. Even in the rest it brings, Death is inferior to drags. Finally, the speaker predicts the end of Death itself, stating “Death, thou shalt die”



'The Sun Rising' has very colloquial opening. Donne addresses sun as 'busy old fool' sun which is the center of our existence the reason of life on earth such a careless regard. The opening line itself turns the idea upside down. A conventional poetic address would regard sun as love giving, life giving qualities and with reverence. Intending of respecting sun Donne rebukes him and tells him to go away from that place because he peeps through curtains.

The sun disturbs lovers, and the first stanza, indicates the range of people on whom the sun should shine and awaken them. In the second stanza, he asks the sun what he thinks about himself. In the third stanza, Donne, the fact that all the world's wealth is insignificant in front of her love.

The poem consists of Donne's remarkable wit and conceit. This conceit continually upholds human regard. Intelligence brings about excitement in the witty movement. In spite of being full of wit, conceit and intelligent ideas, the tone of poem is colloquial.

Donne's poems are extraordinarily witty and ingenious, but this does not exclude the possibility that they also contain strong emotion. Donne's poems are quite capable of stirring the emotions, and no matter how clever his conceits, or revolutionary his thought, his poems would not work without a seed of genuine feeling at their centre.

### References:

- 1 All quotes taken from: *The Metaphysical Poets*. Ed. Helen Gardner. Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1957 (revised 1972)
- 2 Tillyard, E. M. W. *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Harmondsworth: Pelican. 1972
- 3 Lewis, C. S. *The Allegory of Love*. OUP 1973
- 4 Reeves, James, Ed., *Selected Poems of John Donne*, London, Heineman, 1952
- 5 Daiches, David, *A Critical History of English Literature*, Vol. I, Ronald Press Company, Supernova Publishers, 2015
- 6 Reeves, James, Ed., *Selected Poems of John Donne*, London, Heineman, 1952
- 7 Donne's Poetic Works: JC Grierson