



John Donne's Poetry: An Analysis

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English poet, preacher and prose writer John Donne was a chief exponent of Metaphysical style of poetry. Though little poetry was published during his time, his satires, love lyrics and elegies were widely circulated in private. Donne is rediscovered in modern times mostly due to J. C. Grierson and T. S. Eliot's efforts. Historians and critics have assessed him as one of the greatest English poets.

Life: Born in London of a Catholic family Donne had his education at Oxford and Cambridge. Donne was related to Sir Thomas More and Heywood through his mother. He studied law at Lincoln just to become a lawyer. Later he studied theology to know the difference between Protestantism and Catholicism. He had other hobbies as a contemporary describes him: "He was very neat, a great visitor of ladies, a great frequenter of play, a great writer of conceited verses."¹

Donne traveled in the continent and took part in the earl of Essex's expeditions to Spain. He became a secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton in 1598. In 1601 he fell in love with Anne More, niece of Sir Thomas More and daughter of Sir George More. They secretly married at More's displeasure and Donne was dismissed from his post. Donne lost his public career.

John Donne suffered the next ten years. Sir George Drury and Lucy, countess of Bedford helped him financially. In 1615 when King James I urged him Donne got ordained as a minister of the Church of England. Now he was forty-two years old. He became a chaplain to the king and he established himself as the greatest preacher of his time. In 1621 the King appointed him to the post of Dean of St Paul's Church. He served in that capacity til his death. As his friend and first biographer Isaac Walton says Donne's death in 1631 was as dramatic as his life. He was honourably interred in Old St Paul's.

Donne's Poetry: Some of Donne's early poetry reflects his imitation of the traditional poetry. His elegies are modeled on Ovid's *Amores* and his satires on that of Juvenal and Persius. Donne's main poetry collected in *Songs and Sonnets* and published posthumously by his son has his famed "Holy Sonnets" written around the year 1609. These poems express his most complex yet unfired personality. The poems are about his love for his wife Anne as much as his devotion to the transcendent deity. The collection contains both his love poems and devotional poems, otherwise known as profane and religious poems. It is said there is little physical description of any sort in Donne's piety. It is said,

“Specifically intellectual conceptions are manifest in the structures of his poems typically logical or argumentative, and in his figurative devices, notably the ‘conceit’—the startling even farfetched metaphor. Donne’s conceits, unlike those of some other baroque poets, are usually based not on an extravagant perception of physical resemblance but rather on an intellectually perceived resemblance of function or inner nature.”² Such is the case in the famous lines from ‘A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning’ ; in which Donne addresses his beloved, possibly his wife Anne, from whom he is about to be separated. It should be noted that Anne died in the year 1617. The poem refers to their two souls, strongly in unison:

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 th’ other do.

And though it in the center sit,
 Yet when the other far doth roam,
 It leans and hearkens after it,
 And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
 Like th’ other foot, obliquely run;
 Thy firmness makes my circle just,
 And makes me end where I begun.

For more than a generation after his death Donne remained the chief influence on English lyric poetry until the onset of neo-classical poetry in England. Most of the great later English poets honored him, however. John Dryden admired Donne’s wit but was troubled by his flouting of decorum; Alexander Pope found him worthy of imitation. Dr Samuel Johnson esteemed Donne’s learning but censured him for what Johnson felt was a lack of taste. S. T. Coleridge praised Donne, and he is probably to be regarded as one of Browning’s source for his creation of dramatic monologues. Finally T. S. Eliot, through his essay “Metaphysical Poetry” rehabilitated Donne as one of the greatest English poets ever admired.

Today John Donne is known as a ‘Metaphysical Poet.’ The term ‘Metaphysical poetry’ refers to some type of poetry that existed in all the ages and nations. It exists therein of the technical vocabulary of philosophy. As early as Donne’s own lifetime, William Drummond of Hawthornden decried the contemporaneous fashion that reduced poetry to ‘metaphysical ideas and scholastical quaddities.’ John Dryden censured Donne for the fact that in his love poetry he ‘affects the metaphysics...and perplexes

the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy.” It remained for Samuel Johnson, writing in 1779, to establish the phrase “the Metaphysical Poets” as the definitive designation of Donne and his followers. Yet Johnson deplored Donne’s fondness for the conceit, whereas Eliot in the 20th century, praised Donne for the same.

Donne’s Love Poetry: Donne’s love lyrics, the *Songs and Sonnets*, are strikingly original and are among the most read works in English poetry. Such poems as ‘The Good-Morrow,’ ‘The Canonization’ and ‘Lovers Infiniteness’ depart from the conventions observed by Elizabethan love poets such as Spenser, Sidney and Drayton in several ways. Frank J. Warnke thinks Donne’s love poems are dramatic rather than descriptive instead of delineating the beauties of his beloved or recounting the pangs of desire, he characteristically speaks directly to his beloved, some other individual or himself.

A stanza from ‘The Good-Morrow,’
 My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
 And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
 Here can we find two better hemispheres,
 Without sharp North, without declining West?
 Whatever dies was not mixed equally;
 If our two loves be one, or thou and I
 Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die.

A stanza from ‘The Canonization,’
 For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
 Or chide my palsy, my gout,
 My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune, flout,
 With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
 Take you a course, get you a place,
 Observe His Honour, or His Grace,
 Or the King’s real, or his stamped face
 Contemplate; what you will, approve,
 So you will let me love.

A stanza of ‘The Ecstasy,’
 Where, like a pillow on a bed,
 A pregnant bank swelled up to rest
 The violet’s reclining head,
 Sat we two, one another’s best.

It is said, “Donne’s eminence among love poets rests not only on the intensity of his expression and the completeness with which he explores the range of amorous experience and its manifold moods, but also on the nobility of his conception of sexual love. This conception, derived from Plato and influenced by Patriarch, departs from its sources in refusing to separate spiritual love from the bodily love in which, for Donne, it is rooted. His attitude is summed up in ‘The Extasie,’ his most sustained presentation of an amorous philosophy.”⁴

Donne’s interest in Copernican astronomy is evident in his composition of two anniversary poems. He composed one when fourteen years old daughter of Sir Robert Drury died in 1610, and the other he published in *The First Anniversarie: An Anatomy of the World*, accompanied by ‘A Funeral Elegie.’ in these works the girl is identified with some kind of vital female principle, the destruction of which means nothing less than the death of the world. In both, it is felt the Copernican discovery destroyed the religious concept of the world. Copernicus developed his theory this time. See Donne’s poem,

As New Philosophy arrest the sun,
And bids the passive earth about it run.

Devotional Poems: Once Donne was ordained in the Anglican Church he started writing devotional or religious poems. Some of his best such poems are ‘A Nocturnall upon St Lucies Day, Being the Shortest Day,’ ‘A Hymne to Christ at the Authors Last Going into Germany,’ ‘A Hymne to God the Father,’ and ‘Hymne to God my God in my Sicknesse.’ The first one was written about the death of his wife Anne in 1617. This hymn displays the poet’s desperate love for his dead wife with absolute love of god that he is trying to achieve. For example,

‘Tis the year’s midnight and it is the day’s,
Lucy’s, who scarce seven hours herself unmaskes;
The sun is spent, and now his flasks
Send forth light squibs, no constant rays.
The world’s whole sap is sunk;
The general balm th’ hydroptic earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the bed’s feet, life is shrunk,
Dead and interred; yet all these seem to laugh,
Compared with me, who am their epitaph.

In the second one he urges God to compel him to love Him alone. Donne composed ‘Hymne to God my God, in my Sicknesse’ when he was on deathbed. It is reminiscent of Donne’s religious prose in its sobriety of tone and singleness of purpose. The poem recalls both the ‘Holy Sonnets’ and ‘Songs

and Sonnets.’ Its exploitation of the imagery of geography and exploration reminds the reader of such love poems as ‘The Good Morrow,’ and ‘The Sunne Rising.’

Since I am coming to that holy room
 Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
 I shall be made thy music; as I come
 I tune the instrument here at the door,
 And what I must do then, think now before.

Donne’s satires are equally noteworthy. They are direct, natural and truly poetical – abounding in rich thought and melody. Donne is usually considered as the first writer of satire, in rhyming couplets, such as Dryden, Young, and Pope carried to perfection. A copy of his first three satires is in the British Museum, among the Harleian manuscripts, and bears date 1593. the fourth was transcribed by Drummond in 1594, three years before the appearance of Hall’s satires. Acting upon a hint thrown out by Dryden, Pope modernized some of Donne’s satires.

Donne’s Prose:

Donne is credited with several verse letters which are often witty and satirical addressed to fellow intellectuals. His prose piece *Biathanatos*, speaks of sin. It proves that suicide “is not so naturally a sinne, that it may never be otherwise.” *Pseudo-Martyr* is a treatise arguing the Anglican position against the Roman Catholic position. Donne’s tract *Ignatius His Conclave* is a hilarious prose satire against the Jesuits.

After his ordination Donne devoted much of his time for composing sermons. He has composed and delivered 160 sermons. Isaac Walton describes his friend the dean as ‘a preacher in earnest; weeping sometimes for his auditory, sometimes with them; always preaching to himself like an angel from a cloud, but in none.’ His sermons are about Christianity. A recurrent theme of them is divine love, inevitable death and dissolution of the body. However, Donne does not show any contempt for the body. Donne’s sermons speak of the theme of brotherhood as Koranic preaching do. They achieve dramatic and colloquial immediacy rather than lyrical gaiety.

References:

1. American Encyclopedia, p.290.
2. Frank J. Warnke, Coeditor of “Seventieth-Century Prose and Poetry,” American Encyclopedia, Vol. 6. p 290.
3. All the textual references are from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th edition, Vol.
4. Frank J. Warnke, *ibid.*, p. 289.