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A Study of John Donne as a Metaphysical Poet

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Introduction

Literally 'Meta' means "beyond" and "physics" means "physical nature". It was Dryden who first used the word, "Metaphysical" in connection with Donne's poetry and wrote, Donne affects the "Metaphysics" and Dr. Jonson confirmed the judgment of Dryden. Ever since the word, Metaphysical has been used for Donne and his followers. Donne is metaphysical not only by virtue of his scholastic but by his deep reflective interest in the experience of which his poetry is the expression.

This type of poetry is witty, ingenious and highly philosophical. Its topics included love, life and existence. **Metaphysical poetry used literary elements of similes, metaphors, imagery, paradoxes, conceit, and far-fetched views of reality.** Metaphysical poetry represents the splendid and thorough amalgamation of intellect and emotion, creative wit and sharp humor so as to accustom the readers with a new model of poetic excellence.

John Donne, the pioneer of this metaphysical school of poetry, and his contemporaries like Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughan, George Herbert and Richard Crashaw importantly contributed to this new poetic field of metaphysical poetry. In this regard, Grierson rightly describes metaphysical poetry as "poetry inspired by a philosophical concept of the universe and the role assigned to human spirit in the great drama of existence."

Metaphysical imagery and conceit

In other words, Donne's poetry may be called 'Metaphysical' only in as far as its technique or style is concerned. It is heavily over loaded with conceits which may be defined as the excessive use of over-elaborated similes and metaphors. The peculiarity of the metaphysical lies in the fact the...

- 1) They use figures of speech excessively.
- 2) Their similes and metaphors are far-fetched and are often drawn from unfamiliar sources.
- 3) Their figures are elaborated to the farthest limit.
- 4) The relationships they perceive are occult. They are not obvious on the face of nature.
- 5) Their images are logical and intellectual rather than sensuous or emotional.

The chief characteristic of Donne's metaphysical poetry may be summarized as follows

1. It is complex and difficult. Most varied concepts are brought together.
2. It is intellectual in tone. There is an analysis of the most delicate shades of psychological experience.
3. There is a fusion of emotion and intellect, as there is intellectual analysis of emotions personally, experienced by the poet.
4. It is full of conceits which are learned, intellectual and over elaborated.
5. It is argumentative. There is Cubic evolution of thought as Donne advanced arguments, after arguments to prove his points. He is often like a lawyer choosing the fittest arguments for the case.
6. Originality is achieved by the use of a new vocabulary drawn from the world of trade and commerce, the art and the science.
7. In order to arrest attention of tone a poem begins abruptly and colloquially, and unusual rethems are used unusual compound words are also used for the same purpose.
8. It is often dramatic in form. The blossom is the form of a dialogue between the poet and his heart which is treated as a separate entity, has been well said his poetry presents a drama of ideas. His lyrics are dramatic. A poem of Donne's is a piece of drama.

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"*¹

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."*²

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'"*³

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"*⁴

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. **Here he wants to experience false death only to get used to the idea of life without her. No one but she is capable of being fit to be his love in life.** Though she does not like the idea of separation, he tries to persuade her and accepts the reality. He compares himself with sun which rises every day, does the routine job and goes away. The lover expresses the idea that his love is speedier than the movement of sun and also, brighter more forceful.

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.

John Donne's remarkable performance which made metaphysical poetry vigorous in using sparkling wit and jarring language has become a model among his followers. In an excellent piece of poem "A Hymn to God, The Father" the poet mesmerizes the readers by presenting the abundant love and forgiveness of God as omnipotent and omnipresent. This poem embodies the religious elements overflows the metaphysical elements.

"Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun, which was my sin, though it were done before? Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run, and do un still, though still I do deplore?"

The Dream is the good example of one of Donne's more erotic poem. It is a playful in the scenes we have a sort of verbal foreplay situation: Playful, but with a serious desire for sexual union afterwards. **The poem plays with ideas of truth, sexual desires and dreams. He is clearly having an erotic dream when his lady friend wakes him for some reasons.**

Like an angle.

Angles appear in dreams:-are dressed in white, as she would be I her nightgown, and we call our loved ones angles, but angles have their limits. They cannot read people's thoughts, she however must have read his dream, walking him before it reached its climax prevent. **'Excess of joy' waling him instead. So she must be human after all angles. The ultimate job is of course we don't know if this real situation for the purposes writing a poem.** This is thus an excellent example of a play of literature, its joyfulness where the trust dream literature a real life teases one another.

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 Alexander 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.

"A soul that knows itself must know that the proper direction of energy is not outward in a straight line, but round a center which is within it"

The soul of man is threefold.

1. The animal or sensual soul closely bound to the body.
2. The logical reasoning human soul.
3. The intellectual soul, which is one with the Divine Mind. All these ideas are in the background of Donne's mind in the poem

“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 ‘The Sun Rising’ 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.

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