
John Donne: The Innovator of a New Kind of Love Poetry

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Abstract: *John Donne, the founder of the Metaphysical School of Poetry, is the greatest poet of this school. He is remarkable for the variety and scope of his love lyrics and for his oscillation between physical and holy love, between cynicism and faith in love. He is quite original in presenting love-situations and moods which are partly based on common experiences of his contemporaries and partly on his own experiences. His contemporaries wrote love-lyrics after the manner of Petrarch and Ronsard. He moves slowly from the convention of Petrarch. His love songs are unconventional and original, both in form and content. The quality of Donne's love poems is its metaphysical strain. He does not lay stress on beauty or rather aesthetic element in passion. His poems are entirely different from the Elizabethan love lyrics. Donne showed his talent in this genre. In this paper my attempt is to establish the point of view that John Donne was an innovator of a new kind of love poetry in his time.*

Keywords: *Elizabethan, Love, Metaphysical, Petrarchanism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

A wave of romance swept the minds of creative writers. There was a spirit of adventure in literary output, in the efforts to create new literary forms and meters, the desire to reject the old traditions and conventions of theme and expression in literary writing. John Donne is a contemporary of Marlowe and Shakespeare and he shares with them the spirit and the quality of the Renaissance. The contradictions of the age are reflected in the career and achievement of Donne. Of all the poets of his time, he most successfully articulated the scientific ideas in his love poetry. It was an age of intellectual and cultural transition and Donne was analytically concerned with the forces shaping contemporary thought and sensibility. It was this duality of his mind which, more than anything else made him the founder of a new school of poetry. Donne's treatment of love is entirely unconventional. He does not fall in line with the ways and modes of feeling and expression found in the Elizabethan love poetry. Most of the Elizabethan poets followed the fashion set by Petrarch, an Italian sonneteer, in his treatment of love. According to that fashion the lover was always subject, humble. He was very obedient to his mistress's wishes and sighed, wept, yearned, pined, and languished for her. The beloved's coldness and indifference did not damp his enthusiasm. In fact, Petrarch had been widely imitated, and, therefore, cheapened. Besides, the Elizabethan poets were fond of making references to Greek gods and goddesses like Cupid and Venus in their love poetry. Donne rebels against these stale and hackneyed conventions of love poetry. He rejects the lofty cult of the woman. She is no deity or goddess to be worshipped. He ridicules and laughs at her. Broadly speaking, the metaphysical poetry was a revolt against the romantic conventionalism of Elizabethan love poetry. The tendency of Donne, Cowley, and others towards psychological analysis of the emotion of love and religion, their fondness for the novel and shocking, their use of the 'conceits' and the extremes to which they sometimes carried their technique resulted frequently in obscurity, rough verse, strained imagery, repulsive realism, and violation of good taste.

2. REVOLUTION AGAINST THE ELIZABETHAN POETRY

John Donne was an Elizabethan, in the restricted sense of the term, and yet he gave a new direction to the creative activity of his age. Elizabethan poetry followed certain conventions. There were the Petrarchan tradition, the pastoral convention, and the classical norms. There were advantages and disadvantages in these conventions. The sonnet sequences of the Elizabethan age flowed in the Petrarchan channel. The poet sang of the pains and sorrows of love, the beauty of the beloved and her steady cruelty. The images were borrowed from nature – rain, wind, fire, ice, and storm; from the classics and mythology – Venus, Cupid, Cynthia and Apollo. Poetry became a tame and mechanical art, devoid of originality and true feeling. Donne has been categorized both by Dryden and Samuel Johnson as a "metaphysical poet". This has been conferred on him because of "his sudden flights from the material to the spiritual sphere" and also because of his obscurity which is occasionally baffling. His works abounds in wit

and conceits. Conceits are the very soul and stuff of his poetic diction. He set a fashion for metaphysical conceits and influenced a number of contemporary poets like Crashaw and Cowley. Passionate thinking combined with intense intellectual activity is one of main aspects of John Donne's poetry. T.S. Eliot thinks that "passionate thinking" is the chief mark of metaphysical poetry. Donne, in 'The Anniversary', gives a lofty expression to the love and mutual trust of himself and his wife. His restless mind seeks far-fetched ideas, similitude and images in order to convey the reader the exact quality of this love and trust.

By 1590, there were distinct indications of a revolt against the prevailing conventions in poetry. The conventional themes and conceits no longer appealed to the readers. There was opposition both to poetic themes, images, and styles. The bold bawdry of the Elizabethan poets, their references to Greek gods and classical myths were held up to ridicule. Donne challenged the prevailing forms and conventions in Elizabethan poetry. He introduced the 'metaphysical lyric'. On the whole, he was anti-Petrarchan, though at times, he wrote in the Petrarchan vein. He represented the swing from the romantic to the sexual, in English love poetry. His mood was similar to that of Shakespeare when the latter wrote the "dark-lady" sonnets. Donne questioned the sonneteers' constancy to their mistress and ridiculed their Platonism which was a mere pose. He dwelt on the delights of physical love. Moreover, Donne's flair for satire showed his impatience with the artificial and conventional love poetry.

The seventh century was fundamentally an age of transition and revolution. The old medieval world of ideas was undergoing rapid transformation. But there was an element of underlying continuity of tradition. So, one of the basic features of this age is the presence of a tension between the old and the new. The medieval thinker was religious. His outlook on science was theological and metaphysical. He was interested in the origin and the final end of man. The age of Donne was a period of transition. Many changes in the political, social and economic domains were being affected. Colonial expression and increase in industry and trade made people materialistic. The study of medieval literature developed the minds of the readers. Though the education was not so widespread, the common man spared no opportunity of obtaining knowledge from any source. Medieval beliefs held their ground both in Donne and his contemporaries. The discovery of the physical world was another aspect of this age. Columbus discovered America and Vasco de Gama found a new route to India. The English ships sailed round the world and revealed the riches the glories of ancient but hitherto-unknown lands. Donne was intensely interested in the expression of the limits and the knowledge of the physical world. His comparisons, references and allusions to different lands the maps of new regions show conclusively that he was inspired by the wonder and the expanding horizon of the world he lived in. This picture is reflected in the following lines of his poem, 'The Good Morrow':

Let sea-discovers 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 creative faculty of writers was encouraged to imagine new worlds and islands on the basis of the new discoveries. This kind of pure love provides a complete world to the lovers. It is much better than the physical world.

It is hard to find among the English poets, a genius of such versatility and complexity as John Donne. Brought up as a Catholic, Donne led a life of pleasure and promise as a young gallant in the temple in London. He was, in the words of Sir Richard Barker, "not dissolute but very great", a great visitor of ladies, a great frequenter of plays, a great writer of conceited verses. He was not quite sensual, he was passionate and arrogant. In his poems, he lays little stress on the aesthetic element in passion. He had little feeling for pure and artistic beauty. But he ranges through the different moods of passion – from the earliest to the sublimest. Undoubtedly, Donne was ambitious. But there was one hurdle in his way. He was a Catholic. Donne knew that for most men, religion was an accident of birth. He voices the right of the individual to choose his faith and to doubt wisely. As a typical product of the Renaissance movement, Donne shows elements of humanism, both in his personality and poetry. Donne and the religious poets of the seventeenth century were true humanists; they believed in the Christian concept of human nature and man's dependence on God. The advance of knowledge, the discoveries and inventions of science, were viewed by them as manifestation of the Divine Power. The circulation of blood, the motion of the earth, the various natural phenomena only tended to show how man fitted in God's universe

3. DONNE'S INNOVATION IN LOVE POETRY

The distinguishing quality of John Donne is that he is unique in treatment of his love poetry which was written in his brilliant and turbulent youth. According to Dryden, Donne affects the metaphysics not only in his satires but in his

amorous verses where nature only should reign. He perplexes the mind of fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts and entertain them with the softness of love. Tenderness and sentiment are not the qualities to be found in Donne's poetry. The metaphysical strain is evident in his scholasticism, his game of elaborating fantastic conceits, his hyperboles, and paradoxes. Donne uses the common emblem of perfection and intensity of love by means of the circle. In his poem 'Love's Growth', love is symbolized by the growing circles of water stirred by a pebble.

If as in water stirred more circles be, Produc'd by one, love such additions take.

Donne in 'Love's Infiniteness' pleads with his beloved that she should give him a part of her heart. After she has given him a part, he demands the whole heart. When she has given him the entire heart, he feels that his love must grow and have a hope for future. Love's riddles are, that though thy heart depart It stays at home, and thou with losing sav'st it; But we will have a way more liberal, Than changing hearts, to join them, so we shall Be one, one another's all.

We may divide Donne's love poems under three heads – firstly, poems of moods of lovers, seduction and free love or fanciful relationship; secondly, poems addressed to Anne More(his wife) both before and after marriage; thirdly, poems addressed to noble ladies of his acquaintance and compliments to wives and daughters of citizens. There are mainly three strands in his love poems – the strand of casual and extra-marital relation with ladies, the strand of happy married life and the joy of conjugal love in poems like 'A Valediction: Forbidding Morning' addressed to his wife, and the Platonic strand as in 'The Canonization', where love is regarded as a holy emotion like the worship of a devotee of God.

Donne's treatment is realistic and not idealistic. He knows the weakness of the flesh, the pleasures of sex, and the joy of secret meetings. However, he tries to establish the relationship between the body and the soul. True love does not pertain to the body; it is the relationship of one soul to another soul. The sex is holy whether within or outside marriage is declared by Donne in his love poems. If love is mutual, physical union even outside marriage cannot be condemned. Though as a Christian he may not justify extra-marital relationship, as lover and as a poet, he does accept its reality and joy. He would not scorn such relationship as adultery. Donne's attitude to woman is different from his contemporaries. He does not feel that the woman is a sex doll or a goddess. She is essentially a bundle of contradictions. He believes in 'Frailty, thy name is woman'. This two-fold attitude to woman – woman as a butterfly and woman as an angel – depends on the situation and the mood of the poet. In the poems addressed to his wife – Anne more – the poet deals with the joys of fulfilled and consummated love.

While Elizabethan love lyrics are, by and large, imitations of the Petrarchan traditions, Donne's love poems stand by themselves. Donne is fully acquainted with the Petrarchan model where woman is an object of beauty, love and perfection. Such set themes are treated differently by Donne. To him woman is made of flesh and blood and she loves sex as much as man. In 'The Indifferent', Donne openly declares that he does not mind the complexion or proportions of any girl. All that he wants is sexual intimacy. However, he establishes a metaphysical relationship between body and soul – namely that physical love leads to spiritual love as in 'The Ecstasy'.

Love's mysteries in souls do grow, But yet the body is his book.

Donne is different from Petrarch in his attitude to love. Here he is wooing, but it is of a different type.

Most of the poems in 'Songs and Sonnets' and 'Elegies' belong to the first group of Donne's poems Donne analyses the attitudes and moods of love. The majority of the poems belong to the dark period of 1590. In this stage Donne frequently dwells on the fickleness of woman. To him, no woman is capable of faith and virtue. The second group of his love poems is sincere, dignified and grand. The songs are intensely personal. They are addressed to his wife. Many of them were written after marriage. 'The Anniversary' was written to celebrate the second of his wedding. It gives the fine pictures of domestic bliss. Married love knows no change or decay. It is immortal and must continue even in the grave. All other things to their destruction draw, Only our love hath no decay; This no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday.

The third category of Donne's love poems is partly Petrarchan and partly Ovidian in tone. These songs and poems are written in conventional exercises in praise of certain ladies whom Donne knew. Some of them were addressed

to the Countess of Bedford and some to Mrs. Magdalene Herbert. 'The Relic' is addressed to Mrs. Herbert. All measures and all language I should pass, Should I tell what a miracle she was.

In the later poems, Donne achieves the peace that passes understanding through divine love. The journey from physical love to spiritual love is the way of the mystics. So, real and passionate love is the path of a self-discovery, the finding of the universal soul.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude this article we must admit that Donne's love poetry is a record of moods, of the conflict between emotion and intellect, of the war between sense and spirit, body and soul. After the storm of passion subsided, Donne returned to his spiritual self. The variety of moods, situation and treatment of theme of love as sensual, realistic, violent and full of vivacity of life carries the charm and astonishment for the reader. And for this reason, it is very significant and meaningful to treat John Donne as the innovator of a new kind of love poetry in his time.

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