

DONNE'S METAPHYSICAL POETRY: A NEW THEORY OF LOVE

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ABSTRACT

Generally, Donne is read and taught as a metaphysical poet and not a theorist. The paper aims to present Donne as a theorist of love, and discusses multidimensional aspects of his theory implicitly presented in his poetry. Through thematic analysis of his poetry, his theory can be established on various key points, of which ardent, platonic, spiritual, carnal, cynical, brutal, flirtatious and venomous ones are significant.

Keywords: Donne, metaphysical poetry, women's love

INTRODUCTION

As a point of departure, English poetry may be divided into different ages for the convenience of study; for instance, Anglo-Saxon poetry, classical poetry, neoclassical poetry, metaphysical poetry, romantic poetry, modern poetry and so forth. Strictly speaking, metaphysical poetry does not represent to an age rather it is a distinctive school of thought that is distinguished with other trends of poetry by salient features that are the recognizing points of the school of poetry of which John Donne is the leading star. The sort of lyrical poetry of the school was highly intellectual and was written in 17th century England. Besides Donne, some other poets are also listed in this school like George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Robert Southwell, Richard Crashaw, Thomas Traherne, and Henry Vaughan but they are just followers to Donne and cannot claim to equalize Donne in any way.

Donne's poetry is associated to so-called "metaphysical type of poetry." In the outset of the discussion, it would not be inappropriate to interpret the word metaphysical and to probe the origin of what is called metaphysical poetry. Grierson (1921) defines metaphysical poetry in such words: "a poetry which, like that of the *Divina Commedia*, the *De Nature Rerum*, perhaps Goethe's *Faust*, has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence." Donne was not a conscious reviver of Dante's metaphysics and consequently this definition does not throw much light on the nature of metaphysical poetry. In this context, Bennet (1953) writes, "the term 'metaphysical' as applied to a group of poets who wrote under the influence of John Donne, has been consecrated by the use since Dryden first employed it." Now henceforth we shall examine as to how Dryden used this term. Dryden (quoted in Gardner, 1957, p.15) says of John Donne, "*He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign.*" Dryden further says that Donne perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he would engage their hearts and entertain them with the softness of love.

It is not altogether a happy term as it is conceived this label was used derogatively. And moreover that calling them metaphysical poets is mere accidental because metaphysics means the philosophy of knowledge and existence and Donne's poetry does not deal with philosophy in a serious customary way. In fact, they more appropriately can be called

argumentative or dialectical poets. Especially Donne's poetry is affluent with scholastic and fantastic style rather than philosophy.

It is neither the content nor the form but style that gives it the name. Their style was distinguished by witticism, casuistry and metaphysical conceits that are realized by far-fetched or eccentric similes or metaphors, such as in Donne's comparison of tear with a coin. Strange paradoxes, far-fetched imagery and the use of quasi-logic are the hallmarks of metaphysical poetry.

Amor forms the major part of Donne's poetry which is renowned for paradoxical and sensual audacities. His poetry expounds the concept of love in a very innovative and ingenuous way. I call him in this paper a proponent of a new theory of love. We shall analyze innovativeness of his treatment of love by giving examples from his poetry.

Love in poetry can be found in various forms as Dante's love for Beatrice was ideal and intellectualised, Petrarch's for Laura was adoring one, Sidney's for his Stella was sort of a gallant adoration, Ronsard's love was Epicurean and sensuous, Keats' love for Fanny Brawne was reticent, but Donne's love was absolutely different from that of his predecessors or even successors. His love is ardent, rude, brute, cynical and sometimes whimsical or not allegiant.

Through his poetry, Donne projects his theory of love in a very unique way. After the perusal of his poetry and thematic analysis of his poems – especially love poems, we can conclude that Donne was not only a poet but also a great theorist; but his theory is implicitly presented in his poetry. It incorporates variegated forms of love. These forms can be best presented through the following figure.

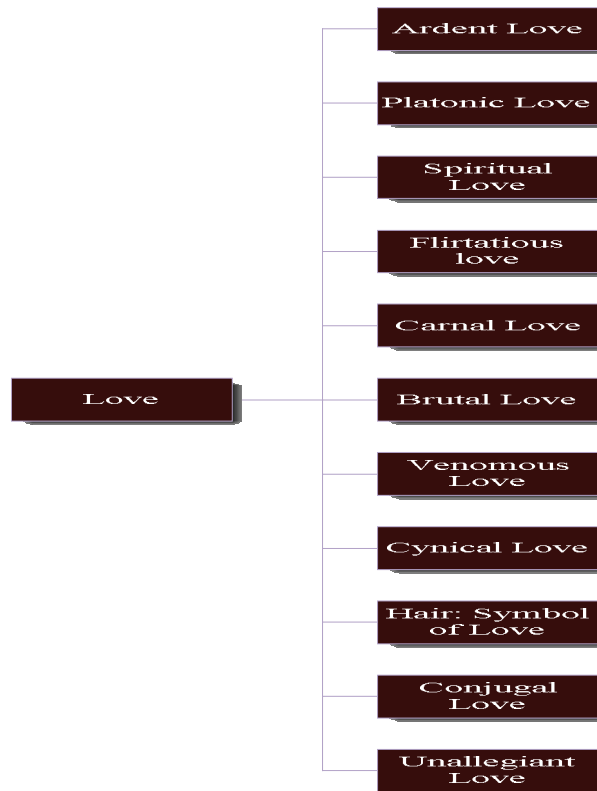


Figure: Graphic Model of Donne's theory of love

Ardent Love

He is ardent in his love. That is, full of passion and so much enthusiastic that he cannot tolerate any intruder, neither a person nor any celestial object like sun.

*For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
Alas, alas, whose injur'd by my love?
What merchant's ships have my sighs drown'd?
Who says my tears have overflow'd his ground?
When did my colds a forward spring remove?
Call us what you will, we are made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly,
We are tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And we in us find th' eagle and the dove. (The Canonization)
Let sea-discovers to new worlds have gone,
Let Maps to other, world on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one. (The Good-Morrow)
Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtaines call on us? (The Sunne Rising)*

Platonic Love

The concept of platonic love was first given by Plato in his dialogue 'Symposium'. He presents love as a means of elation to the devout meditation towards divinity. Platonic love is characterized by the absence of sexual involvement. It is just a spiritual affection. Donne is also a great worshiper of platonic love.

*Difference of sex no more we knew
Than our guardian angels do;
Coming and going us
Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals,
Our hands ne'er touched the seals
Which nature, injured by late law, sets free
These miracles we did; (The Relique)*

Spiritual love

In his theory of love Donne is greatly a proponent of spiritual love. He is of the view that love is not the name of a relationship between two bodies rather it is a form of ecstasy; union of two souls; where two lovers' souls communicate with each other and they remain intoxicated in the trance of love. True love makes the lovers merge in one and forget their separate entities. The more pure love gets, the more they (souls) are battered.

*As 'twixt two equal Armies, Fate
Suspends uncertain victorie,
Our souls, (which to advance their state,
Were gone out,) hung twixt her and me.
And whilst our souls negotiate there,*

*We like sepulchral statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And we said nothing all the day. (The Extasie)
Our two soules therefore, which are one,
Though I must goe, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to ayery thinnesse beate. (A Valediction: forbidding Mourning)*

Flirtatious love

Being flirtatious in love is another aspect of being ardent in love. Love needs expression, admiration and appreciation. Donne is flamboyantly proud of his love. He is not a seductive rather a charismatic flirt when he courts his sweet and says that they have done a miracle when they did not violate the chastity of love. Moreover, praising his beloved he calls herself a great miracle, a marvel.

*Difference of sex no more we knew
Than our guardian angels do;
Coming and going us
Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals,
Our hands ne'er touched the seals
Which nature, injured by late law, sets free
These miracles we did; but now alas
All measure and all language should pass
Should I tell what a miracle she was?
She's all States and all Princes, I,
Nothing else is. (The Sunne Rising)*

Carnal love

Donne is not only an adulatory idealist of spiritual love but also a believer of physical love. He give his justification to account for the need of canal love as he says that soul cannot exist without a body as spiritual love is improbable without bodily love. Therefore, his love has assumed a body and had fixed itself in the lips, eyes and brows of a person.

*Love must not be, but take a body too,
And therefore what thou wert, and who,
I bid love sake, and now
That it assumes thy body, I allow,
And fixe it selfe in thy lip, eye, and brow. (Aire and Angels)
Enter these armes, for since thou thoughtst it best,
Not to dreame all my dreame, let's act the rest. (The Dreame)*

Brutal Love

His love is brutal not feeling ashamed of giving verisimilitude to a flea.

*It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled are.
Cruel and sudden, hast thou since*

*Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee? (The Flea)*

Venomous Love

Done also felt the pangs of love. He sometimes in his pessimistic mood resembles love with a poisonous spider or a snake. It is said that love cannot die; it is truth but not absolutely; absolute truth is that it cannot die out but have power to make a person die out.

*But O, selfe traitor, I do bring
The spider love, which transubstantiates all,
And can convert Manna to gall,
And that this place may thoroughly be thought
True paradise, I have the serpent brought. (Twicknam Garden)*

Cynical love

Sometimes he is extremely cynical in his love unlike eastern lover where in eastern poetic tradition he is usually depicted by recurring images of suffering pain and sorrow of love. This cynical strain is prevailing in his elegies and songs when he says:

*Goe and catche a falling starre,
Get with child a mandrake roote,...
Ride ten thousand daies and nights,
Till age snow white haires on thee,
Thou, when thou retorn'st, wilt tell mee
All strange wonders that befelle thee,
And sweare
No where
Lives a woman true, and faire....
Yet shee
Will bee
False, ere I come, to two, or three. (Song)*

At another place he expresses his idea that there is great disparity between men's and women's love. Women's love cannot so pure as that of men.

*Just such disparitie
As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,
'Twixt womens love and mens will ever bee. (Aire and Angels)*

The motif of feminine disloyalty may be found in Eastern poetic tradition when Punjabi poet Waris Shah says:

Ran, faqir, talwar, ghora cha' reh thok kisay dey yar nahin, (Heer)
(Translation: a woman, a beggar, a sword and a horse are loyal to none.)

A strange similarity of the feeling of repugnance for love is found in Donne's and Munir Niazi's Poetry.

Send home my long strayed eyes to mee,

Which (Oh) too long have dwelt on thee; (The Message)
Sufney bhejey hor jagah te
Akhan rakh layan kol. (Ik Safar de Raat)
 (Translation: I have sent my dreams elsewhere, but kept my eyes with me.)

Hair: Symbol of Love

In oriental culture, to show one's love, different symbols are employed in poetry, for instance ring, or a handkerchief as a reminder of paramour. But Donne sets a new tradition to take a tuft of sweetheart's hair that he will wear around his arm when going to grave to be buried.

Whoever comes to shroud me, do not harme
Nor question much
That subtle wreath of haire, which crowns my arme; (The Funerall)
As he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright haire about the bone, (The Relique)

Conjugal Love:

He also believes in matrimonial love; once it is taken to, one should be passionate so much as not readily desirous to be parted.

Sweetest love, I do not goe,
For wearinesse of thee, (Song)

Unallegiant love:

His idea of love is not confined to pure love or allegiance to only one. He, with the power of his casuistry justifies his previous experiments of love-making with two or three beloveds. He says that he was only in the pursuit of pure image of love.

Twice or thrice had I loved thee,
Before I knew they face or name;

In short, we may conclude that Donne has presented in his poetry, a multidimensional theory of love.

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