

The Appeal of John Donne to the Modern Age: Donne's Popularity and His influence

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Abstract:

John Donne is an English poet, satirist, lawyer and Protestant priest. He is one of the major representative poets of the 17th century. His works are noted for their strong, sensual style and include sonnets, love poetry, religious poems, Latin translations, epigrams, elegies, songs, satires and sermons. He is considered as the pre-eminent representative of the metaphysical poets. His poetry is noted for its vibrancy of languages and inventiveness of metaphor, especially composed of that of his tough eloquence, are both a reaction against the smoothness of conventional Elizabethan poetry and an adaptation into English of European baroque and mannerist techniques. Donne's career is marked by poetry that bears immense knowledge of British society and Donne meets that knowledge with sharp criticism. Donne writes secular poems as well as erotic and love poems. Donne is particularly famous for his mastery of metaphysical conceits. Donne's poems show a developed knowledge of English society coupled with sharp criticism of its problems. His satires deal with corruption in the legal system, mediocre poets, and pompous courtiers. His images of sickness, vomit, manure and plague reflected his strongly satiric view of a world populated by all the fools and knaves of England. His satire deals with the problem of true religion, a matter of great importance to Donne. The present study will try to show the appeal of John Donne to the Modern Age in the present context.

Introduction:

Donne is partly known as a poet of love, and partly as a poet of death for the sense of terror, the pain of disease or violence, and the fear of hell. Donne's poetry is remarkable for its concentrated passion, intellectual agility and dramatic power. He is given to introspection and self-analysis ; he writes of no imaginary shepherds and shepherdesses but of his own intellectual, spiritual and amorous experience. His early satires, his songs and sonnets, his holly sonnets, etc., are all different expressions of his varied experiences. His poetry is marked with a tone of the realism, even cynicism, but it is always forceful and startling. It is interesting to note that Donne's poetry is not metaphysical in the true sense of the word. A metaphysical poem is long, while Donne's poems are all short. His poetry does not expound any philosophical system of the universe, rather it is as much concerned with his emotions and personal experiences, as any other poetry. No doubt, there is much intellectual analysis of emotions and experiences, but this by itself cannot be called metaphysical. Donne draws his imagery from varied sources as Medieval Theology, Scholastic philosophy of the middle-ages, and the concept of contemporary science. Donne's mind moves with great agility from one such concept to another, and it requires an equal agility on the part of the readers to follow him. Donne's poetry is a revolt against the

worn-out conventions of the day. He seeks for originality and newness, and he achieves it in different ways. He uses the 'natural language of men' not when they are "emotionally excited", but when they are "engaged in commerce or in scientific speculations". Through his poems Donne wants to convey his meanings, exactly and precisely, and searches for verbal equivalents for emotional states, and this search often results in the use of archaic and the strange. Donne violates every known rule of rhyme, meter and versification. His rhymes give a jar and jolt to the reader. John Donne is generally regarded as the central figure, the founder of the Metaphysical School of Poetry which flourished in the early half of the 17th century. Donne is certainly the enkindling influence, the seminal force, for all the poets of this school. Though Donne is a source of inspiration to the different poets of the Metaphysical school, his influence is far greater on the religious and devotional poets than on the secular ones, and even on the religious poets his influence is more in evidence in their technique than on their subject matter. Each of Donne's poems represents a complex state of mind and a subtle adjustment of impulses. Donne's followers failed to capture this expressiveness.

Objectives:

1. This paper will simply try to observe the greatness, popularity of John Donne as a poet and his influence over other writers/poets in English Literature.
2. This paper will also try to show how Donne appeals to the Modern Age.

Methodology:

The methodology of this paper will be purely descriptive and analytical.

Discussion:**Imitation of Donne's Imagery:**

As we all know that Donne has been the most popular and influential poet in the 17th century, many poets of that period happened to be the blind imitators of John Donne's style-imagery. Donne's colloquial rhythms, his imagery, his phraseology are freely imitated by the lesser poets of the 17th century. His influence is the greatest on George Herbert whose imagery also works through the mind, and the structure of his poem is also like that of John Donne. Another popular poet of the age Vaughan also borrows many of Donne's images and phrases. The influence of Donne's conceits on Crashaw is undeniable, and Andrew Marvell also delights as much as Donne delights. Like these poets, many other poets of the Modern Age are being highly influenced and blindly imitating this great poet John Donne.

Fluctuation in Donne's popularity:

It is to be noted that in spite of his great influence over other writers of his age, Donne's influence and popularity in his lifetime is confined and limited, as; in his life time his poems are circulated in manuscripts and they are published after his death. It is for his wit that Donne is chiefly admired and for which **Carew** called him the king of 'The Universal Monarchy of wit'. According to Helen Gardiner it is the 'wit' of Donne, not his music and passion, which the **Caroline poets** tried to emulate and when in the classical age of Dryden and Johnson the notion of wit got changed and comes to be regarded merely as happiness of language. Donne has sunk in repute. However, in the classical age, Donne is looked down upon for his many excesses, for his frequent breach of decorum, and for his rough cadence. All through the classical era, Donne is considered as, 'great wit' and satirist, and his love poetry has been ignored.

The Romantic Interest in Donne:

Though in the romantic age the enjoyment of Donne's poetry is confined to a few intellectuals, yet the great romantics strike a new note in Donne's criticism. Donne the love-poet and Donne the religious poet, replace Donne the Satirist, and strength of feeling rather than 'wit', the quality for which he is praised. It is recognized that the psychological veracity of Donne's love poetry, his power to render 'the infinity of passion' and the striking balance of isolated lines make Donne if not "an accomplished poetical artist" an "inspired poetical creator". Thus the way is paved for the 20th century appreciation of Donne. The age of Donne was an age of transition when old Elizabethan ideals and conventions were breaking down. There was a loss of faith in religion and accepted values and a dissolution of older ideals and beliefs, consequent upon the rise of science. There was a conflict of the old and the new, the medieval and the Renaissance. There was stress and strain, conflict and violence, and a wide spread feeling of insecurity. Melancholy and pessimism also characterized the early 20th century. There was a breakdown of the older Victorian ideals and traditions and the consequent spiritual chaos and feeling of insecurity. It was a period of stress and strain when the people were caught between opposite ideals and values of life. Thus, Donne means more than one thing at one and the same time.

The influence of Donne over other writers:

Among the modern poets, Donne has exercised considerable influence on W.B Yeats and T.S. Eliot. Eliot's advocacy of Donne has been decisive in securing the rehabilitation of Donne on both sides of the Atlantic. In his essay on the Metaphysical Poets of the 17th century, T.S. Eliot stressed the fusion of thought and feeling in the poetry of Donne. Donne's conceits, his abrupt beginnings, his juxtaposition of the ironic and the serious, his bringing together of the opposites, etc. can all be traced in the poetry of Eliot himself, and through him the influence of the Elizabethan poets has filtered down to many a younger poet.

The themes in the poems of Donne:

Donne is one of the greatest lyricist in the English language. His genius is essentially lyrical and the lyrical strain penetrates even his longer poems, such as *The Anniversaries* and *The Progress of the Soul*. Donne writes a large number of lyrics in the form of elegies, Songs and Sonnets, Satires, Anniversaries, etc. We get varied themes in the poems of Donne. Each theme has the capability to startle the readers with great excitement and ecstasy. In his many poems we can observe his cynic attitude towards womanhood. In the poem "Goe and Catche a Falling Star", he emphasizes the impossibility of finding a faithful woman. Donne speaks of God in the same terms in which a lover speaks of his beloved; though his theme of love, the emotional range of his lyricist is wide, wider than that of any other poets. John Bennett rightly points out that Donne saved the English love lyric from the monotony which had overtaken it in the early 17th century. Every variety and shade of love-experiences, ranging from the frankly lyrical and brutal to devotion and adoration of the beloved as something sacred and divine, is expressed in his love-lyrics. As a matter of fact, Donne has intellectualized the English lyric and thus has extended its range and scope. Everyone of his lyrics has its origin in some emotional situation and as the lyric proceeds the poet analyses intellectually that particular emotion. Thus in *Valediction Forbidding Mourning*, the poet advances arguments after arguments in support of the view that true lovers need not mourn at the time of parting. Similarly, in the *Canonization* a case is cleverly made out in favour of love-making and the lovers are ingenuously shown to be saints of love. This intellectual analysis of emotion is something new and original in the English Lyric. Donne's lyrics do not lack emotional intensity and immediately, despite all this argumentation, analysis and the use of learning.

Juxtaposition of opposites: Complexity and Dramatic Elements

Donne discovers occult resemblances in concepts apparently unlike, and moves from the concrete to the abstract, from the physical to the spiritual, from the finite to the infinite, from the microcosm to the macrocosm, with bewildering swiftness. The credit of dramatizing the English lyric must go to John Donne. In Donne's lyric there is always a dialogue, or at least a monologue. Thus in the *Canonization*, the very opening line "for God's sack hold thy tongue, and let me love" implies the presence of the third person whom the poet addresses the lyric to meet out his objections to his love-making. *The Valediction Forbidding Mourning* is addressed to the poet's wife, and *The Blossoms* is in the form of an imaginary dialogue between the poet and his heart

Donne's greatness and his Originality:

Donne's rhymes, his cadence; the moment of his verse, change in keeping with change in his thought and emotion. In this respect he closely resembles Robert Browning. As a poetic artist, Donne is highly original, unique and revolutionary. As far as his diction and versification are concerned, he takes his rank with such reformers of the English tongue as Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot. John Donne is particularly known as the great love poet of the 17th century. His reputation as a love poet rests on his fifty-five lyrics which are written at different periods of his life, but are

published for the first time in 1633 in one volume called **Songs and Sonnets**. A few of them can be linked to actual persons and events of his life, but the majority is the expressions of intense emotional activity in the poet's mind. These poems are literary experiments, explorations of love-relationship from the man's point of view. Donne's treatment of love is both sensuous and realistic. He does not completely reject the pleasures of the body even in poems where love is treated as the highest spiritual passion. As a poet Donne is difficult and obscure, and for this reason often irritating. He has been called an Elizabethan Browning. Donne's faults are so gross and so palpable that they hardly need to be emphasized.

Conclusion:

Thus, the above discussion richly claims the influence and popularity of Donne over other poets in the English Literature and shows his strong appeal to the Modern Age. We have seen Donne's poems to be combined with the spirit of Renaissance and modernity. His love poetry is a very complex phenomenon. The texture of John Donne's poetry is more medieval. Donne's poetry is so uneven, at times so startling and fantastic that few critics would care to recommend it to others. John Donne is perhaps the most singular of English poets. His verses offer examples of everything castigated by classical writers as bad taste and eccentricity, all pushed to such an extreme that the critic's head swims as he condemns.

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