

JOHN DONNE - A METAPHYSICAL POET: A REVIEW OF A NEXUS
BETWEEN THE HUMAN MIND AND THE MATTER IN HIS SELECT POEMS

Dr Rupa Sarkar*

*Associate Professor, Dept. Of English, ARKA JAIN University, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, 8969393871

*Corresponding Author:

dr.rupa@arkajainuniversity.ac.in

Abstract:

As John Donne is known as the father of Metaphysical school of poetry, the researcher finds Donne's work fascinating and something different from his contemporary writers with this topic the researcher also wants to put focus and put light on the importance and uniqueness of his writing style. As John Donne is one of the luminaries in this school of poetry, John has fairly helped in the further development of this school of poetry and eventually became a role model for numbers of writers and poets like the researcher and others across the globe. 'Love, Loss and Geographical Imagination' were the themes John Donne wrote most about. The way Donne has depicted his literary works through these themes are the most relatable part of everyone's life. Every now and then we find ourselves going through these phases. The present paper studies the great metaphysical poet, John Donne as a creator of nexus between the human mind and the matter. Thus his selected works that have fascinated as they became different from his contemporary writers.

Keywords: metaphysical poet, review, nexus, human mind

The Flea

The Flea was written by John Donne in around 16th century. The exact date is still unknown. The poem showcases the classical 16th century poetic style and subject theme. This poem was crafted before Donne rose to fame. At the time of the origin of this poem John Donne was a young law student at Lincoln's Inn. It was after this he became the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. This poem showcases the sexual urges of the poet. He cleverly uses the imagery of a flea as a Conceit. In this poem John Donne shows an impeccable use of Metaphor and tries to persuade his lover to engage in a sexual intercourse with him. He tries to change her mind through the following lines:

'It sucked me first, and now sucks thee, and in this flea our two bloods mingled be; Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead.' (Donne, John. "The Flea", 1633)

With these lines Donne is saying that the flea has sucked blood from both of them and their bloods have been mixed inside of it. And he says that no one, not he himself or be it her can call this a sin, shame or a loss of their virginity.

Since, his lover still doesn't seem interested and tries to kill the flea, he then tries to stop her by saying that the flea now contains three lives altogether. One of itself, one of Donne's and one of her. Therefore, she should not kill the flea as this would be self murder and also a sin by killing three lives altogether. But still she kills it and then John Donne taunts her by saying

'Cruel and sudden, hast thou since Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence? Wherein could the flea guilty be, except in that drop which it sucked from thee?'

By these lines he tries to say that she was cruel to kill that innocent flea. He asked about the crime of it, just a few drop of blood? He ends his poem by telling her that she would experience even less guilty in having intercourse with her as compared to what she felt while killing the flea. The main aim of the poet that is being showcased here is to satisfy his lust and sexual need through his beloved. As it is rightly said about Donne as a luminary in the field of Metaphysical school of poetry, he shows true attributes of it through the fair use of Metaphors and Conceits.

This poem is made up of three nine-line stanzas in alternating tetrameter (four metrical feet) and pentameter (five metrical feet). The ninth line in each stanza is in pentameter. The rhyme scheme of each stanza is AABCCDDD, with predominantly full rhymes. Most of the beats are loosely iambic and tend to invite reading with a song-like rhythm. This slightly sing-song rhythm and rhyme suggests a lighthearted tone. In this poem the tone is appropriate for a man's humorous and melodramatic appeal to a woman to have sex with him.

The theme of love is found in many of Donne's poems, but the tonal range is quite broad. In "The Good Morrow," for example, he explores this theme in transcendent and religious terms. In "The Flea," though, he uses the whimsical image of a flea sucking blood, an extended metaphor, or conceit that Donne sustains through the entire poem. The blood of the speaker and the woman mixes inside the flea, which has bitten them both. This unconventionally romantic image becomes a metaphor for the sexual union the speaker would dearly like to have with the woman. The flea provides a rich metaphor for a metaphysical poet, as it allows for several contrasting interpretations.

The Good Morrow

This poem is known to be the earliest work of John Donne, written by him when he was in school. This poem got published in the year 1633 under the literary collection of John Donne named Songs and Sonnets. It is one of the most famous works of Donne.

This poem was written during the time-period known as "Age of Discovery". The timeline of this period lasted between 15th-17th centuries. Many discoveries were taking place during this period as Europeans like Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus had discovered countries like India and America. And even Donne has used some references of this period in the poem.

The major themes used by John Donne in this poem are of Love and Spiritual Awakening. The diction used by Donne in this poem is Archaic. As Donne was a contemporary writer of this period. These words are: Good Morrow, Thou, Thee, Hath and Thin. And as he is known to be holding a prominent position in the field of school of Metaphysical Poetry, he uses planetary imagery through words like world, better hemisphere, sea-discoveries, maps to other worlds and north-west. He creates imagery in the reader's mind of voyages across the seas to far stretched corners of the globe. These are the references to the discoveries that were prevalent and taking place during that period.

The poetic device used by John Donne in this poem is Metaphors and Conceits on a broader basis.

The poem starts with the poet pondering about how he and his beloved lived before they met each other. Were they still sucking milk from their mothers or whether they just passed their time in leisure and idleness?

'I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I did, till we loved. Where we not weaned till then? But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?' (Donne, John. "The Good Morrow", 1633)

He then flirtingly says to his beloved that no matter how irresistible and great beauty he had seen or about the desires of him that got fulfilled, they were mere a dream and nothing compared to her.

'If any beauty I did see, which I desired, and got, taws but a dream of thee' (Donne, John. "The Good Morrow", 1633)

Then the poet is saying that it is a good morning for their souls after they have fallen in love with each other, they now don't have to watch each other with a sense of fear and jealousy. He then metaphorically says that they now don't have to watch anything else besides each other and the room has been envisaged and portrayed as the entire world.

'For love, all love of other sight controls, and makes one little room an everywhere' (Donne, John. "The Good Morrow", 1633)

These lines show the basic themes of Metaphysical Poetry that is the relation between the mind and the matter. The poet says they can see their faces in each other's eyes and the presence of true love in each other's face. And then Donne uses another Metaphysical attribute 'Planetary Imagery' while comparing each other with the two hemispheres on the globe. This poem 'The Good Morrow' showcases us one of the true attributes of John Donne's writing style. He unlike his other poems which usually focuses on sexual love has written keeping the idea between the physical world and the human consciousness. He has used several Metaphors and elaborative imagery to express his love for his beloved through this poem.

The Sun Rising

This poem is considered to be one of the best works of John Donne. This poem got published in the year 1633 collection Songs and Sonnets. In this poem the poet shows his anger towards the Sun. He shows his dire unpleasant experience towards the Sun.

He is unhappy how with the every commencement of the day, the Sun shines and he and his beloved are bothered with Sun's rays. He in a sulking manner curses the Sun and orders it to go away so that the poet and his lover don't have to move out of the bed.

'Busy old fool, unruly Sun, why dost thou thus, through windows and through curtains call on us? Must to thy motions lovers' season run? Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide' (Donne, John. "The Sun Rising", 1633)

Donne in these lines has cursed the Sun as old, fool and unruly. He asks it for the reason behind these actions. He then asks Sun to go and bother the students who usually get late for their school and to the farmers who should be at their fields taking care of their agriculture produce and to the royal huntsmen who should prepare for the king who wants to go for hunting.

He then mocks the Sun by commenting that why does the Sun consider its rays powerful and strong. He says he can eclipse and easily obstruct the Sun's rays just with a wink.

'Thy beams, so reverend and strong, why should thou think I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink' (Donne, John. "The Sun Rising", 1633)

He is portraying his beloved and himself even superior and strong than the Sun through these lines.

Then John Donne asks the Sun to come to him the following day and then tell the poet whether both the Indies and their spices and mines are present at the same place where it saw them yesterday or they were today lying with the poet. Basically the poet John Donne is using an extended Metaphor and compares his beloved to the geographical world. He praises his beloved by dubbing her as the entire world. He says to the Sun that their bed is the centre and the walls of his room are the sphere. He says that his beloved is the entire state and he is the prince of them.

This poem truly showcases the geographical imagination aspect of John Donne's writing. Like a true Metaphysical poet he has fairly used Metaphors, Conceit and Planetary Imagery in this poem. He admires and praises his beloved as if she is the entire world and asks Sun to shine on them and it would not need to shine elsewhere in the world.

A VALEDICTION: FORBIDDING MOURNING

This poem A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning is another one of John Donne's poems. This poem is different from rest of his poems because through this poem, John Donne is portraying the idea of spiritual love. As most of his poems deal with the erotic love and mostly revolve around fulfilling his sexual desires. 'The Flea' is one such example.

This poem revolves around the plot in which, John Donne has to go on a long trip with his friend and his wife who is also pregnant during this period asks him not to leave and therefore, he tries to mourn. The poet has used large numbers of Metaphors and comparisons to portray and showcase the love between his wife and him. He deliberately uses these Metaphors so that they both can avoid the mourning of separation from each other.

In the first stanza, John Donne says that their separation should be like the death of great and virtuous men, who mildly pass away and silently allow their souls to go. Though some of their friends do get sad and say that they should have lived more while some of them say that these people should never die.

'As virtuous men pass mildly away, and whisper to their souls to go, whilst some of their sad friends do say, the breath goes now, and some say, no' (Donne, John. "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", 1633)

Thus, in this similar manner he says that their separation should take place silently and without being noticed to the world. He asks for the separation to take place without shedding tears and says that their love is not just limited to fulfilling the sexual needs and was more of a spiritual love.

And their physical presence is not mandatory. Therefore, showing sadness and mourning for their separation in front of this world would be an insult to their love and to those happy moments which they have spent together.

'Twerp profanation of our joys, to tell the laity our love' (Donne, John "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", 1633)

He then in the next stanza brings the comparison between the earthquakes and the movement of other celestial bodies like planets. He says that an earthquake is what people fear and later on count the destruction and the devastation caused by it. Whereas, the movement of the planets and other celestial bodies are of much greater magnitude but still they are hardly feared from and are actually innocent. Here, he is also depicting their love similar to that of these plants and showcasing how great their love is and it shouldn't be seen as a feeble thing.

He then tells his beloved that in this world there are dull lovers also who only love each other through fulfilling their sexual needs and getting in bed is the ultimate motive behind such love. These couples are likely to feel the absence of "love" amidst separation because as they are also physically separated. Hence, this separation becomes the reason they can't have sex with each other and the sole purpose of their coming together is also lost eventually.

'Dull sublunary lovers' love (whose soul is sense) cannot admit absence, because it doth remove those things which elemental it' (Donne, John. "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", 1633)

By these lines he is trying to draw a comparison between those dull lovers and them. As his wife and his relationship isn't based on the foundation of mere fulfilling physical needs. Therefore, the physical separation won't be a problem for them as their love has taken a spiritual turn. The love between the poet and his wife has become so strong and passionate that both their souls have become one. Thus, when the poet will leave for his journey their love will be able to endure the pain of separation and would remain in continuity and will only expand like a sheet of gold when hammered upon, stretches and stretches but never breaks. Here, John Donne is again using Metaphors by comparing the bond of their love to the malleability and ductility of gold. John Donne is also showcasing his knowledge through these lines.

Now the following stanza is the most authentic, important and famous excerpt of this poem. He says that even if their way of thinking is different from each other they are apart as similar to the two legs of a compass. He is basically comparing the two legs of the compass with the two souls of theirs.

He then says to his wife that her soul is the one which is the fixed leg of the compass and doesn't seem to move anywhere, but actually she is the centre and moves in the fixed area of its when the other leg that is the poet himself moves. These lines are again placed metaphorically in this poem by John Donne.

In the last stanza, the poet John Donne says to his wife that she is the fixed leg of the compass and he is the one who roams freely around in a circular manner. He compliments his wife saying that she is so honest that her loyalty towards John Donne keeps the poet coming back to her always and every time. Therefore, no matter how far he goes, he will always return to her for the sake of her love, trust and loyalty towards him. This poem is one of creations of John Donne in which he is talking about spiritual kind of love between his beloved wife Anne Moore and him. He is seen criticizing the kind of love which only revolves around fulfilling the sexual needs and not going beyond the pleasure of the senses. As a Metaphysical poet, Donne here has used Metaphors and comparisons fairly and once again established the belief why he is regarded as the father of the Metaphysical school of poetry.

Go and Catch a Falling Star

In this poem, John Donne has portrayed his idea of love in a very different manner. Like rest of his other poems John Donne is usually seen praising his beloved, comparing her to the surrounding and often considering her the entire world. But unlike those poems, the poet John Donne has been seen criticizing women. The whole theme of this poem revolves around the idea that a woman who is beautiful can never be faithful no matter what.

The researcher personally struggles to fathom the state of mind that John Donne possessed when he wrote this poem. This poem may offend the feminine population. It is said that poems like these were written by Donne at the very onset of his literary career and he wrote this poem just for the sake of getting popular among the young boys and to earn money.

The poem starts with Donne assigning tasks that are next to impossible to accomplish.

'Go and catch a falling star, get with child a mandrake root, tell me when all past year are, or who cleft the devil's foot, teach me to hear mermaids singing, or to keep off envy's stinging, and find what find serves to advance an honest mind'(Donne, John. "Go and Catch A Falling Star", 1633)

He is asking the readers to go and catch a falling star, to make a baby with the mandrake root. He asks where he can find the past and who cleft the devil's feet. He then asks to teach him how to hear the mermaids sing and how can he lead his life without even getting envious from anyone. And finally he asks to find about the wind which lifts an honest person.

In the next stanza of this poem the poet says to the man that if he wishes to see unnatural and unrealistic sights then he should travel ten thousand days and nights. And keep on travelling till he grows old. And when he will finally return then him he will believe that he may have seen many unnatural and mystical things but not a single woman who is beautiful and faithful both at the same time.

Finally in the last stanza, John Donne writes that even though the man whom he had asked to travel for ten thousand days and nights might be successful in finding such a woman who is both beautiful and honest. But, by the time the man writes a letter to inform the poet about his accomplishment, and the poet would go to see her, she would have already cheated on him for another person.

On a larger context, the researcher finds this piece of poetry by John Donne a bit misogynistic and crude. The way he mocks those boys who are in a perpetual search of a beautiful and faithful partner is actually an act of absurdity and not a thing to be appreciated. And the way he is depicting a beautiful and honest girl as a myth is in itself paradoxical and ironical as cheating your partner isn't anywhere related to a particular gender.

Never the less, this poem of John Donne also shows that he must have got betrayed by his lover at some point of time in his lifetime. This poem is surely one of the collections of his literary works dealing with a sense of loss and regret.

'Song', often known by its first line, 'Go and catch a falling star', is an unusual poem among John Donne's work in several ways. It doesn't use the extended metaphors that we find in some of John's poems, and yet it remains one of his most popular and widely known works. As the short analysis of 'Song' below endeavors to show, 'Go and catch a falling star' is, nevertheless, in keeping with Donne's beliefs and poetic style in many respects.

The earlier sections of the poem, enjoining the listener to go out into the world and make discoveries and see strange sights, is the real core of the poem's meaning, in Carey's analysis. Certainly such a reading connects to Donne's preoccupation with space travel and exploration (something Epton, in his essay 'Donne the Space-man', explored; the idea of discovery and exploration is also there in 'To His Mistress Going To Bed', with its reference to the woman's body as 'my America! my new-found-land').

'The poem has a musical quality, as its alternate title, "Song," implies. It maintains a fairly regular form and rhyme scheme. It is made up of three stanzas of nine lines each, and each with a rhyme scheme of ABABCCDDD. Each stanza begins with six lines generally written in trochaic tetrameter. This type of meter has four metrical feet per line, and each foot is a trochee—one accented syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. Donne does not adhere strictly to this meter. In many lines the last foot is cut short, so that both the first and last syllables are stressed: "Go, and catch a falling star, / Get with child a mandrake root." This pattern adds to the sing-song quality of the verse. However, this rhythm is interrupted by lines seven and eight, each of which is two words long. This creates a jarring slowing of stanza's pace. The two shorter lines set apart the final line of each stanza and the hesitation caused by the short lines gives extra punch to this final line. The lines do seem like the punch lines of a joke. Donne's tone is playful as he pokes fun at honest minds and beautiful women.

In the first stanza the speaker uses a commanding tone, with sentences in the imperative: Go, Get, Tell, Teach, and Find. The images are fantastical and mythical, with references to mandrakes and mermaids. This mythical imagery and commanding tone continue in the second stanza, as the reader is told to "ride" until he is old and white-haired. The reader is supposed to do all the moving and journeying in this poem—traveling endlessly in search of a woman "true, and fair." While the reader is out on this long quest, however, the speaker will be staying home. He already knows the outcome. A faithful and beautiful woman cannot be found, and the speaker is not going to waste his time pursuing one, just as he would not pursue a mythical beast.

Some scholars have noted that this poem is humorous in tone at first but by the end, its tone and message are more of a complaint. The speaker does not believe a woman can be both faithful and beautiful. Readers are left with the sense that the speaker has experience with unfaithful women. His complaints and mockery may be products of these painful experiences despite couching his pain in humor'. (neenglish.wordpress.com)

To His Mistress Going to Bed (Elegy XIX)

This poem by John Donne can be called as his most erotic poems. The exact time of the composition of this poem is still unknown but it is believed that this poem was composed by him in 1593-1596 AD. And even this poem also like rest of his other poems got published after Donne's death. The poem 'To His Mistress Going to Bed' is also known as (Elegy XIX). This poem when it was composed broke all the records of erotic genre of poem that were prevalent and written at that time. John Donne's this poem was considered so explicit and erotic that he never got the license to publish it.

This is not some poem in which the poet just talks about love but this piece of writing deals with the plot in which the poet openly talks about having sex with his beloved and also wants to establish a possession on his mistress. Writing this type of poetry was a big and a bold thing during the Elizabethan age.

In the first stanza, the poet John Donne asks his mistress to come to him as he can't sleep and is feeling uncomfortable and wouldn't feel relieved until unless he has sex with her. 'Come, madam, come, all rest my powers defy, until I labor, I in labor lie' (Donne, John. "To His Mistress Going to Bed", Elegy XIX, the Harmony of the Muses, 1654)

In the next lines, the poet portrays and compares himself with a soldier who is standing for the war and is tired waiting for the war to start. Similarly, he is also tired waiting and looking at his mistress. He asks her to remove the girdle which she is wearing. John Donne here has used Metaphor by comparing the girdle of his mistress to an ocean of star which is covering the entire world.

'Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear, that theses of busy fools may be stopped there. Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime, tells me from you, that now it is bed time' (Donne, John. "To His Mistress Going to Bed", Elegy XIX, the Harmony of the Muses, 1654)

In this stanza John Donne asks the mistress to remove the clothing which is covering her breasts. He says that this cloth is reason why those foolish people can't see the beauty of her breasts, but the poet is different from them and wants to see her breasts. He then asks her to unlace her clothes and since she can hear the harmonious chime, it is signaling that now it is the time to go to bed.

'Off with that happy bask, which I envy, that still can be, and still can stand so nigh. Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals, as when from flowery meads the hill shadow steals' (Donne, John "To His Mistress Going to Bed", Elegy XIX, the Harmony of the Muses, 1654)

In this stanza, the poet now asks her to remove her bask as it is making the poet John Donne envy as he can't see her naked and be close to her body like it. When his mistress removes her bask, the poet is amazed and happy to see her beauty and uses a Metaphor comparing her action of removing of her bask with as if dark clouds have been removed from above the fields of beautiful flowers.

'Off with that coronet and show, the hairy diadem which on you doth grow: now off with hose and shoes, and then softly tread in this love's hallowed temple, this soft bed. In such white robes, heaven's angels used to be received by men; thou angel brings with thee a heaven like Mahomet's Paradise'

In these lines the poet asks his mistress to remove the coronet from her hair and show him the diadem of her hairs. He then asks her to remove her socks and shoes and come to bed with him. Here, John Donne has metaphorically compare the bed to a temple of love. The white clothing which she is wearing is often wore by angels when they come to meet humans and thus, she herself is looking no less than an angel from Mahomet's Paradise. Although, even ghosts and evil spirits wear these white robes but with a beauty like hers, she can easily be identified. He then asks his mistress to grant license to his hands around her body. He wants to touch her body from the front, behind, between, above and from below. He is trying to seduce her and eventually wants to indulge in having sex with her. These lines are truly portraying the sexual tension he is going through and wants her whole compassionately'

'O my America! My new-found-land, my kingdom, safeties' when with one man manned (Donne, John. "To His Mistress Going to Bed", Elegy XIX, the Harmony of the Muses, 1654)

In these lines, John Donne has compared his beloved with America. As America when discovered by Christopher Columbus was new, raw and a free country inhabited by the Native Americans. When British had found America for the first time, they had dubbed it as the "virgin land" and "untouched". Similarly, the poet is calling his mistress the virgin land and she would be safest with him and when only he controls or dominates her. Here, in these lines it can be clearly seen that John Donne not only wanted to have sexual intercourse with her but also to establish a sense of possession over her. Here, again he is trying to objectify his partner which may be and has been criticized by other contemporary writers and readers.

'My mine of precious stones, my empire, how blest am I in this discovering thee! To enter in these lands, is to be free; then where my hand is set, my soul shall be. Full nakedness! Bodies unclothed must be, to taste whole joys, gems which you women use' (Donne, John. "To His Mistress Going to Bed", Elegy XIX, the Harmony of the Muses, 1654)

In these lines, John Donne is comparing her with an empire and a mine which is filled with lots of precious stones. He is saying that he is the fortunate and the blessed one to have her whole and embrace her beauty. He then says that when he will enter her, basically when he would have sex with her, he would get a sense of getting free and liberation.

'Then where my hand is set, my soul shall be'. In this line he says that wherever he touches her, he is putting his seal and establishing the belief that she belongs to him and her body is his property. Again, the researcher finds this line offensive, crude and full of misogyny. He then talks about her nudity and briefs her how lucky women are and all the joys is with them. He says as the souls eventually embody to get liberated, similarly the body should also get free from clothes and embrace the nakedness happily in order to experience all the joys of life. In the next lines, the poet mocks those men who get distracted and attracted by seeing women's jewelers and clothing. In fact, the real beauty lies in their body rest everything is delusional.

In the final stanza, John Donne has compared women with religious and mystic texts who should always be seen uncovered and revealed. He wishes to see her revealed and naked as if she is standing next to her doctor. He then asks her to cast away all her undergarments as there is nothing to get shy of.

'To teach thee, I am naked first; why then what needs thou have more covering than a man'. (Donne, John. "To His Mistress Going to Bed", Elegy XIX, The Harmony of the Muses, 1654). With this line, the poet is comforting her that she should not feel shy and nervous as to teach her the poet himself has got naked first.

Work sighted –

- [1]. Mansour, Wisam. "Donne's The Flea." *The Explicator* 65.1 (2006): 7-9.
- [2]. GEORGESCU, Alina-Bianca. "CONCEITED LOVE IN JOHN DONNE'S POEMS: A STUDY ON THE FLEA AND A VALEDICTION: FORBIDDING MOURNING." *InterCulturalia* 2018 (2019): 283.
- [3]. Smith, W. Bradford. "What is Metaphysical Poetry?." *The Sewanee Review* 42.3 (1934): 261-272. Gale,
- [4]. Robert L. "DONNE, The Sunne Rising." *Explicator* 15 (1956).
- [5]. Satterthwaite, Alfred W. "DONNE'S THE GOOD-MORROW." *Explicator* 34.7 (1976).