

John Donne



Module B: Critical Study of Texts

Disclaimer: Would you like to hear MY reading? “John Donne is a self centred misogynistic bastard with a love of his own words and poetic techniques.” I spent most of the John Donne module drawing evil little pictures of John Donne on the cross, thus the following notes are not guaranteed to be correct

Common Themes

Death
Religious confusion
Unromantic imagery in love poems

Valediction: Forbidding mourning

Religious imagery

"Twere prophanation of our joyes/to tell the layetie our love"

Modern:

Sees this as arrogance as the persona claims that his love is immortal by arguing that everyone else's love is physical

"Dull sublunary lovers love... cannot admit/Absence because it doth remove/those things which elemented it"

Christian:

Would see this as blasphemous as the poet's persona is placing him and his lover on the same level as God

Conceit

"IF they be two, they are two so/As stifle twin compasses are two"

Shows that their love is more than physical

Literary:

Witty and clever as this conceit is so far fetched, yet fits as a good symbol for the persona's relationship. It also ends the poem where it started

"Yet when the other far doth come

It leans and hearkens after it

And growes erect, as it comes home"

"Thy firmness makes my circle just

And makes me end, where I begunne"

Feminist:

The persona of the poem is saying that his wife should stay home while he roams around the world, doing whatever he does, having fun.

"Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show

To move, but doth, if the'other doe"

The Sunne Rising

Personification

Donne personifies the Sun as a "*busie old foole*", "*sawcy pedantique wretch*"

Feminist:

Typical man! just because "*I could eclipse and cloud them with a winke*" doesn't mean that the Sun doesn't exist any more. He claims that "*she is all states, and all Princes, I,/Nothing else is.*" Another wild unjustified claim.

Romantic:

This is very romantic, he claims that "*she is all states, and al Princes, I,/Nothing else is*", and that the sun should just shine and warm our room because that's all the world there is. Of course this is subjective

The Relique

Death imagery

*"When my grave is broke up againe
Some second guest to entertaine"*

Historically:

Graves were often reused after a few years due to lack of space, so this idea was not unusual. The bracelet of hair around the bone was not unusual either.

Modern:

The modern audience may be shocked to hear of graves being recycled. They may also think, why would the gravedigger "*thinke that there a loving couple lies*" because he say "*a bracelet of bright haire about the bone*". Not only that, he will "*bring us, to the Bishop, and the King,/To make us Reliques*" Now that's a bit arrogant.

Religious Imagery

*"To make us Reliques; then
Thou shalt be'a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby;"*

Christian:

The poet's persona compares himself to Jesus, and although he doesn't say it, it was implied. Blasphemy. John Donne, you will burn at the stake, you are damned forever. **BURN IN HELL!!!!**

Modern:

The allusion to Jesus on the cross would have been lost, as the reference to Mary Madgalen is vague.

Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward

Religious Imagery

"Hence is't, that I am carryed towards the West
This day, when my Soules forme bends toward the East"

Christian

Can relate to how hard it is to stick to God's word, how he feels that he is being carried away from God even though his mind wants to be with God

Hymn to God My God, in my sickness

Conceit

To describe or be a metaphor for the journey between life and death
"Cosmographers, and I their Mapp, who lie
Flat on this bed, that by them may be showne
That this is my South West discoverie
Per fretum febris, by these streights to die"

Christian:

The virtuous Christian is not scared of death, and would agree with Donne's sentiments

"I Joy, that in these straits, I see my West"

"What shall my West hurt me? As West and East

In all flat Maps (and I am one) are one

So death doth touch the Resurrection.

Modern: Responders don't understand the references to south west discoveries, and straits so some original meaning is lost

Metaphor:

The soule can be turned and played
:Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy Musique; As I come
I tune the instrument here at the dore;"

Literary: Very witty and clever use of metaphor which relates to heavenly song

Modern: The modern audience is reminded of the television stereotype of angels playing harps in heaven.

Batter my Heart

Metaphor:

Imagery of a blacksmith's forge to symbolise renewing

"Batter my heart, three person'd God for you

As yet but knocked, breathe, shine and seeke to mend;

That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, 'and bend"

Historical:

Forging was one of the earliest methods of working with metal, involved heart and hard labor so it is a fitting metaphor. Also historically, the term heart was Elizabethan slang for Vagina, fitting with the sexual connotations of the sonnet.

Literary:

Good use of alliteration to enhance blacksmith forcing image

"Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new"

Paradox

The path go God isn't easy, but the persona loves his God so much

"Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I

Except you enthrall mee, never shall be free

Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee"

Psychoanalytical:

The persona must have a strange relationship with his God. This anger, all this emotion must be resolved before he takes it out on something else.

Modern: May wonder what bad thing Donne did to be this humiliated, to ask for God to rape him.

This is my Playes Last Scene

Slowing of time metaphors

"my playes last scene...my pilgrimages last mile...my spans last inch, my minutes last point."

A metaphor for death, how death comes slowly and painfully, the heart just slowly stops beating

Psychoanalytical: The persona appears to be depressed in the beginning, as indicated by the slowing of time. Yet by the end, he believes that he will be *"purg'd of evill"* and *"for thus I leave the world, the flesh, and devill"*

Readings

Donne's Time

Thomas Carew (1613)

Described his poetry as throwing away "*the lazy seeds of servile imitation*" (i.e. of Patriarch) and replacing them with "*fresh innovation*" [GOOD]

*"And the deep knowledge of dark truths so teach,
As sense might judge what fancy could not reach"*

(From "*An Elegy Upon the Death of Dr. Donne*")

Ben Johnson

*"Donne, the delight of Phoebus and each Muse
Who, to thy one, all other brains refuse;
Whose every work of thy most early wit
Came forth example, and remains so yet;
Longer a-knowing than most wits do live;
And which no affection praise enough can give!
To it, thy language, letters, arts, best life,
Which might with half mankind maintain a strife.
All which I meant to praise, and yet I would;
But leave, because I cannot as I should!"*

(From "*To John Donne*")

Later 17th to Later 18th Century

John Dryden (1693)

describes as "*metaphysical*" too intellectual and ideas not feelings, "*perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy when he should engage their hearts*" [BAD]

Samuel Johnson (1779)

"The most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together" (for example, religion and violence) [BAD]

20th Century

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

"An admirable poem which none but Donne could have written. Nothing was ever more admirably made than the figure of the compass."

"After all, there is but one Donne" [GOOD]

*"With Donne, whose muse on dromedary trots,
Wreathes iron pokers into true-love knots;
Rhyme's sturdy cripple, fancy's maze and clue,
Wit's forge and fire-blast, meaning's press and screw."*
(From "On Donne's Poetry" by STC)

C.S. Lewis

"It seems odd, at first sight, that a 13th century poet should give us to exactly what we want, but it can be explained."

"Donne's poetry is too simple to satisfy."

"Limited series of passions"

"His love poetry is Hamlet without the prince" [BAD]

Joan Bennett (1936)

"Donne tells us very little about the beauty of colour and skin"

"He writes almost exclusively about the emotion, and not about its cause. He describes and analyses the experience of being in love."

The diversity of experience and feeling is "among Donne's singular marks"

Stevie Davis

"Contempt for women remains a major theme of the songs and sonnets, which span a range of amatory poetry from the salacious and abusive"

"Donne has been congratulated on writing on behalf of the human race. But this is an illusion. He writes as a male"



Professor Helen Gardner

Donne's art in writing was to seem 'to use no art at all'. His language has the ring of a living voice, admonishing his own soul, expostulating with his Maker, defying Death, or pouring itself out in supplication."

"He creates, as much as in some of the Songs and Sonnets, the illusion of a present experience, throwing his stress on such words as now and here and this. And, as often there, he gives an extreme emphasis to the personal pronouns"

"No other religious poems make us feel so acutely the predicament of the natural man called to be the spiritual man."

"Except for Hopkins, no poet has crammed more into the sonnet than Donne."

"He was not, I believe, aiming at originality, and therefore the originality of the 'Holy Sonnets' is the more profound."

"Donne draws out an initial conceit to its limit in order."

"The absence of ecstasy makes his divine poems so different from his love poems"

A.L. French

"The confusion of thought and feeling that seems to me characteristic of these poems comes out most clearly in the most famous of them, "Batter my Heart, three person'd God."

"If then it isn't his fault that the enemy is in occupation, why was he talking about the necessity for God to "batter" his "heart".

"I can only say that it seems to me to offer its confusion as being itself impressive; another way of putting this would be to say that his terror makes Donne elaborate his paradoxes until they become contradictory, inextricably snagged."

"Isn't the poem an attempt to unload the whole mess of feelings onto God and leave Him to sort them out?"

Historically, Holy Sonnets were written before Donne's ordination, therefore it "would be quite natural of Donne in the holy Sonnets were still struggling painfully towards a clarification of his ideas; and it wouldn't be surprising if, at a time of such bitter controversy between people who held absolutely irreconcilable theological positions, Donne should have wavered and been worried and confused."