

Representation of love in Donne's poetry: A Selected Study

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Abstract

The present paper, titled, "Representation of love in Donne's poetry: A Selected Study" deals with the representation of love, both platonic and romantic, in the poetry of Donne with special reference to "The Canonization" and "The Sunne Rising" along with sexual dilemma in his poetry 'The Flea'. These poems give us the insight of lover's sentiments and his rejection of the society's standards. Born in 1572, John Donne is recognized as one of the most intelligent and witty poets of all times. Rightly coined by Samuel Johnson in his Essay, 'Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets', Donne is one of the metaphysical poets, who shuns the age old prejudices associated with love and sex which are still prevalent in the modern world.

One of the greatest love poets of English literature, Donne has written fifty five lyrics which were published in 1633 in the volume "Songs and Sonnets". "The Canonization" also belongs to this volume. In this poem, the poet has treated love as a holy passion similar to the love of a devotee for his creator. This poem presents the platonic form of love. The word canonization means "to consider or treat as sacrosanct or holy" and Donne believed love to be the most superior power that could lift an ordinary human being to sainthood.

Donne treats the theme of love just as divine love. He justifies his selfish love as holy and divine. The body and soul becomes one by the act of love making as happens in a religious mystery. Physical love is regarded as spiritual combination in Donne's poetry. In his poem "The Sunne Rising", lovers are rejecting the material world and in 'The Canonization', they are canonized for making the divine act of loving. The themes in his poems moved around the representation of Divine love in the poems of Donne.

Donne writes his poems in the manner of passionate dramatic monologue and uses it to defend his act of love making. In the beginning, Donne is addressing the poem to all those who try to dissuade him from loving. He also mocks the patriarchal style of love making. He does not want anyone to interrupt his love making with his beloved. John Donne's love

poems are addressed to his wife Anne Moore and reflect the satisfaction of a happy married life.

“For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
 Or chide my palsy, or my gout,
 My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune flout,
 With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
 Take you a course, get you a place,
 Observe his honor, or his grace,
 Or the king's real, or his stampèd face
 Contemplate; what you will, approve,
 So you will let me love.”

“The Canonization” is full of hyperbole that is also one of the characteristics of the metaphysical poet. The second stanza is the perfect example of that.

“Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?
 What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned?
 Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?
 When did my colds a forward spring remove?
 When did the heats which my veins fill
 Add one more to the plaguy bill?
 Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
 Litigious men, which quarrels move,
 Though she and I do love.”

Here, Donne asks the listener who is injured by his act of love making. He compares his sighs to the frivolous winds and asks whether his sighs have interrupted the business. The

tears have been compared with the floods and the poet asks whether it has resulted in any natural calamity. The cold feeling of separation from beloved is compared to the seasons and poet asks whether his feelings have disturbed the occurrence of spring season. The fire of love burning his veins is compared to the life threatening diseases and asks whether it has increased the number of people dying. He further says that if all the worldly tasks are still taking place then why someone would restrict him from loving his beloved.

In the next stanza, poet moves to the spiritual and mystical experience of love. He compares the two lovers with tapers and flies which perish in love.

“Call her one, mee another flye,

We’re Tapers too, and at our owne cost die,”

The poet also compares his lover and himself with the opposite personalities of ‘eagle and dove’. Eagle being the tyrannical and destructive and dove being innocent and meek. He hints that although they are innocent in love but they can be as destructive and fight against everyone for their love. Their love is both self-destructive and self-consuming.

“And we in us find the eagle and the dove.”

Poet mentions the myth of ‘phoenix’ and claims that his love gives more meaning to the ‘riddle of phoenix’. It is believed that there is not more than one phoenix in existence at a time.

The poet says that although they are different physically but their soul has become one after they have made love to each other. This suggests that their love is self-absorbing.

“The phœnix riddle hath more wit

By us; we two being one, are it.

So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.”

These metaphors in which lovers are compared to flies, Eagle and Dove and finally to phoenix are the perfect examples of wit and conceit that Donne uses in his poems.

Donne has so much belief in his and his lover’s love that he feels if their love will not be approved when they are alive, it will be remembered after their death.

“And if unfit for tombs and hearse

Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;”

Donne uses these examples to say that if their love is not as great that tombs will be made for them, but their love will be acknowledged by the poets worldwide and their love will be mentioned in the poems. Songs will be sung and verses will be written to pay tribute to their love.

“We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;

As well a well-wrought urn becomes

The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,

And by these hymns, all shall approve

Us canonized for Love.”

The poet here compares sonnets to “well-wrought urn” and says that the sonnets are as good to bury the lovers as the big monuments spread over “half-acre”. The poet says that although their love is not accepted when they are alive but after their death their love will be remembered as pious and they will be “canonized for love”.

“And thus invoke us: ‘You, whom reverend love

Made one another's hermitage;

You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;

Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove

Into the glasses of your eyes

(So made such mirrors, and such spies,

That they did all to you epitomize)

The poet sums up the poem saying that people from the coming generations will address them as glorified souls who redefined the meaning of love for everyone. They, who saw reflections of each other's world in their eyes and performed the mystical action of

contracting the world will be epitomized for love. And then everyone would long for love similar of their kind.

“Countries, towns, courts: beg from above

A pattern of your love!”

‘The Sunne Rising’ is another love poem written by Donne and published in 1633. In this poem, the poet is being very straightforward while he is addressing the sun. Although the Sun is taken as the supreme power in myths and addressed to as a god, Donne never fails to demean the power of the supreme entity. Donne as a love poet is known for his being vocal about the feelings which he had for his beloved.

For him, love is the prime power and whatever comes in between the love of the partners is trivial. This is evident in the first stanza of the poem where he is chiding the sun for shining over him and his lover. He calls the sun “old fool” and “unruly”. This gives the impression of rebellious nature of lovers.

“Busy old fool, unruly sun,

Why dost thou thus,

Through windows, and through curtains call on us?”

He further asks the sun to go away and to scold others such as “late schooleboyes, and sowre prentices”. Then he asks the sun to address the “court-huntsmen” and “counterynuts” to perform their respective jobs. According to Donne, love knows no seasons, no climates, neither dates nor months. For him, time is petty and worthless.

“Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,

Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.”

Poet has also questioned the sun for his powers. He mocks sun’s rays for being stronger than the feeling of love and togetherness. He belittles the beams and says he can extirpate sun’s glory “with a winke”. After having said this, Donne he says that he won’t do so in the fear of losing the sight of his beloved.

He further makes a beautiful remark by saying that for him his world is contracted into a little bedroom where he and his beloved are lying. He is therefore, glorifying love. For Donne, the

external and the world of love exists in a little world and ‘the little world of the lovers is said to be the microcosm of the outside world’ (Tilak, 124). The lovers contain within themselves “all the glory and riches (spices of East Indies and gold of West Indies) of the outside world” (Tilak, 124)

“Whether both th’ Indias of spice and mine
Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with me.
Ask for those kings whom thou saw’st yesterday,
And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.”

In the last stanza, apt to the metaphysical poetry there is again a reflection of imagery and hyperbole, where poet compares his beloved with “all states and all princes” and represents himself as a cipher.

“She’s all states, and all princes, I,
Nothing else is.”

He again trivializes the powers and glory of kings and wealth of the world. He claims that they are trying to mimic them and achieve the utmost happiness but fail miserably as there is nothing more glorious as compared to the glory that their love has. Donne claims that all the riches and powers are rather deceptive if compared to the power of love.

Again the sun is addressed saying that if it’s his duty “to warme the world”, then he has achieved it by warming the room of lovers as “This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.”

“Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that’s done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.”

The idea of erotic love as a transcendent, spiritual experience was revolutionary at the time. In the Christian tradition sexuality is associated with sin. As discussed by Ilona Bell, Donne’s “rugged unpredictability of passionate, colloquial speech” was not in conjunction with social

mores of his time, in which sexual darings were not discussed. But Donne wrote about sexuality openly in his poems like 'The Flea'. Donne does not only talk about spiritual love or physical love, but for him love is amalgamation of both the body and the soul.

“However, what is contradictory in Donne’s love poems is that he expresses a position where the lovers possess the body and transcend it at the same time. Physicality is embraced, but the ultimate goal of achieving an ideal love appears to lie in transcending the limitations that are enforced by biology.” Donne has also said that the man is neither the body nor the soul but the union of both. His treatment of sex in 'the flea' can be treated as a critique on the contemporary world as well.

He has represented the sexual dilemma of the lovers where the man is trying to convince the women to consummate their love. Donne has used Ovidian conceits to describe human’s sexual desires. The sexual act has been represented as “shameless” and “unimportant” by using the conceit of flea. The quote “two bloods mingles be” is an instance of how insignificant the act of love making is. It has been stated in the poem that physical act of loving is not “a sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead”

The poet belonged to late 16th and early 17th century when writing about the sexual desires and the pleasures of the body was often not easy. But Donne studied love as a concept and wrote about it with so many different perspectives by analysing the concept of love both physical and related to soul and thus came up with some of the most passionate poems of his times out of which 'the flea' is one.

The poet has addressed the dilemma of coming together of two lovers sexually with an open mindset. It is interesting how the poet has reduced a taboo of having sex to just the activity of sucking blood by the flea and the act of consummation by mingling of blood in the flea and thus, the act of having sex is not “A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead”

“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,”

Next he mentions that although they have not been married yet still they have become one. He further says that flea contains three lives in it ie. the lover, his beloved and the flea itself. this blood may also be taken as a symbol of hymen as it is believed that when the hymen of the woman breaks, it bleeds. In the next lines, poet brings in how physical relation between the unmarried couples are seen as a taboo when he says

“though parents grudge, and you, we’re met,”.

This taboo regarding physical relationship of men and women is still prevalent in the modern world. People don’t get the right to acknowledge and exercise their sexual needs openly. The beloved of the poet is that’s why trying to kill the flea and the poet is stopping her to do so as he feels that this will be a sinful act.

“Though use make you apt to kill me,

Let not to that, self-murder added be,

And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.”

As beloved kills the flea, this may be taken as the social customs’ win over pure love. Donne treats this with a conceit that if the beloved has not lost her reverence then she should also not fear about losing her respect after consummating their love.

“Yet thou triumph’st, and say’st that thou

Find’st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;

’Tis true; then learn how false, fears be:

Just so much honor, when thou yield’st to me,

Will waste, as this flea’s death took life from thee.”

“Donne’s originality lies in the fact that his interest is not primarily in the flea, but in the exploration of love-relationship. He emphasises the need of physical union, but physical love merges with the spiritual.”

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