"On His Blindness" Sonnet by John Milton (1608-1674)

The poem “On His Blindness” written by John Milton is a famous autographical sonnet. It is one of most poems written by Milton. The sonnet reflects the poet’s agony on his becoming blind but it ends on a note of reconcilement. In this poem, poet’s whole hearted submission to God, his determination, devotion and noble thinking charm me a lot.

The poem may have been written as early as 1652 (some people consider in 1655).

On His Blindness (Sonnet 16)

-John Milton (1608-1674)

When I consider how my light is spent

Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,

And that one talent which is death to hide

Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent

To serve therewith my Maker, and present

My true account, lest he returning chide,

"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"

I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent

That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need

Either man's work or his own gifts: who best

Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state

Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed

And post o'er land and ocean without rest:

They also serve who only stand and wait."

Summery Analysis/Substance:

The sonnet “On His Blindness” is a personal meditation. This sonnet may be compared with “How soon hath time...” Milton is here concerned with the proper use of the talent which God has given him. He is bereft of his eyesight. His despair is voiced by Samson in his utmost agony-“O dark, dark, dark, amid the blazed of noon.” The poet laments his blindness. He has become blind in the middle of his life. So he can cot serve God with his poetic gift. He, however, earnestly wishes to use his poetic talent which is the gift of god for the service of him.

He afraid that God might scold him for spending his days idly. But the mood of the octet changed suddenly as Milton nourishes a more optimistic view in the sestet.

His ambition was the highest that any writer of that time could have and he has afraid that with his blindness he would no be able to write great poetry which he long cherished. Milton believed in the Parable of talents, which showed that God expected man to use and improve the gist he had been granted.

He compares himself with the third servant in the Parable of Talents. He fears that he will be rebuked by God, as the third servant was rebuked by his master for not using his talent. But then, the question comes to his mind-Does God demand service even from a blind man? Soon his doubt passes and faith in God returns. He comes to believe that God does not demand man’s active service. Persons who resign themselves to the will of God are his best servants. All he demands of man is complete resignation to his will. Those who bear his dispensations without protest and remain ready for his decrees serve him best.

On His Blindness- Analysis Line by Line:

The poet reflects on his blindness. He has become blind in the middle of his life. He therefore cannot make proper use of his poetic talent which is spiritual death for him to hide. His soul is earnestly desirous of serving God with his own talent that God have given him. He wishes to render a true account of his powers to God. He is afraid that god will rebuke him for not using his power. (Lines 1-6)

He anxiously asks-Does God require of a blind man’s service? (Lines 7-8)

Patient thinking make the poet conclude that God needs neither the service of man nor an account of the gifts bestowed by Him on man. Those who resign themselves to the will of God serve Him best. (Lines 9-10)

God is invested with royal power. Thousands of angels fly swiftly over land and sea to do His bidding. Those who have faith in God and calmly submit to God’s powers also render him services. (Lines 11-14)

The word “talent” has been used in more senses than one. In the Bible concept it means a coin or more generally speaking money. When the master gives some money, it is his duty to make use of it and increase it. Figuratively talent is a quality and therefore wealth. In this sense even vision may be recorded as a talent. It is by using one’s vision that one can do a lot of things. Milton was a pious Christian. His devotion and dedication to God are evident in the poem.

Critical Appreciation of The Poem "On His Blindness" By John Milton:

The sonnet “On His Blindness” is perhaps one of the best and most popular of Milton’s sonnets. It is indeed a pearl in the ocean of English literature. It is a great sonnet of lofty tone and noble theme. It was written in 1655. Milton had started losing his eyesight from the year 1645. After some years he lost his eyesight completely. He was about 44 years at that time, when we remember that his great words “Paradise Lost” and “Samson Agonists” has not yet been written.

Strength of mind, power of will and determination, patience; all these traits stood him in good stead when blindness slowly came over his.

What made him so sad was that the gist of poetry which had been given to him could not be used to advantage when he was suffering from blindness.

Here Milton bows down in humble submission to the will of God. The tone of patience and humility has perfectly mingled with that of great dignity. The poem is a human document, a revelation of the struggle in Milton’s own soul. It starts with a note of regret. Then there is a mood of doubt and questioning which however melts in the final attitude of complete resignation. The beauty and exaltation of moral feeling raise the poem to a great height. The poem is full of allusions to the bible.

The extreme simplicity of the language is its peculiar attractive. Two lines are wholly, several others are nearly, monosyllabic. It is a sonnet of Petrarchan type. But there is no division between the octave and the sestet-which is the characteristic of Italian or Petrarchan sonnet. There is a break in the middle of the eighth line.

The poet’s subsequent submission charms the readers. The monologue is simply fascinating. The league used is both easy and catchy. The metre, note and cadence is perfect.

How does Milton make up his mind to serve his maker in his sonnet “On His Blindness”? Analysis of the Sonnet "On His Blindness":

Milton’s “On His Blindness” is a famous autobiographical sonnet. The sonnet records the poet’s agony on his becoming blind but it ends on a note of reconcilement.

When God gives us some talent, it is our duty to use it effectively so that it increases and multiplies. It is a sin to hide one’s talent and not use it. Milton says that god has given him talent to write and express profound thoughts. And it would be wrong not to use his talent through creative enveavours, but unfortunately he has become blind. God has taken away his vision. Light denies to him, and he is plunged in profound darkness. The how can he do the job that he is expected to do. One way to serve God is to use the talent God has given him. Bur this he can not be because he is now blind. So the poet feels and agony of helplessness.

But then patience personified gives him consolation. He realises that Good needs neither man’s work nor utilisation of his gifts. All that he expects is a complete surrender to his will, a readiness to serve him. The poet is like angel who patiently waits for god’s command.

Question: When did Milton lose his eyesight?

Answer: Milton lost his eyesight completely in 1652. As early as 1644, the light of the earth was fast leaving him and the left eye became blind in 1650.

Question: Whose blindness does the poem refer?

Answer: The poem refers to the poet’s (i.e. Milton’s) blindness.

Question: How does Milton console himself at the end of the poem?

Answer: After suffering immensely Milton al last gets some hope. He console himself by saying that the best way to serve God is to obey Him by patiently carrying out His orders.

Question: What is the Parable that has been referred to here?

Answer: The Parable of “talent” is being referred to here.

Question: What does the poet mean by "light"?

Answer: "Light" means the light of the eye. It means eyesight. In the poem "On His Blindness" eyesight is compared to light.

Question: How does Milton compare himself through the word talent?

Answer: Milton thinks that he is like the third servant of the parable of Talents who kept his one talent (gold coin) hidden in the earth. He did not use his talent (poetic gift).

Question: "Which is death to hide"

What is death to hide?

Answer: Milton cannot use his one talent (poetic gift given to him by God). It is death not to use it. The third servant in the Parable of Talents hides the one talent given him by his master. The master threw him into outer darkness. Similarly, Milton would suffer spiritual death for his inability to use his poetic gift due to blindness.

Question: Why Milton laments his blindness?

Answer: Milton laments his blindness because he cannot us e his poetic gift given to him by God. He cannot serve God.

Question: Who is the maker? How does Milton wish to serve the maker?

Answer: God is the maker. Milton wishes to serve his God by using his poetic gift.

Question: Doth God exact day-labour-

What does the poet mean by 'day-labour'?

Answer: Day-labour meant labour done in daylight.

Question: What is Milton's question to God?

Answer: Milton asks if God would demand active service from him when he has denied the light of the eye o him.

Question: How can one serve God best?

Answer: One can serve God best by willing submission to the will of god and to God's gentle rule.

Question: Who are the thousands who work at God's bidding?

Answer: God have many angels who are His ministers. God through these ministers rules the universe. The sun, the moon rise daily and move in the sky at His bidding.

Question: When did Milton wrote his sonnet "On His Blindness"?

Answer: The sonnet "On His Blindness" may have been written in 1652.

Question: What is the sonnet about?

Answer: The sonnet laments the blindness of Milton.

Question: What type of sonnet is "On His blindness"?

Answer: On His Blindness is a Petrarchan or Italian type of sonnet with octave and sestet.

Question: What does Milton mean by "era half of my days"?

Answer: Milton became blind in the middle of his life. He became totally blind in 1652 at the age of about 44.

Question: "That one talent"

What is the double meaning of 'talent'? Is there any allusion here?

Answer: Here talent means gift (poetic gift given to him by God).

Talent originally means o gold coin. It has the allusion to the Biblical story of one gold coin given by a master to his servant and the servant did not use the talent.

Question: 'Which is death to hide'

What does Milton mean here?

Answer: It meant that to hide the gift or to keep it useless is death to him. It is spiritual death.

Question: What does Milton's soul wish?

Answer: The soul of Milton wishes to serve God by writing great poetry.

Question: 'Lest the returning chide'

How does the line allude to the Biblical story of talents?

Answer: The master in the Parable of Talents rebukes the servant for keeping his talent (gold coin) useless.

Question: 'Doth God exact day-labour'

What is meant by day-labour?

Answer: Day-labour mans labour done in the daylight-the full amount of his work.

Question: 'But Patience, to prevent that murmur'.

What is meant by 'Patience'? How is it used?

Answer: Patience means here patient thinking. Patience is personified here.

Question: How does one serve God best?

Answer: One serves God best by submitting to the gentle control of God.

Question: Who are the thousands at God's bidding?

Answer: Milton perhaps means the angels traveling over land and oceans. God's ministers (servants) are the sun, moon, stars, natural objects who work their allotted duties.

Question: 'Who best bear His mild yoke'

What is the 'mild yoke'?

Answer: Mild yoke means the gentle rule of God.

Question: 'They also serve who only stand and wait.'

What does Milton mean by 'stand and wait'?

Answer: 'Stand and wait' means remain firm in faith and devotion to God.

LET ME NOT TO THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,

That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is a star to every wandering bark,

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle's compass come;

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If this be error, and upon me prov'd

I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd

INTRODUCTION

This is a sonnet also called sonnet 116 written by a British metaphysical poet William Shakespeare (1564-1616) that tries to fill the vacuum of infidelity and unfaithfulness in marriage relationships. The poet shows that at least true love based on truth and understanding can exist. He presents two glorious lovers who come into relationship freely and are trustful to each other. He shows that this kind of love is usually unshakable and always remains so no matter the circumstances.

Summary: Sonnet 116

This sonnet attempts to define love, by telling both what it is and is not. In the first quatrain, the speaker says that love—"the marriage of true minds"—is perfect and unchanging; it does not "admit impediments," and it does not change when it find changes in the loved one. In the second quatrain, the speaker tells what love is through a metaphor: a guiding star to lost ships ("wand'ring barks") that is not susceptible to storms (it "looks on tempests and is never shaken"). In the third quatrain, the speaker again describes what love is not: it is not susceptible to time. Though beauty fades in time as rosy lips and cheeks come within "his bending sickle's compass," love does not change with hours and weeks: instead, it "bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom." In the couplet, the speaker attests to his certainty that love is as he says: if his statements can be proved to be error, he declares, he must never have written a word, and no man can ever have been in love.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

TRUE LOVE

The kind of love that Shakespeare brings out here is the one that stands firmly even if there might be consequences to shake it. He says that such kind of a love does not alter/change when it alteration finds. For him true love is like "an ever-fixed mark" which will survive any crisis. In lines 7-8 he continues to say although we may be able to measure love to some degrees, this does not mean we truly understand it. Love's actual worthy cannot be known- it is a misery.

O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,

That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is a star to every wandering bark,

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken

This kind of love that Shakespeare expresses is the one that is unchangeable even when challenged by some circumstances. Love is not flat but he warns that even if it means to go through upside downs they should remain firm. It's like a North Star that guides the ship (bark) in deep sea.

On the marriage day there may really be no impediments (obstacles) but in the long run, changes of circumstances, outward appearance and other conducts may challenge the

relationship. But lines 9-12 reaffirms that, this kind of love is unshakable throughout time and always remains so.

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

UNFAITHFUL LOVE

On the other hand he shows that there is another extreme of love that is not based on mutual love. If something happens to challenge the relationship it breaks away.

……Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

Lastly, in the final couplet the poet declares that if he is mistaken in his view of the unmoveable nature of true love then he must take back all his writings on love, truth and faith. Then he says if he judged love inappropriately no man has ever really loved in the ideal sense that the poet professes.

If this be error, and upon me prov'd

I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd

QUESTIONS

Comment on the Tone and mood of the poem.

The tone is lovely because the poet generally talks about true love of two lovers and the mood is romantic.

ii) What is the type of the Poem?

It is a sonnet made up of 14 verses (line)

iii) Comment on the rhyming scheme/ Pattern

The poem has a regular rhyming pattern of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

iv). Comment on the Figures of speech and sound devices

Ø Metaphor

Love is compared to the star

It is the star to every wandering bark

Ø Allusion

The first two lines are a manifest of allusion to the words of the marriage service 'if any one of you knows cause of just impediments why these two persons should not be joined together in a holy matrimony'

Ø Alliteration

….compass come.

Ø Personification

The poet uses abstract things like Time and Love as human beings to show that they can do of feel like human beings. He even uses pronoun 'his' when referring to them. E.g.

Ø Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks.

Ø Or bends with the remover to remove:

Is the poem relevant to your society?

Ø In the society today there are people with true love though they are very few. Most of them fall in the category of love which changes with circumstances. When challenged by poor income, lack of a child, or any other challenge it easily breaks away though on the marriage day they admitted to remain together until death separates them. And that they will survive the coming impediments.

What lesson do you get from the poem?

1) We should cherish true love.

2) True love is unshakable and remains so throughout time.

o What are impediments? What do you think the marriage of true minds is?

In actual sense impediments means obstacles/ hindrances. In marriage service this is a covenant that the couple should make to see to it that their love is free and willing and is one motivated by true love.

o What does the poet mean when he says that you can measure the height of a star but not its worth? How can you apply this to love?

Always we can only judge outward appearance of something but inward characters are difficult to be measured. So even in the case of love it is not what it always seems to be in the outside. It's worth lie deeper into the heart of someone. There is more to it than just outward appearance. No one can read someone else's heart.

- **In Shakespeare's day the word 'fool' could mean a servant. Why is love 'not Time's fool'?**

Love is not Time's servant in a sense that love is timeless. It does not last with time but it endures forever as long as those in love have decided to remain in love no matter what circumstance may challenge their relationship.

When I am Dead my Dearest by Christina Georgina Rossetti: Summary and Critical Analysis

When I am dead, my dearest,

Sing no sad songs for me;

Plant thou no roses at my head,

Nor shady cypress tree:

Be the green grass above me

With showers and dewdrops wet;

And if thou wilt, remember,

And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,

I shall not feel the rain;

I shall not hear the nightingale

Sing on, as if in pain:

And dreaming through the twilight

That doth not rise nor set,

Haply I may remember,

And haply may forget.

The first stanza of the poem describes the world of the living people. The poet addresses her dearest one and asks him not to sing sad songs for her when she is

dead. She does not want others to plant roses or shady cypress tree at her tomb. She likes her tomb with green grass associated with showers and dewdrops.

Normally, we find that after the death people express their grief by singing sad songs and by planting roses and cypress tree. But the poet thinks that they are just showing off. She does not like showy behavior. She rather thinks that if people are really sorry for the death of their loving person they should be humble like grass and only few drops of tears will be sufficient. As the showers and dewdrops make the grass green forever, so the tears will make their love eternal. Afterwards she does not force him to remember. If he likes he will remember and if he does not like he will forget.

After her death she will be buried in the grave, and she will go into the world of the dead. She will not see the shadows of the cypress planted by her dearest one. She will not feel the rain or tears. However, sadly one may sing, but she will not hear it. The sweet and sad song of the nightingale will not touch her. She will pass the rest of her time dreaming through the never-ending evening when the sun neither rises nor sets. Perhaps she will remember it. Perhaps she will forget it.

The entire poem consists of two stanzas and of two varying significance. The first stanza deals with the world of living and the second with the poet's experience in the grave. The poet may be trying to be realistic regarding her death. She is against any sort of mourning that sings like of showing off. When she is dead, she won't be able to hear any songs, see any roses, or feel the Cypress shade. Therefore, the best way to mourn someone's death is by expressing the love as immortal as the green grass through the drops of tears as pure as the dew drops. It is also equally meaningless to insist someone to remember him/her after his/her death. Therefore, she gives her dearest one the freedom to remember of forgetting as he/she wishes. The poem also suggests us that no one can escape from the torturous grip of the death. If reflects a quite melancholic and inflicted heart of the speaker.

By questioning the mourning ritual a poet had criticized the showing of behavior and suggested some more sincere ways to express one's sadness. Similarly, she also seems to be giving more importance to life than after death rituals. Many people neglect their loved one when they are alive, but try to show their grief by spending a lot of time and money, when they are dead. The poet seems to be against such attitude and conduct. Rather people should be humble in expressing their love and their sadness for the departed ones.

The poem is published under the title 'song' elsewhere. It can be sung to the accompaniment of some musical instrument. It has expressed the feelings and thoughts of the poet in a very personal and subjective way. The rhymes, me and a tree, and rain

and pain please us. Similarly, the rhymes wet and forget, and set and forget having the harsh sound ‘t’ which reminds us the harsh reality in life. The repetition of ‘s’, ‘w’ and ‘sh’ sound makes this song perfect. The music of the stanzas of this poem rises like a gesture of the hand.

Attitudes Expressed in the Poem:

contemplation

calm

weary

confident

acceptance

self-aware

tolerant (about death)

curious

melancholy

solemn

somber

indifferent - nonchalant

ambiguous towards death

loss

Form and Structure:

Rossetti structured the poem in two regular stanzas which have eight lines each. This even structure reinforces the confidence and self-awareness of the persona.

Meter: 'Song (When I am dead, my dearest)' uses a trimeter (there are three metrical feet in each line) apart from the third line of each stanza where there's a metrical deviation. Here an iambic tetrameter is used, therefore there are four iambic feet in the metrical line, which contrasts the first, fifth and seventh line of each stanza. These metrical lines are composed of two iambs and an amphibrach. This again is different to the even-numbered lines of the stanzas which are all in iambic trimeter. This form of hymn meter with alternating longer and shorter lines gives the poem a song-like rhythm which gives the poem a confident tone.

The sonnet uses a direct address which means that the first person persona (or the voice of the poem) is talking to an addressee. This allows the reader to develop an emotional connection with the persona. Evidence for this can be found immediately in the first line of the poem: "When I am dead, my dearest,".

Language Analysis:

TITLE:

Significance of Title: The title, 'Song (When I am dead, my dearest)', suggests that poem can be sung. This is reinforced by the rhythm that is created by the hymn meter. As a result, the poem is given connotations of funerals creating a somber and solemn mood. The (partial) repetition of the title foregrounds these attitudes.

STANZA ONE:

Repetition: The persona repeats the phrase "And if thou wilt," in the last two lines of the first stanza. The use of the archaic term "wilt" (meaning will) suggests the persona's indifference to whether they'll be remembered after they die. This nonchalant attitude towards her legacy is emphasised not only by the repetition in these last two lines, but by the caesurae following the repeated phrase. This break in the metrical line creates a pause which allows the reader time to understand the persona's point of view. "And if thou wilt, remember, / And if thou wilt, forget." This attitude may have been viewed as controversial as the persona goes against the conventions of her time (when everyone wanted to be remembered).

Alliteration: Throughout the first stanza, Rossetti also uses alliteration and sibilance to create a song-like tone. The alliterative phrase "sad songs" which consists of a an adjective followed by a noun, highlights the melancholic voice of the persona. On the other hand, the use of "green grass" a phrase that is structured in the same way as "sad songs" (adjective + noun), contrasts the gloomy mood of the previous phrase, bringing connotations of freshness and new life perhaps offering a comforting promise of life after death. The soft ‘sh' sound in the adjective "shady" and then again in the noun "showers" reinforce her weary tone. This perhaps makes the reader more sympathetic towards the persona.

Enjambment: The persona's use of enjambment between the fifth and the sixth lines of the first stanza creates a sense of spontaneity and foregrounds the idea that the speaker is freely expressing her controversial ideas about death and what comes after. This makes her seem brave in the eyes of the reader, especially since the persona is assumed to be a woman in the Victorian era.

Use of the Preposition "Above": The persona uses the proposition "above" when she talks about where the addressee will be relative to her after her death. This suggests

that the persona will remain in the grave - both her body and soul - after she dies. This contrasts the beliefs of the highly Christian society of Victorian Britain and the Anglo-Catholic faith of the poet herself which both teach of life after death. The idea of the persona staying in the grave after she dies eliminates the idea of a heaven and gives death a sense of finality. This is also suggested by the lack of words with religious connotations which is very different to many of Rossetti's other poems that focus on the topic of death.

Use of the Noun "Cypress Tree": Cypress trees were planted typically in Victorian cemeteries and therefore carry connotations of death, mourning and funerals. When the persona tells the addressee not to plant a "cypress tree" by her grave the reader is given the expression that the persona doesn't want the addressee to mourn. Perhaps this is why she indifferent to whether they are forgotten or not - after all, she isn't the one that has to live on after a tragedy (a lover's death, assuming that the addressee is her lover). This creates a parallel between 'Song' and Rossetti's sonnet 'Remember'.

STANZA TWO:

Caesura: The persona uses a caesura in the fourth line of the second stanza: "Sing on, as if in pain:" . This break in the metrical line reinforces her acceptance of death, her acceptance of not being able to experience any earthly wonders.

Repetition of "I Shall Not": The persona repeats the negative modal verb "shall not" in the first three lines of the second stanza which highlights the difference between life and death. The repetition of "I shall not" highlights the transformation of the persona's senses after death (she will no longer able to "see", "feel", or "hear" earthly phenomena), demonstrating this clear divide between the living and the dead. This foreground the idea expressed in the previous stanza that death is final and that the body simply stays in the grave for eternity.

Use of the Archaic Adverb "Haply": The persona uses the archaic adverb "haply" , meaning perhaps, to express her uncertainty about death. This creates a sense of ambiguity towards what happens after death which brings about a sense of hope: perhaps there is a life waiting for us after death. This contrasts previous interpretations which imply the finality of death and the absence of a heaven. The ambiguity towards death is an attitude that is also suggested by the euphemism "twilight" in reference to the subject. The use of this euphemism hints at the possibility of an afterlife and also makes the persona seem curious about what awaits her after she dies.

Idea of a Nightingale's Song: The persona revisits the idea of songs in second stanza when she says "I shall not hear the nightingale / sing on, as if in pain:". Here, unlike in the first stanza where songs were given connotations of mourning and funerals, the idea of happy, cheerful bird chirping is given a bitter mood, creating a sense of loss. This implies that while the persona doesn't want her lover to mourn and sing sad songs when

she dies, she will feel deprived of the nightingale's song which she will not be able to hear again after she dies. The contrast between the two different attitudes linked to songs is highlighted by the metrical deviation of the third line in which the persona mentions "the nightingale".

Themes

Self-expression and the natural world

This poem is concerned with natural and spontaneous expression through song or poetry, such as the song of the 'nightingale' (l.11). Poetry provides a natural outlet for the speaker's emotions.

Memory and forgetfulness

Memory is a sustaining force. In Song forgetfulness is the axis upon which the poem is rooted. This hints at the notion that identity is founded upon memory and that self-awareness is constructed by the remembrance of a former self.

Earthly life and 'life after life'

The images of natural growth in Song can be seen to replace the grief that the speaker anticipates her lover will experience after she has died.

SONG: (GO AND CATCH A FALLING STAR) by John Donne

CRITICAL APPRECIATION

This song was posthumously published in 1633 in the volume entitled 'Songs and Sonnets'. It was written by Donne in his youth when he saw a good deal of London life. The subject of woman's inconstancy was a stock subject but Donne enlivened it with his personal experience. His gay life in London and his association with different women in London only confirmed his view about woman's faithlessness.

In this poem, the poet, through a series of images, shows the impossibility of discovering a true and faithful woman. While the poets following the Petrarchan tradition made of woman a heroine and a goddess, worthy of love and admiration, the metaphysical poets poked fun at woman's fashions, weakness and faithlessness. Shakespeare's maxim—"Frailty thy name is woman" —was quite popular in the age of Donne. The fickleness of woman could be more easily experienced than described. The cynical attitude to the fair sex in the early poems of Donne, is in contrast with the rational attitude to love and sex to be found in his later poems.

DEVELOPMENT OF THOUGHT

According to Donne, it is impossible to fins; a loyal and chaste woman. Woman's inconstancy proved a popular subject with the Elizabethan and the Metaphysical poets. The poet, through irony and exaggeration suggests the impossibility of the undertaking to discover a true and fair woman. Fair women will have lovers and therefore it is not possible for them to be faithful to any of them. (Faithfulness on the part of an ugly and uninviting woman can be a possibility because she will not be able to attract lovers). The poet mentions a number of impossible tasks—catching a falling star or meteor, begetting a child on a mandrake root, memory of past years, finding the name of the person who clove the Devil's foot, listening to the music of the fabulous mermaids, changing human nature so as to make it indifferent to envy and jealousy or finding out the climate which would promote man's honesty. Just as it is impossible to do these jobs, in the same way it is impossible to find a faithful woman. Even if a man were to travel throughout the world for ten thousand days and nights—this would cover more than twenty-seven years—till his hair grew grey, he would not come across a faithful woman. He might have seen many wonderful scenes and sights, but he would not have seen the most wonderful sight of all—that of a true and fair woman.

A real pilgrimage

The poet is very keen on discovering a true and fair woman if there be any such in the world. If any one tells the poet that there is such a woman, he would go on a pilgrimage to see her. She would really deserve his admiration and worship. The poet, however, feels that the journey will be futile, for even such woman's faithfulness will be temporary. By the time one writes a letter to her, she would have enjoyed with two or three lovers. Hence the poet despairs about seeing any constant woman.

CRITICAL COMMENTS

Though technically the poem is a 'song' which should have sweetness, lilt and smoothness, it has a lot of argument. The colloquial form of the poem—the speaking voice in a real situation—deserves attention. The rhythm is similar to that of speech rhythm which changes according to the needs of the argument. 'The breaking of the tetrameter form in lines seven and eight (with two syllables each) is a dramatic device that projects tension rather than irregularity, and indicates the stress that one would use in a dramatic reading. "The poet constantly indulges in dislocating the accepted rhythms, dropping his lines most unexpectedly (though always giving us pleasant surprises) but the final impression is not one of confession but of an inner logic of the poet's experience". The use of hyperbole is understandable: "Ten thousand days and nights till age snow white hairs on thee". The witty ironic reversal in the last stanza is a device commonly used by Donne. All his journey and trouble in finding a true and fair woman would result in 'love's labour lost'. The poet draws images from a wide field of knowledge—mythology, Christianity and legendary love. He proves his thesis with a masculine gusto and youthful vivacity.

Donne's Contribution to English Style and Language

Donne has made a remarkable contribution to English poetic diction and versification. In this respect his status is like that of Dryden, Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot. We understand that the English language became too poetic in the age of Wordsworth, and in that of T.S. Eliot. It lost its touch with the language of everyday life, with the result that it became weak and enervated. Donne endeavoured to re-vitalise and invigorate English language by making it flexible. He imparted to it sinewy strength, energy and vigour.

Donne's poetry is based on an individual technique. His poetic diction and style is unconventional. The 'Donne-poem' is an argument in which a mind living in analogy exploits a chosen situation with a new and elaborate set of inter-connected images. His poems are like voyages of discovery, exploring new worlds of life, love and spirits. They are voyages of the mind which

> Cerates, transcending these,
> and other seas.

Matter more important than words

To Donne, matter was more important than words and the management of the thoughts dictated the form of the poem. De Quincey thought that Donne laid principal stress on the management of thought and secondly on the ornaments of style. Here is a poet who argues in verse accompanied by music. As T.S. Eliot puts it, "A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility."

His love-poems are explorations of the types of love and friendship, from the man's point of view. They are not so obviously "poetic", as those of Marvell and Herrick. Excess of intellectual satires and complexity prevent the luminosity and certainty of statement. This partly accounts for his occasional inequality, violence and obscurity. His style stands in a class by itself. Cazamian writes: "Donne will have nothing to do with the easy and familiar, the mythological imagery. At the risk of being enigmatic, he takes pleasure only in the subtle. Passion, feeling, sensuousness—all are subjected to wit. This play of wit sometimes results in astounding hyperbole; sometimes he ingeniously brings together ideas as remote from each other as the antipodes, mingling the lofty and the mean, the sublime and the trivial. He often prefers to a smoothly flowering line, the lines that are freely divided, and in which he accents have an effect of shock, and pull the reader up and awaken his attention".

Donne's world of ideas

The basis of the 'Donne-poem' is neither music nor imagery but the idea. There is a basic idea underlying each poem. The idea may be real or fantastic but it is never artificial or affected. Donne is modern in his psychological realism; he believed in the realism of a world of ideas. Donne told his friends that he described "the idea of a woman and not as she was." He rejected the courtly idea of woman as an angel or a goddess. To him, woman was essentially fickle and inconstant in love. The song beginning, "Go and catch a falling star" is based on the faithlessness of women in love. Nowhere can you find a woman who is faithful to her lover—"Fraility, thy name is woman." His important poem—*The Anniversary*—is a record of domestic bliss. The love of Donne and his wife is eternal and immortal and is not subject to decay or death:

> All other things, to their destruction draw,
> Only our love hath no decay;
> This no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday....

His poem—*The Sun Rising*—is a stern warning to the sun not to disturb the lovers in their bed-chamber. The proper duty of the sun is to call on schoolboys, apprentices and courtiers who must attend to their work in time. His song—"Sweetest Love"—is based on the idea that parting is no doubt sad and painful, but those who love each other sincerely and deeply can never be really parted. This poem was addressed by Donne to his wife when he wanted to go to foreign countries for about six months. He bids her farewell cheerfully, till he meets her again.

Both structural and decorative peculiarities of Donne's poems

The 'Donne-poem' possesses both structural and decorative peculiarities. Firstly, the metre is not a matter of chance but of choice. The metre is a part and parcel of the fused whole; it is not an ornament super-added. S.T. Coleridge writes: "To read Dryden and Pope, you need only count syllables; but to read Donne you must measure Time and discover Time of each word by the sense of Passion." You must hear his silences and his eloquence. Examine the following lines of the poem *The Relic:*

When my grave is broke up again
Some second ghost to entertain,
(For graves have learned that woman-head
To be more than one a bed)
And he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright hair about the bone
Will not he let us alone,
And think that there a loving couple lies,
Who thought that this device might be some way,
To make their souls, at the last busy day,
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?

Donne's interest in music

Moreover, the greatest metrical variety in the form of syllables and stanzas shows not only the fertility of his genius but also his interest in and ear for music, Let us analyse *The Relic* and study its metrical effects. *The Relic,* a love poem, contains three stanzas. Let us read loudly the first stanza to grasp the movement. Each stanza contains eleven lines, of which the first four are octosyllabic or four-footed lines, the fifth and seventh are three footed, and the remainder of the length are—of the blank. verse line *i.e.* decasyllabic. "In reading the first stanza aloud, one sees that the first two lines, regular and equal, broach the theme with a typical Donnian startlingness and boldness, lines three and four have the same length as one and two but their being enclosed in brackets and the dig at woman's inconstancy which they offer, the meaning is, graves have learnt the feminine trick of being a bed to more than one person; old graves were often dug up to make room for new tenants."

Donne's use of simple and colloquial language

Dryden appreciated Donne for fusing and combining complexity of substance with simplicity of expression. According to Legouis, he did not feel any necessity of mentioning gods and goddesses in his poetry. He rejected all the conventional and traditional poetic devices. He used the different vocabulary and imagery which was quite popular among the masses of his time. In his time, medieval scholastic learning and science was quite popular, although it appears very dull and boring to the modem reader. Donne used all the current phrases and diction of his age. He even expresses complex emotions by means of simple and colloquial diction and phraseology. Thus, he revolted against the Petrarchan, Spenserian and pastoral poetry. The poet expressed "Petrarchan sighs in Petrarchan language". The language, diction and imagery of poets had become too poetic, hackneyed and stereotyped. The conceits and images, metaphors and similes

bear resemblance to one poet or another. Donne's constitution is considered remarkable because of infusing into English language energy and sinewy strength. Due to the invigorating influence of his poetic diction, his language brought new lustre to English literature.

Harmony of English verse

Donne tries to lend metrical pattern to the rhetoric of utterance. Yet his verse has no note of jarring disharmony; on the contrary, it has a haunting harmony of its own. He is successful in finding the rhythm that will express his passionate argument, and his mood: that is why his verses are as startling as his phrasing.

Donne master of poetic rhetoric

What Jonson called the 'wrenching of accent' in Donne, can be amply justified. He plays with rhythm as he plays with conceits and phrases. Fletcher Melton has analysed his verse to show two metrical effects, the "troubling of the regular fall of verse-stress by the intrusion of rhetorical stress on syllables which the metrical pattern leaves unstressed, and secondly, an echoing and re-echoing of similar sounds parallel to his fondness for resemblances in thoughts and things." He apparently uses an individual poetic diction, in the same way, he chooses metrical effects which are new and original. Prof. Grierson writes: "Donne is perhaps our first great master of poetic rhetoric, of poetry used, as Dryden and Pope were to use it, for effects of oratory rather than of song, and the advance which Dryden achieved was secured by subordinating to oratory the more passionate and imaginative qualities which troubled the balance and movement of Donne's packed out imaginative rhetoric."

Bold, original and startling use of figures of speech

The other important feature of his poetry is the bold, original and startling use of figures of speech. Comparisons are useful in communicating sensations, feelings and states of mind. Donne relies on his scholasticism for new and far-fetched comparisons, and yet they are real, credible and meaningful. Donne, in *Love's Progress,* draws on geography and science of navigation in praising his mistress. The simile refers to the beloved's eyes as sun, and the nose as the meridian.

> The nose (like to the first meridian runs)
> Not 'twixt an East and West but 'twixt two suns

The tears of lovers are always of great poetic account but Donne handles them in different ways. In *A Valediction of Weeping,* he calls his tears coins; they bear her stamp because they reflect her image; the tear acts as a mirror. Then be compares the tear to a blank globe before a cartographer. In *Witchcraft by a Picture,* the poet's eye is reflected in his beloved's eye. As his tears fall, her image also falls and so her love. In another poem, Donne compares a good man to a telescope because just as a telescope enables us to see distant things nearer and clearer, in the same way a good man exemplifies virtue in his life in a practical manner. A highly developed simile is found in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* written on the poet's temporary separation from his wife. The leave-taking should be quiet and peaceful as the dying of virtuous men. During absence, the lovers' two souls are not separated but undergo,

> An expansion
> Like gold to airy thinness beat.

Then the poet remarks that the two souls are like the two legs of a compasses:

> If they be two, are two so
> As stiff twin compasses are two;

Thy soul the fix'd foot makes no show
To move but doth if th' other do.

The wife's soul is the fixed foot of the compass, the foot with the pin that remains in the centre of the circle. It moves only when the other foot—the husband's soul—moves and then only by leaning in the direction of the return to the centre—symbolically—the journey to Europe and return—are accomplished because the other foot—the wife's soul—remains fixed. The journey is realised in terms of the completion of the circle.

Contribution of conceits to English versification style

Donne's conceits are peculiar and novel. A conceit means a strained or far-fetched comparison or literary figure. The Elizabethan conceits were decorative and ornamental, while metaphysical conceits were the products of the intellectual process of thinking in figures. Donne's poems abound in conceits. Here are a few examples:

The spider lover, which unsubstantiates all
And can convert manna to gall,
Love, all alike, no reason knows, nor clime,
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.
If, as in water stir'd more circles be
Produc'd by one love such additions take,
Those like so many spheres but one heaven make
For they are all concentric unto thee

For Donne, the flea who has sucked their blood is the blessed go-between who has united the lovers.

This flea is you and I and this
Our marriage bed and marriage temple is

In *Twicknam Garden,* Donne desires to measure the love of other lovers by the taste of his own tears:

Hither with crystal vials, lovers come,
And take my tears which are love's wine
And try your mistress tears at home
For all are false that taste not just like mine.

Donne combines two figures of speech in *The Sun Rising;* here is apostrophe coupled with personification:

Busy old fool unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus
Through windows and through curtains, call on us?

Here is a hyperbole in *Song* to describe the speed of a lover's journey:

Yestemight the sun went hence,
And yet is here today,
He hath no desire nor sense,
Nor half so short a way;
Then fear not me,
But believe that I shall make
Speedier journeys, since I take
More wings and spurs than he.

Donne's irony

Donne is fond of irony. A faithful woman will be false even while you inform others of her virtue:

> Yet she
> Will be
> False, ere I come, to two or there.

In *Woman's Constancy,* Donne shifts irony from the beloved to himself:

> Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day
> Tomorrow when thou leav'st what will thou say?
> Will thou then antedate soon new made vow?
> Or say that now.
> We are not just those persons which we were?
> For by tomorrow I may think so too.

The poet is afraid that the beloved will break off their relationship in one way or another. He changes his own idea, and thinks that even if she does nothing, he himself may end their relationship. Donne does not spare himself when he engages in pun.

In *A Hymn to God the Father,* he writes, "When thou hast done, thou has not done, For, I have more."

Donne is fond of paradox. Here is one from *A Burnt Ship* with all its grim humour:

> Out of a fired ship which by no way rescued
> But drowning could be rescued from the flame
> Some men leap'd forth and even as they came
> Near the foe's ships did by their shot decay
> So all were lost which in the ship were found,
> They in the sea being burnt they in the burnt ship drowned.

The abundant use of poetic devices and metres shows that Donne is intellectual to the finger-tip. He plays not only with words but also with ideas. His mind is full of medieval theology, science, mathematics and jurisprudence. His imagination is as complex as his intellect. His ingenuity finds expression in hyperbole, wit and conceit. His poetry may not be harmonious or musical at times, but we cannot deny that it always poses both sincerity and strength—elements necessary for greatness in poetry. The strength of Donne lies in his being an inimitable poet, one whom it is very difficult to emulate. Donne in the *Holy Sonets* writes: "Show me dear Christ, thy spouse so bright and clear." The Church is certainly the bride but she is open to most men which is hardly complimentary to any married woman. Here he is both paradoxical and ironical.

Donne's use of Diction in a Peculiar Manner

Simple words are used in unexpected way. Although diction is simple, yet simple words are combined in unexpected ways and thus strange compounds are formed. For example:

(i) A she-sigh from my mistress' heart....
(ii) No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;...

Donne, sometimes, uses puns which are simple but effective; for example *son/sun; done/Donne.* Thus his use of words is often subtle and suggestive. He suggests much more than he narrates or describes.

Tone generally colloquial and flexible

Love-songs are highly admired because of the general tone of the language which are usually colloquial. They have liveliness of spoken language and thus they are flexible. The first lines are often colloquial in tone. They immediately startle the readers and capture their attention. For example, note the opening of *The Canonization*.

Donne's symbols are intellectual

Helen Gardner commends the verbal craftsmanship of Donne which has an attraction and magic of its own. It arouses memories and associations in the minds of the readers. Such associations have an intellectual, not an emotional content. Though Donne deals with love, yet he borrows ideas from geometry and hydraulics to explain a gamut of emotions. In this connection, Helen Gardner writes: "Donne's words bring with them the memory of abstract ideas. The magical lines in his poetry are those which evoke such conceptions as those of space, time, nothingness, and eternity. The words which strike the keynote of a poem are circles, spheres, concentrique, etc. They are the symbols of that infinity in love which underlies the human ebb and flow. The circle occurs again and again in Donne's verse and in his prose as the symbol of infinity, insensibility to such intellectual symbolism has caused not only Dr. Johnson but even so modern a critic as Miss Sackville-West to cite the compass image in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,* as an example of metaphysical inaptitude."

Variety of versification

Donne is a great experimenter in verse. He uses a large number of metres and different types of forms. However, he sees to it that his versification suits the subject matter and is in harmony with the ideas expressed in the poems. In this connection, Redpath remarks: "Some of the stanza forms are very attractive in themselves. Much play is made with variations of lines length. Stanzas of more than six lines seem to give Donne the scope he so often needs to develop the complex interplay of thought and feeling which is so typical of him. With exceptions, the poems in shorter stanzas tend to be thin or slight."

In the song, *Go and Catch a Falling Star,* the short lines offer a contrast to the long line at the tail of each stanza. Similarly, the change of line length in *A Valediction: of Weeping,* echoes the turbulent passion expressed in the poem.

Donne's ruggedness

His ruggedness has been condemned by Ben Jonson who said that for not keeping of accent, Donne deserved hanging. It is true that Donne disregarded the simple rhythms of Elizabethan Age and introduced complicated rhythm patterns in order to convey the intellectual gymnastic and metaphysical conceits. One critic observes that every twist and turn of the sound pattern corresponds with the twist and turn of thought process. In the satire specially, his language is harsh and coarse. In this connection, Grierson remarks: "If there is one thing more distinctive than another of Donne's best work it is the closeness with which the verse echoes the sense and soul of the poem. And so it is in the satires. Their abrupt and harsh verse reflects the spirit in which they are written. Horace, quite as much as Persius, is Donne's teacher in satire and it is Horace he believes himself to be following in adopting a verse in harmony with the unpoetic temper of his work."

Grierson points out: "Donne was no conscious reviver of Dante's mataphysics, but to the game of elaborating fantastic conceits and hyperboles which was the fashion throughout Europe, he brought not only a full-blooded temperament and acute mind, but a vast and growing store of the same scholastic learning, the same Catholic theology, as controlled Dante's thoughts, but jostling already with the new learning of Copernicus and Paracleus."

"His vivid, simple, and realistic touches are too quickly merged in, learned and fantastic elaborations and the final effect of almost every poem of Donne's is bizarre, if it be the expression of a strangely blended temperament, an intense emotion, a vivid imagination."

Donne is bizarre and wayward in his style. He is "a maker of conceits for their own sake, a grafter of tasteless and irrelevant ornaments upon the body of his thought There are poems which undoubtedly support these accusations, and I shall be the last to deny that Donne relished the play of "wit' for its own sake; but I am convinced that in general his style is admirably fitted to express his own thought and temperament, and in all probability grew out of the need of such expression. The element of dissonance is no exception. No doubt, it expresses his spirit of revolt against poetic custom.....in this case the poetic ideal of harmony. But the expression of revolt is only a superficial function. With its union of disparate suggestions dissonance is most serviceable instrument, in fact a prime necessity of expressing Donne's multiple sensibility, his complex modes, and the discords of his temperament. In short, the dissonance; of style reflects a dissonance inwardly experienced."

"What is true", writes Grierson, "of Donne's imagery is true of the other disconcerting element in his poetry, its harsh and rugged verse. It, is an outcome of the same double motive, the desire to startle and the desire to approximate poetic to direct, and unconventional colloquial speech."

"Donne's verse has a powerful harmony of its own, for he is striving to find a rhythm that will express the passionate fulness of his mind, the fluxes and refluxes of his moods, and the felicities of his verse are as frequent and startling as those of his phrasing. He is one of the first, perhaps the first, writers, of the elaborate stanza or paragraph in which the discords of individual lines or phrases are resolved in the complex and rhetorically effective harmony of the whole group of lines...."

"Donne secures two effects; firstly the trebling of the regular fall of the verse stresses by the introduction of rhetorical stresses on syllables which the metrical pattern leaves unstressed; and secondly, an echoing and re-echoing of similar sounds parallel to his fondness for resemblances in thoughts and things apparently the most remote from one another."

"He writes as one who will say what he has to say with regard to conventions of poetic diction or smooth verse; but what he has to say is subtle and surprising and so are the metrical effects with which it is presented...It was not indeed in lyrical verse that Dryden followed and developed Donne, but in his eulogistic satirical and epistolary poems."

Donne's dramatic flexibility, rhetorical touches and poetic rhythms

Donne is quite dramatic in offering catchy opening lines. He almost catches the reader by his arms and give him a jolt. This dramatic rhythm gives the illusion of talk in a state of excitement. Donne is original in his innovation of poetic rhythm. As Legouis asserts: "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...At the outset of Donne's career, Spenser had already won his glory, and the Petrarchan sonneteers were producing collection upon collection. The independent young poet reacted against these schools. He despised highly regular metres and monotonous and harmonious cadences. He violated the rhythm in his *Satires, Songs and Sonets* and in his *Elegies*. His friend and admirer Ben Jonson said of him that he esteemed him 'the first poet in the world for some things' but also that, 'Donne, for not keeping of accent deserved hanging'. Closely examined, this crime, for such it is, derives from his subordination of melody to meaning, his refusal to submit to the reigning hierarchy of words, sometimes from his lapses into the expressive spoken tongue, in defiance of the convention of poetic rhythm."

Helen Gardner further remarks: "Donne deliberately deprived himself of the hypnotic power with which a regularly recurring beat plays upon the nerves. He needed rhythm for another purpose; his rhythms arrest and goad the reader, never quite fulfilling his expectations but forcing him to pause here and to rush on there, governing pace and emphasis so as to bring out the full force of the meaning. Traditional imagery and traditional rhythms are associated with traditional attitudes; but Donne wanted to express the complexity of his own moods, rude or subtle, harmonious or discordant. He had to find a more personal imagery and a more flexible rhythm. He made demands on his reader that no lyric poet had hitherto made."

Conclusion

The memorable nature of Donne's verses will strike any casual reader. Such verses haunt our memory and return to us again and again. Grierson has beautifully summed up the salient characteristics of John Donne's style and versification. As he remarks: "Donne's verse has a powerful and haunting harmony of its own. For Donne is not simply, no poet could be, willing to force his accent, to strain and crack a prescribed pattern; he is striving to find a rhythm that will express the passionate fulness of his mind, the fluxes and refluxes of his moods; and the felicities of verse are as frequent and startling as those of phrasing. He is one of the first masters, perhaps the first, of the elaborate stanza or paragraph in which the discords of individual lines or phrases are resolved in the complex and rhetorically effective harmony of the whole group of lines...The wrenching of accent which Jonson complained of is not entirely due to carelessness or indifference. It has often both a rhetorical and a harmonious justification. Donne plays with rhythmical effects as with conceits and words and often in much the same way...There is, that is to say, in his verse the same blend as in his diction of the colloquial and the bizarre. He writes as one who will say what he has to say without regard to conventions of poetic diction or smooth verse, but what he has to say is subtle and surprising, and so are the metrical effects with which it is presented. There is nothing of unconscious or merely careless harshness in his poetry. Donne is perhaps our first great master of poetic rhetoric, of poetry used, as Dryden and Pope were to use it, for effects of oratory rather than of song, and the advance which Dryden achieved was secured by subordinating to oratory the more passionate and imaginative qualities which troubled the balance and movement of Donne's packed, but imaginative rhetoric."

Donne: A Religious Poet

The intensity of Donne's feeling and the inner conflict is reflected in his religious poetry. His religious sonnets and songs are intensely personal and sincere. Donne was a Catholic by birth. He felt humbled and persecuted like other Catholics of his age. Religion, for most of the people, was a matter of accident.

Those who liked antiquity and tradition turned to Rome, those who disliked formality and ritual turned to Geneva. But, religion should be, according to Donne, a matter of deliberate choice, made after careful study and consideration. Many of the principles Rome did not stand his intellectual inquiry. It is difficult to fix the precise date of his conversion. It is, however, Convenient to assume that by 1598, when Donne entered Sir Thomas Egerton's service, he must have embraced the Church of England. Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, could never have employed a distinguished Catholic for important public duty.

Donne's conversion to Anglicanism greatly influenced his poetry. Grierson calls this conversion, a "reconciliation, an acquiescence in the faith of his country—the established religion of his legal sovereign". Probably, the Renaissance spirit, leaning towards nationalism, was partly responsible for Donne's change of faith. But the conversion caused Donne some pangs and heart-searching. Dr. Johnson says: "A convert from Popery to Protestantism gives up so much of what he has held as sacred as anything that he retains; there is so much laceration of mind in such a conversion, that it can hardly be sincere and lasting". Undoubtedly, Donne felt this laceration of

the mind and this conflict between the old and the new faith. "Show me dear Christ thy spouse so bright and clear". There was also the other conflict in Donne—the conflict between ambition and asceticism, between the prospects of civil service and the claims of a religious life. But after a number of years, Donne continued to retain a soft corner for Catholics.

Main Aspects of Donne's Religious Poetry

Donne was essentially a religious man, though he moved from one denomination to another. His spirit of rational faith continued throughout his life. The following are the main aspects of Donne's religious poetry:

(i) Conflict and doubt

As a man of the Renaissance, he could not but question the assumptions and beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. Being born in a particular religion is one proposition and being convinced of the Tightness of one's faith, is quite another. As he was sceptical of the religious dogmas of the Catholic Church, he adopted the Anglican faith, but even so his mind was not at peace. He could not reconcile the inner conflicts and as such he prayed for God's mercy and grace, so that he might be able to build his faith on a sound foundation. In his *A Hymn to God the Father,* he ultimately arrives at a firm faith. It is perhaps the culmination of his spiritual quest.

(ii) Note of introspection

The metaphysical clement which is so evident in his love poems, finds expression of an inner heart searching. He digs deep within himself in order to measure his sincerity and devotion to God and above all his consciousness of sin and the need of penitence. His fear of death—Donne must have seen many of his friends on their death-beds and their last struggles—makes him repent for his past follies and hence his prayer to God for His mercy and compassion. *The Holy Sonets* particularly maybe regarded as poems of repentance, and supplications for divine grace. Donne's intention is not to preach morality or to turn men to virtue. Grierson writes in this connection: "To be didactic is never the first intention of Donne's religious poems, but rather, to express himself, to analyse and lay bare his own moods of agitation, of aspiration and of humiliation, in the quest of God, and the surrender of his soul to Him. The same erudite and surprising imagery, the same passionate, and reasoning strain, meet us in both".

(iii) The themes of his religious poetry

Donne found the contemporary world dry and corrupt. He felt that its degeneration would lead to untold human misery. The main theme of his religious poems is the transitoriness of this world, the fleeting nature of physical joys and earthly happiness, the sufferings of the soul imprisoned in the body and the pettiness and insignificance of man. Above all, the shadow of death is *all pervasive* and this makes him turn to Christ as the Saviour. Even so, his metaphysical craftsmanship treats God as 'ravisher' who saves him from the clutches of the Devil. Though Donne regarded the world a vanity of vanities, he could not completely detach himself from the joys of the world and there is a turn from other-worldliness to worldliness. However, we cannot doubt the sincerity of his religious feelings and his earnest prayer to God for deliverance. His moral earnestness is reflected in his consciousness of sin and unworthiness for deserving the grace of Christ He uses the images of Christ as a lover who will woo his soul.

(iv) Parallelism with love poetry

There is a great similarity of thought and treatment between the love poems and holy sonnets, though the theme is different. The spirit behind the two categories of poems is the same. There is the same subtle spirit which analyses the inner experiences like the experiences of love. The same kind of learned and shocking imagery is found in the love poems:

Is the Pacific sea my home? or are
The Eastern riches? Is Jerusalem?
Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar.
All straits (and none but straits) are ways to them.
Whether where Japhet dwelt, or Ham, or Shem.

Similarly in his treatment of divine love, the poet uses sexual images in holy situations. As for example:

Betray kind husband thy spouse to cur sights,
And let mine amorous soul court thy mild Dove
Who is most true, and pleasing to thee then
When she's embraced and open to most men.

Critical survey of Donne's religious poetry

There are two notes in Donne's religious poems—the Catholic and the Anglican. *The Progress of the Soul* leans towards Catholicism and it records the doubts and longings of a troubled subtle soul. The following lines show the working of the mind and are full of bold and echoing vowel sounds:

O might those sights and tears return again
Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent.
That I might in this holy discontent
Mourn with some fruit, as I have mourned in vain;
In mine Idolatory what showers of rain
Mine eyes did waste? What griefs my heart did vent?
That sufferance was my sin; now I repent.
Cause I 'did suffer I must suffer pain.

The Progress of the Soul, though written in 1601 was published after his death, in 1633. Ben Jonson called it "the conceit of Donne's transformation." Donne describes his theme in the very first stanza.

I sing the progress of a deathless soul
Whom Fate, which God made, but doth not control
Pla'd in most shapes; all lines before the low
Yok'd us, and when; and since, in this I sing**.**

He describes the soul of heresy which began in paradise (in the apple) and roamed through souls of Luther, Mahomed and Calvin and is now at rest in England:

The great soul which here among us now
Doth dwell, and moves that hand, and tongue and brow,
Which as the moon the sea moves us.

Donne moves from the aesthetic to the ethical plane of existence. His curiosity about the microcosm and his scepticism find expression here:

There's nothing simply good, nor all alone,
Of every quality comparison,
The only measure is, and judge, opinion.

The poem was written soon after the inner crisis and his conversion:

For though through many straits and lands I roam,
I launch at Paradise and I sail towards home.

The psychological problem finds its solution in a spiritual reintegration.

The *Divine Poems* include 'La Corona' and six holy sonnets on Annunciation, Nativity, Temple Crucifying, Ressurrection and Ascenstion. Donne seeks divine grace to crown his efforts:

But do not with a vile crown of frail bays,
Reward my muses white sincerity,
But what thy thorny crown gain'd, that gives me
A crown of glory, which doth flower always**.**

The other, group of sonnets also entitled *Holy Sonnets* contains 19 sacred poems. They belong to the period of doubt and intense inner struggle which preceded Donne's entry into the Church of England. Here is a mood of melancholy and despair.

This is my play's last scene here heavens appoint.
My pilgrimage's last mile. (Sonnet VI)
Despair behind and death before doth caste
Such terror and my feeble flesh doth waste.

In sonnet II, Christ appears as a lover and Donne as a temple usurped by the Devil.

Myself a temple of thy spirit divine
Why doth the devil then usurp on me...

In Sonnet III, Donne is sincerely repentant for his past sins:

That I might in this holy discontent
Mourn with some fruit, as I have moum'd in vain....
No ease, for long, yet vehement grief hath been
The effect and cause, the punishment and sin.

In Sonnet IV, Donne compares himself to a felon charged with treason, and yet he cannot resist conceits.

Christ's blood, though red, will whiten the souls stained and polluted with sin.

Oh make thyself with holy mourning black
And red with blushing, as them an with sin;
Or wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might
That being red, it dyes red souls to white.

Sonnet V shows Donne's Renaissance-spirit--his wander-lust:

You which beyond that heaven which was most high
Have found new spheres, and of new lands, can write,
Power new seas in ruined eyes, that so I might
Drown my world with my weeping earnestly.

Donne prays sincerely for pardon for his misdeeds:

Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
As if thou hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood.

The pilgrim-soul is not afraid of death.

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.

In Sonnet XIII, Donne brings forward the argument that because beautiful women have liked him in his youth, so Christ, the Incarnation of Beauty, should be kind to him:

No, no; but as in my idolatry,
I said to all my profane mistresses,
Beauty, of pity, foulness only is
A sign of rigour: so 1 say to thee.

In Sonnet XVII, Donne refers to the death of his wife which has now made him turn his attention to spiritual attainment:

Since she whom I lov'd hath paid her last debt
To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead.

In Sonnet XVIII, Donne expresses his desire to see the true church (England, Rome, Geneva) undivided, because it is indivisible. The bride of Christ is the mistress of the whole world.

Who is most true, and pleasing to thee then
When she is embrac'd and open to most men.

The *Hymn to God,* written during his serious illness in 1623, is a sincere prayer to God to receive him in His grace:

So, in his purple wrapp'd receive me Lord,
By these his thorns give me his other Crown,
And as to others' souls I preach'd thy word
Be this my Text my sermon to mine own,
Therefore that he may arise the lord throws down.

The *Divine Poems* contain a vivid and moving record of a brilliant mind struggling towards God. Truth, is the goal but there are hurdles and temptations in the way. Donne is not afraid of analysing the appalling difficulties of faith. The vacillations, the doubts, of this imperfect but sincere man are reflected in all their passion. Donne's aim is not didactic or moral; he wishes to lay bare his own moods, his aspirations, his sins, his humiliation in the quest of God. He is the most sincere and introspective Anglican poet of the seventeenth century. He had experienced the intensification of religious feeling mentioned in the holy sonnets. Walton writes: "His aspect was cheerful and such as gave a silent testimony of a clear knowing soul, of a conscience at peace with itself. His melting eye showed that he had a soft heart full of noble compassion, of too brave a soul to offer injuries and too much a Christian not to pardon them in others." W.B. Yeats, a mystic poet, writes of Donne, "his pedantries and his obscenities, the rock and loam of his Eden, but make us the more certain that one who is but a man like us all has seen God!"

Conclusion

Some critics question use of the metaphysical method in holy sonnets and religious poems. Grierson, however, justifies use of the metaphysical method in these serious poems. He writes: "Here, he recaptures the peculiar charm of his early love verse their best, the unique blend of passionate feelings and rapid subtle thinking, the strange sense that his verse gives of a certain conflict between the passionate thought and the varied and often elaborate pattern into which he moulds its expression, resulting in a strange blend of harshness and constraint with reverberating and penetrating harmony. No poems give more...the sense of conflict of soul, of faith and hope snatched and held desperately...."

Donne's religious poetry cannot be called mystical poetry. Donne does not forget his *self* as the mystics do. His is always conscious of his environment, of the world in which he lives and of his passionate friendships. As such his religious poetry lacks the transparent ecstacy found in great religious poetry. Helen White writes in this connection: "There was something in Donne's imagination that drove it out in those magnificent figures that sweep earth and sky, but whatever emotion such passages arouse in us, Donne was not the man to lose himself. In another world beyond the release of death, he hoped to see his God face to face, and without end. But he was not disposed to anticipate the privileges of that world in this, nor even in general try to do so... The result is that in most of the mystical passages in both his poetry and his prose, the marvellous thrust into the ineffable is followed by a quick pull-back into the world of there-and-now with its lucid sense-detail and its ineluctable common sense."

Donne's holy sonnets are deservedly famous and are remarkable. They embody his deeply felt emotions in a language reflecting conscious craftsmanship.

The Wit of John Donne

What is wit

It is difficult to give a satisfactory definition of wit. The dictionary definition mentions a keen perception and cleverly apt expression of amusing words or ideas or of those connections between ideas which awaken amusement and pleasure. Wit is revealed in the unusual or ingenious use of words rather than in the subject-matter.

Inferior wit lies in the use of paradox, pun, oxymoron and word-play. Higher wit is the discovery of conceits and the assembly and synthesis of ideas which appear dissimilar or incongruous.

> In a true piece of wit, all things must be
> Yet all these things agree
> As in the Ark join'd without force or strife
> All creatures dwelt, all creatures that had life (Cowley)

Donne is remarkable as much for his metaphysical element as for his wit. Hartley Coleridge, however, pokes fun at Donne's wit:

> Twist iron pokers into true love knots
> Coining hard words not found in polyglots.

Peculiar wit

Donne has been called "the monarch of wit'. Dryden wrote: "If we are not so great wits as Donne, we are certainly better poets." Pope echoed the same thought: "Donne had no imagination, but as much wit, I think, as any writer can possibly have." Dr. Johnson felt that Donne's wit lay in the discovery of hidden resemblances in dissimilar things.

Donne's wit is deliberate and peculiar. It impresses us with its intellectual vigour and force and does not merely lie in the dexterous or ingenious use of words. Secondly, it comes naturally from the author's expansive knowledge and deep scholarship. According to Leishman, Donne's wit lies in his imprudent and shocking language. T.S. Eliot, however, finds his wit in the fusion of opposites—the blend of thought and feeling, what he calls 'sensuous apprehension of thought'.

The wit of Donne stands in a class by itself. Though his wit has points in common with Caroline poets, it has certain points which are peculiarly its own. Moreover, there is a world of difference between the wit of Shakespeare and Pope and the wit of the metaphysical poets. T.S. Eliot remarks: "The wit of the Caroline poets is not the wit of Shakespeare, and it is not the wit of Dryden, the great master of contempt, or of Pope, the great master of disgust." In Elizabethan poets, wit is decorative and ornamental. It is a result of light-hearted fancy or strange setting. In Donne, wit is the result of weighty thought and brooding imagination. It is a living image, and a subtle conceit, coloured with the quality of his thought:

I saw Eternity on the other night.

Donne's wit is grave and full of significance and sometimes pregnant with strange ideas.

Its complexity

Donne's wit is a compound of many similes extracted from many objects and sources. His wit has certain distinct qualities. Donne's wit is scholastic or dialectical rather than metaphysical. He is fond of a logical sequence, ingenious and far-fetched analysis. In his poem entitled, *The Anagram,* Donne by a series of dialectical paradoxes defends the preposterous proposition that an old and ugly woman will make a better wife than a young and handsome one.

Similarly Donne defends his apparent gaiety during the absence of his beloved in his own paradoxical manner:

That Love's a bitter sweet, I never conceive
Till the sour minute comes of taking leave
Another I taste it. But as men drink up
In haste the bottom of a next civned cup
And take some syrup after, so do I.
To put all relish from my memory
Of parting, drown it in the hope to meet
Shortly, again and make our absence sweet.

Variety of moods

Donne's wit expresses all moods from the gay to the serious, and from the happy to the pessimistic. Sometimes he is flippant and irreverent. In the *Flea,* he deifies a flea and calls it a marriage temple. In many poems, the poet debunks the customary vows of lovers and the Petrarchan conventions. Sometimes there is self-mockery and the poet plunges from the sublime to the ludicrous. The variety of poems on love like *Love's War, Love's Diet, Love's Exchange, Love's Usury,* and *Love's Alchemy* shows the range of his passion and wit.

Mental vigour

The secret of Donne's wit lies in its mental strength and intellectual power. It is an expression of his rational outlook on life, an embodiment of his poetic sensibility, and a reflection of his vision of life. One critic observes in this connection that it is "the outward projection of his sense of the many-sidedness of things, of his manifold possibility, and ultimately a recognition of the multiplicity of experience." Donne could afford to laugh at established practices and convictions because he disliked humbug and pretence. A critic remarks: "What one sees all the time are established certainties being crumbled, positive pretensions denied or mocked, the very affirmations of the poem doubted or discredited before it ends, and a few certitudes won by hard proof in the face of contingent circumstance".

Irony

The secret of Donne's wit lies in his use of irony. Irony is a literary device by which words express a meaning that is often the direct opposite of the intended meaning. In this manner, the poet by implication comments on the situation. Donne's irony is noticed in his attitude to love which can, to an extent, be summed up in the phrase: "What fools these mortals be!" The indignation and mockery takes on a literary phraseology and the intention of the poet is obvious. A.J. Smith writes in this connection: "The outright mockery of people and sects, and the impugning of motives in general, certainly isn't cynical. It expresses a perspective which takes the world's activities as ludicrous feverishncss in respect of bedrock human certainties; not however occasion for despair but, diverting by their own zestful life. The overturning of accepted evaluations seems the more convincing because it is the reverse of solemn: and because it emphatically doesn't imply any rejection of experience, but rather a delight in it."

Comparisons

Donne's analogies are apt and full-blooded. In *Love's War,* Donne compares the qualities of a good lover and a good soldier; as for instance, the capacity to keep awake for nights together, the courage to face an enemy (rival) boldly, to besiege and take by storm, to elude watchmen and sentries. Donne's analogies are compressed syllogisms. Just look at this syllogism:

All that is lovable is wonderful
The mistress is wonderful,
Therefore the mistress is lovable.

Donne compresses the above argument in the following two lines:

All love is wonder; if we justly do
Account her wonderful, why not lovely too?

At times, Donne's wit takes the form of epigram:

If things of sight such Heaven be
What Heavens are those we cannot see.

Donne makes a sort of pattern of thought, of a mind moving from the contemplation of a fact to a deduction from a fact, and thence to a conclusion. Oliver Elton notes the endless 'teasing of words and thoughts'. Prof. Croft observes: "Thus the brain-sick fancies are piled up, twaddle upon twaddle, until the whole thing explodes with a passionate contrary or a familiar image." The notable thing about his comparisons is their novelty and freshness, their references to unlikely things and places. For example, the poet compares the two lovers to the Phoenix and to both the eagle and the dove. The lovers will be ressurected after death like the Phoenix. Joan Bennett observes: "They evoke severe sense memories of a literary heritage. If they evoke memories, they are of large draughts of intellectual drink, imbibed from science rather than poetry. "Donne is in the habit of elaborating a figure to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it.

Exaggeration

Exaggeration is an important element in Donne's wit. This exaggeration appears to be outrageous in its high spiritedness:

Go and catch a falling star
Get with child a mandrake root....

Donne being an anti-traditionalist, is keen on shocking people. His wit takes a kind of moral holiday by flouting traditional ideals and morals in several relationships. Dr. Johnson takes exception to Donne's wit on two grounds, aesthetic and moral. Dr. Johnson is offended by its lack of proportion and decorum, its "fundamental unseriousness, its detachment, and its immorality"

To teach thee, I am naked first, why then
What needst thou have more covering than a man

Dr. Johnson applies Pope's definition to the works of Donne:" That which had been often thought, but was never before so well expressed". Donne does not conform to this concept of wit. According to Dr. Johnson, wit is both conventional and new, but the wit of Donne is a combination of dissimilar images, a discovery of the occult resemblances in things unlike. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together, nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions; their learning instructs and their subtlety surprises, but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought and though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. If they frequently threw their wit upon false conceits, they likewise sometimes struck at unexpected truth; if their conceits were far-fetched, they were often worth the carriage.

Paradox

Dr. Johnson compares Donne's paradoxes to remarks made by epicurean deities on the actions of men, devoid of interest or emotion. T.S. Eliot is also struck by the "telescoping of images and multiplied associations, constantly amalgamating disparate experiences always forming new wholes out of matter so diverse as reading of Spinoza, falling in love and smelling the dinner cooking". In one of his satires, Donne emphasises his companion's inconsistency and absurdity in hating naked virtue, although he loves his naked whore. Leishman dwells on the outrageous hyperbole and perversity of Donne's wit—"wit, often deliberately outrageous and impudent and coat-trailing, often breath-takingly ingenious in the discovery of comparisons and analogies, but nearly always, in one way or another, argumentative, sagacious, rigid, scholastically argumentative, whether in the defence of preposterous paradoxes or in the mock-serious devising of hyperbolical compliments."

She is all States and all Princes, I,
Nothing else is.
Countries, Towns, Camps, beg of from above
A pattern of your love.

What can be more dramatic and hypothetical than:

I wonder, by my troth what thou and I
Did, till we lov'd?

When the lover is dead on account of disappointment in love, ghost of the lover will haunt and harass the beloved.

Donne is not merely witty but passionately witty or wittily passionate, in the two poems entitled *The Anagram* and The *Bracelet*. The words in themselves are not difficult, but the structure of sentences is far from simple.

Conclusion

To some critics, Donne's wit is one of the means of escape, an escape from boredom and depression which constantly afflicted him during the years of his creative activity. Through wit and intellectual ingenuity, Donne avoids both self-pity and Hamlet-like frustration. Drummond rightly calls him "the best epigrammatist we have found in English".

In the ultimate reckoning, Donne's wit may be regarded not only symbolic of his spirit of interrogation and discovery but also the embodiment of introspection and intellectualism, the rebellion and conflict in the mind of Donne.

Conceits and Images of John Donne

What is a conceit?

One of the stock devices used by a poet is imagery. Images which are just and natural are employed by all the poets; conceits, however, are unusual and fantastic similes. Comparisons indicate similarity in dissimilar objects, but conceits emphasise the degree of heterogeneity—the strong element of unlikeness and the violence or strain used in bringing together dissimilar objects. There is more of the incongruity rather than the similarity in a conceit. Comparing the cheeks of the beloved to a rose is an image, while comparing the cheeks of the lover to a rose because they have lost their colour and are bleeding from thorns, (and the consequent gloom) is a conceit.

The nature of Donne's conceits

Donne's conceits are metaphysical because they are taken from the extended world of knowledge, from science, astrology, astronomy, scholastic philosophy, fine arts, etc. They are scholarly and learned conceits and much too far-fetched and obscure. Moreover, they are elaborate. The well-known conceit of the two lovers being compared to a pair of compasses, where one leg remains fixed at the centre and the other rotates is an elaborate and extended conceit. Similarly, the comparison of the flea to a bridal bed or a marriage temple is another example of an elaborate conceit. In *The Sun Rising,* the beloved's bed is the universe and the walls are the sphere.

Secondly, there is a sort of tension or magnetic force holding together the apparently dissimilar objects in a conceit. This tension holds the two together, while keeping their identities separate. This violent yoking together is done by the metaphysical element. In this connection A.J. Smith writes: "Metaphysical problems rise out of pairs of opposites that behave almost exactly as do the elements of a metaphysical conceit. Take multiplicity and unity or reality, for (example: the multiplicity submits to the unity for its coherence, and at the same time preserves itself as multiplicity: while the unity, without ceasing to be unify, receives from multiplicity its significance. The two support and complete, and at the same time deny, each other."

Thirdly, Donne's conceit is not a decoration, a piece of super-imposed machinery or setting but an organic part of the poetic process. While the Elizabethan conceit is traditional and ornamental, the metaphysical conceit is basic and structural. It is a part of the process of amplification and argument. It plays a vital role in proving the thesis of the poet. In this connection Helen Gardner writes: "In a metaphysical poem the conceits are instruments of definition in an argument or instruments to persuade. The poet has something to say which the conceit explicates or something to urge which the conceit helps to forward. It can only do this if it is used with an appearance of logical rigour, the analogy being shown to hold by a process not unlike Euclid's super imposition of triangles. I have said that the first impression a conceit makes

is of ingenuity rather than of justice: the metaphysical conceit aims at making us concede justness while we are admiring its ingenuity."

The separation of the husband and wife in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,* is like the movement of one leg of the compass while the other leg is fixed at the centre. The drawing of the circle to indicate the journey of the poet to a foreign country and the stay of his wife at London like the fixed side of the compass is basic to the theme of the poem. The rotating side of the compass must return to the base to join the other side ultimately and as such there is no need to mourn.

Mixture of thought and feeling

Donne blends thought and feeling in his conceits to achieve the 'unification of sensibility. The situation is emotional, almost explosive while its treatment and descriptions are wholly intellectual. Mark the description of the cheeks of the beloved in *The Second Anniversary*.

> Her sure and eloquent blood
> Spoke in her checks and so distinctly wrought,
> That one might almost say her body thought.
>
> *(LI. 244-246)*

Here the body (a physical thing) is connected with thought. In this connection T.S. Eliot writes: "The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience...simple, artificial, difficult, or, fantastic...."

Sources

Donne does not draw on the source-material of Elizabethan poets for his conceits. His originality prevented him from following the Petrarchan or pastoral tradition. He sought conceits from the rich and varied experiences of his own life and the widening horizons of knowledge and the world around him. Joan Bennett writes in this connection: "His images are drawn from his own interests, so that he is always illustrating one fact of his experience by another. Everything that played an important part in his life or left its mark upon his mind occurs in the poetry, not as subject-matter but as imagery. His subject-matter was, as has been seen, confined almost entirely to various aspects of love and of religion; but his imagery reveals the width of his intellectual exploration". Moreover, Donne had tasted life to the finger-tips and had lived en the continent for quite some time. This widened the scope of his knowledge and as such he enriched his poetry with conceits drawn from his vast experience of men and manners.

(i) Conceits reflecting contemporary developments

John Donne made various references to alchemy for his conceits. He utilisea contemporary chemical ideas indiscriminately. He made use of the latest scientific theories and current superstitions for ornamentation of his poems. He frequently utilised geographical images which reflected increasing knowledge of the world's surface during his time. All these subjects were his delight; all such subjects occurred to him in his mood of poetic creation. For example, his poems *A Valediction: Of the Book, The First Anniversary, Hymn to God, God in My Sickness, The Good Morrow,* and *An Anatomy of the World* reflect his craziness for using the contemporary ideas pertaining to geography.

(ii) Imagery drawn from everyday trade and commerce

Donne was a realist. This fact becomes evident when we see images drawn from the world of everyday commerce, trade and industry. Red-path asserts: "A firm and even a stern realism is often imparted to the poems by the references to war and military affairs, death, law, politics, medicine, fire and heat, business, the human body, and many of the features of home life; while, on the other hand, a certain lofty" strain is often provided by the references to scholastic doctrine, astronomy, religion, and learning; and a note of strangeness is injected by the references to alchemy, astrology and superstition."

(iii) Imagery drawn from disease and death

Donne himself experienced disease and poverty. So, he had an urge to learn medicine. His knowledge of medicine enabled him to draw images from disease, dissolution and death. A critic asserts: "Such imagery has aroused disgust in certain quarters and has laid Donne open to the charge of morbidness. In this connection it must be remembered that Donne was writing in an age when Death lurked round the corner, and plague, famine and violence were an everyday occurrence."

Function of Donne's imagery and conceits

Donne's originality is reflected when he makes use of images and conceits drawn from various sources and spheres. In this respect, he is different from the other poets. T.S. Eliot appreciated him highly because of this remarkable trait. Donne achieved unification of sensibility i.e. fusion of thought and feeling very successfully and artistically. His reader is capable of simultaneously sharing an emotion, enjoying a joke feeling and thinking at the same time. Take for example *The Sun Rising* where the reader moves from the mood of the first stanza to that of the last. Another poem, *The Relic* indicates the sardonic mood which the reader shares. So the function of his image and conceit is multifarious. Coleridge defines the function of poetry: "Judgement ever awake and steady, self-possession with enthusiasm, and feeling profound or vehement." This view of Coleridge is applicable to John Donne's imagery and conceits. The great critic, Joan Bennett, has compared the poetry of John Donne with that of Keats. Keats's sensuous impression is identified with the thing he wants to express. On the other hand, Donne identifies his intellectual analogy with his emotion. Thus, "the purpose of an image in his poetry is to define the emotional experience by an intellectual parallel."

Donne's images and conceits, not isolated from the context

Although Donne's conceit or image is rugged, coarse and far-fetched, yet it imparts a sense of pleasure and exaltation as it has an astonishing link with the whole poem. In other words, an image cannot be detached from its context. It emerges out of a certain situation of high emotional tension. His conceits or images outgrow from the given dramatic movement to indicate the relationship of the characters and that of ideas. Same is the case with the conceits of Shakespeare, a born dramatist of his period. John Donne's conceits or images reveal an organic growth, profuseness and proliferation which get sustenance from complexity, intensity and profundity of the given experience. Thus a particular conceit of Donne has a significance in the context of the whole poem.

Obscure and complex nature of Donne's conceit

Donne's conceit or image is highly obscure, difficult and complex. It makes a considerable demand on the reader to understand it. According to J.C. Grierson, it brings together the opposites of life i.e., body and soul, earth and heaven, the bed of lovers and the universe, life and death, microcosm and macrocosm in one breath. Readers, further, undergo difficulty because of the medieval learning of Donne. Although these images or conceits were popular in his age, yet readers of the present age are not well conversant with them. Donne has a fertile mind. He

encloses within a little space huge conceits. His mind moves very smoothly and with great agility from one dissimilar concept to another. Readers are confused and bewildered because of this fact. They should also possess equal agility and profound understanding to follow him. A student of ordinary calibre cannot follow Donne's far-fetched objects and concepts which are juxtaposed in his conceits. In this manner, John Donne puts his readers to great strain and demands considerable efforts from them to understand him because of the complex nature of his imagery.

John Donne: A Poet of Love

The variety and scope of Donne's love lyrics is truly remarkable. He oscillates between physical love and holy love, between cynicism and faith in love and above all the sanctity and dignity of married life. His earlier love-poems are rather erotic and sensual and deal with the real escapades and intrigues of lovers. Moreover, he is quite original in presenting love-situations and moods. Partly they are based on common experiences of his contemporaries and partly on his own experiences. In the gay and fashionable life of London of his time, Donne had ample opportunities of establishing both casual and lasting love-relationships.

Born at a time when the writing of love poems was both a fashionable and literary exercise, Donne showed his talent in this genre. His poems are entirely different from the Elizabethan love lyrics. They are singular for their fascination, charm and depth of feeling. His contemporaries wrote love-lyrics after the` manner of Petrarch and Ronsard. But Donne dallies half-ironically with the convention of Petrarch. His love songs are unconventional and original, both in form and content. Here is a blend of sensibility and wit, of joy and scorn, of beauty and repulsion. Look at the scornful anger of the jilted lover:

When by thy scorn, o murderess,
I am dead
And that thou think'st thee free
From all solicitations from me.
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed.

Another peculiar quality of Donne's love poems is its metaphysical strain. Donne does not lay stress on beauty or rather the aesthetic element in passion. His poems are sensuous and fantastic. He goes through the whole gamut of passion from its lowest to its highest forms. Had he had a greater sense of beauty and intensity of feeling, he would have ranked as one of the greatest love poets of the world. His metaphysical wit makes his readers doubt his sincerity and earnestness. Dryden writes: "Donne affects the metaphysics not only in his satires but in his amorous verses where nature only should reign. He perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts and entertain them with the softness of love." Tenderness and sentiment are not the qualities to be found in Donne's poetry. The metaphysical strain is evident in his scholasticism, his game of elaborating fantastic conceits, his hyperboles, and paradoxes. Donne uses the common emblem of perfection and intensity of love by means of the circle. In his poem *Love's Growth,* love is symbolised by the growing circles of water stirred by a pebble.

If as in water stirred more circles be,
Produc'd by one, love such additions take.

The lover's feelings resemble, by their harmony, the concentric spheres of the Ptolemaic universe. Love is infinite like God's creation.

Donne in *Love's Infiniteness,* pleads with his beloved that she should give him a part of her heart. After she has given him a part, he demands the whole heart. When she has given him the entire heart, he feels that his love must grow and have a hope for the future.

> Love's riddles are, that though thy heart depart,
> It stays at home, and thou with losing sav'st it;
> But we will have a way more liberal,
> Than changing hearts, to join them, so we shall
> Be one, and one another's all.

This is the goal and consummation of love. He then startles and outrages the expectations of his readers. Similarly, in the matter of expression, he is rugged and rhetorical. No doubt by bringing in the personal element, his verses become impressive and arresting:

> For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me love.
>
> I long to talk with some old lover's ghost
> Who died before the God of love was born,
> Twice or thrice had I loved thee,
> Before I knew thy face or name.
>
> I am two fools, 1 know,
> For loving and for saying so.
> In whining poetry.
>
> I fix mine eye on thine and there
> Pity my picture burning in thine eye,
> My picture drowned in a transparent tear,
> When I look lower I espy.

Donne's love poems can be divided under three heads—

(i) Poems of moods of lovers, seduction and free love or fanciful relationship.

(ii) Poems addressed to Anne More (his wife) both before and after marriage.

(iii) Poems addressed to noble ladies of his acquaintance and compliments to wives and daughters of citizens.

Three strands

There are mainly three strands in his love poems. Firstly, there is the cynical which is anti-woman and hostile to the fair sex. The theme is the fraility of man—a matter of advantage for lovers who liked casual and extra-marital relations with ladies. Secondly, there is the strand of happy married life, the joy of conjugal love in poems like *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* addressed to his wife and *Elegy on His Mistress*—where temporary absence will only whet the appetite of love:

When I am gone, dream me some happiness,
Nor let thy looks our long-hid love confess.

These poems are dedicated to the peace and fulfilment to be found in a happy marriage. Thirdly, there is the Platonic strand, as in *The Canonization,* where love is regarded as a holy emotion like the worship of a devotee of God. There are, however, certain poems where the sentiment oscillates between the first and the third strands—where sexual love is treated as holy

love and vice versa. In some poems the tone is rugged, harsh and aggressive as in *The Apparition*. Much depends on the situation selected and the mood of the poet.

Realism

Donne's treatment is realistic and not idealistic. He knows the weaknesses of the flesh, the pleasures of sex, the joy of secret meetings. However, he tries to establish the relationship between the body and the soul. True love does not pertain to the body; it is the relationship of one soul to another soul. Physical union may not be necessary as in A *Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*. However, in another poem, *The Relic,* the poet regards physical union as necessary. Such contradictions, however, do not mar the value of his poetry. They only tend to emphasise the dichotomy between the claims of the body and need of the soul.

In spite of the realistic touches and descriptions in the love-poems, Donne does not take pains to detail the beauty and fascination of any part of the female body. Rather he describes its effect on the lover's heart. Here and there, he allows himself freedom to wander over the different parts of female anatomy, but like the earlier poems, he does not dwell on the charms of the lips, eyes, teeth or cheeks of a handsome mistress. It is rather surprising that a poet who is so fond of sex should abstain so totally from the temptation to dwell on the physical structure or charm of any part of the female body.

Extra-marital love

That sex is holy whether within or outside marriage is declared by Donne in his love poems. If love is mutual, physical union even outside marriage cannot be condemned. Though as a Christian he may not justify extra-marital relationship, as a lover and as a poet, he does accept its reality and joy. He would not scorn such relationship as adultery. What Donne feels is that the love-bond is essential for sexual union. Without love, any act of sex is mean and degrading. However, true love can exist outside marriage, though moralists may sneer at it.

Attitude to woman

Donne does not feel that woman is a sex-doll or a goddess. She is essentially a bundle of contradictions. As such he laughs at her inconstancy and faithlessness. He believes in 'Fraility, thy name is woman". His contempt for woman is more than compensated by his respect for conjugal love. At times, he regards the beloved as an angel who can offer him heavenly inspiration and bliss. This two-fold attitude to woman— woman as a butterfly, and woman as an angel—depends on the situation and the mood of the poet.

In the poems addressed to his wife—Anne More—the poet deals primarily with the joys of fulfilled and consummated love. Here is a total experience of the triumph of serenity and mutual love which brings with itself a sense of serenity and bliss. Moreover, these poems *(Valediction : Forbidding Mourning* and *A Valediction: of Weeping* reveal the poet's eternal faith in life. Conjugal love, at its best is more rewarding and meaningful than weeping in unfulfilled love. The best love poems are, indeed, those which show the fulfilment of a happy married life.

Petrarchanism with a difference

While the Elizabethan love lyrics are, by and large, imitations of the Petrarchan traditions, Donne's love poems stand in a class by themselves. Donne's love poems are entirely unconventional except when he "chose to dally half-ironically with the conventions of Petrarchan tradition." Donne is fully acquainted with the Petrarchan model where woman is an object of beauty, love and perfection. The lover's entreaties to his lady, his courtly wooing, the beloved's

indifference and the self-pity of the lover are common themes of Petrarchan poems. Such set themes are treated differently by Donne, because he has no own intimate experience to guide him. His utter realism makes him debunk the idea of woman as a personfication of virtue and chastity; woman is made of flesh and blood and she loves sex as much as man. In *The Indifferent,* Donne openly declares that he does not mind the complexion or proportions of any girl. All that he wants is sexual intimacy. However, he establishes a metaphysical relationship between body and soul—namely that physical love leads to spiritual love as in *The Ecstasy:*

> Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
> But yet the body is his book.

Donne is different from Petrarch in his attitude to love. Here is wooing, but it is of a different type. The plea is a marriage bed and a holy temple of love. His courtship is aggressive, compelling and violent; there is no trace of self-pity in it. Rather there is a threat of revenge declared openly by the lover:

> Then shall my ghost come to thy bed.

The lover's ghost watching the beloved enjoying with another lover will cause a shiver in the beloved and she herself will turn into a ghost. The theme of death as in The Relic, *The Funeral,* and *The Apparition* is given a realistic and vivid interpretation.

Undoubtedly, Donne adopted the important characteristics of Petrarch, namely his use of images and conceits, and his dramatic approach. He, however, transformed them so rigorously by his intellect that they appear to be quite original. The hyperboles of Petrarch are farfetched while those of Donne are not so. His conceits are not decorative but functional. Take the conceit of the pair of compasses in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*. How factual and how convincing is love that must return to its base after it has gone full circle. Secondly, mark the dramatic way in which the lover addresses the beloved in harsh and rhetorical language:

> When by thy scorn, O murderess I am dead....
> I am two fools, I know
> For loving and for saying so....
> I wonder by my troth, what thou and I
> Did, till we lov'd? Were we not wean'd till then?...

The conceit becomes a blend of levity and seriousness, of mockery and wisdom, of physical passion and higher love.

Passion and thought

The fact is that Donne does not allow his passion to run way with him. He holds it in check with his reason. When the beloved wants to crush the flea who has bitten her, the poet argues with her dissuading her from what he calls triple murder of the lover, the beloved and the flea.

Similarly, Donne moderates the intensity of passion with his life as in *The Canonization*. The lovers will be regarded as saints of love and worshipped accordingly. Donne's achievement lies in wedding thought to emotion, and argument to personal passion. In this connection, Grierson writes: "Donne's love poetry is a very complex phenomenon, but the two dominant strains in it are just these : the strains of dialectic, subtle play of argument and wit, erudite and fantastic; and the strain of vivid realism, and the record of a passion which is not ideal or conventional, neither recollected in tranquility nor a pure product of literary fashion, but love as an actual, and immediate experience in all its moods, gay and angry, scornful and rapturous with joy, touched with tenderness and darkened with sorrow." Dryden, too, comments on the intellectual and metaphysical element of his love poetry thus: "He perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice

speculations of philosophy when he should engage their hearts and entertain with softness of love."

Supremacy of love

Mutuality of love is the secret of penance and bliss in conjugal life. Love is not subject to change on account of the passage of time or difference in enviornment:

> Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,
> Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

The total fulfilment and glory of love is echoed in *The Sun Rising:*

> She is all states, and all Princes I,
> Nothing else is.

In fact true love is the merger of two souls—two bodies with one life:

> Our two souls therefore, which are one.

The poems like *Good Morrow, Valediction* and *Ecstasy* represent oneness of the souls of real lovers—the joy of contented passion, where love has been sublimated into holy affection.

Donne: an innovator of a new kind of love poetry

Donne was an innovator of a new kind of love poetry. Elizabethan love poetry was written on the Petrarchan model following the pattern set by the Italian poets like Dante, Ariostio and Petrarch. The love songs and sonnet sequences of Spenser, Sydney, Wabon, Davidson and Drummond described the pains and sorrows of love—the sorrow of absence, the pain of rejection, the incomparable beauty of the lady and her unwavering cruelty. They seldom (except some of the Finest of Shakespeare's sonnets) dealt with the joy of love, and the deep contentment of mutual passion. Moreover, they made use of a series of constantly recurring images, of "rain, of wind, of fire, of ice, of storm and of warfare; comparisons and allusions of Venus and Cupid, Cynthia and Apollo etc. as well as abstractions such as Love and Fortune, Beauty and Disdain.

Donne's attitude towards love is intellectual

John Donne was the first English poet to challenge and break the supremacy of Petrarchan tradition. Though at times he adopts the Petrarchan devices, yet the imagery and rhythm, the texture and the colour of the bulk of his love-poetry are different. Moreover, there are three distinct strains in his love poetry-cynical, the Platonic, and of conjugal love. A number of his popular songs *as Go and catch a falling star, Send home by my long stray'd eyes to me,* or such lyrics as *Women's Constancy, The Indifferent, Aire and Angels. The Dream, The Apparition* and many others, are written in a cynical strain. The love which he portrays is not impassioned, courtly or chivalric, but intellectual love in which art plays a predominent part.

Classification of Donne's Love-Poems

First group: Most of the poems in *Songs and Sonets* and *Elegies* belong to the first group. Donne analyses the attitudes and moods of love. The majority of the poems belongs to the dark period of 1590. Donne frequently dwells on the fickleness of woman. No woman is capable of faith and virtue. His songs, beginning with *Go and catch a falling star,* end with a bitter mocking, cynicism and denunciation of the fair sex. Nowhere can one find a true woman if one travels the

whole globe. Even assuming that a faithful woman has been found, that woman will prove faithless even before the poet is able to visit her

> Yet she,
> Will be,
> False, ere I come, to two, or three.

There is no Platonism here, but bitter satire against woman:

> Hope not for mind in woman; at their best
> Sweetness and wit, they're but mummy possest.

Sometimes Donne is extremely sensuous and even indelicate:

> As the sweet sweat of roses in a still,
> As that which from chafed musk cat's pores doth trill,
> As the 'almighty balm of th' early East,
> Such are the sweet drops of my mistress' breast,
> And on her neck her skin such lustre sets.
> They seem no sweat drops, but pearl coronets:
> Rank sweaty froth thy mistress' brow defiles.

Donne is even more passionate and sensual in *Elegie XIX* entitled *To His Mistress Going to Bed:*

> Licence my roving hands, and let them go
> Before, behind, between, above, below.
> O my America! my new found land,
> My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned
> To teach thee, I am naked first, why then
> What needst thou have more covering than a man.

After the night of love, the sun warns the lovers. In *The Sun Rising* the lover rebukes the sun for disturbing the lovers. The sun should not call on lovers but on school-boys, hunters and farmers. Love is beyond time and space.

> Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,
> Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time **...**

The lover seeks to kill the flea which has bitten him, but on second thoughts forbears, because it has also bitten the beloved and has brought about the union of lovers in its body:

> Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee,
> And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;
> Confess it, this cannot be said
> A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead
> Let not to this, self murder added be,
> And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

The lover thinks that killing the flea will amount to a triple murder (shedding the blood of the lover, the beloved and the flea).

In *The Funeral,* the lover warns the undertaker not to remove the hair of his beloved tied to his arm.

Whoever comes to shroud me, do not harm,
Nor question much
That subtle wreath of hair, which crowns my arm;
The mystery, the sign you must not touch.

Ironically, the lover has a fling at his beloved in the last lines:

So, its some bravery,
That since you would have none of me I bury some of you.

Donne challenges Platonic love by dwelling on his frank delight in physical love. *The Ecstasy* shows that body and soul are mutually dependent and that one soul cannot unite with the other soul except through the medium of physical love. The lover has fooled the girl by his philosophy and got his way:

To our bodies turn we then that so
Weak men on love revealed my look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow.
But yet the body is his book.

In *The Relic,* the lover plays with the idea that the grave hides more than one person, as woman plays the trick of being bad with more than one person. This is the lover's device to stay together with his beloved in the grave, just as they stayed together while living.

It is difficult to say whether these love-situations found parallels in Donne's life. It may be that like the young templer of his age, he may have had a liaison with a married woman, or an intrigue with an unmarried girl as in *The Perfume*. In the first elegy, *Jealousy* the lover acts prudently so as not to rouse the suspicion of the jealous husband.

Nor when he swoll'n and pampered with great fare,
Sits down, and snorts, caged in his basket chair,
Must we usurp his own bed any more,
Nor kiss and play in his house, as before.

All these early poems shows his delight in shocking people, in enlarging on the folly of confining love by rules and conventions, in emphasising the physical basis of love. Possibly, some of them reflect the moods of Donne as lover.

Second Group: The second category of love poems is sincere, dignified and grand. The songs are intensely personal, taken from his diary. They are addressed to his wife Anne More. Many of them were written after marriage. *The Anniversary* was written to celebrate the second anniversary of his wedding. It gives a fine picture of domestic bliss. Married love knows no change or decay. It is immortal and must continue even in the grave.

All other things to their destruction draw,
Only our love hath no decay;
This no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday.

According to Grierson, *The Anniversary* (specially the second), "remains, despite all its faults, one of the greatest poems on love in the language, the fullest record of the disintegrating collision in a sensitive mind of the old tradition and the new learning."

Similarly the song beginning with "Sweetest Love" is addressed to his wife when the poet had to undertake foreign travel for a short period. He bids farewell to his wife cheerfully, because this

separation is only temporary. Love triumphs over the idea of parting. This separation is like a short sleep:

> But think that we
> Are who but turned aside to sleep;
> They who one another keep
> Alive, ne'er parted be.

Another poem—*A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* also refers to a temporary separation when Donne was called from home. The poet compares the journey to the two legs of a compass, one remaining fixed and the other moving to complete the circle.

> Such wilt thou be to me who must
> Like the other fool, obliquely ran;
> Thy firmness mike my circle just,
> And mikes me end, where I begun.

These love lyrics are inspired by a depth and sweetness of affection and offer a contrast to the trival and 'conceited' poems of the early period.

Third group: There is a third category of love poems which is partly Petrarchan and partly Ovidian in tone. These songs and poems are written as conventional exercises in praise of certain ladies whom Donne knew. Some of them were addressed to the Countess of Bedford and some to Mrs. Magdalene Herbert. *Twicknam Garden* refers to the poet's friendship with the Countess of Bedford, a cultured and accomplished lady of the seventeenth century. It is not known weather this lady, in any way, responded to the love of the poet Possibly Donne misconstrued her friendly regard for him as a son, Love converts joy into sorrow. Even spring cannot bring happiness to the poet's heart. Though women in general are false and faithless, the poet's sweet heart is an exception. The "poet desires that lovers should judge their mistresses" love by comparing the taste of her tears with that of their tears. The poet feels drawn to her on account of her sincerity and faithfulness.

> O perverse sex, where none is true but she,
> Who's therefore true because her truth kills me.

In *A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day,* being the shortest day, Donne brings forward the argument that whereas in nature, love brings life to a dead world every spring, his love cannot be revived after his beloved's death.

> For I am every dead thing,
> In whom love wrought new alchemy .

The Relic is addressed to Mrs. Herbert:

> All measures and all language I should pass,
> Should I tell what a miracle she was.

Similar compliments were paid to the Countess of Huntingdon and others. This was a fashionable literary pastime. As Grierson puts it: "It is after all convention that regulates both the length of a lady" skirt and the kind of compliments one may pay her" So these pieces do not express the true sentiments of the poet.

Donne's love poetry is a record of moods, of the conflict between emotion and intellect, of the war between sense and spirit, body and soul. Donne wanted to embrace the totality of experience--not a slice of life, but life in all its entirety. So his experiences are both good and bad, bitter as well as sweet. After the storm of passion subsided, Donne returned to his spiritual and ascetic self.

His thought developed as he grew. He refused to accept the dualism of the body and the soul. In love, too, it is heresy to separate the body from the soul. Strangely enough, love and death are brought together, because they release man from human limitations and inhibitions. Death will open a way to the infinitude of love which is not possible in physical existence. Ordinarily it is thought that death cheats the lovers of their joy, turning to defeat their feat of victory:

> Death be not proud, though some have called thee
> Mighty and dreadful, for, thou are not so.

In the later poems, Donne achieves the peace that passes understanding through divine love. From physical love to spiritual love--this is the way of the mystics. So real and passionate love is the path of a self-discovery, the finding of the Universal soul:

> where no one but thee, th' Eternal root,
> Of true love I may know.

Conclusion

What surprises the reader, is the variety of moods, situation and treatment of the theme of love-sensual, realistic, violent and full of vivacity of life. There is scorn, sarcasm, bitterness and cynicism at times, but the genuineness and force of love is unquestionable. George Saintsbury writes in this connection: "To some natures, love comes as above all things, a force quickening the mind, intensifying its purely intellectual energy, opening new vistas of thought, abstract and subtle, making the soul intensely wondrously alive. Of such were Donne and Browning.

Donne is one of the greatest of English love-poets. In fact, among all the English love poets, he is the only complete amorist. His capacity for experience is unique, and his conscience as a writer towards every kind of it allows of no compromise in the duty of doing justice to each. The poetry of lust has never been written with more minute truth, but then neither has the poetry of love transcending sex.

Metaphysical Poetry And John Donne

Elizabethan poetry in spite of its merits and popularity suffered from inherent weaknesses. It was artificial and conventional. The uniform attitude to love, the mechanical sweetness of verses, the decadence of inspiration were bound to produce reaction. Donne led the revolt against Elizabethan poets. He disliked the Petrarchan convention, the tears of lovers, the cruelty of the mistress, and conceits of the Elizabethans. Thus, he may be said to be the founder of a new type of poetry. As C.S. Lewis asserts: "Metaphysics in poetry is the fruit of the Renaissance tree, becoming over-ripe and approaching putrescence."

The term "Metaphysical": Johnson's views on Metaphysical poetry

The word "metaphysical" has been defined differently by various writers. R.S. Hillyer writes: "Literally, it has to do with the conception of existence, with the living universe and Man's place therein. Loosely, it has taken such meanings as these—difficult, philosophical, obscure, ethereal, involved, supercilious, ingenious, fantastic, and incongruous."

According to Grierson, Donne's poetry is metaphysical, "not only in the sense of being erudite and witty, but in the proper sense of being reflective and philosophical." In other words, the learned critic feels that metaphysical poetry is "inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence."

Dryden was the first use the epithet—metaphysical poetry—to cover the poetic work of Donne, Cowley, Vaughan and his contemporaries. Dr. Johnson revived this epithet and wrote an essay on the metaphysical poets in his *Life of Cowley*. Dr. Johnson attacked the metaphysicals on several grounds—for their parade of learning, for their remote and fantastic analogies and conceits, for their carelessness; in diction, for their novelty intended to shock the reader, for their ingenious absurdity, rug-gedness and subtlety. He was indifferent to the vein of weighty thought and brooding imagination, the originality and metrical achievement of the metaphysical poets. He had no eye for the nobler and subtler qualities of their genius. A literary dictator as he was, he condemned without reservation what did not appeal to his classical mind.

Dr. Johnson's account of the school is well worth quoting, though its general condemnation is unjust to some delightful poets, such as Herbert and Vaughan. As he states in *Life of Cowley:* "About the beginning of the seventeenth century, appeared a race of writers that may be termed the Metaphysical poets…The Metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour….If the father of criticism (i.e., Aristotle) has rightly denominated poetry an imitative art, these writers will, without great wrong, lose their right to the name of poets, for they cannot be said to have imitated anything; they neither copied nature nor life, neither painted the forms of matter, nor represented the operations of intellect. Their thoughts are often new but seldom natural. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises: but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. They were wholly employed on something unexpected and surprising. They never inquired what, on any occasion, they should have said or done, but wrote rather as beholders than part-takers of human nature; without interest and without emotion. Their courtship was void of fondness, and their lamentation of sorrow. Their wish was only to say what they hoped had been never said before….Their attempts were always analytic; they broke every image into fragments; and could no more represent, by their slender conceits and laboured particularities, the prospects of nature, or the scenes of life, than he who dissects a sunbeam with a prism can exhibit the wide effulgence of a summer noon." From the aforesaid statement, Dr. Johnson has pointed out the following peculiarities of the metaphysical poets:

(a) They were men of learning and made a pedantic display of their strange knowledge.

(b) They affected a peculiar 'wit' which may be described as a kind of *Discordia Concors* a combination of dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike.

(c) Their fondness for analysis, which broke an image into bits, led them to the dissection of emotion rather than a direct and impassioned expression of it.

(d) Harshness and irregularity of their verse which is poetry only to the eye, not to the ear.

MAIN ASPECTS OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY

"Passionate thinking"

There is plenty of passion in this kind of poetry, but it is passion combined with intense intellectual activity. T.S. Eliot thinks that "passionate thinking" is the chief mark of metaphysical poetry. Thus, even in *The Anniversary* where Donne gives a lofty expression to the love and mutual trust of himself and his wife, his restless mind seeks farfetched ideas, similitudes and images in order to convey to the reader the exact quality of this love and trust.

The peculiarities of the metaphysical lyric

The metaphysical lyric lays stress on the fantastic, on the intellectual, on wit, on learned imagery, on conceits based on psychology of flights from the material to the spiritual plane, on obscure and philosophical allusions, on the blending of passions, and thought, feeling and ratiocination. The metaphysical lyric is a blend of passion, imagination and argumemnt. According to A.C. Ward, the metaphysical style, is a combination of two elements, the fantastic in form and style and the incongruous in matter and manner.

Philosophical conception of the universe and ordinary experiences

Metaphysical poetry is inspired by a "philosophical conception of universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence." Undoubtedly, its themes are simple human experiences, the joy and sorrow of love, the thrill of adventure and battle, the hustle and excitement of the town and in addition mystic experiences and inner conflicts known to the greatest thinkers and philosophers. Donne and his fellows are not the metaphysical poets in the full sense of the term. They are 'metaphysical' in a restricted sense. Donne is metaphysical, by nature of his scholasticism, his knowledge of Plato, Aristotle, the medieval philosophers and the new learning of the Renaissance, his deep reflective interest in his personal experiences, the new psychological curiosity and dissecting genius with which he writes of life, love and religion. But he is often frivolous, tortuous and sceptical. According to T.S. Eliot, the metaphysical desire is the "elaboration of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it" and the telescoping of images and multiplied associations. Donne is aware of the dash between the old and the new, the world of faith and the world of reason, the clash between the old geographers and Copernicus and his followers:

> The new philosophy calls all in doubt
> The element of fire it quite put out;
> The sun is lost and the earth, and no man's wit
> Can well direct him where to look for it.

Source of metaphysical inspiration: love poetry and religious poetry

Metaphysical poetry resolves itself into the two broad divisions of amorous and religious verse. The former was written largely by the courtly poets, Carew, Suckling, and Lovelace, and the latter by Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan, who all dedicated their gifts to the service of their religion. The metaphysical element, it seems, first made its appearance in love poems, following the example of the Italian writers, whom Donne seems to have adopted as his models. Under this influence, made yet more popular by the practice of Donne, "every metaphor, natural or traditional to the theme of love, was elaborated in abstract and hyperbolical fashion," till it gave rise to indulgence in strange and far-fetched images. From this the practice spread to all kinds of poetical writing, amorous or otherwise. But though it returned to England through Italy, the metaphysical mode is traceable, in its origins, to the poetry of the Middle Ages, where the lover woos his mistress in the same artificial tone which characterises metaphysical verse. As Prof. H.J.C. Grierson puts it: "The Metaphysicals of the seventeenth century combined two things, both soon to pass away, the fantastic dialectics of medieval love-poetry and the simple, and sensuous strain which they caught from the classics—soul and body lightly yoked and glad to run and soar together in the winged chariot of Pegasus."

Donne has written many 'songs' and 'sonnets' on the subject of love. But *he does not follow the Petrarchan tradition of love poetry* as we find in Spenser and Shakespeare. He does not flatter his beloved or glorify her. On the contrary, in many of his songs he shows a cynical contempt for women. For example, in 'Song' he makes it clear that a man may be able to catch a falling star or say where all the past years are; he may, indeed achieve the impossible, but he will never be able to find a woman true and fair. But *Donne is also capable of deep feeling*. The poems he wrote to

celebrate his wedded love, are full of such feelings. He says to his wife in *The Anniversary* that all honours and glories, all the princes and their favourites might perish—

> Only our love hath no decay
> This no to-morrow hath, nor yesterday.
> Running it never runt from us away,
> But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day,

There is also a fine feeling in the song, *Sweetest love I do not go*.

But Donne as a poet of love is very often given to subtle arguments. If he had less of arguments and more of passion he would have been a greater poet of love. He is rather rough too.

Although in his youth he had lived an irregular life, Donne took to religion whole-heartedly in his middle age and entered the church. He was an excellent preacher and rose to be the Dean of St Paul's. His *Divine Poems,* as his religious verse is called, is marked by an intense feeling of piety, by a brooding thought on the subject of death and a strong faith in Resurrection.

Learning in Metaphysical poetry

Metaphysical verse is laden with the scholarship of its authors. A whole book of knowledge might be compiled from the scholarly allusions in Donne and Cowley alone. To such learning in itself there could, of course, be no objection. It is an enrichment of the poet's mind, and part of the equipment for his high vocation. Injudiciously applied, however, it can only mystify the average person, and it was unfortunate that, as Dr. Johnson noted, the Metaphysicians "sometimes drew their conceits from recesses of learning not very much frequented by common readers of poetry." The poet is not made by what he can give at second or third hand, unless his own genius can transmute it. As Johnson also said: "No man could be born a Metaphysical poet, nor assume that dignity of a writer, by descriptions, copied from descriptions, by imitations borrowed from imitations, by traditional imagery and hereditary similes, by readiness of rhyme, and volubility."

Obscurity in metaphysical poetry

"In the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling," to quote T.S. Eliot, the Metaphysicals made themselves difficult to understand. As we have seen, they combined dissimilar ideas without attempting to unite them, and the reader was left to divine what they really had in mind. So far as their later reputation was concerned, this did not serve them well for several generations. Ben Jonson predicted that Donne's fame would not live because of his incapacity to open himself to his reader, and indeed this great poet had almost to be rediscovered in our own times. Coleridge however, did the school more justice. "The, style of the Metaphysical," he wrote, "is the reverse of that which distinguishes, too many of our most recent versifiers;' the one conveying the most fantastic thoughts in the most correct lanaguage, the other in the most fantastic language conveying the most trivial thoughts."

"Unified sensibility" in metaphysical poetry

It was T.S. Eliot who made the phrase "unified sensibility" popular. According to Eliot, the two faculties, that of feeling and of thinking came to be dissociated from each other on account of one-sided emphasis placed since the time of Milton on intellect. Thus after the seventeenth century, we have either poetry of thought or poetry of feeling. Such a separation of thought from feeling is called dissociation of sensibility. This had an adverse effect on the history of poetry. But in the early part of seventeenth century feeling and thought were combined, they were one operation of the mind. It was not possible to think without feeling and to feel without thinking. This is called a unified sensibility (or unification of sensibility). Donne and the Metaphysicals had

a unified sensibility. Their poetry expressed through thinking and feeling at the same time. Here is a direct apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling. Eliot tells us in the essay *Metaphysial Poets:* "The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience." Thus in the seventeenth century, a dissociation of sensibility set in. If the Metaphysicals are obscure and difficult, it is because their sensibility is unified, and ours dissociated.

The Metaphysicals are constantly amalgamating disparate experiences. Donne had the knack of presenting different objects together. These objects are quite remote though undeniable similarity has been brought about by the poet. He connects the abstract with concrete, the physical with spiritual, the remote with the near and the sublime with the common-place. "This juxtaposition, and sometimes, interfusion of apparently dissimilar or exactly opposite objects often pleasantly thrills us into a new perception of reality." And Donne, says Hayward, is a 'thrilling poet':

> Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one
> Inconstancy naturally hath begot
> A constant habit.

These "contraries" meeting in Donne's poetry vex not only the poet but also his readers. His successors handled these contraries rather crudely with very unpleasant effects.

Metaphysical conceits and images

A characteristic feature of metaphysical verse is indulgence in "dissimilar images, of discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike." A comparison is often instituted between objects that have ostensibly little in common with each other. Cowley, for example, compares being in love with different women to travelling through different countries—"two heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together":

> Hast thou not found each woman's breast
> (The land where thou hast travelled)
> Either by savages possest,
> Or wild, and uninhabited?
> What joy could' st take, or what repose.
> In countries so uncivilized as those.

Often the figure of speech is elaborated to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it. In the following stanza from the same poem, Cowley pushes the geographical metaphor as far as it can go: women's breasts (or, as we should say, hearts) being different lands, have now different constellations to influence their climate:

> Last, the scorching dog-star, here
> Rages with immoderate hen;
> Whilst Pride, the ragged Northern Bear,
> In others makes the cold too great.
> And where these are temperate known,
> The soil's all barren sand or rocky stone.

In plain language, some women are too wanton, others too proud; those who are temperate are unresponsive to the approaches of love.

The metaphysical poetry is full of far fetched images ("conceits" as they are called) and allusions and references borrowed from branches of learning—old and new. For example, Donne represents himself in *Twicknam Garden* as an unhappy lover. He comes to a public garden in

order that the sights and sounds there might console him. But that is not possible as he has brought with him his spider Love, which transubstantiates all (a piece of medieval science). He wants to be converted into a fountain so that he may weep all the time. But his tears would be true tears of love. Lovers should come and take his tears in phials and comparing them with those shed by their mistresses find out if the latter are true in love! Again, his own mistress is unkind to him because she is chaste. But what a paradox! Among the women she is the only true of chaste woman, and "who's therefore true, because her truth kills me."

Metaphysical conceits convey a unified experience

R.G. Cox points out: "At its best the metaphysical conceit communicates a unified experience; what matters is the sense of imaginative pressure and intensity; it is only where this is absent that the ingenuity seems obtrusive and we feel impelled to speak of frigidity and fantastic hyperbole". John Donne has made a characteristic use of ideas and experience and the most startling connections are discovered between them. When the use of conceit fails in its purpose, Dr. Johnson's remark. "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" seems to be justified and when it succeeds one thinks rather of Coleridge's remark that imagination shows itself in "the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities."

Affectation and hyperbole in metaphysical poetry

Natural grace is often hard to find in metaphysical writing, which abounds in artificiality of thought and hyperbolical expression. The writers probably deemed it a passport to fame to say "something unexpected and surprising." "What they wanted of the sublime, they endeavoured to supply by hyperbole; their amplification had no limits; they left not only reason but fancy behind them and produced combinations of confused magnificence, that not only could be credited, but could not be imagined". Here is Cowley again, promising a tempest of sighs in return for one or two from his dear one:

> By every wind that comes this way,
> Send me at least a sigh or two
> Such and so many I'll repay
> As shall themselves make winds to get to you.

The complement is violent and unnatural, and does not give the effect of real emotion.

Diction and versification of metaphysical poetry

The Metaphysicals reacted against the cloying sweetness and harmony of the Elizabethan poetry. They deliberately avoided conventional poetic expressions. They employed very prosaic words as if they were scientists or shopkeepers. Thus, we find rugged and unpoetic words in their poetical works. Their versification and their diction is usually, coarse and jerky. According to Grierson, the metaphysicals had two motives for employing very coarse and rugged expressions in their poetical works. Firstly, they wanted to startle the reader. Secondly, they had the desire to make use of direct, unconventional and colloquial speeches.

Donne could "sing" whenever he liked but often, he seems to be "bending and cracking the metrical pattern to the rhetoric of direct and vehement utterance." He very often throws all prosodic considerations to the winds and distributes his stresses not according to the metre but according to the sense.

Excessive intellectualism of metaphysical poetry

According to Grierson, the hallmark of all metaphysical poetry are passionate feeling and paradoxical ratiocination. The same critic observes that the Metaphysicals "exhibited deductive

reasoning carried to a high pitch". Often Donne states at the beginning of a poem a hopelessly insupportable proposition which he defends later.

The metaphysical poets, in Johnson's words, desired "to say what they hoped had been never said before. They endeavoured to be singular in their thoughts and were careless of their diction." They did not feel obliged to follow the trodden path. They had their own thoughts and they worked out their own manner of expressing them. "They played with thoughts," said Sir Walter Scott, "as the Elizabethans had played with words." In fact, they carried the Elizabethan freedom of imagination and delight in verbal fancies to a point at which it became difficult for the average reader to grasp their meaning. For splendour of sound and imagery they substituted subtlety of thought, though this must not be taken to mean that their work lacked its own beauty and grandeur.

Reactions against metaphysical poetry

About the middle of the seventeenth century a change came over the English poetic temperament. The metaphysical wave had exhausted itself, and had left literary standards and values confused. The Metaphysicals had misused the Elizabethan ideal of liberty. It necessitated the growing realization of clarity and control in poetry. Ben Jonson with his prophetic vision had advocated literary order and discipline in place of lawless impulse and unbridled fancy. His example was ignored for a time, but it was effective later when metaphysical method, in its decay, began to produce more weeds than flowers. Cowley and Marvell had realised the importance of poise and control in their verse. But Edmund Waller and Sir John Denham were the real pioneers of the new movement. They led the reaction against metaphysical excesses by writing charming verse on the classical model.

Rehabilitation of metaphysical poetry in the twentieth century

After the First World War metaphysical method again came into vogue. Consciousness of the waste and futility of war, and the desolation and hopelessness resulting from it once more brought God in purview. A sincere quest for positive faith emerged, and we have a marked tendency with the opening of the thirties. Religious poetry came to be written under the influence of the seventeenth century metaphysical poets. What gave a further impetus to the writing of religious poetry was the popularity of Hopkins after being resurrected by Bridges in 1819. The poetry of Hopkins had qualities which particularly appealed to the postwar world; it revealed a sense of spiritual tension and frustration; it combined a powerful intellect with a strong sensuousness; it possessed a bold originality of technique. The poetry of Hopkins is completely on the lines of the old metaphysicals, with the same devotion of grace, the same technique of expression and the same use of Donne's breaking up of lines, suddenly indicating a pause.

'The Caged Skylark' is a typically metaphysical piece. In the thirties the poetry can be judged from the impact it made upon poets who did not share the religion which inspired and governed all that Hopkins wrote.

Eliot himself turned his face away from the faithlessness of the 'Waste Land' and 'Hollow Men' and in 'Ash Wednesday' sought refuge in the Anglo-Catholic doctrines of faith. Since then, religion has become his voice and he has been considered by some as the lost leader. Eliot's poems are in a complete sense metaphysical. Eliot's art embraces Donne's technique of the juxtaposition of the levity with the seriousness, his method of presenting things by contrast, his use of wit and conceits as well as his free manipulation of metre and rhyme scheme to suit the melody and meaning of the piece. *Ash Wednesday* and poems composed after it are marked clearly by his Anglo-Catholic inclination; *Burnt Norton, East Coker, The Dry Salvages,* and *Little* Gidding--each of these of *Four Quartets* reveals symbolically this highest faith and is a finely universalised song of enchantment of the highest entity in the sober and philosophical tone.

Conclusion

The term 'Metaphysical' was applied to the poetry of Donne and his followers first by Dryden and then by Dr. Johnson. These poets—Donne, Cowley, Herbert etc.,--wrote mainly on two subjects, love and religion. The term 'Metaphysical' is rightly applied to them as in their poetry there is the habit *"of always seeking to express something after, something behind the simple, obvious first sense and suggestion of a subject." (Meta = beyond+physical)*. Dr. Johnson was unkind to this school. He thought that these poets only wanted to display their learning and to say something which had not been said before.

It will be interesting here to mention that the future of metaphysical poetry is bright. Prof. Ransom, an eminent critic of today meditating upon the nature of true poetry, has indicated that metaphysical poetry is alone true poetry. In his treatise he concedes pure physical poetry as an impossibility aiming at the 'thinginess' and also 'Platonic poetry' which is a false poetry dealing with ideals and ideas alone. He prefers metaphysical poetry not because it represents the middle way between the two, but because it produces a beautiful blend of the two.

The Living John Donne

(A) THE LIFE OF JOHN DONNE (1572-1631)

A contemporary of Marlowe and Shakespeare, Donne (pronounced as "Dun") shares with them the spirit and the quality of the Renaissance. The contradictions of the age are reflected in the career and achievement of Donne. The inconsistency of the Elizabethans is mirrored in the complex personality of Donne, a poet of intellectual ingenuity and theological ingenuousness. It is not difficult to explain the versatility and the varied achievements of the poet, in the light of the age to which he belonged.

Birth, parentage, early life and marriage

John Donne, born in 1572, was the eldest son of a London iron-merchant. His mother was the sister of John Heywood, the dramatist. After receiving education privately, Donne matriculated at Oxford in 1584. Probably he went to Cambridge for higher education, but obviously he could not take a degree on account of his opposition to the oath of thirty-nine articles. Of the years from 1584 to 1592, we know very little. He was admitted as a law student to Lincoln's Inn in May 1592. Like many young members of the Inns of Court, he was fond of pleasure and company: "Not dissolute but very neat, a great visitor of ladies, a great frequentor of plays, a great writer of conceited verses."

John Donne tells us that during that period, he "of study and play made strange hermaphrodites". During these formative years, Donne studied both law and religion. He also wrote a number of songs, elegies and satires before his twenty-fifth year. There is no doubt that he visited Italy in order to proceed to Jerusalem but prevented from doing so, he passed over into Spain, where he studied the laws, the language and the arts of Spain. His collection of books contained many Spanish writers. The earliest portrait of Donne, dated 1591, bears a Spanish motto. The spirit of Italian life and literature and influence of Spanish philosophers and theologians dominated his early poetry. He also came across other Catholics who, like him, felt terribly the harassment and persecution they were subject to. John Donne wrote of this period: "I had my first breeding and conversation with men of suppressed and afflicted religion (Catholicism), accustomed to the respite of death and hungry of an imagined martyrdom." These were the days of inner conflict. His soul was torn between Catholicism and Anglicanism. Ultimately, by 1597 he must have embraced the Church of England, when he entered the service

of Sir Thomas Egerton. But before 1597, Donne enlisted as a volunteer in two combined military and naval expeditions. The Cadiz Expedition of 1556 and Azore Expedition of 1597 show that he was an adherent of the Earl of Essex His. *The Storm* and *The Calm* describe the experiences of his voyage. It was during the expedition that he came in contact with Thomas, the eldest son of Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. He served Egerton for four years as Secretary. He would have got promotion and advancement in public service had he not committed the indiscretion of contracting a run-away marriage with Anne More, daughter of Sir George More of Losely and niece of Egerton's second wife. Possibly Donne miscalculated, as he thought this marriage would strengthen his claims to promotion. On the contrary, Egerton dismissed him from service. The reconciliation with More, his father-in-law, saved him from a long imprisonment.

Donne's conversion of Anglicanism

A word may be said about his conversion to Anglicanism. Brought up among the Catholics in early age, his belief in the old faith struggled against the impact of the Established Church. Donne was no hypocrite; he knew the shortcomings of the Church of Rome; his intellectual spirit detached itself from Catholicism. His conversion to Anglicanism was not due to opportunism or expediency but intellectual persuasion. Even then, in later life he felt, to some extent, a sort of spiritual unrest:

> Show me, dear Christ, thy spouse so bright and clear…

Donne's hasty and imprudent marriage meant the loss of a promising and stable public career. The years from 1601 to 1609 were full of fluctuating fortunes, when Donne had to depend on the generosity of his patron, Sir Robert Drury, the Countess of Beford, Lord Hay, Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, who helped him in different ways. The *Pseudo Martyr* (1610) shows him definitely on the Anglician side, trying to defend the oath of allegiance.

Two loves of Donne

Donne had two loves—poetry, the mistress of his youth, and Divinity, the wife of his mature age. Equally remote he stood from the ascetic ideal. He believed in the joy of living and the seduction of poetry. Donne followed the middle path between blind faith and reformation.

> To adore or scorn an image, or protest,
> May all be bad; doubt wisely; in strange way
> To stand inquiring right is not to stray;
> To sleep or run wrong is.

Donne's satiric genius found expression in his satire on heresy and on women. In *The Progress of the Soul* (1601), he traces the progress of the soul of heresy from the fall of Eve to the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The career of Donne entered a prosperous phase by his entering the Ministry of the Church of England in 1615. His steps to the altar, had cost him much misery and anguish. His pursuits were now controversial but devout. His sermons and poems written during this period reflect the complexity of his character, his varied erudition and his alert mind. The letters in verse written to different persons reflect his moods and interests. These metaphysical compliments and hyperboles need not make us forget the intensification of religious feeling and inner experience which found expression in the *Holy Sonets*. His *Divine Poems,* likewise, show the conflict of faith and reason, of hope and despair, and the penitence of a soul which has undergone a purgation of emotional experience. And yet the last poems queerly blend harshness with a sonorous harmony.

Some of his poems are in the amorous Cavalier tradition; such is his celebrated song *Go and Catch a Falling Star,* which avers that no-where lives a woman true and fair. In something of the same tradition is the poem *Love's Deity,* beginning:

I long to talk with some old lover's ghost
Who died before the god of love was born.

In a somewhat different strain, one more like his religious poems, is *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*. It is for his religious poetry, however, that Donne is most admired. Among the best of these are masterful sonnet Death, with the inspired couplet:

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And Death shall be no more, Death, thou shah die:

and the powerful *A Hymn To God The Father,* spun out of amazing puns on the poet's own name: *'When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done….".*

Donne—the Dean of St Paul's

In 1619, Donne, the Chaplain, accompanied his friend the Earl of Doncaster to Germany. He was promoted to the post of Dean of St. Paul's in 1621. His sermons attracted large audiences. During his serious sickness he composed a few devotional poems including the hymns *Since I am Coming* and *Wilt thou forgive*. Donne felt greatly comforted by the first hymn: "The words of that hymn have restored me to the same thoughts of joy that possessed my soul in my sickness when I composed it". During his second sickness in 1630, he gave orders for his own monument which still stands in St. Paul's. He died in London on 31st March 1631.

Conclusion

Donne left a deep and pervasive influence on English poetry. The metaphysical lyricists owed a great debt to him. Sometimes, his followers excelled him in happy conceit, passion and paradoxical reasoning. And yet he gave a sincere and passionate quality to the Elizabethan lyric. He interwove argument with poetry. In spite of its intellectual content, his poems attract us with a sense of vision, an intensity of feeling, and a felicity of expression. He is one of those great poets who have left a mark on the history of English poetry. Look at the compliments in verses below:

That never any one could before become,
So great a monarch, in so small a room,
He conquered rebel passions, ruled them so,
As under-spheres by the first Mover go,
Banished so far their working, that we can
But know he had some, for we knew him man.
Then let his last excuse his first extremes,
His age saw vision, though his youth dream'd dreams'

—Sir Lucius Carie

This soul of verse (in its first pure estate)
Shall live, for all the world to imitate
But not come near, for in thy Fancy's flight
Thou dost not stoop unto the vulgar sight,
But hovering highly in the air of Wit
Hold'st such a pitch that few can follow it.

—Arthur Wilson

Who was the Prince of wits, amongst whom he reign'd
High as a Prince, and as great State maintain'd?

—Robert Browning

(B) THE WORKS OF JOHN DONNE

(1) JOHN DONNE'S SECULAR POETRY

The secular poems of John Donne may be classified under the following headings:

(a) "Songs and Sonets" (Love Poems)

His love poems, *Songs and Sonets,* were written in the same period, and are intense and subtle analyses of all the moods of a lover, expressed in vivid and startling language, which is colloquial rather than conventional. A vein of satire runs through these too. The rhythm is dramatic and gives the illusion, of excited talk. He avoids the smooth, easy pattern of most of his contemporaries, preferring to arrest attention rather than to lull the senses. His great variety of pace, his fondness for echoing sounds, his deliberate use of shortened lines and unusual stress contribute also to this effect of vivid speech, swift thought, and delicate emotional responses. He is essentially a psychological poet whose primary concern is feeling. His poems are all intensely personal and reveal a powerful and complex being. Among the best known and most typical of the poems of this group are *Aire and Angels, A Nocturnall upon St. Lucies day; Valediction; forbidding Mourning,* and *The Extasy*.

(b) The Satires

"Donne put much more into satire than any English writer did before him, and in any history of English verse his satires would have to be described as a landmark." These satires are five in number. They are modelled in style and technique on the Roman satirist Persius. Like Elizabethan satire, John Donne's satires are rough and harsh. His satires have the usual energy—a richness of contemporary observation. They were written in the early period of his life. They reveal his cynical nature and keenly critical mind. They were written in the couplet form, later to be adopted by Dryden and then by Pope and show clearly, often coarsely and crudely, Donne's dissatisfaction with the world around him.

(c) The Elegies

The elegies are twenty in number. They were first published in 1633, although they were written in the early period of his life, most probably in 1590. "They are all love-poems in loose iambic pentameter couplets, and have always had a reputation for indecency". The titles of these elegies indicate their nature, e.g. *Jealousy, The Anagram, Change, The Perfume, His Picture, On His Mistress Going to Bed, Love's Progress, Love* and *War*. The main features of the elegies are vigour, concrete imagery, a set of psychological attitudes which are found also in some of the poems of *Songs and Sonets*.

(d) Verse letters

These verse letters were addressed to the Countess of Bedford. They reveal the author's unique personality.

(e) Epithalamions

Donne has attempted three epithalamions or marriage songs. The first song was written for the marriage of Princess Elizabeth on St.Valentine's Day, 1613. As Grierson remarks: "In this poem, Donne comes in places near in style to Spenser, supreme master of the epithalamion". The second epilhalamion was attempted to celebrate the marriage of the Earl of Somerset who was the King's favourite and Chief Minister in 1613. The third epithalamion may be described as more Spenserian than princess Elizabeth's epithalamion

(f) The Progress of the Soul

It is a strange and fantastic poem which was written in 1601 by John Donne. The queen has been treated as the last of a line of arch-heretics. As Gransden asserts: "The poem is one of which Donne would have had enough reason to repent (it is indecent and unpatriotic)". He used the title again, perhaps by way of expiation, for his *Second Anniversary* written eleven years later, in which he followed with Christian fervour the soul of a dead girl on its direct, innocent and orthodox flight to paradise. The soul makes a very different sort of problem in this poem. It is Donne's most fantastic piece of speculation. It provides an evidence of youthful interest in the Cabbal.

(g) Epicedes and Obsequies

These poems were written to mourn the death of celebrated contemporaries. They are, in fact, elegies. "These elegies are good working examples of how the resources of the metaphysical technique enable the poet, who probably feels no personal grief, to offer a variety of comfort, appropriate yet original, upon the formal occasion of death; the conceits and analogies are as carefully chosen as acquaintances would now-a-days choose flowers for a wreath."

(h) The Anniversaries

The two *Anniversaries* were published in 1611. They were written for Sir Robert Drury on the death of his daughter Elizabeth. These poems characterized the transition from the secular to the divine poems. They reveal the darker side of Donne's wit. The basic idea of these poems is that the death of one who is so young and innocent, makes the world empty, virtueless and rotten. They reveal the poet's disillusion with this life and hope of the next with which his mind has been filled during the difficult and frustrated decade.

(2) RELIGIOUS POETRY OF JOHN DONNE

His religious poetry was written after 1610, and the greatest, the nineteen *Holy Sonets,* and the lyrics such as A *Hymn to God the Father,* after his wife's death in 1617. They too are intense and personal and have a force unique in his mind before taking orders in the Anglican Church--his horror of death, and the fascination which it had for him, his dread of the wrath of God, and his longing for God's love. They are the expression of a deep and troubled soul. In them are found the intellectual subtlety, the scholastic learning, and the 'wit' and 'conceits' of the love poems.

(3) PROSE OF JOHN DONNE

Donne's prose work is considerable both in bulk and achievement. *The Pseudo-Martyr* (1610) was a defence of the oath of allegiance, while *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611) was a satire upon Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits. The best introduction to Donne's prose is, however, through his *Devotions* (1614), which give an account of his spiritual struggles during his serious illness. They have many of the qualities of his poetry. They are direct and personal and also reveal a keen psychological insight and the preoccupation with death and his own sinfulness which is also to be seen in his *Holy Sonets*. The strong power of his imagination and the mask of learning, which are the features of his works, cannot hide the basic underlying simplicity of Donne's faith and his longing for rest in God. His finest prose works are his *Sermons* which number about 160. In seventeenth-century England the sermon was a most important influence, and the powerful preacher in London was a public figure capable of wielding great influence. We possess a great number of these sermons which show the form to have a highly developed literary technique based on well-established oratorial traditions. Donne's sermons, of which the finest is probably *Death's Duel* (1630), contain many of the features of his poetry. Intensely personal, their appeal is primarily emotional, and Donne seems to have used a dramatic technique which had a great hold on his audiences. They reveal the same sort of imagery, the same unusual wit, the keen analytical

mind, and the preoccupation with morbid themes which exist in his poetry, and they are full of the same out-of-the-way learning.

(C) THE PERSONALITY OF JOHN DONNE

Donne's was a complex personality, abounding in good and bad qualities. In him, great virtues and serious faults were inextricably mixed together. His merits often fascinate us; "his weaknesses often repel us." On the whole, in spite of, all his shortcomings and faults,we cannot help feeling the fascination of Donne as a man. This *monarch of wit* will continue to find favour with coming generations:

> Here lies a King, that rul'd as he thought fit,
> The universal Monarch of wit;
> Here lie two Flames, and both these, the best,
> Apollo's Tint, at last, the true
> God's Priest.'

John Donne's versatility and complexity

It is hard to find among the English poets, a genius of such versatility and complexity as John Donne. Brought up as a Catholic, Donne led a life of pleasure and promise as a young gallant in the temple in London. He was, in the words of Sir Richard Barker, "not dissolute, but very great", a great visitor of ladies, a great frequenter of plays, a great writer of conceited verses. It was impossible that "a vulgar soul should dwell in such promising features." We have a portrait of this young man as he appeared in 1591, holding a sword, possessing an eager and intellectual look, with a Spanish lover's motto, *"Sooner dead than changed"*. This portrait is in harmony with the tenor of the poems of the period namely, the *Song and Sonets*. He was not quite sensual, he was passionate and arrogant. In his poems, he lays little stress on the aesthetic element in passion. He had little feeling for pure, and artistic beauty. But he ranges through the different moods of passion—from the earthliest to the sublimest. There are poems of illicit love and seduction (as *The Extasy* and *The Perfume);* of lover's moods *("For Godsake hold your tongue and let me love", "Twice or thrice had I loved thee"),* of Petrarchan love (like the *Primrose, The Relique* and *Twicknam Garden)*. It is possible that Donne paid compliments to the noble ladies whom he knew, in the Petrarchan tradition. There are a few songs of the later period dealing with love in a restrained and chastened mood, possibly written after his marriage with Anne More. They are *A Valediction* and *Sweetest love, I do not go*. These poems possess the depth and sweetness of pure love.

Influence of European literature on Donne

Donne's personality was enriched by his residence abroad. His service as a volunteer in the expeditions of Essex, and his stay in Italy and Spain opened up the treasures of European literature to him, His library contained many volumes of foreign poets. He was extremely fond of Spanish authors. The Renaissance strain in his genius made him welcome the fresh air offered by contemporary writers.'

Influence on Donne's personality by his conversion to Anglicanism

Donne's conversion to Anglicanism and his ordination as Dean of St Paul's should not be construed as a swing of the pendulum, from a life of fun and pleasure to asceticism and repentance. The basic characteristic of Donne is not change, rather it is the constancy of his nature. His poems represent the balanced and harmonious development of life, the merging of the body and the soul in religious experience.

Donne—a student of literature and religion

Throughout his life, Donne remained a great student of literature and religion. He spent a considerable time every day in his library, pondering over books.

> Here are God's conduits, grave divines, and here Nature's Secretary (Aristotle), the philosopher,
> And jolly statesman which teach how to tie
> The sinews of a city's majestic body,
> Here gathering chroniclers, and by them stand
> Giddy fantastic poets of each land.

Donne's multifarious activities

Undoubtedly, Donne was ambitious. He had the examples of Bacon, Davies and Raleigh before him. But there was one hurdle in his way. He was a Catholic. Either he should go abroad and seek employment under a Catholic Prince or lead a simple life at home. Donne knew that for most men, religion was an accident of birth. He voices the right of the individual to choose his faith and to doubt wisely. Some critics feel that Donne's farewell to Rome was a matter of expediency. He had to lean towards Anglicanism if he desired a bright future. But it was in pursuance of the individual's right to choice of faith that Donne embraced the Church of England. His later poems show his great love of and enthusiasm for Anglicanism.

Though Donne occupied the high office of the Dean of St. Paul's he was a city poet, a court-poet, a poet who wrote for wits and elite of the metropolis.

His evaporations of wit were quite consistent and in keeping with his pursuits, devout and secular. His letters to the Countess of Bedford, Elizabeth Drury and other aristocratic ladies abound in conceits and compliment. And yet these poems of extraordinary and erudite wit were written side by side with the holy sonnets and divine poems dealing with religious and transcendental topics.

Donne's letters to his friends and patrons throw a flood of light on his personality. Here he appears as a brilliant but arrogant young man, scholarly and witty, often harassed and melancholy, soliciting for favour or preferment, flattering the great, eagerly canvassing for office, and even conniving at corrupt arrangements. Moreover, his melancholy, often verging on the need of suicide in face of failure in love or ambition is deep-rooted, though held in abeyance by his quibbles and quips and the sunny prospect of the affection, esteem and favour of high ladies.

(D) DONNE'S HUMANISM

As a typical product of the Renaissance movement, Donne shows elements of humanism, both in his personality and poetry. Humanism has been defined by Maritain as something which "essentially tends to render man more truly human and to make his original greatness manifest by causing him to participate in all that can enrich human nature and in history, (by 'concentrating the world in man', as Schiller has said, and by 'dilating man to the world')". It, at once, demands that man makes use of all the potentialities he holds within him, his creative powers and the life of the reason, and labours to make the powers of the physical world the instruments of his freedom. "So humanism leads to individualism, to self-analysis, to the discovery of the latent powers of man. The navigational explorations of the physical world in the sixteenth century and the voyages of the mind of Marlowe, Bacon and Donne are manifestations of the humanist spirit. Humanism discovers the importance of the world of man, and man's relation to the physical world. It, therefore, ensures the freedom of creative development, the curiosity, the courage of experiment and the revelation of the inner spirit of man. Donne and the religious poets of the

seventeenth century were, true humanists; they believed in the Christian concept of human nature and man's dependence on God. The advance of knowledge, the discoveries and inventions of science, were viewed by them as manifestations of the Divine Power. The circulation of blood, the motion of the earth, the various natural phenomena only tended to show how man fitted in God's universe.

Donne's humanism finds its best outlet in his hunger for knowledge and thirst for unravelling the mystery of existence.

> Thirst for that time, O, my insatiate soul
> And serve thy thirst, with God's safe-sealing Bowl.
> Be thirsty still, and drink still till thou go,
> To tho' only Health, to be Hydroptique so

(The Second anniversary, Ll. 45-48)

Even in his disillusionment and despair, he finds his sheet-anchor in faith—"I am the man that cannot despair, since Christ is the remedy." And yet this thirst cannot be quenched, the search of a truth is an arduous endeavour, a steep climb uphill:

> On huge hill
> Cragged, sod steep. Truth stand, and he that will
> Reach her, about must, and about must go;
> And what the hills suddenness resists, win so;
> Yet strive so, that before age, death's twilight
> Thy soul rest, for none can work in that night.

—(Satire III, LI. 79-84)

Donne's attitude to love is another aspect of his humanism. His love is not subject to time, nor his beloved's beauty liable to decay, as swift as that of the rose:

> No spring, nor summer Beauty hath such grace,
> As I have seen in one Autummal face

—(The Autumnall)

Donne's intellectual curiosity enabled him to challenge accepted beliefs and conventions. Donne's dismissal and adversity shook for a time, his belief in humanism. This was responsible for the gloomy strain and pessimistic note of his later writings. His craving for death, his inability to reconcile flesh and spirit, his vacillation between faith and reason was but a temporary phase due to unfavourable domestic circumstances. Donne regained his humanism by reconciliation of matter with spirit

Donne does not belittle the world of the senses. Just as the alchemist distills the quintessence from elemental matter, so the poet derives refined pleasure through the senses. To him, *"the gifts of the body are better than those of the mind*' and the joy of physical love as portrayed in *The Ecstasy* is the mystical union of souls. The senses show the way though they are not the end of his search—*"They are ours, though they are not we"*. As Mahood puts:" In this double hunger after metaphysical knowledge and supersensory experience, Donne has a life-line."

There is a strain of scepticism in Donne. He does not understand the mysteries through reason but through intuition. He knows the invisible world which is as real as the visible one. He realises man's condition as not that of one fallen but redeemed. In *his Devotions,* Donne writes: "Earth is the centre of my body. Heaven is the centre of my soul....As yet not in. As yet God suspends me between Heaven and Earth, as a Meteor, and I am not in Heaven, because an earthly

body clogs me, and 1 am not in the Earth, because a heavenly soul sustains me." His mind no longer vacillates like the quivering needle of the mariner's compass.

(E) DONNE AND THE ELIZABETHANS

Donne was a contemporary of Shakespeare and most of his work was written before 1593. He was an Elizabethan, in the restricted sense of the term, and yet he gave a new direction to the creative activity of his age.

Main features of Elizabethan poetry

Elizabethan poetry followed certain conventions—there was the Petrarchan tradition, the pastoral convention, and the classical norms. There were advantages and disadvantages in these conventions. Spenser's mellifluousness, Sydney's passionate outbursts and Marlowe's *mighty line* gave Elizabethan poetry a distinct and high place in English literature. Poetry gained in intensity but lost in complexity or what T.S. Eliot called the "dissocation of sensibility".

The sonnet sequences of the Elizabethan age flowed in the Petrarchan channel. The poet sang of the pains and sorrows of love, the beauty of the beloved and her steady cruelty. The images were borrowed from nature—rain, wind, fire, ice, and storm; from the classics and mythology--Venus, Cupid, Cynthia and Apollo. Poetry became a tame and mechanical art, devoid of originality and true feeling.

John Donne's revolt against the Elizabethan poetry

By 1590, there were distinct indications of a revolt against the prevailing conventions in poetry. The conventional themes and conceits no longer appealed to the readers. There was a demand that the poet should go "back to nature"--to life itself--to appeal to the true lovers of poetry. Sidney's recipe--"Look *in thy heart and write... "*. Drayton's affirmation that he was no "pickpurse of another's wit" showed clearly a tendency towards realism. There was opposition both to poetic themes, images, and styles. The bold bawdry of the Elizabethan poets, their references to Greek gods and classical myths were held up to ridicule.

The reasons for the change in literary taste were not far to seek. The tone of the age by the end of the sixteenth century was becoming sober and puritanical. The drama was insisting on a realistic treatment of the problems of ethics and behaviour. The people wanted solid stuff--"more matter with less art".

Donne challenged the prevailing forms and conventions in Elizabethan poetry. He introduced the "metaphysical lyric" On the whole, he was anti-Petrarchan, though at times, he wrote in the Petrarchan vein. He represented the swing from the romantic to the sexual, in English love poetry. His mood was similar to that of Shakespeare when the latter wrote the "dark-lady" sonnets. Donne questioned the sonneteers' constancy to their mistresses and ridiculed their Platonism which was a mere pose. He dwelt on the delights of physical love. Moreover, Donne's flair for satire showed his impatience with the artificial and conventional love poetry. Carew commended Donne's purging the Muses' garden of its "Pedantic weeds".

Donne was no iconoclast. He did not reject all that was Elizabethan but he presented the same values in terms of contemporary life. Donne did not neglect the Elizabethan conceit. He revitalized it by making it a vehicle of his logic and eloquence. Donne put common images to different uses, for example, the image of the besieged fort which was usually associated with love he used in a religious context.

> I like an usurpt town to another due.
> Labour to admit you, but, oh, to no end.....

—(Holy Sonet, XIV)

So the church which is the bride of Christ *"is embraced and open to most* men"--something which cannot be said with propriety of a chaste wife. The mathematical, astronomical and medical images show his originality and intellectualism. Donne delights in playing with emotions and conceits. He shows a weakening of the moral sense, a spirit of scientific curiosity and interrogation which anticipates the spirit of the Restoration.

Conclusion

Paradoxically enough, Donne, though an Elizabethan, is trying to undermine Elizabethan poetic convention from within. He develops the dramatic strain in non-dramatic poetry.

It is not true to say that whatever Donne touched he adorned. At times, his poetry is strange, fantastic, bizarre, may be repellent. Just as Michaelangelo turned out to be a bad model for those who did not possess his strength or vision, Donne became a bad example for his weak successors. The worst effects of Donne's influence can be seen in his successors who failed to weld passion with reason. Donne may not be capable at times of graceful love or sweetness of song, but he definitely enriched Elizabethan poetry with sincerity, originality and fullness of thought.

(F) JOHN DONNE AS A POET

John Donne is the most remarkable of English poets. In a strict sense, he was a true Elizabethan who, however, led a most daring revolt against the conventional romanticism of Elizabethan love poetry. The Elizabethans were dominated both by Spenser and Petrarch--the Italian poet. Pastoral poetry, allegories, and conventional love-poetry were the order of the day. Donne was a sworn enemy of convention and monotonous form. Especially, he despised the harmonious cadences and highly regular metres of his contemporaries. He violated the conventional rhythms and traditional poetic expressions. He proclaimed his revolt with a resounding trumpet sound. "I sing not siren-like to tempt; for I am harsh". He broke fresh ground both in subject matter and style. Ben Jonson, commenting on the harshness of Donne's style is said to have remarked: "Donne is the first poet in the world for some things, but, for not keeping of accent, deserves hanging".

Donne as a metaphysical poet

Donne has been classified both by Dryden and Samuel Johnson as a "metaphysical poet". This title has been conferred on him because of "his sudden flights from the material to the spiritual sphere" and also because of his obscurity which is occasionally baffling. His work abounds in wit and conceits. Conceits are the very soul and stuff of his poetic diction. In addition to this, he has been termed a metaphysical poet because his style is overwhelmed with obscure philosophical allusions (references) and subtle and abstract references to science and religion. He set a vogue (fashion) for metaphysical conceits and influenced a number of contemporary poets like Crashaw and Cowley.

Donne as a love poet

Donne's treatment of love is entirely unconventional. He does not fall in line with the ways and modes of feeling and expression found in the Elizabethan love poetry. Most of the Elizabethan poets followed the fashion set by Petrarch, an Italian sonneteer, in his treatment of love. According to that fashion the lover was always subject, humble, and obsequious (over-respectful). Obedience to his mistress's wishes was his chief virtue. He sighed, wept, yearned, pined, and languished for her. The beloved's coldness and indifference did not damp his enthusiasm. In fact, Petrarch had been widely imitated, and, therefore, cheapened, Besides, the Elizabethan poets

were fond of making plentiful references to Greek gods and goddesses like Cupid and Venus in their love poetry.

Donne rebels against these stale and hackneyed conventions of love poetry; He rejects the lofty cult of the woman. She is no deity or goddess to be worshipped. He ridicules and laughs at her. This attitude is best revealed in *The Song: "Go and catch a falling star",* where he says that nowhere lives a woman true and fair, and that even the truest woman is false to several men. This poem is a brilliant piece of mockery. Even in his defeat Donne rises superior to the woman. Her faithlessness to him only makes her look stupid and cheap. In *Twicknam Garden* also, he refers to woman as the perverse sex, and says that it is wrong to judge a woman's thoughts by her tears. In fact, his attitude in this poem is a mixture of scorn for the fair sex and praise for the particular woman.

Donne's use of conceits

A conceit is a pleasant, fantastic far-fetched idea, image or comparison. For instance, it would be a conceit to say that cool wine laughs for joy because a charming woman's lips will touch it Similarly, when a lover talking of his love for his mistress says that if he were dead and buried and if his mistress were only to walk over his grave, his very bones would stir and grow into a flower-plant this is also a conceit

A conceit is a poetic ornament. Elizabethan poetry contains hundreds of conceits. Conceits are found scattered throughout the works of Shakespeare and Sydney. In the eighteenth century, however, conceits were not favoured.

Donne and his followers made an excessive use of conceits. While in Shakespeare or Sydney a conceit is an ornament or an occasional grace, in Donne it is everywhere. It is his very genius, and fashions his feeling and thought. Donne's conceits are more intellectual than those of Shakespeare or Sydney. It is chiefly on account of the excessive use of intellectual and far-fetched conceits that Donne is known as a metaphysical poet. He employs scholastic, superstitious, sceptical, theological, and mathematical conceits.

His use of strange and far-fetched conceits may be illustrated from the poems included in our selected poems of Donne. In *The Song* the whole of the first stanza contains a series of conceits. The poet asks us to catch a falling star, get a mandrake root and find out who cleft the devil's foot. In *The Anniversary* each of the lovers is a king with the other as the subject. In *The Sun Rising,* the lover declares that he would have extinguished and eclipsed the sun-beams with a wink but he cannot afford to miss the sight of his beloved even for a moment. The beloved in his bed represents both the East Indies (known for spices) and the West Indies (known for diamond mines), because she is fragrant like spices and bright like diamonds. The lover's bed chamber is the whole sphere of the sun because the entire earth is compressed there. In *Twicknam Garden,* the poet's love is like a spider which converts the beauty of spring into poison. The garden is like paradise where his love, because of its poisonous quality, is like the serpent. The lover would like to be some senseless object in order not to feel the pain of disappointment: he may be a mandrake (an imaginary plant) or a stone fountain. His tears are the standard by which the taste of the tears of all true lovers is to be tasted.

Being more often intellectual than emotional, these conceits make Donne's poetry difficult. We find it hard to get the meaning of most of his conceits without guidance of notes. They puzzle and perplex us. At the same time when we succeed in understanding them, we feel a certain pleasure as we feel after having solved a difficult mathematical problem. They make Donne's poetry obscure but at the same time a source of delight. They lend originality and novelty to his poetry.

A quality of dissonance in Donne's poetry

A distinguishing quality of Donne's poetry is what may be called dissonance. Just as in music, a dissonant chord is sometimes struck to produce a certain artistic effect, similarly Donne employed dissonances in his poetry. "The spider love" in *Twicknam Garden* is an example of this. Usually a poet is expected to use decorative and attractive pictures when talking of love. But Donne mentions the spider, thus striking a note highly dissonant with the reader's expectation. Sometimes, dissonance is produced by diction which offers contrast in dignity or general associations. Again, *Twicknam Garden* contains an illustration. Throughout the first five lines the diction has been simple and sensuous, consisting for the most part of monosyllables. Then in the sixth line comes, as if from a different world, the use of a learned word, "transubstantiates", the very length of which makes a savage thrust among the dominant monosyllables.

Another method of producing dissonance is to introduce some well-known conventional element and then shatter it by introducing some discordant (i.e.,disharmonious) association or conclusion. For instance, a lover's sighs and tears are a well worn idea for a poet *Twicknam Garden* opens with a reference to the lover's sighs and tears; but later in the poem, Donne makes a dissonant association of the tears with wine and finally points out that the taste of his tears represents the standard by which the tears of all true lovers are to be judged.

Dissonance may also arise in the enumerations which Donne frequently introduces:

> Go and catch a falling star,
> Get with child a mandrak root,
> Tell me where all put yean are,
> Or who cleft the Devil's foot,
> Teach me to hear Mermaids singing,
> Or to keep off envy's stinging,
> What find,
> What wind,
> Serves to advance an honest mind.

Here the concrete and the abstract, the real and the legendary, the literal and the figurative, are mingled. Again, in *The Sun Rising:*

> Go tell Court-huntsmen that the king will ride.
> Call country ants to harvest offices

Here such diverse elements as the 'king' and 'ants' are introduced together.

Donne wrote in a spirit of revolt against poetic custom. Dissonance, he employed, in revolt against the poetic ideal of harmony or concord. But at the same time, dissonance expresses Donne's multiple sensibility, his complex moods and the discords of his temperament. In short, the dissonance of style reflects a dissonance inwardly experienced by the poet. His creation of a technique for expressing the complex moment of feeling, was probably Donne's greatest contribution to English poetry.

Donne's obscurity

According to another critic, "the chief characteristic of Donne's style are his obscurity, his inequality and his violence. The obscurity is due partly to the fact that Donne has deeper thoughts than words will readily convey, and that he tries to express them in too few words, and partly to his metaphysical indulgence in difficult conceits. His inequality is annoying and perverse; many a time he will begin a poem smoothly and beautifully, only to continue harshly and obscurely. His

violence consists in his startling and unusual phrases which, however, sometimes harmonise with his thoughts and emotions."

On account of the obscurity of his style, Donne has also been likened to Robert Browning whom he anticipated by two centuries. Ben Jonson said about Donne that "Donne would perish through not being understood". The bulk of Donne's poetry "is distinguished by wit, profundity of thought, erudition (scholarship) passion and subtlety, coupled with a certain roughness of form".

Robert Browning: Poems Summary and Analysis of "My Last Duchess"

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Summary

"My Last Duchess" is narrated by the duke of Ferrara to an envoy (representative) of another nobleman, whose daughter the duke is soon to marry. These details are revealed throughout the poem, but understanding them from the opening helps to illustrate the irony that Browning employs.

At the poem's opening, the duke has just pulled back a curtain to reveal to the envoy a portrait of his previous duchess. The portrait was painted by Fra Pandolf, a monk and painter whom the duke believes captured the singularity of the duchess's glance. However, the duke insists to the envoy that his former wife's deep, passionate glance was not reserved solely for her husband. As he puts it, she was "too easily impressed" into sharing her affable nature.

His tone grows harsh as he recollects how both human and nature could impress her, which insulted him since she did not give special favor to the "gift" of his "nine-hundred-years-old" family name and lineage. Refusing to deign to "lesson" her on her unacceptable love of everything, he instead "gave commands" to have her killed.

The duke then ends his story and asks the envoy to rise and accompany him back to the count, the father of the duke's impending bride and the envoy's employer. He mentions that he expects a high dowry, though he is happy enough with the daughter herself. He insists that the envoy walk with him "together" – a lapse of the usual social expectation, where the higher ranked person would walk separately – and on their descent he points out a bronze bust of the god Neptune in his collection.

Analysis

"My Last Duchess," published in 1842, is arguably Browning's most famous dramatic monologue, with good reason. It engages the reader on a number of levels – historical, psychological, ironic, theatrical, and more.

The most engaging element of the poem is probably the speaker himself, the duke. Objectively, it's easy to identify him as a monster, since he had his wife murdered for what comes across as fairly innocuous crimes. And yet he is impressively charming, both in his use of language and his affable address. The ironic disconnect that colors most of Browning's monologues is particularly strong here. A remarkably amoral man nevertheless has a lovely sense of beauty and of how to engage his listener.

In fact, the duke's excessive demand for control ultimately comes across as his most defining characteristic. The obvious manifestation of this is the murder of his wife. Her crime is barely presented as sexual; even though he does admit that other men could draw her "blush," he also mentions several natural phenomena that inspired her favor. And yet he was driven to murder by her refusal to save her happy glances solely for him. This demand for control is also reflected in his relationship with the envoy. The entire poem has a precisely controlled theatrical flair, from the unveiling of the curtain that is implied to precede the opening, to the way he slowly reveals the details of his tale, to his assuming of the envoy's interest in the tale ("strangers like you….would ask me, if they durst, How such a glance came there"), to his final shift in subject back to the issue of the impending marriage. He pretends to denigrate his speaking ability – "even had you skill in speech – (which I have not)," later revealing that he believes the opposite to be true, even at one point explicitly acknowledging how controlled his story is when he admits he "said 'Fra Pandolf' by design" to peak the envoy's interest. The envoy is his audience much as we are Browning's, and the duke exerts a similar control over his story that Browning uses in crafting the ironic disconnect.

In terms of meter, Browning represents the duke's incessant control of story by using a regular meter but also enjambment (where the phrases do not end at the close of a

line). The enjambment works against the otherwise orderly meter to remind us that the duke will control his world, including the rhyme scheme of his monologue.

To some extent, the duke's amorality can be understood in terms of aristocracy. The poem was originally published with a companion poem under the title "Italy and France," and both attempted to explore the ironies of aristocratic honor. In this poem, loosely inspired by real events set in Renaissance Italy, the duke reveals himself not only as a model of culture but also as a monster of morality. His inability to see his moral ugliness could be attributed to having been ruined by worship of a "nine-hundred-years-old name." He is so entitled that when his wife upset him by too loosely bestowing her favor to others, he refused to speak to her about it. Such a move is out of the question – "who'd stoop to blame this kind of trifling?" He will not "stoop" to such ordinary domestic tasks as compromise or discussion. Instead, when she transgresses his sense of entitlement, he gives commands and she is dead.

Another element of the aristocratic life that Browning approaches in the poem is that of repetition. The duke's life seems to be made of repeated gestures. The most obvious is his marriage – the use of the word "last" in the title implies that there are several others, perhaps with curtain-covered paintings along the same hallway where this one stands. In the same way that the age of his name gives it credence, so does he seem fit with a life of repeated gestures, one of which he is ready to make again with the count's daughter.

And indeed, the question of money is revealed at the end in a way that colors the entire poem. The duke almost employs his own sense of irony when he brings up a "dowry" to the envoy. This final stanza suggests that his story of murder is meant to give proactive warning to the woman he is soon to marry, but to give it through a backdoor channel, through the envoy who would pass it along to the count who might then pass it to the girl. After all, the duke has no interest in talking to her himself, as we have learned! His irony goes even further when he reminds the envoy that he truly wants only the woman herself, even as he is clearly stressing the importance of a large dowry tinged with a threat of his vindictive side.

But the lens of aristocracy undercuts the wonderful psychological nature of the poem, which is overall more concerned with human contradictions than with social or economic criticism. The first contradiction to consider is how charming the duke actually is. It would be tempting to suggest Browning wants to paint him as a weasel, but knowing the poet's love of language, it's clear that he wants us to admire a character who can manipulate language so masterfully. Further, the duke shows an interesting

complication in his attitudes on class when he suggests to the envoy that they "go Together down," an action not expected in such a hierarchical society. By no means can we justify the idea that the duke is willing to transcend class, but at the same time he does allow a transgression of the very hierarchy that had previously led him to have his wife murdered rather than discuss his problems with her.

Also at play psychologically is the human ability to rationalize our hang-ups. The duke seems controlled by certain forces: his own aristocratic bearing; his relationship to women; and lastly, this particular duchess who confounded him. One can argue that the duke, who was in love with his "last duchess," is himself controlled by his social expectations, and that his inability to bear perceived insult to his aristocratic name makes him a victim of the same social forces that he represents. Likewise, what he expects of his wives, particularly of this woman whose portrait continues to provide him with fodder for performance, suggests a deeper psychology than one meant solely for criticism.

The last thing to point out in the duke's language is his use of euphemism. The way he explains that he had the duchess killed – "I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together" – shows a facility for avoiding the truth through choice of language. What this could suggest is that the duchess was in fact guilty of greater transgression than he claims, that instead of flirtation, she might have physically or sexually betrayed him. There's certainly no explicit evidence of this, but at the same time, it's plausible that a man as arrogant as the duke, especially one so equipped with the power of euphemism, would avoid spelling out his disgrace to a lowly envoy and instead would speak around the issue.

Finally, one can also understand this poem as a commentary on art. The duke remains enamored with the woman he has had killed, though his affection now rests on a representation of her. In other words, he has chosen to love the ideal image of her rather than the reality, similar to how the narrator of "Porphyria's Lover" chose a static, dead love than one destined to change in the throes of life. In many ways, this is the artist's dilemma, which Browning explores in all of his work. As poet, he attempts to capture contradiction and movement, psychological complexity that cannot be pinned down into one object, and yet in the end all he can create is a collection of static lines. The duke attempts to be an artist in his life, turning a walk down the hallway into a performance, but he is always hampered by the fact that the ideal that inspires his performance cannot change.

Robert Browning: Dramatic Monologue

Robert Browning aspired to be a dramatist. He wrote eight dramas and all of them failed on the stage. Browning's genius was contemplating than dramatic. Its main reason was that neither Browning was so mature for writing a drama nor was his audience. Browning made a practical compromise and decided to write the drama of the soul – dramatic monologue. This drama is acted within the mind of the character. It is not projected on the stage of a theatre. So, Browning interiorized the drama.

Dramatic monologue is different from a drama and a soliloquy. In drama the action is external but in dramatic monologue, the action is internal and his soul is the stage. In a soliloquy, only one character speaks to himself and there is no interference of any other character but in a monologue, one character speaks his mind and the character is listening to him, but he is not interfering in the action.

Victorianism was an age of renaissance. It was an age when British colonies were being forced. British Empire was reducing to England. So people were very much disturbed. The whole of the England was in a state of crisis. There was also a restriction of the people that they could not discuss this issue with others in public places. So there was a conflict in the minds of the people and they were thinking in their minds of the people. They were thinking and talking only to themselves.

Browning wanted to present all this on the stage but in this period of gloominess it was not possible for him to stage a drama. Even the intellectuals were not allowed to write on critical issues of the country. Browning thought a very clever device and decided to write dramatic monologue. This was exactly the situation of the people that they had a drama in their minds but they could not express it. So they were only talking to themselves. Browning did not directly write about England rather he picked up the same situation of Italian Renaissance, some 200 years earlier, in Italy. At that time Italy was passing through the same critical situation as it was in the England in Browning's times.

In this period every Englishman was suffering from a critical situation. Every individual was thinking about the past glory of the England, there was a conflict in his mind. He was thinking about his present and past. His soul was in confusion, he was thinking about the causes of this failure, he tried to give some justifications and everyone had a sense of optimism in his mind though that might not be a false one.

So we see that Browning's characters are also representing the same situation of English people and the pessimism of the age.

Browning's dramatic monologue deals with the subject of failure. He takes a character who has been failed in his life. He is caught up in crisis and now tells his story of crisis and bores out his soul before us. The last rider, Fra Lippo Lippi, Bishop at his death bed and Andrea are the typical example of this kind. Fra Lippo Lippi has been caught up in an area of prostitutes:

“I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!
You need not clap your torches to my face.”

The last rider has been rejected by his beloved:

“I said – Then, dearest, since ’tis so,
Since now at length my fate I know,”

Bishop is on his bed:

“Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?”

And Andrea's wife does not care for him.

“But do not let us quarrel any more,
No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for once:”

So, we see that Browning’s characters are in a conflict, they are in a critical situation and they now try to cope up with their situation.

To deal out with this situation Browning presents the whole of his case. Browning shows us the past and present of his character and how this character gets involved in this critical situation. So Browning unfolds the whole of the life of his character to make it possible to analyze the history of the character. This is Browning’s technique of case-making. The stronger is the case, the interesting will be the poem.

Through the technique of case-making, browning dissects the soul of his character and this technique of soul dissection helps the reader to understand the character and clearly see why his character reaches to this critical juncture.

We know that Fra was poor in his childhood and the guardian church was very strict with him. He had been suppressed adversely in his life.

“And I’ve been three weeks shut within my mew,
A – painting for the great man, saints and saints
And saints again. I could not paint all night –”

The last rider could not express his love to his beloved and won her.

“– And this beside, if you will not blame,
Your leave for one more last ride with me.”

The bishop had been a worldly man and jealous of Gandolf.

"And so, abut his tomb of mine. I fought
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye known:"

Andrea deceived the French King, who was very kind to him.

"… … … … … … … … God is just.
King Francis may forgive me: … … …"

To conclude, Browning's business is to render the soul or psyche of his protagonists and so he follows the same technique as the modern impressionist. With the help of the technique of soul dissection, we clearly see the soul of the character. In his monologues, Browning constantly strikes a curiously modern note.

Robert Browning: Obscurity

Much ink has been spilt in proving and disproving that Browning is an obscure poet. It is hard to absolve Browning of the charge of unintelligibility and difficulty. In his own age, he was considered very difficult and obscure and hence could not achieved popularity and recognition like his contemporary Tennyson. "Sordellow" was regarded as more obscure than any other poem in the English language. Mrs. Carlyle read the poem and could not judge whether 'Sordellow' was a man, or a city, or a book. Douglas Jerrold, after reading it said:

"My God! I am an idiot. My health is restored, but my mind is gone."

Browning certainly is a very difficult poet. Dawson calls him "the Carlyle of poetry". Various reasons are given for the obscurity and difficulty of his poetry. According to some critics, obscurity of Browning's poetry is

"... a piece of intellectual vanity indulged in more and more insolently as his years and fame increased".

But as Chesterton points out:

"All the records of Browning's long life and caret show that he was at all vain. All his contemporaries agree that he never talked cleverly or tried to talk cleverly which is always the case with a man who is intellectually vain. It is psychologically improbable that the poet, made his poems, complicated from mere pride of his powers and contempt of his readers."

According to the learned critic:

"Browning was not unintelligible because he was proud, but unintelligible because he was humble."

He was humble enough to think that what he knew was quite commonplace and was known even to the man in the street. His own concepts were quite clear to him that he found nothing difficult or profound in them.

It is fantastic, it is grotesque, and it is enigmatical but there is nothing philosophical about it. Browning is not obscure because he is philosophical poet; the real reasons of his obscurity lie elsewhere. In the passage in question, the obscurity arises from Browning's use of the unfamiliar and unusual 'Murex', the key-word in the passage and essential for its understanding. More other than not, the key-word in a passage is missing and so it becomes dark and obscure.

Obscurity in Browning's poetry results not from any one reason but from a number of reasons.

Browning had a very high conception of his own calling. He once wrote to a friend:

"I never designedly tried to puzzle people as some of my critics have supposed."

He believed that a poet should try to put "the infinite within the finite". It is not a kind of poetry to be read merely to while way a leisure hour.

Browning was a highly original genius and his poetry was entirely different from contemporaries.

Browning's dramatic monologues are soul studies; they study the shifting moods and changing thoughts of a developing soul. It is always soul dissection, it is thought, thought and thought; and thought all the way. It is always "interior landscape" with no chronology or background. Obviously such poetry is bound to be difficult. Browning's long, argumentative and philosophical poems are tiresome and boring.

This difficulty of comprehension is further increased by the fact that he was interested in the queerest human soul, and tried to probe the odd and the abnormal in human psychology. "He sought the sinners whom even the sinners had cast out", and tried to show that even they might be generous and humane. He tried to reveal the essential nobility and humanity even of a mean impostor.

Browning was a very learned poet. His schooling was mostly private and so his learning was more profound and thorough than of those who have been educated at school. He knew in detail the history and geography not of one country, but of a number of countries. Many of

his poems require knowledge of medieval history and of Italian history.

There is frequent use of Latin expressions and quotations; there are illusions to little known literary, mythological, historical sources and information of Medieval and Renaissance art and culture of Europe. Browning sought his object in many lands.

Often Browning's metaphors, similes and illustrations are far-fetched and recondite as in "Two in the Campagna" and in "Memorabilia".

Often Browning's writes a telegraphic style. Relative, prepositions, articles, even pronouns are left out. It might be that his pen failed to keep pace with the rush of his ideas, but such telegraphic style is certainly confusing and bewildering for his readers.

Browning's frequent inversions and the use of long, involved sentences, heavily overloaded with parentheses, create almost insurmountable difficulties in the way of his readers. In poems like "The Grammarian's Funeral", he not only buries the grammarian but also grammar.

Frequently, he coins new words, uses unusual compounds and expressions and is too colloquial, jerky, abrupt and rugged.

When his "Sordellow" first appeared, he was accused of verbosity and since then he made it his rule to use only two words where ten were needed. He admits this complexity of his poetry in "Rabbi Ben Ezra".

Thoughts hardly, to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped;

However, the obscurity of Browning's poetry must not be exaggerated. As Duffin, points out, the majority of Browning's shorter poems are read as easily as the verse of Tennyson. Poems like "Evelyn Hope", "The Last Rise Together", "The Patriot", "Prophyria's Lover", "Prospice", "My Last Duchess", "Home Thoughts, from Abroad" etc are perfectly lucid and simple. The intelligent reader can enjoy most of his lyrics and longer poems in blank verse after a little mental adjustment. Even in these thorniest poems there are passages of great originality and eloquence of classical beauty and easy comprehension.

Robert Browning: Optimism

Browning is an optimist, and as an optimist, he is a moralist and a religious teacher. He holds a very distinct place among the writers of the Victorian Age. He is an uncompromising foe of "Scientific Materialism". He preaches God and universality as the central truth of his philosophy of life.

Victorian Age is a watershed age in English literature. As there is the influence of Classicism,

Italian Renaissance, British Renaissance, Individualism, Socialism, Utilitarianism, Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Modernism and Scepticism.

Therefore, there are a lot of confusions and conflicts in this age. There are the conflicts between art and life, art and morality, content and form, man and woman, classic education and progressive education, flesh and spirit, body and soul and what not.

In this entire prevailed situation, Browning remains unaffected by these confusions and conflicts. He is at heart an optimist. His optimism is clear even in his style of writing a poem that he always picks up his central character in crisis or in some critical situation, then this crisis reaches the climax and ultimately resolved and he ends his poem with optimism. As in his poem "Patriot into Traitor", he says:

'Tis God shall repay one, I am safer so.

As in "Fra Lippo Lippi", he says:

Don't fear me! There is the grey beginning. Zooks!

Browning is a very consistent thinker of optimistic philosophy of life. His poetry has immense variety, but his unchanging philosophical view of human destiny gives unity to it. He does not challenge the old dogmas. He accepts the conventional view of God, the immortality of the soul, and the Christian belief in incarnation.

Browning's optimism is founded on the realities of life. It is not 'blind' as he does not shut his eyes to the evil prevailing in daily life routine. He knows that human life is a mixture of good and evil, of love and the ugliness, of despair and hopefulness, but he derives hope from this very imperfection of life. His optimism "is founded on imperfections of man". In the famous lines of "Pippa Passes", he says:

God is in his Heaven –
All is right with the world!

Browning believes that experience leads to enrichment. His attitude towards evil, pain and misery is not merely abstract. He does not accept evil merely as a practical instrument of human advancement. His approach is pragmatic as it is based on the actual experience of life. He tests every theory on the touchstone of pragmatism. Browning believes that it is not achievement, but it is struggle that empowers man in life.

His optimism is based on his theory of evolution that life is constantly progressing to higher and higher levels. Man progresses in the moral and spiritual sense through persistent struggle against evil. He says that evil is our foe, and no victory is possible over the foe. Evil is the opportunity offered to us by the divine power to advance spirituality.

"Evil is, therefore, a way of man's moral progress."

Browning believes that this life is a preparation for the life to come. In "Evelyn Hope", the lover does not despair as he derives consolation from the optimistic faith that "God creates the love to reward the love". True love is sure to be rewarded in the life after death, if not in this life.

Browning's optimism is firmly based on his faith in the immortality of the soul. The body may die but the soul lives on in the Infinite. Life, in the other world, is far more valuable than life in this finite world. This ideal which is attainable here is worthless, for by attaining it here, we shall not deserve to attain it there in the next world.

Browning believes in the futility of this worldly life. He thinks that failure serves as a source of inspiration for progress as in "Andrea Del Sarto":

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's heaven for?

Browning's firm faith in God is beyond any doubt. He is never sceptical about the existence of God controlling the world. Even his knaves have firm faith in God, and rely upon His mercy. They constantly talk of their relation with God, and are sure of their ultimate union with Him. It is love which harmonizes all living beings. It is on love that all Browning's characters build their faith saying:

"God, Thou art Love I build my faith on that"

Life in this world is worth living because both life and the world are the expressions of Divine Love. The world is beautiful as God created it out of the fullness of His love.

… …This world's no blot for us,
Not blank; it means intensely, and means good:

Browning's optimism finds the passion of joy no one has sung more fervently than Browning of the delight of life. David in "Saul", Pippa in "Pippa Passes", Lippo in "Fra Lippo Lippi" and a host of other poems are keenly alive to the pleasure of living. The Rabbi in "Rabbi Ben Ezra" condemns the aesthetic negation of the flesh, and asserts the necessity and moral usefulness of the flesh and the soul:

As the bird wings and sings,
Let us cry 'All good things
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul'

So, we can safely conclude the Browning speaks out the strongest words of optimistic faith in his Victorian Age of scepticism and pessimism. Of all English poets, no other is so

completely, so consciously, so magnificently a teacher of man as is Browning.

However, according to modern criticism, in certain cases, Browning's optimism can be interpreted as false or hollow optimism. Sometimes, it seems a justification of failure than optimism; it seems a hope against hope or a hope for the impossible.

As in "Andrea Del Sarto", he says:

… … … What would one have?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance–

As in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb", he says:

Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion–stone,
As still he envied me, so fair she was!

As in "The Last Ride Together", he says:

So, one day more am I deified.
Who knows but the world may end to–night?

On another place, he says:

I hoped she would love me; here we ride.

Again at the end of this very poem he says:

The instant made eternity, –
And heaven just prove that in and she
Ride, ride together, for ever ride?

Despite, all this we call him as an optimist because of his firm faith in God.

His poems are full of courage and inspiration, telling people that there are no difficulties if they have self-dependence and self-control. It was a good omen for English literature that the two leaders in Poetry, Tennyson and Browning differed from on another. Tennyson was at heart a pessimist. But Browning was at heart a strong optimist.

"To be, or not to be..." - An Analysis of Hamlet's Fifth Soliloquy

Hamlet's soliloquy

To be, or not to be? That is the question—

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And, by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep—

No more—and by a sleep to say we end

The heartache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wished! To die, to sleep.

To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub,

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

Must give us pause. There's the respect

That makes calamity of so long life.

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,

Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,

The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,

The insolence of office, and the spurns

That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,

When he himself might his quietus make

With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,

To grunt and sweat under a weary life,

But that the dread of something after death,

The undiscovered country from whose bourn

No traveler returns, puzzles the will

And makes us rather bear those ills we have

Than fly to others that we know not of?

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,

And enterprises of great pitch and moment

With this regard *their currents turn awry,*

And lose the name of action. —Soft you now,

The fair Ophelia! —Nymph, in thy orisons

Be all my sins remembered.

A modern English translation of Hamlet's soliloquy

To live, or to die? That is the question.

Is it nobler to suffer through all the terrible things

fate throws at you, or to fight off your troubles,

and, in doing so, end them completely?

To die, to sleep—because that's all dying is—

and by a sleep I mean an end to all the heartache

and the thousand injuries that we are vulnerable to—

that's an end to be wished for!

To die, to sleep. To sleep, perhaps to dream—yes,

but there's there's the catch. Because the kinds of

dreams that might come in that sleep of death—

after you have left behind your mortal body—

are something to make you anxious.

That's the consideration that makes us suffer

the calamities of life for so long.

Because who would bear all the trials and tribulations of time—

the oppression of the powerful, the insults from arrogant men,

the pangs of unrequited love, the slowness of justice,

the disrespect of people in office,

and the general abuse of good people by bad—

when you could just settle all your debts

using nothing more than an unsheathed dagger?

Who would bear his burdens, and grunt

and sweat through a tiring life, if they weren't frightened

of what might happen after death—

that undiscovered country from which no visitor returns,

which we wonder about and which makes us

prefer the troubles we know rather than fly off

to face the ones we don't? Thus, the fear of

death makes us all cowards, and our natural

willingness to act is made weak by too much thinking.

Actions of great urgency and importance

get thrown off course because of this sort of thinking,

and they cease to be actions at all.

But wait, here is the beautiful Ophelia!

[To OPHELIA] Beauty, may you forgive all my sins in your prayers.

Analysis:

Hamlet's "To be, or not to be…" soliloquy is possibly the most famous and most quoted speech in all of English literature. In the soliloquy, Hamlet contemplates the disparities of the human world, the attraction of suicide, cowardice, revenge and the human conscience. The harrowing thoughts expressed by our young prince embody a large number of the play's themes, and indeed they reveal a vast amount about the hero's character. The language itself demonstrates Hamlet's perceptive, intelligent but also (and perhaps consequently) melancholic character and hopeless attitude to life. These aspects of his personality are demonstrated throughout the play, particularly in his soliloquys, and the concerns he expresses about death and revenge are also recurring themes of Hamlet.

Hamlet begins his soliloquy with the famous aphorism, "To be, or not to be, that is the question…" This rather extreme simplification of an almost impossible question immediately conveys Hamlet's perturbed state of mind: suicide is a genuine option at this point. It has come down to a simple choice that needs to be made: life or death, and the audience mourns to witness Hamlet's appearing to sway towards the option of suicide, which is described as warring against and so ending "a sea of troubles". This natural metaphor intimates not only the enormity of his troubles, but also their potency and uncontrollability. He presents death as alluring and attractive, metaphorically comparing it to sleep, certainly more appealing and natural than death. Hamlet also refers to "The sling and arrows of outrageous fortune," depicting life as a cruel battle and immediately recalling his earlier exclamation in Act I, Scene 5: "O cursèd spite, | That ever I was born to set it right." He goes on to describe "the whips and scorns of time, | Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely…" giving an extensive list of all the world's disparities and problems.

Hamlet's first soliloquy, in Act I, also relates the harsh cruelties of our lives. Again, he seems to be swaying towards the notion of suicide when he exclaims: "O that this too too solid flesh would melt, | … | Or that the Everlasting had not fixed | His canon 'gainst self-slaughter." The threat of damnation is thus presented by Hamlet as the only reason for not killing oneself, and his hyperbolic repetition of 'too' shows his desperation. He

describes the uses of the world as “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable.” It is worth noting that “weary” is a word he repeats in the fifth soliloquy. Hamlet’s depiction of the world as rotten and stale (a motif that recurs throughout the play, particularly in describing Denmark) accompanied by his exclamations (“Fie on’t, ah fie,”), emphasises his melancholic state of mind. He later describes Denmark as a prison (page 141) with “many confines, wards, and dungeons…” This, too, demonstrates his despair and his consequent desire for escape, and perhaps suicide. Thus, the language employed by Hamlet in his fifth soliloquy reflects the ideas expressed regarding death and suicide in various other parts of the play.

Hamlet’s fascination with death and its uncertainty is another motif that recurs throughout the play. In his fifth soliloquy, Hamlet, although seemingly attracted towards death (“To die, to sleep – | No more…”), realises:

“To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub,

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

Must give us pause.”

There is a suggestion here of risk and the idea that the dream of death could in fact be a nightmare. Moreover, Hamlet’s use of the word “us” rather than “me” universalises Shakespeare’s explorations of Hamlet’s mind into explorations of the human condition, implying that these ideas are felt by all at some point or other. Hamlet goes on to question why people would bear life’s problems if “he himself might his quietus make | With a bare bodkin?” It is this “dread of something after death” that helps to make the question of “To be, or not to be” much more complex than Hamlet at first believes. He would rather bear the ills that he currently experiences “Than fly to others that we know not of…” Life is here presented as the lesser of two evils, since the unknown may be even worse. These gloomy ideas of death are perhaps inspired by the Ghost’s descriptions of his own purgatorial afterlife: he is “Doomed for a certain term to walk the night, | And for the day confined to fast in fires…” It is somewhat ironic that Hamlet should describe death as “The undiscovered country from whose bourn | No traveller returns,” since he has only just seen his own father returned from the dead. Shakespeare could be suggesting that the Ghost that Hamlet saw was not really a “traveller”, but in fact the devil himself, a concern raised in Hamlet’s fourth soliloquy.

Hamlet's fascination with death is demonstrated again in Act 5 Scene 1, the famous grave scene. Hamlet questions how the Clown could possibly be singing while digging graves, which he sees as harsh and unfeeling. He is angered by the way the Clown treats the skulls, asking: "Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggets with 'em? Mine ache to think on't." Hamlet is amazed (emphasised by his repeated questioning) that such important people as politicians, Lords and lawyers should be treated with such disrespect by a "rude knave". Perhaps he himself feels threatened by the great irony of death: that everyone, even Princes, are reduced and equalised by the great powers of nature. These ideas are expressed again when Hamlet, after seeing Yorick's skull, reflects upon the cruelty of death: "To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till a find it stopping a bunghole?" The suggestion is that Hamlet is thinking of his own death and afterlife and how his body will be treated. These reflections show Hamlet's fascination and fear of death, also demonstrated through the language of his fifth soliloquy.

Hamlet's fear of death and its uncertainty is what causes him to delay. He is an intelligent and sharp young man unlikely to act without due consideration: it is this discernment in his character, demonstrated in his fifth soliloquy, that prevents him from committing suicide. He takes care to question a number of aspects of suicide: whether God would approve (his first soliloquy), and whether it would be considered "nobler" to "suffer | The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or to kill himself, and here we see his feeling of duty as a Prince and as the son of his virtuous father. He explains:

"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought…"

It is the scholar's predicament that "enterprises of great pitch and moment | … turn awry" once contemplated and considered at length. This intelligence, shown throughout the play, also leads to Hamlet's delaying in his resolution to avenge his father's death.

In Act 2 Scene 2, Hamlet, comparing himself to the passionate player, accuses himself of having no resolve and for being "unpregnant" of his cause. He casts aspersions on his own manliness by exclaiming: "Am I a coward?" and asking who "Plucks of my beard and blows it in my face, | Tweaks me by th'nose…" Then, in an effort to emulate

the powerful emotions of the First Player, he pours out a splurge of anger: “Bloody, bawdy villain! | Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!” He soon realises, however, that his outburst of words is futile without action: “Fie upon’t, foh! About, my brains.” His discernment leads him to delay and question the nature and intentions of the Ghost, which “May be a devil” and may be trying to damn him. Thus he decides upon the play, in which he might “catch the conscience of the king.” The audience can see that he is not delaying simply due to cowardice. Rather, it is because of his intelligence and his consequent uncertainty about the Ghost. Intelligence is also seen as the cause of delay in various other parts of the play. Even once he has seen Claudius’s reaction to the play, which surely serves as a proof of his guilt, he ensures that Horatio too agrees and asks: “Didst perceive?” As an intelligent man, Hamlet wants absolute evidence of Claudius’s guilt before he makes any rash decisions, for he knows that if he was to wrongly commit murder then he would be eternally damned. Henry Mackenzie describes Hamlet as a man of exquisite sensibility and virtue “placed in a situation in which even the amiable qualities of his mind serve but to aggravate his distress and to perplex his conduct.” It is his discernment and forward thinking, the “amiable qualities of his mind,” not cowardice, that makes him “lose the name of action”, and these characteristics are skilfully portrayed in the fifth soliloquy.

Hamlet’s fifth soliloquy also returns to the play’s central theme: revenge and its justification. Unlike Vindice, who only seems to realise the sinful nature of his murderous vengeance at the end of the play, Hamlet questions throughout whether revenge is justified. Therefore, his use of the word “conscience” (“Thus conscience does make cowards of us all…”) can in fact be seen as a reference to his moral uncertainty about whether revenge is good or evil. Indeed, less than ten lines before Hamlet’s speech begins, after Polonius’s speech about sugaring over the devil, Claudius himself exclaims: “Oh, ‘tis too true. | How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!” and he goes onto cry: “O heavy burden!” And so, Hamlet’s own use of the word “conscience” immediately encourages a comparison between Claudius and Hamlet, both polarised in the extent to which they allow their consciences to determine their action. While, as Hamlet explains, conscience may lead to cowardice, it also sets us apart from evil. Claudius, although saying: “My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,” refuses to give up what he has gained from his fraternal murder: “May one be pardoned and retain th’offence?” Despite claiming that he does have a conscience, he never acts upon it, even to the extent that, when Gertrude proposes to drink from the poisonous cup, all he can bring himself to say is: “Gertrude, do not drink!” He is heartless and cruel, and it is this that separates him from Hamlet.

However, Hamlet is not completely devoid of flaws: although questioning the morality of vengeance (as when he asks the ghost: “Do you not come your tardy son to chide…” and describes revenge as his “dread command”), he does not seem to realise that by

killing Claudius he effectively, some would argue, sinks to his level. Herman Ulrici points out that it would be a sin to put Claudius to death without a trial and without justice. However, is this necessarily true? Claudius has killed Hamlet's father, and has also attempted to kill Hamlet himself, and so one could argue that Hamlet, by killing Claudius, is simply preventing further deaths, and thus that revenge is somewhat justified. Nonetheless, Hamlet's occasional lack of conscience is undeniable: his cruelty to the women of the play is a good example of this. Despite his father's beseeching him: "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive | against thy mother aught…" he still grows angry at her for marrying Claudius. This cruelty to his mother is particularly evident when he unremittingly questions her about her actions, asking, amongst other things: "O shame, where is thy blush? Rebellious hell…" We begin to pity her as she begs him repeatedly to "speak no more" and tells him:

"Thou turn'st my eyes into my very soul,

And there I see such black and grainèd spots

As will not leave their tinct."

Even when the ghost begs Hamlet to "step between her and her fighting soul," he continues to attack her for her actions. However, he does tell her later that he "must be cruel only to be kind," and so we begin to understand the teleology of his attacks – he simply wishes to metaphorically heal his mother of her sins. In the case of Ophelia, on the other hand, there is little justification for his cruelty: he simply uses her as a pawn for his plans. Ophelia believes and is "so affrighted" by everything that Hamlet says to her in his "antic disposition". Hamlet's least admirable side is seen in Act 3 Scene 3 when he refuses to kill the praying Claudius, fearing that, if he does, Claudius will be sent to heaven. Instead, he resolves to kill him "When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage, | Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed…" He wants Claudius to be "about some act | That has no relish of salvation in't…" Murder is not enough for Hamlet – he wants to ensure that Claudius experiences the true horrors of Hell that he feels he deserves. Dr Johnson (1765) spoke of the "useless and wanton cruelty" of Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia, and he says that Hamlet's speech in the prayer scene is "too horrible to be read or to be uttered". It is, indeed, an awful thought, but there is some sense of justice in the idea: surely it is not true revenge if Hamlet's father goes to Hell and Claudius goes to Heaven, when it should surely be the other way around? Thus, the debate comes down to the morality of revenge, a debate impossible to conclude. However, the critic Maynard Mack ('The World of Hamlet') seems to present a fair argument: "The act required of him, though retributive justice, is one that necessarily involves the doer in the general guilt." Although the inner play reveals to Hamlet Claudius's guilt, the

question of revenge and its morality still remains: how does one revenge a murder without becoming a murderer oneself?

The language of Hamlet's fifth soliloquy thus serves to expand and elucidate many of his traits already displayed in the play, and it prepares the audience for his actions later on. It reveals Hamlet's fear of and fascination with death, his discernment and intelligence, as well as inviting a comparison between himself and Claudius (through the word "conscience"). It is obvious from the outset that Hamlet is the more admirable of the two, but Hamlet is certainly not perfect. Indeed, as Aristotle says, every tragic hero must have a 'hamartia' (error of judgement or tragic flaw), otherwise the audience will be left with a sense of total injustice and outrage. Shakespeare places Hamlet in a situation almost impossible to navigate safely: perhaps we are too harsh in our judgements of Hamlet? Is it not part of the human condition to desire some form of retribution? Whatever the answer, it is clear from Hamlet's "To be, or not to be…" speech that he is an intelligent young man with an active, although occasionally failing, conscience – surely he is admirable for this?

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Biographical Information

Thomas Gray was born in London on December 26, 1716. He was the only one of twelve children who survived into adulthood. His father, Philip, a scrivener (a person who copies text) was a cruel, violent man, but his mother, Dorothy, believed in her son and operated a millinery business to educate him at Eton school in his childhood and Peterhouse College, Cambridge, as a young man.

He left the college in 1738 without a degree to tour Europe with his friend, Horace Walpole, the son of the first prime minister of England, Robert Walpole (1676-1745). However, Gray did earn a degree in law although he never practiced in that profession. After achieving recognition as a poet, he refused to give public lectures because he was extremely shy. Nevertheless, he gained such widespread acclaim and respect that England offered him the post of poet laureate, which would make him official poet of the realm. However, he rejected the honor. Gray was that rare kind of person who cared little for fame and adulation.

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Type of Work

"Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is—as the title indicates—an elegy. Such a poem centers on the death of a person or persons and is, therefore, somber in tone. An elegy is lyrical rather than narrative—that is, its primary purpose is to express feelings and insights about its subject rather than to tell a story. Typically, an elegy expresses feelings of loss and sorrow while also praising the deceased and commenting on the meaning of the deceased's time on earth. Gray's poem reflects on the lives of humble and unheralded people buried in the cemetery of a church.

Setting

The time is the mid 1700s, about a decade before the Industrial Revolution began in England. The place is the cemetery of a church. Evidence indicates that the church is St. Giles, in the small town of Stoke Poges, Buckinghamshire, in southern England. Gray himself is buried in that cemetery. William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, once maintained a manor house at Stoge Poges.

Years of Composition and Publication

Gray began writing the elegy in 1742, put it aside for a while, and finished it in 1750. Robert Dodsley published the poem in London in 1751. Revised or altered versions of the poem appeared in 1753, 1758, 1768, and 1775. Copies of the various versions are on file in the Thomas Gray Archive at Oxford University.

Meter and Rhyme Scheme

Gray wrote the poem in four-line stanzas (quatrains). Each line is in iambic pentameter, meaning the following:

1..Each line has five pairs of syllables for a total of ten syllables.

2..In each pair, the first syllable is unstressed (or unaccented), and the second is stressed (or accented), as in the two lines that open the poem:

.....The CUR few TOLLS the KNELL of PART ing DAY

.....The LOW ing HERD wind SLOW ly O'ER the LEA

.....In each stanza, the first line rhymes with the third and the second line rhymes with the fourth (abab), as follows:

a.....The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,

b.....The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,

a.....The plowman homeward plods his weary way,

b.....And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Stanza Form: Heroic Quatrain

.....A stanza with the above-mentioned characteristics—four lines, iambic pentameter, and an abab rhyme scheme—is often referred to as a heroic quatrain. (Quatrain is derived from the Latin word quattuor, meaning four.) William Shakespeare and John Dryden had earlier used this stanza form. After Gray's poem became famous, writers and critics also began referring to the heroic quatrain as an elegiac stanza.

Complete Poem With Explanatory Notes

Compiled by Michael J. Cummings © 2003, 2009, 2010

Stanza 1

1. The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,

2. The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,

3. The plowman homeward plods his weary way,

4. And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Notes

(1) Curfew: ringing bell in the evening that reminded people in English towns of Gray's time to put out fires and go to bed. (2) Knell: mournful sound. (3) Parting day: day's end; dying day; twilight; dusk. (4) Lowing: mooing. (5) O'er: contraction for over. (6) Lea: meadow.

Stanza 2

5. Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight,

6. And all the air a solemn stillness holds,

7. Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,

8. And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds.

Notes

(1) Line 5: The landscape becomes less and less visible. (2) Sight . . . solemn stillness . . . save: alliteration. (3) Save: except. (4) Beetle: winged insect that occurs in more than 350,000 varieties. One type is the firefly, or lightning bug. (5) Wheels: verb meaning flies in circles. (6) Droning: humming; buzzing; monotonous sound. (7) Drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds: This clause apparently refers to the gentle sounds made by a bell around the neck of a castrated male sheep that leads other sheep. A castrated male sheep is called a wether. Such a sheep with a bell around its neck is called a bellwether. Folds is a noun referring to flocks of sheep. (8) Tinklings: onomatopoeia.

Stanza 3

9. Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r

10. The moping owl does to the moon complain

11. Of such, as wand'ring near her secret bow'r,

12. Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Notes

(1) Save: except. (2) Yonder: distant; remote. (3) Ivy-mantled: cloaked, dressed, or adorned with ivy. (4) Moping: gloomy; grumbling. (5) Of such: of anything or anybody. (6) Bow'r: bower, an enclosure surrounded by plant growth—in this case, ivy. (7) Molest her ancient solitary reign: bother the owl while it keeps watch over the churchyard and countryside. (8) Her ancient solitary rein: metaphor comparing the owl to a queen.

Stanza 4

13. Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,

14. Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,

15. Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,

16. The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

Notes

(1) Where heaves the turf: anastrophe, a figure of speech that inverts the normal word order (the turf heaves). (2) Mould'ring: mouldering (British), moldering (American), an adjective meaning decaying, crumbling. (3) Cell: metaphor comparing a grave to a prison cell. (4) Rude: robust; sturdy; hearty; stalwart. (4) Hamlet: village.

Stanza 5

17. The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,

18. The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed,

19. The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,

20. No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

Notes

(1) Breezy call of incense-breathing Morn: wind carrying the pleasant smells of morning, including dewy grass and flowers. Notice that Morn is a metaphor comparing it to a living creature. (It calls and breathes.) (2) Swallow: Insect-eating songbird that likes to perch. (3) Clarion: cock-a-doodle-doo. (4) Echoing horn: The words may refer to the sound made by a fox huntsman who blows a copper horn to which pack hounds respond.

Stanza 6

21. For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,

22. Or busy housewife ply her evening care:

23. No children run to lisp their sire's return,

24. Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

Notes

(1) hearth . . . housewife . . . her: alliteration. (2) Climb his knees the envied kiss to share: anastrophe, a figure of speech that inverts the normal word order (to share the envied kiss).

Stanza 7

25. Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,

26. Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;

27. How jocund did they drive their team afield!

28. How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Notes

(1) Sickle: Harvesting tool with a handle and a crescent-shaped blade. Field hands swing it from right to left to cut down plant growth. (2) Furrow: channel or groove made by a plow for planting seeds. (3) Glebe: earth. (4) Jocund: To maintain the meter, Gray uses an adjective when the syntax call for an adverb, jocundly. Jocund (pronounced JAHK und) means cheerful.

Stanza 8

29. Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,

30. Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;

31. Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile

32. The short and simple annals of the poor.

Notes

(1) Ambition: Personification referring to the desire to succeed or to ambitious people seeking lofty goals. (2) Destiny obscure: the humble fate of the common people; their unheralded deeds. (3) Lines 29-30: anastrophe, a figure of speech that inverts the normal word order (let not Ambition obscure their destiny and homely joys).

(4) Grandeur: personification referring to people with wealth, social standing, and power. (5) Annals: historical records; story.

Stanza 9

33. The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,

34. And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,

35. Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.

36. The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Notes

(1) Boast of heraldry: Proud talk about the aristocratic or noble roots of one's family; snobbery. Heraldry was a science that traced family lines of royal and noble personages and designed coats of arms for them. (2) Pomp: ceremonies, rituals, and splendid surroundings of nobles and royals. (3) Pomp of pow'r: alliteration. (4) E'er: ever. General meaning of stanza: Every person—no matter how important, powerful, or wealthy—ends up the same, dead.

Stanza 10

37. Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,

38. If Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise,

39. Where thro' the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault

40. The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Notes

(1) Impute: Assign, ascribe. (2) Mem'ry: Memory, a personification referring to memorials, commemorations, and tributes—including statues, headstones, and epitaphs—used to preserve the memory of important or privileged people. (3) Where thro' . . . the note of praise: Reference to the interior of a church housing the tombs of important people. Fretted vault refers to a carved or ornamented arched roof or ceiling. (4) Pealing anthem may refer to lofty organ music.

Stanza 11

41. Can storied urn or animated bust

42. Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

43. Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,

44. Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

Notes

(1) Storied urn: Vase adorned with pictures telling a story. Urns have sometimes been used to hold the ashes of a cremated body. (2) Bust: sculpture of the head, shoulders, and chest of a human. (3) Storied urn . . . breath? Can the soul (fleeting breath) be called back to the body (mansion) by the urn or bust back? Notice that urn and bust are

personifications that call. (4) Can Honour's . . . Death? Can honor (Honour's voice) attributed to the dead person cause that person (silent dust) to come back to life? Can flattering words (Flatt'ry) about the dead person make death more "bearable"? (5) General meaning of stanza: Lines 41-45 continue the idea begun in Lines 37-40. In other words, can any memorials—such as the trophies mentioned in Line 38, the urn and bust mentioned in Line 41, and personifications (honor and flattery) mentioned in Lines 43 and 44—bring a person back to life or make death less final or fearsome?

Stanza 12

45. Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid

46. Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;

47. Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,

48. Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre.

Notes

(1) Pregnant with celestial fire: Full of great ideas, abilities, or goals (celestial fire). (2) Rod of empire: scepter held by a king or an emperor during ceremonies. One of the humble country folk in the cemetery might have become a king or an emperor if he had been given the opportunity. (3) Wak'd . . .lyre: Played beautiful music on a lyre, a stringed instrument. In other words, one of the people in the cemetery could have become a great musician if given the opportunity, "waking up" the notes of the lyre.

Stanza 13

49. But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page

50. Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;

51. Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,

52. And froze the genial current of the soul.

Notes

(1) Knowledge . . . unroll: Knowledge did not reveal itself to them (their eyes) in books (ample page) rich with treasures of information (spoils of time). (2) Knowledge . . . unroll: Personification and anastrophe a figure of speech that inverts the normal word order (knowledge did ne'er enroll). (3) Chill . . . soul: Poverty (penury) repressed their enthusiasm (rage) and froze the flow (current) of ideas (soul).

Stanza 14

53. Full many a gem of purest ray serene,

54. The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:

55. Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,

56. And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Note

Full . . . air: These may be the most famous lines in the poem. Gray is comparing the humble village people to undiscovered gems in caves at the bottom of the ocean and to undiscovered flowers in the desert.

Stanza 15

57. Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast

58. The little tyrant of his fields withstood;

59. Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,

60. Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood.

Notes

(1) John Hampden (1594-1643). Hampden, a Puritan member of Parliament, frequently criticized and opposed the policies of King Charles I. In particular, he opposed a tax imposed by the king to outfit the British navy. Because he believed that only Parliament could impose taxes, he refused to pay 20 shillings in ship money in 1635. Many joined him in his opposition. War broke out between those who supported Parliament and those who supported the king. Hampden was killed in battle in 1643. Gray here is presenting Hampden as a courageous (dauntless) hero who stood against the king (little tyrant). (2) Milton: John Milton (1608-1674), the great English poet and scholar.

Stanza 16

61. Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,

62. The threats of pain and ruin to despise,

63. To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,

64. And read their hist'ry in a nation's eyes,

Notes

The subject and verb of Lines 61-64 are in the first three words of Line 65, their lot forbade. Thus, this stanza says the villagers' way of life (lot) prohibited or prevented them from receiving applause from politicians for good deeds such as alleviating pain and suffering and providing plenty (perhaps food) across the land. These deeds would have been recorded by the appreciating nation.

Stanza 17

65. Their lot forbade: nor circumscrib'd alone

66. Their growing virtues, but their crimes confin'd;

67. Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,

68. And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

Note

General meaning: Their lot in life not only prevented (circumbscrib'd) them from doing good deeds (like those mentioned in Stanza 16) but also prevented (confin'd) bad deeds such as killing enemies to gain the throne and refusing to show mercy to people.

Stanza 18

69. The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,

70. To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,

71. Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride

72. With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Notes

(1) General meaning: This stanza continues the idea begun in the previous stanza, saying that the villagers' lot in life also prevented them from hiding truth and shame and from bragging or using pretty or flattering words (incense kindled at the Muse's flame) to gain luxuries and feed their pride. (2) Muse's flame: an allusion to sister goddesses in Greek and Roman mythology who inspired writers, musicians, historians, dancers, and astronomers. These goddesses were called Muses.

Stanza 19

73. Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,

74. Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;

75. Along the cool sequester'd vale of life

76. They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Note

(1) General meaning: The villagers plodded on faithfully, never straying from their lot in life as common people. (2) Madding: maddening; furious; frenzied. (3) Noiseless tenor of their way: quiet way of life.

Stanza 20

77. Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect,

78. Some frail memorial still erected nigh,

79. With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,

80. Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Note

General meaning: But even these people have gravestones (frail memorial), although they are engraved with simple and uneducated words or decked with humble sculpture. These gravestones elicit a sigh from people who see them.

Stanza 21

81. Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd muse,

82. The place of fame and elegy supply:

83. And many a holy text around she strews,

84. That teach the rustic moralist to die.

Notes

(1)Their . . . supply: Their name and age appear but there are no lofty tributes. (2) Unletter'd muse: Uneducated writer or engraver. (2) Holy text: probably Bible quotations. (3) She: muse. See the second note for Stanza 18. (4) Rustic moralist: pious villager.

Stanza 22

85. For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,

86. This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,

87. Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,

88. Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind?

Note

General meaning: These humble people, though they were doomed to be forgotten (to dumb Forgetfulness a prey), did not die (did not leave the warm precincts of cheerful day) without looking back with regret and perhaps a desire to linger a little longer .

Stanza 23

89. On some fond breast the parting soul relies,

90. Some pious drops the closing eye requires;

91. Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,

92. Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

Note

General meaning: The dying person (parting soul) relies on a friend (fond breast) to supply the engraved words (pious drops) on a tombstone. Even from the tomb the spirit of a person cries out for remembrance.

Stanza 24

93. For thee [32], who mindful of th' unhonour'd Dead

94. Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;

95. If chance, by lonely contemplation led,

96. Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate [33],

Notes

(1) For thee . . . relate: Gray appears to be referring to himself. Mindful that the villagers deserve some sort of memorial, he is telling their story (their artless tale) in this elegy (these lines). (2) Lines 95-96: But what about Gray himself? What if someone asks about his fate? Gray provides the answer in the next stanza.

Stanza 25

97. Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,

98. "Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn

99. Brushing with hasty steps the dews away

100. To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

Notes

(1) Haply: Perhaps; by chance; by accident. (2) Hoary-headed swain: Gray-haired country fellow; old man who lives in the region.

Stanza 26

101. "There at the foot of yonder nodding beech

102. That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,

103. His listless length at noontide would he stretch,

104. And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

Notes

(1) Nodding: bending; bowing. (2) Listless length: his tired body. (3) Pore upon: Look at; watch.

Stanza 27

105. "Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,

106. Mutt'ring his wayward fancies he would rove,

107. Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,

108. Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

Notes

(1) Wood, now smiling as in scorn: personification comparing the forest to a person. (2) Wayward fancies: unpredictable, unexpected, or unwanted thoughts; capricious or flighty thoughts. (3) Rove: wander. (4) Craz'd . . . cross'd: alliteration.

Stanza 28

109. "One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,

110. Along the heath and near his fav'rite tree;

111. Another came; nor yet beside the rill,

112. Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

Notes

(1) Another came: another morning came. (2) Nor yet: But he still was not. (3) Rill: small stream or brook.

Stanza 29

113. "The next with dirges due in sad array

114. Slow thro' the church-way path we saw him borne.

115. Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,

116. Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn."

Notes

(1) The next: the next morning. (2) Dirges: funeral songs. (3) Lay: short poem—in this case, the epitaph below.

THE EPITAPH

117. Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth

118. A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.

119. Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,

120. And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.

121. Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,

122. Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:

123. He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,

124. He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.

125. No farther seek his merits to disclose,

126. Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,

127. (There they alike in trembling hope repose)

128. The bosom of his Father and his God.

Note

General meaning: Here lies a man of humble birth who did not know fortune or fame but who did become a scholar. Although he was depressed at times, he had a good life, was sensitive to the needs of others, and followed God's laws. Don't try to find out more about his good points or bad points, which are now with him in heaven.

..

Summary

The speaker is hanging out in a churchyard just after the sun goes down. It's dark and a bit spooky. He looks at the dimly lit gravestones, but none of the grave markers are all that impressive—most of the people buried here are poor folks from the village, so their tombstones are just simple, roughly carved stones.

The speaker starts to imagine the kinds of lives these dead guys probably led. Then he shakes his finger at the reader, and tells us not to get all snobby about the rough monuments these dead guys have on their tombs, since, really, it doesn't matter what kind of a tomb you have when you're dead, anyway. And guys, the speaker reminds us, we're all going to die someday.

But that gets the speaker thinking about his own inevitable death, and he gets a little freaked out. He imagines that someday in the future, some random guy (a "kindred spirit") might pass through this same graveyard, just as he was doing today. And that guy might see the speaker's tombstone, and ask a local villager about it. And then he imagines what the villager might say about him. At the end, he imagines that the villager points out the epitaph engraved on the tombstone, and invites the passerby to read it for himself. So basically, Thomas Gray writes his own epitaph at the end of this poem

Themes

Death: the Great Equalizer

.....Even the proud and the mighty must one day lie beneath the earth, like the humble men and women now buried in the churchyard, as line 36 notes: The paths of glory lead but to the grave. Lines 41-44 further point out that no grandiose memorials and no flattering words about the deceased can bring him or her back from death.

Can storied urn or animated bust

Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,

Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

Missed Opportunities

.....Because of poverty or other handicaps, many talented people never receive the opportunities they deserve. The following lines elucidate this theme through metaphors:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,

The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:

Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,

And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Here, the gem at the bottom of the ocean may represent an undiscovered musician, poet, scientist or philosopher. The flower may likewise stand for a person of great and noble qualities that are "wasted on the desert air." Of course, on another level, the gem and the flower can stand for anything in life that goes unappreciated.

Virtue

.....In their rural setting, far from the temptations of the cities and the courts of kings, the villagers led virtuous lives, as lines 73-76 point out:

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,

Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;

Along the cool sequester'd vale of life

They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Inversion

.....For poetic effect, Gray frequently uses inversion (reversal of the normal word order). Following are examples:

Line 6: And all the air a solemn stillness holds (all the air holds a solemn stillness)

Line 14: Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap (Where the turf heaves)

Line 24: Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share. (Or climb his knees to share the envied kiss)

Line 79: With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd (deck'd with uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture)

Syncope

Omitting letters or sounds within a word.

Gray also frequently uses a commonplace poetic device known as syncope, the omission of letters or sounds within a word.

The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea (line 2)

Now fades the glimm'ring landscape on the sight (line 5)

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r (line 9)

The swallow twitt'ring from the straw-built shed (line 18)

Figures of Speech

.....Following are examples of figures of speech in the poem.

Alliteration

Repetition of a Consonant Sound

The plowman homeward plods his weary way (line 3)

.

The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn (line 19)

.

Nor cast one longing, ling'ring look behind? (line 88)

.

Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn (line 107)

.

Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless love. (line 108)

Anaphora

Repetition of a word, phrase, or clause at the beginning of word groups occurring one after the other

And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave (line 34)

Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd muse (line 81)

Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,

Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires. (lines 91-92)

Metaphor

Comparison between unlike things without using like, as, or than

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,

The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:

Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,

And waste its sweetness on the desert air. (lines 53-56)

Comparison of the dead village people to gems and flowers

Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride

With incense kindled at the Muse's flame. (lines 71-72)

Comparison of flattering words to incense

Metonymy

Use of a word or phrase to suggest a related word or phrase

To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land

Land stands for people.

Personification

A form of metaphor that compares a thing to a person

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil

Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;

Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile

The short and simple annals of the poor. (lines 29-32)

Ambition and Grandeur take on human characteristics.

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page

Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll (line 49-50)

Notice that Knowledge becomes a person, a female.

Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,

And Melancholy mark'd him for her own. (lines 119-120)

Science and Melancholy become persons.

Assessment of the Poem

.....Scholars regard "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" as one of the greatest poems in the English language. It weaves structure, rhyme scheme, imagery and message into a brilliant tapestry that confers on Gray everlasting fame. The quality of its poetry and insights reach Shakespearean and Miltonian heights.

Critical Appreciation

The Elegy is one of the greatest and finest of Gray's poems and marks a stage in the development of his poetic genius. It reveals a growing democratic sentiment and romantic mood of the poet. Instead of confining himself to the saloons, coffee houses or the fashionable society of the town, Gray undertakes in this poem to deal with the life of the rustic people of the village, to present the 'short and simple annals of the poor'. Wit its lyricism, its treatment of nature, its melancholic mood and its emotional and imaginative vigour, the Elegy reveals a romantic spirit and marks a shift from the neoclassical poetry of the Augustan age, towards the Romantic poetry of the coming age. It is essentially transitional in character and ushers in the era of romanticism.

Universal Appeal: There is little originality or novelty of thought or sentiment expressed in the Elegy. It expresses the feeling for the common man, which everybody has. The poet's views about death as an inevitable fact of life, are quite common. The presentation of the contrast between the destiny of the rich and the poor, is based on conventional views. The thought about fame and obscurity, human ambition and pride are quite old too. The Elegy abounds in what Tennyson calls 'divine truisms that make us weep'. However, Gray has lent great force to these common thoughts and truisms through his unique expression that they have become universally appealing. The universal appeal of the poem is an important source of its greatness and popularity. The commonest man finds the Elegy echoing his own feelings and sentiments. The poem transcends the limits of time and place, and appeals to people everywhere and in all times.

Originality: Despite its treatment of common themes and sentiments, the poem is not totally devoid of originality. Dr. Johnson acknowledges the originality of the four stanzas beginning 'yet even these bones'. Gray's originality and individual talent may be seen in his condensed expression of great ideas in highly quotable phrases like " Full many a flower blush to die unseen" and "On some fond breast the parting soul relies". Herbert W Starr points out " probably no other poem of the same length has contributed so many famous phrases to our language." Gray's originality also lies in the fact that he

raised the voice of democratic sympathy much before the French or the American revolution, aiming at the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity, had taken place. He may be said to have inspired the democratic sentiments of Wordsworth who, much later, wrote about poor rustics like Michael, the leech gatherer and the wagoner. Carl J Webber remarks "Thomas Gray is the pioneer literary spokesman for the ordinary man, the patron saint of the unknown soldier... . Gray's rude forefathers were also the forefathers of Wordsworth's Wagoner, Michael and Peterbell."

Gray's originality also lies in his treatment of the non fulfillment of the desires of common man and the non utilisation of his powers and talents because of lack of proper opportunities. The poem may be called an elegy on the premature death of the talents and energies of the poor. Another mark of Gray's originality is, that instead of addressing it to the rich, great or privileged men, he addresses this poem about common man to common men and seeks to elicit a sympathetic response for their common lot. The adoption of the elegiac quatrain in place of the conventional heroic couplet and the novel use of abstract personifications also reveal Gray's originality.

Humanity & Democratic Sentiments: The Elegy is remarkable for its humanity and its concern for the lot of common human beings on this earth. It may be put alongwith Keats's Ode to a Nightingale, which deals with the lot of man on this earth. Although it hints at the inevitability of the end of all human glory and the futility of power, wealth, ambition and pride, it is mainly concerned with the destiny of the common man and seems to lament the loss and waste of so much talent and energy of the poor because of lack of opportunity. A note of exultation may also be found in Gray's view that if poverty proved hinderance in the way of the advancement of the common rustic people, it also restrained them from doing evil and practising violence to gain material ends.

The democratic note may be found in the poem in the form of idea of equality and helplessness of both the rich and the poor before death. Death is a great leveller. If it deprives the poor of the opportunities ton rise, it also mercilessly snatches the power and the glory of the rich. Both alike await the inevitable hour of death and both feel helpless to do anything. The vanity of human wishes and aspirations has been nicely pointed out in the poem. The distinction between the lives of the rich and the poor is thus obliterated by death.

Melancholic Note: The Elegy is characterised by a melancholic note. The dominant mood of the poem is one of gloom and sadness. The shadow of death hovers throughout the poem and the regret over the frustration of human efforts and hopes is inherent in its tone. The opening scene of the poem is steeped in melancholy and the

musings on human destiny in the later parts are also of melancholic nature. The description of the rustic poet also gives a gloomy picture of his life. Thus, the whole atmosphere and mood of the poem is tinged with melancholy. According to W V Moody and R M Lovett the Elegy "is the finest flower of that literature of melancholy Which Gray may be said to be haunted by a Hamlet like melancholy and sense of frustration. The thirty two stanzas of the poem embody almost all the emotions and reflections that a man commonly feels in the presence of death.

Personal & Autobiographical Element: Besides being an expression of general or universal feelings and sentiments, and dealing with the lot of the common man, the Elegy contains some autobiographical or personal elements. It deals with the life, destiny and anticipated death of the poet himself. He was, as Gray shows in the Elegy, a man of melalancholy and wayward disposition, who lived a secluded life 'far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife.' He was, as he tells in the Epitaph, of humble birth and lived a life of obscurity and seclusion. In spite of his birth in a poor family, he had acquired much knowledge and learning but remained unknown of fame and fortune. He was sincere and had great gifts of mind and heart. Living a melancholic life, he faced much misery and had to shed tears frequently.

Unlike the neo classical poetry, the Elegy deals with the poet's personal feelings and reflects his own mood like romantic poetry. In the original draft of the poem, consisting of twenty two stanzas, quantity of personal references was less than what it is in the expanded version.

Moral Tone: The Elegy is didactic in nature and seeks to convey certain morals about human life. Gray exhorts the proud and ambitious people not to laugh at the simple life and obscure destiny of the poor. He tells them that they are much like the poor that they also have to die one day and leave all their glory, wealth and luxuries in this world. The poem lays emphasis on the transitoriness of all human glory and the emptiness of all boasts of power and wealth. It also points out the inevitability of death. Gray seems to impress upon us the idea that being poor is not altogether a matter of misfortune. The poor are fortunate in that they do not have to shut the gates of mercy on their fellow beings as the great men have to do.

Technical Beauties: The Elegy is remarkable for its simplicity of expression, and Gray says in it plainly what he has to say. There is nothing in the poem which can be called extraordinary but there is what I A Richards terms "that triumph of an exquisitely adjusted tone." The poet gives a perfect expression to his feelings and sentiments. Several critics tend to criticise the Elegy on account of its common places and truisms.

These common places are good and have what Graham Hough believes to be 'their compulsive force'. In them, Gray has generalised his personal views and reflections. According to Hough "they are compelling because they are not only what they first appear, majestic statements about the common lot: they are also the solution of Gray's personal problem, and perhaps the only one possible in his day."

The Elegy possesses qualities like the stately measure of its verse, and the wonderful felicity and perfection of its style. It contains the neoclassical qualities like allusiveness, alliteration, personification and a dignified manner. The Elegy has not the delicate shadowiness of 'Ode to Evening' and its monumental style and weight of thinking seem beyond Collins. The verse of the Elegy is polished and musical and has a haunting quality.

The reflections on life and death make the Elegy a philosophical poem but it is also a sort of dramatic monologue in which the speaker has addressed imaginary readers or listeners. The poem is a formalised composition and has a rhetorical condensed expression. Historically speaking, the Elegy marks a shift from the neo classicism of the 18th century to the romanticism of the early 19th century. It foreshadows the romantic poetry of Burns, Wordsworth, Shelley and others.

Despite its melancholic tone and its harping on the transitoriness of human glory, it would be difficult to agree with Lyly Glazier's view about the Elegy that "the net effect of the whole poem is negative and fatalistic." We may find the positive effect of the poem in the fact that it does not glorify death. It lays emphasis on a desire for immortality signified by the desire to be remembered or to perpetuate human by memorials.

It presents a faithful account of the human condition on this earth, and if that condition turns out to be gloomy, Gray is not to be blamed for this. To him goes the credit for pointing out not only the obscurity of life of the poor, but also their good luck in having escaped, through death, the acts of cruelty and violence that they might have committed had they lived longer.

The Elegy is certainly a great poem. Its universal appeal, its humanity and its broader concern with the human condition are as much contributive to its greatness as its poetic merits. Different factors may be said responsible for its greatness. To conclude it may suffice to quote Douglas Bush who has nicely summed up its greatness, he remarks, "one obvious reason is power of style which makes almost every line an example of 'what oft was thought but never so well expressed.' Images, though generalised, can be

nonetheless evocative. The antitheses are more than antitheses; they are a succession of dynamic and ironic contrast between ways and views of life. And all this inward force comes from a full sensibility working under precise control. In its combination of personal attachment and involvement, as well as in its generalise texture, the Elegy is in some sense an 18th century Lycidas."

1.**Comment on the use of transferred epithets and personifications in the Elegy**

In Thomas Gray's Elegy there are a number of 'transferred epithets'. The poem abounds in this figure of speech. He uses "weary way" in the first stanza. 'weary' is transferred from the ploughman to 'way'. Similarly in the line 'the beetle wheels his droning flight' the epithet droning is transferred from the beetle to 'flight'. In the line 'the passing tribute of a sigh' the word passing is transferred from the passer-by to 'tribute'. Similarly the poem abounds in personifications. The abstract nouns like 'Ambition', Grandeur, Memory, Death, Knowledge, Luxury and Pride are personified to human being or gods. In the Epitaph, the abstract nouns like Fortune, fame, science, melancholy and misery are personified.

2. What are the pictures of the simple homely joys and the useful toil of the peasants the poem presents before us?

"Elegy written in a country churchyard" written by Thomas Gray is one of the most famous poems in English literature. The poem is enriched with beautiful epigrammatic phrases. "The paths of glory lead but to the grave", "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day" are a few of them. An Elegy is a poem lamenting the death of a person. Thomas Gray laments the death of the poor, landless peasants of his hamlet Stoke Poges. They are dead and buried in the church cemetery for ever awaiting the Judgement Day. So the poet says that "the rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep". The poet has used a number of effective personifications which add to the beauty of the poem. Gray introduces a suitable atmosphere which is very effective to the Elegy. The church bell ringing the "curfew" is the death bell of the dying day. It is getting dark and the crescent moon appears in the sky. The peace and silence of the churchyard is broken by the droning flight of the beetle, the tinkling noise of the bell from the sheep's neck and the cry (hooting) of the owl from the disused ivy covered tower.

Now the poet tells us the story of the "rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep" in the churchyard. Early in the morning they used to wake up by the sweet smelling breeze and other noises such as the twittering of the swallow birds, the sound of the cocks and the horn of the hunters in the surrounding jungle. They enjoyed their work. They cut down trees and made farm. They went to farm with their cattle and ploughed the field, sowed seeds and made very good harvest. They worked hard from dawn to dusk. In the evening when they came back home with their cattle, their children welcomed them with

sweet kisses and their wives made very tasty food for them. Thus their life was full of innocent, homely joys. They lived in peace and love. The Bible was everything for them. If they said a lie, it was reflected on their faces and they were ashamed of it. They strictly followed the teachings of the Bible and they died in peace.

3. How does the Elegy reflect Gray's democratic spirit?

In his "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" Thomas Gray warns the rich and the grandeur people not to laugh at the 'short and simple annals of the poor' because the family reputation, the glory of wealth and beauty and the pomp of political power and all other human achievements are short-lived and buried with man in the tomb. These landless peasants are the food producers of England. During his period all poems were written about the glory of kings, landlords and other great men and women. No one dared to write anything about the misery and sorrow of poor people. But Thomas Gray showed democratic spirit when he wrote about the 'rude forefathers of the hamlet'. These farmers are far greater than the rich and the grandeur people of London city because these rude illiterate farmers have not committed any crime in their lives and they strictly followed the teachings of the Bible and worked hard from dawn to dusk and enjoyed their simple innocent family joys and died in peace.

4. Explain the relevance of the lines: Full many a gem of purest ray serene

The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,

And waste its sweetness in the desert air.

Thomas Gray, the great English poet in his poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" laments the death of the 'rude forefathers of the hamlet'. These landless peasants are as pure as the precious gems and gold ornaments hidden in the dark caves of ocean. These peasants had great poetic, administrative and leadership qualities but at the same time they were great moralists of the period. But utter poverty prevented them from going to school to develop their inborn talents. This is why the poet compares their lives to beautiful, sweet smelling flowers of the jungle where their beauty and fragrance are wasted.

5. "The paths of glory lead but to the grave" – Comment.

Thomas Gray in his famous poem "Elegy Written in a country churchyard" warns the rich, the grandeur people of the city not to look down upon the 'simple, short annals' of the rude forefathers of the hamlet or their useful work because these hardworking farmers are the food producers of England. Although they lived in poverty, they enjoyed

their work and innocent homely joys and kept away from the criminal activities of the city people. The speaker also warns them that family reputation, show of political power and the glories of beauty and wealth are short lived. All these human achievements are buried with man in the churchyard.

6. Examine with reference to the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", Gray's status as a transition poet

Thomas Gray's famous poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a turning point in English poetry because there are many traces of Romanticism in this poem. Although it is a Neo-classical poem, it abounds with the basic qualities of Romanticism. Therefore it is a transitional poem. With its lyrical qualities, its treatment of Nature and rustic life, its melancholy mood, humanism, its emotional and imaginative qualities and above all its democratic spirit, this poem is partly romantic and partly Neo-classical poem of Augustan Age. Neo-classical poetry of Alexander Pope, John Milton and others, we find town life and cultural, artificial values. But in Elegy, we find the rustic life of common man and his day to day expressions. It also deals with the personal pain and frustration of the poet. On the other hand the Neo-classical poetry dealt with the story of the rich, the grandeur and gods and goddesses. But Elegy speaks about the sufferings and pain of the down-trodden, the exploited class by the Feudal landlords. Love of Nature is another important element of this poem. However,the form of Gray's elegy is more classical than romantic. The poet uses many a number of personifications and 'transferred epithets and outmoded bombastic phrases which are the hall mark of Neo-classical poetry. The poem is also didactic in nature and gives certain moral lessons about life. Therefore Thomas Gray is a transition poet.

A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London- Dylan Thomas

About the Author

Dylan Marlais Thomas (27 October 1914 – 9 November 1953) was a Welsh poet and writer who wrote exclusively in English. In addition to poetry, he wrote short stories and scripts for film and radio, which he often performed himself. His public readings, particularly in America, won him great acclaim; his sonorous voice with a subtle Welsh lilt became almost as famous as his works. Dylan's most popular poems include 'Do not go gentle into that good night' and 'And Death Shall have No Dominion'. He also included poetry in his famous play for voices, 'Under Milk Wood'.

Theme

Dylan Thomas's "A Refusal to Mourn" was first published in "The New Republic" in 1945. It was published soon after the end of the Second World War. The poem is an emphatic refusal to mourn the dead. Here, the dead being represented by the child. The loss of a child is the greatest tragedy; and symbolic of life lost without having blossomed. Thomas simply refuses to mourn for it would relegate the child itself to the action of mourning. This refusal to mourn is rather a celebration of every innocent life lost.

Appreciation

The poet's use of strong religious imagery reflects the connection of humanity to the natural world, and the inevitable cycle of life and death. Essentially, no degree of mourning or ritual can replace the life of the child. Further, the poem allows the reader to interpret an individual perspective of the nature of death. Thomas offers the possibility of a perpetual life after death, but also alludes to the notion of death as being final. Thus, Thomas questions the validity of the mourning process, as it connects to the natural cycle of life and death, from which humanity can not be rendered as superior or segregated.

Within the first stanza, Thomas reveals his attitude that mankind is on the same level of existence as 'Bird beast and flower.' In this, he indicates that humanity is at one with the natural world, and that subsequently we are subjected to the same cycles of life and death that apply to even the smallest of organisms. 'Making' and 'fathering' are used to convey the sense that darkness is the generator or creator of life, although it is also what prevails when life is taken away. Darkness is therefore a symbol of the creation of life and death, and light becomes symbolic of the life that exists between the creation

and finality of death. It is in this stanza that Thomas reveals his paradoxical refusal to allow elegy to console the feelings that loss of life provokes. As the poem opens with 'Never,' the reader acknowledges that Thomas rejects the idea of elegy, as no amount of ritual and religious ceremony can ever do justice to the life that was lived.

However, Thomas presents the idea that death is a return to the natural world and merely a completion of the life cycle. Thomas strongly alludes to the moment of conception as he acknowledges that life ultimately stems from seed and water and through death, it is this that he 'must enter again. In 'Zion of the water bead/ And the synagogue of the ear of corn,' the poet reveals the sources from which life is born, seeds and water. These elements are symbolically part of the renewal process. Just as the Temple of Jerusalem (in the Mount of Zion) was replaced by the synagogue, the similar idea of change is reiterated here with the words 'Zion', 'synagogue,' etc. By these symbols the poet also echoes the death of institutions and religions, to give way to new ones.

By these symbols the poet also echoes the death of institutions and religions, to give way to new ones. The image of 'corn' alludes to the parables. The phrase 'ear of corn' refers to the listening to these parables that preached these stories of inevitability. The poet asks himself once again as to why he should pray for the shadow of a sound. The memory of the person in question is only the shadow of a sound, remembrance of a once-existing reality. The action of mourning is compared to the 'sowing a salt seed'. The hope of breeding something sterile or stagnant, for the death cannot come to life with mourning.

The poet parodies the Valley of the Shadow of Death by the phrase 'valley of sackcloth" deteriorating the action of mourning as a ritual by itself that relegates the sacredness of the funeral and dead one in question. Instead of the funeral shroud, the poet utilizes the word 'sackcloth' to belittle the situation caused by the human ritualistic mourning of the dead.

With generalizations over death, he will not tarnish the individuality and majesty of the child. The 'burning' or the passionate emotions associated with death of the child were too profound to be expressed. They were significant as compared to the mundane war. Mankind did not represent her, rather she represented mankind. She proceeded with a 'grave' truth. The word 'grave has two meanings here-that of being 'serious' and 'pertaining to the grave'. He makes a reference to the 'stations' of the cross, the several sufferings of Jesus Christ. He will not understate this 'death' with generalizations on the transient nature of innocence and youth. The poet utilizes the statement "I shall not murder"-a reminder of the Ten Commandments. It is indicative of how religion (also) does not advocate the mourning of the child.

The poet addresses the dead as "London's daughter". This is further enforced by the term" first dead", as in 'First Lady'. The long friends refer to the worms in the grave.

“One dies but once,” says Daiches , “and through that death becomes reunited with the timeless unity of things”. The disintegrated body turns into particles of dust that are ageless since they take part in the timeless cycle of nature. These particles get ingrained in the veins of Mother Earth. The water of Thames is depicted as still and ‘unmourning’. The river that is otherwise kinetic (‘riding Thames’) is seen to be static. After the first death, there is no other. Therefore, the action of mourning is useless, for there is no further averting of the situation just because there is no death again.

Questions and answers

a. Work out the sentence structure of the first 13 lines by thinking about the relationships between ‘Never’, ‘until’ ,’Shall I’.

I shall never (do something) until (something happens).

b. **What is the subject of ‘Tells’(1.4)? What does it tell?**

The subject of ‘tells’ is ‘darkness.’ The darkness announces ‘the last light breaking’ (the last dawn on earth).

c. Most of the other words in lines 1 to 3 are adjectives qualifying ‘darkness’. Can you identifying and explain three composite adjectives in these lines?

‘Mankind making,’ ‘bird beast and flower Fathering’ and ‘humbling’ are the adjectives qualifying the noun ‘darkness.’ The poet points at the ambiguous nature of death as it marks the destruction of life but paves way for newer life. Bird, beast and flower alike are common and universal to this truth. Death fathers all-it has a towering, commanding and dominating effect over all. It is a kind of all-consuming darkness that has a humbling-effect, for, in the face of death all are equal. All distinctions of high/low, rich/poor are erased in the face of it, humbling the person with the highest earthly paradigm of virtue. The phrase ‘bird beast and flowers’ may also denote the return to the nature or the basic elements of life-a universal phenomenon that marks the end of earthly individuality.

d. What will happen to the sea?

The sea, whose waves are ‘tumbling’, will be made completely still.

e. Where will the poet (‘I’) ‘enter again’ (1.7)?

He will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. A drop of water and ‘the ear of corn’ stand for the inevitable essentials of life. They are symbolic of God’s greatness. The reference to ‘Zion’ and ‘synagogue’ support the idea of Heaven or God. In short, he must die.

f. What does ‘show my salt seed’ mean in the context of mourning?

The paradox of 'salt seed' can be interpreted in different ways. For example, as salt can be indicative of sterility, the process of mourning can be seen as unproductive.

Alternatively, the poet may be alluding to the sterility of life itself, in that death is inevitable and thus life is continually approaching its end. It can also mean simply ‘to cry’ as tears are salty.

g. The third verse exalts the girl’s death, and makes anything the poet might say worthless. What words show the negative effect his words would have?

Murder, a grave truth, blaspheme.

h. What double meanings are there in ‘a grave truth’ (1.15) and ‘stations’ (1.16)?

Grave- means tomb or serious

Stations- stations of the cross, stopping points of breath/sobs

i. Who do you think ‘the first dead’ (1.19) are, and whose ‘the first death’ (1..24) is?

The people who have died first in the dreadful war. The poet means that all deaths are equal. He feels that there is no meaning in mourning the death of these people as it would be to mourn the death of those countless people who died centuries ago.

j. Who or what are ‘the long friends’ (1.20)?

‘The long friends’ refer to the worms in the grave. But the implication also covers the memories of friends, the long friendship and community- the oneness of mankind.

k. Apart from the poet, who or what does not mourn?

The River Thames.

l. The third verse seems to imply that the poet is not indifferent to the child’s death. Do you agree?

He is awed by death. The poet assures his readers that death is an uncompromising fact in life. However the poem justifies his refusal to mourn.

m. When will the poet mourn? Why not till then?

Not until the end of time or of the world. It is because death has to be accepted as an inevitable fact in this world.

· Vocabulary

Humbling darkness- darkness (suggesting death) having a humble and meek appearance

Tumbling- To perform acrobatic feats such as somersaults, rolls, or twists.

Harness- To bring under control and direct the force of (verb), the combination of straps, bands and other parts forming the working gear of a draft animal (noun).

Zion- A term that most often refers to Jerusalem and, by extension, the Biblical land of Israel. The term Zion came to designate the area of Jerusalem where the fortress stood, and later became a metonym for Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem (Temple in Jerusalem or Holy Temple refers to one of a series of structures located on the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem.)

Synagogue- A building or place of meeting for worship and religious instruction in the Jewish faith.

Sackcloth- Garments made of camel's hair, goat hair, hemp, cotton, or flax, worn as a symbol of mourning or penitence.

Blaspheme- A contemptuous or profane act, utterance, or writing concerning God or a sacred entity.

Stations of the breath- stillness, death

Elegy- A poem or song composed especially as a lament for a deceased person.

Robed- To put on robes or a robe.

Unmourning- not grieved for; causing no mourning

Thames- A river in England, flowing through London to the North Sea.

The Poetic Imagery of Dylan Thomas

Dylan Thomas is widely regarded as one of the 20th Century's most influential lyrical poets, and amongst the finest as such of all time. His acclaim is partly due to the force and vitality of his verbal imagery that is uniquely brilliant and inspirational. His vivid and often fantastic imagery was a rejection of the trends in the 20th Century poetics. While his contemporaries gradually altered their writing to serious topical verse, Thomas devoted himself to his passionately felt emotions. Thomas, in many ways, was more in alignment with the **Romantics** than he was with the poets of his era. He was considered the **Shelley** of the 20th century as his poems were the perfect embodiments of 'new-romanticism' with their violent natural imagery, sexual and Christian symbolism and emotional subject matter expressed in a singing rhythmical verse. His rich rhetoric and imagery gave his poetry a magical touch.

Dylan Thomas attached great importance to the use of imagery, and an understanding of his imagery is essential for an understanding of his poetry. Thomas' vivid imagery involved word play, fractured syntax, and personal symbolism. Thomas' poetic imagery shows the use of a mixture of

several techniques, the most prominent being the **surrealistic**, **imagistic**, and **metaphysical**. But the bible, his study of Shakespeare and other English poets also laid under contribution. Thomas as a resourceful "language-changer", like **Shakespeare**, **Dickens**, **Hopkins** and **Joyce**, shaped the English language into a richly original mélange of rhythm, imagery and literary allusion. Here follows a brief discussion on Dylan Thomas' poetic imagery along with a critical inquiry into the major woks by this poet:

Nature Imagery

Dylan Thomas is especially renowned for his celebration of natural beauty. Some of his poems contain vivid and refreshing pictures of nature, even though he does not have any philosophy of nature to offer. The influence of the **Romantic** poets is seen in his recurrent vision of a pristine beauty in nature. Indeed, Thomas was a nature poet in the sense that much of his truest inspiration arose from a natural scene which he had observed long and lovingly. This is particularly seen in *Poem in October*. In this poem Thomas illustrates nature wonderfully alive with ordinary sights and sounds. In his thirtieth birthday when he comes out of the town, he finds the whole nature is greeting him. Thomas sees himself on his way to heaven or in the sight of heaven. The whole scene seems holy to him. He feels a complete harmony with nature. The wood seems to him to be his neighbor, the herons to be priests and the waves of the ocean rise high as if in honour and worship of their creator. The birds are calling and the gardens are blooming. In short, the poem encapsulates one of the most remarkable accounts of wonderful vivid nature pictures with a general atmosphere of joy.

Imagery of death

Death is a frequent theme in Dylan Thomas' poetry, especially in the corpus of his mature work. Thomas employs different interesting and unorthodox images to present various aspects of death. In the poem *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*, for example, he emphasizes resistance towards death as he repeats this appeal in the last line in every stanza. Imagery is used by Thomas to create the theme of his poem and what it means. Although readers are unaware of the details behind the on coming death of Thomas' father, the motives of the author for writing this poem are very obvious. In this Thomas is asking his father through pleading words to fight against the darkness that is taking over and leading him into the afterlife.

Initially, Thomas uses images of fury and fighting in the lines "do not go gentle", "good night" and "dying of the light" to emphasize the resistance towards death. With these images, Thomas conveys death as the end and where darkness prevails. He takes his stand within concrete, particular existence. He places birth and death at the poles of his vision. Excessive images of anger and rage towards death exemplify the passion Thomas feels for life.

Secondly, Thomas brings into action images of "burn" and "rave at close of day" to show and emphasize the resistance towards death. Contrasting images of light and darkness in the poem create warmth of living and the coldness of death, so as to discourage people from choosing the dreary, bitter coldness of death:

> *Do not go gentle into that good night,*
> *Old age should burn and rave at close of day;*
> *Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

In addition, Thomas uses images of " wise men" and " grave men [who] have not used their blinding sight" to tell his dying father that all men either smart or ignorant need to fight against death. A man peacefully may prepare to die only when he has made his true contribution to society. Here Thomas shares an attitude towards death, which is very much similar to **Robert Frost's** *Stopping by Woods on a snowy Evening*:

> *The Woods are lovely, dark and deep.*
> *But I have promises to keep,*
> *And miles to go before I sleep,*
> *And miles to go before I sleep.*

Sexual Imagery

Sexual imagery is recurrent in Thomas' poetry. He uses sexual imagery almost everywhere. The influence of the seventeenth-century **metaphysical poets** is often cited in connection with Thomas' unconventional religious imagery. Thomas speaks with directness and passion on the theme of sex quite similar to **Donne**. Thomas' work shows the same fusing of sexual and religious imagery as it is seen in Donne's poetry. In both poets there is an intense consciousness of death. Donne preached a sermon in his grave-clothes and Thomas' poems show a similar fixation with the physical fact of death:

> *And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb*
> *How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.*

Imagery of Growth and Decay

The imagery of Destruction and creation are very much common in Thomas' poetry. Like **Thomas Hardy**, he indicates a driving force of the universe, which both generates and destroys. Many of his poems can be studied in this contextual consideration. In The *Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower***,** for instance, he indicates that an invisible cosmic force is responsible for both creation and destruction. The process of life goes on because of the operation of this force. Again, this force is working in the animal, vegetable and human world. This is the force that destroys the roots of trees and also acts as the destroyer of the poet's youth. The force is watering the ground and withering away the mountain spring. In the same way, the very worm, which is eating up the body of the dead lovers, will also eat up the poet when he is dead:

> *The force that through the green fuse drives the flower*
> *Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees*
> *Is my destroyer.*

Imagery of the Subconscious

During the 20th century Thomas was being hailed as the most spectacular of the **surrealist** poets, or poets who used fantastic imagery of the subconscious in their verse. And it cannot but be so in the age of **Freud**, **Jung** and **Bergson**. Dylan has uncanny insights into the processes of the mind, much more profound than that of any other poet. He penetrates deeper into the human soul than even Freud and his followers.

In his best works he captures psychological moods which have been rarely captured, especially those of childhood and adolescence. He himself matured early, and his early poetry is the poetry of an adolescent. In *The Hunchback in the Park* Thomas talks about a solitary hunchback who eats bread from a newspaper, drinks water from the chained cup of the fountain, and sleeps at night in a dog-kennel. These details about him show that he is a homeless outcast, not a normal member of society. He is doubly an outcast, because of his deformity and vagrancy, and therefore an object of mockery to the truant boys playing in the park.

Religious Imagery

Dylan Thomas' interests were psychological but they were also religious. Indeed, God and Christ are rarely absent from his poems since he takes imagery largely from the Bible. For example, in the poem *After the Funeral* we see religious imagery when the poet regards the woods as a kind of chapel where a religious ceremony would be held in honour of his deceased Aunt. He visualises four birds who will fly over her, making the sign of the cross in order to bless her spirit. Again, in the poem *A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London* we have religious imagery like: "Zion of the water bead" and "the synagogue of the ear of corn". The words "Zion" and "synagogue" provide a sacramental quality to enhance its religious appeal.

Text

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever-dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan

I set her on my pacing steed,

And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna-dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
'I love thee true'.

She took me to her Elfin grot,
And there she wept and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

And there she lullèd me asleep,
And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—
The latest dream I ever dreamt
On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—'La Belle Dame sans Merci
Thee hath in thrall!'

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gapèd wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,

Alone and palely loitering,

Though the sedge is withered from the lake,

And no birds sing.

Summary

The speaker notices a knight wandering alone on the road, and asks himself what troubles the knight could possibly have encountered. He appears in a poor physical and emotional state, his skin a deathly pallor. The speaker asks the knight about his troubles. He tells a story about a mysterious woman he met on the hillside. Her wild eyes quickly captivated the knight and, before long, they made love and rode away on the speaker's horse. However, the "faery-like" lady had a few tricks up her sleeve. In her home, a small cave on the hillside, the woman lulled him to sleep. In the knight's dream, he meets kings, princes, and warriors who were also seduced by the woman, only to be left eternally pale and loitering in the woods. He woke up alone, abandoned by the woman, lost like the others.

Characters

The speaker

A man who notices a fellow knight wandering through a chilly hillside one evening.

The knight

The "haggard" knight who appears to the speaker on a hillside, and relates to the speaker his encounter with a beautiful woman on the same hillside.

The beautiful woman

A mysterious, enchanting woman who lives in the hillside. She possesses supernatural charms, and each man she meets succumbs to the power of her spells.

The pale kings, princes, and warriors

The characters the knight meets during his dream on the hillside who, like him, fell beneath the woman's charms.

Themes

The supernatural

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" deals with supernatural elements. The woman that the knight falls in love with is described as a "faery's child." A faery is a mythical, supernatural being, thus, by describing the woman as a faery's child, Keats brings out the theme of supernatural beings in this poem. Moreover, when the knight describes the time he spent with the woman, he states that she gave him wild food, thereby bringing out the eeriness of this woman.

In the end, the knight finds himself on a cold hillside along with other men who were rapt in the same woman's spell. When they saw the knight, they exclaimed that "La Belle Dame sans Merci / Thee hath in thrall!'. Through the setting and the description of the woman, Keats brings out the supernatural element in this poem.

Erotic Love and Seduction

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" can also be approached through the tensions between erotic love and seduction, and a ideal, chivalrous partnership. When we first meet the knight, he still has "a lily upon [his] brow," signifying his loyalty the courtly tradition. However, as the color quickly drains from his cheeks, he becomes vulnerable to the woman's charms. With his defenses lowered, he quickly succumbs to his desires. Here, love is immediately associated with sex, fantasy, and the supernatural: they make love in the meadows, ride away on the knight's horse, and then the woman expresses her love for him in her "strange language," suggesting her words are closer to a magical spell than the truth.

Does the knight, weak and weary in the forest, give in so quickly to the woman because of her supernatural charm, or because he longs for a love that falls outside of the strict, courtly restraints? While the poem explores the pleasures of sexual liberation, it ends cautiously. His love for the woman is briefly requited, but the satisfaction is short-lived: she leaves him the way she found him, "alone and palely loitering" among the hillside.

The femme fatale

The theme of the femme fatale was popular among Romantic poets. The femme fatale is a seductive, beautiful woman who charms and ensnares men, leading them into dangerous situations. The poem clearly depicts the theme of the femme fatale as the woman, described as a "faery's child," makes the knight fall deeply in love with her, which later leads to his deterioration. Moreover, in the end of the poem, it is revealed that the speaker was not the only

man to be ensnared by this woman. The dialogue spoken by the pale lovers—"La belle dame sans merci, / Thee hath in thrall"—further highlights the theme of the femme fatale.

La Belle Dame sans Merci Summary and Analysis of lines 1-12

Summary

In the first three stanzas, the speaker notices a knight wandering among a pastoral landscape near nighttime. The knight is visibly wearied and fatigued, and the speaker wonders what could possibly befall him. It's late Autumn or early winter, and the birds are silent. While we don't know yet what happened to the knight, the speaker sets up the reader for the knight's story, establishing the poem's dreary tone and atmosphere.

Analysis

The speaker directly addresses the knight he meets in the hillside, calling attention to the knight's vulnerability. The knight is "alone and palely loitering," his physical state mirrored by the landscape, which is a common feature of Romantic poetry. The grasses have withered, and the birds have grown silent. The harvest season is over, and the natural world prepares its transition into winter. The lily on the knight's brow suggests purity, innocence, and virtue: in spite of his haggard and woeful state, he retains the sense of honor and duty expected of a man of his stature. But the lily also symbolizes death, and as the speaker notices, the knight's face looks anguished and feverish, and the color is quickly draining from his cheeks.

Although the first three stanzas are relatively short, we can learn a remarkable amount about the knight, the speaker, and the poem’s conflict through the language and detail. First, we know that the knight is traveling alone and, based on his physical state, he’s been on the road for quite some time. Next, we know that it’s the end of autumn or early winter, because harvest time has ended and the grass has begun to wither and die. Finally, the symbolic juxtaposition of the lily and rose foregrounds a tension between purity and eros. The troubles the knight encountered on the road were likely erotic in nature.

From the repetition of “O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,” we can deduce that danger lurks in the woods, and that the knight isn't exactly in the best shape to face any more impending challenges. By opening the poem with the question, the speaker begins a conversation that will last throughout the duration of the poem, and the majority of the poem is the knight's answer. What will the knight tell him when he begins to speak?

Summary and Analysis of lines 13 - 36

Summary

In stanza four, the knight begins to recount his experience on the hillside. He describes the beautiful woman he met in the meadows, and the way he quickly fell for her charms. After making love, the couple ride away on the speaker's horse, and the woman sings to him a 'faery's song'. They stop briefly, and she feeds him honey and manna, claiming she loves him in her own, strange tongue. When they reach her hiding place—an "Elfin grot"—the woman starts to weep, and the knight kisses her eyelids. Then, the knight falls into a deep sleep, dreaming wildly on the cold hillside.

Analysis

We learn that the knight was enchanted by the woman, and that his experience with her caused his poor state. He compares her to “a faery’s child,” suggesting that she possessed a supernatural charm. Her “wild” eyes indicate her sexual appeal and desire. The garland and bracelets that he makes for the woman indicate his own desire, while the woman’s looks and moans let us know that their brief relationship was, indeed, erotic. However, the woman's supernatural characteristics suggest that, for the knight, the love he found may be too good to be true.

In stanzas four and five, the knight appears to occupy a position of power in the relationship, in spite of the woman’s charms. He gives her gifts and sets her on his horse, and the couple rides away. However, in stanza six, the situation reverses: the woman feeds him honey and manna, expressing her love, and then brings him to her home. When the knight kisses her eyelids, the woman lulls him to sleep, bringing woeful, foreboding nightmares. The knight's act of love becomes the cause of his pain, in spite of the affair's pleasure.

The first half of the knight's story creates a complex picture of the woman: she is a femme fatale with a supernatural ability to seduce the men who cross her path. Her "faery-like" characteristics, as well as the knights, kings, and princes who populate the poem, look back to a medieval poetic tradition. Keats draws upon these references and modernizes them through his explicit juxtaposition of sexual liberation and the courtly tradition. What will happen in his dream, and what will the horrific sights he sees tell him about the woman's true nature?

Summary and Analysis of lines 37-48

Summary

In his nightmare, the knight sees kings, princes, and warriors who tell him that he's fallen completely under the woman's power. The men, once strong, powerful, and chivalrous, are now starved, pale, and horrified. When he wakes up, the woman is nowhere to be seen. Like

the men in his dream, the knight is doomed to wander pale and alone among the hillside, on a journey that never ends.

Analysis

The climax of the poem occurs during the knight's terrifying nightmares in stanza 10. We learn that all of the men ensnared by the lady are of regal stature. This detail is crucial because it alerts us to the tensions between the woman's sexual liberation and the chivalrous, courtly tradition of the kings, princes, and warriors she seduces. Bound to a code of honor, these men would probably think twice before sleeping with a woman they met in the woods. However, their exhaustion, loneliness, and desire, combined with the woman's charm and forward nature, created the perfect storm for spontaneous, immediate, erotic satisfaction.

At first, the joy and pleasure these men experience testify to the value of a less straight-laced attitude to erotic love. But, as we know from the dream, falling for the lady proved disastrous: they woke up cold and alone, wandering forever in the woods, searching for a love that will never be found again. But the poem isn't simply condemning this kind of love; rather, it expresses a contradictory longing for both the courtly tradition's security and the intense passion of eroticism. For the knight, the woman's earlier emphasis on her "true" love for him certainly connected to an idea of stability and faithfulness; however, the association of sex with the woman's "faery-like," bewitching charms suggests the danger of erotic desire, and the uncertainty of these affairs.

Considering the poem's context in Keats' life—as well as the personal nature of much of his poetry—it's possible that the poet's allegorically-inflected knight's tale speaks to the frustrations and fears of his own relationship. Although Keats' love for Fanny Brawne was reciprocated, the couple faced difficult obstacles—first, Brawne's family was of a higher social class, and second, Keats' health was failing. Keats' proposals to Fanny Brawne were initially rejected because of his financial situation; Brawne and her family accepted when it became clear Keats was dying of tuberculosis, knowing well his winter in Italy would be his last. While scholars believe that Brawne and Keats never consummated their love, the powerful emotions expressed in their letters read much like the speaker's passion for the lady.

Giving in to sexual desire could mean losing love and experiencing profound emotional pain—but resisting this desire can be just as painful, and just as preoccupying as love's loss. Is it better to wander cold and alone, stuck somewhere in a dream-space where time appears to stop, with only the memory of this love? Or should one turn away from love and hold fast to tradition, regardless of how strong one's desire may be and how lonely one may feel? Even though the knight was bewitched by the woman, the pleasure and joy he felt during their brief, erotic relationship was real. The woman is no longer physically present at the end of the poem, but she still holds countless men "in thrall," or captive beneath her power.

When the knight ends his story, the speaker from the first stanza has yet to meet the lady in the meadows. What choice will he make when they eventually cross paths? Will he make it through the woods with his heart intact? Or will he be like the other men lost in the woods, alone and bloodless, only capable of reliving his story as a warning?

Symbols and Motifs

Flowers (Motif)

Flowers are repeatedly mentioned throughout the poem, both as symbols of virtue and sexuality, and as gifts expressing sexual desire. Early in the poem, a lily and a fading rose are used to describe the knight's complexion, establishing a tension between pure and erotic love. When he met the lady in the meadows, he made her flower garlands and bracelets, hoping to gain her favor. The multiple meanings attached to this imagery correspond to the poem's complex psychological underpinnings: the men who fall beneath the woman's spell—kings, princes, knights, warriors—are caught between their chivalrous honor and their intense erotic desire for the lady. By allowing both interpretations to exist side by side, Keats keeps the tensions alive.

Paleness (Symbol)

All of the men who fall beneath the woman's spell are pale and weary, suggesting illness or a loss of vitality. At the same time, the lily—a white flower with a powerful symbolic history—upon the knight's brow indicates his purity, virtue, and chivalrous honor. The paleness of the men in the knight's dream could also express fear: the absence of color in their face reflects the horror of being trapped upon the hillside by the woman's charms, stuck somewhere been nightmare and reality.

Lily (Symbol)

In a biblical tradition, the lily is commonly associated with the ideas of purity and innocence. By alluding to the purity of the lily, the speaker lets us know that the knight appears to retain his honor in spite of his poor state. It could also allude to innocence or ignorance, meaning the knight may not fully believe that he was tricked by the woman, believing he may come across her love again some day. Finally, given that lilies are often used at funerals (to signify the purity of the soul of the deceased), the lily may allude to the death-like state in which the knight wanders.

Questions

1. Why does the narrator find the condition of the knight so strange that he has to ask him that he has to ask him what ails him?

The knight looks pale like winter. He seems to have no purpose. His paleness has something to with what is ailing him. Paleness is associated to death. So death and his heart break seem to have engulfed his whole being and thus reflect on his face. The colour of his face had gone from rode red to lily white signifying complete thrall. This paleness startles

the narrator since there seems no evidence of any war or attack about the calm place where the narrator found the knight. He thus presumes that there could be something else that could have made the knight death pale.

2. Describe how the knight fell in love with the beautiful lady and declared his love and passion for her.

The knight instantly fell in love with the lady. Her delicate fairy like stature, her long hair, light feet, wild eyes in short her beautiful looks sweeps him off his feet the very moment he saw her. He makes flower garlands for her hair and bracelets too for her picked freshly from nature. Both look at each other with a lot of love. He takes her on his teed and ride on it the whole day. He heard her beautiful singing that sounded like a fairy's song. He relished her words when she said she loved him. At the elfin grot he kisses her eyes that sobbed heavily and he fell asleep as she lulled him asleep.

3. What happened at the elfin grot?

The beautiful lady wept her heart out. It is unknowingly why she cried. The reason for her taking him to her 'elfin grot' is also vastly criticized. She probably casts her magic spell on the knight. Her crying induces the knight to calm her with kisses on those beautiful eyes that shed copious tears. Two kisses on each eye pacify her. She puts him to sleep gently. She had already cast her spell on beauty on him. That made him love her with all his heart. Now she further casts her spell on him to end the dreamy love sequence by putting him to sleep. It is probably not sane to continue the love story. Everything mortal has to come to an end and every immortal dream should wake to reality. This is what it probably means to lull him to sleep to wake up to reality. The whole love affair ought to be a dream. But he actually dreamt of kings, princes and warriors who gathered about him shouting that the beautiful lady had deserted him, throwing him into much danger and misery. They all looked pale like death as they shrieked his misfortune. While the whole love affair had been in summer, this dream seems to be in winter since their lips were 'pale' and 'starved' either to personify the thrall the knight is in or depicting the wretchedness of the season which has emanated from summer. This could possibly connote the doom of the knight.

4. What lines are repeated in the ballad and to what purpose?

The lines 'o what can ail thee,/ knight at arms' has been repeated twice to signify the immense paleness the face of the knight bears. His face seems to be fully thrall struck and its lack of colour startles the narrator. The line is also repeated to make the ballad effective: to make it sound appealing while sung. It is rhythmic to suit its purpose. The lines 'alone and loitering?/ The sedge has withered from the lake,/ and no birds sing' have been

repeated twice once in the beginning of the poem and once at the end. The lines in the first stanza denote the end of the dream that has led the knight deep into winter which could mean that his paleness/ his misery has increased. His battered soul ceases to comprehend the pain it has to go through. The lady has deserted him for reason unknown. The lines repeated in the final stanza denote how he became pale and how the season has affected him indirectly. The reason for his paleness that has just slipped from summer beauty into wintery paleness. It connotes the starvation and desperation of his heart just like the gruesome winter. Its repetition is to also satisfy the balladic feature of lyrical rhythm. The word 'dream' is repeated twice which makes readers wonder if the knight wants to insist that the vision he saw was infact a dream and not a real event. The harsh repetition of the 'th' sound in the line 'hath thee in thrall' has possibly been used to wake the knight up from his dreamy sleep. In the next stanza he sees their mouth open, as if in yawning, after having 'cried' their warnig and then he wakes up.

5. Narrate the sad tale of the knight at arms.

Keats sets his simple story of love and death in a bleak wintry landscape that is appropriate to it: "The sedge has wither'd from the lake / And no birds sing!" The repetition of these two lines, with minor variations, as the concluding lines of the poem emphasizes the fate of the unfortunate knight and neatly encloses the poem in a frame by bringing it back to its beginning.

In keeping with the ballad tradition, Keats does not identify his questioner, or the knight, or the destructively beautiful lady. What Keats does not include in his poem contributes as much to it in arousing the reader's imagination as what he puts into it. La belle dame sans merci, the beautiful lady without pity, is a femme fatale, a Circe like figure who attracts lovers only to destroy them by her supernatural powers. She destroys because it is her nature to destroy. Keats could have found patterns for his "faery's child" in folk mythology, classical literature, Renaissance poetry, or the medieval ballad. With a few skillful touches, he creates a woman who is at once beautiful, erotically attractive, fascinating, and deadly.

Some readers see the poem as Keats' personal rebellion against the pains of love. In his letters and in some of his poems, he reveals that he did experience the pains, as well as the pleasures, of love and that he resented the pains, particularly the loss of freedom that came with falling in love. However, the ballad is a very objective form, and it may be best to read "La Belle Dame sans Merci" as pure story and no more. How Keats felt about his love for Fanny Brawne we can discover in the several poems he addressed to her, as well as in his letters.

6. Bring out the romantic, medieval and supernatural elements in the poem.

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" is a ballad, a medieval genre revived by the romantic poets. Keats uses the so-called ballad stanza, a quatrain in alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter lines. The shortening of the fourth line in each stanza of Keats' poem makes the stanza seem a self-contained unit, gives the ballad a deliberate and slow movement, and is pleasing to the ear. Keats uses a number of the stylistic characteristics of the ballad, such as simplicity of language, repetition, and absence of details; like some of the old ballads, it deals with the supernatural. Keats' economical manner of telling a story in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is the direct opposite of his lavish manner in The Eve of St. Agnes. Part of the fascination exerted by the poem comes from Keats' use of understatement.

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Summary And Analysis Of O What Is That Sound By W. H. Auden

About W H Auden

Wystan Hugh Auden was born in the year 1907 in York in England. He was an English-American poet applauded especially for his technical and stylistic achievements and for his ability to write in any form of verse. He rose to fame with 'Poems' published in the year 1930. His most notable works include 'Funeral Blues', 'September 1, 1939', 'The Age of Anxiety' and 'For the Time Being'. He won the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 1947 for The Age of Anxiety. A man both controversial and influential, Auden died in the 1973 of natural causes.

About 'O what is that Sound'

'O what is That Sound' is a ballad style poem with the events in it taking in an unspecified time giving it a universal ideology. It is poem of presumably war, its effects on a couple and betrayal.

Setting of O What is that Sound

The setting of the poem is the home of the speaker. From the comfort of his home, the speaker sees the valleys and his neighboring houses which are all referred to in the poem.

Poetic Devices in O What is that Sound

Stanza:

The poem has 9 stanzas of 4 lines of verse each.

Rhyme and Rhythm:

The poem has a rhyme scheme of ABAB in each stanza. The last words of the first and third line and the last words of the second and fourth line of each stanza rhyme with each other. The rhythm of the poem makes it adapt a ballad form.

Foreshadowing:

The speaker of the poem presents foreshadowing of what the soldiers are about to do starting from the second stanza itself though he does not realize it himself until the last second stanza.

Repetition:

The last word of the second line of each stanza is repeated twice. This repetition gives it a song like quality while keeping the severity of the content unreal. There is also the repetition of the word ‘O’ at the beginning of each stanza and the word ‘dear’ as the last word of the third line of all but the final stanza.

Allusion:

It is not explicitly said that the speaker of the poem and the one who answers his/her questions are married. It is inferred in the last second stanza when the speaker speaks of vows. There is no allusion to whether the speaker is the husband or the wife.

Summary of O What is that Sound

The speaker of the poem hears a sound down in the valley from his home in the morning. He asks his spouse what that sound was. The spouse replies that it was the marching of soldiers. The rest of the poem continues in this conversational style except for the last stanza.

The speaker next asks what the light that keeps flashing was. It is the glint of their weapons dear, says the spouse.

Similarly the speaker continues to question the actions of the soldiers and the spouse gives appropriate answers. The soldiers all the while keep marching towards the speaker’s house. The speaker thinks that they would stop somewhere before, but no; they pass the doctor’s house and the parson’s church and the cunning farmer’s barn, straight towards his house.

The spouse says he/she was leaving the speaker now. The speaker, afraid asks him/her if the vows he/she took were all false. The spouse replies that they were all true but still, he/she must leave.

And then the soldiers break the door, and come into the house with burning eyes.

Analysis of O What is that Sound

The poem starts with the speaker hearing drumming noises from the valley and the speaker's spouse says that it was just the scarlet soldiers coming. The use of scarlet here is not expanded in meaning. It could mean that the soldiers were bloody after fighting or that they were the ones who killed/or are going to kill.

The light glinting off their weapons shows that the soldiers most probably had a purpose on their march. It is said they step lightly which is to indicate that they increased their pace of the march. The foreshadowing in the poem makes its presence acute from here on. The spouse says that they were either training or doing the march as a warning. This indicates that that spouse had a faint idea as to the purpose of the soldiers. This also cements the possibility of hostility.

The soldiers suddenly turn off course and this makes the speaker of the poem kneel down. It is unclear whether he was doing so in prayer or in order to hide, but we get the idea that there is a possibility that the soldiers were there for the speaker. The speaker realizes that at this point but he does not take any action and only keeps on hoping that the soldiers weren't there for him, that they would stop somewhere else.

The soldiers do not stop at the doctor's house which eliminates the possibility that the 'scarlet' in stanza 1 meant bloody. The soldiers do not stop at the parson's house either. There is an increasing urgency in the voice of the speaker. This indicates his hope against hope that the soldiers were there were some other person. This idea is cemented when he describes the farmer as cunning. The speaker was so desperate that he started wildly accusing and guessing other possibilities. The soldiers start running after passing the farmer's house.

At this point, the spouse realizes that the soldiers were here for his/her significant half. But that does not stop him/her from leaving in this moment of crisis. This is shown in the penultimate stanza where the speaker pleads the spouse to stay, holding him/her to the vows they exchanged during their wedding. But this does not sway the spouse. He/she says that he/she still loves the speaker but he/she must be leaving. This betrayal of the partner is shown simply and without much ado, which makes it that much more brutal.

The narrative which was in a conversational style till now turns to a single voice in the last stanza. The soldiers break the door and come for the speaker and the poem ends here, leaving the reader speculating as to what happens next. It might be guessed that whatever it was wasn't anything pleasant to the speaker seeing his previous frightened state and the burning eyes the soldiers bore.

The speaker of the poem avoids the truth for as long as possible. He/she has an idea of his/her deeds (which is not mentioned in the poem), and that someday they would catch up to him/her (seeing the way he/she knelt upon seeing the soldiers change course towards his/her home), but he/she still remains inactive in light of the faintest chance that it wasn't for him/her that the soldiers were coming for. This avoidance of the truth ended up in him/her being betrayed by his/her spouse; whereas if acted upon earlier they could both have a chance of escaping together.

Central Idea of O What is that Sound

The central idea of the poem is to tell frailty of humans. The speaker was frail when he continued avoiding the truth even when it was right in his/her face. The spouse was frail when he/she chose to escape leaving the speaker alone to face the wrath of the soldiers.

Tone of O What is that Sound

The tone of the poem is mostly expectant. The speaker expects the soldiers to stop somewhere else. The tone is also a sing-song one, contributing to its ballad-y character. The suspense is built with each passing stanza. The tone in the penultimate stanza is one of shock and betrayal. The poem climaxes in the last stanza with a matter-of-fact type of tone.

Conclusion

W H Auden presents a story of a couple, one of whom betrays another upon facing difficulties, and does so in the form of a ballad using effective rhyme and rhythm.

Ode to the West Wind

Summary and Analysis of "Ode to the West Wind"

Summary

A first-person persona addresses the west wind in five stanzas. It is strong and fearsome. In the first stanza, the wind blows the leaves of autumn. In the second stanza, the wind blows the clouds in the sky. In the third stanza, the wind blows across an island and the waves of the sea. In the fourth stanza, the persona imagines being the leaf, cloud, or wave, sharing in the wind's strength. He desires to be lifted up rather than caught low on "the thorns of life," for he sees himself as like the wind: "tameless, and swift, and proud." In the final stanza, he asks the wind to play upon him like a lyre; he wants to share the wind's fierce spirit. In turn, he would have the power to spread his verse throughout the world, reawakening it.

Analysis

The poet is directing his speech to the wind and all that it has the power to do as it takes charge of the rest of nature and blows across the earth and through the seasons, able both to preserve and to destroy all in its path. The wind takes control over clouds, seas, weather, and more. The poet offers that the wind over the Mediterranean Sea was an inspiration for the poem. Recognizing its power, the wind becomes a metaphor for nature's awe-inspiring spirit. By the final stanza, the speaker has come to terms with the wind's power over him, and he requests inspiration and subjectivity. He looks to nature's power to assist him in his work of poetry and prays that the wind will deliver his words across the land and through time as it does with all other objects in nature.

The form of the poem is consistent in pattern. Each stanza is fourteen lines in length, using the rhyming pattern of aba bcb cdc ded ee. This is called terza rima, the form used by Dante in his Divine Comedy.

Keeping in mind that this is an ode, a choral celebration, the tone of the speaker understandably includes excitement, pleasure, joy, and hope. Shelley draws a parallel between the seasonal cycles of the wind and that of his ever-changing spirit. Here, nature, in the form of the wind, is presented, according to Abrams "as the outer correspondent to an inner change from apathy to spiritual vitality, and from imaginative sterility to a burst of creative power."

Thematically, then, this poem is about the inspiration Shelley draws from nature. The "breath of autumn being" is Shelley's atheistic version of the Christian Holy Spirit. Instead of relying on traditional religion, Shelley focuses his praise around the wind's role in the various cycles in nature—death, regeneration, "preservation," and "destruction." The speaker begins by praising the wind, using anthropomorphic techniques (wintry bed, chariots, corpses, and clarions) to personalize the great natural spirit in hopes that it will somehow heed his plea. The speaker is aware of his own mortality and the immortality of his subject. This drives him to beg that he too can be inspired ("make me thy lyre") and carried ("be through my lips to unawakened earth") through land and time.

The first two stanzas are mere praise for the wind's power, covered in simile and allusion to all that which the wind has the power to do: "loosen," "spread," "shed," and "burst." In the fourth and fifth stanzas, the speaker enters into the poem, seeking (hoping) for equal treatment along with all other objects in nature, at least on the productive side. The poet offers humility in the hope that the wind will assist him in achieving his quest to "drive [his] dead thoughts over the universe." Ultimately, the poet is thankful for the inspiration he is able to draw from nature's spirit, and he hopes that it will also be the same spirit that carries his words across the land where he also can be a source of inspiration.

Critical Appreciation of the Poem "Ode to the West Wind"

"Ode to the West Wind" , Critical Appreciation

"Ode to the West Wind" is one of the most famous poems by Shelley and it was published in the same book, which consists of his famous drama, Prometheus Unbound and many magnificent lyric poems. He wrote this poem in the autumn of 1819 in Florence. The poem is considered as one of the noblest lyrics in English. It bears testimony to the poetic genius that Shelley was.

Structurally the poem is divided into five stanzas or cantos. Each stanza is in sonnet form. The ode consists of five sonnets. Every sonnet consists of four terza rima with traditional terza rima rhymes and a rhymed couplet. The first three stanzas are the address of the wind and at the same time the characterization description of the wind. All of three stanzas end with the "O hear" prayer. In the fourth stanza, personal elements penetrate in the poem and Shelley compares himself with the wind. He makes fervent plea to the wind to lift him up as he bleeds falling on the 'thorns of life'. The last stanza is a prayer to the

forceful spirit of the wind to use him for regeneration of humanity. Shelley ends on a note of optimism

"O, Wind,

If winter comes, can spring be far behind"

In the poem, the West Wind is presented as a powerful force. Shelley makes myths of the autumnal West Wind as a great force which possesses redeeming power. It is gigantic, wild, restless power, free and unbounded. Two contrasting aspects of the wind are under lined in the first three stanzas- its terrifying destructive power and its gentle fostering influence. It is simultaneously a destroyer and a preserver. On the earth, the wind drives away dry leaves of trees like "ghosts from an enchanter fleeing". It also carries the winged seeds and deposits them in the 'dark wintry bed', where they remain buried throughout the winter. The same wind will also make them germinate in the spring. It also sweeps wild storm clouds along on the firmament from the bottom of the sky to the peak of the sky. The wind also makes its mighty influence felt on the sea. It stirs the Mediterranean Sea to its depth. It makes a lashing progress through the waters of the Atlantic, dividing the mighty Atlantic's 'level powers' into two halves, its impact reaching miles below to turn the submarine nature grey in fear. Thus, the mythical might of the wind cover the earth, the sky and the seas.

"Ode to the West Wind" is a lyric. The music swells like the surge of the west wind. Shelley uses a number of poetic devices in order to bring his ideas home. The dramatic alliteration in the opening line, "Wild West Wind", announces energy and force. The wind is personified and has been given a mythical stature. The poem is replete with images and metaphors. There is a rapid succession of images in the poem. The poet's emotion is at the peak when he makes fervent appeal to the wind to make him its 'lyre'. His use of emotive language is noteworthy.

The poem starts with the natural and the moves to the personal finally turning to the universal. Shelley deftly blends the natural, the personal and the universal in the same poem. It also captures the past, the present and the future. Shelley finished this great poem optimistically believing in the rise of humanity.

Shelley as a Lyrical Poet

Percy Bysshe Shelley is one of the great Romantic poets in English literature. His poetry is marked by excellence and power in several departments. In the first place, he possesses the lyrical gift or the power of embodying in musical language some transient but vivid emotion or some passing mood in such a way as to reproduce the feeling in the

reader. Commonly acclaimed as one of the supreme lyrical geniuses in English poetry, Shelley's poetry is always pleasant reading because of the lyrical qualities it embodies.

Shelley is an intense lyricist. He stands alone among singers and he is the perfect singing bird. His poems reveal intense lyricism. His lyrical temper finds expression in flashes of imagination, emotional exuberance, lilting melody, splendor of imagery and subjective note. His ***"Ode to the West Wind"*** and ***"To a Skylark"*** are two of his most outstanding lyrics. They exhibit **Shelley's genius as a lyric poet.**

Spontaneity is one of the most striking features of Shelley's lyrics. His lyrics are pure effusions and they come directly from his heart. In "To a Skylark" he sings as naturally as the bird. The poet's spontaneous expression is notable in the following lines:

"Teach me half the gladness

That thy brain must know,

Such harmonious madness

From my lips would flow

The world should listen then, as I am listening now"

Emotional exuberance is another lyrical quality. There is a great intensity of feeling ins Shelley's lyrics. There is also a note of desire and longing in most of his lyrics. He is always yearning for what is unattainable. In "Ode to the West Wind" Shelley gives vent to his intense desire to the united with the force of the wind. He expresses his ardent desire to accompany him in his mission of creating a new order of life but the agonies and bitterness of life- "heavy weight of hours" have repressed his qualities. He makes an ardent appeal to the wind to lift him like 'a wave, a leaf, a cloud'. In the last section, he vehemently urges the west wind to infuse its vigour and power into him, so that he can play the "trumpet of prophecy" and render his massage to mankind. In "To a Skylark", we observe the poet's emotional outpouring in the lines expressing human sadness:

"We look before and after,

And pine for what is not:

Our sincerest laughter

With some pain is fraught;

Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought"

Subjectivity is a common feature of **lyrical poetry**. Idealization and abstraction are characteristic features of Shelley's poetry. In ***"Ode to the West Wind"***, he personifies the wind and treats it as an indomitable force that can liberate human beings from bout of despondency and bring about revolutionary changes. In "***To a Skylark***", the bird is idealized and presented as 'an image of that rapture which no man can ever reach'.

Musical quality is an integral part of all lyrics. **Shelley's lyrics** are surprisingly musical and sweet. He has the gift of lending to his lyrics the sweetest and most liquid harmonies. "To a Skylark" and ***"Ode to the West Wind"*** are both musical triumphs. In addition to the melodic effects, Shelley's lyrics are highly embellished compositions replete with ornamental imagery. "**To a Skylark**" presents many glittering pictures. One such image is found in the following lines:

"Keen as are the arrows

Of that silver sphere,

Whose intense lamp narrows

In the white dawn clear

Until we hardly see, we feel that it is there."

Shelley's genius was essentially lyrical. He is one of the r musical poets in English literature. **His poems embody all the qualities of lyric poems.**

Theme of Hope and Regeneration as You Find it in Shelley's Poetry

Shelley as a poet of hope with reference to his poem "Ode to the West Wind".

Write a note on Shelley's optimism with illustrations from his poems.

Theme of Hope and Regeneration in Shelley's Poetry

Shelley was a born revolutionary and he had firm faith in the regeneration of mankind. He was a visionary whose faith and optimism never dwindled. His motto of life was to liberate mankind form the tyranny of all types. He dreamt of a bright and radiant future. His

constant aim in poetry was to bring about a glorious millennium- a Golden Age in future. His “Ode to the West Wind” is a poetic manifestation of the home and optimism that he would nourish in the inner recesses of his heart.

In the poem **“Ode to the West Wind”**, Shelley presents the wind as a mighty, powerful force. The duality of the wind’s power is emphasized throughout the poem. Two contrasting aspects of the wind are underlined in the first three stanzas- its terrifying destructive power and its gentle fostering influence. It is simultaneously a destroyer and preserver. The wind destroys in order to create something new. It drives away all the dead leaves- “Young, and black, and pale, and hectic red,/ Pestilence- stricken multitudes” because they pose obstacles to new germination. The dry old leaves stand for old and useless thoughts that barricade the inauguration of new and revolutionary ideas. The wind symbolically representing a powerful force destroys the old, useless thoughts and preserves the new ideas represented by “winged seeds”.

In the second and third stanza Shelley describes the tumultuous impact of the West Wind in the sky and on the ocean. On the sky there is a deep commotion as the clouds are dispersed just like the decaying leaves on the ground with the approach of the West Wind. There comes tempestuous storm from which ‘Black rain and fire and hail will burst out’. The west wind recreates havoc on the ocean- bed also. The Atlantic Ocean cleaves itself into a deep chasm when the west wind raises high weaves on it. Even the sub- marine plants, flowers on the bed of the ocean tremble in fear. The west wind is thus a cataclysmic force that effects a phenomenal change in the natural world. Shelley was attracted by this tremendous manifestation of the hidden power of nature. He saw it as a symbol of the force of revolution that is necessary to change. The present life is a death like state- it is winter of discontent and despair. If we are to bring in a spirit of hope on this earth, we have to destroy the old world and create a new one on its wreckage.

In the fourth stanza, the poet seeks participation in the energy of the wind. He expresses his ardent desire to accompany him in his mission of creating a new order of life but the agonies and bitterness of life- “heavy weight of hours” have repressed his qualities. He makes an ardent appeal to the wind to lift him like ‘a wave, a leaf, a cloud’. In the last section, he vehemently urges the west wind to infuse its vigour and power into him, so that he can play the ‘trumpet of prophecy’ and render his massage to mankind. He wants to awake mankind from their ‘wintry slumber’. He expresses his ardent zeal for regeneration's- ‘scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth/ Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!’ Final manifestation of hope and optimism occurs in the last two lines

“O, Wind

If winter comes, can spring be far behind?”

This establishes Shelley as a poet of inspiration; ***hope and optimism*** who sees the rays of hope even through the worst condition.

Keats' ODE TO AUTUMN

1. INTRODUCTION

The Striking Beauty of Autumn

This poem was written by Keats in September, 1819. He was greatly struck by the beauty of the season. The air was fine, and there was a temperate sharpness about it. The weather seemed "chaste". The stubble-fields looked better than they did in spring. Keats was so impressed by the beauty of the weather that he recorded his mood in the form of this ode.

One of Keats's Finest Poems

The *Ode to Autumn* ranks among the finest poems of Keats. The treatment of the subject is perfectly objective or impersonal. The poet keeps himself completely out of the picture. He only describes certain sights and sounds without expressing his personal reaction to these sights and sounds. The poem is a perfect Nature-lyric. No human sentiment finds expression; only the beauty and bounty of Nature during autumn are described.

An Autobiographical Element in the Poem

Sometimes this ode is taken as having an autobiographical quality: it is possible to connect its serenity with the way of Keats's own life. However, it is almost certain that he simply tried to catch the spirit of an autumn afternoon.

2. CRITICAL SUMMARY

The Progress of Thought and Feeling in the Poem

Here is a poem in which a season has been personified and made to live. In the first stanza, the poet describes the fruits of autumn, the fruits coming to maturity in readiness for harvesting. In the second stanza, autumn is personified as a woman present at the various operations of the harvest and at cider-pressing. In the last stanza, the end of the year is associated with sunset; the songs of spring are over and night is falling, but there is no feeling of sadness because autumn has its own songs. The close of the ode, though solemn, breathes the spirit of hope.

The Fruits of Autumn

Autumn is a season of ripe fruitfulness. It is the time of the ripening of grapes, apples, gourds, hazelnuts, etc. It is also the time when the bees suck the sweetness from "later flowers" and n\ake honey. Thus autumn is pictured in the stanza as bringing all the fruits of earth to maturity in readiness for harvesting.

The Occupations of Autumn

In the second stanza, autumn is seen in the person of a reaper, a winnower, a gleaner, and a cider-presser. Reaping, winnowing, gleaning and cider-pressing are all operations connected with the harvest and are, therefore, carried on during autumn. Autumn is depicted firstly as a harvester sitting carelessly in the field during a winnowing operation; secondly, as a tired reaper fallen asleep in the very midst of reaping; thirdly, as a gleaner walking homewards with a load on the head; and fourthly, as a cider-presser watching intently the apple-juice flowing out of the cider-press.

The Songs of Autumn

Autumn is not altogether devoid of music. If spring has its songs, autumn too has its sounds and songs. In the evening, when the crimson light of the setting sun falls upon the stubble-fields, a chorus of natural sounds is heard. The gnats utter their mournful sounds; the full-grown lambs bleat loudly; the hedge-crickets chirp; the robin's high and delicate notes are heard; and the swallows twitter in the sky. In this last stanza the close of the year is associated with sunset and night-fall.

3. CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Its Faultless Construction

This is the most faultless of Keats's odes in point of construction. The first stanza gives us the bounty of Autumn, the second describes the occupations of the season, and the last dwells upon its sounds. Indeed, the poem is a complete and concrete picture of Autumn, "the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness".

Its Sensuousness

The bounty of Autumn has been described with all its sensuous appeal. The vines suggesting grapes, the apples, the gourds, the hazels with their sweet kernel, the bees suggesting honey—all these appeal to our senses of taste and smell. The whole landscape is made to appear fresh and scented. There is great concentration in each

line of the first stanza. Each line is like the branch of a fruit-tree laden with fruit to the breaking-point.

Its Vivid Imagery

The second stanza contains some of the most vivid pictures in English poetry. Keats's pictorial quality is here seen at its best. Autumn is personified and presented to us in the figure of the winnower, "sitting careless on a granary floor", the reaper "on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep", the gleaner keeping "steady thy laden head across a brook", and a spectator watching with patient look a cider-press and the last oozings therefrom. The reaper, the winnower, the gleaner, and the cider-presser symbolise Autumn. These pictures make the poem human and universal because the eternal labours of man are brought before the eyes of the reader.

The Poet's Keen Observation of Nature

The third stanza is a collection of the varied sounds of Autumn—the choir of gnats, the bleating of lambs, the singing of crickets, the whistling of red-breasts, and the twittering of swallows. Keats's interest in small and homely creatures is fully evidenced in these lines. The whole poem demonstrates Keats's interest in Nature and his keen and minute observation of natural sights and sounds. Keats's responsiveness and sensitivity to natural phenomena is one of the striking qualities of his poetry.

Its Objectivity and its Greek Character

The poem is characterised by complete objectivity. The poet keeps himself absolutely out of the picture. Nor docs he express any emotion whether of joy or melancholy. He gives the objects of feeling, not the feeling itself. The poem is written in a calm and serene mood. There is no discontent, no anguish, no bitterness of any kind. There is no philosophy in the poem, no allegory, no inner meaning. We are just brought face to face with "Nature in all her richness of tint and form". The poem breathes the spirit of Greek poetry. In fact, it is one of the most Greek compositions by Keats. There is the Greek touch in the personification of Autumn and there is the Greek note in the poet's impersonal manner of dwelling upon Nature.

Felicity of Diction

We have here the usual felicity of diction for which Keats is famous. Phrases like "mellow fruitfulness", "maturing sun", "hair soft-lifted", "barred clouds" which "bloom the soft-dying day", "hilly bourn" are examples of Keats's happy coinages. Nor

is poetic artifice wanting to add beauty to the verse. The alliteration in the following lines is, for instance, noteworthy:

To smell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Several words here contain the same "z" sound—hazel, shells, flowers, bees, days, cease, cells. The abundance of "m" sound in these lines is also noteworthy: plump, more, warm, summer, brimni'd clammy.

Its Form

The rhyme-scheme in this ode is the same (except for a little variation) in all the stanzas each of which consists of 11 lines. Thus it is a "regular" ode.

A Critic's Comment

"Most satisfying of all the *Odes,* in thought and expression, is the *Ode To Autumn.* Most satisfying because, for all the splendour of diction in the others, there are times when the poetic fire dwindles for a moment, whereas in this *ode,* from its inception to its close, matter and manner are not only superbly blended, but every line carries its noble freight of beauty. The first stanza is a symphony of colour, the second a symphony of movement, the third a symphony of sound. The artist shapes the first and last, and in the midst the man, the thinker, gives us its human significance. Thus is the poem perfected, its sensuous imagery enveloping as it were its vital idea." (A. Compton-Rickett)

David Perkins on the *Ode to Autumn*

A Significant Ode

David Perkins, quoting another critic, says that this ode is regarded as "a very nearly perfect piece of style" but that it has "little to say". However, says David Perkins, this ode is very "significant". Even more than Keats's other odes, *To Autumn,* is "objective, oblique and impersonal, carried scarcely at all by direct statement that involves the poet". Its expression, like that of the *Grecian Urn* or the *Nightingale,* is concrete and symbolic, and as in these other odes, the symbol adopted has been previously established in Keats's poetry. Keats's view of the seasons is on the whole

rather conventional: spring is the time of budding, summer of fulfilment, and winter of death. Autumn coming between summer and winter, can be seen as the intensifying and prolonging of summer. In other words, autumn suggests precisely that lengthening-out of fulfilment as its crest or climax which Keats had desired to find in the concrete world. So the poet, turning to the concrete, contemplate it with serenity.

The Imagery in the First Stanza

Autumn, accordingly, is described as a season of "mellow fruitfulness". The sun is ripening or "maturing" the earth, "conspiring" to load the vines and bend the apple trees, "to swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells". The season fills "all fruit with ripeness to the core"; and these images of full, inward ripeness and strain suggest that the maturing can go no further, that the fulfilment has reached its climax. Even the cells of the bees are over-brimmed. Yet the ripening continues, "budding more, and still more, later flowers". The bees "think warm days will never cease". Thus through the imagery the poem suggests a prolonging of fulfilment. At the same time, however, there are indirect images of ageing. For the sun is maturing—it is not only ripening the things, but is also growing older. So also autumn itself, the "close-bosom friend" of the sun.

The Imagery in the Second Stanza

The second stanza picks up and continues imagery of arrested motion in the first. Autumn is here personified in a variety of attitudes; but the dominant image is of autumn as the harvester—and a harvester that is in a sense another reaper, death itself. Instead of harvesting, however, autumn is motionless, death being momentarily held off as the ripening still continues. First autumn appears "sitting careless on a granary floor". The granary is where the harvest would be stored, but autumn is not bringing in the grain. The assonance and alliteration of the line, "Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind", leads into the image of autumn feeling drowsy or sleepy on a half-reaped furrow—again the harvest arrested. Finally autumn is seen near a cider-press where it watches "the last oozings hours by hours". This is one of the two images suggesting activity, the other being the gleaner with laden head crossing a brook; but the motion is so slow that the reader takes the cider-press almost as a repetition of the half-reaped furrow. But, of course, these are the last, oozings, and the harvest is drawing to a close. The notion of death is present but it will emerge more emphatically in the third stanza.

The Imagery in the Last Stanza; the Mood and the Thought of the Poem

Things reveal their essential identity most intensely at the moment if dying or readiness to die. So the last stanza begins with the one comment the poet offers in his own person. "Where are the songs of Spring?" but there is no rebellion in the answer: "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too". There follows an image of the day, which, like autumn, is about to end, and the death is accompanied by a fulfilment; for as it dies the day blooms all flowers ("While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day"). The stanza proceeds with images of death or withdrawal, and of song, and the songs are a funeral dirge for the dying year. At the same time, there is a tone of tenderness in the stanza; and the objectivity of the last few lines suggests an acceptance which includes even the fact of death. Death is here recognised as something inherent in the course of things, the condition and price of all fulfilment, having like the spring and summer of life its own distinctive character or "music" which is also to be prized and relished. In the last analysis, perhaps, the serenity and acceptance here expressed are aesthetic. The ode is, after all, a poem of contemplation. The symbol of autumn compels that attitude. The poet's own fears, ambitions and passions are not directly engaged, and hence he can be relatively withdrawn. The poet seems to suggest that life in all its stages has a certain identity and beauty which man can appreciate by disengaging his own ego. "Thus the symbol permits, and the poem as a whole expresses, an emotional reconciliation to the human experience of process."

Robin Mayhead on the *Ode to Autumn*

An Acceptance of Impermanence

Superficially altogether different from the *Ode On Melancholy, To Autumn,* is deeply related to that poem. The *Melancholy* ode accepts the impermanence of beauty and joy as inevitable. In the *Ode To Autumn,* impermanence is again accepted, and accepted without the least trace of sadness because Keats is able to see it as part of a larger and richer permanence.

The Continuity of Life

This greater permanence is the continuity of life itself, in which the impermanence of the individual human existence is one tiny aspect of a vast and deathless pattern. The rotation of the seasons offers a symbol of this continuity that is immediately satisfying. When Keats, in the last stanza, refers to the "music" of autumn, he is obviously pointing out the futility of regretting that spring has gone by.

What is past is past. After all, autumn has its own characteristic sounds, which are as much part of the year as the songs of spring. Moreover, although autumn will be followed by the cold and barrenness of winter, winter will in turn give way to a fresh spring. Life goes on. The individual year may be drawing to a close, but there will be a new year to take its place. This is indirectly conveyed with wonderful effect in the concluding line of the ode: "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies". In one way the line gives a hint of the coming winter, for the swallows are gathering to migrate to warmer climates. Yet we remember that migratory birds return when the cold weather ends, so that the very hint of their 1'orihcoming departure carries with it a suggestion of their re-appearance when warm days come again.

The Structure of the Poem

The handling of verse-structure is here wonderfully resourceful. The use of the run-on line in the first stanza, for instance, is noteworthy. If "swell" and "plump" give the outward signs of fat richness, the stress on "sweet kernel", inevitable after the pause at the end of the previous line, vividly makes us think of the lusciousness within. And the imagined sweetness leads to even greater sweetness of the honey made by the bees. The loaded abundance is suggested by the heavy movement in the last line which describes the over-brimming of their cells. There is so much oozing sweetness here that the honey-combs are insufficient to hold it all.

As **F.R. Leavis** has shown (in *Revaluation),* Keats employs verse-structure in the last four lines of the second stanza to enact the very movement of the gleaner. Keats is here able to suggest the prudent hesitation of the man (or woman) carefully balancing his load before he crosses the brook. Again, the extreme slowness with which the drops of cider issue from the press is suggested by the line: "Thou watchest the last oozings, hour by hour."

No Resentment or Horror About the Fact of Death

There are various hints of death in the final stanza, but the idea of death is not treated with horror or resentment. The day is dying softly, the rosy "bloom" of sunset taking away from the stark bareness of the now fully-reaped corn-fields. And, in any case, the very reference to the close of the day, like the final line about the swallows, carries with it a suggestion of its opposite. Just as the swallows will come back next year, so another day will down, for the great movement of life goes on, however short the existence of the individual.

Walter Jackson Bate on the *Ode to Autumn*

One of the Most Nearly Perfect Poems

To Autumn is one of the most nearly perfect poems in English. The different parts of the poem contribute directly to the whole, with nothing left dangling or independent. The *Ode to a Nightingale* is a less "perfect" though a greater poem.

The Complete Objectivity of the Poem

The poet himself is completely absent from the poem; there is not "I", no suggestion of the discursive language that we find in the other odes; the poem is entirely concrete, and self-sufficient in and through its concreteness. There is also a successful union of the ideal (that is, of the heart's desire) and reality. What the heart really wants is being found (in the first stanza, fullness and completion; in the second, a prolonging of that fulfilment): Here at last is something of a genuine paradise, therefore. It even has its deity—a benevolent deity that wants not only to "load and bless", but also to "spare", to prolong, to "set budding more". And yet all this is put with concrete exactness and fidelity.

The Dominant Aspects of Autumn

Each of the three stanzas concentrates on a dominant aspect of autumn. The theme of the first is ripeness, of growth now reaching its climax. Yet growth is still surprisingly going on. The second stanza depicts stillness, for now autumn is conceived as a reaper or harvester, but a harvester who is not harvesting. Movement begins only in the latter part of the stanza. Even then it is suggested only in the momentary glimpse of the gleaner crossing a brook; and autumn then stops again to watch the slow pressing of the apples into cider as the hours pass. There is a hint that the end is approaching: these are the "last oozings".

A Shift in the Final Stanza

In the final stanza, the personified figure of autumn is replaced by concrete images of life, and of life unafflicted by any thought of death: the gnats, the hedge-crickets, the redbreasts. Moreover, it is life that can exist in much the same way at other limes than autumn. Only two images are peculiar to the season—the "stubble-plains" and the "full-grown lambs". The mind is free to associate the wailful mourning of the gnats with a funeral dirge for the dying year, but the sound is no more confined to autumn alone than is the "soft-dying" of any day; and if the swallows are gathering, they are not necessarily gathering for migration.

Ode to Autumn: Critique and Analysis/ Faultless construction and masterpiece

Keats was inspired to write “Ode to Autumn” after walking through the water meadows of Winchester, England, in an early autumn evening of 1819. The poem has three stanzas of eleven lines describing the taste, sights and sounds of autumn. Much of the third stanza, however, is dedicated to diction, symbolism, and literary devices with decisively negative connotations, as it describes the end of the day and the end of autumn. The author makes an intense description of autumn at least at first sight.

The first stanza begins showing this season as misty and fruitful, which, with the help of a ‘maturing sun’, ripens the fruit of the vines. Next, we can see clearly a hyperbole. Keats writes that a tree has so many apples that it bends, while the gourds swell and the hazel shells plumps. The poem widely has been considered a masterpiece of Romantic English poetry. Harold Bloom described it as: "the most perfect shorter poem in the English language." Conciseness is reflected as follows:

“And still more, later flowers for the bees,

Until they think warm days will never cease?”

Keats suggests that the bees have a large amount of flowers. And these flowers did not bud in summer but now, in autumn. As a consequence, the bees are incessantly working and their honeycombs are overflowing since summer. In both its form and descriptive surface, "To Autumn" is one of the simplest of Keats's odes. There is nothing confusing or complex in Keats's paean to the season of autumn, with its fruitfulness, its flowers, and the song of its swallows gathering for migration. The extraordinary achievement of this poem lies in its ability to suggest, explore, and develop a rich abundance of themes without ever ruffling its calm, gentle, and lovely description of autumn. Where "Ode on Melancholy" presents itself as a strenuous heroic quest, "To Autumn" is concerned with the much quieter activity of daily observation and appreciation. In this quietude, the gathered themes of the preceding odes find their fullest and most beautiful expression. Keats’s approach here is particular as the line shows:

“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!”

"To Autumn" takes up where the other odes leave off. Like the others, it shows Keats's speaker paying homage to a particular goddess--in this case, the deified season of Autumn. The selection of this season implicitly takes up the other odes' themes of temporality, mortality, and change: Autumn in Keats's ode is a time of warmth and plenty, but it is perched on the brink of winter's desolation, as the bees enjoy "later flowers," the harvest is gathered from the fields, the lambs of spring are now "full grown," and, in the final line of the poem, the swallows gather for their winter migration. The understated sense of inevitable loss in that final line makes it one of the most

moving moments in all of poetry; it can be read as a simple, uncomplaining summation of the entire human condition. Despite the coming chill of winter, the late warmth of autumn provides Keats's speaker with ample beauty to celebrate: the cottage and its surroundings in the first stanza, the agrarian haunts of the goddess in the second, and the locales of natural creatures in the third. Keats's speaker is able to experience these beauties in a sincere and meaningful way because of the lessons he has learned in the previous odes: He is no longer attempting to escape the pain of the world through ecstatic rapture (as in "Nightingale") and no longer frustrated by the attempt to eternalize mortal beauty or subject eternal beauty to time (as in "Urn"). The poem recalls earlier poems as in the lines:

“Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind”

In "To Autumn," the speaker's experience of beauty refers back to earlier odes (the goddess drowsing among the poppies recalls Psyche and Cupid lying in the grass), but it also recalls a wealth of earlier poems. Most importantly, the image of Autumn winnowing and harvesting (in a sequence of odes often explicitly about creativity) recalls an earlier Keats poem in which the activity of harvesting is an explicit metaphor for artistic creation. In his sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be," Keats makes this connection directly using the metaphor ‘ripen'd grain’. In "To Autumn," the metaphor is developed further; the sense of coming loss that permeates the poem confronts the sorrow underlying the season's creativity. When Autumn's harvest is over, the fields will be bare, the swaths with their "twined flowers" cut down, the cider-press dry, the skies empty. But the connection of this harvesting to the seasonal cycle softens the edge of the tragedy. In time, spring will come again, the fields will grow again, and the birdsong will return. The speaker knows joy and sorrow, song and silence are as intimately connected as the twined flowers in the fields. Thus the prime note of the poem is that of optimism as the following lines reveal.

“Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too”

‘Ode to Autumn’ reveals not Keats’s pictorial quality only; but also a deep sense of purpose underneath. Although the first impression may be that John Keats is simply describing the main characteristics of autumn, and the human and animal activities related to it, a deeper reading could suggest that Keats talks about the process of life. Autumn symbolizes maturity in human and animal lives. Some instances of this are the ‘full-grown lambs’, the sorrow of the gnats, the wind that lives and dies, and the day that is dying and getting dark. As all we know, the next season is winter, a part of the year that represents aging and death, in other words, the end of life. However, in my opinion, death does not have a negative connotation because Keats enjoys and accepts ‘autumn’ or maturity as part of life, though winter is coming. Joys must not be forgotten in times of trouble. Blake’s dictum, ‘Under every grief and pine/Runs a joy with silken twine.’ The two are the part of life. Thus ‘thou has thy music too’ is the right approach to life showing the process of maturity and optimism.

In short, what makes "To Autumn" beautiful is that it brings an engagement with that connection out of the realm of mythology and fantasy and into the everyday world. We are part of Autumn when it is personified and presented to us in the figure of the winnower, “sitting careless on a granary floor”, the reaper “on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep”, the gleaner keeping “steady thy laden head across a brook”, and a spectator watching with patient look a cider-press and the last oozings therefrom. The reaper, the winnower, the gleaner, and the cider-presser symbolize Autumn. Through his process, the poet has learned that an acceptance of mortality is not destructive to an appreciation of beauty and has gleaned wisdom by accepting the passage of time that it is engagement; not escape is the purpose of life.