John Donne: Britain’s Greatest Poet

John Donne (1572-1631) is considered to be one of Britain’s greatest poets of the 17th century as his poetry holds a unique position in Renaissance literature. Those who admire his work consider him to be one of Britain’s greatest metaphysical love poets of his time. Although born into a Catholic family in the 1500s to well off parents, he ultimately converts to Anglicanism. John’s upbringing becomes everything but easy as society shuns his religious beliefs as a Roman Catholic. Upon his entry to colleges such as Oxford university at the age of 11 and later the University of Cambridge, John never receives his degree due to his belief in Catholicism. He goes on to train as a barrister and begins practicing law in the late 1500s at the Lincoln inn. When his father dies John becomes wealthy and spends most of his fortune on women, travel, and literature. During this time, he begins writing a stream of sonnets and erotic love poems. At age 20 he publishes his first book of poetry which becomes highly prized by a small group of admirers.

John forces himself to work as a lawyer to fight off poverty. While working as a lawyer he begins writing on subjects like theology, canon law, and anti-Catholic polemics. In one of the deepest depressions of his life, he writes his famous poem “Biathanatos” where he defends the right to suicide. As he becomes more popular, so does his poetry. In the early 1600s, he becomes the Dean of St Paul’s and becomes widely known for his sermon. However, during all of this, his love for writing and poetry did not suffer. Even on his sickbed while contemplating the relationship between the physical and the spiritual he continues writing poetry.

As being a Roman catholic puts Donne at a disadvantage he finds his way through poetry writing numerous lyrics and sonnets. Despite the fact of his later works taking more of a metaphysical approach, the earlier John Donne argues his viewpoints with the frequent use of paradox as well.

During the time of its emergence in the 17th century, metaphysical poetry did not draw much of an attraction to the majority of people but T.S Elliot revitalizes it in the 19th century. In Andrew Cutrofello’s “How do we recognize Metaphysical Poets?”, he says “Eliot characterizes metaphysical poetry as poetry that expressed the experiential force of thought.” (pg.77), and indeed, Donne allows his readers to feel his thoughts from the strange imagery he creates within his poems. In his works such as “The Apparition” and 'Death Be Not Proud' (pg.757), he uses elaborate descriptions to create imagery of flowering death as he even understands death is inevitable. In “The Flea”, “Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God”, and “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”, Donne creates discernment throughout his argument as he uses his twisted perception to moralize his true intentions towards the subject. Nevertheless, Critics take admiration for his common elements of love, death, and religion often presented with highly complex thoughts and frequent use of paradox deeming him to be one the most influential metaphysical love poets of the 17th century.

In the “Apparition” (pg.757) John spoke of his hurt, that his beloved has scorned her lover, and that she will be scared of his ghost when he visits. He sees himself as the spurned lover in this triangle. His hurt clearly shows through as he claims that she is no “fain d vestal”, that she is a liar and will ultimately suffer for all of her wrongdoings.

His sonnet, 'Death be not proud' (pg.757), Donne speaks of death as if it were a person, a physical thing. He refers to “death” as proud and not being humble, that generations of people before him even fear death. As he displays aspects of his real-life, John knows despite having the will to fight sickness, poorness, etc. there is no fighting the will of death. Death was “mighty and dreadful…” as it attacks everyone.

In “The Flea” and holy sonnet “Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God”, Donne speaks of love. In “The Flea” he speaks of the flea as a representation of his lover, his references to the flea sucking bold interprets the lovemaking between him and his lover as their blood intertwine. In “Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God”, Donne again speaks of love, however, in this one he speaks of God as being three-persons (the father, the son and the holy ghost) as he challenges God to show him a way to accept him into his heart after his promise with the devil.

In “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” John takes on a more direct form of his spiritual love in a sense. He believes the souls of him and his beloved shall never part as he is afraid of the absence she will feel when he is gone. Unable to escape the inevitable, eventually certain circumstances will cause them to part. Yet their souls will always remain one for their love for each other is pure and true.

All of John’s poems follow the same theme that deals with emotions, passions, and words that leave us seeking more defined meaning. As the reader familiarizes themselves more with John Donne and his poetry, it is evident the common elements they share. Eliot also says, “Donne was able to write metaphysical poetry because he experienced his thoughts as objects.” (Cutrofello, pg.77), infusing complex emotions and thoughts, Donne makes sure his level of sophistication withholds its stance in the common use of everyday language.

Although his poems follow a faint rhyme scheme, it still barely exists. Instead, he focuses more on conveying his raw emotions without any true distinctive structure. The propensities of promiscuity, love, religion, and death finds its way through the vast majority of his poetry. Critics who are familiar with John Donne's work will strongly agree there is a significant change in the emotional approach he takes on in his poetry as he transitions from a youth to a mature adult. 'The Flea' John Donne relies more on a spiritual connection to himself when relating his death to the scorned of his beloved. In 'The Apparition' gives a straightforward description of his desires for her to repent when he says, “Then shall my ghost come to thy bed, /And thee, feigned vestal, in worse arms shall see', hinting at his lover's promiscuity when calling upon a sense of fear to confess her sins or she will face his ghost. One thing that is apparent about his work is the particular obstacles he faces throughout his lifetime and how he chooses to present them that makes his poems so distinctive from others. However, he still presents them in a way that appeals to the senses when he argues his contradicting view-points.