



John Donne as a Satirist

Bipin Chandra Uniyal

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Bal Ganga Degree College, Sendul, Kemas, Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand.

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Bipin Chandra Uniyal

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Abstract

John Donne was a satirist, lawyer, a priest and prominent and leading English poets of metaphysical school and the greatest love poet of English literature. John Donne was a brilliant student and a learned theologian. Satire is an oldest literary genre. The word satire is derived from Latin word 'Satura' which means full. The term satire was coined by the classical rhetorician Quintilian. It is the art of making someone or something look ridiculous, raising laughter in order to encourage moral improvement. The satires are considered by some to be among the best examples of their particular genre, formal verse satire, but this genre, based upon Roman models and especially on Juvenal's satire, had only a brief vogue in the 1590's. John Donne wrote five satires in his early poetical career. In his poetry satire is everywhere. These satires were written around 1593 to 1600. His poetry revealed his inner soul. His satires are about politics, religion and social order of the period. His satires are based on the realities of time. John Donne has reflected the evils and ills of the society of his time. The third and fourth satire reflects John Donne's own life and career. John Donne was influenced by other writers but he was no imitator, for he could not but stamp his individuality upon anything that he wrote.

Keywords: Satire, religion, law, lawyer, court, criticise, poet, catholic, tradition, custom, and ideals.

John Donne born on 21 January 1572 and died on 31 March 1631 in London, was son of wealthy and prosperous London merchant. His father was descended from a very ancient family in Wales. His mother was a descendent of John Heywood and Sir Thomas More. His parents were Roman Catholic. John Donne was a satirist, lawyer, a priest and prominent and leading

English poets of metaphysical school and the greatest love poet of English literature. John Donne was a brilliant student and a learned theologian, but being from a Catholic family he could not get a degree from either University as he could not swear the required oath of allegiance to the Protestant Queen Elizabeth. During his study of law in Lincoln's Inn he

solemnly renounces the old religion for the principles of the reformers and visited Spain and Italy. He spent much of his inheritance on women, literature and travelling to different places. An incident happened with Donne's brother Henry Donne gave him occasion to consider about his religion Catholic. "Donne's brother Henry was also a University student prior to his arrest in 1593 for harbouring a Catholic priest William Harrington (English Jesuit priest and a Roman Catholic was sentenced to be hanged) and died in Newgate Prison of bubonic plague, leading Donne to begin questioning his catholic faith". (1). Later on John Donne left or renounced the Catholic faith and accepted the Protestant Church of England in an effect to save his career and life. After the journey of Italy and Spain Donne returned to England with many useful information and observation. As his biographer Izaak Walton said "He returned not back into England till he had stayed some years, first in Italy and then in Spain, where he made many useful observations of those countries, their system of government, manners, customs, traditions and law of government, and returned perfect in their languages.". (2). After coming back to England John Donne was appointed chief secretary to the Lord Keeper of the great seal Sir Thomas Egerton. John Donne fall in love with Anne More, niece of Egerton, and secretly married to her. This wedding ruined Donne's career. He was dismissed from the post of secretary. Donne was a very able person, Earl regretted at his dismissal "a friend and such a secretary as was fitter to serve a king than a subject". (3). For his secret marriage he was imprisoned. According to Izaak Walton: "when Donne wrote to his wife to tell her about losing his post, he wrote after his name: John Donne, Anne Donne, Un-Donne". (4).

Donne's poetic career was developed in the Jacobean age (reign of James I 1603 - 1625). Poetically in this period there was pessimism, despondency and anxiety all around. In the later period of Queen Elizabeth there was political uncertainty and instability, as there was no

obvious heir to the throne at her death. Religiously there was also fear and anxiety among the people. The Elizabethan compromise of religious sect between Catholic and Protestant began to break down as King James I believed in the theory of divine right of king. Queen Elizabeth tactfully ruled the nation but King James I was not wise and tactful like queen Elizabeth. His despotic nature, extravagance and immorality of the court, made him unpopular. In such condition there was the rise of Puritanism. Common people of the nation sympathised with the puritans and criticised the court and church as they became the centre of corruption, and it is reflected in the literature of that time. "The times were out of joint and pessimism and satire are the natural results of the dissatisfaction with existing order. The 'Melancholy Pose' of the 1590's is not a mere affectation, it is an expression of the inner gloom and frustration of the age. It is also seen in the morbid preoccupation of the writings of the age with the themes of decay, dissolution, disease, sickness and death". (5).

Satire is a oldest literary genre. The word satire is derived from Latin word 'Satura' which means full. The term satire was coined by the classical rhetorician Quintillian. It is the art of making someone or something look ridiculous, raising laughter in order to encourage moral improvement.

This was the period of great stress and strain. The faith in older tradition, custom, values, ideals and morals was shaken. Men were confused and all this is reflected satirically in the literature of the period. In this period there was the grow of satire and realism. There was satire in prose, poetry of the period. Grandson says the significance of John Donne as a satirist "Donne put much into satire than any English writer did before him and in any history of English verse his satire would have to be described as a landmark". (6).

John Donne wrote five satires in his early poetical career. In his poetry satire is

everywhere. These satires were written around 1593 to 1600. His poetry revealed his inner soul. His satires are about politics, religion and social order of the period. "The satires are considered by some to be among the best examples of their particular genre, formal verse satire, but this genre, based upon Roman models and especially on Juvenal's satire, had only a brief vogue in the 1590's". (7).

John Donne's satires are on different issues of his time. His satires are based on the realities of time. John Donne has reflected the evils and ills of the society of his time. The third and fourth satire reflects John Donne's own life and career.

Satire I: - 'None's Slave' is the title of John Donne's first satire. In this satire Donne describes his own conditions. He describes about the corruption and distorted government. The satire depicts the personal life of Donne, his entry in the court and his dismissal from the court. It describes his thoughts about the life that everyone should have the right to make progress according to his talent. There should be no hurdles of law, and religion because Donne has suffered a lot on the basis of religion. He was the victims of England's legal and religious system. He describes that he was persuaded to distract from his book and take a walk from a young boy. It is depicted in this satire that protagonist and the foolish companion or the young boy is completely different from character from each other. The protagonist, the writer himself is a simple and a peace loving person, while the boy is a materialistic person. He judges his friends by their social standing. The humorist depicts the middle class life of London as selfish and materialistic. He greets all well dressed people, on the way -

He them to him with amorous smiles
allures,

And grins, smacks, shrugs and such an
itch endures.

This depicts the middle class life of
London as sensitive and foolish.

The humorist's inquiring eyes

Dost search, and like a needy broken
prize

The silk and gold that people wear"

Young boy or foolish companion, who after smiling at every fine silken painted foole' they met, left him, first for a celebrated tobacco, smoker, then for a celebrated judge of clothes and finally for his mistress, in whose house he quarrelled with other gallants and was turned out of doors with a broken head". (8). The aim of Donne's satire is to make fun of certain types of people or certain aspects of society. In the satire first Donne made fun of middle class society of London by a humorist. This satire shows that Donne does not want to involve in the outer world. He prefers to lead an isolated life and find or seek relief in his books from social, political and religious upheaval. A critic Chorney rightly remarks about the first satire: - "In Donne's first satire, the ambivalent poetic persona is divided between the scholar moralist, i.e. a man at the Inns engrossed in study, and the inconstant fop, addicted to the trends and fashions of court. The splitting may also be seen as an ironic comment on the divisions between the private and the public sphere of life". (9)

Satire II: - The second satire is about the corrupt poets and lawyers. It is not individual. It is about the miserable condition of the poets, who write to prosperous people, lords and courtiers in hope to get monetary reward. Donne criticises such kind of poets and playwrights. Coscus (the author of the anonymous sonnet sequence Zepheria) is the antagonist of the satire. "The description of Coscus in satire II is the only extended portrait of a contemporary writer in Donne's satires, and even in that poem he reserves most of his scorn for Coscus's behaviour as a lawyer". (10). This satire is in a letter form written to an unnamed person. It criticises the position of poetry and justice in society. This satire is not humorous and comical. Rather Donne has used harsh words against the targets. Donne criticises those playwrights who

write for bad actors. He criticises those writer, who copy other's work. Donne accepted it that these bad poets and playwrights have not done any harm to him. Bad poets irritate Donne. Donne compares these bad poets to an animal who presents other's work as their own -

"doth chew Other's wits fruits, and in his ravenous maw Rankly digested, doth these things out spew. He criticised the bad lawyers and their effects on people and society. Bad lawyers do not care about furthering justice. They care about only their benefit: Men which chose, Law practice for their gain.

Justice for clients is not important for bad lawyers. Donne compares these bad lawyers with disease spreading all over."

Shortly (as the sea) he will compass all our land
From Scots, to Wight, from Mount, to Dover strand

Good works as good, but out of fashion now,
Like old rich wardrobes.

Donne felt that his satires although they are clever, would not make real change in people and society he made target for his satires. This satire is focussed on injustice by law, use of law for personal gain, lawyers lying, and perjury, extortion for money and land and falsifying legal documents. This satire reflected life of Donne. Donne studied law at Lincoln's Inn. R.C. Bald comments: " like his other contemporaries at the Inn, Donne seems not wholly to have confined himself to the routine of law studies but from time to time to have presented himself at court". (11)

Satire III: - In third satire he is in the search of true religion. The third satire is entitled "Of Religion". This satire is the most popular and significant among his five satires. Leishman says: " Donne is inspired (as against in the second satires) and his wit and his smiles never get out of hand. He is not merely witty but passionately witty, or witty passionate, and the

poem gives an unforgettable picture of an eager mind at work - for even here Donne is in a sense dramatic, as he is nearly in all his best and most characteristic work". (12). John Donne made investigation in the field of religion, because he suffered a lot due to religion. He criticised Catholic and Protestant faith prevailing that time in England. In later period he turned to Anglicanism. As Moore says: - "Most critics agree that the satire represents a transitional stage in the progress of Donne's religious thought from Roman Catholicism to Anglicanism while they differ on whether it illustrates his struggle to renounce the faith in which he was raised or his search for a new faith". (13). Due to religious causes Donne was in the state of depression. He searched for spiritual truth. He believed that the salvation of soul relies on truth. So he emphasised we must seek for truth. Satire III is about the religious choice. Donne shows the importance of true religion among the Catholicism, Calvinism and Anglicanism. Donne thinks that his soul is wracked with sin and its only cure for sin is a devotion to the religious life.

Is not our mistress, fair religion,

As worthy of all our soul's devotion.

Donne was in favour that it was to better to examine carefully one's religious faith or beliefs than to follow blindly any established belief. He advises to people to doubt wisely or to raise question in order to find true religion as religion is the personal matter of individual. He says that to stand inquiring right is not to stray. He suggest to people rather to trust in human law and power, trust in God. Donne criticised those people who following false ideals, neglecting faith and morality, who believes in all religion. This satire is considered also a sermon. In this satire Donne deeply thinks about religion and life as there was a religious crisis in his life. Carey rightly remarks : " the poetic evidence of this crisis is satire III - the great, crucial poem of Donne's early manhood. For most of its length it is not a satire at all, but a self lacerating record

of that moment which comes in the lives of almost all thinking people, when the beliefs of youth unquestioningly assimilated and bound up with our closest personal attachments, come into conflict with the scepticism of the mature intellect. The poem begins in a flurry of anguish and derision fighting back tears and choking down scornful laughter at the same instant". (14)

Satire IV: - His fourth satire is his longest satire, in which he speaks of different things. Donne writes about himself, and his foolishness to go to the court. This was suggested by Horace, satire I, ix, was written in 1597. Though Donne's treatment and manner of satirising are original and English not Roman.

Well, I may now receive, and die, My sin
Indeed is great, but yet I have been in
A purgatory, such as fear'd hell is
A creation and scant map of this.
My mind, neither with pride's itch, nor
yet hath been
Poisoned with love to see or to be seen.
(Lines from Satire IV).

In this satire John Donne vehemently criticise the court life. At the time of Donne court life was very superficial and hypocrite, and flattery. A person of court claims to speak all languages but Donne found it a jumble of nonsense and sycophancy. Bradbury pointed out: - " the evocation of his Mistress Truth placed at the poem's center provides an ideal against which the corruption of the court and the debasement of language can be measured. Ideals are not easy to come by in this genre, and Donne places at the centres of satire iii and satire iv ideals as high as any that can be found in Elizabethan satire". (15) As Donne's poems are the exploration of inner emotions, his satire IV is the external observation of contemporary society. He describes in this satire queen Elizabeth's government exacted fines from Roman Catholics for attending mass, Guiana's rarities, Raleigh's account discovery of Guiana,

stranger's unpopularity in London and slaughter of all Danes in England. In this satire Donne talked about pride, sycophancy, and flirtation, occupation with outward appearance, sexual immorality, corruption, treachery and hollowness of characters. He compares these courtiers with miniature statues. Hester writes about satire IV: - " Satire iv is the longest, most complex, the most comprehensive of the five poems, its narrative complicated by the conflation of horizontal and vertical levels of discourse, its unity complicated by diverse strands of imagery.....Framed as a meditation mortis, the poem falls into five sections: an introduction (1-4) and conclusion (237-244) spoken from the dramatic present moment, the three central sections of retrospective analysis, which recount and evaluate the satirist's adventure prior to the time of the poem". (16).

Satire V: - "the fifth and last of Donne's satire is on suitors and law officers. Here we feel continually that the particular abuse Donne professes to be satirising is merely a topic for the display of his wit, which is a thing we almost never feel in reading Dryden's satires, however true it may be that he never writes as one inspired by his subject in it." (17). This satire is about the courts disorder and corruption and bribery of Elizabethan court. Satire V is focused on corruption of lawyers and judges as lawyers were exploiting law and people for their own needs and desires. Queen Elizabeth was quite ignorant about the prevailing justice system. There was injustice in the court of Queen. Suitors were greedy to gain the property unjustly. Satire V discloses the corrupt justice system of his time. This satire is about the reform of the law, and the step taken in this regard. Hester appreciate the approach of satire: - " Satire V expands the merely legal ramification of the world of human law and its manipulations into judicious, meditative analysis of the eternal law on which law is founded. Not merely an attempt to impress his new employer with his ingenuity (as some readers have suggested), the poem meditates

the ultimate foundations and spiritual significances of Donne's new position". (18).

John Donne was influenced by other writers but he was no imitator, for he could not but stamp his individuality upon anything that he wrote. John Stubbs comments: - Donne was rather more conscious of the actual circumstances of those who tried living by the pen, and scathing of them for even trying. Many poets wrote for the stage, which was hard work, poorly and inconstantly rewarded. Donne scorned the writer who gives idiot actors meanes/(starving himself) to live". (19). Donne's satires are the landmark in the history of English Literature.

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