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John Donne's Holy Sonnets

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Abstract

Donne was the first metaphysical, religious and divine poet of 17th century. His divine verses are very popular and made him a distinguished religious poet of England. As far as the religion is concerned for John Donne, he was open minded person. He believes in that a person should select his religion after a careful study and observation. There should be no discrimination on the basis of religion. In his religious poetry, he shows his love and faith for Christ and God. His religious poems mostly are addressed to Christ, to God, and to death. He is requesting to God and Christ for mercy. Donne wrote religious poetry in later years of his life. That was the period when his wife passed away and his financial condition was not very good and he converted from Roman Catholic beliefs to the Anglicanism. He was in the state of gloom, despair and frustration. His poetry is full of biblical and theological allusions. In his poetry he sees the Lord Christ as the only true source of comfort and piece. His poetry is filled with the love of Christ and a deep assurance of the bond of love between the believer and Christ and Christ and his Church.

Keywords: Catholic, Anglican, Religious, God, Christ, Christianity, Death, Mercy.

John Donne was born in 1572, in the family of John Donne (his father also named John Donne) and Elizabeth Heywood. His family belongs to Roman Catholics. His father was of Welsh descent and his mother was the daughter of John Heywood, the dramatist, sister of Jasper Heywood, a Jesuit priest and translator and great-niece of Thomas More. In that time Roman Catholic religion was illegal in England. His father passed away in 1576 when he was four years old. John's mother married to a

wealthy widower John Syminges. Donne was educated at Hertford College and Cambridge University. He could not obtain a degree because he belongs to Roman Catholicism as he refused to take the oath of supremacy, as it was the requirement to be graduate. Later on, he was accepted as a student and got admission in Lincoln's Inn. There was a turning point in his life, when his brother Henry, a university student was arrested, for giving shelter to a Catholic priest William Harrington. Henry was

kept in Newgate prison and died in prison in 1593 of bubonic plague. After this incident John Donne started to think and raised the questions on his Catholic faith. Donne's life was full of struggle and hardships. He was a talented poet but lived in poverty for many years. His wealthy friends supported him during his hardships. He spent his wealth on women, literature and travel.

John Donne travelled Italy and Spain. There he observed their custom, laws, manners and culture. As 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 laws and manner of Government and returned perfect in their languages" (1). Donne was the first metaphysical, religious and divine poet of 17th century. His divine verses are very popular and made him a distinguished religious poet of England. As far as the religion is concerned for John Donne, he was open minded person. He believes in that a person should select his religion after a careful study and observation. There should be no discrimination on the basis of religion. In his religious poetry, he shows his love and faith for Christ and God. His religious poems mostly are addressed to Christ, to God, and to death. He is requesting to God and Christ for mercy. Donne wrote religious poetry in later years of his life. That was the period when his wife passed away and his financial condition was not very good and he converted from Roman Catholic beliefs to the Anglicanism. He was in the state of gloom, despair and frustration. Leishman remarks on Donne's religious poetry " Donne's best religious poetry is intensely personal, not an exposition of Christian doctrine, but passionate and dramatic prayer to be made single- hearted, to find in God's will his piece." (2).

After accepting the Anglicanism John Donne wrote two anti catholic polemics - Pseudo Martyr and Ignatius His Conclave for Morton. Pseudo Martyr argued that the English

Roman Catholics should take the oath of Allegiance of James I of England. This work has changed his career and he became a clergyman of the Church of England. In Pseudo Martyr Donne has described the characteristic of English mission of Catholic priests trained to convert Protestant and sustain English Catholics as " enemies to the dignity of all princes and seditious because of the theories of temporal power of the Pope supported particularly by the Jesuits." (3).

Rebecca Lemon says " a more subtle side to the argument is that it recognised that the oath had closed down the option of passive obedience to the king. Donne threw the onus of swearing onto individual conscience, discounting both arguments from the state and the authority of casuistry. The only acceptable basis was scripture and knowledge of nature, the duty of obedience being considered in the light of natural law." (4).

Donne fell in love with Egerton's niece Anne More. They secretly married in 1601. But this marriage spoiled his career; he was dismissed from the job and put in prison along with the priest, Samuel Brook, who married them. Later on his marriage was proved valid and in 1609 he was reconciled with his father-in-law and received his wife's dowry. After releasing from prison he worked hard but his financial condition was not good. In sixteen years of marriage, Donne's wife gave birth to twelve children, including two stillbirths. He was completely dejected. " In a state of despair that almost drove him to kill himself, Donne noted that the death of a child would mean one mouth fewer to feed, but he could not afford the burial expenses. During this time, Donne wrote but did not publish 'Biathanatos' (biathanatos derived from Greek meaning violent death. It was written in 1608 and published after his death) his defence of suicide." (5). His wife Anne passed away in 1617 five days after giving birth to their twelfth child, a still born baby. Donne was completely broken and mourned

deeply and wrote his 17th holy sonnet in love of his wife.

In 1602 Donne became the Member of Parliament but it was honorary post. After the succession of King James I, he sought the patronage. He wrote poems for his wealthy friends and patrons. King James was pleased with Donne's work and in 1615 he was ordained priest in the Church of England. He was awarded an honorary doctorate in divinity from Cambridge University in 1616. After returning from Germany in 1621 Donne was made Dean of St. Paul's in the Church of England, a leading and well paid position, and he held the post until his death in 1631.

John Donne was the first and the greatest religious poet of 17th century. Although he wrote religious poetry at the end of his career, it was time when Donne was in the state of gloom, despair and frustration which were the result of his ill health, poverty and his wife's death. His religious poems are addressed to God, to death and to Christ or angels. Donne's religious poems are humble, honest about his own sin and frailty. His poetry is full of biblical and theological allusions. In his poetry he sees the Lord Christ as the only true source of comfort and piece. His poetry is filled with the love of Christ and a deep assurance of the bond of love between the believer and Christ and Christ and his Church.

John Donne as a Dean of St. Paul's understood that his chief work was to preach the gospel of Christ from the scripture. He said that his ambition and prayer was to die in the pulpit. Of scriptures he writes "As much as paradise exceeded all the places of the earth, doe the scriptures of God exceed paradise. In the midst of paradise grew the tree of knowledge, and the tree of life: in this paradise, the scripture, every word is both these trees; there is life and knowledge in every word of God." (6). And of preaching the scriptures..... "to doe great works by small means, to bring men to heaven by preaching in the Church, this is a miracle....

preaching must be a continual application of all that Christ Jesus said and did and suffered to thee." (7).

Donne's holy sonnets, also known as the Divine meditations or Divine Sonnets published from 1611 to 1633, two years after Donne's death. These are nineteen sonnets written in the style and form of Renaissance, Italian poet Petrarch in which the sonnet consisted of two quatrains and a sestet. Many of these sonnets are believed that they were written in 1609 and 1610. This was the period, when John Donne was in great personal distress and strife and suffered physical, emotional and financial hardship. This was time also when Donne was in the process of conversion from Roman Catholicism to Anglicanism. His holy sonnets are about more serious questions of religious devotion and uncertainty. " In holy sonnets, Donne addresses religious themes of mortality, divine judgement, divine love and humble penance while reflecting deeply personal anxieties." (8).

According to A. J. Smith " the holy sonnets make a universal drama of religious life, in which every moment may confront us with the final annulment of time.... His poetry is heavily informed by his Anglican faith and often provides evidence of his own internal struggles as he considers pursuing the priesthood." (9).

In the holy sonnet I '*Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay*' the speaker is a sinner, whose death is rapidly approaching to him. He is horrified by his past sins. So he appeals directly to God for guidance and help. The poem is about sinfulness and fear of death, specifically the belief that human beings are dependent upon God for salvation. Speaker is ailing both physically and spiritually and is in need of God's help. He knows that only God's grace can save them from the temptation of the devil. Poet realises that the God's grace is the sole source of human salvation. " only thou art above" shows that God is unique and almighty.

God is their creator, so God has some responsibility for the speaker's soul.

In the holy sonnet II "*As due by many titles*" speaker points out that there are many reasons why he should resign himself to the Will of God. Firstly, God has created him, secondly he is the son of God, and thirdly he is servant to God and God is a kind master, who rewarded him for his pains. Poet's spirit is possessed by the devil. Poet himself is helpless to fight the devil and drive him out. The poem shows the struggle between good and evil within the soul of the poet and his helplessness and deep anguish.

In the holy sonnet III "*O might those sighs and tears return again*" Donne deeply expresses his struggle to come to terms with his own grief. This poem is based on love, religion and wellness. Poet struggles with his feelings and idea about religion. Poet repents the time he spent mourning and also accept his wrongdoing in past. He wants to atone for his sin. He allowed to himself to idolatry, so he must experience the result of sin, which is pain or punishment. In the end of sonnet poet emphasises on his lack of comfort or relief as he mention "no ease". He has been enduring the intense grief for a long time. So this sonnet explores a form of spiritual love. He is longing for redemption and connection with the divine.

In the holy sonnet IV "*Oh my black soul*" poet points out that he is in anguish and confronts with death. Poet has committed sin and his soul is black with sin. He is sick and sickness is the call of death. His soul is afraid to face death. A person who visits to some foreign country and commits some acts of treachery against his own country and afraid to return, though he loves his own country. Similarly, the human soul is a traveller, and commits sins against God, and afraid to return to him. So poet is full of fear and agony. Sincere repentance, suffering and self-sacrifice would get for him the blessing of God and forgiveness.

In the holy sonnet V "*I am a little world made cunningly*" Donne points out that he is made up of both good and evil. Generally the good control the bad, but here the evil "black sin" within his heart has betrayed the rest of his soul, and taken over more of his being than even before. So he turns to God for help. He requests to God to show his power and bring a flood over the world or bring fire which will clean everything bad and good within him or burn everything out of him. He is ready to give himself over to God. He himself refers as a 'little world made up by artful element and cunning ones. His spirit is angelic but betrayed by black sin. Now good and bad within him are condemned to die. He is determined to kill of all parts of himself in order to save his soul. He refers to God "you which beyond that heaven which was most high." God is all powerful, who can create new land and new sea. He shows his desperation and trust to God who solve his all problems.

In the holy sonnet VI, "*this is my plays last scene*" Donne points out, the fear of damnation. In poem Donne compare his life first to drama and then to a race. He thinks that he is close to death. He personified death as a glutton, who waits for him at the end of his life's race. Glutton will devour his body and made his soul free. Soul will return to God where it originated. He has committed sin in life, so he would surely be damned. But he thinks God is just and merciful and he is hopeful that God would not punish his soul for the sin of body.

In the holy sonnet VII, "*at the round earths imagined corners*" poet points out fear of Divine judgement and punishment. The poet imagines about the doomsday, the day on which, the dead would arise from their graves and face the judgement of God. Donne expressed that floods, fires, disease, old age, war are the various causes of human death. On doomsday dead will awaken from the sleep of death, and would be rewarded or punished according to their worldly deeds. Some would go heaven and others to hell.

Leishman comments on the sonnet – “ Donne is often deliberately raising to the highest pitch of drama, what theology tells him is the reality of his situation, in order, as it were, to convince himself or reconvince himself of that reality in order to achieve the complete possible imaginative realization of it. He has to stimulate his awareness of God by dwelling on the awfulness of God, has to exaggerate the sins of his youth in order to bring home to himself the need for repentance, has to underline the urgency for repentance by dwelling on the terrors of death and the possibility of perishing as he later expressed it. On the shore it is as though in order to convince himself, or sufficiently convince himself of the need for repentance here and now. Donne had first to fill his imagination with the sound and spectacle of the last judgement, when repentance would be too late.” (10)

In the holy sonnet **VIII**, “ *if faithful souls be alike glorified*” speaker is saying that his dead father is glorified in heaven, sees that his child has successfully avoided hell which brings his father felicity. Here speaker doubts their nature and his salvation. Speaker is full of grief and sorrow. In the last two lines of sonnet, poet addressed to soul and asked to turn to God, because only God knows his grief and have put it in the speaker’s breast. Speaker searches for his own kind of sorrow. This sorrow is a sign of spiritual crisis. Turn to God is a means of salvation.

In the holy sonnet **IX**, “ *if poisonous mineralls*” Donne points out the fear of divine judgement, faith in God and mercy of God. The forbidden tree, lustful goats and treacherous serpents are the devil himself in disguise. They are the great sinner. He says that poet is not alone sinner. God is merciful, great and glorious. God will pardon him and not punish him. Poet prays to God to forgive him because his repentance is genuine, and Christ, his own son, flesh and blood, has already suffered crucifixion. Poet does not agree with the view that man must suffer for his sins, as a debtor has

to repay his debts. Thus, the sonnet begins with the note of despair, doubt and ends with the poet’s faith in divine mercy.

In the holy sonnet **X**, “ *Death be not Proud*” Donne presents an argument against death. Generally, death is supposed to be ‘mighty and powerful’, but in real death is neither mighty nor powerful. So, death should not be proud. Donne gives argument after argument to prove it. Donne personifies death as a person, who is slave to other forces, such as, fate, chance, kings and desperate men. For those whom death is supposed to kill are not killed in reality. They do not die; they only sleep a long and peaceful sleep. Rest and sleep are like death. Death merely frees the soul from body. It brings rest and peace. After a short sleep in grave, soul will awake in the other world and live there eternally. At the end of the sonnet Donne predicts the end of death itself saying “ Death thou shall die.”

In the holy sonnet **XI**, “ *Spit in my face, you Jew*” speaker compares himself to Jews and says to Jews, who killed Jesus, to kill him too. He is a sincere and seems to believe that he should be treated the same. In fact he is much worse than Jesus. He says that even his death will not remove his sins and so everyday he continues to sin. God clothed himself in vile Man’s flesh, that so, He might be weak enough to suffer woe. (Lines 13-14) God is said to clothe himself in the flesh of human being so that his weakness allowed him to suffer woe, and die for human sins.

In the holy sonnet **XII**, “ *Why are we by all creatures waited on*”, speaker finds out the privilege of humankind over the animal world or lower creatures on the evolutionary scale to be an unhealthy and destructive force. The position of humankind in the world is at the top. The physical power of those lower creatures is more than of any man and woman, but it is humankind that has the ability to control those lesser creatures. Speaker finds an imbalance of justice here as humankind is prone to sin while

the other creatures are not. Humankind is capable of sin because he controls others. Speaker addresses to lower creatures why they allow themselves to be subjugated by humankind. Speaker says that as far as the sin is concerned, humankind is weaker and worse, than lower creatures.

In the holy sonnet **XIII**, "*What if this present*", poet puts a question to man of what would happen if this were the last night of the world or if he were to die, what would happen? In that time he tries to focus on the image of Christ. He observes Christ tears and the blood from his wound. A battle is going in the mind of poet. He says that cause of the sin in the past is a sign of stubbornness. This is a religious poem that discusses the poet's mortality and change of opinion when it comes to beauty and the state of his soul. The poem portrays Donne's moral and spiritual turmoil.

In the holy sonnet **XIV**, "*Batter my heart, three person'd God*", poet talks about holy trinity – Christianity's depiction of God as the father, the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit.

I like an usurp'd town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end.
(Lines 5-6).

Here speaker is requesting to trinity to attack his heart, as his heart is captured by enemy and he became unfaithful to trinity. So, he requests to trinity use all your power to break me, to blow me to burn me and in that way make me a new person. God can transform the speaker back into a devout Christian. The speaker sincerely or honestly wants to go back to God, but he has captured by devil, doesn't have strength to do it alone. The poem is about speaker's faith and personal relationship with God. Poet presents contrast between God and Satan and how God make free him from his spiritual distress, from the hand of the Satan.

In the holy sonnet **XV**, "*Will thou love God as He thee*"? Poet is addressing his soul in meditation and he completely understands that

soul is an image of the Divine. He is examining his own understanding of his faith. He asks his soul is it capable of loving God as God loves the human soul? Speaker compares his relationship to the beloved creator as an adopted son. He is aware that he is 'co-heir' to his glory. Speaker compares humankind's lot to the man who is robbed. Man has choice to get them back or let them go. At the end of the poem speaker compares man to God. Man is made in the image of God, and it's also great that God is also made in the image of humankind.

In the holy sonnet **XVI**, "*Father, part of his double interest*", poet demonstrates his strong desire to inherit the legacy that will cleanse his soul. He is addressing to heavenly father that governs the relationship between fallen souls and their creator. He explores his relationship with the Christ as exemplified in the body and life Lord Jesus Christ. Speaker with the terms 'interest' and 'jointure' expresses his close relationship with the part of the holy trinity. He becomes aware that through the "all healing grace" of the Divine the soul of each human being can revive again. In the end speaker accept the reality that God's rules are immutable and the divine creator himself can abridge them.

In the holy sonnet **XVII**, "*since she whom I loved*", poet expresses his deep sorrow at the death of his wife Anne More, whom he loved. Death is considered as debt, which his beloved has paid to Nature with her life. Abandoning her physical body was an act of paying her last debt. Donne finds that his wife's leaving has left him at a loss, and he believes that he had lost all his goodness. The poem provides a kind of link between divine love and secular love. But his goal is divine union.

Donne understands that it is God, who always quenched his thirst. Donne believes that her wife's soul has gone to heaven, so his whole heart is also turned to heaven. Donne found God's love for him is as intense and passionate as his own love for his wife. So after her death,

Donne believes, she lives with God. So poet turns his mind to heaven and forgetful of the worldly things.

In the holy sonnet XVIII, "Show me dear Christ thy spouse so bright and clear" poet is asking Christ to reveal his Church as bride. The poem shows relationship between Jesus and his bride – the Church. He asks about the nature of Christianity and the way that the Church can be used as a way for people to get closer to Jesus. Poet implores Jesus as the husband – to show the secrets or to betray these secrets. In the end poet says that the spouse – the church – is most pleasing to Jesus and as the husband Jesus wants to share the true nature of the Church with people and it is most pleasing. In the poem true nature of Christianity is considered.

In the holy sonnet XIX, "Oh to vex me" poet points out the self-evaluation and hypocritical life he lived. His mind continuously changes and slips into sin and then poet returns to God. After trying to persuade God, poet realised that God is not fooled and becomes fearful of his wrath. It is an emotional poem that reflects poet's faith. It includes the poet's contemplation of his feelings and faith. In the poem poet clearly describes how it fluctuates between feelings of unworthiness, attempts at appeasement, genuine fear, and moments of true connection with God. The poem is a reflection on the ever-changing nature of spiritual devotion.

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