UNIT 5  JOHN DONNE

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5.0  OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will be reading three poems of John Donne, a leading metaphysical poet. On reading this Unit you will be able to:

• understand the features of the metaphysical school of poetry;
• appreciate the salient features of the poetry of John Donne;
• understand the stylistic achievements of John Donne; and
• understand the popularity of John Donne with modern poets.

5.1  INTRODUCTION

John Donne is the most influential poet of the Metaphysical School, a name that was given by Dr. Johnson in the eighteenth century. It was a disparaging christening in as much as it was meant to suggest a major drawback of the poetry that Donne and his followers wrote. In *Lives of the Poets* Dr. Johnson commented: *the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions.*

It can be seen that there is little association of this poetry with metaphysics, a subject that enjoyed a high rank in the classical learning. Dr. Johnson only meant that the poets pretended to be learned.

Succeeding Shakespeare and Ben Johnson immediately, John Donne wrote a poetry of love which clearly breaks from the Elizabethan courtly and pastoral tradition. The lover addresses neither a princess nor a lady of rank who is virtually unapproachable nor does he relate himself to a shepherdess living in idyllic landscape, away from the
John Donne
din and bustle of a city. She is rather a person who reciprocates the lover, is of the same social class and has been on terms of real intimacy. There is a genuine earthly touch about this kind of love. Shorn of loftiness and vague imaginative touches, the poems articulate feelings of fulfilment or frustration that can be shared by common men. The bold physicality of approach makes the experience of love more concrete and human. It is not an experience of the distant ages in a remote diction; it is an everyday experience given in startling words and idioms.

What is very striking is the fact that despite private circulation – Donne’s poems were not published in his lifetime – his writings could have almost a mass following as every poet of the seventeenth century is seen imitating his attitude and style of expression.

It is the style which basically provoked Dr. Johnson’s censure; but it was this that was actively imitated by Donne’s contemporaries. A major characteristic of this style was its colloquialism, its closeness with the spoken language of London of its time. What Ben Jonson used in his satirical plays is here as a vehicle of poetry, creating an immediate bond with the readers. In a sense this kind of writing was a revolt against Elizabethan diction, its tenderness and selectiveness. Lines like Busy, old unruly Sun, Go and catch a falling star were somewhat harsh and unpoetic and yet they created a tone of conversation, natural and familiar.

Being an ecclesiastical figure himself, Donne also wrote religious poems in which again his non-conformism is evident. Instead of writing in a humble devoted manner, he chose to express his doubts and apprehensions, even his sinfulness so candidly that it altered the texture of religious poetry. However, it was seen by his contemporaries as an honest representation of human predicament, of the fundamental situation of being in sin and aspiring for the grace of God at the same time. This was later on termed as tension between flesh and soul – a motif that recurs in the works of George Herbert, Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan.

A curious fact about Donne is his influence on T.S. Eliot who credited him for uniting feeling with thought. Generally, poets are supposed to be concerned with feeling, the emotional response to a situation in which there is little intervention of thinking. But, in Donne and the metaphysical poets T.S. Eliot observed: a thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility ........ in Chapman there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling which is exactly what we find in Donne.

What is implied in this remark is the power of poetry to incorporate thought into the framework of feeling so that an experience could be communicated in its totality. The truth is that in any experience feeling and thought are inextricably fused; a poet by emphasizing the one robs poetry of its comprehensiveness.

John Donne therefore should be seen not as an innovative poet, but as a poet who corrected the course of poetry. In the modern age his influence has been very deep both on the writing of poetry and critical thought.
5.2 JOHN DONNE: LIFE AND WORKS

John Donne was born in a Roman Catholic family in 1572. After the death of his father in 1576, his mother, Elizabeth Heywood, married one Dr. John Syminges. Donne studied in Cambridge and then at Lincoln’s Inn. But he had bitter experiences of religious persecution, a fact of his life that turned him into a rebellious thinker. His brother was put to great torture for his religious views and practices. All this left a painful imprint on the mind of John Donne.

By a stroke of good luck, Donne came to enjoy political patronage. He travelled in Spain and Italy and fought against Spain in the company of the Earl of Essex and Sir Walter Raleigh. At the age of 25 he entered into a diplomatic career as Chief Secretary to the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, Sir Thomas Egerton at
whose house he had opportunity to mix with the high and the mighty of the London society.

Donne’s falling in love with Anne More, the niece of Egerton, ruined his career. He was imprisoned. On release he had to remain content with a country life, making his living as a lawyer.

In 1602 Donne was elected Member of Parliament from Brackley. His financial difficulties were not yet over. But his way with the rich and the influential was further supported by his poetry that was now in circulation among the elite of London. Sir Robert Drury became the chief patron of Donne, for whom he wrote many poems. On acceding to King James’s wishes Donne was ordained into the Church of England. He was awarded an honorary degree in divinity by Cambridge in 1615. In 1621 he was made Dean of St. Paul’s.

In addition to his poetry, John Donne’s sermons have exercised great intellectual appeal. His famous lines from the sermons are: no man is an island, one equal music and for whom the bell tolls. They have been used by modern writers as titles of their works. Ernest Hemingway chose For whom the Bell Tolls as a title of a novel of his. Interestingly, Vikram Seth’s novel is An Equal Music.

The years of poverty and uncertainty had a toll on Donne’s health. He is supposed to have died of stomach cancer in 1631.

Major Works
Anniversary 1611
The Progress of the Soul 1611
Anatomy of the World 1611
Holy Sonnets 1613
Devotions upon Emergent Occasions 1624
A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy’s Day 1627

(The above are actually dates of composition given by editors of Donne’s manuscripts)

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John Donne
2) How did Donne become part of the glamorous life of London?

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3) Describe the later years of Donne’s life.

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5.3 POEM: THE SUN RISING

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers’ seasons run?

**Saucy pedantic** wretch, go chide
Late school boys and **sour prentices**
Go tell court huntsmen that the king will ride,
Call **country ants** to harvest offices;
Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,

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

Thy beams, so revered and strong
Why shouldst you think?
I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,
But that I would not lose her sight so long;

15 If her eyes have not blinded thine,
Look, and tomorrow late, tell me,
Whether both th’ Indias of spice and mine
Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with me.
Ask for those kings whom thou sawst yesterday,

And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.

She’s all states, and all princes, I,
Nothing else is.
Princes do but play us; compared to this,
All honour’s **mimic**, all wealth **alchemy**.

Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,
In that the world’s contracted thus.
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that’s done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.

5.3.1 Glossary

Saucy : rude, offensive
Pedantic : academic, teachers
Sour : having bitter taste, implying people who have become bored by their routine of hard work
Prentices : apprentices, trainee mechanics
Country ants : peasants, so called because of their hard work
Mimic : imitation, a copy (it has a Platonic / Aristotelian echo), to imitate
Alchemy : a form of chemistry studied in the Middle Ages which involved trying to discover how to change ordinary metals into gold.

5.3.2 Discussion

Let us visualize the situation – the speaker and his beloved are still in bed when the former observes the sun’s rays falling on windows and curtains. This provokes his anger. In a sharp rebuke to the sun he says that it has no business to disturb the lovers. Love is not a slave to time and season; the world’s time-keeper, the sun, has therefore transgressed its limits by trying to awaken the lovers.

There is significant novelty in this situation to attract and sustain the attention of the reader. With great amusement one hears the mocking tone of the speaker and is almost persuaded of the crime of the sun. The lines that follow make a well-argued case on behalf of the speaker who seems to be quite knowledgeable as well as quite sure of the privileges of lovers.

The speaker asks the sun to mind its business which is to regulate the conduct of late school boys, mechanics, hunters and village farmers. These are the people who should follow the regulations of time. A school boy must get ready for school in the morning, a mechanic should make preparations for his everyday work, a hunter should get ready to accompany the king and equip himself with arms accordingly, and village farmers should do agricultural work demanded by the season. These worldly activities cannot go on in the absence of the sun. Therefore, it is quite logical to ask the sun to supervise the activities of the above-mentioned classes of men.

More boastful claims follow in the next two sections of the poem. The speaker says that he can eclipse the sun by closing an eye of his. But he is not ready to lose the sight of his beloved even for an instant by doing so. Whatever is rich and magnificent in the world – precious spices, gems of the eastern countries or the royal power – they all happen to be there contracted in his bedroom. Finally, he asks the sun to mind its old age and take rest. This it can avail of by forsaking its daily travelling from east to west and showering its beams on the two lovers.

There is reversal of the speaker’s stand in the last; but it is in the interest of the sun that he makes such a concession.
5.3.3 Appreciation

You should take note of some important features of the language, structure and thematic novelties of the poem.

Donne’s tone is colloquial and deliberately irreverential. Can you see that he is trying to imitate the attitude of seventeenth century scientists who were trying to research planetary motions and were entirely rational and objective in their approach? The sun and other stars were objects of study, not of worship. Donne goes a step further and calls the sun a busy old fool, brushing aside all reverence that theology suggested.

Words and phrases like motions, Indias of spice and mine, all states, alchemy, thy centre, thy sphere have been taken from astronomy and politics. Not only they connect the audience with contemporary scientific attitudes, they give a new orientation to poetic activity. It is no longer an entry into the recesses of emotions and feelings; it is an interiorization of the external world.

The use of hyperbolic expressions is quite abundant. The defiant mood of the lover is established thereby. The situation of the lovers in the bedroom is in itself quite different from the lover begging a glimpse of the beloved, the staple theme in the Elizabethan sonnets.

The poem is developed as a thesis that proves that the bedroom is the centre of the world. Something of the traditional glorification of love is however still there in Donne’s claim that all wealth and power are perishable; being in love alone gives a joy that is eternal.

The beginnings of a dramatic monologue can be felt in a poem like this where the speaker, in a specific situation of his life, speaks to a silent listener. There is enactment of drama; the changing gestures and verbal attacks create varieties of scenes. The concentration and slow movement of a lyric have been substituted by fast tempo.

| Self-check Exercise I |
| 1) Why is the sun called unruly? |
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| 2) Who should the sun wake up? |
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3) How could the speaker eclipse the sun?

4) How is the bedroom the centre of the world?

5) What are the contemporary political and scientific references in the poem?

5.4 POEM: THE ANNIVERSARY

All kings, and all their favorites,
All glory’ of honors, beauties, wits,
The sun itself, which makes times, as they pass,
Is elder by a year, now, than it was
5 When thou and I first one another saw:
All other things to their destruction draw,
Only our love hath no decay;
This, no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday;
Running it never runs from us away,
10 But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day.

Two graves must hide thine and my corse;
If one might, death were no divorce.
Alas, as well as other princes, we
(Who prince enough in one another be)
15 Must leave at last in death, these eyes, and ears,
Oft fed with true oaths, and with sweet salt tears;
But souls where nothing dwells but love
(All other thoughts being inmates) then shall prove
This, or a love increased there above,
When bodies to their graves, souls from their graves remove.
   And then we shall be thoroughly blest,
   But we no more than all the rest;
   Here upon earth, we’re kings, and none but we
   Can be such kings, nor of such subjects be;

Who is safe as we, where none can do
   Treason to us, except one of us two?
   True and false fears let us refrain,
   Let us love nobly, and live, and add again
   Years and years unto years, till we attain

To write threescore, this is the second of our reign.

5.4.1 Glossary

Corse : corpse, dead body
inmates : inhabitants, dwellers

5.4.2 Discussion

Apparently the poem is the celebration of the first anniversary of falling in love, the occasion on which the speaker turns quite philosophical. He has passed a year in love and had an opportunity to follow the movement of time in the world and in the realm of love. It is this dual movement of time that is the subject of the speaker’s reflection.

He refers first of all to the important political milestones of the year – the changes in the fortunes of the princes and the kings. He finds that all of them have suffered a change. The sun, the marker of time and change, is also older by a year. And then he turns to the personal phenomenon, the act of falling in love. He finds that there has taken place no loss, no disfigurement, no change – the indications of decay in other substances of the world. Love alone has been above all change. It seems to be constant. Once it has occurred it simply continues to be.

The thought of death amidst this feeling of certitude appears to be out of tune. But it is part of a strategy. And Donne’s poems are at once an exercise in argument and a splendid strategy by which the speaker wins the beloved’s heart. The issue of death the speaker brings in intentionally only to allay all doubts in the last. At one instant he lets his beloved apprehend – we must leave at last in death.

But this is all momentary. He tries to convince that the real grave is the body from which the soul, at the moment of death, will find quick and sure release. Then he announces his programme. As the two alone are real sovereigns between whom there is no chance of breach of trust they should continue to be in love for the next three scores of years.

5.4.3 Appreciation

Now that you have read two of Donne’s poems you can better understand what metaphysical conceit is. It is essentially a use of images from diverse worlds, an extended metaphor that combines two entirely different ideas into a single one. In The Sun Rising the two Indias, alchemy, sphere, eclipse are geographical and technical images, used in a context of love. In The Anniversary the solar movements and the political affairs are juxtaposed against love’s constancy.
create a sequence of arguments and connect things and experiences which are apparently unconnected.

Donne’s interest in politics and science is not merely superficial. The readers of his manuscripts were the highest of the nobility, capable of enjoying the subtlest of references to political plots and intrigues. More importantly they underline Donne’s independent thinking and secular interests.

It would be interesting to see common patterns in Donne’s love-poems. A very important point is the use of unconventional situations – it may be the bedroom scene, celebration of anniversary, a planning of the future, or simply a continuation of a quarrel. An attitude to death also forms part of these poems – in some poems the tone is mocking and satirical, while in some Donne is quite melancholic and yet capable of rising above the fit of sadness to a brilliancy of wit. There is always something unexpected and sparkling in his poems, forcing the readers to be watchful and alert. The line of his argument is simple, almost predictable and yet the conclusions can be hilarious and complex.

**Self-Check Exercise II**

1) How does the speaker mark the change in a year?

2) What is unchanged in the opinion of the speaker and how?

3) What is the speaker’s argument about death?
4) Summarise the line of argument in the poem.

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5) Note the examples of alliteration, conceit, paradox and hyperbole in the poem.

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5.5 POEM: THE RELIC

When my grave is broke up again
Some second guest to entertain
(For graves have learned that woman head
To be to more than one a bed),
And he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,
Will he not 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?
If this fall in a time, or land,
Where mis-devotion doth command,
Then he that digs us up, will bring
Us to the Bishop and the King,
To make us relics; then
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby;
All women shall adore us, and some men;
And since at such time, miracles are sought,
I would have that age by this paper taught
What miracles we harmless lovers wrought.

First, we loved well and faithfully,
Yet knew not what we loved, nor why,
Difference of sex no more we knew,
Than our guardian angels do;
Coming and going, we
Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;
Our hands ne’er touched the seals,
Which nature, injured by late law, sets free:

These miracles we did; but now, alas,
All measure and all language I should pass,
Should I tell what a miracle she was.

5.5.1 Glossary
spies : to discover suddenly
the last busy day : Judgment day
mis-devotion : false mode of worship
Mary Magdalen : a prostitute from whom Christ cast out seven devils; she has been painted by Renaissance painters with long golden hairs.

5.5.2 Discussion
The poem is a fine example of the unconventional ways of thinking of John Donne. He imagines here discovery of a long bright hair around the bone of the speaker’s corpse in case of digging of his grave. The hair is rightly pictured as a bracelet, an ornament, priceless and indestructible. In fact, the entire thing is a brilliant imaginative exercise that continues in the subsequent lines. The discovery would lead to speculation that the single grave accommodated a lover-couple. Donne contradicts this and says that it could be a device by which – To make their souls, at the last busy day / Meet at this grave, and make a little stay.

As on Judgment day, men would be resurrected, this hair would revive not only the speaker but also his beloved and reunite them. It is a very clever way of sanctifying love, of raising it to a Christian scale of values.

The speaker thinks of a second possibility of being discovered in this fashion where heathen practices are in force. In that case the diggers would have this preserved as a relic and would be used as a magical object. The speaker thinks that his beloved may be viewed as another Magdalene, and he as an evil cast out from her body.

The rest of the poem is a marvellous pun on miracle. A miracle is a phenomenon that is beyond common laws of nature and science. In this sense the love affair of the speaker was also a miracle, not merely an earthly phenomenon. He recapitulates his affair from the beginning. They loved well and faithfully. The sexual suggestion is not lacking here. But something is incomprehensible – yet knew not what we loved nor why. Love has a physical basis, but there is a transcendent element in it. It is these vague perceptions of transcendent that have been suggested – perchance we might kiss, these miracles we did. To love was to go beyond the limits of mortality. And it is in this sense that the affair is a miracle. It is no wonder that the hair of his beloved is on his bone.

5.5.3 Appreciation
Of all the poems written by Donne this one seems to be quite popular. Although it has an argumentative structure like other poems of his, there is a touch of sentiment also in this slight picture of a bright hair about the bone. Whatever Donne may say in its defence, it is truly a bright idea. Something very tender and passionate enters into this
picture. There is in love something very pure and ethereal that transcends time and death.

From a poet who treated love in its physical form or simply as a fashion of the day, it would have required a little devotion to speak of this eternity of love. A study of the holy sonnets of Donne shows that actually there is no break between his love poems and religious poems. Already he was on the way to realize that love opened such areas of sensitiveness to which divine reflections came quite easily and naturally.

Donne’s knowledge of scientific affairs apart, we are impressed by his mastery of ecclesiastical facts which he subjects to an idiosyncratic vision. To bring the judgment and Magdalene’s hairs together, to talk of miracles in a witty fashion and to weave a poem around a slender idea – all this shows a complexity that characterizes his poetry.

Self-Check Exercise III

1) With what new idea does the poem begin?

2) What explanation would the diggers give?

3) What alternative explanations does the speaker offer?

4) What view of love does the poem express?
5.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we studied:

• the poetry of John Donne, the leading metaphysical poet;
• the three well-known poems of John Donne, noting their stylistic features;
• the influence of John Donne on his contemporaries and also on modern poets.

5.7 SUGGESTED READING

For a more detailed study you can refer to the following books:

E. Gosse, Seventeenth Century Studies, Oxford, 1883
H.J.C. Grierson, Crosscurrents in English Literature of the Seventeenth Century, Oxford, 1929
R.L. Sharp, From Donne to Dryden, Oxford, 1929
P. Legouis, Donne, The Craftsman, Paris, 1928
J.B. Leishman, The Monarch of Wit, Cambridge, 1951

5.8 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I
1) The sun is called so because he has dared to disturb the sleeping lovers.
2) The sun should wake up all kinds of workmen. Give details.
3) The speaker could do so by closing of his eyes.
4) The bedroom is the centre of the universe as only a fixed point can be a centre. The lovers have remained unchanged; everything else has changed its position.
5) Consult a history text book for more details.

Self-check Exercise II
1) The change is reflected in the position of the sun and in the conditions of kings and princes.
2) There is no change in the attitude to love.
3) Death is inevitable but the speaker believes that the body is a grave from which the soul will get a release in death.
4) Consult discussion.

Self-check Exercise III
1) It begins with the discovery of a lock of bright hair on the bone of the speaker.
2) They would think that a couple was lying in the grave.
3) There are many alternatives. Consult discussion.
4) The poem presents a very exalted notion of love. Consult Appreciation.