
Re-critiquing/Redefining the Nature of Death: A Study of John Donne’s ‘Death Be Not Proud’

Ramesh B.Patel

I/C Principal, M. A. Parikh Fine Arts & Arts College, Palanpur, (B.K) Gujarat.

ABSTRACT:

The poetical oeuvre of John Donne encompasses plethora of themes among which the prominent are love and religion. Donne seems to be obsessed by the nature of death which is apparent in his poems. Death is a terrible reality and possesses immense potentiality to terrify anyone. The so called religious preachers have pictured Death in a very misleading way. This poem by John Donne soothes and provides a kind of inner composure to face it with heroism and stoicism. Human beings have been trying to evade death since time immemorial, but it is a sad reality none has succeeded so far. If the human beings accept death with a kind of stoicism, death will meet with a natural death. The present paper focuses on one of the sublime poems of John Donne and debunks some of the misconceptions, associated with death.

Key words: Death, immortality, indefatigable spirit, stoicism, heroism

John Donne, the pioneer and founder of the metaphysical school of poetry was the most original of the Elizabethan poets. He along with the Metaphysical poets led revolt against the pastoral convention of the past age. Donne holds a very unique position among the poets of the world literature as his poetry is marked by boldness, novelty, and originality. He wrote both religious and philosophical poetry. He also wrote poetry about platonic love. Thomas Crew spoke of Donne as “Here lies a king that rul’d as he thought fit. The universal monarchy of wit.”

Donne’s poetry is mainly noted for its variety of subjects, vibrancy of language and inventiveness of metaphor. He employed novelty of thoughts, paradoxes, puns, and subtle analogies which help his works to be labeled as witty. His writings often carried ironic and cynical elements, especially regarding human love and motives. Donne’s mastery over metaphysical conceits has won him acclaimed all over the world among the scholars and readers. It has been rightly noted:

Donne is considered a master of the metaphysical conceit...Donne’s works are also witty, employing paradoxes, puns, and subtle yet remarkable analogies. His pieces are often ironic and cynical, especially regarding love and human motives. (Anil Kumar, 35)

Donne’s poems are so thought provoking that serious ruminations have been carried out on them. Among the most appreciated poems of Donne, Death Be Not Proud is such a poem that shows the religious undertones in Donne. It deals with a subject that creates a kind of terror when a person or even an animal or a bird has to face it beforehand. The very idea of death

makes each and every creature of the world terror stricken. They try their best to escape death.

Death has always been remained as one of the most preoccupied subjects in the realm of literature. Death appeals the great poets of the world in a various ways. For Emily Dickinson, it is dear and loveable one who kindly stopped for her when she could not stop for him while for the Romantic poets John Keats and P.B. Shelly consider death as a means to escape from the weary and fretful world which has nothing to offer expect sorry, pain, despair and unhappiness. The war poets of 20th century like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke glorified it with heroism associated with martyrdom.

Death has been interpreted in different ways by various writers of the world. Even the death of their dear ones has been lamented upon by them in their elegies, dirges and requiems from time to time. Death has always been considered as mighty and powerful which kills the people of the world. But the way, Donne looks at death is really praiseworthy. He very boldly rejects the mightiness, powerfulness, and dreadfulness. He merely considers death a slave of destiny. The philosophy of Donne which defies the authority of death puts him among the great thinkers of the world.

The poet boldly challenges death in a very candid manner in the beginning of the poem. Death has been personified and openly denied what it supposed to be considered by some of the great thinkers of the world or death itself. Donne derides the authority of the death and brings before the readers how he himself is free from the fear and awe of the death. The death has been addressed thus:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so; (John Donne)

Donne, like a reasoned philosopher, proceeds to prove that death has always been given a very high estimation; in fact, death does not deserve that much importance as he firmly believes that death does not possess any power to kill anybody. He dare challenge the wrong conception of the death that it feels proud of thinking that all the human beings in the world are simply the puppets in its hands and can kill them at any desired time and but actually it cannot kill them or the poet himself. He says:

For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me. (John Donne)

Donne in his belittling tone pokes fun at the conventional characteristics of the death. He attempts to convince his readers not to be afraid of death as death is not powerful at all but actually it is weak and servile. He has made use of the common belief that death is nothing but 'rest' or 'sleep'. He believes that those who are supposed to have been killed by death do not die in reality. They only sleep a long and peaceful sleep. For the poet, the experience of being dead must be more pleasurable than rest and sleep. The experience of death is not at all fearful but it rather brings much pleasure, joy and happiness. To support his view, the poet mentions that most of the enlighten persons of the world who are still remember for their wisdom died young for they might have realized the real life after death. The poet makes his argument more powerful by saying that death can provide relief and pleasure to bones as well as soul which made the best people die most readily to hurry to their "soul's delivery". He says,

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery. (John Donne)

Donne's attack on death becomes even more poignant when it has been called the slave of 'Fate', 'chance' and 'desperate men'. Death has just to obey the decree of these masters of death. Actually they summon death and order it to take away the life of the human beings. Death has no power or privilege to decide the end of the life of the people of the world. Furthermore, Donne through his logical arguments criticize death and divests of it of its powers when he says that its dwelling places are such in the company of pernicious things or events like 'poison', 'war' and 'sickness' and the strokes of poppy and other intoxicated materials are better than the strokes of death. By bringing the authority of the death at a very lower stage, the poet very mockingly asks a question to death "why swell'st thou then?" It has been rightly commented:

Death is associated only with the most destructive elements in life—poison, war, and sickness. Moreover, opium and other drugs can put a person to sleep as easily and better than death does. Thus, as a result of its servility, weaknesses, and association with the worst human events, death should not swell with pride. (www.enotes.com)

Death has been very reasonably presented powerless and dread less by the poet by explaining various beliefs which almost all the people of the world associate them with death. In fact, the poet seems to wage a war against the proud nature of the death. He is too harsh to his addressing to the death. This may be the reason that Donne has seen so many deaths of his dear ones from childhood to his last days. It is because of this reason that Donne from the very beginning to the end of the poem remains abrasive to the general concept of death as mighty and powerful and one who is destroyer and can kill anyone at anytime according to his wish. It has been rightly attributed:

In a series of paradoxes, the poet attacks the conventional characterization of death as man's invincible conqueror...Moreover, death is not the tyrant that it imagines itself to be; rather, it is a slave to the arbitrary dictates of fate and chance and to the whims of capricious monarchs and murderers. (www.enotes.com)

Donne very skilfully brings arrogant death down to size and tries to erase the fear of death from the mind of his readers. Death has no reason to be proud because its power is an illusion, its reign fleeting. Once it has served its purpose of transporting its victims out of earthly life, it is "no more," overcome by life which lasts eternally. The last lines manifest the real mystery behind death, "One short sleep past, we wake eternally, / And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die." The poet here goes with the general myths regarding death and soul that after death soul leaves the body to wake eternally then after soul makes itself free from all the bondages of the world. At this stage, death also dies. It has been rightly noted:

In the couplet, the speaker rounds out the idea of the poem, by saying that, if the afterlife is eternal, then upon the moment a person dies, it is really Death that dies to that person and not vice-versa, for that person will never again be subject to Death. (SparkNotes Editors)

Donne preaches the stark reality of life that If one learns to face death with a kind of indifference, the frightful nature of the death shall be evaporated. Here it seems that John Donne has been reiterating the philosophy of Bhagwat Geeta which asserts that death cannot penetrate soul which is everlasting and eternal:

नैनं छिन्दन्ति शस्त्राणि नैनं दहति पावकः .
न चैनं क्लेदयन्त्यापो न शोषयति मारुतः

Donne turns out to be a preacher poet who in his remonstrance and chastisement out rightly rejects the haughtiness ascribed to death by the most men of the world. He like a reasoned philosopher explains his readers the real status of the death in one's life and this way provides a kind of eternal knowledge to his readers. Death is not a conqueror so one should never get afraid of it. It reminds us the popular saying in gujarati 'Ram Rakhe tene kon chakhe'. Life and death are in the hands of god so death will only come to those when it is summoned by god. Donne here adds one more thing that life after death is a glorious one which will be beyond the faintest influence of death. His declaration of the salvation and the immortality of the soul brings him final triumphant over death.

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