

Analysis on the Metaphysical Conceit in John Donne's Poems

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Abstract

In 17th century, Metaphysical poetry came into existence which adopted the unconventional and subversive means. John Donne's poems were featured with exquisite conceit, profound meaning and unconventionality. The conceits were not in the stone-cold speculative and philosophical perspective, but the flowing of inner emotions in peoples' hearts. This thesis explores the inner spiritual meaning by learning the conceit skills of Donne. I

Keywords — *Metaphysical poetry, conceit, defamiliarization*

I. INTRODUCTION

As the representative figure of Metaphysical poetry, John Donne played an important role in the Metaphysical poetry. Through analyzing the theme and image of the poetry of John Donne, people can understand the special emotions of John Donne.

Because of the unconventional conceits and overstatement, John Donne's works were castigated by many critics. At the beginning of 20th century, the metaphysical poetry received the reassessment. The poetry of John Donne contain the specific and disorganized rhythm, colloquial without mincing words, it makes his poetry full of strongly emotions and direct effects. For it is his intelligence, which combined sophism and sentiment integrated that made conceits the significant symbol of Metaphysical poetry. The Poetry of John Donne is the treasure of literature of Human.

This thesis aims to find another perspective to study the conceits of poetry of John Donne. Through analyzing the skills of expression, people can get a comprehensive understanding of novel conceits.

II. METAPHYSICAL CONCITE

Metaphysical school is a special poetry school in the 17th century in UK. The poets have a strong rebellious spirit and tended to apart from the traditional love poetry during the Elizabethan period. Metaphysical school is not an organized literary group, only the poets have the common point in literary style. Metaphysical poetry characterized by unconventional conceits, peculiar rhyme, speculative philosophy and frequent use of paradoxes.

Conceit is the main feature of Metaphysical poetry. Most of John Donne's poetry has the wit and the

conceit. However, the man who first put forward the "Metaphysical poetry" is not John Donne, is John Dryden. John Dryden pointed that "He affects the Metaphysics in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign, and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts that is the origin of Metaphysical poetry"^[1]. The conceit is an elaborate poetic image or a far-fetched comparison of very dissimilar things, a witty or ingenious way. The poets blended the images with conceit, allusions, and thoughts become one. The conceit can present people a new appearance. The conceit is different from the traditional ones. What makes Metaphysical poetry different is the special conceit. The conceit gives people totally different feelings while reading the poetry. Metaphysical poets regarded that ordinary and stale can not express the rich connotation and real feeling of life. Metaphysical poets broke the form and pattern, using unconventional images to manifest the rationality, setting people thinking deeply and taste the aroma.

III. THE METAPHYSICAL CONCEIT IN JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

The conceit in John Donne's poetry is peculiar and unconventional, so the paper divided the conceit into following parts: special meaning of the ordinary images in John Donne's poetry and the distortion of the traditional images in John Donne's poetry.

A. The Special Images in John Donne's Poetry

There are many images in John Donne's poetry; the images are ordinary and common. However, in John Donne's poetry, the images are covered with the mysterious color. It makes the special meaning of the poetry distinguish from the ordinary meaning. John Donne find a new path to endow the novel meaning which lifting the inherent meaning. That is the ingenious skill of the Metaphysical poets owned.

a) The Mystery of Geometric Circle

In the poetry of John Donne, geometric circle is the important image. Geometric figure have the mystique associated with the philosophy. It is not difficult to find out mysterious figures in his poetry. The shape of circle gives people a feeling of smooth.

In western, geometric circle means perfection, integrity. No matter where to start, it will come back to its end. So circle also have the endlessness and loop. In John Donne's poetry, he usually link circle with compass in his love poems. In A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning^[2], he writes:

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

—A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning (lines: 25-28)

In this poem, John Donne compares the feet of compass with the relationship of a couple. That is the ingenious conceit. The feet of the compass is just like the wife and husband. The wife is the fixed foot, only the wife fixed in the center, can the circle be perfect. The circle shows the perfection and happy ending. The feet show the souls of the couple. John Donne eulogizes the faithfulness and spiritual love. Because of the perfection of circle, it was covered with the color of holiness. In A Valediction of Weeping^[2], John Donne blended many circle images.

On a round ball
A workman that hath copies by, can lay
An Europe, Afric, and an Asia,
And quickly make that, which was nothing,
all;

So doth each tear

—A Valediction of Weeping (lines: 10-14)

In this poem, John Donne used a series images of circles blended and fused. From round ball to global, from tear to the world, it showed a perfect world, a perfect state. Through these images, it also showed the ideal love. The blended images of circles such as a round ball, tear and the globe; these show the images of circles naturally. A workman pasted the picture of the earth to a round ball; the ball then from empty became the globe. The image of the circle implied that the mystery and wonder from emptiness to fullness. These images leave people a vast imaginary space and profound meaning.

b) The Dynamic Images of Death

More than half of the Songs and Sonnets written by John Donne, are related with the theme of "Death"^[3]. Unlike other poets, John Donne's attitude towards to death is quite optimistic. John Donne regards death as a new birth; people can get immortal through experiencing death. That is his attitude towards to death; the images have the dynamic state. In John Donne's poetry, the death has the dynamic state and the static state. In this section, the author of the thesis emphasized the dynamic state of the death. In Death Be Not Proud^[2], John Donne writes:

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.

—Death Be Not Proud (lines: 5-8)

In this poem, John Donne describe death with the "rest and sleep", it shows his dauntless spirit on death. John Donne regard death as a short period of rest and sleep, it shows that death is just a moment, while the joy after the death is eternal. Death is just a short time for flesh to rest, but the spirit can be free. Death can take away everything, but we need not fear that. The dynamic words "rest and sleep", skillfully modified the death and the poet's attitude. In the poetry Holy Sonnet x vii: Since She Whom I Loved^[2], John Donne showed his contradictory feeling towards death and life. In the former stanzas, he held the optimistic feeling to death, but in latter stanzas he held the opposite feeling.

Since she whom I loved hath paid her last
debt

To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,
And her soul early into heaven ravished,

Wholly on heavenly things my mind is set.

—Holy Sonnet x vii: Since She Whom I Loved
(lines: 1-4)

John Donne showed his optimistic feeling to his wife's death without too much sorrow. After death, his wife could get rid of the affairs of human life. John Donne used the phrase "paid her last debt" to describe the death, it gave people a feeling of ease and novel. However, John Donne did not ignore the death of his wife completely, so the following stanza is:

But why should I beg more love, whenas
thou

Dost woo my soul, for hers offering all thine:
And dost not only fear lest I allow

My love to saints and angels, things divine.

—Holy Sonnet x vii: Since She Whom I Loved
(lines: 9-12)

John Donne could not put all his love for his wife to God, so he burst into bitter grumble to the divinity. It shows the contradictory feelings of John Donne to death. In Song^[2], John Donne described the death as following:

But think that we
Are but turn'd aside to sleep;
They who one another keep
Alive, ne'er parted be.

—Song (lines:37-40)

Sleep was used by John Donne to describe the death. John Donne told his lover that regarded his death as turning aside to sleep. In John Donne's poetry, death is often shown by dynamic state, not a static state. In Devotions upon Emergent Occasions^[2], John Donne treated death as another state of life. He regarded human beings as the book that created by the God. Everybody is a chapter of the book. When one is dead, it is not equally to be torn out, but be translated into a better language and all that. John Donne said that everyone in his mother's womb, he wrapped in a shroud^[4].

In conclusion, the images that John Donne used to describe death are rather novel to people. John Donne used dynamic words to describe death give people a fresh feeling; it manifested the deep thinking and feeling of death, different from the traditional images.

B. The Distortion of Traditional Images in John Donne's Poetry

One of the characteristics of John Donne's writing is the distortion of traditional images. Different meaning of the traditional images spurted by the artful skill of John Donne. As the impression left by the traditional images, people easily know the meaning wherever it appears. However, John Donne changed the situation the stiff form; he put the novel and special meaning into the traditional images, which gave people a fresh and peculiar feeling. John Donne has made his poetry different from others. The poetry of John Donne is famous for its conceit.

a) The Reconstruction of Sun's Image

Beyond all expectations of the conceit in John Donne's poetry is also the characteristic of defamiliarization. In the period of Renaissance in England, most of the poets wrote the sun as the embodiment of the gods. People regarded the sun as the light of the universe, and took it as their sublime king and lord. In most of the works, people admire and esteem the sun. However, in *The Sun Rising*^[2], John Donne added unconventional meaning to the sun. He regarded the sun as the busy old fool, unruly sun; it totally subverted the traditional image. In this poem, John Donne described:

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

—The Sun Rising (lines: 1-5)

In this poem, John Donne regarded the sun as the pedantic wretch and unruly sun. The sun is the disturber who interrupted the lovers in their sleep. The lovers were falling in love; they were all over the world with each other, other things were the redundant things. The sun disturbed the lovers; it should be rebuked by them. John Donne called the sun unruly sun for it interrupt the sweet sleep with his lover. The sun symbolizes the power and light, so it should do its duty, but the sun failed to keep its duty and called the lovers suddenly.

b) The Innovative Image of Flea

People tended to use the wonderful and perfect objects to describe the sweet love. Whereas in John Donne's famous poem, he use flea to described love. The employment of the conceit "flea" shows the feature of the Metaphysical poetry. This poem used

the dramatic monologue. In this poem, the speaker is a man, who wanted love from his lover, but he was ruthlessly refused. People could not here the voice of the lady, she is the silent character. Flea is a kind of geeky insect. However, in John Donne' poetry, flea becomes a tie of love.

Mark but this flea, but mark in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;
Thou knowest that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead.

—The Flea (lines: 1-6)

In this poem, John Donne showed his great intelligence in love poems. The first lines look insipid, but in actually it is very clever. It gives people the suspense in mind and wonders the event. The flea, sucked the speaker first, and then sucked the listener. The body of the flea flew the blood of the speaker and the listener. So the flea became the symbol of the knit of the both fleshes. The little flea, created a new life of "us". The three shared the fusion of the blood and showed the relationship. The speaker compared the flea to persuade the listener to accept his love, for the speaker thought that love should not only have the sweet words but the enjoyment of the happiness. But the listener rejected immediately. Then the speaker found that it was the secular concept that blocks their enjoyment. The speaker in some degree envied the flea for it can easily touch the lover, but the speaker could not touch through trying hard.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, yea, more than married
are.

This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, we are met
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that self murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins is killing three.

—The Flea (lines: 10-18)

In the second stanza, it showed a dramatic point. To surprised, the flea has the third life. The listener threaded to beat the flea to death, the speaker said the flea was their marriage bed and their marriage temple^[5]. In this part, people can realize that the cleverness of John Donne, for less of poets can link the love with the flea in this way.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be
Except in that drop which it sucked from
thee?

Yet thou triumph'st, and sayest that thou
Find'st not thyself, nor me, the weaker now.
'Tis true, then learn how false fears be;
Just so much honor, when thou yieldst to me,
Will waste, as flea's death took life from
thee.

—The Flea (lines: 19-27)

However, the listener did not allowed the speaker's words, she killed the flea and enjoyed the feeling without guilty. John Donne adopted the argument way to improve the persuasion, it showed his speculative philosophy. The flea became the coalition of love and the evidence to induce the lover. John Donne found out the similarity between human beings and the flea. The two both had the strong and uninhibited desire. The unconventionality of John Donne showed his achievement. John Donne maintained the humanity wholly for the traditional poets emphasized the adoration of mind while John Donne pursued the union of flesh.

John Donne specialized in using figures in his poetry to show his real emotions. The figures should be cold and emotionless, but in his pen, the cold and emotionless figures became the tender and soft ones. Due to his unconventionality, the conceit of his works could be handed down to generations. His creatively use of the figures to express his real feeling distinguished from those who followed the traditional and invariable style.

C. Conclusion

All the works are the mirror of history. Setting the point of the modern people's view, the precondition of understanding John Donne's poetry is to enter into his times. As the forerunner of the Metaphysical school, John Donne developed a style of his own. The author of the thesis focused on the two aspects of history and images and had given an analysis of the conceit of the Metaphysical poetry of John Donne.

The reasonable understanding to these images can help people to know the thoughts and art of John Donne further. The love poetry of John Donne shoes the rebellion and innovation of the tradition. From study the history and times, people know the background the John Donne's writing. The conceit in John Donne's poetry is the most peculiar element. First, in the image of geometric circle, John Donne gave the circle the property of perfection, holy and endlessness, just like the god^[6]. Circle also shows the fusion and harmony of love. John Donne added the compass into his poetry; he changed the cold machinery into the carrier of the lover. Second, in the dynamic images of death, John Donne used the verb phrases like "to go" "rest and sleep" and "turned aside to sleep" to describe the death. These dynamic images of death show the deep consideration and feeling of John Donne on the death concept. In the view of John Donne, he considered that death is the beginning of the immortal. John Donne said that he is willing to be defeated by death, not be announced that his life is over^[7]. In the distortion of the traditional images, John Donne subverted the images of the sun, the flea and the figure. The sun, on behalf of the power and light, turned into a busy old fool. It

totally subverted the traditional images of people's mind. The flea, a kind of annoying insect, became the link of the lovers and the proof of persuasion.

As the most distinctive feature, the Metaphysical conceit played an important role in John Donne's poetry. The conceit that John Donne used that added profound meaning and philosophical thought into his poems. The conceits and the thought were based on his experience, which the meaning was more profound.

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