

A VALEDICTION FORBIDDING MOURNING: - JOHN DONNE

- **About the poet**

John Donne (1572-1631), the most prominent poet of the metaphysical school of poetry, was born in London, into a Roman Catholic family when practice of that religion was illegal in England. His father was John Donne, a prosperous ironmonger and his mother was Elizabeth Heywood, the daughter of John Heywood, the playwright. He attended Oxford and Cambridge Universities. But he was unable to obtain a degree from either institution because of his Catholicism, since he could not take the oath of Supremacy required of graduates.

He joined the expedition of Essex for Cadiz in 1596, and for the Azores in 1597 where he wrote 'The Calm'. Returning home, he became secretary to Lord Egerton and fell in love with the latter's young niece, Anne More. In 1601, he secretly married Anne More, risking his worldly prospects. The marriage was happy, but he was imprisoned and dismissed from his job.

Many of his poems were written for wealthy friends or patrons, especially Sir Robert Drury, who came to be Donne's Chief Patron in 1610. Donne wrote the two Anniversaries, *An Anatomy of the World* (1611) and *Of the Progress of the Soul* (1612), for Drury. In 1610 and 1611 he wrote two anti-catholic polemics: *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Ignatius His Conclave*. In 1615, he took Holy Orders. James I appointed him a royal chaplain and he began to acquire a reputation as a fine preacher. Donne became unwell in 1630 and he died on 31 March 1631.

A superbly prolific writer, Donne has innumerable songs and sonnets, divine poems, satires, epigrams, sermons and other similar works to his credit. Some of his important works are *A Nocturnall upon Lucies Day*, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, *The Extasie*, *Devotions* and *Death's Duell*.

- **The Metaphysical School of Poets**

The term 'metaphysical' was first used by Dryden and further extended by Dr. Johnson. It refers to a group of British lyric poets of the 17th century who employed far-fetched imagery, abstruse arguments, scholastic philosophical terms, and subtle logic. John Donne was the leading figure of the metaphysical school of poets. The other poets who belonged to this group were George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Carew and Abraham Cowley. In the chapter on Abraham Cowley in his *Lives of the Poets*, Dr. Johnson has given an analysis of the characterisation of metaphysical poetry. According to him, the metaphysical poets were men of great learning and to show their learning was their whole endeavour. They were metaphysical in the sense that they were deeply learned. Donne had an intimate knowledge of medieval scholasticism. Cowley was well-versed in the achievements of science. Besides they were metaphysical

not only by virtue of their learning but also by their deep reflective interest in the experiences of life namely, love, religion, death etc.

Their peculiar quality is the fantastic imagery, for example, the comparison of parted lovers to the legs of a pair of compasses (*A valediction Forbidding Mourning*). There is again the intellectual character of their wit, that is use of conceits and hyperboles. The evolution of their lyrics is more argumentative than emotional. In them we find a peculiar blend of passion and thought.

- **TEXT**

A Valediction Forbidding Mourning

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say,
“Now his breath goes,” and some say, “No”.
So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
‘Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.
Moving of th’ earth brings harms and tears;
Men reckon what it did, and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.
Dull sublunary lovers; love
-whose soul is sense-cannot admit
of absence, ‘cause it doth remove
The thing which elemented it.
But we by a love so much refined,
That ourselves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips and hands to miss.
Out two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to aery thinness beat.
If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix’d foot, makes no show
To more, but doth, if th’ other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.
Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I began.

- **Introduction to the Poem**

A *valediction Forbidding Mourning* is one of the better-known poems of Donne for its conceit of the compass. It was written in 1611. The poem was addressed to the poet's wife. It was written on the occasion of the poet's departure for France with Sir Robert Drury. It is a typical metaphysical poem, remarkable for its ingenious comparisons, mockery of the sentiments, display of logical arguments and use of hyperbole.

- **Word Notes and Explanations:**

- **Stanza 1**

valuediction: bidding farewell

mildly: gently, calmly

whisper: speak with a low hissing voice

whilst: while

- **Summary**

Virtuous men are not afraid of death they pass away quietly, and gently ask their souls to depart from this world without any fret or fever, even though their friends are sad at their death, and want that they should live here for some time more. Others do not want them to die at all.

- **Stanza 2**

melt: depart

tear-floods: flood caused by tears

sigh-tempests: tempests caused by sighs

profanation: treating something sacred with irreverence, such as admitting the unworthy into a shrine reserved for priests and priestesses (of love)

laity: laymen; common people

- **Summary**

Speaking to his wife the poet says that like virtuous people, let them also bid good-bye to each other without making any noise about it. The poet does not want to raise floods by their tears nor tempests by their sighs. It would be a vulgarisation of their love, to mourn and weep and in this way tell the world of

it. Their love is something sacred and they must not defile it. The poet is actually making fun of the ordinary lovers who often make a show off of their love.

○ **Stanza3**

reckon: count; esteem

trepidation: tremor; trembling

• **Summary**

Moving of the earth, as during an earth quake, bring disaster and frightens people. People calculate the damage it does. But the movement of the sun and other heavenly bodies, though much greater, causes no damage and people are not afraid of it. Their parting is like the trepidation of the heavenly bodies and so it is not to be dreaded.

○ **Stanza 4**

dull sublunary lovers: stupid, earthly lovers

cannot admit: cannot endure

elemented: made; constituted

• **Summary**

Stupid, earthly lovers, who are united solely by the senses, cannot endure the absence of the object of their love. For absence removes the physical self of the beloved on which their love is based.

○ **Stanza 5**

refined: pure

• **Summary**

Their love is so spiritual and refined that even they themselves do not understand its real nature. They are sure that their love will not diminish by the absence of the beloved. Theirs is a spiritual passion that the physical self, eyes, ears, lips, hands etc do not matter at all to them.

○ **Stanza 6**

endure: tolerate

breach: separation

expansion: enlargement

• **Summary**

Their souls are one and they are rather more strongly united by the temporary separation. The departure of the poet would not cause any breach in his love. Rather it will expand, like gold, when beaten, does not break but expands wider and wider.

○ **Stanza7**

stiff: rigid; stubborn

• **Summary**

If their souls are considered as two, they will be like the two legs of a compass. Her soul is the fixed foot which does not want to move itself but is made to move because the other soul (the other foot of the compass) moves.

○ **Stanza 8**

roam: rove; wander over

leans: inclines

hearkens: listens

erect: upright; firm

● **Summary**

The beloved is like the fixed foot of the compass which remains fixed at the centre. But it leans and follows the other foot when it moves, and grows erect and unites with the moving foot when it returns to the starting point after completing the circle. Similarly, his going away would be like the moving of the foot of a compass and they would be united when he returns home.

○ **Stanza 9**

obliquely: at an angle; slanting

● **Summary**

The beloved has the same relations with the lover as the fixed foot of the compass has with the moving foot, which moves and draws a circle. It is the firmness of the fixed foot that enables the moving foot to draw the circle correctly, and then return to the place where it began. Similarly, it is the firmness of her love that enables him to complete his journey successfully and then return home.