Analysis Of Metaphysical Poetry: A Valediction Forbidding Mourning And To His Coy Mistress

The term ‘Metaphysical poetry’ first appeared in Samuel Johnson’s book Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (1179-1781). In his book, Johnson dedicates a complete chapter to the most famous metaphysical poets of the 17th century such as John Donne, George Herbert and Andrew Marvell. Metaphysical poetry was a new way of expression, combining emotions and wit. It is a combination between ‘meta’ meaning ‘after’ and ‘physical’ which means the poetry is about things beyond the physical world. This poetry is for the reader to question himself and the world surrounding him. The poems written by the metaphysical poets mainly focus on serious questions like “The existence of God and the vision of the world by humans”. The authors like to use humor in order to make these existential questions appear more accessible. The main principle of the movement is to compare two ideas that have nothing in common. “metaphysical poetry brought a whole new way of expression and imagery dealing with emotional, physical and spiritual issues of that time”.

The poets used literary devices such as “extended metaphors called conceits”. These metaphors throughout the first reading are meant for the reader to question the association of different ideas. When reading metaphysical poems, the readers need to separate their emotions from their intelligence in order to fully understand the comparisons. This is why metaphysical poems were criticized and poets were accused of writing poems containing no emotion. But the use of the intellect in the poems intensifies the meaning and message behind it and produces a sense of emotion through “highly complex and intellectual theories”. As Joan Bennett said, “Most of the poems contain arresting imagery, which forces the mind to work, rather than those that appeal to the senses or evoke an emotional response through memoryX”.

In John Donne’s poem A Valediction Forbidding Mourning, Donne explores a “logical subtlety capable of expressing complex emotion”. It is very clear in stanza number three when the poet makes a comparison between the “Moving of the earth” and “the spheres”. Here the comparison is very logical and taken from one of the metaphysical poets’ favorite subject, science. Another important comparison can be found in stanza number seven when Donne compares the couple to compasses.

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 the other do

At first, it can seem very unusual in a love poem. But when the reader is trying to understand what is really meant, the two parts of a compass are never far from each other and always come back together. Even if these ideas do not seem romantic, Donne was able to talk about feelings such as love in his poems taking images from mechanics and science. It is the reader’s job to understand and see the beauty of this poem. As Joan Bennett describes it

“Using grand images the subject matter is also inflated and the stunning imagery can only add expression to simple thought, provide an analysis as well as a correlation of emotions”.

In the poem The Canonization other combinations of emotions and intellect can be found. As explained above, Donne gives in his poems an “intellectual analysis of emotion”. There always is a balance between reason and emotion and Donne leaves more space for reason in general. Passion is expressed through metaphors.

Call us what you will, we are made such by love;

Call her one, me another fly.

We are tapers too, and at our own cost die.

As for Andrew Marvell, another famous metaphysical poet of the 17th century, in the poem To his Coy Mistress, the author also uses emotions through reasoning. Marvell uses references to time to show and prove his love is strong.

I would Love you ten years before the flood,

And you should, if you please, refuse

Till the conversion of the Jews.

My vegetable love should grow

Vaster than empires and more slow;

The author is referring to well-known events such as the Great Flood and proves his love goes through time. He also uses in his poem a comparison of his love as “vegetable love” which describes the idea of fruits growing and his love growing just like it. This poem is a good example of the use of the intellect as most images are not romantic at all but rather ambiguous. And the verses coming later on, show the vulgarity used by the poet to replace the romantic images usually used in poems.

then worms shall try

That long-preserved virginity

He also uses images such as the ball, “Our sweetness up into one ball” as a metaphor for two lovers coming back together. The ball is like a sphere and represents the idea of a perfect unity.

In another of his poems, The Definition of Love, two lovers are on opposite sides of the world. One is in the North Pole and the other in the South Pole. They will be able to be together only under certain conditions, only after “the fall of heaven and the folding of the Earth”. As Marvell says in the poem “Be cramped into a planisphere”

George Herbert, one of the most important poets of the movement in his poem The Pulley uses once again, scientific vocabulary for comparisons. This poem is one of the most famous of the

religious metaphysical poems. The scientific tool, the pulley is here to help humans get closer to God. This tool is used as a metaphorical conceit and “to reveal the truth of why human beings are so restless in the world.” The poet says that wisdom and honor are the greatest things God gave to humans but when they are resting, they lose all these virtues. God should then not allow humans to rest anymore.

Throughout all the metaphysical poems cited above, the criticism saying that metaphysical poems are too complex to be emotional can be understood. Authors use mainly scientific and mechanical comparisons and conceits in order to talk about feelings such as love which can seem surprising to the reader. But when taking a closer look to the poems and after analyzing them in detail and trying to understand the comparisons, the reader can understand why these poems still express feelings but in a different way. For instance, when John Donne compares two lovers to compasses. The comparison is unromantic but when the reader understands that it is because the two sides of the compass are always meant to be near each other, the image of unity can be understood. As Johnson said, “The metaphysical poets use the natural language of men when they are soberly engaged in commerce or in scientific speculation, so that the words themselves cut themselves off from one of the common means of poetry and thus became entirely dependent on a successful fusion between thought and feeling.” For other authors such as Dryden “Donne perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts and entertain them with the softness of lovex”. Metaphysical poetry was definitely a new style during the 17th century and very different from the Petrarchan sonnet. It was meant for the reader to question what he already knew and push his reflection further on matters such as religion, faith and being. This is why readers might have taught that the form was too intellectual to communicate emotions.