

James(J): How is your study of John Donne going for the HSC, Pete?

Pete(P): Not bad, but I just that all Donne's purpose is to show off his knowledge: The poems are just intellectualising and there's no emotion in them at all!

J: I hope we've been reading the same poetry because I think the opposite. Donne's imagery and conceits, in my opinion, are only a platform for the personal, and common experience, of love and guilt that he is trying to convey. In my opinion, Sir Herbert Grierson said it best: "The thought in his poetry is not the primary concern but the feeling."

P: Oh really? I reckon Dr. Johnson hit the nail on the head when he said "to show their learning was their whole endeavor." I believe that Donne's fondness for odd, extremely precise imagery and conceits, is the poetry's strong-lined nature and his passionate paradoxical



arguments drain any emotion from seeping through.
J: I disagree. Donne's conceits, in my opinion, actually heighten the emotion trying to be expressed, and his abrupt personal openings are usually soaring with passion. Let's have a look at The Sunne Rising, ~~Rising~~ and I'll show you what I mean.

P: Ok.

J: It begins with the abrupt personal opening opening, hurling abuse at the sun: "Busy old fadde, unwarpy sunne!" Nothing but Donne's irreverence for the sun coming through here...

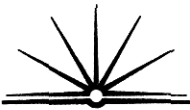
P: Fair enough, but let's look at some of the imagery. I believe it's contrived intellectualising, ~~too~~ ~~rather~~ draining the poem of emotion. For example, when he ~~tries~~ tries to convince the sunne, through paradoxical argument, that all the wealth in the world lies there in the bed in the form of the two lovers. ~~He~~ He uses his geographical imagery, "The Indias of spice and

mine," to convince the sun of the wealth in the room, and so it need not spin around the world, but only through their window. Anyway, how romantic can it possibly be to be referred to as an "You are worth more than spice?", to put it colloquially.

J: I disagree. I agree Donne effectively combines intellectual argument with emotional. Look at his reverent tone to the lover: "She is all states, all princes I...", and he even uses his knowledge of physics and chemistry: "all wealth mimic" and the world's gold is simple "alchimie," or fool's gold compared to the wealth of their love.

P: Again complex imagery to convey a fairly simple and common idea.

J: Complex, yes, but unemotional no. Donne's paradoxical arguments eventually convince the sun that "thou'st best thy center is, these walls thy sphere." The sun need not shine anywhere else, because all the wealth, royalty



and love in the world lies in that room. To me, this appears to be a ~~strong~~ deeply emotional poem.

After all, Donne's knowledge is incidental to his social class, and ~~therefore~~ in my opinion, is merely a platform for expressing his deep emotions.

P: I still disagree, but while we're still on the topic of love his 'love' poetry, let's have a look at the conceit in A Valediction: forbidding mourning. You know, the famous conceit of the compass. Tell me honestly, would he honestly flattered if you were compared to a compass?

J: The way Donne expresses it, with a conventional rhyming a-b-ab pattern, the ideas simply flow forwards. I still think that this conceit, although odd, is steeped with emotion.

P: Please explain.

J: Well, Donne and his wife must endure a parting, but through passionate, paradoxical argument Donne convinces his wife their parting is not a breach but "an expansion, like gold

to a very immense plate." Therefore, their love will permeate the air, and therefore will be everywhere. However, Donne now has to face the reality of the parting, and so he counsels his wife that if she be true, then only as "stiffest turn companions are two." If Donne must leave, then he is relying on his wife to be strong so that he may: "My soul be the fixed foot." On top of this, in a fitting and emotional tribute to his wife, he states that "My firmness makes my wife just, and makes me end where I beginne." Donne is saying that his wife's strength through the tribulation will allow him to draw a perfect wife, figuratively speaking, and he will eventually be able to return home.

P: Well, I guess you are on that one, there's definitely emotion seeping through along with solid, intellectual debate. But now I want to show you his religious poem, supposedly about guilt and sinfulness. To me it's over-strenuous and



extremely 'strong-lined', meaning densely packed with meaning. It's called Batter my heart...

Right from the opening, when there is evidently a height of emotions of guilt and self reproach, Donne can't help but let his imagery and precision drown out emotion: "Batter my heart three person'd God" I'm not anyone would refer to God as three person'd, even when pleading in such a tone as Donne's.

J: Well, all he's doing is calling on all aspects of God's being to punish him, evident through the line "break, blow, burn and make me new." He is so emotionally distraught about his sinfulness he not only wants God to punish him but totally break him and make him anew. To me it's intellectual in the name of emotion, to not the other way around. This is most evident in the extreme paradoxes of the final tercet, as he states that he will never be free unless God imprisons him. Donne



takes the idea further, stating "now ever chaste except you ravish me." This forced, sexual conceit appears to be purely emotional, with the paradoxical nature of his argument intensifying his experience of guilt and emotion as far as I'm concerned.

P: Well I guess I can see where you're coming from, but for me, Donne's still all about showing off his learning. But then again, maybe the more I read it the more I might to begin to see the emotion through the odd techniques that he's using.

J: Maybe, but anyway I've gotta go home. The exams in a few days, and I need to memorise a few more quotes from The Relique.

P: Ok, see ya later.