THE CONCEPT OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY AND JOHN DONNE’S POETRY:

John Donne(1571-1631) was the greatest of the English Metaphysical poets. He wrote love lyrics, religious verses and treatises and sermons. In his early literary career, he also wrote secular poetry; they are witty and extremely imaginative. His famous 19 holy sonnets were published after his death.

Donne realized the many moods of love in his canvas of poetry. In case of his love poems it is a fusion of the secular and the sacred which lends a special poignancy to his lyrics. In the poem: ‘The Good – Morrow’, for instance, first he states about the beauty of his beloved as :

If ever any beauty I did see,

Whcich I desir’d and got, ‘twas but a dream of thee.

In the same poem he later says:

Here the admiring her mind did whet

To seeke thee God; so streames do shew their head;

In the poem he is seen transcending from temporal to the sublime. This tendency may also be called a form of romantic idealization. A number of poems by him however displays his ability to control passion. A delight in dialectic is one noticeable feature. ‘The Sunne Rising’ is such a poem. The poem is a logical presentation of how the beauty of love may overshadow even the beauty of the sunrise. The poet appears to carry on a powerful discourse with the sun, chiding, rebuking and advising this object of nature. The poem illustrates his association of thought with emotion to bring the whole experience of his love to the sensitivity of his readers.

Donne’s religious strain is too obvious in many of his poems. ‘The Progress of the Soul’ is one such poem. The poet originally intended to write about the progress of the soul of the apple which Eve pulled (in the Genesis of the Bible), but it concludes with a meditation on moral values which is done with a reference to Queen Elizabeth. The poem later had a sequel of its own with the poem: ‘On the Progress of the Soul’, which deals with the exaltation of the soul in the next life.

Donne wrote some other sacred poems in the last phase of his life that were published in a volume titled: “Divine Poems”. They are about the paradoxes involved in man’s relation with God. In ‘Good Friday: Riding Westward’, for example, he mentions about the paradoxical situation of his mind in respect to the fact that he is going west, but his thoughts turn east, where Christ was crucified. Trying to explore the possible significance of such a situation of his mind, he finally implores to God:

Restore thine image so much by thy grace

That thou mayst know me, and I’ll turn my face.

His “Holy Sonnets” contains nineteen religious poems. ‘Death be not Proud’ is one of these poems. The poems introduce us with a religious man who is searching for the right relationship with God, who is aware of both his own unworthiness and of God’s infinite greatness.

Donne’s poetry is conspicuous by a combination of simple and direct tone with skilful presentation of argument aided by a compelling intensity of feeling.

Donne is known as a Metaphysical Poet. The term Metaphysical poetry was used for Donne and his followers by Dr. Samuel Johnson in his discussion of Cowley in “Lives of the English Poets”. The term however had been earlier introduced by Dryden in one of his discourses. These poets, as observed by Johnson, attempted to introduce into their poetry an intellectual strain. According to Dr. Johnson, the metaphysical poets “were men of learning and to show learning was their whole endeavour.” But, in regards to the kind of poetry written by Donne and his followers, apart from what Dr. Johnson said, there was also the strain of a singular refined and ingenious combination of thought and passion. As a metaphysical poet, however, Donne stands apart from the other such poets in more than one ways. Herbert, Vaughan and Crashaw, for example, did not uphold physical love before the love of God. But Donne, to the contrary, did not belittle physical love. In the religious poetry, Donne, indeed explored his feelings towards God just as, in the secular poetry he explored his feelings towards the beloved. Donne was widely read in many subjects and he had a cultivated mind in all these subjects. Therefore, he drew upon various subjects such as astronomy, chemistry, geography, physiology, law and theology for illustration. His images are drawn from his own interests, so that he can illustrate one facet of his experience by the other.

(In the term: Metaphysical Poetry, ‘metaphysical’ came from: metaphysics, the branch of philosophy dealing with, among other things, the relationship between mind and matter, or between the physical world and human consciousness. Metaphysical Poets looked for a connection between their emotion and mental concepts. The poetical imagery arises from a perceived likeness between different things. To quote from Joan Bennett: “In metaphysical poetry emotions are shaped and expressed by logical reasoning, and both sound and picture are subservient to this end…. They cut themselves off from one of the common means of poetry and thus become dependent on successful fusion between thought and feeling.”

Topics of interest often included love, religion, and morality. The poets of this genre show an interest in exploring the interplay between the physical and spiritual world.

John Donne was the leading Metaphysical poet of this genre; others include George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Andrew Marvell, and Abraham Cowley.

According to Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopedia, Metaphysical Poetry is “highly intellectualized poetry written chiefly in 17th century England. Less concerned with expressing feeling than with analyzing it, Metaphysical poetry is marked by bold and ingenious conceits(e.g., metaphors drawing sometimes forced parallels between apparently dissimilar ideas or things), complex and subtle thought, frequent use of paradox, and a dramatic directness of language, the rhythm of which derives from living speech.

Conceit is an important element of the Metaphysical poetry. Conceit is a kind of elaborate, extended metaphor or analogy. However, it is an unusual or surprising analogy, metaphor, or simile. Metaphysical poets often use this in their poetry. John Donne in his poem ‘The Flea’ uses the conceitof the flea. The flea first bites him and then bites his mistress and, as it were, thus they’ve already been intimately joined through the flea’s sharing of their blood:

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,  
How little that which thou deniest me is;  
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,  
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;  
Thou know’st that this cannot be said  
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,  
Yet this enjoys before it woo,  
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,  
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Donne by adopting the image of the flea intends to state that the flea by sucking bloods from both of them doesn’t cause them any sense of shame or for that matter it is not considered by anybody as a ‘sin’; so why should their going to bed together be considered sinful? Here, the flea is a conceit in the hands of Donne as he through this image has put across an extended argument).