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JOHN DONNE AND ELIZABETH BISHOP AS TWO METAPHYSICAL POETS WITH
DIVERSE RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The world of metaphysics is one of the most interesting studies in various fields of study, including literature. The sublime thoughts are coupled with extraordinary intellect to bring forth astounding poetry that has the ability to remain stuck in the minds of the readers for several years together. Poignant and even baffling at times, metaphysical poetry has captured the hearts of the lovers of poetry. Known as the representative of the 17th century metaphysical poets, John Donne etched his name in history as one of the accomplished poets in the field of metaphysics. Though there were many writers who tried to emulate his style, they failed in the process. Donne was popular for his love sonnets and his divine poems are adored by his ardent admirers. The legacy of the metaphysical poetry greatly deteriorated after the death of John Donne. However, in the early twentieth century, Elizabeth Bishop rose to fame as her metaphysical poetry captured many hearts due to its originality and uniqueness. Bishop's life was anything but smooth and she spilt her angst and doubts about the existence of God on paper. In contrast, John Donne was a preacher who worshipped God with all of his heart. This paper expounds the religious implications between the poems of these two great minds who shared the gift of manifesting the beauty of metaphysics in curiously different ways.

Keywords: Metaphysical, God, religious, poetry, divine, Christian

INTRODUCTION

The term "metaphysical" was introduced by Samuel Johnson in his book *Life of Cowley* where he wrote about "a race of writers that may be termed as metaphysical poets" (Johnson 27). His usage of the word "maybe" suggests that he was not sure if he could call these poets as metaphysical. His intention was to ridicule but the term has become a suitable fit to describe these poets of admirable intellect. As the term implies, this type of poetry transcends the physical world and crosses limitations to poetically talk of things in a sublime manner.

John Donne and Elizabeth Bishop had their own struggles that they had to surmount. Their journeys were not easy and were starkly different from each other. While Donne looked above for comfort and

strength, Bishop remained a skeptic most of her life looking for proof for the existence of God. Their poems help us understand their psyche in relation with religious matters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

John Donne's contemporaries hailed God in many of their poems. Gerard Manley Hopkins was a well-known metaphysical poetry whose writings are proof of his unflinching devotion. His usage of sprung rhythm enhanced the beauty of his poetry and delivered the intended message in an aesthetic way. His nature poems brought out his admiration of God's power in the seemingly insignificant flower or a bird.

Andrew Marvell's "The Coronet" and Abraham Cowley's "The Garden" were written in the metaphysical style admiring the chief architect, God.

DISCUSSION

John Donne's metaphysical poetry covered many themes and ideas. He wrote on love, God, faith and even elegies. Elizabeth Bishop wrote widely on childhood, pain, loss, travel and her disdain for anything to do with moralizing. If her works contained any moral virtue, she explained it subtly and without much elaboration.

"The roots of the meditative lyric tradition are decisively Christian, as Louis L. Martz proposed decades ago in his ground-breaking study, *The Poetry of Meditation*" (Wilson). Bishop's seemingly secular poems have in them Christian aspects of lyric poetry.

One of Elizabeth Bishop's popular poems is "The Fish" which is often cited as a good example for eco-criticism talked about the relationship that is needed between humans and other living beings. The description of the fish that was caught is long and detailed but in the end the speaker released the fish because of the epiphany that came along with the fish that every ecological being is connected in a circle with another. One's existence is ensured by the existence of another.

The poem has been analyzed on various grounds using different perspectives and theories. Scholars also believe that it has Biblical implications in that the speaker finds it important to preserve a life, unlike the Bible which talks of the dominance of man amongst all other living beings. This verse comes up in the Book of Genesis which addresses the man saying, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (*The Bible* 2).

John Donne, on the other hand, always believed in the supremacy of God over all the other living things on earth. The Bible symbolizes the serpent as that of the devil.

Yet may I, with this, my first Serpents hold,
God gives new blessings, and yet leaves the old;
The Serpent, may, as wise, my pattern be;
My poison, as he feeds on dust, that's me.
And as he rounds the Earth to murder sure,
My death he is, but on the Crosse, my cure. (Luminarium.org)

Interestingly, Donne used the same symbol, serpent, to denote someone higher than the creation. The poet was aware of the fact that his old sins were no longer remembered by the One who died on the cross to save him. The awareness that had been born in the poet is that the creation, no matter how evil, is subject to the powerful Creator. God was to Donne, the chief reason for the sustenance of life. Domination, in a rational way, was not a choice but a necessity.

"I have never been religious in any formal way and I am not a believer," Bishop wrote to Ann Stevenson in 1964. "I dislike the didacticism, not to say the condescension, of the practicing Christians I know...They usually seem more or less on the way to being fascists." (Wilson). However, Bishop was attracted to the Christian metaphysical poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins and especially to George Herbert. She acknowledged Herbert's influence in her works time and again.

Quite ironically, Bishop was most touched by Herbert's Christian poems on Jesus' crucifixion and the guilt that accompanies with the act of committing a sin. She found it to be very real and associated herself with the poet. Though she was not a believer of Christ, she believed in the poet who trusted Him. Bishop was not an atheist but a skeptic in many ways. As Wilson puts it, "we may judge Bishop's meditative lyrics not as mere secularized analogues to Herbert's. They remain open to the divine—to Christ, to the "Absolute"—both because it grounds them, informs them with moral significance, and, finally, because it is the elusive object of their scrutiny (1).

Donne's poems have moral significance attached with God's word. Whatever sin separated Donne from God was seen as a move away from morality. He defined morality in terms of the Bible and this is clearly seen in his Holy Sonnet 14, "Batter my heart".

The speaker implored of the Lord to not gently knock on his heart's door but to use force to get his attention. The poem is filled with metaphysical elements that are weaved together to portray a picture of the need of a man's heart to be renewed frequently. When the sins of the world seemed to prove to be a temptation he could not resist, the poet pleaded with God to take full control so that he might be set free.

But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me. (Donne, "Holy Sonnets: Batter My Heart")

He believed to be under the control of the enemy in a pact similar to that of marriage. The speaker was aware of the power of the omniscient God and prayed for the latter to break the bond and make him free through the act of divorce. Donne found no evidence of morality in the secular world, unlike Bishop, and he solely relied on the ethics of morality as described in the Bible.

"The End of March" by Bishop is one of the most interesting poems that she had ever written because the analysis of the simple symbols can lead to a wholly different perspective. The poem is about a walk on the beach which turned out to be nothing eventful, yet teaches us the value of life through the simplest of things. "Here is Bishop's habit of turning to the everyday for consolation, making jewelry out of the humble stones, then conflating the earlier images of the "lion" and the all-but-absent sun so that the poem can end with the metaphor of play" (Kesler).

The images of the lion and the sun are strongly associated with Christianity as they represent the lion of Judah, Jesus Christ. The end of March also stands for the Passover season which celebrates the season of Easter that comes after Good Friday. Scholars who have devoted to the study of Bishop's writings believe that she was confused and at the same time enthralled with the religious ideals of Christianity and by the influence of great Christian poets, she introduced Christian symbols with or without her knowledge.

Symbols abound in metaphysical poetry. John Donne's "As due by many titles I resign" is a poem in which the poet completely surrenders to his Creator. The lines, "and when I was decay'd/ Thy blood bought that, the which before was Thine" represent the main doctrine which explains how the blood of Christ bought salvation to man. When the poet was filled with sin or "decayed" from the form the Holiest One expects, he realized how the blood washed him clean.

I am Thy son, made with Thyself to shine,
Thy servant, whose pains Thou hast still repaid,
Thy sheep, Thine image, and—till I betray'd
Myself—a temple of Thy Spirit divine (Donne, "As Due by Many Titles I Resign")

The "sheep" in Christianity stands for the people for whom the "Shepherd", Christ, came to die for. The "temple" signifies the body which Christ dwells in.

CONCLUSION:

The poems of Bishop and Donne are far from being similar but their poems touch on the themes of religious faith. After reading Augustine's *The City of God*, Bishop contacted her friend Peggy Ellsberg and exclaimed, "I want to believe this" (Wilson). However, Wilson denoted as to how the poetess never completely gave in to God in an evident note of sadness. However, it is undeniable that she was attracted to Christ, yet lived a life constantly questioning His preaching. Donne remained, throughout his life, as an avid lover of Jesus and served in the church till his last breath. The poems of these two renowned poets are of much significance in understanding their knowledge of God in diverse levels.

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