
Original Paper

A Study of John Donne's Love Ethic in His Poems from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract

John Donne (1572-1631) was a significant figure of Metaphysical poetry, a school of poets who were noted for their use of special comparison and composed various kinds of poems throughout his whole life. He created poems with different themes and thoughts in different stages of life, which were the authentic depictions of his time.

Donne was adept at writing love poems, which can be seen in his work *Elegies*. In his love poems, he deliberately belittles women and promotes physical love. Many scholars therefore believe that he is dissolute and dissipated, and does not understand his special poems, thus criticizing and accusing him.

However, with the change of the concepts, more and more scholars have begun to interpret Donne's poems from a new perspective, and there is also a new understanding of Donne's works.

This thesis attempts to interpret Donne's poems with the method of ethical literary criticism. Ethical literary criticism is a literary research method that interprets, analyzes, and explains literature from an ethical standpoint. Taking Donne's *Elegies* as an example, this thesis combines the theories of ethical literary criticism to reveal Donne's ethical significance in his poems from the perspective of love ethics.

After reading Donne's love poems, we found that Donne's love ethics is harmonious and just. In his love poems, he showed a humanistic spirit originating from the Renaissance period. This humanistic spirit is incompatible with the rational consciousness advocated in his era. He opposes the poetic tradition that over-dignified women and shows a greater understanding of women. At the same time, he opposes overemphasizing human factors curbing people's desires, and respecting human instincts and needs. His love ethics is also advanced now.

Keywords: John Donne, love ethic, ethical literary criticism

Introduction

Ethical literary criticism advocates returning to the ethical background of the poet's life to analyze his or her literary works. So it is necessary to learn the basic knowledge of the poet's time.

Donne underwent three dynasties in his life: Elizabeth I (1558-1603), James I (1603-1625), and Charles I (1625-1649) respectively. In his youth, Elizabeth I was the queen of England. At that time, the Petrarchan sonnet was popular, which possessed a fresh style, rigorous structure, and musical rhythm. To cater to the queen many writers created Petrarchan love poems to praise women, sing for their virtues, and admire their beauty. In the early 16th century, under many poets' efforts, some advocated the Petrarchan poems like Sir Thomas Wyatt while some adjusted this poem form like Henry Howard, Petrarchan sonnets became the favorite form of poetry for Elizabethan poets. Almost all important poets had published collections of sonnets, for instance, Samuel Daniel's *Delia* (1592). All these followed the traditional pattern of sonnets established by Petrarch, which were full of compliments to women, and revealed the yearning for Platonic love which advocates spiritual love rather than sexual love.

Donne's ethical environment determined his strong opposition to the tradition of Petrarchan sonnet. He no longer complimented and praised women as Petrarchan sonnets did, under this ethical background,

Donne composed many love poems to ridicule, satirize, and despise women with solemn scholastic philosophy in his love poem. He vacillates between sense and sensibility, and his poems seem ridiculous but rational, sophisticated but persuasive.

There is one thing that needs to be noticed: Donne's *Elegies* are not related to mourning for death of someone. In the beginning "eleg" refers to reflective poems by poets similar to Donne, gradually it was applied particularly to poems of mourning.

In his *Elegies* sometimes he defies the Platonic love, sometimes he satirizes and belittles females. In these poems, Donne reveals the complex psychological and contradictory behaviors of women and men from the ethical aspects.

In consequence, this paper is divided into two parts to analyze Donne's love ethics from the perspective of ethical literary criticism.

Understanding to women

Traditional love poetry tends to describe women with all beautiful words, describing women as a model of goodness without shortcomings. Here we can take Spenser's poem as an example:

*Lyke as a ship that through the ocean wyde,
By conduct of some star doth make her way,
Whenas a storme hath dimd her trusty guyde,
Out of her course doth wander far astray.
So I whose star, that wont with her bright ray,
Me to direct, with cloudes is overcast,
Doe wander now in darkness and dismay,
Through hidden perils round about me plast.
Yet hope I well, that when this storm is past
My Helice, the lodestar of my lyfe
Will shine again, and looke on me at last,
With lovely light to cleare my cloudy grief.
Till then I wander carefull comfortlesse,
In secret sorrow and sad pensivenesse.*

(Amoretti: Sonnet 34)

Here the poet compares his lover to the stars. His lover is his "Helice", who encourages the poet when he is confused, leads the poet to get out of depression and hesitation, find the right direction again, and understand the meaning of life.

This poem seems to praise women's wisdom.

The poet in trouble feels extremely depressed and upset, but "Helice" in the poem can always understand the poet's pain, soothe his heart, tolerate his depression, and use her wisdom to solve problems for the poet. She is positive all the time and always maintains a perfect appearance. Like the stars, her glory will never fade.

But how can a normal person maintain a glorious image all the time? Won't "Helice" encounter difficulties? Won't she encounter anything troublesome? Will there be no time when her emotions get out of control? Doesn't "Helice" sometimes feel as embarrassed as a poet? The poet raised "Helice" to an unparalleled height, just like a distant star.

On the surface, it seems to praise Helice sincerely, but it erases Helice's right to show her weakness.

Having shortcomings is also a human right. With such praise, Helice's shortcomings will be infinitely magnified.

The poet's praise has deprived women of basic rights. Women are portrayed as perfect. They are the embodiment of loyalty, generosity, kindness, wisdom, courage, beauty, and virtuousness, and they cannot be defective. But men are different. They don't need to be perfect and have the right to make mistakes. They can boldly express their thoughts and love through poetry, while women are not even allowed to engage in literary creation. This gives men in a patriarchal society a greater right to criticize women's reasonable imperfection. Women's imperfections cannot be accepted. When women make a mistake, men will attack them in groups, which makes women afraid to express their desires and ideas.

Ethical literary criticism holds that everyone possesses a Sphinx factor. The Sphinx factor is composed of the human factor and animal factor. Only when the human factor and animal factor are balanced can individuals remain stable. Human factor refers to the rational side of a man. Animal factor indicates the desire and untrained feeling of a man.

Petrarchan poetry deified women, emphasizing the beauty of female and human factors, completely ignoring women's desires and personalities. This tendency is extremely unfavorable in the face of the growth of women's personalities and even the normal development of social ethics.

In the face of this tendency, Donne expressed his thoughts in his poem. He believes that women don't need to be perfect. A normal person, can also have defects and shortcomings in character, be irritable in personality, and be ugly in appearance.

He maliciously holds the view that "most of women are this kind of beast." Donne is demeaning women, actually expressing a more objective understanding and tolerance of women. Like beasts, women have a grumpy side, which is understandable and acceptable.

It will be seen from this that Donne formed a paradoxical and anti-moral love ethics, whose manifestation was pluralistic.

Take "*Elegy 2 The Anagram*" for an example:

*What though her cheeks be yellow, her hair is red,
Give her thine, and she hath a maidenhead.
These things are beauty's elements, where these
Meet in one, that one must, as perfect, please.*

This love poem praises extreme ugliness, which was a trend in sixteenth century Europe. Donne opposes the tradition of complimenting beauty and praises ugliness. In his eyes, as long as these elements are combined in perfect form and all the ugly elements are integrated into one, they will please people. This seems to have released women out of the beautiful shackles. Different people have different appearances. Even red hair and yellow skin can be appreciated and praised as long as they are natural and harmonious.

Donne also put forward his own different opinions on the immutable loyalty of women that has been advocated and praised in traditional poetry.

In his Elegies, he often expresses anger against female infidelity. Such as in "*Elegy 15 The Expostulation*", he directly expresses that "no woman's true". For a certain purpose, women will tell lies. Although Donne expressed his anger at women's infidelity, he did not express his willingness to punish them for their disloyalty. Disloyalty should be tortured by conscience, but it is also unreasonable to execute women for their disloyalty.

Take "*Elegy 13 Julia*" as an example:

*These, like those atoms swarming in the sun,
Throng in her bosom for creation.
I blush to give her half her due; yet say,*

No poison's half so bad as Julia.

In this poem, Donne accuses women of wickedness. The women represented by Julia are extremely vicious, and would incur the scourge "legions of mischief" and "formless curses", women also would create insincere thoughts, "Misshapen Cavils", perceptible infidelity, unavoidable wrongness, and "self-accusing loathes".

In this poem, Donne deconstructs the traditional female image which is frequently shown in Petrarchen's Poems. The Julia in this poem may be imperfect, insincere, or even loyal, and is selfish and evil. The poet even thinks that the most poisonous drug in the world is not half as deadly as her. But all this does not affect the poet to present her in his poems in a complicated tone. She was said to be in prison, but the poet himself seemed to be intoxicated.

It can be found that Donne respects the existence of animal factors and believes that women have the right to make mistakes and to be imperfect, which demonstrates his tolerance and understanding of women.

In Donne's poems, women's imperfection seems to be reasonably accepted. Donne does not describe women as flawless goddesses.

Physical love

Love was always Donne's most concerned issue, in his *Elegies*, Donne both pursued physical love frankly and longed for spiritual love, and also emphasized the union of body and soul.

Donne directly affirmed physical love and was obsessed with physical pleasures, challenging the traditional love poems. Compared with the pseudo-ethics of strangling human nature, Donne's immoral behavior of indulging physical love showed the spirit of humanism, transcended the concept of that era, and also was a more moral humanistic concern.

The poem "*Elegy 19 To His Mistress Going to Bed*" is a typical poem to demonstrate the fearless love scene.

Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glistening,

But a far fairer world encompassing.

Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear

The male speaker asks the woman to take off the glittering girdle, spangled breastplate, and happy busk to show her "beauteous state". Donne also employs the phrase "harmonious chime" to imply the woman's obedience and the man's successful seduction.

The harmonious chime suggests that the woman is in accord with the speaker and has begun to undress as he urges her.

In Donne's view, physical love itself should never be suppressed and despised, it is sacred and an indispensable part of human nature. It should be accepted and respected.

Even more, his poems contain a rebellion against traditional hypocritical morality. His love poems sometimes are full of affirmation of physical love and chasing for physical pleasure.

In Petrarchan poems animal factor is severely suppressed, and normal instincts have nowhere to vent and cannot be satisfied.

The most serious crime of Petrarchan poems is that they suppress and distort human nature, that is, the instinct of sex and sex. They advocate spiritual love and criticize physical communication for inhibiting human animal instincts.

He called on people to return to nature and life ontology, listen to the "call of blood" in the depths of life, and try to build a new sexual and ethical balance.

Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be,

Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee,

As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be,

(Elegy 19 To His Mistress Going to Bed)

This kind of bold expression is a rebellion against social ethics, and it is the further development of humanism in the process of the Renaissance. But the love ethics advocated in his poems is harmonious.

Donne's view on love did not stay at the level of sensual love, but the union of body and soul.

Conclusion

In Donne's *Elegies*, he expressed his love ethics from the ethical aspects and dealt with the themes of what is love and how to handle love. We can find that there was a contradiction between the poet's inner love ethic and the ethical system in English society at that time.

He realized that people are an organic combination of desire and reason. Only when the human factor and animal factor are full of vitality and coexist harmoniously and balanced can society move in the right direction.

He was keenly aware of the tendency of some poets to place too much emphasis on human factors (rationality) at that time. For this reason, he expressed his different ideas in his poems and emphasized the animal factor (spirit of humanism).

He believes that Petrarchan poems over-deify women and over-praise women's human factors, which reduces society's tolerance of women, and strengthens the control and suppression of women's instincts and desires, which is extremely unfair to women.

In his poem, he indicated that women are also ordinary people and have weaknesses and shortcomings. Society should be more tolerant of women and respect women's animal factors, instead of suppressing women's instincts all the time.

Besides, he criticized the traditional Petrarchan poems for they excessively advocated the suppression of human sexual desire instincts, praised spiritual love, and emphasized excessive suppression of human natural nature. He believed that body love is also an indispensable part of love, which is as important as spiritual love. What people should pursue is the harmonious relationship between spiritual love and body love rather than emphasizing spiritual love and despising body love.

Praising spiritual love is an act to express one's respect for human factors, while despising body love shows their misunderstanding and prejudice toward animal factors.

As mentioned earlier, he stressed that Sphinx also knows that balance is, that is, the balance between human and animal factors.

Ethical literary criticism holds that human beings are a "Sphinx factor". The "Sphinx factor" contains two parts: the human factor and the animal factor. Only when human factors and animal factors are full of vitality and harmony can personal development and social progress move in the right direction.

Donne realizes that the progress of social history must be based on the balance of reason and desire and that the overemphasizing of any factor will bring obstacles to the development of individuals and society. This understanding is extremely sensitive and advanced.

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