

Approaching a Critical Perspective: A Study of New Criticism Approach on John Donne's *Death Be Not Proud*

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Abstract:

Criticism has a very significant and highly-made role in the analysis of literature nowadays. It opens the ties or unlocks the confidential ideology hidden in almost every single line of any written literary work. Literature is encountered with many ups and downs by application of any literary criticism theory on it. It is attempted to provide the New Criticism approach upon John Donne's *Death be not proud* or *holy sonnet X* in this research paper. This sonnet is also known as the *Divine Poem* which is analyzed through many literary criticism perspectives. This prominent approach is free and independent of the intention of the author which closely and attentively examines the text independently or goes for its literariness of this rare piece of literature. Besides, it provides a detailed explanation of representational, dramatic, imitative, and cognitive aspects of literature to reach its meaning. Therefore, the text ought to be independently examined to arrive at its interpretation. 'The text itself' is what it matters here. The New Criticism perspective is based on the consideration of the text.

Key Words: Intention, Author, New Criticism, Literariness, Cognitive

Introduction to John Donne Literary Life

John Donne is a precise and distinguished name in British Literary Canon, Donne's life is marked from "1572-1631" (Bloom, 2008, p. 1) "into a strongly Roman Catholic family" (Emden, 1986, p. 11). John Donne was the son of a prosperous merchant and his mother was a pious Catholic. His family was religiously persecuted and banished. John Donne was "Probably fortunate in the new King, James" (Emden, 1986, p. 22). King James I obliged John Donne to be a clergyman. Since his outstanding and theatrical sermons were very rich and religious, so he became the head priest at St Pauls Cathedral in London. John Donne has a poetic, scholarly, and religious background. By his entrance to British Literature, British Literary Canon gained prominent fame. His achievements, accomplishments,

dedication, and contribution to British Literature are prosperously rich and significantly valuable. John Donne was regarded as the preeminent and superior representative in a metaphysical poetic style. Notably, English poetry was deeper; therefore, metaphysical poetry is “a type of 17th-century English poetry” (Quinn, 2006, p 258). It is characterized as more intellectual and abstract. This prosperous metaphysical poetic style is preeminent by its haunting, obscure, and ingenious imagery, philosophical and religious speculations, rough-sounding meter, and witty wordplay. Donne’s poetry is highly-made and well-known for its metaphorical and different sensual style. He contributed many sonnets including Holy Sonnets, epigrams, satire, religious poetry, and different love poems for British Literature. His poetical style is immensely characterized by an unexpected opening and it includes various paradoxes, ironies, or many various poetic elements. His poetry is acknowledged as a very smooth, convenient, passionate, learned, and argumentative one. His first and most desired wish was to become a courtier, a part of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Although he never desired to get fame as a poet, his true argumentative and stylistic poetry earned him much reputation. Donne's life is accompanied or associated with ups and downs. Since he married his loved girl named "Anne More, the daughter of Sir George More,” (Nutt, 1999, p. 167), without her father’s consent, so Sir George More had John Donne accused, jailed, arrested and dismissed him from his governmental position. Joe Nutt (1999) considers this relationship as the “most significant event in Donne’s life as a man and a poet” (P. 168). Donne's imprisonment resulted in a loss of his career as a courtier and it also caused him to produce dominant poems in the jail. Despite his huge poetic capability, it is said that Donne lived a life of poverty for many years. He lavishly spent his inheritance on women and pastime. John Donne is described as ‘the great visitor of ladies.’ Donne also served as a parliament member. John Donne eventually died in 1631 and he was buried in St Paul's Cathedral. And he received many poetical tributes from various poets after his death.

Sonnet X or Death be not Proud is also known as a divine poem, it is a 14-lined short poem that flourished in the 17th century. *Death be not proud* indicates a claim or argument against the might of death. The speaker warns the death as a person, and he commands the death to stop being proud. The speaker insists that death is a short period of time resembling sleep or rest. Therefore, he thinks that such sleep is a transferring from the mortal world to the immortal one. The speaker furthermore criticizes death that it is a “slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men” (Robbins, 2010, p. 548). It is said that the divine poem, *Death be not Proud*, is composed “during his tedious illness” (Bloom, 2008, p 131). Accordingly, Donne was suffered or afflicted by many various illnesses throughout his life. One of the afflictions over Donne was typhoid fever which forced him to stay in bed for long.

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John Donne is one of the lovely remarkable poets who is loved and regarded by many, but for some “in some respects, Donne isn’t a love poet at all. The physical characteristics of the girl he’s supposed to be talking to don’t concern him. Nor does her personality: it is completely obliterated by Donne’s. He doesn’t even seem to feel sexually excited. As sensualists, the Victorian poets far outclass him” (John Carey, 1981). Some critics have remarked upon the traces of legal training evident in the conceits and tight reasoning of his verse” (Bloom, 2008, p 1). Some of the writers consider him as is “the foremost metaphysical poet” (Quinn, 2006, p. 93). Edward Quinn (2006) also argues that “John Donne and his followers developed this unique style of metaphysical poetry” (P.225). John Donne is also characterized as a very dominant great writer of conceited metaphorical verses, so conceited metaphor is related to the Renaissance Age which is "a particularly fanciful metaphor” (Quinn, 2006, p. 93). Generally, critics applied “it to the 17th-century metaphysical poets” (Quinn, 2006, p. 92). Furthermore, some critics e.g. Calvin Bedient argues that “the performance is at once fiercer” (Bedient, 2017). *Death be not Proud* was just written in the days when he was severely sick. Accordingly, John Carey (1981) argues that Donne preferred to think of ways in which death could be minimized, he also insists that “his sonnet to death might almost be a reply to Raleigh” (John Carey, 1981). Death is different according to each individual, so each person invents his view of it and it is therefore based on the scope of his imagination. It is a practice which no one can run from. Sir Walter Raleigh considers death as a 'hero' in a passage from *History of the World*, so according to Carey the sonnet, *Death be not Proud*, might be a strong reply to Raleigh. Moreover, John Carey (1981) says, “Its argument is so weak. Its ill-assorted reasons tumble out in no recognizable order, reflecting inner disarray.”

One of the basic instances of the school of poets, Dr. Johnson says that “Donne and his followers were always ready to deal with metaphysical subjects, but it was from their mode and not their subjects” (Bloom, 2008). It seems that Wordsworth has read John Donne's poems; therefore, “He copied the opening of *Death be not proud* into a manuscript in which he was working on *The Ruined Cottage*,” so he further writes that it is “so eminently characteristic of his manner and at the same time so weighty in thought, and vigorous in the expression” (Dayton Haskin, 2007). On the other hand, Coleridge also did not show much interest in Donne's religious poems because "Coleridge did not annotate the religious poetry in any of the extant volumes that contain marginalia" (Dayton Haskin, 2007). In a paper entitled *Death be not Proud: Children, Families, and Cancer in Postwar America* which is published by Johns Hopkins University Press, Gretchen Marie Krueger argues about the motivation of the divine poem that gives a person. Krueger also insists on the death power’s loss that is convenient for every individual. In addition, it seems that John Milton’s ‘*On Time*’ figures out that he had been influenced by reading John Donne’s *Death be not Proud*. If a person read Milton’s ‘*On Time*’ along with Donne’s *Death be not*

proud, he will perceive that John Milton found very little use for John Donne's poetry. It seems that John Milton has "read Donne's poem not long after its publication, found its chop-logic and ambivalence disconcerting, and responded with a poem which attempts to make good its dubious triumph over mortality" (Tromly, 2015). If this is true, then the poem *On Time* by John Milton is a criticism and rewriting of John Donne's poem entitled *Death be not Proud*.

Reaching the New Criticism

"Literary theory has permeated our thinking to the point that it has defined for our times how discourse about literature, as well as about culture in general, shall proceed. Literary theory has arrived and no student of literature can afford not to come to terms with it." (McLaughlin, 1990, p.1). The history of literary criticism or theory is very deep and ancient; it is not dated just one or two centuries earlier. Some scholars dedicatedly date it to the time of Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle which has continued to the present day, who have been debating or disputing over the meaning of a drama-text; therefore, everyone was judging the meaning of the text in some way. Literary critics involve themselves in either theoretical or practical criticism; theoretical criticism formulates the theories, principles, and tenets of the nature and value of art. The way we arrive at the meaning of the text of drama, poem, fiction, or any other style of literature is rooted in the time of Plato. So when anyone responds to any text is already a practicing literary critic, so that literary criticism is situated in his/ her precondition expectation. Therefore, the way a person analyzes or depicts any reaction to any given text is not something new. Literary theory and criticism had their ups and downs, but it developed much, even today lots of critics work hard to give it a different look. Aside from other schools of criticism, new criticism is a way of analyzing any literary text "to discover its true or correct meaning independent of its author's intention or of the emotional state, values, or beliefs of either its author or reader" (Bressler, 2007, p. 55).

New criticism is a school of thought that analyzes any piece of literary work by close examination of work's words; including both connotative and denotative meaning, after that, it moves to the allusion inside the text, it goes further to look for phrases, words, grammar, clauses, sentences, figures of speech and allusions. In addition the critics of this school of thought also examine points of view, tone, symbols, and after that whole critics can declare what the poem means. New criticism concentrate on the sole meaning that is hidden within the text, whatever information they need they search inside the text by untying the secretive ties. Generally, new criticism is "an emphasis on form parenthesizes concern for the representational, imitative and cognitive aspects of literature" (Habib, 2005, p.602). It has been widely dominant during two-third of the twentieth-century in the West. So that literature is aiming to represent reality or to impart moral or intellectual lessons, and it is considered to be an object on its own. Therefore;

the text must be treated as an autonomous think possessing its laws and regulations. New criticism draws an easy formula for arrival to an interpretation of the text; this approach or formula provides the readers with a true interpretation of a text using only the text itself.

In new criticism, the critics assert that only the poem (any piece of literary work) can be objectively evaluated, not the feeling, the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the author or anyone else. The main and pivotal focus of this school is on the examination of the text itself rather than the background of the author or the historical background of the work. Thus, the new critics espouse what many call the 'text and text alone.' This is their only approach to come to the meaning of the text. Although New Criticism has emerged as a very powerful approach in the 1940s, its roots were planted in the 1900s. "The name 'New Criticism' seems to have been derived from John Crowe Ransom in a 1941 book of that title, which examines the work of I.A. Richard and William Empson, T.S. Eliot, Yvor Winters, and the philosopher Charles W. Morris" (Richter, 2007, p. 754). New Criticism borrows lots of its foundation and elements from T.S. Eliot's. Eliot maintains that a good reader perceives the poem structurally. New critics look to a work of art as an existed object, so that the meaning of a poem must not be equated to the feelings and intentions of the author inside it. As well as the text must be treated as an object of the public.

To apply this approach to any literary text, we have to take in mind the diction of the text, consider the etymological roots of every word along with its denotation and connotation. We have to examine the grammar, clauses, phrases, constructions, tones, sentences. Above all, we have to go for every literary element like the point of view, theme, tone, dialogue, narration, parody, setting, foreshadowing, and allusion as well as a critic shall relate them to the dramatic situation of the text. As well as we have to evaluate in interrelationships of each element with the text and take in mind where tensions, ambiguities, and paradoxes arise. After all, we have to justify the result of our work with the above-mentioned points to reach the true meaning of the given text.

Critical Appreciation of the *Death be not Proud*

To apply the New Criticism to the selected poem of John Donne, it's better to cite the whole poem in this section of the present research. Notably, the theoretical assumption and practical methodology of New Criticism would be applied to John Donne's *Death be not proud*.

Sonnet X

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
 Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;

For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
 Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
 From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
 Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
 And soonest our best men with thee do go,
 Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
 Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
 And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
 And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
 And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
 One short sleep past, we wake eternally
 And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die. (Nutt, 1999, P.161)

There are two major types of sonnets in English Literature named as the Shakespearean sonnet and another type is named after the Italian poet so-called Petrarch so that it is famous as Petrarchan Sonnet. Shakespearean sonnet consists of three quatrains and a couplet with 'abab-cdcd-efef-gg' rhyme scheme. On the other hand, the Petrarchan sonnet consists of an octave and one sestet with 'abba abba' and 'cdecde' rhyme scheme. Petrarchan sonnet is one of the most-used and effective poetic structures. Therefore, both forms are applied by Donne in holy sonnet X. Donne follows the Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet form which is made up of 3 quatrains and a concluding couplet. From the other aspect, the rhyme scheme of 'abba' for the first two quatrains categorizes the poem as a Petrarchan sonnet onto an octet. After all, he switches the rhyme scheme into 'cddc' and the couplet to 'ee' which is usual in Elizabethan sonnet form.

In the early beginning of the poem, when the speaker says death be not proud, this stanza focuses on the subject and audience of the poem. It seems that the text is narrated through an anonymous first-person point of view, this is more clear in the fourth line of the poem, when the speaker says, "die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me" (Nutt, 1999, p. 161). The speaker directly addresses death and gives death commands to stop pride. He behaves death as a character through personification. This harnesses the attention of the audience and gives them the courage to stand for that. It is like that the speaker controls and manages the passion and feelings of his. It seems that the speaker is a bold and courageous person who tries to challenge death and prove that your pride is meaningless. In the first section of the octave the speaker acclaims that death must not be proud. It must be proud and rude because it kills all human beings. This part can figure out the paradox of the poem, and it has been resolved in the sestet

section when the speaker compares death to short sleep. This is to say that the narrator of the poem is romanticizing the notion of death. The poet regularly occupies connotation to show his contempt for death's pride. He furthermore frequently insists to emphasize the helplessness or powerlessness of death. The narrator usually refers to death as a rest or sleep, implying the impotence or helplessness of death as well as the transience of death's effects. When the writer says that death as rest gives a person pleasure, he associates the metaphysical conceit that is an unusual comparison. In addition, He truly depicts what death is like and to avoid being afraid by implication of death as sleep or rest. Therefore, for some people who believe in the other world, according to them there is no death in the other world. In this sense, it is clear that the speaker is a religious person who believes in the afterlife (eternity) and he envisions no death in the other world. The writer uses the personification to personify death as a rest or sleep that gives human beings pleasure and comfort. This is in the case to capture his emotion and direct them toward tranquility. The writer effectively communicates with the speaker's emotions and passion for death. After the octave he uses the turn, this is the time that the emotions of the speaker are tranquilized and captured, and he initiates the sestet with a discussion where the issue is changed.

Since it is a holy sonnet or religious sonnet, the writer desires to convey a very moral and virtuous lesson to his readers, when he says, "And soonest our best men with thee doe goe" (Nutt, 1999, p. 161). He insists and asks his reader to be good people; good people can be those who practice religion. Whoever believes in life after death, this is like a reward proposed to them. Furthermore, it seems that Donne attempts to remove the tension and worries about death that some of his audience had. Even the language and tone are very serious which successfully conveys the moral lesson to the audience.

The speaker of the poem dramatically establishes the poem by capturing the first line and drawing the reader into the controversial paradox that encompasses the poem. The speaker introduces the motif of death and afterlife in the poem as well as he, the speaker, characterizes him as a commander who commands for another commander or killer. The speaker confronts death and considers it as a nonsense shadow as per his duty is to convey us to the other world. He claims that some call you 'Mighty and dreadful', so that some refer to a small number of people. In line 4, he refers to death as 'poore' and it is significant because the term poor imply the reduction of its power and ability. Furthermore, addressing the death as poor can decrease the drastic and fearful emotions of people about death. The speaker insists that it cannot kill him.

The second quatrain that is linked to the first turns death into very less harmful and fearful that gives human beings pleasure. The writer criticizes death for considering too highly placed. In addition, he treats death as no sovereign but a 'slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men'. The slave is death here. To

define the slave, it is someone who must be devoted to another's will or wishes. By doing such the writer demonstrates the absence and powerlessness of death authority. The writer's metaphorical implication of connotations of charms and poppy implies that the feeling of death is pleasant. Poppy and charms both give a tranquil and comfortable transient passing into sleep. Thus, he approximately decreases the dreadful feelings of death. Since the rest or sleep is a much comfortable experience; he claims that death must be of the same experience and a deeper way of sleep. The narrator attempted to associate an unknown phenomenon to a much-known phenomenon through a metaphorical comparison between death and sleep. It seems that he wanted to convey the feeling of familiarity to unfamiliarity one and therefore to extract the fear of the unfamiliarity. He encounters death as a gateway from suffering toward pleasure. As though, death has no superiority out there.

After the second quatrain or the shift, the speaker becomes more hostile with death and calling him a slave. With this metaphor, the speaker proposes that death is not free but rather a slave. He cannot act out of his free-will. Moreover, he is manipulated by another superior owner like 'fate, chance, kings, and desperate men.' Fate and chance also have been treated as a person in the literature that control whatever happens to people. Thus death doesn't decide for men rather than fate. However, king and desperate men can be different because they carry out their orders about death. He again accuses death in line 10 claiming that death is a friend of war, poison, sickness, and compared them to poppy and charm which give a person amusement or delight.

Both the octave and sestet of the sonnet are interrelated or correlative sections. The octave expands the issued situation within itself up to the sestet. Generally, the octave explains one single situation while the sestet provides more hints related to the situation. After all, it concludes the situation and resolves the paradox expressed in the opening line. The writer adheres to some rules taking from both major types of sonnets and yet fully expressing the emotion of the narrator through that combination. He uses the tradition of both sonnets to communicate the speaker's emotions to the audience. The speaker is seriously explaining his comfortable feeling of the unknown phenomenon that is very familiar to him. The sonnet is very rich with personifications and metaphors exemplifying the writer's mastery and his superiority in his poetic profession. The figurative elements make the tone and mood of the poem very serious moving to a very luxurious one. The way he manipulates the words and emotions of the speaker, the tone varies and gives a relaxing feeling to both the speaker and audience. Eventually, he launches or offers another figurative element in this closing line; "And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die" (Nutt, 1999, p.161). This personification that death is destined to die, he uses to inject his pleasant feelings and vision of death to the audience. So this final couplet caps the arguments against death the servant of other

powers. It is mentionable that the speaker kills death at the couplet. As in Christianity and Islam religions, the dead people will be resurrected for their eternal reward. The poem is a transition of the writer's death feelings to the audience.

Conclusion

New criticism is a school of thought that examines the diction of a text associating the connotations, denotations, and the etymological root of each word in a given text. This literary perspective further takes into account the allusion, analyzes the imagery, symbols, and figures of speech throughout a specific given text. It also analyzes the different structures, grammar, tone, theme, point of view, and any other literary element within a text. After all, new critics look for the tension that is arisen in the text and they try to resolve that tension. In a poem, the most important things are the paradox and irony to be resolved. In the *Death be not Proud*, the author raises a paradox at the opening line of the poem and he, therefore, resolve the paradox at the couplet of the text. It has been worked to provide the readers with the correct interpretation of the text-only by using the text alone. The analyzed sonnet is considered to reach for its exact meaning by going deep into the text without its author's intention, beliefs, values, and emotion. First, it has been focused on the structure of the sonnet. In the poem, the speaker attempted to convey his feeling of death to the readers. So what he feels about death are tranquility and easement. In a broad sense, he just wants to give convenience to the people who are about to die. The speaker tries to tell the readers that death is just a transition and its effects are transient. Finally, the speaker anticipates the end of the death itself. As well as, the speaker wants to indicate death's powerlessness and it is a pathway to the eternal world.

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