

METAPHYSICAL CONCEIT / DONNE'S USE OF CONCEIT

The term 'conceit' in English literature is generally associated with the metaphysical poets of the 17th century. In the metaphysical conceit, metaphors have a conceptual, and thus a tenuous, relationship between the things compared. Helen Gardner observed that 'a conceit is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness' and that 'a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness.' The use of conceits is all pervasive in the metaphysical poems, especially in those of John Donne. In many of his poems, conceits seem to form the crux of metaphysical poetry.

There is in fact nothing new about the use of conceits in English poetry. Elizabethan poetry also abounds in rich conceits. But, the metaphysical conceits were so startling, so subtle, and so pervasive as to demand the supreme attention in any metaphysical poem. In general, the metaphysical conceit is a shocking, far-fetched metaphor feeding on the erudition of the poet. But, when it works, it reveals an amazing sense of appropriateness that makes us look at something in an entirely new light. A classic example of the metaphysical conceit is Donne's comparison of the union between two lovers to the two pointers of a compass in the poem 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning'.

In his song 'Sweetest Love, I do not go', again, Donne makes a superb use of some metaphysical conceits. In this poem, he undertakes a personal trip to a foreign country. It is only quite natural that his wife would be anxious to know of it. But, he assures her that he does not undertake this journey simply because he has grown tired of her nor because he has found a new love in a foreign country, which he considered worthier than her. However, the fact of the matter is that one fine day, death would separate them eternally. So starting as of now, she should train herself to get used to this eternal separation. In this way his regular journey abroad would be the frequent rehearsals of death which would eventually lessen her suffering of his real death. Donne expresses this concept by the use of the following conceit, where he compares their temporary separation with eternal death:

'But since that I
Must die at last, 'tis best
To use myself in jest
Thus by feign'd deaths to die.'

In yet another conceit, Donne assures his love by comparing his travels to the movement of the sun across the sky. He promises that this present journey abroad will be of a much shorter duration than the journey of the sun from dawn to dusk:

'Yesternight the sun went hence,
And yet is here today;
He hath no desire nor sense,
Nor half so short a way...'

By all the conceits in this poem, Donne means to convince his love that their separation is both temporary and inevitable. He will return at any moment she deems fit. Therefore, Donne urges his beloved to redirect her mind from her negative thoughts of this physical separation and relish every moment of happiness of the present. In happy moments like these, time should not be wasted in thinking about future mishaps. He urges her not to weep as her grief will cause him much sorrow and pain. She is the best thing that has ever happened to his life.