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Temporal Anxiety and Romantic Immortality Reading John Donne and John Keats with Dialogue**Dr. Afroza Banu¹****Dr. Md. Shahidul Islam²**

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between the temporal anxiety and the quest of immortality in the metaphysical poetry of John Donne with the Romantic poetry of John Keats. The aim was to explore the two poets wrestling with the fears of time, death and transcendence and how each poet portrays differing but complementary opinions of the mortality of humanity and the immortality of poetry. This study was based on some chosen poems of Donne, like Death Be Not Proud and A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning, and Keats, especially on Ode to a Nightingale and When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be. This study gathered data on the existing primary poetic works and rely on critical secondary material such as scholarly articles, volumes of books and literary commentaries. To follow the inter-textual and thematic dialogues between the poets, a brief textual analysis was carried out based on the theory by Mikhail Bakhtin of the dialogism. The results indicate that Donne is engaging temporal anxiety as spiritual assurance and metaphysical argument and Keats views in permanence in the aesthetic experiencing and imaginative transcendence. Such comparative reading demonstrates a dialogical continuum in which metaphysical faith and Romantic sensibility are united and participates in the comprehending of poetic responses to mortality and eternity in terms of literature and philosophical seeing.

Keywords: Temporal Anxiety, Romantic Immortality, Dialogism, Metaphysical Poetry, Intersexuality.

I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the human to face time and death, and his desire to find something eternal in life has been one of the basic issues of the poetic expression throughout time. More specifically, the works of 17th century metaphysical poet John Donne and 19th century Romantic poet John Keats point very thoughtful reflections on the impermanence of existence and the desire to be immortal. His metaphysical conceits and theological reasoning are imbued with Donne poetry and they usually seek to harmonize Christian eschatology and temporal anxiety (Gardner, 1961). On the contrary, the Romanticism of Keats follows its focus with the appeal of the senses and imagination that seeks to escape the realm of mortality with beauty and art (Stillinger, 1989). The conflict between transience and permanence, although occurring in different contexts and with varying worldviews among two different poets, constitute an interesting dialogic genre that literature can explore. The main issue of the proposed study was the explanation of how these two poets so different in their style, time and philosophy can react to the one and the same dilemma of man concerning death and desire of the transcendence. Whereas Donne encourages the metaphysical argument and spiritual faith to face death, Keats is religiously satisfied in the realm of aesthetic and imagination. Such opposition and implicit dialog between their works have not been previously subject to the full exploration in the context of dialogism, a concept introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and according to which texts were in the state of constant dialogue with one another and with immediate cultures.

This research paper is important in various ways. To begin with, it is between metaphysical and Romantic poetics, showing a continuum in the history of literature in which the polar philosophies deal with some of the same existential issues. Second, it brings a dialogical model into the picture, which allows a more sophisticated interpretation of the inter-textual polarity and stylistic overtones between Donne and Keats. Lastly, the study advances the overall field of literary research in that it challenges the classic periods and revises them by reiterating the historicity of human preoccupation with death and life after death. In such a way, it leaves no doubt about the timeless value of poetry as a means to bargain with the dark and the hope in the human condition. With the help of the dialogic reading of the selected poems of both Donne and Keats, this study is aimed to reveal the way in which it will be possible to put the traditions of metaphysical and Romantic poetry into a productive dialogue and illuminate how the poets respond to time, death, and the eternal.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

This paper aimed at exploring the ways in which Donne and Keats explore the issue of mortality and immortality by means of a dialogical approach to the metaphysical poems of the former and the Romantic poems of the latter author.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of the afterlife and the desire to become immortal has been the guiding theme in metaphysical and romantic poets. John Donne and John Keats relying on their temporal and stylistic difference, revolve in their poems over the thought of death and the human urge to surpass it. These issues have been handled by different thinkers and their ideas are incorporated into the dialogical character of the current work. According to Gardner (1961), the metaphysical poems written by Donne, particularly, in such poems as *Death Be Not Proud*, bear the evidence of spiritual confrontation with death. She points out that the Christian view of the world makes Donne sideline his terror of death with promise of salvation. This theological confidence is in stark contradiction with the existential angst which tends to feature in Romantic poetry. Conversely, the poetry of Keats shows what Bloom (1973) described as a melancholic poetics which is an anxiety on the part of the poet with regard to premature death along with anxiety about the transience of all the human

accomplishments. The analysis of *When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be* by Bloom indicates that Keats is unconsciously trying to pour his fear of death on poetic immortality instead of religious belief.

In the meantime, the works of Stillinger, (1989) penetrate new ground of Keats in the use of sensual images as the Keats explores issues of metaphysics. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, the bird is used as an allegory to poetic and nature immortality, which despite human time slips, gives them an alternative. The reading by Stillinger coincides with the idea that Keats changes the theological certitude with imaginative transcendence. According to Crawford (1993), an analysis of the cultural aspect of death in early modernity England reveals that death was held as a fearful and religious issue. The context can be used to shed light on bodily decay and spiritual redemption of Donne. Conversely, Gigante (2005) analyzes the Romantic impulse and states that Keats recreates the immortality not as the life itself after death but life in art in order to survive symbolically. Her interpretation can endorse a dialogic reading according to which Keats has to answer to metaphysical questions through aesthetic strategies. Bell (2002) also offers feminist interpretation to the poetry of Donne, and says that there is a conflict between physicality and spirituality. Her contribution is relevant to the realization that Donne is a person who sees human relationships as a metaphor and analogy to divine relationship, which is critical in his approach of the mortality. In the Romanticism, Bennett (1996) discusses the connection between death and authorship. He points out that Keats was very conscious of his death and tended to think frequently how his poems could be more permanent than he. In the analysis done by Bennett, Keats is placed in a literary tradition that aspires to imminence of symbolic immortality in art.

Post (2003) discusses how poets like Donne have been able to have profound reflections on the aspect of life through the meditative method of metaphysical poetry. This mode is in contrast with the Romantic ode that projects interior struggle into luxuriant images and passion as does Keats. Spearing (1981) links the intellectualism of Donne with his poetic composition and implies that his form of reasoned argument narrates metaphysical demand to find order amidst the chaos. This compositional juxtaposition to the fluid and organic compositions of Keats opens up still more discrepancies in how to handle time anxiety. The methodology of this research is based on the theory of the dialogism developed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Bakhtin rationalizes that texts may exist in a relation that is functional to one another, as well as to larger structures of discourse. Applying it to Donne and Keats then the reading becomes one that takes into consideration; as they both take to putting their texts in context of a continuation of the contemporary discussion of time, death and transcendence. T.S. Eliot (1921) also adds his opinion about the outstanding ability of Donne to blend thought and feeling with metaphysical conceits. He gives credit to Donne who formulated a consistent metaphysical image in which spiritual faith faces death squarely. The insights by Eliot allow Donne to be classified as a poet who answers to the challenges of temporality by influenced theology on his poems.

These studies complement each other and present a critical background to the current one. Whereas metaphysical poetics of Donne and Romantic vision of Keats have been treated in the scholarly literature separately, a dialogic reading of both texts is still rare. Placing their works in dialogue, using the model of Bakhtin, it is hoped that this work will help distinguish how poetic expression, historical situation and philosophical perspective lead to differing reactions by the mind to the experience of death and desires of immortality.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

This study adopted the methodology of qualitative research based on literary analysis and examines thematic and philosophical overlap of metaphysical poetry of John Donne and Romantic poetry of John Keats. It aimed to analyze the positioning of the two poets with regard to the subject of temporal anxiety and the desire to gain immortality, basing the theory of dialogism developed by Mikhail Bakhtin as the theoretical background. The study is comparative and interpretive in its orientation that puts stress on close reading and hermeneutic reading. The main sources on this study were pre-selected canonical poems according to the topic: *Death Be Not Proud*, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* and *Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness* by Donne and *Ode to a Nightingale*, *When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by Keats. Those works were selected because they directly relate to the subject of mortality, time and longing of spiritual or poetic transcendence. Secondary sources comprised critical work by Gardner (1961), Bloom (1973), Stillinger (1989), Bell (2002) and Bakhtin (1981), among others, offering the theoretical and interpretive scope. The analytic framework was implemented in three layers: thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes; comparative reading, bringing out the contrasts in the philosophical and stylistic levels; and dialogic interpretation, in which the inter-textual and cross-traditional jokes and discussions are revealed between the metaphysical, Romantic traditions.

V. FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

This study demonstrates that both John Donne and John Keats create something deeper but opposite poetical sentiment of universal anxiety about death and the need to be immortal. In a dialogic reading provided by the poets this study observed a cross-temporal conversation of metaphysical certainty and Romantic aestheticism and how they intersect, conflict, and complement one another. Metaphysical wit and theology of Donne speak to death, with spiritual certitude, whereas the poetry of Keats speculates on the nature of death, trying to achieve transcendence and finding beauty and art as the means. The main textual evidence and interpretations of the findings raised under themes are provided in this discussion part. Donne in his *Death Be Not Proud* has written such a proclamation against death: "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so." This bold theatricalization of the death lowers the fear of death and only states that it is not omnipotent and cannot be final. The theology of Donne helps him to make fun of death, counting on the life after death. His metaphysical certainty is contrasted with a groping vision of Keats

The beginning of *When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be* by Keats reads: "When I have fears that I may cease to be / Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain." Death is not overcome and here death is feared. Keats is concerned with the temporary existence and with loss of the poetic possibilities. In contrast to Donne, Keats is not spiritually sure, but feels instead the creative anxiety, his dread of dying before attaining poetic immortality. In *Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness*, Donne says: "Since I am coming to that Holy room / Where, with thy Choir of Saints for evermore, / I shall be made thy Music." This is a visualization of death as a process moving one into divine harmony. Donne equates death and salvation and is not based on termination but it is based on a start. His mix of language of the spirit and of the music sets forth a religion-inspired immortality based on Christian eschatology. In *Ode to a Nightingale* Keats admires the ambivalent eternity of the bird: "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" The nightingale as a token of aesthetic continuation is a contrast to human rottenness. Keats finds a release of mortality through art.

The world of imagination serves to give him a temporary transcendence, which is a contrast to eternity and spiritual absoluteness which Donne praises.

Quoting *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* by Donne, the writer says: "Our two souls therefore, which are one, / Though I must go, endure not yet / A breach, but an expansion." Donne uses spiritual definition of separation. His metaphysical conceit puts love and soul as the boundaries of physical absence. In this case time and space are made ineffective as a result of metaphysical union, which alludes to a suggestion of eternity as a result of spiritual bonds. Once again in *Ode to a Nightingale* Keats is wishing he could get away: "Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known." The words of Keats who would like to merge with the world of bird are helplessness of the author to solve the problems of human nature as well as mortality. The freedom does not last long and reality reminds him of death. The temporal is emphasized instead of being solved by the beauty of the nightingale. Engrossed in paradox as he is, in so many of his metaphysical compositions, Donne even uses it as the basis of his structure in *Death Be Not Proud*: "One short sleep past, we wake eternally." In this case, sleep is used as a metaphor of death, which makes it less harsh. Paradoxical logic by Donne is not something that is written rhetorically because it contains a vision of theology in which death-time is temporal and eternal-life is permanent, which gives a feeling of metaphysical domination over time.

In *When I have Fears*, Keats cries: And feel a fair creature of an hour / That I shall never look on thee more." There is a rise in the transient eroticism of love. The "creature of an hour" is also the indicator of the Romantic obsession with the present and the sad beauty of that which does not stand the time. Love and experience are torn apart by the passing of time, which increases the disturbance of Keats even further. In the *Hymn to God*, Donne is in readiness to die: "Therefore that he may raise, the Lord throws down." This verse points at the Christian teachings that death results in resurrection. Theological clarity found in Donne makes suffering worth hope and structure, and the cause of divine preparation. Keats has eternalized art in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: Thou still unravishd bride of quietness." Beauty, love and life have been kept in silence in the urn forever. But this eternity is deadness also. Keats acquires symbolic immortality, and he doubts whether it is worth the price, frozen time does not give an actual experience. Art gives immortality, but it costs whilst making it vitally. In *Valediction*, Donne uses the following words: "As virtuous men pass mildly away./ And whisper to their souls to go." Death does not trick, die suddenly, but in a voice, a whisper. The steering of the soul is not accidental and violent. In this poem, Donne discusses death as a spiritual experience and diminishes its fear of the temporal by faith and tranquility.

Ode to a Nightingale is a poem where Keats, wonders, "Now more than ever seems it rich to die." Keats has a vision of death which is attractive under the fascination of beauty. Art briefly makes death something to look forward to by replacing horrors of death with a desire. Such a change is fictitious however, he is unable to accept it completely. Although the two poems are really different some ways they end up being the same with the human imagination and soul struggling to surpass the body. Donnes: "One short sleep past, we wake eternally" and of Keats: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." These are the end lines of both the poems, summarizing their philosophies. The theological victory over times by Donne is apparent by his statement whereas the triumph of the beauty and truth presented by Keats in his aphorism makes this the only immortal values that can be provided to humankind.

VI. DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

The findings of this study demonstrate the existence of the rich dialogic interrelation between metaphysical poetry written by John Donne and Romantic poems authored by John Keats both of whom struggle with the underlying themes of losing life and feeling the anxiety

connected with time, and the desire to achieve immortality. Although both poets belong to different philosophical and literary tradition, the analysis shows that their work is undertaken in a considerable dialogue through time and also they offer a complementary answer to the same existential problem. John Donne, with deep belief in Christian metaphysics of the 17th century, treats death with spiritual confidence. His renowned statement in *Death Be Not Proud*, that, Death, thou shalt die, is the typical example of the metaphysical paradox according to which Donne trivializes the finality of death (Gardner, 1961). A theological inclination also reflects on the part of the Donne since, in a comment that influenced his *Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness*, he expresses in the title a fear that he would be made Gods music describing entry into eternity instead of the end (Gardner, 1961; Eliot, 1921). According to T.S. Eliot as we can see in his poem, the poetry of Donne is characterized by a combination of the quality, metaphysical conceits, and it expresses spiritual truths.

Keats, on the other hand, is representative of the Romantic ideal of imagination, poetic sensuality and legacy. In *When I have fears that I may cease to be*, Keats laments the untimely end of his own life and artistic inspiration, and Harold Bloom (1973) describes such an attitude as melancholic poetics. However, unlike Donne, Keats does not refer to the theological comfort anymore; instead, he finds immortality in his art. *Ode to a Nightingale* uses the image of a nightingale as a transgression of the poetic tradition, as temporary transcendence of human grime (Stillinger, 1989; Gigante, 2005). Such an opposite can be matched to Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) approach of dialogism; according to which a text can be seen as an actor in the discourse of culture. When employing the theory of dialogism, one can see that these two (Donne and Keats) are not juxtaposed historical characters but inter-textual speakers in a larger philosophical discourse. The metaphysical control of death exercised by Donne in the lines, "One short sleep past, we wake eternally" is contrasted by the aesthetic one that Keats holds, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*). There is difference between the two foundations as in as much as one will be based on Christian eschatology and the other in artistic idealism but the two poets share the human wish to rise beyond the boundaries of time.

Moreover, authors like Andrew Bennett (1996) draw our attention to the fact that Keats himself was well aware that his poetic life was passing and he said that immortality of poetry was the result of compensatory reaction when he realized that he was dying at an early age. Likewise, Patricia Crawford (1993) places the work of Donne in context of the early modern anxieties of mortality and subsequent salvation, thus, supporting the spiritual exigency of his poetry. Even the style of the emotional passionate odes of Keats and the pensive style of Donne in metaphysical poems (Post, 2003) does not only depict a stylistic difference but rather, a metaphysical difference as the method of facing up to the predicament of death. The dialogic model reveals how Donne and Keats with their historical and philosophical gaps come together in terms of poetic confrontation with time and the immortality promise. In their pieces, there seems a notion that the battle with death is not a problem of the time and ideology but rather eternal human interest that comes out in various forms poetry, and poetry, and poetry, faith in Donne and imagination in Keats.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has found out that despite the distance that chronologically and the literary tradition creates between John Donne and John Keats, the two authors enter into a deep dialogic discourse about death and immortality. A metaphysical assurance of Donne, based on the theology of the Christian faith, has been contrasted with the Romantic desire of Keats to achieve aesthetic transcendence. However the similarities between the two poets is a struggle of mankind against the stewardship of time. With references to the theory of dialogism advanced by Bakhtin, their poetry would seem a flow of existential contemplation;

on the one hand, metaphysical faith and artistic imagination meet. Finally, both Donne and Keats provide a dualistic view of the existence of finding meaning after death, but still rallies against one of the greatest traditions of poetry, the expression of the ultimate fears and hopes of mankind.

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