

No Man Is An Island By John Donne (1624)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

John Donne (1572-1631) was an English poet whose time spent as a cleric in the Church of England often influenced the subjects of his poetry. In 1623, Donne suffered a nearly fatal illness, which inspired him to write a book of meditations on pain, health, and sickness called *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. “No Man is an Island” is a famous section of “Meditation XVII” from this book. As you read, take notes on how the author uses figurative language to describe humanity.

John Donne was part of the group of poets called the metaphysical poets. This group was interested in understanding how humans interact with each other. They were also interested in understanding what makes life satisfying. They decided that knowing your purpose (what you are on earth to do) gives meaning to life. They believed that all life forms are connected – humans, animals, and plants.

This poem was written over 400 years ago: around about the same time as when Shakespeare was alive in Elizabethan England. Slavery existed all over the world; women had no civil rights (to work or vote), and there were still strict divisions between rich and poor. A poem such as this one, which argued in favour of equality and respect, must have seemed shocking at the time.

SUMMARY

The poem explains that we are all connected to other humans, even though sometimes we think we are separate. If we are all part of a common (shared) humanity, it means we have to care about each other. Donne describes how all humans are connected and do not live or die in isolation from one another. He philosophises that every individual’s life affects everyone else’s life. The poem says that it doesn’t matter how small or big a person is, whether you are related by blood or not, their death will affect you because all humans are part of one collective.

The poem starts by comparing humans to land (‘islands’ and ‘continents’). Then it compares humans with houses (‘manor’). Lastly, Donne uses the image of church funeral bells to say that we all have to die someday. He means we are all equal in death, so we should behave with respect towards other people in life. The poem’s message is very similar to the South

African maxim (saying) about ubuntu: ‘Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’, which means ‘We are who we are because of other people’.

TYPE OF POEM

This is a short, philosophical (thinking about the meaning of life) poem. It comes up with a rule for living: understand that we are all connected because we are all human.

CHARACTERISTICS

It is written in free verse, but there is some internal rhyme. Every fifth line rhymes ('sea', 'me', and 'thee'). Assonance (the repetition of vowel sounds) helps to make the poem sound like a speech. The poem is built around one extended metaphor: the comparison of people and land.

SPEAKER / VOICE / ADDRESSEE

1 SPEAKER:

The speaker of the poem is unnamed, but probably John Donne himself. He uses a first-person narrative voice ('I') who speaks on behalf of all of us.

2 VOICE:

The voice of the poem is calm, serious, reflective (thoughtful) and confident. This is because the poet is sure that we are all connected by our common humanity. He is telling us about an idea that he is passionate about and completely believes in it.

3 ADDRESSEE:

The poet is addressing both himself and all of humanity because he is writing about the natural relationship between all humans. This is a message he wants everyone to hear.

THEMES AND EVIDENCE OF THEMES IN TEXT COMMUNITY

Although Donne says 'man', he means 'human'. The poem focuses on the way all people are part of one large group. Donne draws our attention to his idea of community when he says that one death affects us all. We need to care about all humans – not only ourselves. Donne wants us to understand that we all share the same hopes and fears. We are living through each other's experiences and can thus empathise with each other.

EVIDENCE OF THEME IN TEXT

'No man is an island': This extended metaphor compares humans to land. We cannot live by ourselves, as islands can be independent from the mainland. We need other humans for survival and also for companionship: we cannot exist separately, as islands do. Donne says that all humans are part of something much bigger than themselves – they are part of a 'continent' of humanity.

Donne writes that 'Any man's death diminishes me, / Because I am involved in mankind,' (lines 10–11). This quotation tells us that all humans are actively engaged with the rest of humanity. When someone dies, every other human has lost that person's wisdom and experience. The message is that all humans are connected because of our humanness.

EVIDENCE OF THEME IN TEXT

‘If a clod be washed away by the sea, / Europe is the less. / As well as if a promontory were.’ (lines 5–7) A clod is a small piece of earth. It may seem small and insignificant by itself, but when enough clods are together, they form a mass of land. That land is a promontory, which is big and very visible because it sticks out from the sea. This is an extended metaphor.

Donne compares us to clods of earth. Every clod is equally important, just as every human is as important as any other. It doesn’t matter how rich, famous or beautiful you are.

Donne’s meaning is that by ourselves we are weak or unimportant, but when we are united, we can be visible and powerful – as big as a continent like Europe.

DICTION / FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

1 METAPHOR:

A metaphor directly compares two things. Donne uses extended (long) metaphors in this poem. There is one literal, physical meaning, and then there is another, deeper, poetic meaning.

A. The title ‘No man is an island’ is the main idea or statement of the poem and is an extended metaphor. Donne refers to islands, which are small pieces of land, cut off from the mainland, and surrounded by the sea. They exist on their own. Donne means figuratively that humans cannot live in isolation. Nobody can live entirely on their own, without any form of community.

B. Donne uses other images in the extended comparison: he compares people to ‘clods’ of earth. He says when we are together we form a ‘promontory’ as big as ‘Europe’. These are all part of the same comparison – humans as earth. The metaphor compares physical separation (the islands and the continent) with emotional or spiritual separation between people.

2 ALLITERATION:

Alliteration is a sound device that repeats consonant sounds (usually at the beginning of a word). We see alliteration in the words ‘death diminishes’ (line 10). The / d / sounds are hard, and they are meant to make us think about how final, sudden and shocking death is. The poet wants us to understand how terrible the loss of another human is, and he uses these hard sounds to do that.

3 ASSONANCE:

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds close together. ‘Every man’s death diminishes me’ (line 10): The repetition of the /e/ sound draws out the line. The tone is sad, and the poet wants us to reflect on the idea of death and loss. The vowel sounds slow down the pace (how fast or slow something sounds). This gives us time to think and reflect.

4 SYNECDOCHE:

(Pronounced suh-nek-duh-kee) Synecdoche is like symbolism: when you use a part of something to talk about the whole thing. ‘The bell tolls’ (line 12) is an example of synecdoche because the bells are part of the church, and churches are where funerals often happen. Instead

of saying, 'There is a funeral happening, and the bells are ringing to tell people that someone has died', Donne uses this shortcut and just says 'the bell tolls'. We know that the bells tolling are symbolic of someone's death.

Analysis and Criticism

The Full Text of "No Man Is an Island"

1 No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a
2 piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod
3 be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well
4 as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy
5 friend's or of thine own were; any man's death
6 diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and
7 therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
8 it tolls for thee.

1. Refer to 'No man is an island' (line 1) Explain the metaphor in this line. [2]
2. Refer to 'Europe is the...thine own were:' (lines 3–5). The poet compares the loss of a person with two other losses. In your OWN words, explain what these two other losses are?
3. What figurative device is 'the bell tolls'? Explain in full.
4. Identify and discuss one of the main themes of this poem. Use evidence from the poem to support your answer.