

Robert M. Bean

Professor Kathy Frederickson

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Donne's "Iland," Undone

"Metaphysical", as defined by the *Online Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, is "the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of existence, truth and knowledge." Many who read poetry, and those who study it, consider John Donne to be one of the most influential metaphysical poets of his time. Mr. Donne was an English poet, satirist, lawyer, and priest whose poems are now seen by many as containing honesty and truth of human life, and death. Though today, Donne himself may not be widely known, some of his most famous lines are - "No man is an Iland" or "...for whom the bell tolls..." - are widely recognized by many people. So is one of John Donne's most famous poems, *No Man is an Iland*, true, in the sense of being reflective of mankind, and that which we all must endure?

"No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*..." It begins with Donne drawing us all together; bringing humankind into a group, all connected, dependent in some way, whether it is physical, emotional or spiritual. He is saying that we are all the tiniest pieces of a much greater organism, or entity. As humans we are all members of this one group, whether we want to be or not.

We are beings brought together by basic human wants and needs. John Cacioppo Ph.D, on the Psychology Today website states, "It is in our nature to want to be close and valued by others." If asked, and given time to reflect, most people will not deny some type of greater humankind connection, one which reaches beyond where we live, when we live or the color of one's skin. All of us different, and human, but drawn together by the very same invisible roots, deeply sewn into all people.

Donne goes on to write that "...if a *Clod* bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse, as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor* or thy *friends* or of *thine owne* were..." Here, Donne is telling us that it does not matter who is lost; a clod, a dignitary, a friend, a family member or someone whom we did not even know from a foreign land, "...any mans death diminishes *me*." No matter, who or where a human life is lost, it takes something away from us all, away from mankind. Each and every person, as they pass on, takes things with them which were uniquely theirs. Maybe it was a unique personality trait, knowledge, or more likely, a combination of things which make each individual unique. Whatever each of us sees in loss, we can all agree that it is much stronger, and more forceful than a simple biological end. Donne wants to make us think and see; Steve Jobs, an astronaut crew returning from space, the nameless faceless millions who have lost their lives in war, or simple peasants, permanently bent at the waist from years of labor in the fields, and how they *all* take from mankind when they pass on.

The final lines of Donne's poem, "...because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls;" Simply, Donne is saying that because he is of man, he cannot know for whom the bell is, or will, toll. But in the end, "...It tolls for thee." His final four words should strike us all; though none of us likes to think about our own mortality, not one among us will escape the tolling of the bell.

There really is nothing extraordinarily unique about the construction of *No Man is an Iland*. It consists of one long sentence, the stringing together of eighty-two carefully chosen words. Each line creates its own unique images in the mind of the reader. Donne makes a simple and concise statement followed by descriptives, explaining how and why none of us is an Island unto our selves. Then he goes on to prove that statement, showing us a much larger picture, mankind, and how it is affected when seemingly minute bits, humans, die. Here, the spellings have been kept as they were printed in the front of Hemingway's, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The spellings may be off from their more modern forms, but Donne's chosen words still convey the proper meaning to the contemporary reader. Many of the words have been italicized; *Iland*, *continent*, *maine*, *Clod*, *Sea*, *Europe*, *Promontorie*, *Mannor*, *friends*, *thine owne*, *death*, *me*, *Mankind*, *bell* and *thee*. Some of these words invoke thoughts and images of a smaller more personal world, while others have a much broader and wider, philosophical view of the bigger picture, as some like to say. The capitalization of some of these words also brings an air of importance, size and scope to the poem.

Much of Donne's poetry shows deep thought, and insight into the natural and spiritual worlds. In *The Flea*, Mr. Donne also talks about the "losing" of small bits of life; his blood being drawn by a flea, then mixed with another's. In his *Holy Sonnet 10* he writes how death itself is a slave to fate. Being a priest, Donne probably had more run-ins with death than the average person of the time, though life expectancies in the late 1500's and early 1600's probably did not extend beyond one's forties or fifties. He must have dealt with the many facets of death; the deceased, and those left behind. This could account for his philosophical views and ideas on the *greater* connections of mankind. Or was it a fascination with death, and what, if anything, lies beyond it? Writer R.S. Gwynn, in his anthology on literature describes Donne's work of later life as "...sober religious meditations of his maturity." A younger reader may have little or no appreciation for a poem like *No Man is an Island*. When dealing with a subject as harsh and deep as death, certainly a mature mind is better suited to dealing with the reality and permanence of human demise. But Donne just wants us to take a minute, a time out, to reflect on all that is lost as each individual moves on from life.

Donne was a man of many talents but it was probably the priesthood which influenced his most famous poems. The nature of existence, truth and knowledge, are words used earlier to define metaphysical. And John Donne has brought his insight into the nature of our existence, bringing truth and knowledge into a fairly short poem. By its very design, *No Man is an Island* was written by a mature, educated mind for people who have travelled far enough on life's road, that they are able to stop, think and see the losses mankind suffers each day. None of us ever know for whom, or when, the bell will

toll. Though not a poet, Hemingway wrote in his novel, *Death in the Afternoon*, "...all stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true-story teller who would keep that from you." Donne has achieved this, bringing to mankind, great scope and truth to a most sober subject.

No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man
is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a
Clod bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse,
as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor*
of thy *friends* or of *thine owne* were; any mans *death*
diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And
therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls;
It tolls for *thee*. John Donne

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