Truth in Donne’s “Meditation #17”

John Donne’s “Meditation #17” is most widely known for the saying, “For whom the bell tolls” (Donne 1305). Ernest Hemingway used that phrase as a book title, but that same piece of literature contains another catch phrase that has been repeated in various forms over the years. “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main” (Donne 1305). Donne could not have known that this one line would still be affecting literature and popular culture almost 400 years later. The idea that “no man is an island” still rings true today. It has experienced a revival in literature and pop culture over the last one hundred years.

Even though Donne usually gets credit for the idea of “no man is an island,” it was Francis Bacon who first said, “If a man be gracious and courteous to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world, and that his heart is no island, cut off from other lands, but a continent, that joins to them” (Bacon). Bacon wrote this only a few years before Donne wrote “Meditation #17.” It may or may not be a coincidence that these two men wrote something so similar in the same era; but, one thing is certain, the idea that human beings need each other and cannot survive in isolation is not a new idea.

Donne’s ‘island’ reference in “Meditation #17” was more than just a statement about humanity needing relationships to be happy and thrive. The overall theme of the meditation is saying that we are all connected, whether we realize it or not (Beer). We are all connected in the
sense that when one of us dies, something is lost. A piece of the whole is lost because of our interdependence on one another.

Donne’s poem may have been almost forgotten until it was reprinted in the early part of the twentieth century (Beer). After the reprinting, Donne’s ideas started to show up again in literary works, such as the aforementioned “For Whom the Bell Tolls.” In 1965, Paul Simon released a song titled “I Am a Rock.” Although the song does not quote Donne directly, it does use the phrase “I am an island.” The man in the song is alone, by choice, and quite miserable. By choosing solitude, he thinks he is protecting himself from the possibility of heartbreak and betrayal. He spends his time alone in his room reading books and avoiding human contact. While the essence of the song seems to contradict Donne’s idea that man cannot exist on his own, at the same time it confirms Donne’s analysis by showing the misery of a person who chooses the path of solitude. The song laments, “I touch no one and no one touches me…I am a rock…I am an island” (Simon). The phrase, “no man is an island,” appears as an example of common clichés in a Jon Bon Jovi song called “Santa Fe,” released in 1990.

Another appearance of the island theme came in 2002 with the release of a movie called About a Boy, based on a novel by the same name. The main character in the movie is named Will Freeman. This name is an obvious play on words to signify that Will lives a very carefree lifestyle and has few connections with other people. He is happy, living the bachelor life, and answering to no one. The first thing the audience hears at the beginning of the movie is a segment from a television show, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire, asking the question: “Who wrote the phrase ‘no man is an island?’” The main character acts as narrator and tells the audience “in my opinion, all men are islands…100 years ago, you had to depend on other people…whereas now, you can make yourself your own island paradise, with the right supplies,
and more importantly the right attitude” (Weitz and Weitz). This initial narration sets the theme for the rest of the movie; Will is trying to prove that he does not need other people, only to be proven wrong before the end.

The Weitz brothers, Chris and Paul, directed About a Boy. In a 2002 radio interview by Jacki Lyden, Paul Weitz said, “It’s about a commitment-phobic guy who in order to-he gets it in his head that he’s going to date single moms and that’s the future for him. And in order to meet them, he pretends to have a child and joins a single parents group” (Lyden). Chris Weitz also comments, “Through this, he meets the fairly disturbed child of a depressive hippy single mom, who stalks Will and forces him essentially to become a father figure to him” (Lyden). At first, Will does not like the idea of Marcus coming around his house. The initial reason that he lets Marcus associate with him is because Marcus threatens to tell his mother and the single parent group that Will lied about having a child.

The theme that Will is an island continues throughout the entire movie. During an argument with the boy’s mother, Fiona, Fiona tells him, “Now I understand that you’ve come into his life for a reason, and you can’t just shut him out! You can’t shut life out! No man is an island” (Weitz and Weitz). Will replies by saying, “Some men are islands. I’m an island! I’m bloody Ibiza” (Weitz and Weitz). It is not until after this argument that Will acknowledges that being a lonely island is not the best idea.

Near the end of the movie, Marcus decides to participate in a talent show because he is trying to cheer up his depressed mother. Will rushes to the school to try to stop Marcus from committing “social suicide.” In a conversation backstage at the talent show, Will tells Marcus, “The important thing is to make yourself feel happy.” Marcus replies, “I’ve tried making myself happy; she’s tried making herself happy, but it doesn’t work. You need other people to make you
happy.” Will responds, “But that’s just it. If other people can make you happy, then they can also make you unhappy” (Weitz and Weitz). The audience realizes this is the turning point in the story because Will has just acknowledged his own fear. In trying to help Marcus, he has unwittingly gotten to the root of his own problem, fear of rejection. This same feeling is shown in the Paul Simon song with the words “I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain” (Simon). What the man in the song failed to realize is that relationships with other people require taking chances. Without taking a chance, there can be no true happiness.

Through their relationship, Marcus and Will both find acceptance and healing, along with several other characters in the film, including Marcus’s suicidal mother. The movie closes with Will saying, “Every man is an island. I stand by that. But, clearly some men are island chains. Underneath, they are connected” (Weitz and Weitz). Marcus finished his thought by saying, “I used to think two was not enough. But now things are great; there are loads of people... I don't know what Will was so pissed about. I don't think couples are the future. The way I see it now, we both got back up. It's like that thing Jon Bon Jovi said: 'No man is an island’” (Weitz and Weitz). Marcus was referring to the opening line of the Bon Jovi song, “Santa Fe,” which also utilizes the phrase, “no man is an island.”

Even after four hundred years, John Donne’s words are still meaningful and relevant. Paul Simon’s song, “I am a Rock,” illustrates how miserable an isolated person can become by refusing to be involved and have relationships with other people. The Weitz brothers’ movie, About a Boy, shows a detailed illustration of a man coming to an epiphany about this issue. He changes his fundamental ideas about life through the experience of realizing that life is better when shared with others.
Works Cited


