

## A Brief Thematic Survey of the Discourse of Love in the Poetry of John Donne

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### Abstract:

*There is no doubt that love constitutes the main text as well as the subtext of John Donne's poetry. This paper scrutinizes some of his poems in order to uncover his treatment of the twin concepts of divine love and erotic love. As a tool for doing this, some of his poems as compiled in Helen Gardner's book **The Metaphysical Poets** are analyzed in order to explore the confluence of the sacred and the profane in his poetry. The paper reveals that in his poetry the sacred and the profane are not independent and separate but rather form an unbreakable continuum. The paper further observes that in the poems studied John Donne has tried to avoid the metaphysical dualism that most often pitches the demands of the body against those of the spirit in the realms of love. The paper concludes that it is indeed in the cerebral metaphysical quest of a harmonious balance between these supposedly distinct demands that Donne demonstrates his exquisite mastery of the grammar of love. Moreover, in the poetry of John Donne the love of God ultimately merges with the love of wo/man.*

**Key words:** Divine love, erotic love, man-woman relationship, Ovid, Petrarch, Christian Platonism.

### Introduction

From the Medieval right through the Renaissance, to the Modern, and Post-modern periods, love has always been an

important topic of discussion in literature in general, and poetry in particular. Its trope has been appropriated by poets to plumb into the depth of man's quest for self-immortalization and personal aggrandizement. Perhaps this is because of the fact that our human ancestors (Adam and Eve) were first and foremost joined together in the Garden of Eden by the combinatorial bond of love and friendship. It is significant also that even after their glorious fall and eventual expulsion from the Garden as a result of their ineluctable disobedience caused by irresistible satanic impulses, Adam and Eve continue to love each other faithfully and assiduously.

### **John Donne**

John Donne was born in 1572. In 1601 he secretly married Anne More, a 16 year old girl, and her angered father had him imprisoned. He was born a Catholic but later converted to Anglicanism in his middle age, and was subsequently ordained as an Anglican priest in 1615. Though his marriage to Anne More did not last long, he irremediably saw in her a glimpse of the glory of God, and by extension through his relationship with her and the human love that developed between them, he also saw the irresistible pull of Divine love itself. His poetry, mostly composed before his ordination as a priest, includes poems sacred and secular, full of puns, paradoxes, conceits, wit, and recondite allusions at whose meanings we can sometimes only guess. He is famous for presenting networks of amorous experience in religious terms as well as couching intense devotional experience in erotic terms. As a poet who could write of the murky contours of man-woman relationship with misogynistic delight and hedonistic idealism, Donne often resorted to metaphors of divine love to explain the chiasmic ontology of the human bond of friendship. Indeed, in his poetry love is as much a filter as it is a mirror of the existential

struggle of humanity in the vast and thorny field of human personal relationships.

### **Love: Erotic and Divine**

According to Deborah Kuller Shrufer, during the Renaissance period “there are two well known paradigms for love in Western Christianity: one that models love on sexual desire, and one that views it in terms of friendship” (224). Both of these feature prominently in Donne’s poetry. It is important to note that for John Donne life was a totalizing gesture of love in its entirety—the love of women in his early life, then the love for his wife Anne More, and finally the love of God. Love was the supreme concern of his mind, the perpetual preoccupation of his heart, the focus of his experience, and the subject of both his poetry and sometimes his sermons. Most importantly, he writes about love with a rare candor and noetic bravura. Even more significantly, his poetry also bears a livelier sense of discursive-self-creation often framed as a metaphysical quest for human transcendence. In the meantime, however, his unbounded love for women has drawn the anger of some critics, mostly female, that sees him as a reprobate misogynist that takes pleasure only in having sexual relationship with women without the corresponding responsibility of giving them their due, as human beings that deserve respect. In this league are critics like Rebecca Ann Bach, who in her essay severely scolds Donne for his eroticism and pernicious disregard for the chastity of women. She argues that “Donne’s poetry and prose [has] revealed him as a man... opposed to all the major tenets of what would become heterosexuality—a system wedded to the principles that women are naturally inferior to men and, therefore, naturally more sexually desirous (and unfaithful);” (263). She also sees him as a vainglorious promiscuous person that takes delight in having sexual relationship with women by mischievously declaring that

“Donne obviously loved having sex with women” (263). Further pouring her outrage on Donne, Ann Bach says, “Donne...wasted his youth in the very pleasurable pursuit of sex with women.... [And] Throughout his life, he saw women as oversexed and naturally unfaithful” (264). However, without contesting the right of Ann Bach to see John Donne as a playboy and a misogynist, it is still arguable that he is a tenacious advocate of love that wrote songs and sonnets that compellingly celebrated it during his lifetime. For him love is an auratic enclave of self-affirmation; an area of erotic and divine sensual freedom. Consequently, love features in his poetry as an extended trope for self-exploration as well as a precoded signature of being and existence.

It is noteworthy that praising courtly love was a well established tradition in European palaces especially in England and Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In such palaces poets were specifically commissioned by monarchs to compose poems praising their amorous lives. More often than not, the poets would employ personally edifying conceits to praise the generosity of their patrons, mistresses, or both. Two of such prominent poets in the sixteenth century were the Roman poet Ovid and the Italian poet Petrarch. The two are known for sentimental sophistication in their poetic compositions. There is no doubt that in writing his poetry, John Donne was influenced by some of the literary conventions current in his time. For instance, some scholars have argued that a proper study of his poems would reveal the influence of the cerebral Roman writer Publius Ovidus Naso [known as Ovid] famous for his explorations of erotic love especially in his works such as *Amores*, *Amatoria*, and *Remedia Amoris*. There is also, they further suggest, the perduring influence of the Italian poet and humanist Francesco Petrarch [known as Petrarch] who is best known for his “Rime Sparse”, a collection of Italian lyrics which includes the long series of poems in praise of the mysterious “Laura”, the yet to be identified woman

who inspired his love poetry. For instance, N.J.C., Andreassen has boldly suggested that there is in the poetry of Donne a clear influence of both the Ovidian and the Petrarchan traditions.

Andreasean comments thus:

[... ] a sizeable number of Donne's poems can with some fairness be seen as subtypes within three general categories, each of which concentrates on a particular literary tradition. One group, those poems which treat love cynic-ally or see it as limited to sexual attraction, follows the Ovidian tradition. Although Donne is sometimes said to be anti-Petrarchan, mostly because of the anti-idealism which characterized his Ovidian poems, there is another group of poems... which draw on Petrarchism and portray a more impassioned and romantic love. And finally there is a group which reflects the doctrines of Christian Platonism, although in this case the tradition upon which Donne draws is perhaps more philosophical than literary [17].

From the above quoted passage three strands of influence which forms the justificatory foundation for his poems could be clearly discerned: Ovidian, Petrarchan, and Christian Platonism, both of which severally and jointly feature in his poetry.

Similarly, J.B. Leishman has also acknowledged the use Donne made of Ovid's trenchant amatory agenda especially in selected poems in the "Songs and Sonnets". Leishman argues that Donne in these poems "proceeded to reproduce something of the tone, the situations and the cynical wit of Ovid's *Amores*" (56). These texts, according to him, conveys typical Ovidian themes including triangular situation between poet, mistress, and husband; secret signs exchanged between lover and beloved, personal training in the theory and practice of love; the virtue of inconstancy, the vice of fidelity, and so on. In the same vein, Stampfer Judah poignantly concurs with Leishman by asserting that Donne, "... [Is] the forerunner and advocate of ... sexual libertarianism" (65). He goes on to say that Donne's love poetry portrays "...a boy of high theoretical

daring[...]waving his[...]sword in all directions as he treads gingerly forward(towards women).” Judah further observes that, in his poems he praises “the doctrine of intercourse, the exhilaration of chasing women,[ but] not the experience that follows catching them” (83). Donald Guss also discusses both the Petrarchan as well as the Ovidian influence in his book *John Donne: Petrarchist—Italiante Conceits and Love Theory in The Songs and Sonnets*. Guss (17-18) commented that there is definitely the Ovidian strand in Donne’s poetry, and it can be discerned by taking note of three things. First of all, he says, these works are characterized by flagrant, animated promiscuity and amorous insouciance. Second, he notes that these texts imply a bawdy naturalism by promoting debauchery on the basis of the sexual behavior of animals, and on the ground of the depressing moral neutrality of women as well as their psychological capabilities. The third characteristic according to Guss is Donne’s fine-grained practicality expressed by a complete lack of sentimentality. Guss goes on to conclude that in these ways, Donne seemed to draw upon the Ovidian tradition in his love poetry.

As mentioned earlier, there is also a strand of the Petrarchan influence in John Donne’s poetry. The influence of the Italian writer and humanist in the writings of Donne was deep-rooted and pervasive. It was reported by Guss that Donne was such an admirer of Petrarch that he took a line from his *Canzonieri* (CCVI) as his personal motto and inscribed it on flyleaf of his books: “*Per Rachel ho servitor, e non per Lia*” (For Rachel I have served, and not for Leah). Presumably, this indicated that his true commitment to the Petrarchan tradition was to the contemplative rather than the active life, a motto that seems appropriate for the religious Donne. Donald Guss further argues that the Petrarchan tradition is the key that unlocks the meaning of much of Donne’s love poetry, believing as it were that Petrarchism supplies him [Donne] with his basic subject, amatory themes, and extreme evocative images. He

was however quick to point out that there were two types of Petrarchism at work during Donne's time. The first type was what he calls "Humanistic Petrarchism" which "aims at universal truth, eternal emotions, and neoclassical decorousness: it is elegant, idyllic, and sentimental" (18). This form of Petrarchism was in practice in England and on the continent [of Europe] in the mid- sixteenth century just slightly prior to Donne's time. Similarly, there was what he calls "Extravagant Petrarchism" which was Donne's presumed poetic tradition. It is characterized by "fantastic arguments, emotional extravagance, and peregrine comparisons" (18). The subject of this Petrarchism was "love", of course, emotional as well as spiritual "conceived as a noble way of life, and the lover as an aristocrat of feeling"(49).

Other critics have noticed these and similar Petrarchan themes especially in Donne's "Songs and Sonnets". For instance, Andreasen has isolated four of such themes in his book. Firstly, is the motif of scorn, that is, the loathing of the beloved for the lover and the lover's reaction to it, including the idea that the latter's death is a fait accompli if love is not returned (as in "Love's Deity" for example). A second approach concerns the reaction of a lover who has loved his beloved intensely such that when she dies, he is overcome with disabling grief and despair, especially in acknowledging that the beloved was, after all, a mortal ("A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day" is a good example). The third proposition developed by Donne is that of self-deception, namely that lovers trick themselves by believing that their relationship is the epitome of human love, and that it presents a valuable example for all others in the world to follow because of its continuing and pervasive shaping influence (as seen in "The Canonization" and "The Ecstasy"). A final Petrarchan conception exploited by Donne has to do with a two-fold remedy for disordered love. Idolatrous Petrarchan love is a typical example here. It is

commonly characterized by apathy, pain and misery, especially when such imprudent love is not returned.

The third and the final leg of Donne's literary influence is that built around the doctrine of Christian Platonism. This is a philosophy of love that seeks to balance the roles as well as to establish the right relations between body and soul. In the history of the West, hegemonic metaphysical or ethical perspectives have lopsidedly emphasized the role of either the body or the soul (à la Descartes), but failed to bring them into equilibrium. In this regard, for instance, Epicureanism and Naturalism in general diminish the soul and dissolve it into the body. On the other hand, Manichaeism and Absolutism in general squelch the body and submit it to the domination of the soul. In principle both are guilty of reductionism, either to aestheticism or asceticism, or of inclining adherents to either hedonism or mysticism. In both cases, it would seem, human life and human love will be anamorphosed and disfigured. It is precisely at this point that Christian Platonism comes into play. Though it may have a tendency to elevate the soul (over the body), especially in its more ethereal formulations, it nonetheless seeks to bring the two together in a happy harmony, thereby substituting wholism [favoring only one end of the body/soul divide], for a dis/integrating dualism. In order to understand John Donne's Platonic outlook, a closer connection must be made with his Christian conceptions. A critical look at these conceptions would reveal a doctrine that first believes that God is the quintessence of goodness as well as the creator of all things (à la Puritanism). Since his good creation would include the human soul and body, both must be included and given their due in a comprehensive understanding of love. Secondly, since God is the creator of all things, all things do indeed participate in and reflect the creator and his goodness. As a corollary, physical beauty in the body would reflect spiritual beauty in the soul, and spiritual beauty in the soul would mirror the beauty of God. In fact Jacques Derrida

has expressed this point with striking eloquence when he imputes that love is nothing but “the spiritualization of sensuality” (93). Consequently, there is a ladder of ascent from the physical to the purely spiritual, but both would be necessary in the grand unity of things. And finally in this world view, three types of union would be recognized: the union of human bodies sexually, the union of souls emotionally, and the union of souls with God spiritually.

In broader terms, therefore, to limit love to the union of bodies, or to focus on the union of souls apart from bodies would be asymmetrically incomplete. Similarly, to experience the union of both body and soul, but excluding union with God would be a manifest idolatry. Simply stated, for love to be perfect and complete there must be a coupling of body, soul, and God; anything short of this is inadequate and could morph into idolatry.

In fact, N.J.C. Andreasen captures Donne’s Christian Platonism with logical stringency when he avers that:

Although human beings may enjoy and love physical beauty, it alone will never satisfy, and so they must also love spiritual qualities and ultimately the eternal and unchanging *Imago Dei* which shines within the beloved; when they love the image of God, their love helps them climb toward God; such love is lasting, because it is founded on something not subject to change; and because such love is self-less, sympathetic, and charitable, it produces an unshakeable spiritual union between two partners (197).

An acquaintance with Donne’s poetry would meticulously reveal the integrative role played by both body and soul in a proper conception of love. The best example of this could be found in his poem “The Ecstasy” where he speaks of “that subtle knot that makes us (hu)man”. This poem is an emblem of both sensual and Platonic love. For instance the opening stanza in its contemplative mirroring of time well spent by the two

lovers, is clearly talking about sensual love at its passionate best:

Where, like pillow on a bed,  
A pregnant banke swel'd up, to rest  
The violets reclining head,  
Sat we two, one another's best; [Gardner 74].

The imagery in this stanza, evokes a sensual atmosphere of love, cordiality and relaxation (“pillow on bed”, “The violets reclining head”), and by quest of the souls of the lovers seeking union with one another as suggested by “Our hands were firmly cimented / with a fast balme, which thence did spring”,. A further alignment of the lovers’ souls is hyperbolically hinted at in the line that says “Our eye beames twisted, and did thread/our eyes, upon one double string;” Further down the stanza, the meeting of the souls of the lovers is Platonically described using the overarching metaphor of the army:

As ‘twixt two equall armies, Fate  
Suspende uncertaine victorie,  
Our Soules, (which to advance their state, were gone out,)  
hung ‘twixt her, and mee [Gardner 75].

From the foregoing stanza it could be seen that the union of the two lovers is through the tactile sense of touch and the cognitive sense of sight. It is by this means, particularly through the visual economy of gazing into each other’s eyes, “that soul is being conveyed to soul” and such strident desire for union is being commandeered as will make “the souls of each other to abandon their bodies”[Gardner 234]. If the spiritual union of the souls of the lovers is the *raison d’être* of “The Ecstasy”, the physical union of the lovers’ body is that of another of Donne’s amorous poems “The Flea”. In this poem the poet-persona delivers a fiery, sermonizing speech with the aim of cajoling his lover to have sexual intercourse with him. Using quasi- theological language to advance his argument, he uses the metaphor of the flea to a great effect. Consequently, the flea

in this poem becomes an iconic and fetishized image of sensual love. For example, the opening lines of the poem are poignant and persuasive in their appeal to the undefined lover, presumably a female:

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,  
How little that which thou deny'st me is;  
Mee it suck'd first, and now sucks thee,  
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;  
Confesse it, this cannot be said  
A sinne, or shame, or loss of maidenhead, [Gardner 57].

In this opening stanza, we could see the direct appeal of the poet-persona to his lover to consent to a sexual union of the flesh through the use of what Donald Gus (18) elegantly describes as “fantastic arguments, emotional extravagance, and peregrine comparisons”. By using the metaphor of the flea that sucked and mixed their blood, the poet-persona is using a rhetorical conceit to hide his amorous advances to the lover. Having set the tone of the poem thus, he goes on to warn the lover not to spurn his love, because doing so will tantamount to a sacrilege. He goes on to say that killing the flea that has already sucked and mixed their blood, would be a very big sin. He argues that in killing the flea, she would be committing three sins: murder (her sexual reluctance, in the courtly tradition, is killing him); suicide (shedding the flea's blood is also shedding her own blood); and sacrilege (the flea being the temple in which their wedding has taken place). In spite of this appeal however, the woman goes on to crush the flea and in the process “Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?” He then marvel at her heedlessness and rhetorically asks:

In what could this flea guilty bee,  
Except in that drop which it suckt from thee?

The poet-persona also goes on to beg the woman lover not to consider their act of intercourse “A Sinne, or shame, or loss of maidenhead” because a flea bite, which, like sex, would mingle

the two lover's blood/fluid could not possibly be classified as sin. He also points out to her that yielding herself to him would cost her little or nothing at all by drawing her attention to the fact that her killing of the flea in spite of his appeals did not in any way change the status quo. He then cautions her to "then learn how false fears be; /Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,/Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee."

"The Flea" is one of the most important in the corpus of Donne's amorous poems. Another of his poems in the same category is "A Valediction Forbidden Mourning". In this poem too, the poet-persona says to his lover that their separation should be as quiet as the passing of a holy man, so quiet that the rest of the world would not know when body and spirit had separated. He also cautions the lover against publicly exposing their liaisons by equating such action to a "Prophanation of our joys/ To tell the layetie our love." In this poem the vocabulary of the church provides Donne with his stinging metaphors and hyperbolic exhortations. Consequently, expressions that have biblical connotations such as "teare floods", "Prophanation", "Layetie", etc. are vigorously appropriated. The poem has also benefited from the scientific/Newtonian language of the seventeenth-century. For instance, he describes the meeting of the souls of the two lovers in a compelling, hyperbolic verbal imagery "As Stiffe twin compasses are two,/ Thy Soule the fixed foot, makes no show/ To move, but doth, if the' other doe." This Metaphorical comparison of the soul with the (legs) of the compass is very superb. It is a Metaphysical conceit that encapsulates and unveils the supreme yearning of the male-lover for his estranged female-partner as captured in the imagery of the two legs of the compass that are providentially bound temporally as well as metaphysically.

As mentioned elsewhere in this essay, in John Donne the love of women is akin to the love of God. In other words, to love wo/ man and God at the same time is a commendable act in his philosophy. The only caveat to observe, however, is to guard

against turning the love of a woman into idolatry by elevating it [the love] over and above that of God. Furthermore, an interesting sidelight to all this is that in the poetry of John Donne it is possible to find the two kinds of love harmoniously coexisting side by side as well as mutually enriching each other. An example of this could be found in his poem "Love's Dietie" which beatifies both human and divine love. The declamatory opening lines of the poem signifies the concern of the poet-persona: "I long to talke with some old lovers' ghost,/ who dyed before I was borne:/ I cannot thinkee that hee, who then lov'd most, / Sunke so low, as to love one which did scorne." He then goes on to describe true love as that love which is reciprocal and mutually beneficial, "It cannot bee / Love, till I love her, that loves mee." The poet-persona in a bid to win over his lover further describes his sexual modus operandi and the presumed sanctioning of it by the "God of love." In this regard he says "To rage, to lust, to write to, to commend, / All is the purlewe of the God of love." Arguably, by grammatically capitalizing the "G" in the word "God" Donne is suggesting that this God is none other than the *Imago Dei*. It is my contention however, that the word as used in this context could also have a dual meaning. In one sense it connotes the diachronic loving grace of God upon his creatures; in yet another sense it evokes the synchronic love of God upon the lovers.

Similarly, divine love could be seen in poems such as "Holy Sonnets: Divine Meditations," "Aire and Angels" and "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucies days, Being the shortest day". Indeed this study of Donne's love poems has deductively unfolds the arguable fact that his perspective is an attempt at integration, at wholeness, and at the fusion of dialectical forces of human and divine love. Yet, another important thing that could be noticed from this study is the fact that as far as Donne was concerned, love has a renewed potential for further humanizing interpersonal relationships. Even more radically and fundamentally, Donne concurrently suggests that love is

powerful, but if left unguided, it may very well abuse both the body and the soul in its quest for satisfaction. However, with careful nurturing and proper guidance, love can be rightly animated by an optimistic vision of blissful existence. In this respect, Donne's outlook finds an appropriate place for both body and soul in the dynamic existential project of a rightly guided love. Furthermore, Donne's poetry reveals that the fusion of human and divine love can produce a pattern of life that is profoundly rooted in man's existential longing for wholeness. This is arguably true because it is in the love of God, which is the highest of all love, that human love itself finds its meaning and final reference point.

## **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, if it is true that all human love has its source and meaning in the very love of God, then there ought to be a reciprocal relationship between these two forms of love, i.e., the infinite [divine love] and the finite [human love]. In the meantime, however, Divine love validates human love, and human love reflects and reinforces God's love. Consequently, there is a close nexus between human and divine love[s]. This is certainly true in Donne's Christian Platonism in which all things in the universe, including human love, are a reflection of and point to things in heaven. Needless to say, love is a recurrent navigational device in his poetry. It was the supreme concern of his mind, the perpetual preoccupation of his heart, the focus of his experience, and the subject of his poetry and sometimes his sermons. Certainly, he writes about it with a rare candor and noetic bravura. Indeed, in Donne's poetry human love is undergirded by divine love and the two in turn forms an unbroken continuum. A refined way of saying all this is that in the poetic world of John Donne there is a link between the corporeal and the ethereal, body and soul, God and

man; and love is the defining element that stitches them together.

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