

John Donne: Selected Poems

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Introduction

John Donne (1572-1631)

“There is no such thing as a human independent of culture”

(Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*)

Clifford Geertz’s remark showcases the correlation between an individual and the society to which that individual is born, as “culture” is “a set of control mechanisms- plans, recipes, rules, instructions...for the governing of (individual) behaviour”. The contemporary socio-cultural-political-economic histories thereof become the various determinants that shape the personal and literary life of the authors producing the literature of those times. This socio-cultural discourse that dominates the public space seeps into the personal/private spaces occupied by the individuals of that society to become part of their subconscious identity. Correspondingly, the texts produced by the authors are symptomatic of various cultural codes, which are constantly both a reflection of and a response to the social dynamics.



Donne in 1591, an engraving by William Marshall

Born in the Elizabethan England, starting his writing career in the Jacobean Era and breathing his last in the Caroline Age, John Donne’s personal and literary life stands as a testament to the inter-reliance existing between an individual/author and his socio-political circumstances. Each detail in Donne’s personal life becomes a document that informs the reading of his poems, satires, sermons, prose pieces, and so on. This is not to reduce the reading of

Donne’s works to a mere literary biography, but to “understanding literature as a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture....(And) great art is an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture...”

(Stephan Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self- Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*).

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John Donne:

Born in 1572 in Bread Street, London, Jack Donne was the third of six children born to staunchly Catholic parents, John Donne, an ironmonger and Elizabeth Heywood, the youngest daughter of a writer and epigrammatist, John Heywood. Donne's father died a couple of years after his birth in 1576 and his mother remarried a well-off widower, Dr. John Syminges. Elizabeth Heywood was a descendant of Sir Thomas More's family and knowing the family history of persecution, especially More's execution in the year 1534, and exile of his uncles Ellis and Jasper Heywood, Donne right from the onset was extremely conscious of his religious orientation in testing political times. Sixteenth century England knew no other religion than Christianity, but being a Catholic Christian, Donne was consistently paying its price. He writes in a letter:

"As I am a Christian, I have been ever kept awake in a meditation of martyrdom, by being derived from such a stock and race, as I believe, no family hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the teachers of Roman Doctrine, than I hath done."

 <p>Henry VII (1485 - 1509)</p> <p>Henry VIII (1509 - 1547) m. Catherine of Aragon</p> <p>Anne Boleyn</p> <p>Jane Seymour</p> <p>King Philip of Spain m. Mary I (1553 - 1558)</p> <p>Elizabeth I (1558 - 1603)</p> <p>Edward VI (1547 - 1553)</p>	<p>1534- King Henry VIII declared the Church of England independent of the Church of Rome and announced himself as the Supreme Head of the Church of England. This is also known as the Act of Supremacy.</p> <p>It is believed that The Act of Supremacy was established by the king foreseeing the difficulty in negotiating with the Pope, for annulment of his first marriage with Catherine of Aragon, facilitating the acceptance of his marriage with Anne Boleyn.</p> <p>This Act was, however, repealed in the year 1554 by Mary, eldest daughter of Catherine of Aragon and Henry VIII, when she ascended the throne.</p> <p>Sir Thomas More was executed in the year 1534 for his refusal to accept King Henry VIII as the supreme authority presiding over the Church of England.</p>
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	The repealed 1534 Act of Supremacy was reinstated by the Protestant Queen, Elizabeth I, when she ascended the throne in the year 1558.
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The repercussions of belonging to a Catholic family, living under the rule of a Protestant Queen and at times when the state demanded the Oath of obedience from all its citizens, was experienced by Donne at various stages. He had to be educated at home, if he were to receive education by Catholic priests. And later, when he did attend college at Hart Hall, Oxford, he would not be awarded the degree, for he was a Catholic. Jonathan F.S. Post, in his essay on the early life of John Donne, would go so far as to say, that while Donne was aged 12 during his matriculation at Oxford, on the records he was made to be 11 years old, in order to escape the Oxford Matriculation Statute, which meant to bypass the Papal authority. However, according to his biographer, Isaac Walton, for reasons of conscience, Donne did not stay for the degree, at all.

The consolidation of the State/and Court and the Church only made him tread over a more and more infertile a soil as far as issues of sponsorship and marketability were concerned. This was so because the London of his times was divided among rigid class, social and religious hierarchies. The monarch and the court favourites were at the top of the social ladder and Donne, even when he chose to stay clear of any controversy by writing on secular themes, remained on the periphery.

In the face of this backdrop, it would not be an exaggeration to say that some of the professional decisions taken by Donne at this stage were purely owing to his economic location. The year 1596 marks the beginning of a new phase in Donne's life, a phase which is characterized by several mysteries, ambiguities and unresolved doubts about Donne's faith. His voluntary participation in the Essex expedition of 1596 and 1597 against Catholic Spain enables him to gain secretariship under Egerton and also manages to achieve positive reception by the state, having proved his loyalty for the state and having cleared the suspicions about his religion. Rina Ramdev in her

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'Introduction' to Donne quotes George Parfitt, who in *John Donne: A Literary Life* writes, "the movement from full integration in a Catholic family to the deanship of St. Paul's may have less to do with epiphanies than with a series of small shifts, compromises with circumstances which do not necessarily call integrity in doubt." Isaac Walton, however, views this as a kind of religious/spiritual betrayal in pursuit of worldly, material gains. Despite enclosing two different perspectives on Donne's faith, both Parfitt and Walton maintain that what was of utmost significance to Donne at that point was the economic sustenance. This tendency in Donne, I would a little later argue at length, to acclimatize himself is seen repeatedly in the kind of poetry he writes, which also explains his shift from writing love and erotic poetry to being a poet of holy sonnets and sermons. However, before we begin analyzing his 'poetry', we need to know that this phase of promissory monetary comforts comes to an end after his secret marriage with a minor, Anne More, daughter of Sir George More (Egerton's brother-in-law) in 1601. After this marriage is revealed in 1602 to his wife's father, he loses his employment and lands up in prison. Furthermore, the responsibility of roughly 12 children that were produced at an interval of nearly every year, further crush the prospects of a comfortable life.

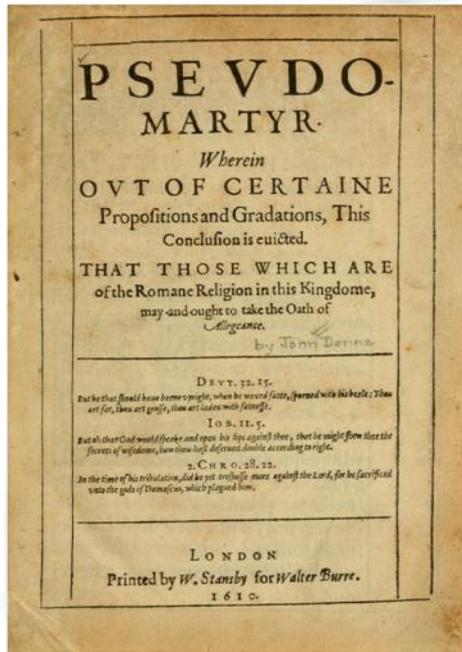
Donne's ability to acclimatise himself:

Donne did not write for the masses, but always for a small section of people, for coterie readers. At Lincoln's Inn, he was comfortable writing lewd, bawdy and a highly sensual and erotic kind of poetry, for that's what was appreciated in that circle. To make a place for himself in the Elizabethan court, he began writing what was then fashionable, for the court. Elegies, along with songs and sonnets, mostly on the theme of love and love-making were the suitable substances to gain favours from the queen and the elders at the court. However, after the death of Queen Elizabeth I and with the ascension of King James I on the throne of England, a shift could be seen in Donne's writing. Elegies about heterosexual love, unabashedly sexual and erotic were replaced with holy sonnets advocating divine love and spiritual coding. For in the Jacobean court, religious verses were the order of the day, as the king himself had had an interest in composing religious

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poems. However, recurrent themes like thwarted ambition, search for employment, economic crisis, and advancement in court and so on supplied the immediate vocabulary and metaphors to both love as well as religious poems.

During this phase, could be seen yet another significant choice made by Donne: the composition and publication of *Pseudo Martyr* in 1610.



This text, abundant with quotations and references, charting the relations between the state and the church from the earliest times to 1600s, was written to convince the English Catholics that it was possible to swear obedience to the English ruler, James I, without betraying one's faith. This text was a testament of Donne's support for the king and the Oath of Allegiance, requiring obedience from all its citizens, issued by the king in 1606, soon after the Gunpowder plot in 1605.



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunpowder_Plot

The Gunpowder Plot (1605)

It was a failed assassination attempt against King James I, headed by Robert Catesby and a group of provincial English Catholics on 5th November 1605. The lack of religious tolerance during the reign of James I left the Catholics disappointed. The gunpowder plot was, therefore, their way of avenging for their faded secular hopes by blowing up the House of Lords.

In January 1606, during the first sitting of the Parliament after the plot, it was decided that this day would be celebrated every year commemorating the failure of the event with church bells,

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	fireworks, bon fires and so on. This was also known as the observance of 5 th November 1605 Act, or the Bonfire Night, or the Guy Fawkes Night.
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Pseudo Martyr was instrumental in Donne being rewarded with an honorary M.A from Oxford. It proved further beneficial for Donne, as this led the King to arrive at a resolution that Donne was not so much meant for the court as for the church. Shortly, in the year 1615, Donne assumed over a very important role, being ordained the deacon and priest at St. Paul's Cathedral on 23rd January 1615 and also to attend James I as the royal chaplain to Cambridge. In March, in keeping with the command of the king, he was given an honorary Doctorate degree from Cambridge. With these new roles, his final conversion from Catholicism to Anglicanism was sealed. From this point on, Jack Donne's erratic, impulsive and colourful life got buried under the much celebrated life of Dr. John Donne; post his acceptance of the holy orders. With this, Donne managed to escape a narrow social sphere and stepped into a realm where he was constantly in the contact of powerful people.

This trajectory in Donne's life, however, proves not just his willingness to customize his verses to suit the times, but also in realizing the ways through which power is localized in certain institutions that inadvertently lead to the formulation of the personal "I". Greenblatt in his essay emphasises the importance of 'cultural poetics' as a crucial interpretative device in decoding historical principles and symbolic structures that exist in the "careers of authors and in the larger social world as constituting a single, complex process of self fashioning and through this interpretation, come closer to understanding how literary and social identities were formed in this culture...to be able to achieve a concrete apprehension of the consequences for the human expression – for the "I".

Self, Identity and self-fashioning

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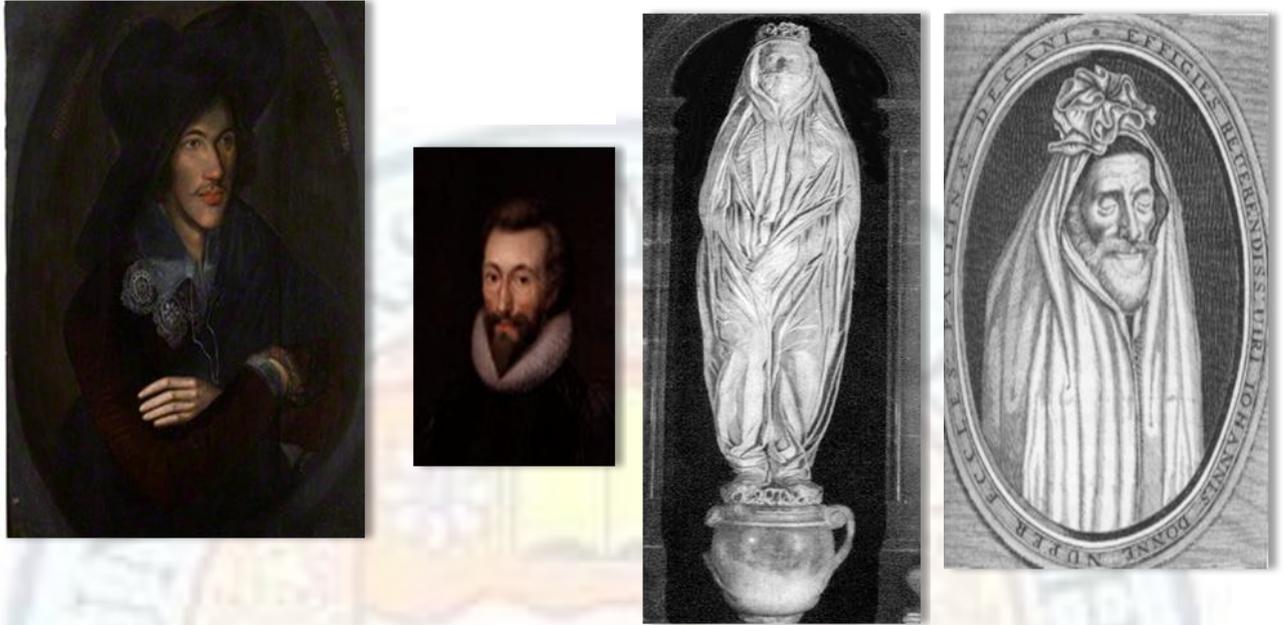
I attempt to decode multiple identities and 'selves' that are staged in the writings of John Donne. Prior to this, it is essential to be aware of 'self-fashioning', a trait which according to Greenblatt, existed in most of the writers during the sixteenth century. Greenblatt calls this "the shaping power" that these writers exercise over their lives, as being the sovereign creators of their 'self' was a means of both understanding as well as gaining human autonomy. Greenblatt, however, confesses that by the time his project ended he had comprehended the inescapability of cultural patterns in 'fashioning' what was perceived to be an exemplar of human autonomy. Nonetheless, like most of the writers of this time such as More, Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Spenser, Donne too is extremely conscious of his representation in social and literary circles.

Donne and the world of publication: Ted Larry Pebworth notes in his essay, 'The Text of Donne's writings', that Donne was exceptionally apprehensive about offering his writings to a general audience and therefore even in the post-Gutenberg period of print revolution (1475), withheld his manuscripts from going into print. He restricted the circulation of his manuscripts to certain patrons and very intimate friends like Christopher and Samuel Brooks, and Rowland Woodward. He feared infamy and disgrace in being recognized as a professional writer, as was the fate of the water poets like John Taylor. Pebworth thus explains why only a very few of Donne's works like the *Anniversary Poems*, *Pseudo Martyr* and a couple of others went into print, while Donne was still alive. While it was fashionable for the sixteenth century man to compose verses, and Donne did need a stable income to support himself and a large family; he considered it un-gentleman like and below his 'gravity' to be considered to be so.

Portraits of Donne: Donne's fascination with drama, performances and visual arts is now an established fact; to an extent that his acquaintance of visual arts lending the dominant imagery and metaphors to his poems is now in vogue in Donne criticism. For his times, however, he was an unusual writer for commissioning his own portraits at significant stages of his life. His biographers, Isaac Walton and Nicholas Stone, would

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remark that he gave special instructions to the artists, meticulously managing each detail in his portraits.



Picture I

Donne's Lothian portrait, painted by an unknown artist, was commissioned to be painted around 1590s, in all likelihood in the year 1595. In this portrait, Donne fashions himself as a melancholy lover, sitting with crossed arms and wearing a wide-brimmed hat. It is also believed that the dates of this portrait coincide with the period in which Donne was composing love poems in the courtly love tradition. Germaine Greer, writing for "the Guardian", in a January 2006 review, writes that the portrait is a replication of amorous lovers, since there appears a tinge too red on his lips and expression in his eyes is more close to languor. At the same time, one can say, that keeping in mind the complexities in Donne's poems and the subversion of Petrarchan courtly love tradition, the style adopted could also be a way of mocking at amorousness to be found in such poems. The interplay between light and shade, the illuminated features and the elongated fingers, nevertheless, are striking in highlighting the sexuality of the sitter; one cannot escape

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the sheer charm and elegance with which the eyes seem to be communicating with its viewer.

Picture II

Painted by Isaac Oliver in the year 1616, this portrait is based on a miniature painted by the miniature artist. This is a highly stylized portrait in which Donne perhaps fashions himself as a soldier and a secretary. As compared to the Lothian portrait far less is known about this portrait, but in keeping with the dates of this painting, one can safely assume this portrait to be emerging out of a secure period in Donne's life, having gained temporal success after his conversion to Anglicanism, and his access to the favours of James I. The frill or the ruffle around the neck of his garment could be an indicator of this, as this style is a peculiar feature of Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

Picture III and IV

Towards his end, Donne chose to leave an image of himself in the statue engraved by Nicholas Stone in 1631. For this statue, Donne posed to be in his shroud while he was still alive. This statue is emblematic of a period of extreme poor health. Donne apparently meditated over his withered and emaciated image as it would be lying on the death bed before commissioning the carving of this marble effigy, which was later to be placed in St Paul's Cathedral. Donne's pre-occupation with death had revealed itself at various stages in his life, especially because of a constant grief at losing one or the other near or dear one. He had written epitaphs on the death of his wife, Anne, the two 'Anniversary poems' on the death of Robert Drury's daughter, Elizabeth and so on. However, writing an

Donne's Epitaph on Himselfe

My fortune and my choice this
custom break,

When we are speechless grown to
make stones speak,
Though no stone tell thee what I was,
yet thou

In my grave's inside seest what thou
art now,
Yet thou 'rt not yet so good; till death
us lay

To ripe and mellow here, we're
stubborn clay.

Parents make us earth, and souls
dignify

Us to be glass; here to grow gold we
lie.

Whilst in our souls sin bred and
pamper'd is,

Our souls become worm-eaten
carcasses,

So we ourselves miraculously
destroy.

Here bodies with less miracle enjoy
Such privileges, enabled here to scale
Heaven, when the trumpet's air shall
them exhale.

Hear this, and mend thyself, and thou
mend'st me,

By making me, being dead, do good
for thee ;

And think me well composed, that I
could now

A last sick hour to syllables allow.

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epitaph for his own death and creating a spectacle or an image for his own death is the pinnacle of both this preoccupation as well as the idea of 'self-fashioning'.

Even when Donne appears to be fully in charge in both creating as well as transmitting that created 'self' in the social and literary spaces to the extent of monitoring this projection even after his death, there is a certain failure associated in the act as far as the 'self' is concerned. Contrary to the motives of 'self-fashioning', that is to gain autonomy; the fashioned-self loses some of its intrinsic value in constantly conforming to and surrendering itself to that discourse in the public space from which it seeks approval, acceptance or appreciation. It then, rather than becoming more autonomous, in reality becomes more and more dependent on that dominant discourse. Likewise, the fashioned-self is more of a portrait of the cultural codes and patterns of the social space than that of the inherent elements of a more personal and private world. Thus, one could argue that a mysterious veil is thereby casted upon the 'real self' that gets lost in the processes of "self-fashioning". This is perhaps one of the reasons why the questions on Donne's Self and Identity continue to puzzle scholars till date.

In Donne, we come across a highly restless and layered self. Multiple identities and multiple voices stage themselves when we read a Donnean poem or sonnet. These multiple identities and voices of the poem's speaker is the poet's negotiation with the structures of power that surround him.

Donne and the Elizabethan times: According to Sussanah B. Mintz, in her essay, "Forget the Hee and Shee: Gender and Play in John Donne" expounds on the theory of Roy Roussell that the Donne's speakers navigate between the competing urgencies of intimacy and autonomy. Roussell describes this as "the twin inevitabilities of distance and desire." It is interesting to note that the reception of Donne's poetry during these times, rested entirely with women. They were his patronesses and not the other way round. Seeking patronage from Magdalen Herbert, countess of Bedford, countess of Salisbury and a couple of others, he bowed to their pleasures and displeasures. He had

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also been writing to seek favours from the Elizabethan court which was functioning under the dominance of a female monarch, Queen Elizabeth I. Despite being invariably bordered by the ladies in the public and political space, there is a considerable anxiety in submitting to the rule of a female. The inability of being able to assert the masculine principle, which is essentially a principle of power and dominance, is then almost affirmed aggressively in the text. This reading assists our comprehension of the multiple selves that the Donne's speakers possess, as they are relentlessly negotiating with their position. His treatment of women, heterosexual love as providing stability to the society and the self-other relation, therefore, are all immersed in an unfathomable ambivalence.

In his love poems, Donne establishes a certain unity of oneness between the heterosexual lovers. Unlike the feudal hierarchies that existed between the powerless Petrarchan lover and his beloved that have been staged infinite number of times in the sonnets of Sidney, Donne establishes a degree of equality between the lover and the beloved as what is of utmost significance to them is love; no class, no gender, no race:

"Call us what you will, wee are made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly..."

(Cannonization, 209).

Our hands were firmly cemented
With a fast balm, which thence did spring...
So to' intergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the means to make us one..."

(The Ecstasy, 159).

Yet, there are an equal number of poems in which this on-the-surface neat unity is entirely and easily bombarded:

"Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be"

(Elegie, To His Mistress Going to Bed, 199).

"She's all States, and all Princes, I,
Nothing else is"

(The Sun Rising, 207).

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From being equal and "One in love", the male immediately presumes the role of a persuader and possessor, and the female quite automatically becomes the persuaded and the possessed. The male and the female, then, are not just prefixed with two different kinds of power roles, the former with a certain degree of superiority and the latter with a measure of inadequacy, but they are also placed at polar ends to each other. So, while Donne's poems convey a certain urgency of contact in love and love making ("come, Madam, come, rest all my powers defy", "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love", ...), at the same time the fear of being consumed by that contact is powerfully spelled out through the distance of power and dominance that he creates between the lover and the beloved. Janel Mueller in her essay, "Women among the Metaphysicals: A Case, Mostly, of Being Donne for", shares a remark by Natalie Davis on the notions of gendered difference to be found in Donne as an outcome of being a product of the Renaissance. In renaissance culture, and in Donne "to confront the fact of sexual difference is to engage with issues of dominance and subordination, for there seems to be no other reason for the difference to exist."

Donne in Jacobean times: The power relations that underline such binaries also inform the self-other relation in the religious verses of Donne. In the male speaker's correspondence with God, Donne had to find a suitable model to communicate the conflict between autonomy and dependence, assertion and submission, power and surrender. For many critics, this conflict was central to Donne's temperament. However, the problem lay in finding a model to replace the power relations that revolved around hetero-normativity, as in this model it was taken for granted that the female figure was to be made subservient to her male counterpart. This neat power game, however, proved difficult to be replicated when the male figure stood face to face with another male authority. The most favourable preference for writing religious poetry would have been to opt for the father-son model, which was a sanctioned and established model within the framework of Christian orthodoxy. Also this model could have been helpful in generating a political analogy, employing the relationship between the devotee and the

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God as a way of subscribing to the divine authority of the male king. Yet, this model would not have been satisfactory in enabling Donne in his affirmation of the masculine principle. Donne, therefore, turned back to the model of hetero-normativity to derive a potent vocabulary to define the self-other correspondence in the holy sonnets.

This is how the language of love and sexuality found its way into the world of religious verses composed by Donne. The male speaker, as a devotee, immediately assumed the role of a female figure, investing a lot of faith and power in the male authority, the God. Even when Donne's speaker assumes a role that is associated with the female principle, which is essentially a principle of surrender and submission, there is an affirmation of the universal masculine power. The language of love and eroticism is, therefore, further intensified in the holy sonnets; it becomes a language of sheer power, force and violence:

"divorce me, untie, or breake that knot againe,

Take me to you, imprison me, for I

Except You enthrall me, never shall be free"

(Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God, 212)

It is interesting to note that be it the love poems or the holy sonnets, there is a certain "monopoly of discourse" that is to be seen in Donne's poetry. In the love poems, it's the male speaker that is engaged in the argument, urging the compliance of the beloved. In the religious poems, likewise, it's the male devotee who leads the argument by accusing God for neglecting him and therefore seeking his corrective powers in order to gain a spiritual union. Janel Mueller uses Virginia Woolf's term, "monopoly of discourse" from Woolf's essay on Donne, "Donne after Three Centuries"; to state that in Donne's poems the dialogue is always between one person, the male speaker, which reinscribes the inequality between the sexes. The gendered language to be found in

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Donne's poetry has kept alive the debate on the role of the lady in his poetry even after four centuries.

The Lady in Donne's Poems

Comprehension of Donne's correspondence with women, both in his real life as well as the women as represented in his writings is layered with complexities. However, to locate this debate in socio-cultural, political and historical times in which Donne was writing may prove helpful in demystifying the role of 'the lady' in his *Songs and Sonnets*. In an attempt to do so one encounters two extremely opposing notions on Donne. According to one school of thought, Donne is nothing more than a blatant manifestation of patriarchy, a misogynist; a view that has been put into circulation by intellectuals like Elaine Hobbes, Helen Gardener, Catherine Belsey, and many others. However, there is emerging a fairly recent body of criticism that is beginning to perceive Donne through alternative perspectives. Scholars such as Iona Bell, Natasha Distiller, and a few others appear to mark a departure from the conventional approaches of reading Donne in a stereotypical frame. It would also be of use to look at the representation of 'the lady' in the sonnet tradition as initiated by the earlier sonnet writers, a tradition which Donne both inherited, as well as subverted.

'The lady' in the Petrarchan sonnet tradition – The Italian sonneteer, Francesco Petrarch is considered to be the earliest writers of the sonnet tradition. Inspired by and addressed to his beloved, Laura, Petrarchan sonnets depicted the archetypal love relationships that were characteristic of the feudal society. The beloved was eulogized for both her inner and outer beauty and for the kind of love she inspired in the poet, but remained unattainable. The woman, usually being the wife of the noble lord for whom the poet/lover would be rendering his services, not just the fate of this asymmetrical relationship was sealed to always exist outside the domain of unison and consummation, but also defined the power relations between the lover and the beloved. Therefore, in Petrarchan sonnets and the sonnets inspired by him, common themes would be the

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sufferings and the disappointment of the lovers, distance and cold-heartedness of the beloved and so on. The sonnets would be peculiar in their lack of placing desire at the centre of lover's meditations on the beloved, for his certainty of this desire remaining unrequited in the given circumstances. Wyatt and Surrey who introduced the Italian/Petrarchan sonnet tradition to the English landscape in the sixteenth century, their sonnets were usually translations of Petrarchan sonnets, but with a different metrical pattern. Sidney, who developed this model further, and is credited to have popularized the sonnet tradition in England, stuck closely to Petrarchan themes and power relations that operated between the lover and the beloved.

It is believed that with Donne, the sonnet tradition entered an entirely different realm. His beloved was neither extolled to the level of an angel or a deity, nor debased to the level of a whore. She was as worldly/and earthly as Donne himself. The beloved was also, unlike her earlier Petrarchan counterparts, very much attainable, thereby inspiring in the lover/poet a discourse on desire and its fulfilment. With Donne, then, for the first time during the English Renaissance, desire is articulated in its myriad perspectives, and is unapologetically physical and sexual, without any need for a spiritual veil to be cast over it.

Nonetheless, Donne, even while subverting the Petrarchan tradition, continues to be an inheritor of that tradition and perhaps as a legacy of the same tradition the power dynamics between the lover and beloved as seen in Petrarch, and Wyatt and Sidney and Spenser, get reinstated. These power dynamics get further strengthened in the two spaces Donne travels during the early period of his writing career: the Inn's court and the Elizabethan England.

The Inns of Court - At the Inns of Court, encountering real women was a bleak possibility, as it was an entirely male space. Any kind of emotional, intellectual or physical dealing with women was thus out of question. This ignorance about women was, therefore, substituted with cultural stereotypes about women, which also found their way

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in the literature of the times. Any poetry composed in this space, then, is both composed by and meant for men. The power then given to female readers, female patronesses and female beloved was just a superficial way of giving power to women, considering the dynamics of the feudal society existing during the reign of a female monarch. This pseudo-agency given to women was misinterpreted by some as a central presence of women in the poetry of the times. Interestingly, these significant 'presences' never utter a single word; never express their feelings through language. They are "seen", performing some or the other action, but never "heard".

Silencing of Women – Antonio Ballesteros Gonzalez in his essay, "The Rest is Silence: Absent Voices in John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*", attracts the reader's attention to the personal pronouns used by the male speakers. The poems usually begin with the male poetic "I", but soon this "I" becomes a global "we". Despite this alteration, what the reader gets to read/hear is the male speaker's voice, his perceptions, his views. There are various cues that indicate to the presence of women, a series of verbs that show women in action, doing different tasks; yet these acting verbs become increasingly critical signifiers in raising doubts about her forced absence.

"It is the silencing of the nightingale (Philomela)....One of the most marked features of male love poetry is the silence within it of the women it is supposedly addressed to: the woman is usually present as an object of desire, but not as a speaking object."

Elaine Hobbes looks at the legal and economic organization of the then society, the conduct books of the times, the laws pertaining to the rights of women in marriage, and realizes that the powers of women are consistently curtailed. Such laws ensured women's subordination to men; it is not surprising if her powers are similarly kept under check in the poetry of the times. Donne's silencing of women in his *Songs and Sonnets* could be his way of reverting to the older hierarchies, in which men are forever, superior, hierarchies that were altered in the political space under the reign of the queen.

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This silence becomes increasingly problematic as the poems point to a very noticeable disjunction between "sound" and "action", what we "see" and what we "hear." The readers are made to "see" the woman primarily through the male gaze. For instance, in *Elegie: To His Mistress Going to Bed*, on the surface level, appears to be an argument put forward by the male/lover speaker to convince his beloved to undress. This argument presumes the beloved's denial or her choice to agree to or refute what her lover desires and thereby the need to convince her, a view put forward by Ilona Bell. However, the poem could also be read as a string of instructions that the lover spells out for his submissive beloved to fulfil. The woman's assertiveness or rebelliousness is not pronounced through language even when the pictorial quality of the poem constructs a certain delay at the end of the woman in granting to her male lover, the pleasure he seeks.

Donne writes to a male audience and not for a conventional lady could be further illustrated in the constant intrusion of the public world/spaces into the world of the lovers. The presence of an onlooker, a friend, in all likelihood a male figure of a public man is a recurrence in Donne's poems. For instance in *The Sun rising* and *The Canonization*, not just the public-private divide is blurred, but also the poetic persona is seen to be urging the male figures (the sun and the public man, respectively) to not cause any hindrance between him and his beloved and allow him to love. Conversing with male figures simultaneously while he takes charge of creating a personal, private space for the lovers, utopian as far as possible, deplores his determinacy to shut the lovers' space from any surveillance coming from the public space. Again, it's not the beloved but the representatives of the public space to whom he seems to be talking.

Catherine Belsey in her essay, "Worlds of Desire in Donne's Lyric Poetry" elaborates on Antony Easthope's point that the sexual object is constantly desexualized. The focus is not so much on the female body or sexuality, but on the recognition and visibility of the male body and masculinity. This reading necessitates the presence of a "Third Party", the onlooker or the friend to whom he could display his riches, possessions,

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masculinities and so on. ("My mine of precious stones", "Whether both the Indias of spice and Myne/ Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with mee", and so on). The vocabulary of imperialism and colonialism that Donne employs in his poetry is not just the dominant discourse coming from the seventeenth century political space but also a way of reconfiguring the distraught power roles that operate between the two genders.

The law of possession demands a spectacle of wealth for it to be converted into power, and this spectacle further demands the presence of a spectator. Donne's poems, thus, reveal a critical but compulsory tripartite in the act of achieving power; the tripartite between the possession, possessor and the spectator, that is to say, the nexus between the woman, the male lover and the male onlooker.

This is not the only instance when Donne employed the woman as an "object" in his poems, as a gateway to arrive at something. In his religious poems, the woman becomes the site to which Donne transfers his guilt, his guilt for having betrayed his faith. It has already been highlighted in the essay that the male poetic persona of Donne's religious poems assumes a female identity in offering its devotion to the male god. For many critics, this is Donne's way of re-staging certain stereotypes about women being unfaithful and disloyal. So, the burden of religious disloyalty was shifted to a perceived sexual infidelity to be a commonplace in women.

Defending Donne – The absence of female voice in Donne's poems has caused a lot of discomfort to many readers, who, then accuse Donne of being a misogynist. However, many critics are now challenging this charge and constructing the 'absent-presences' as substantial figures that help understanding Donne's perceptions about both men and women in his poetry. For many critics, the starting point in this project is Dryden's negative criticism of Donne:

"Donne perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softness of love."

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Dryden's argument is based on the cultural assumptions and stereotypes that indicate an inverse proportion between women and intelligence. Donne, on the other hand, continues to engage with complexities in his poems, knowing well, that at least some of his readers would be female. It is easy to believe that in making his poems complex, Donne was not merely exhibiting his fine talent at being witty but was being tongue-in-cheek and mocking the intelligence of his female readers for whom it would be difficult to comprehend the meaning of his poems. Mueller, in her essay would illustrate that this was not the case. When the two Anniversary poems of Donne went into print it caused a great deal of displeasure to the countess of Bedford and the countess of Salisbury. Donne immediately bowed down to the censures of his two patronesses and made all possible amends to seek their appreciation. Based on these details, one could comfortably dismiss Donne's conscious attempts at displeasing his female readers. Rather, Donne's witty and complexly layered poems, then, stand as a testimony to the intelligence and good opinion that he accepted in the female figures of the society. Ilona Bell in her essay, "The Role of the Lady in Donne's Songs and Sonnets", suggests that Donne has managed to "perplex" the minds of both the sexes with brilliant speculations about women. "Unlike his Petrarchan predecessors, when Donne writes of love, he writes not of imagined love or exalted beauty but of loving and being loved, at times, of hating and being hated, not of ladies seen and admired from a distance but a lady who is highly present, loving and criticizing, judging as well as admiring."

Donne's poems, then, become a site where female subjectivities are revealed. In fact, for Mueller, "In Donne the female other begins to contribute crucially to male selfhood when a speaker registers the onset of desire." The importance of 'self' is a well established feature of lyric poetry. Natasha Distiller, in her essay, "Petrarchism in Early Modern England" notes lyric tradition to be "a poetic genre that is profoundly concerned with the speaking of the self, and with speaking the self into being accordingly." Mueller and Bell's similar arguments about women, the highly subjectivised presences in Donne's poetry, are instrumental in facilitating both the formulation and the limiting of the self of

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the male poetic persona/lover. The speaking male fashions his self in relation to love, a love whose source is the female figure and exterminates the discussion of anything besides this loving self, that is to say that the vastness of the world outside the world of the lovers is no longer significant. This argument justifies the settings of Donne's poems to be restricted to one room, the bed, and the smaller spaces occupied by the lovers than the courts, palaces, cities, all public spaces in which the subjectivity of the male lover and the female could be lost.

In Donne's love poems, rather than staging 'women' as props to fulfil the sexual desires of the male lover, exercise a great deal of agency as believed by critics like Bell, Mueller, and Adney. It is true that Donne was polishing his skills as a lawyer in his poetry and that's why his poems come across as skilled arguments. At the same time, there is no reason as to why the poetic persona is required to use a grand amount of pragmatic oratorical skills in ensuring that the beloved at least considers granting what the male lover seeks. In *Elegie: To His Mistress Going to Bed*, the poem comes across as an argument that the lover constructs to convince his beloved to make haste with undressing herself. Be it the "male gaze" or the instruction- book mode that the poem adopts, it needs to be remembered that the poem ends without the lover's desires being fulfilled. The poem does not stage the fulfilment of the lover's desires; it ends precisely before the act of love- making or consummation that the male lover had been desperate for. Moreover, there is a certain degree of ambiguity as to whether the beloved gives in to the string of meticulous instructions put forward by the lover. The maximum that the readers know is, "To teach thee, I am naked first...", the male lover as if at the mercy and the benevolence of the beloved.

The argument that in Donne's religious poems, the hetro-sexual model is appropriated in order to make woman a site of transference of Donne's guilt is similarly challenged by the defenders of Donne. Mueller would elucidate this idea in her essay, "Once love (religious love, in this case) overwhelms the Donnean male with the complexities and uniqueness of being human, he seeks to reconstitute his identity by

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obtaining the loving recognition of the woman who is the object of his love." The woman becomes the epitome of pure love, a model that inspires the fashioning of the self in the male devotee. Love as a human and religious experience for Donne unites sense and soul; the inspirer and the inspired, too, likewise stand united ("So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit").

Analysis of the poems

In the 'Preface' to his book, *The Well Wrought Urn*, Cleanth Brooks prescribes an alternative perspective to comprehend the poems of Donne. Besides being an "expression of its age", it should be remembered that the poem is a work of art. For Brooks, it was essential to look at more "universal values" represented by the poem than the "particular values" of the times in which it was being composed. Casting aside the socio-cultural, political, historical and other such milieus, to read some Donnean compositions as an outcome of highly skilled art will complete our discussion on Donne.

The Sun Rising

Donne's dramatic monologue, *The Sun Rising* attempts at establishing the cult of love. The male poetic persona, the lover, decentres the sun from its new found position of power and places the lovers in that crucial centre. The poem begins with a string of abuses unleashed at the sun for disturbing the lovers after a night of passionate love-making. As and as the poem progresses, the speaker strips the sun, a representative figure of power of the natural as well as the public world, and appropriates that power to achieve a certain secularization of love.

Sun, at the centre of the cosmos, was a fairly recent discovery. Before the Copernican system replaced the Ptolemaic model, Earth and not the sun occupied that centre. Through the sheer power of language, Donne proves that the truth of one generation becomes fiction for the next. As sun has replaced Earth, it is possible that the

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sun is replaceable too, thus challenging the authority of the sun and nature. Donne offers yet another model, a model in which the lovers occupy the centre, as unlike the inconsistencies of science, love and the lovers' world are far too constant: "This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere."

Love as something more absolute is again established as Donne draws a distinction between the nature's time and the lovers' time:

"Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time."

Love is neither ruled by nature, nor constrained by time; it's quite independent of the natural order of things. Love has its own order and is marked by infinity, which is impossible to control. Thus, all the semblances of the public world, whom the sun attends and are under the control of nature, like "the late schoolboys", "sowre prentices", "Court- huntsmen", "the king", and so on, the lovers' world is far too superior.

Against this background of the public and real world, Donne sets the more private and ideal world of the lovers. The lovers become more and more aware of this ideal space. Therefore, the intrusion of the voyeur, the sun, the public gaze, is generously welcomed. Their love is seen as a golden book of knowledge, reading which, the voyeur or the onlooker could pace further to partake that ideal vision. The "bed", then, assumes a greater significance. It is not just the site where the sexual consummation has taken place, but also the site which, just like the sun, emanates the rays of pure love, something that has got lost in the rush of activities of the public world.

The metaphysical conceit that brings together the sun and the bed, the site of sexual consummation is not just extraordinary, but also radical for the times. The significance attached to the privacy of the lovers and the sexual act of love-making was not to be found even in the best of the poems before Donne. With this, Donne introduces

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the processes of urbanization as forming the core of the lovers' space and the new concept of a nuclear family to the Renaissance sexual imagination.

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

The poem was in all likelihood composed in the year 1611 as a parting song for his wife, when Donne was going to France for a period of two months. It is believed that this composition was triggered by Anne's premonitions during the last phase of her pregnancy, which prove true as she gives birth to a still born child. The crux of the argument is based on the premise that the body is separated from its soul. Yet, the lovers' souls are united and therefore the geographical separation cannot separate or impact their love for each other.

"Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion..."

In the opening lines, Donne establishes a distinction between virtuous and non-virtuous men. This distinction is based on the ability of the virtuous men to communicate ("whisper") with their souls and the non-virtuous men's unawareness of their souls. The imagery of the death employed is not to mention the literal death of the poet-lover-husband, but to be able to celebrate the death of the virtuous men, which is their gateway for seeking heavenly favours. The lovers temporary separation from his beloved/wife is similarly, supposed to be celebrated as it does not indicate any kind of suffering, sorrow or tragedy, but expansion, "endure not yet/ A breach, but an expansion,/ Like gold to aery thinness beat."

The separation allows them to be aware of the expansive qualities of their souls. Even when the two lovers possess two different bodies, their souls are intermixed like two liquids that are poured into each other. The metaphysical conceit of the "twin compasses" employed illustrates how the two lovers are joined together by one common handle. The wife, because she is staying back at home, becomes the "fixed foot" of the

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compass, whereas the husband, because he is travelling, becomes the other leg of the compass that "far doth roam". Yet, even when the two legs of the compass seem to be engaged in their different tasks, they supply a certain degree of inter-dependence and mutuality to each other:

"And though it in the centre sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect as that comes home."

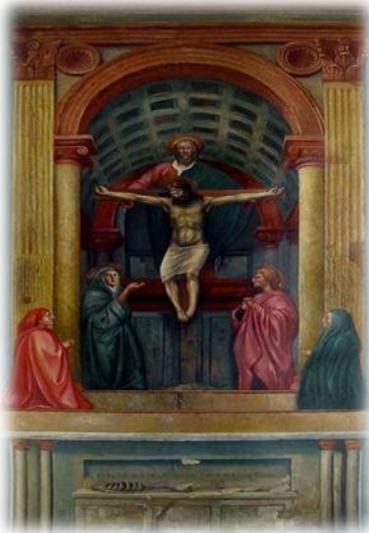
As the husband's soul moves away in distance, the wife's soul continually inclines towards him, for they are joined together, and not separate. It's precisely because of her love and firmness, that allows the other leg of the compass to complete full circle, and return to the centre, "thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end, where I begun."

The pun on the word "growing erect" supplies the earthly, carnal and sexual element to the discussion on the body and soul. Even when he talks about souls, the body and the bodily pleasures cannot be discarded or set aside. In fact, 'body' becomes the indispensable site where the spiritual could be realized. In the post-sex, pre-spiritual gap lies the real meaning of love and other concepts such as the divide between the sensual and the spiritual. Donne's lover repeatedly establishes the impossibility of concrete and absolute articulation of love in language: "a love so much refined, that ourselves know not what it is."

Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God

Batter My Heart is an unusual and unconventional holy sonnet. The sonnet does not employ the polite openings and the passive devotion of the usual devotee, seeking God's love and grace. The poetic persona seeks the grace from the Christian god, in his threesome capacity of God, the father, the son and the Holy Ghost. Overwhelmed by his sins of the past life, the poet/ persona implores god to use nothing but violence to save

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him. Each line of the fourteen line sonnet exemplifies the language of force and violence, “batter”, “knock”, “overthrow”, “break”, “blow”, “burn”; the alliteration further intensifying the effect. The martial language of war and the sexual vocabulary within the marital fold is employed to seek divine intervention in order to save him from damnation.

The Holy Trinity Masaccio, 1426-27 Fresco, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy.

<http://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/05/17/john-donne-batter-my-heart-his-sonnet/>

Employing the dominant vocabulary of imperialism and conquest, comparing his self to a usurped town, the speaker puts a lot of meaning in “Reason” that proves too weak. He seeks divine intervention and authority to be saved from captivity. The use of the term, “viceroy”, gives the entire line the tone of a battle in which, the male speaker solicits another male warrior to come to his rescue. Till this juncture, the hierarchy between god and the devotee is not a gendered hierarchy. However, as the sestet begins, this homologous relationship transforms itself into the same gendered hierarchies that marked Donne’s love poetry:

“But am betrothed unto Your enemy,
Divorce me, untie, or breake that knot againe”

The male speaker, assuming the female voice, uses terms like “divorce”, “untie”, “ravish”, and so on, almost seeking a sexual/spiritual rape to be rescued by God. Except to God, the object of devotion, it does not belong to anybody. God has the right to un-mould/break him, in order to re-mould him, and this right is both derived and given to god through the existence of strong bond of marriage between the devotee and the devoted.

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Metaphysical Poetry

The term metaphysical was perhaps coined as early as in the 1600s by Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649), who in one of his letters speaks of "Metaphysical Ideas and Scholastic Quiddities". The term was, however, applied to discuss Donne in *laissez-faire* by Dryden in his critique of the kind of poetry that Donne wrote:

"He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature alone should reign."

Further, it was Samuel Johnson in his discussions on "wit" in the *Life of Cowley* (1779-81), who appropriated the term in its critical usage, to dismiss the poetry of certain seventeenth poets, such as Donne. Though, the term had been known and used several times, it was perhaps being used indiscriminately, as its definition was not clearly established nor the poets who write in this vein, clearly enlisted. Therefore, for a critic Grierson, "all great poetry is metaphysical." Using the term metaphysical as a synonym for "all great poetry" elides not just the uniqueness of "metaphysical", but also the specificities of time and space.

W. Bradford Smith, in his essay "What is Metaphysical Poetry?", attempts to supply a definition of metaphysical poetry by enlisting five characteristic traits of the same which become indispensable when we discuss the term "metaphysical":

"Metaphysical poetry is a paradoxical enquiry, imaginative and intellectual, which exhausts by its use of antithesis and contradiction and unusual imagery, all the possibilities in a given idea. This idea will predominantly be a psychological probing of love, death, or religion as the more important matters of the experience in life of the poet, and will be embodied in striking metaphorical utterance or in the use of the common (familiar) or the scientific word."

Imagery – Imagery in Metaphysical Poetry is often believed to be "a yoking together of disparate objects". For instance, Eliot finds that the sound of the typewriter, the smell of

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the dinner cooking, and the reading of Spinoza, all likewise contribute in defining the feeling of love, when attempted by a metaphysical poet, such as Donne. Smith discusses the etymology of the word, 'metaphysics', as coming after physics or from the natural world; the knowledge of the natural adopted to become the dominant imagery for the poem could be seen as metaphysical imagery. It encompasses large horizons, but as blended in the 'small circle of man's comprehension.' Further, that imagery in Metaphysical Poetry is never an embellishment, but a vehicle to express the idea.

Donne's employment of imagery and conceit is so unusual and charged with witticism, that it often shocks the reader. Alice Stayert Brandenburg divides imagery into two types- static and dynamic. The Donnean imagery, according to her, fits under the latter category, it describes the way in which objects act and interact. "Thought" is never a static condition, but a mental journey from point 'a' to point 'b', to point 'c', and this may or may not be a linear journey. Therefore, to describe thought poetically, it is but obvious that the poet employs dynamic imagery, an imagery that well describes the swiftness and complexities of thought and thought patterns. For Donne then, his experiences could be expressed only by employing a vast repository of thought patterns, and vocabularies he possessed that were derivations from myriad spheres of knowledge, such as law, science, geometry, geography, astronomy, medical sciences, and anthropology and so on.

Sensuality – The use of physical and/or physiological is a recurrence in metaphysical poetry, and therefore, the imagery is usually sensual and erotic. Derived from a refinement of everyday experiences as potent tenors and vehicles of poetic thought, their poetry is also a psychological rendition on their ideas about love and religion and the interface between the sensual and the spiritual. The body becomes significant for both its carnality and a site where the spiritual could be enacted.

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Sentimentality is banned – Supremacy of the intellect over the emotional is another established trait. It doesn't convey absence of emotions, but emotions polished by great intellectual activity.

Masculinity – The metaphors used by the metaphysicals are usually bold and their poetry is an exact and true rendition of human experiences as they find it. Unabashed masculinity, the desire for power and dominance, the markers of possession, all overflow in their poems.

Sonority – Metaphysical poetry is never grandiloquent. The poet is first concerned with experiences in his own life, and then the experiences that occur around him. Such realism doesn't require verbose expressions.

In the succeeding generations, with the onset of neo-classical age, Donne's poetry came to be looked down upon as derogatory, for it did not put sufficient emphasis on "purity of thought", which was significantly essential for the neo-classicals. It was difficult for the neo-classicals to accept and appreciate poetry that brought together disparate ideas like carnal and spiritual, financial/economic and emotional, body and soul, and so on. For Metaphysicals, this purity of thought is to be superseded by a certain complexity of thought, for thoughts are layered and convoluted. The skill Donne employs in blending together heterogeneous elements like compass and the lovers, bed and the universe, cartography and the beloved's body, which T. S. Eliot understood as "Concordia discourse", remained unappreciated and unacknowledged by the following generations of English readers, till its revival in the poetry of Hopkins, Browning, Eliot and Dickenson.

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