



## John Donne as a Love Poet

Dr. Bipin Chandra Uniyal

Associate Professor, Department of English  
Balganga Degree College, Sendul, Kumar  
Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand, India

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### Abstract

John Donne, one of the foremost metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, revolutionized English love poetry by blending intellect with emotion, and spirituality with sensuality. His exploration of love transcends the boundaries of physical attraction to embrace a spiritual and intellectual union between lovers. Poems such as *The Canonization*, *The Flea*, *The Good Morrow*, *The Sunne Rising*, *The Blossom*, *Sweetest Love*, *I Do Not Goe*, and *The Dreame* reflect the complexity of his perception of love—ranging from the physical and passionate to the spiritual and eternal. Through striking conceits, paradoxes, and metaphysical imagery, Donne depicts love as both earthly and divine, personal yet universal. His portrayal of love's union and separation, constancy and transience, demonstrates his mastery in expressing emotional depth with philosophical insight. Donne's love poetry celebrates the unity of body and soul, affirming that true love endures beyond time and space. This paper examines Donne's treatment of love, the fusion of metaphysical wit with human emotion, and the transformation of personal experience into universal truth, establishing him as one of the greatest love poets in English literature.

**Keywords:** - innovation, religion, love, experience, emotions, relationship, affairs, sensual

As a writer of love poems, John Donne earned great fame and popularity and became one of the most distinguished poets of love. Donne introduced remarkable innovations in love poetry. He is regarded as the first metaphysical poet, a religious poet, and a love poet. Donne was both a poet of love and an analyst of his own experiences. A true

worshipper of love, he formed romantic relationships and friendships with several women. He fell in love with Anne More and married her secretly. His diverse experiences of love from different perspectives made him a celebrated love poet. His works are noted for their strong and sensual style and include sonnets, love poems, religious poems, Latin

translations, epigrams, elegies, songs, and satires.

Donne's reputation as a love poet rests on his fifty-five lyrics, written at different periods of his life and published posthumously in 1633 in the volume *Songs and Sonnets*. These poems express a wide variety of emotions and attitudes, as if Donne himself were attempting to define his experiences of love through poetry. A few of the poems in *Songs and Sonnets* are based on his personal experiences and events from his life, while others reflect his intense emotional insights. His love poems are literary experiments—explorations of love relationships from a man's point of view. *Songs and Sonnets* provides a deep insight into the complex range of human emotions and experiences associated with love.

His love experiences were wide and varied and so is the emotions range of his love poetry. He had love affairs with a number of women. He spent lot of money on his affairs with women. Grierson distinguishes three distinct strains in it. "first there is the cynical strain and his attitude towards women and their love and constancy are one of contempt and rejection. Secondly, there is the strain of conjugal love to be noticed in poems like Valediction; Forbidding Mourning, addressed to his wife Anne More whom he loved passionately and in his relationship with her he attained spiritual peace and serenity. Thirdly, there is the platonic strain of poems like The Canonization in which love is treated as a holy passion, not different from the love of a devotee for Maker". (1).

In cynical he has depicted mocking and distrustful view of love. His early poems reflect a disdain for women. He portrayed them as fickle and untrustworthy. The best example of such poem is "Go and Catch a Falling Star". In later period Donne wrote about devoted relationship, particularly about his own married life with Anne More. 'The Anniversary' is the best example of faithful love poem celebrating constancy and strength of love. In the last,

Donne wrote spiritual and idealistic poem. He has explored love as a supreme spiritual and philosophical concept. 'The Good Marrow' is the well-known example of Platonic love. He depicted a new kind of love that elevates and transforms the lovers.

The cynical, conjugal and platonic or spiritual strain, there are numbers of poems which shows an endless variety of his mood and tone. In some poems his tone is harsh and defiant, in others his tone is coarse and brutal. In his love poems, there is a strain of happy married and joy of conjugal love. This makes Donne singularly original, realistic and unconventional love poet. But whatever may be the mood or tone of a poem it is always an expression of his personal experience. Each poems deal with a love situation which is intellectually analyzed with the skill of an experienced lawyer.

His wider range of emotions which are conveyed with personal experience set him apart from his contemporaries. Donne drew the themes for his love poems from his many personal love affairs – some short lived and others lasting. Donne ignored the traditional Petrarchan form. In his poetry true emotions are expressed by ideas and ideas are defined by their emotional context. It portrays love as a complex and multifaceted emotions. Love is divine, it does not understand the caste, creeds, religion, black, white, and rich, poor etc. his treatment of love is intellectual, analytical and psychological. Love was the supreme concern of his mind. As a investigator, he examined love from every angle, tested its hypotheses, experienced its joys and embraced its sorrows. Donne presents his experience, experiments and imagination, and about love. Louis Martiz writes about Donne's love poems that "Donne's love poems take for their basic theme the problem of the place of love in a physical world dominated by change and death. The problem is broached in dozens of different ways, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, sometimes by asserting the immortality of love,

sometimes by declaring the futility of love". (2)  
N. J.C. Andereasen writes about the philosophy of John Donne that " the central problem in Donne's love poetry: the nature of love dramatized in each poem and the attitude expressed by the poem toward that kind of love and toward the nature and purpose of love in general". (3).

*"The Canonization"* is one of the best-known love poem of John Donne. The poem is expressing the positive attitude towards love, an attitude of satisfaction and absorption in a love relationship

" For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love, or chide my palsy, or my gout, my five gray hair, or ruined fortune flout, with wealth your state your mind with arts improves." (Lines from the Canonization).

Poet asks his friend or well-wisher, who tries to dissuade him from love making. Love making is natural to him, physical weakness or disease can't stop his love. He says to his friend he should mind his own business instead to interfere with pleasure.

'Alas, alas, who's injured by my love' the poet says that love making is an innocent activity. It does not harm to anyone. It does not cause any storms, floods or disease. It does not affect any human and natural activity. So nobody should object to his love making.

"The Phoenix riddle hath more wit By us we two being one, are it."

Donne compares his love with the immortal bird Phoenix. He says that after we die we came to life again, the same being that we were before just as the Phoenix rises from its own ashes. Such kind of love makes us a mystery worthy of reverence. This is the finest example of his wit and conceits. After their death, lyrics about their love would be like hymns, love song of a devotee for his maker. After their death they would be remembered as

saints of love, lovers devoted to each other. They would be recognized as a model by all lovers.

"beg from above, a pattern of your love."

Donne and his beloved are saints of love. So lovers would pray to God on their behalf, to send them love as deep and intense as their own. Donne and his beloved are saints of love. They have renounced the world for each other, and the body of each is a hermitage for the other. So a physical relationship is treated like the spiritual relationship of a devotee with his God. The paradox is Donne's inevitable instrument, allowing him with dignity and precision to express the idea that love may be all that is necessary for life. Brooks looks at the paradox in a larger sense: " more direct methods may be tempting, but all of them enfeeble and distort what is to be said .... Indeed, almost any insight important enough to warrant a great poem apparently has to be stated in such terms" (4).

*'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning'* is one of the Donne's well known love poem. The poem was written in 1611 or 1612, for his wife before going on a journey to European continent with Sir Drury Robert. The poem was published in 1633 in the collection of 'Songs and Sonnets' two years after his death. In the poem, the poet advises his beloved not to mourn at the moment they bid farewell to each other. Poem is about the union of true lovers, even when they are physically separated. Poet presents number of arguments to prove the point, just to persuade his beloved not to grieve at time of his departure.

"As virtuous men pass mildly away and whisper to their souls, to go". (lines from poem)

Donne says that true lovers should welcome separation like virtuous men, because such separation does not mean a break in their love like virtuous people they also bid good bye to each other without making any noise about it.

They should not raise floods by their tears and storm by their sighs. Their love is spiritual love, something divine and holy, and to mourn and weep would be vulgarization of it.

"Dull sublunary lovers love (whose soul in sense) cannot admit absence.

Donne asserted the eternity of spiritual love. He compares spiritual love with physical or sensuous love. Physical love cannot endure the absence of the lover because it is based only on physical beauty. "Gold to airy thinness beat" – true love, like gold, expands and becomes more refined when tested by separation. Similarly, the lovers' separation from each other makes their love more spiritual, refined, and ethereal.

"If they be two, they are two so  
As stiff twin compasses are two."

Donne again shows the superiority of spiritual love by using the conceit of the compass. Both lovers are united spiritually even when separated physically, just as the two legs of a compass are joined at the top. The lover may go out for some time, but he is bound to return. It is the firmness of the fixed foot that enables the moving foot to draw a perfect circle. In the same way, it is the constancy of the beloved's love that enables the lover to complete his journey successfully.

A. J. Smith remarks about the poem:

"The subject of this poem is a metaphysical problem – that of the union of lovers even when they are separated. Donne wishes to show that his lovers are united. Their souls are of one substance, which has the invisibility of air but also the obvious unity of a lump of gold. It is to stress this last point that the compasses are brought in... Compasses do not vanish; they have not the remotest connection either with physical or metaphysical subtlety." (5)

"*The Flea*" is another metaphysical poem. The poet uses the conceit of a flea that has sucked blood from both the male speaker and his female

lover. The lover is the speaker, while the beloved remains the silent listener.

"Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee,  
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;  
Confess it, this cannot be said  
A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead."

The flea has sucked blood from both of them, and their blood mingles within its body. The speaker tells his beloved that this mingling of blood in the flea's body cannot be considered a sin, shame, or loss of virginity. When the beloved wishes to kill the flea, the lover pleads with her not to kill the poor creature, saying it would be a sin and a sacrilege. He calls the flea "our marriage bed" and "our marriage temple" and asks her to spare its innocent life. If she kills it, it would amount to triple murder – herself, himself, and the flea.

Regarding *The Flea*, Anthony Low writes:

"Donne invented a new kind of private love that people can learn to appreciate." (6)

Achsah Guibbory, however, challenges this view, writing:

"*The Flea* focuses on Donne's capacity for arrogance and misogyny, making his poetry appear crude in today's society." (7)

"*The Good Morrow*" was published in 1633 in the collection *Songs and Sonnets* and is considered the first poem in that volume. It has three stanzas, each containing seven lines. The poem opens with a question:

"I wonder, by my troth, what thou and  
I did till we loved?"

He asks what he and his beloved did before they fell in love. Addressing his beloved, he wonders how they spent their lives before discovering true love. He regards their earlier pleasures as childish and rustic, and their former life as a long sleep in which they were unaware of life's true reality – like the seven young men who, out of fear of persecution, took refuge in a cave, fell asleep, and awoke two hundred years later.

The poet says that all the pleasures he experienced before his present love were unreal—mere dreams or fancies. He declares that their current love is perfect and immune to external temptation. Their love reigns supreme; they no longer desire other sights or experiences, for each is a complete world to the other. Sailors may explore and claim new worlds, but the poet is content with his own world of love. He compares their faces to two hemispheres, symbolizing physical and emotional unity.

"If our two loves be one, or thou and I  
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die."

*The Good Morrow* thus describes a state of perfect love in which the lover and his beloved exist in complete harmony.

"*The Sunne Rising*" is a poem addressed to the Sun, in which the poet expresses his desire to remain undisturbed with his lover.

"Busy old fool, unruly Sun,  
Why dost thou thus,  
Through windows, and through  
curtains call on us?" (Lines 1-3)

The poet calls the Sun an "old fool" for intruding upon his private moments. He is angry because the Sun shines through the window and curtains, disturbing his love-making. The poet urges the Sun to go and wake the courtiers who must attend the king or tell the farmers to begin their day's work, but to leave the lovers alone. Donne asserts that love is not bound by seasons, geography, or time—these are of no real importance to true love.

The poet playfully claims he can block the Sun's rays simply by closing his eyes, yet he refuses to do so because he cannot bear to lose sight of his beloved even for a moment. He declares that his beloved embodies all the states and princes of the world.

"She is all states, and all princes, I,  
Nothing else is." (Lines 21-22)

In the end, he welcomes the Sun, acknowledging that its light shines upon them,

thereby illuminating the entire world. Percy Marshall observes:

"Here the poet catches the Sun and, addressing him as man to man, playfully reproaches his intrusion. He vividly pictures the early morning activities—the boys on their way to school or work, and the court, the very heart of 16th-century English life." (8)

"*The Blossom*" is addressed to Donne's beloved—probably his patroness, Mrs. M. Herbert, to whom he was deeply devoted for her help during his time of distress. The poem uses Petrarchan and Platonic conventions of love but treats them ironically. In Petrarchan convention, the lover is devoted and faithful, while the beloved is cruel, proud, and unresponsive. In Platonic tradition, love is purely spiritual, a union of minds and hearts.

The poet observes the growth of his beloved's youth and beauty and warns that her beauty will soon fade:

"That it will freeze anon, and that I  
shall, Tomorrow find thee fallen, or not  
at all."

He realizes that her beauty, like a flower, will wither. The poet addresses his heart, saying it is useless to hover around a beloved who is unattainable—like a forbidden tree, as she belongs to another man. His heart insists on staying behind even if he departs, but the poet reminds it that a "naked thinking heart" is meaningless to a woman:

"A naked thinking heart, that makes no  
show, Is to a woman but a kind of  
ghost."

He concludes that a woman values physical affection over spiritual love, for she cannot recognize a heart—she has none. The poet finally decides to leave and give his heart to another woman who appreciates both his body and mind.

"*Sweetest Love, I Do Not Goe*" is one of Donne's tenderest love songs. It is believed to be addressed to his wife, Anne, when he was



leaving for Europe in 1611. Published in *Songs and Sonnets* (1633), the poem reveals Donne's deep affection for his wife. The poet consoles her, saying that his departure does not mean the end of their relationship. He calls this temporary separation a "mock death," a rehearsal for the real one.

"Yesternight the Sunne went hence,  
And yet is here today." (Lines 9-10)

He compares his journey to the Sun's daily course—its setting and rising again. Like the Sun, he too will return. He advises his beloved not to waste moments of happiness in sorrow or fear of the future.

"When thou sighest, thou sigh'st not  
wind, But sigh'st my soul away." (Lines 25-26)

The poet expresses his deep love, asking his beloved not to sigh or weep, as her sorrow takes away his soul. He ends by affirming that true lovers are never truly separated by distance or time.

"*The Dreame*" was written around 1633 and published posthumously. In this poem, the poet addresses his beloved and explores the dream state as an escape from reality and as a reflection of love's transformative power. The poet dreams of his beloved and the joy of loving her, but when she actually arrives, his dream turns into reality.

The poem reflects on reality, love's power, the passage of time, and the relationship between the lover and his beloved. Though he fears that love might bring uncertainty, true love conquers such fears. The beloved is portrayed as divine, almost goddess-like. The poet compares himself to a torch and his beloved to the torchbearer who kindles his passion. Even as she departs, he continues to dream of her return:

"Thou cam'st to kindle, guest to come,  
then I Will dream that hope again, but  
else would die."

He says to his beloved that as she leaves, he will return to his dream, hoping for her swift return to make his dream come true.

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