

John Donne: The Monarch of Wit and Icon of Metaphysical Poetry

جون دون: ملك الذكاء وأيقونة الشعر الميتافيزيقي

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Metaphysical poets revolutionized English poetry stylistically and thematically. They worked out a new way to give expression to their thoughts. They sometimes drew their conceits from "recesses of learning not very much frequented by common readers of poetry". As Sir Walter Scott said, "they played with thoughts as the Elizabethans had played with words." Metaphysical poetry is less concerned with expressing feeling than with analyzing it, with the poet exploring the recesses of his consciousness. The boldness of the literary devices used—especially obliquity, irony, and paradox—are often reinforced by a dramatic directness of language and by rhythms derived from that of living speech. As a representative of Metaphysical poets, John Donne's poems were featured with exquisite conceit, profound meaning and unconventionality. This article sheds light on features of metaphysical poetry and explores the conceit in John Donne's selected poems. It puts forth the assumption that the conceit is a sign of novelty in English poetry and that readers of John Donne should be acquainted with science, philosophy, astronomy, geometry, law and other fields of study.

Keywords: Conceit, John Donne, Metaphysics, Seventeenth Century.**ملخص:**

تمكن الشعراء الميتافيزيقيون من أحداث ثورة فكرية واسلوبية في الشعر الإنجليزي تجسدت في استحداث طرق جديدة لإيصال الفكرة عن طريق الخيال الميتافيزيقي الذي لا يفهمه الا قليل من القراء والذي يتطلب ثقافة واسعة وفطنة حادة للوصول إلى أعماق الصورة الشعرية غير المألوفة. تميز الشعراء الميتافيزيقيون بتعزيز أدوات أدبية تتمثل في الانحراف، السخرية، المفارقة، التوجيه الدرامي للغة والاقباعات المستمدة من الكلام الحي، والتوازي والتشبيه الميتافيزيقي الجريء. يعتبر الشاعر الإنجليزي جون دون أيقونة شعراء القرن السابع عشر وقائد جيل الدهاء والذكاء الميتافيزيقي حيث أن الخيال الميتافيزيقي قد بلغ ذروته في أشعاره ما جعله في طليعة الشعراء الانجليز لكافة العصور والأزمنة. تلخص هذه الدراسة ميزات وخصائص الشعر الميتافيزيقي والخيال المبالغ من خلال أشعار مختارة للشاعر جون دون لتثبت أنه يتعين على قراء دون التكيف مع العلوم، الفلسفة، علوم الفلك، الهندسة، وعلوم القانون لاستنباط معاني الصور التي يجسدها الشاعر بين أسطر قصائده الجريئة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشعر الميتافيزيقي، الخيال المبالغ، جون دون، القرن السابع عشر

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1- Introduction

The Elizabethan period provided a kind of socio-political stability which vehemently influenced the artistic and literary productions. Moreover, it paved the way for another literary explosion that would take place in the seventeenth century with a new generation of poets who enriched the English library with their artistic and literary productions. While some critics consider the seventeenth century as a continuation of the Elizabethan era, others believe that the seventeenth century had its own literary features and tradition. Seventeenth century lyrical poets gave rise to metaphysical poetry that inspired the whole world with its unique style and scope. The term 'metaphysical poetry' is used to designate works of English poets of the 17th century who sought to express something behind the simple, obvious first sense and suggestion of a subject. This unique poetry became the richest and most widely ranging in language.

The Metaphysical poets reacted against the Elizabethan literary style and ideas. They rejected the conventional ideal of love held by Elizabethan poets and their indifference to real experience. While the Elizabethans saw love as a romantic pleasure to be described in general terms and simple imagery, the Metaphysical poets relied on exaggerated imagery that required wit. They devoted a special corner to mind and its ability to join ideas and objects apparently dissimilar and unrelated. The disclosure of similarity in the dissimilar is called 'the conceit' which is a distinctive feature of metaphysical poetry

2- Issue and Methodology

This paper is an attempt to revise the major features of the Metaphysical poetry and the conceit in John Donne's poetry. The aim of the study is to demonstrate the novelty of the Metaphysical poetry through the study of some selected poems by John Donne. Choosing John Donne as a case study is motivated by the fact that he is still regarded as the icon of this poetry. The present study is divided into two main parts. While the first part introduces the Metaphysical poetry and its major features, the second part deals with John Donne's conceit in some his love sonnets. Accordingly, the nub of this scrutiny is to maintain that in spite of our familiarity with the theme of love in the poetry of William Shakespeare and his fellows, the novelty in Donne's love is the high imagination and conceit which make his poems unique and powerful.

3- The Metaphysical Poetry: Etymology, History, and Features

In the early decades of the seventeenth century, a group of intellectuals appeared to mimic the stylistic and thematic concerns of John Donne. Poets like George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Andrew Marvel and Richard Crashaw revolted against the poetic traditions of the Elizabethan poetry such as the easy and fluent style, the stock imagery and the pastoral conventions of Spenser and his fellows. These poets were united by the use of far-fetched comparisons, or ‘conceits’, that drew attention to their own ingenuity—although this is more evidently a feature of John Donne's work than that of other members of the group. They also combined thought (or metaphysical speculation) with feeling in ways that were distinctive to the seventeenth century.

Etymologically, the term ‘Metaphysics’ is a combination of two Greek words, ‘meta’ and ‘physics’. ‘Meta’ means beyond or after while ‘Physics’ means a natural science. Therefore, Metaphysical means something that comes after or beyond natural science. Literally speaking, ‘Metaphysical poetry’ can be defined as a philosophical poetry that deals with the subjects which lie beyond the purview of natural science. As far as the term ‘metaphysical poetry’ is concerned, critics argued that its selection was arbitrary. John Dryden was the first to mention the concept in *A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire*. He believes that John Donne “affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and 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” (qtd. in Beer 2). Dryden, however, does not precisely describe the poetic style of Donne’s school. Instead, critics argue that it was Samuel Johnson who coined the term in *Life of Cowley* where he claimed that “about the beginning of the seventeenth century, appeared a race of writers that may be termed the Metaphysical Poets.” (2)

The term Metaphysical poetry has been used for at least two centuries. It gradually disappeared when a number of critics proved their deepest dissatisfaction with its thematic and stylistic principles. Many readers and critics accepted the term with all its philosophical assumptions. In his essay “The Metaphysical Poets”, the modernist poet T.S. Eliot urges and invites readers to define the essential qualities of those poets instead of discussing the possible accuracy of the term itself. In his *Clark Lectures*, delivered at Trinity College Cambridge in 1926, T.S Eliot explains the first usages of the term ‘Metaphysical’:

This term “metaphysical”, used by Dryden, adopted by Johnson, was first used as a convenient term, and as much defined by the material in hand, as defining it. It was used by persons who were not themselves metaphysicians, or of a philosophical cast

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of mind, and they certainly did not employ the term with any thought of Lucretius or Dante in their heads. (Eliot 1993)

In *The Metaphysical Poets*, Helen Gardner explains the origins of the term. In the introduction, she claims that Samuel Johnson first coined the term ‘metaphysical poets’ with the intention to label John Donne and his followers for their rather queer poetic style (1). The term, has also been used to label other poets whose styles resemble that of Donne. T.S Eliot, however, believes that Donne will take the leading place in any classification of metaphysical poets. For Eliot, John Donne is the fixed point. He admits that although there are two periods of metaphysical poetry besides that of the seventeenth century, Donne is the point of reference that can be used in comparing and contrasting different metaphysical poets.

In her book *Five Metaphysical Poets*, Joan Bennett admits that John Donne possesses what could be called metaphysical knowledge which is apparent in his poems. Further, she comes up with assumption that Donne is expressing his mind’s states by referring to a background and ideas rather than describing the ideas themselves. In this regard, she asserts that “the metaphysics occur in his poetry as a vehicle, but never as the thing conveyed” (30). Additionally, James Smith claims that Donne and his followers use the metaphysical propositions not seriously as they were true or worth debate, but they did so to demonstrate different arguments and beliefs.

Compared to the pre-seventeenth century poetry, Metaphysical poetry is unique and different in its style and content. Bennett claims that one of the main features of ‘Metaphysical Poetry’ is the delight in thoughts and expressions. It is said that John Donne and his fellows had their own independent thoughts and poetic principles. Sir Walter Scott argued that “they played with thought as the Elizabethans played with words”. Indeed, a common feature of all Metaphysical verses is the dissimilar images and the creation of the occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. A good illustration of this idea can be found in Abraham Cowley’s poetry which explains that being in love with different women is similar to traveling meaninglessly through different countries. Likewise, John Donne used conceits that mixed up different ideas from the ordinary life with some complex philosophical spheres. This is more apparent in his poem “The Flea” where he provides us with a divergent image as he argues that the flea which sucks his bold and that of his beloved to become their bridal bed and temple their wedding: “This flea our marriage bed, our marriage temple is”.

In the seventeenth century, literary imagination reached its highest peak. Poets at that time were compelled to compete and use unexpected imageries to avoid the traditional simplicity. A good example is found in George Herbert’s “The Pulley” where the term ‘rest’ is used as a pulley by God. It lifts the sinners from the world of heaven. This is to argue that Metaphysical

writing abounds in artificiality of thought and hyperbolic expression. Those poets relied on images that were surprising.

Critics believe that wit and irony are also other features of the seventeenth century poetry. T.S Eliot assumed that the seventeenth century poets exemplified a very rare “fusion of thoughts and feelings of intelligence and sensual experience concentrated in verse” (Summers and Pebworth 2). Further, James Smith regards the Metaphysical poetry as akin to an epistemological exercise. In this respect, he states that “wit focuses an interest in the rendering of our ambiguous state when sensation and idea interfuse in the language itself, opening absolute consequences in the momentary encounter and registering the shock of metaphysical predicaments posed in the play of the senses.” (qtd. in Summers and Pebworth 2). It becomes evident that the distinguishing general characteristic of the seventeenth century poetry is the remarkable combination of an aggressive intellectuality with the lyric form and spirit. Other features like irony and the extensive use of imageries played a vital role in its boom.

4- The Power of the Conceit in John Donne’s Selected Poems

As it has been stated in the introductory statement, the last part of this paper examines some poems of John Donne to demonstrate some of his dissimilar images that differentiate him from the Elizabethan poets. Born in 1573 and died in 1631, Donne possessed one of the keenest and most powerful intellects of his time. He is still considered as the greatest metaphysical poet. His poetry is most of the time metaphoric, highly symbolic, and paradoxical. Part of his life was devoted to the study of theology and law. It was during this time that he wrote his love poems. While living with his wife and children, Donne turned to religious poetry and entered the church to become one of the most eloquent preachers. Through the favor of King James, he was made Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

Donne’s poetry is based on the conceit which is a kind of a dissimilar comparison. It is a fanciful expression in writing or speech; an elaborate metaphor with a complex logic that governs a poem. It forms an exaggerated ingenious parallel between apparently dissimilar objects or situation. While the Petrarchan metaphor is a dramatic comparison between a mistress or a lover and objects like the sun or the sea, the metaphysical conceit is a more intricate and intellectual device that usually sets up an analogy between one entity’s spiritual qualities and an object in the physical world. Thus, the conceit can be either a simile or a metaphor that creates ingenious or fanciful parallel between apparently dissimilar or incongruous objects or situations.

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The conceit is essential to Donne's poetry. Many of his poems contain metaphysical conceits and intellectual reasoning to build a deeper understanding of the speaker's emotional state. According to Dr. Johnson, conceits are "the most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together" (qtd in. Ahmed 325). Mackenzie (1990) argues that "the most immediate striking feature of Metaphysical style forged by Donne is the use of the conceit" (54). This is to assert that Donne's conceits retain the attentiveness of readers and help the emotions pass through various dimensions. This is the main reason behind Ben Jonson's claim that "the poetry of Donne would perish for lack of being understood." (Redpath 202)

Like the Elizabethan poets, John Donne devoted his pen to love. The concept of love in Donne's poetry has drawn the attention of critics in an ample measure. He used conceits to fuse the sensory and the abstract, trading on the element of surprise and unlikeness to hold the reader's attention. Donne was an inspiring poetical creator and the 'monarch of wit'. His literary abilities made him unique and different from poets of his time he formed the pillars of metaphysical poetry. Louis Martz believes that:

It is with Donne's pursuit of love. It has many temporary conclusions, some cynical, some ennobling, but all only 'for a moment final', as Wallace Stevens might say. Behind all these varied posturings lies the overwhelming question: what is the nature of love, what is the ultimate ground of the love's being? His best poems are not those which move towards either extreme in his answer, but they are rather those in which the physical and the spiritual are made to work together through, the curiously shifting and winding manner that marks Donne's movement towards Truth. (172)

Donne's wit is deliberate and peculiar. It impresses us with its intellectual vigor and force. It does not merely lie in the dexterous or ingenious use of words. Critics believe that it comes naturally from the author's expansive knowledge and deep scholarship. In "The Body, the Soul, and Romantic Love in John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*", Rasha El-Haggan admits that Donne's poems draw a distinction between the body, the soul, and the romantic love. She asserts that for Donne the soul is the most important part of romantic love, yet his poetic puns suggest that the body is just as important. Donne's love poetry has been appreciated by Helen Gardner who argues in *The Metaphysical Poets* that:

The poems which Donne wrote on the experience of loving where love is returned, poems in which 'Thou' and 'I' are merged into 'We' are his most original and profound contributions to the poetry of human love. It is not possible to find models for such poems as 'The Good Morrow', 'The Anniversarie', 'The Canonization', and, less perfect but still wonderful 'The Extasie'. These poems have the right to the title metaphysical in its true sense, since they raise, even when they do not explicitly discuss, the great metaphysical question of the relation of the spirit and the sense. They raise it not as an abstract problem, but in effort to make the experience of the union of human powers in love, and the union of two human beings in love, apprehensible. (xxx)

Donne's wit is scholastic or dialectical rather than metaphysical. He is fond of a logical sequence, ingenious and far-fetched analysis. This makes reading his poems a very complex task. The reader is obliged to connect the poet's images and critically read them depending on his different moods. In her book *Five Metaphysical Poets*, Joan Bennett writes:

To enjoy, it is only necessary to be prepared for a strange assortment of moods, to enter into each without reserve, and one thing further Donne's reader must share, in some degree, his own capacity for associating widely diverse themes and feelings. He travelled from one type of experience to another, but carried with him into the new a vivid memory. (14)

Apparently, Bennett believes that Donne had a unique experience to realize the different moods of love moving from the most brutally cynical to the most idealistic.

What really matters as to fit the nub of this scrutiny, is the stylistic, thematic, and philosophical fusions in Donne's poetry which make his love poetry distinct. In "The Poetry of Donne" Hebert Grierson writes:

Donne's love poetry is a very complex phenomenon. The two dominant strains in it are these: the strain of dialectic, subtle play of argument and wit, erudite and fantastic, and the strain of vivid realism, the record of a passion which is not ideal or conventional, neither recollected in tranquility nor a pure product of literary fashion, but love as an actual, immediate experience in all its moods, gay and angry, scornful and rapturous with joy touched with tenderness and darkened with sorrow. (9)

In relation to the metaphysical qualities, Grierson writes in his article "The Metaphysical Poetry":

Metaphysical in this large way, Donne and his followers to Cowley are not, yet the word describes better what is peculiar quality of their poetry than any other... the more intellectual, less verbal, character of their wit compared with the conceits of the Elizabethans; the finer psychology of which their conceits are often the expression; their learned imagery; the argumentative, subtle evolution of their lyrics; above all the peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination which is their greatest achievement.... All these qualities are in the poetry of Donne, and Donne is the greatest master of English poetry in the seventeenth century. (5)

The complexity of metaphysical poems can be ascribed to their concentrated structure, which means that they contain a strict line of argument expressed as briefly as possible, but dense with meaning. Therefore, the reader is required to concentrate through the whole poem and think about its contents while giving his mind full responsibility to link the ideas and make sense of the whole poem. The use of metaphors is so frequent and emphasized in John Donne's poems to the fact that the reader has the impression that the poet cannot express "what he feels until he finds the precisely appropriate metaphor" (Sicherman 80).

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Donne introduces some unexpected images to make his poetry only one of its kind. Metaphysically, the image of pregnancy is dominant in some the sonnets to fulfill his dissimilar comparisons. “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” and “A Valediction: Of Weeping” belong to the four farewell poems of John Donne, besides “A Valediction: of the Book” and “A Valediction: of My Name in the Window.” These poems express the speaker’s feelings over parting, but the former are reflections on the act of leaving the beloved lady. “A Valediction of Weeping” was written in a time when he was about to make a temporary stay far from the beloved. In this poem, the speaker tells his wife that this temporary separation is not an obstacle and advises her not to lament or weep since this will disturb their peace of mind:

Let me pour forth
My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here,
For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,
And by this mintage they are something worth,
For thus they be
Pregnant of thee.
Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more,
When a tear falls, that thou falls which it bore,
So thou and I are nothing then, when on a diverse shore.

In “A Valediction: Of Weeping”, the lover imagines his tears as containing an image of his beloved’s face and since they bear her stamp they are of a crucial value. The poem begins with persona’s attempt to pour forth his feelings. The word pour implies his inclination to both express himself freely and allow himself to cry. His lover is also described as crying as her face “coins” his tears. Just as a monetary coin bears the stamp of a face, so does her face reflect his tears. Thus, the speaker’s tears are meaningful only because they bear her “stamp” and demonstrate her return of affection. Furthermore, her tears give his own a “mintage” by giving his love and sorrow a worth. By suggesting that she determines his worth, he is trying to console his lover in this time of parting. As they cry together and their tears mingle, Donne metaphorically connects between their tears and pregnancy. He asserts that just as pregnancy is a creation between two people, their tears are intermingling and bear the “fruits” of their love. Accordingly, their tears are “emblems” of their subsequent sadness at parting. Moreover, as the tears fall from their eyes, so will the two lovers into despair and sorrow because the love that they share will be lost when they are apart on a “divers shore”.

Elizabethan poets considered time and age as man’s enemies. Donne, however, gave them another dimension and special interpretation. Images of age in his poetry are those of infancy, childhood, and old hood. He scrupulously describes his love as passing from one step to another. Yet, the cyclical pattern of time is used to reveal the strength and power of his

love. Donne's poetry proves that he is highly platonic. He keeps insisting on the most idealistic love which is devoted to the soul. That love, accordingly, begins like a new-born, then grows up to be a child, and then attains youth to finally reach old hood.

In "A Lecture Upon the Shadow", the speaker apparently refers to the infant image when he says:

Our infant love did grow
Disguises did and shadows, flow
From us, and our cares; but not'tis not so

Their love has grown up to be compared to a child. This has been declared in "Air and Angels" where the speaker says:

But since my soul, whose child love is

Metaphorically, love for Donne is a baby-like. He shows the triangular/ symbiotic relationship between love, the spiritual, and the physical. His speaker states that love is the child of his soul. This invisible emotion came from his invisible essence. In order to make itself known, love must "Take...limbs of flesh." It is necessary for love to be as obvious as the "parent is". Love grows up but time cannot defeat. In "The Paradox", he claims ,that love is always young and no source of its youth is the heat of love:

Love with excess of heat, more young than old

In his poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", Donne addresses the concept of love in a concrete way with the aid of the conceit of the compass:

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.

In the course of this poem, Donne depicts his beloved through a vivid geometrical explanation. The persona addresses his beloved to maintain that their souls may be two but they are united at a center like the two legs of the compass. While the beloved's soul is the fixed foot of the compass, his soul is like the other foot which keeps moving in a circle. This image suggests that in spite of their separate identities, the poet would return to his woman to re-achieve the union. The two souls get freedom to roam in the infinite vista of joy, love, and emotion.

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“The Flea” is among the poems which catapulted Donne in the pool of fame and reputation. Edwin Honig and Oscar Williams believe that when the style was most vigorous in the seventeenth century, it brought forth the best erotic poetry and the best devotional poetry as well as the finest lyrics, satires, pastorals and visionary meditations of that era perhaps the best of any-era" (qtd. in Rajagopalan 29). Symbolically, the flea represents the persona’s passionate plea for a physical love. The speaker addresses his beloved pointing to the flea which has sucked their blood. The mixing of the lovers’ blood inside the flea makes them married:

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare
Where we almost, nay more than married are
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is

In this poem, John Donne relies on the simple flea to develop his argument for a young lady to forfeit her chastity. Using the example of the flea, Donne claims that the flea bite joins them just as does the sexual intercourse. In this respect, she should no longer consider her chastity as an obstacle.

T.S Eliot asserts that one of the most striking aspects of metaphysical poetry is the unification of sensibility by which he means the fusion of thought into feeling. Eliot believes that along with the Elizabethan poets and Jacobean dramatists, metaphysical poets had a special mechanism of sensibility that accommodate any kind of experience. Grierson rightly points out that the "peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination, is the greatest achievement of the metaphysical poets". In this respect, James Reeves argues that metaphysical poets proved that “intellect and emotion are inseparably united, they exist in harmony, not in opposition”. Donne's poem "Song" is a clear illustration of unified sensibility. The poem begins with the persona addressing his wife:

Sweetest love, I do not go,
For weariness of thee,
Nor in hope the world can show
A fitter love for me;
But since that I
Must die at last, 'tis best
To use myself in jest
Thus by feign'd deaths to die.

The speaker of the poem by passionate arguments consoles his wife. He tries to tell her that he is not leaving because he wants to, but death will part them in the end. His absence from her will therefore be a rehearsal of death. He keeps arguing passionately about the importance of

her presence. The following lines from the same poem denote the integration of thought and feelings:

When thou sigh'st, thou sigh'st not wind,
 But sigh'st my soul away;
 When thou weep'st, unkindly kind,
 My life's blood doth decay.
 It cannot be
 That thou lov'st me, as thou say'st,
 If in thine my life thou waste,
 That art the best of me.

The poet makes his relationship with her lover lucid and simple. He says that when she inhales oxygen, she actually grasps his soul. Her tears are not only tears but the blood of the poet. It seems that he is deeply in love with the beloved and that her pain is also his. Hence the poet argues in this stanza that he and his wife are like two bodies and one soul.

5- Conclusion

Like the Elizabethan poets, the Metaphysical poets carried the fire and went on to tackle themes like love, beauty and time. They inspired the reader and wheedled inventive perspectives through the philosophical and paradoxical images. The conceit played a vital role in this ability and had an impact on the reader's mind. Leishman believes that "Donne's monarchy of wit was not a trick or fashion but one of the achievements of the poetic intelligence." John Donne has marshaled a large number of images from different subjects to energize, enliven and animate the theme of love in his poetry. His poetry is full of intense emotion and images derived from science, philosophy, astronomy, geometry, law and other fields of study. By so doing, he makes relentless use of the intellect and of verbally precise but actually prosperous logic, striking out astonishing brilliant but utterly fantastic flashes of wit. Accordingly, he gathers different examples like the flea and the compass to energize his love. In a nutshell, one is able to maintain that the conceit is Donne's tool to communicate his thoughts, revolutionize the content, and 'make seventeenth century's poetry new'.

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