

**A Comparative Study of John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" and "A Valediction: Of Weeping"**

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**Abstract**

*The paper attempts a comparative study of John Donne's poems "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" and "A Valediction: Of Weeping" through an analysis of the metaphysical conceits, images and predominant themes in the poems.*

Julian Lovelock in her introduction to *Songs & Sonnets* observes the age in which metaphysical poets lived as an age of realism. This age set out to "shatter myths and replace them with 'truth'" (Lovelock 15) through conscious change. She also says that "Metaphysical poetry reflects this realism breaking free from the elegant but artificial rhetoric of what is often loosely termed the Petrarchan tradition" (Lovelock 15).

According to Herbert Grierson, poets like John Donne are "designated as 'Metaphysical Poets' in so far as their poetic works have been enriched by the varied aspects of human life like love, religion, death etc by the way of demonstrating their impact on human life in a lively manner with the help of far-fetched imagery" (Sarkar 447). In other words, these poets embarked on a journey of revealing metaphysical truths, through their poetry.

The use of far-fetched imagery or 'metaphysical conceits', is the most remarkable feature of metaphysical poetry. In her introduction to her edition of *'The Metaphysical Poets'* Helen Gardner explains, "A conceit is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness, or, at least, is more immediately striking. All comparisons discover likeness with things unlike: a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness".

Unlike the Elizabethan conceits, metaphysical conceits are more extended and less ornamental, and serve as "...instruments of definition in an argument or instruments to persuade. The poem has something to say which the conceit explicates, or something to urge

which the conceit helps to forward” (Gardner 15). Thus, conceits play a major role in articulating metaphysical truth.

John Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” and “A Valediction: Of Weeping” are two love poems from his collection titled *Songs and Sonnets* (1663). Donne’s two famous conceits, the twin compasses and the coin are linked to the elaborate and continuing argument of the separation of the lover and his beloved in the poems respectively.

“The simile of the compass notwithstanding its quaintiveness is more perfect in its kind, and more beautiful than anything we are acquainted with” (Anonymous 58). The couple even when separated physically is spiritually united and is like a pair of compasses. This conceit has been drawn from the renaissance preoccupation with voyaging and sailing. In the poem, the beloved is compared to the fixed foot and the lover to the mobile foot. Just as the mobile foot is inevitably depended on the fixed foot, the lover has to return to the beloved wherever he roams to.

Some critics recognize the compass as a conceit for the union of souls. The beloved’s soul is taken away by the lover while roaming. Her body only remains, and is passive (‘sit’), suggesting a physical separation, not a mental and spiritual one. Through this, Donne manages to raise their love and separation to a spiritual level.

In “A Valediction: Of Weeping” tears are compared to coins. Donne uses the parallel of coins being stamped with someone’s face, giving them validity, to tears being stamped with the beloved’s face. He extends this comparison by using the conventional Elizabethan idea of tears mirroring or reflecting the face of the beloved. Thus these tears are rendered value and preciousness, “by this mintage they are something worth”. At a spiritual level, the poet places their love and the beloved on a pedestal.

These conceits are accompanied by “Donne’s characteristic choice of imagery” (Lewis 124). Donne draws imagery from sources such as law, science, philosophy and common places of urban life.

In “A Valediction: Forbidding mourning” the permanency of love even in the physical separation of the lovers is depicted through the image of “the death of virtuous men” (separation of soul from body) whose soul attains eternal life.

In the third stanza, the images are drawn from the geological and astronomical sciences. While earthquakes are a cause of damage, destruction and fear, the movement of celestial bodies, ‘trepidation of the spheres’ is innocent and harmless. The intolerable and unbearable nature of their separation is thus lightened by comparing it to the significant yet calm movement of the planets.

The popular belief in Donne’s age that ‘change’ only happened in those that existed beneath the moon is depicted in the image of the “dull sublunary lovers”. The lover hails their

love as unsusceptible to any change, even in physical separation, and transcends it beyond the moon. Change was also seen as a sign of imperfection in that age.

In the sixth stanza, Donne draws image from metallurgy and alchemy; preoccupations of the age of renaissance. Just as gold expands while it is beaten into 'airy thinness' their love spreads. Their 'love [is] so much refined' and echoes the process of alchemy where a base metal is converted into the noble metal gold, devoid of all kinds of impurity.

In "A Valediction: Of Weeping" images are drawn from various spheres and are adapted in the depiction of the tears flowing from the lover and the beloved. The tears of the lover are like 'fruits of much grieve' due to their similarity in shape and are like the womb of a pregnant woman in carrying the image of the beloved. This extends to the image of the globe (spherical) in the next stanza, and suggests that the tears are similar to a globe as they carry the image of his beloved, his world, in them.

The image of the moon as a source of destruction is evoked in the third stanza of the poem. While the moon draws up the tidal force of the sea, the beloved is 'more than Moone' as she is capable of drowning the land with her tears. Placing the beloved over the moon can also be seen as a covert indication to superlunary love, where the poet transcends their love beyond the moon, vouching the firm nature of their love; invulnerable to any form of physical separation.

The conceits and images in the two poems act as agents in the declaration of Donne's philosophy of love. He demarcates physical love from spiritual love in his poems. In both the poems, the beloved is seen only through the eyes of the lover and remains invisible to the readers. Thus physicality is shunned and hidden.

The neo-platonic nature of love is depicted through the conceits and suggests the union of souls. The twin compasses suggests "a world of twoness united" (Stein 165) in love, and the coin suggests an "objective recognition of self in another and the feeling of another in self" (Stein 166). This can be explained by the answer given by Dr. Watson to Sophia in *Dialoghi d' Amore* when asked how many are they when in love, "only one or else four" (qtd. in Gardner 241)

'One' can be traced back to the pair of compasses which suggests a union of two souls into one and 'Four', to the tears from the lover 'minted' with the face of the beloved, becoming two selves at a time in the act of love, assimilating the beloved fully. Thus, the two gets multiplied into four in true love.

According to Martz, the dominion of spiritual love over physical love is portrayed through logic and reason and the conceits and images which are essentially physical and scientific. This is also evident in the structure of the poems where the logical structure and the substance of the poem, spiritual love, blends together. The inner soul or the essence of the

poem is expressed through the body or structure of the poem and vice-versa, suggesting the interdependence of spirituality and physicality, and body and soul in the expression of love.

A similar trajectory can be traced in the poems in regard to the poet's journey through physicality and spirituality. "A motion from restless change to conscious peace and rest, and thence to an idea of eternal motionless", associated with physicality suggests an experience to a unifying transcendence, an attainment of spirituality and union of soul. "A movement from the first world of flesh to that of mind and thence to a world of spirit" traces the progression of significant spiritual love.

This path is followed even in the structure of the poems, "[a] confident opening, a middle in which initial certainties give way gradually to new perceptions and a conclusion manifesting a clear and profoundly rooted assurance" (Sicherman 11).

Both the Valedictions, replete with conceits and images from everyday life and the scientific and mathematical spheres, that are essentially physical in nature expounds a neo-platonic and spiritual love. Donne deviates from the Elizabethan obsession with physicality and appearance in the act of love. The interdependence of spirituality and physicality is foregrounded in both the poems, more in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" than "A Valediction: Of Weeping". Donne's assertion of neo-platonic love also situates him as a propounder of Catholicism.

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