

**Selected Love Poetry**  
**of**  
**John Donne**

(metaphysical poet 1572-1631)



Love in a Turbulent Age: an introduction to John Donne's love poetry

*During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war, and such a war as is of every man against every man . . . In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; . . . no arts; no letters; no society; and, which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.*

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). *Of Man, Being the First Part of Leviathan*.

Thomas Hobbes pictures the terrible condition of people who lived before there were kings to bring about order of society. Without rulers to keep people *in awe*, Hobbes insisted that society would dissolve into chaos and life would be *poor, nasty, brutish, and short*. Hobbes claimed to be writing about a time that existed before the dawn of history, but in fact, he may have been worrying about the breakdown of English society around him – civil war was happening; the king was beheaded; the monarchy was abolished; long-held beliefs and ideas were being discredited; optimism and confidence gave way to questioning, uncertainty, even pessimism. These changes all lead scholars to proclaim that the Seventeenth Century was indeed a time of intense political and religious unrest for England.

The literature of the turbulent years from 1625-1660 in part continued the styles of the Renaissance, and in part reflected the conditions of the time. The writers of this period can be divided essentially into two groups: the metaphysical poets, and the Sons of Ben. Although Ben Jonson and others wrote plays that were often more popular than Shakespeare's, the period is not remembered for its drama. Rather, it is an age that produced many memorable poems by John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and John Milton, for example. In this era of unrest and change, John Donne stands out for his often brilliant and intellectually amorous and religious poems and verses. For many, Donne is the most popular of the metaphysical poets, and within his often difficult and demanding writing one finds a great deal of love, passion, seduction, and sorrow. Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* are among the finest collections of lyrics in the English language, and although these lyrics refer to a multitude of diverse thoughts, images, conceits, paradoxes, and allusions, all which characterize metaphysical poetry, at their core is a sense of love.

## What exactly is *metaphysical poetry*?

The term 'metaphysical' was first used by Samuel Johnson in an attack on writers who fill their works with far-fetched conceits and who make poetry a vehicle for displays of learning. Johnson writes:

*Wit, like all other things subject by their nature to the choice of man, has its changes and fashions, and at different times takes different forms. The Metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour . . . Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious . . . and the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found . . .*

*. . . Ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs and surprises; but the reader, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.*

[From Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* series, published between 1779-1781]

Well, it looks like Johnson was undeniably not a fan of the metaphysical poets, so here's the question:

*Does John Donne love poetry truly and genuinely express real love in its many experiences, allowing the reader to be moved and to feel?*

or

*Is John Donne merely a talented poet who uses his wit and ingenuity to create love poems?*

Metaphysical poetry arose as a reaction to the extremes of Petrarchism; one problem with Petrarchan poems is a kind of predictability -- mellifluous madrigals, charming love lyrics and such. The conceit is found, presented, elaborated, but there are few subsequent surprises. Metaphysical poets were far more intellectual, and their intellectuality is expressed in the matter and the manner of their poetry. Donne and his followers (Andrew Marvell, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan) like to catch us off-guard, change direction, foil expectations. Reading poems by the metaphysical poets is often an academic, intellectual exercise. Above all, metaphysical poets are characterized by their use of wit, often revealed in the unusual or ingenious use of words rather than in the subject matter.

## Various characteristics of metaphysical poetry

- cleverness of wit displayed through subtle and brilliant images or conceits, associated with things that at first seem incongruous; the development of the conceit is the development of the thought; demands concentration, and emotional, intellectual, and sensory response from the reader
- imagery based on perception of similarity between different things
- scorn for conventional poetic themes and images; strong realism
- lots of images from learning: geography, maths, alchemy, theology . . .
- lots of images from everyday life
- use of images which contain other things in some way; for example, reflections
- keen perception and cleverly apt use of words, ideas, connections
- dramatic, colloquial tone
- startling openings; energy, movement
- freedom of rhythm in which we can hear stresses, pauses, tempo
- frequent use of puns and paradoxes
- tendency to develop themes by use of argument, often through syllogistic proofs – two statements and conclusion drawn from them – (eg. *all plants have roots; a tree is a plant; therefore, trees have roots*); may be based on false analogies though (*she is heavenly; heaven is unchanging; therefore, she can not die*)
- a fusion of emotion and intellect – typically, metaphysical poetry requires deep and difficult *thought* as well as *feeling* from the reader
- uses words which call the mind into play, rather than words which appeal to the senses or evoke an emotional response (through memory)
- involves a perceived likeness
- emotions are shaped and expressed by logical reasoning; *Intellect was at the tip of the senses* – T. S. Eliot

## John Donne, his love poems, and SPACE / PLACE

In many Donne poems, the use of *space* and *place* is significant. Some characteristics are as follows:

- ❖ *discoveries*: the delight of discovery is often profound
- ❖ *spatial imagination*: many unique images are used; boundaries are pushed
- ❖ *sense of place*: awareness of a physical setting is important
- ❖ *circles (concentric circles)*: may be symbolic, loving, social, spiritual
- ❖ *cosmos*: centered upon Earth and arranged in concentric spheres; *sublunary sphere* (sphere enclosed by the moon) is always changing, living / dying; composed of four elements (earth, water, fire, air); *celestial sphere* is purer, simpler, heavenly
- ❖ *time*: often uncertain, changing

John Donne's lovers often attempt to transform place and space, attempt to transform world. They are shut out; they shut out; they are the world.

Donne's poems are often set at the edge of delight, written in resistance to the inevitable – forbidding sun, morning, break of day . . .

Conflicts between Time and Love occur; arguments are inevitable

Speakers assert power over Time; speakers imagine power over space.

Power of lovers is able reach beyond time into the celestial sphere.

For Donne, love:

- may be an experience of the body, the soul, or both
- may be a religious experience or merely a sensual one
- gives rise to emotions, from ecstasy to despair

Reading John Donne's love poems gives insight into the complex range of experiences connected to love, and / yet are often contradictory.

For each poem included in your reading package (which you will soon receive), consider each of the following questions which will serve as the basis for our final exam question.

- *analyse how the speaker uses varied imagery to reveal his attitude towards the nature of love*
- *discuss how this poem is typical of John Donne and/or metaphysical poetry*

## **And finally (sort of), some more thoughts on John Donne and Metaphysical Poetry**

John Donne wrote his poetry in a much different climate than the Neoclassicism which sought to reformulate the literary values of ancient Greece and Rome. He was influenced by the experimentation of other contemporary poets, who were striking out against a tradition of highly stylized poetic clichés, such as bleeding hearts, cheeks like roses, Cupid's shooting arrows. These aspects had been employed by the poetry of *courtly love*, a tradition that was nourished by literary texts and consisted of poetry written to and about the aristocracy. This poetry depicted the knight's protestations of unworthiness and his endless pursuit of danger and adventure to prove his faithful and devoted service to his lady.

Donne was also writing against the backdrop of a religious and literary tradition, begun in the early Middle Ages, that asserted that the body and soul were distinct. This tradition believed that the present life was one of self-denial. The everlasting peace of the soul in the next world would compensate for this renunciation of passion (and sexuality). In other words, the suffering and tribulations of this world would all be rewarded by the soul's future happiness in the world to come. Conversely, frightening images of damnations awaited those who sinned.

After the Middle Ages, literature tried to repair the divorce between body and soul. This rhetorical division between body and soul had been so persuasive that after the Renaissance, literature became deeply engaged with the effort to repair this rift. Donne's poetry, as well as that of the other metaphysical poets, sought to establish a way of inseparably uniting the body and soul in this world; it affirmed human sexuality as a way to achieve spirituality. Indeed, Donne dared to use potentially perceived erotic images in complete opposition to what had been previously considered appropriate and decorous. Thus, in his bold and often incongruous imagery, Donne broke away from the past and offered new way to perceive reality and the spiritual nature of our (secular) existence.

## John Donne -- Metaphysical Poet – Assignment 1

Working on your own or with a partner, you are to select one John Donne poem (not taught in class; I will provide a couple of good on-line sites to access the works of Donne) and prepare a comprehensive report on the poem. You will be presenting your poem to your classmates. Your report can be shaped any way you feel best, but it must contain the following:

- a copy of the poem
- a solid paraphrasing of the poem
- a discussion of any relevant historical or background information
- a thorough analysis of the poems' literary techniques (include the speaker's attitude toward the subject and how the poem is typical of Donne)
- your personal response(s) to the poem
- something else that is impressive / inspiring

Although our class package focuses on selected love poems by Donne, you are free to select any other poem; it need not be a love poem, but I would prefer that you not select any of the holy sonnets. Students cannot research the same poems, so all poems will be designated on a first come, first sign up process. You will be given some class time to work on this assignment. All secondary resources must be cited properly. The assignment is worth 20 marks. Remember: be thorough and professional in your presentation.

a couple of sites to begin your search:

*The Poetry Foundation* <[www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)>

*Luminarium* <[www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnebib.htm](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnebib.htm)>

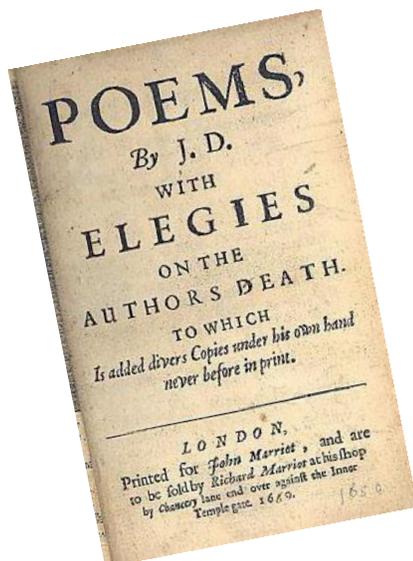
## **You're not Donne yet: Let's get metaphysical: find your inner Donne**

We began our study of John Donne metaphysical poetry by looking at, and playing with, some unique conceits connected to love and concluded by watching Emma Thompson's powerful performance in *Wit*. Your task for our final Donne assignment (in lieu of test) is to write your own metaphysical poem, using the style and characteristics of metaphysical poetry.

You have a choice:

1. Select one of the Donne poems presented to you in class, then respond to the ideas and/or speaker of the poem, following the structure of the original poem.
2. Create an original metaphysical masterpiece, using any/all of the characteristics of metaphysical poetry.

(this assignment is worth 20 marks)



A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be "John Donne" written in a cursive, calligraphic style. The signature is positioned to the right of the book's title page.