

Metaphysical Elements in the Poetry of John Donne: A Study of 'The Canonization' and 'The Sunne Rising'

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Abstract

This paper examines the metaphysical elements in the poetry of John Donne, focusing on 'The Canonization' and 'The Sunne Rising'. Donne, the foremost of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, reshaped the conventional Petrarchan love lyric by fusing intellectual argument with emotional intensity through elaborate conceits, paradox, wit, and a dramatic, colloquial voice. The paper situates his poetry within its biographical circumstances and the intellectual instability of the Jacobean age, traces the critical debate over the term "metaphysical" from Samuel Johnson's censure to T.S. Eliot's revaluation, and offers close readings of both poems to examine their conceits, paradoxes, religious and cosmological imagery, and argumentative structure. The study finds that both poems assert the self-sufficiency and transcendence of love against an indifferent world, and concludes that Donne's fusion of thought and feeling — Eliot's "unified sensibility" — remains the achievement that secures his place as the exemplary metaphysical poet.

Keywords

Metaphysical Poetry, John Donne, Conceit, Paradox, Wit, The Canonization, The Sunne Rising, Unified Sensibility.

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Introduction

John Donne (1572–1631) occupies a singular place in English poetry as the founder of what later criticism termed the “metaphysical” school. This paper studies the metaphysical elements in Donne’s poetry, focusing on ‘The Canonization’ and ‘The Sunne Rising’, and examines how conceits, paradox, wit, argument, dramatic openings, and philosophical depth combine to produce poems of remarkable richness. Its objectives are to: situate Donne biographically and historically; define metaphysical poetry as a movement; analyse the two poems in detail; identify their shared and distinctive metaphysical elements; compare their themes, style, and technique; and survey critical responses to Donne’s work from the seventeenth century to the present.

The study matters for three reasons. First, Donne’s poetry marks the transition from smooth Petrarchan convention to a more intellectually demanding mode of verse, making it essential to the development of English poetry. Second, his conceits and his fusion of the sacred and profane influenced later poets from Herbert and Marvell to Eliot and twentieth-century modernists.

The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together. — **Samuel Johnson, on the Metaphysical poets**

Third, his poetry raises enduring questions about love, body and soul, the individual within a vast cosmos, and the sacred and the profane — questions this paper seeks to illuminate through a combined biographical, historical, and formalist approach, with close reading anchored in a wide range of critical perspectives from Johnson to Eliot and beyond.

Life and Literary Background

Donne studied at Oxford and Cambridge without taking a degree — likely because graduation required an oath he could not take as a Catholic — and later read law in London, immersing himself in theology, philosophy, law, medicine, astronomy, and alchemy. This learning pervades his poetry, which circulated in manuscript among a sophisticated coterie and displays extraordinary wit and audacity. *Donne, the delight of Phoebus and each Muse, / Who, to thy one, all other brains refuse.* — **Ben Jonson, “To John Donne,” Epigrams**

The turning point of his life came in 1601, when he secretly married Anne More, niece of his employer’s wife, without her father’s consent. The marriage cost him his career and led to years of poverty. This experience of transgressive, defiant love shaped the Songs and Sonnets, including both poems studied here, which repeatedly assert the lovers’ self-sufficiency against a hostile world.

John Donne — Anne Donne — Un-done. — **attributed to Donne; Izaak Walton, Life of Dr. John Donne, 1640**

Anne's death in 1617 plunged Donne into grief that shaped his later religious poetry. Having converted to Anglicanism around 1598, he was ordained in 1615 and became Dean of St. Paul's in 1621, where his sermons made him the greatest preacher of his age.

The label "metaphysical" was applied retrospectively — Dryden first noted that Donne "affects the metaphysics," and Johnson later codified the term — but its defining qualities appear throughout Donne's earliest work. His poems use love or religion as an occasion for rigorous philosophical exploration, bringing scholastic and scientific method — close argument, syllogism, analogy, learned allusion — to bear on feeling.

In Donne, there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling. — **T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," 1921**

Eliot's "unified sensibility" — feeling thought as immediately as the scent of a rose — captures what makes Donne the exemplary metaphysical poet: thinking and feeling are, for him, aspects of a single apprehension of experience.

Historical and Literary Context

The Jacobean age (1603–1625) was culturally vital yet anxious: the Gunpowder Plot, the King James Bible, and the flourishing of Jacobean drama coincided with a world-picture destabilised by the Reformation, the Copernican revolution, and new voyages of discovery.

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt, / The Element of fire is quite put out; / The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit / Can well direct him where to look for it. — **John Donne, An Anatomy of the World, 1611**

In this climate, the absolute, self-sufficient love celebrated in both poems takes on special urgency as a source of certainty. Metaphysical poetry emerged as a reaction against the exhausted conventions of Petrarchan verse — the distant, idealised lady and stock similes of sun, rose, and gem — as Donne and others sought a more intellectually demanding, colloquial, and "anti-musical" mode.

Donne threw off the Petrarchan mode more thoroughly than any other poet of his time, replacing it with a mode that was at once more rigorously intellectual and more dramatically immediate. — **C.S. Lewis, English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, 1954**

Its principal features — the conceit; the dramatic, in medias res opening; the fusion of emotion and intellect; paradox and irony; colloquial, argumentative

structure; learning drawn from diverse fields; and a preoccupation with body and soul, sacred and profane — are all abundantly present in the two poems studied here.

The Concept of Metaphysical Poetry

“Metaphysical” derives from the Greek *meta ta physika*, “what comes after the physical” — the branch of philosophy concerned with reality, being, time, and causation. In criticism the term points, more loosely, to poetry that moves beyond the sensory into intellectual speculation. Johnson’s classic negative definition remains influential:

The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they only wrote verses. — **Samuel Johnson, Life of Cowley, 1779**

Eliot’s 1921 revaluation transformed critical opinion, arguing that the metaphysicals possessed a “unified sensibility” later “dissociated” in English poetry. Its key features are the conceit — an extended, surprising comparison between unlike things; colloquial diction that imitates argument; the fusion of wit and seriousness; paradox and oxymoron; diverse learning; and a concern with love and religion, body and soul, time and eternity.

This is a poetry of deliberate intellectual difficulty, one that challenges the reader to follow the argument and resolve the paradox rather than obscuring meaning for its own sake.

Donne’s poetry presents a blend of passion and intelligence, of sensuous immediacy and intellectual abstraction, that is unique in English literature. — **Helen Gardner, The Metaphysical Poets, 1957**

The conceit, elaborated at length through multiple points of analogy, is the movement’s defining figure — most famously Donne’s comparison, in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” of two souls to the two legs of a compass. Paradox is equally central: in ‘The Canonization’ the lovers, seemingly useless to the world, prove more significant and immortal than kings; in ‘The Sunne Rising’ the sun, ruler of the universe, becomes the servant of a single bedroom. Wit, in its seventeenth-century sense, is the faculty that perceives such unexpected resemblances and drives Donne’s argument throughout.

Major Metaphysical Elements In Donne’s Poetry

Where the Petrarchan poet expressed feeling through convention, Donne thinks his way through emotion, giving his poems the shape of philosophical argument: proposition, development, anticipated objection, and conclusion. ‘The

Canonization' proceeds like a legal brief, demolishing each objection to the speaker's love before asserting its transcendent significance.

Donne turned the love lyric into an intellectual exercise — not to diminish feeling, but to intensify it through the pressure of thought. — **A.J. Smith, The Metaphysics of Love, 1985**

At its best, Donne's conceit is a genuine intellectual discovery rather than mere ingenuity: the compass conceit, the flea conceit, and the saint conceit of 'The Canonization' all illuminate real truths about the lovers' experience. In the latter, the lovers are compared to canonized saints — dead to the world, "made" by love as saints are made by God, their story preserved in poems as saints' lives are preserved in hagiography.

The inseparability of feeling and thought is Donne's defining quality: emotion generates the need for philosophical inquiry, and inquiry intensifies emotion — Eliot's "unified sensibility," contrasted with a later "dissociation."

A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. — **T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," 1921**

This fusion runs through 'The Sunne Rising', where indignation at the sun's intrusion is transmuted into witty argument about the relative value of love and the world — at once intensely personal and philosophically speculative on time, space, and value. Donne draws on theology, law, medicine, geography, astronomy, and alchemy to serve these arguments: in 'The Sunne Rising' the "Indies of spice and mine" and "all states, and all princes" measure the beloved's worth against commerce and politics, rooting the poem's argument in the material realities of the age.

A recurrent theme is the spiritualisation of love — the transformation of erotic passion into something of quasi-religious significance — most fully realised in 'The Canonization', where the lovers become literal saints, but present throughout the Songs and Sonnets in the claim that true love unites souls, not merely bodies.

Donne's love poetry is unique in its insistence that the union of souls — not merely of bodies — is the truest and most lasting form of love. — **Clay Hunt, Donne's Poetry: Essays in Literary Analysis, 1954.**

Metaphysical Elements In 'The Canonization'

The poem's five nine-line stanzas (rhyming ABBAABCCC) open with an imperative addressed to an unnamed critic of the speaker's love. The second and third stanzas argue that the lovers injure no one, comparing them to the self-consuming fly and taper, the eagle and dove, and the phoenix reborn from its own ashes. The fourth stanza introduces the central conceit: having "died" to the world,

the lovers will be “canonized” and their story preserved as a “pattern” for future lovers, who in the fifth stanza invoke them as saints.

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love, / Or chide my palsie, or my gout, / My five gray hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout. — **John Donne, 'The Canonization', ll. 1–3**

Its central theme is love's capacity, once celebrated in art, to outlast the lovers' mortality — a variant of the “poetry makes immortal” argument in Shakespeare and Horace, given a distinctively metaphysical twist through religious canonization.

We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms; / As well a well-wrought urn becomes / The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs. — **John Donne, 'The Canonization', ll. 32–34**

Religious imagery pervades the poem from its title onward: “canonization” is the Church's formal declaration of sainthood, and Donne applies it to the lovers to argue that they, like saints who intercede for the living, can become patterns and intercessors for future lovers.

And thus invoke us: You, whom reverend love / Made one another's hermitage. — **John Donne, 'The Canonization', ll. 38–39**

Interlocking conceits structure the poem: the central canonization conceit; the fly-and-taper image of self-consuming passion; and the phoenix, in which the lovers “die” (a pun on sexual consummation) and rise again as a single immortal entity.

We die and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love. — **John Donne, 'The Canonization', ll. 26–27**

Its central paradox is that lovers who seem useless to the world are in fact more significant than its princes and merchants — their withdrawal from the world becomes the condition of their immortality — while a sustained irony leaves open whether Donne elevates love through sacred language or exposes the presumption of doing so.

Donne's poems are arguments as much as they are lyrics — the drama of a mind in the process of convincing itself and others. — **Barbara Everett, Poets in Their Time, 1986**

This argumentative structure — dismissal of the critic, demonstration of harmlessness, assertion of transcendence, vision of future vindication — is the poem's most striking formal feature, and its deployment of hagiographic vocabulary (canonization, legend, hermitage, intercession) elevates profane love to the level of grace.

The Canonization makes a serious theological argument: that love, at its highest, is a form of grace. — **John Carey, John Donne: Life, Mind and Art, 1981**

Symbolic imagery reinforces this claim: the eagle and dove represent strength joined with gentleness, the phoenix embodies love's death-and-resurrection, and the "well-wrought urn" figures the poem itself as a vessel preserving the lovers' essence. The poem's colloquial, even aggressive opening — "hold your tongue" — gives way to a complex argument conducted through rhetorical question, command, and logic, its irregular line lengths lending a spontaneous energy that builds cumulatively to the claim of immortality through verse. Long regarded as one of Donne's most representative poems, it fuses emotion and intellect and treats love as a subject that can be examined, defended, and spiritually elevated — a quality modern critics prize where Johnson once condemned it as forced yoking of unlike ideas.

Metaphysical Elements In 'The Sunne Rising'

The poem's three ten-line stanzas (ABBACDCDEE) open with an abrupt rebuke to the sun, a "busy old fool" with no right to intrude on the lovers. The second stanza claims the speaker could eclipse the sun by shutting his eyes, but will not, since his beloved outweighs the wealth of "both the India's." The climactic third stanza declares that "all states and all princes" are contained within the lovers' bed — the true centre of the universe — so the sun need shine nowhere else.

Busy old fool, unruly sun, / Why dost thou thus, / Through windows and through curtains call on us? — **John Donne, 'The Sunne Rising', ll. 1–3**

Its dominant theme is love's supremacy over all external authority, including the sun as symbol of cosmic order and time: love makes its own world, time, and space, and the lovers' room becomes a microcosm replicating "all states and all princes."

Nothing else is; / Princes do but play us; / compared to this, / All honour's mimic, all wealth alchemy. — **John Donne, 'The Sunne Rising', ll. 21–24**

Personifying the sun as a meddlesome bureaucrat deflates a traditional symbol of divine order with maximum wit and economy — to call the sun "unruly" is itself paradoxical, implying that from love's perspective its intrusion disrupts a higher law. Geographical, political, and astronomical imagery — spice and mines, states and princes, the sun's "reverend and strong" beams — makes the bedroom simultaneously an intimate space and, by the poem's central conceit, the centre of the universe.

The dramatic opening — the triple vocative, the rhetorical question, the colloquial urgency — plunges the reader immediately into a bedroom at dawn, a technical innovation much imitated in the metaphysical lyric.

The dramatic opening of the metaphysical lyric — its characteristic plunge in medias res — is one of Donne's most influential technical innovations. — **Louis Martz, The Poetry of Meditation, 1954**

The poem's central conceit inverts the Renaissance microcosm–macrocosm idea: rather than the lovers' room merely reflecting the greater world, Donne argues that the room is the more real entity, the sun and the world of kings and merchants comparatively unreal for lacking the lovers' self-sufficiency.

She is all states, and all princes I; / Nothing else is. — **John Donne, 'The Sunne Rising', ll. 21–22**

Wit and logic are inseparable throughout: love, usually subject to time, is declared timeless; the beloved, usually valued for beauty, is valued in commercial and political terms; the sun, usually central, becomes love's servant. This playful sophistry serves the serious purpose of transforming conventional categories of value, nowhere more than in the claim that love exists outside time altogether.

Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime, / Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time. — **John Donne, 'The Sunne Rising', ll. 9–10**

The poem's diction is direct and colloquial rather than ornamental, its irregular rhythm enacting the spontaneity of speech, each stanza building toward the conclusion that the sun's true purpose is to serve the lovers. Widely regarded as one of Donne's finest achievements, the poem is prized for combining strong feeling with intellectual argument, redefining the sun from a controlling cosmic force into a servant of love — precisely the kind of “forced” connection modern critics read as creative depth rather than the excess Johnson once condemned.

Conclusion

This study of the metaphysical elements in 'The Canonization' and 'The Sunne Rising' confirms that Donne's poetry represents a uniquely rich mode of expression, marked by elaborate conceits, paradox, wit, and irony; dramatic, argumentative structure; the fusion of emotion and intellect; learning drawn from theology, philosophy, science, law, and medicine; and sustained engagement with love, time, transcendence, and the sacred and profane.

In 'The Canonization', Donne fuses erotic passion and religious aspiration, arguing through the phoenix conceit and the “well-wrought urn” that love celebrated in art achieves a form of immortality. In 'The Sunne Rising', he asserts love's supremacy over external authority by personifying the sun as a meddlesome fool and making the lovers' room the centre of the universe, elevating private experience to cosmic significance without losing its intimate grounding.

The two poems share a metaphysical vision while drawing on different source domains — Catholic hagiography in one, cosmology and political economy in the other — a versatility that marks Donne as a poet of inexhaustible range rather than a single register. His metaphysical poetry endures because it refuses easy answers, holding in productive tension the claims of body and soul, the transient and the eternal, the individual and the cosmos, the erotic and the divine — the essence of the metaphysical mode, and the secret of Donne's enduring fascination.

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