

The Metaphoric Bridge: Connecting the Physical with the Metaphysical in Selected Poems of John Donne

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Abstract

The paper explores the metaphorical link between the physical and metaphysical realms as depicted in the selected poems of John Donne. Through a close analysis of Donne's poetic works the paper investigates how skilfully Donne weaves together the tangible and intangible aspects of existence, creating an innate connection between the physical world and the metaphysical realms of love, spirituality, and the human condition. Through his use of metaphors, paradoxes, and conceits, he invites readers to contemplate the complex relationship between life's material and spiritual aspects. By analysing a range of Donne's poems, especially "The Ecstasy," "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," and "The Flea," the study aims to demonstrate how Donne employs metaphors to bridge the gap between the tangible world and abstract concepts such as love, spirituality, and the soul.

Keywords: Metaphysical poetry; Metaphoric bridge; Metaphor; John Donne; Love

Introduction

Metaphor, traditionally regarded as a figure of speech employed by poets and intellectuals for aesthetic purposes, underwent a significant shift in perception during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Romantic movement expanded the boundaries of metaphor beyond its confinement within literary language, transforming it into a powerful tool for thought and reflection of the world. This evolution gained further momentum in the 20th century with the groundbreaking work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who introduced the "conceptual metaphor" theory in their influential book, *Metaphors We Live By*. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is not limited to linguistic expression alone but constitutes a fundamental mechanism of the mind, enabling individuals to draw upon their physical and social experiences to gain understanding across diverse subject matters. They assert that human thought processes are largely metaphorical, underlining the influence of metaphor in shaping cognition and perception (Lakoff and Johnson 6). By delving into the metaphors employed by authors, we gain valuable insights and delve into their cognitive space. In John Donne, we see a varied use of metaphors and various studies charting the linguistic, aesthetic and cognitive dimensions of Donne's metaphors but a gap remains that leads to the question: Is Donne's metaphor a vehicle or a bridge that connects the physical and the metaphysical and helps transcend to the later from the former? This paper is an attempt to find Donne's use of metaphor as a link between the real and the ethereal, the practical and the ideal.

Discussion and Analysis

The theoretical framework utilized in this analysis draws upon the analytic philosophy of Max Black, a prominent British-American scholar. Black's conceptualization, known as the interaction view of metaphor, provides a comprehensive understanding of the poets' employment of metaphors. This approach stands in contrast to two alternative perspectives: the substitution view, which posits that a metaphor replaces literal statements within a sentence, and the comparison view, which considers metaphors as

condensed or elliptical similes expressing similarity or analogy (Ortony, 1993:27). The interaction view of metaphor encompasses five key statements, which serve as fundamental pillars for analysing and comprehending the intricacies of metaphorical language. These statements elucidate the dynamics involved in the construction and interpretation of metaphors, shedding light on the interplay between the primary and secondary subjects within a metaphorical statement:

1. A metaphorical statement has two distinct subjects, to be identified as the "primary" subject and the "secondary" one.
2. The secondary subject is to be regarded as a system rather than an individual thing.
3. The metaphorical utterance works by "projecting upon" the primary subject a set of "associated implications," comprised in the implicative complex, that are predicable of the secondary subject.
4. The maker of a metaphorical statement selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the primary subject by applying to it statements isomorphic with the members of the secondary subject's implicative complex.
5. In the context of a particular metaphorical statement, the two subjects "interact" in the following ways: (a) the presence of the primary subject incites the hearer to select some of the secondary subject's properties; and (b) invites him to construct a parallel implication-complex that can fit the primary subject; and (c) reciprocally induces parallel changes in the secondary subject.

(Ortony 27-28)

Furthermore, the idea that metaphor is the link connecting the physical with the metaphysical can be strengthened by remembering Jesper Sørensen's view in the article *Magic among the Trobrianders: Conceptual mapping in magical rituals*

“When understanding something like “my love is a rose,” two mental spaces are constructed ... each informed by information and inferential structures stemming from a conceptual domain: one about love, another about roses. When the two are brought together, some aspects of each are projected into a new, emerging mental space, the “blend,” in which these can interact to create new meaning, not explicable by each of the source domains alone. Thus, my love will be beautiful, fragile, smells good and possibly has thorns, at the same time as she, obviously, retains the characteristics of human beings (biological and mental processes)” (Sorenson 40).

Using these paradigms, we see that Donne's use of metaphor in a cognitive sense engages metaphor as the bridge to connect the everyday real with the transcendental ethereal and in making this connection it imprints characteristics of the metaphysical or ethereal upon the regular and physical by modifying it to/by the other plane. The love in the earthly attire becomes a divine presence potent enough to canonize the physical love into a transcendental reality where only love exists and "nothing else is" ("The Sun Rising" Line 23). In "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning", we see, using the theory of 'conceptual blending', the metaphorical construction of transcendental love from the earthly plains. The poem begins by drawing a parallel between virtuous men passing away and the ephemeral nature of love. The idea of love as a transient and elusive entity is conveyed through the metaphorical blending of the passing of souls and the breath. The blend creates a new mental space in which the qualities of both love and the passing of souls intertwine. The subsequent stanza emphasizes the sacred and private nature of love. The speaker suggests that expressing love openly and publicly would profane its true essence. This blending of the conceptual domains of love and religious devotion gives rise to the idea that love is a profound and intimate experience that is best kept private, shared only between the two individuals involved. As the poem progresses, the blending of the conceptual domains expands to incorporate notions of cosmic order and harmony. The comparison of earthly movements and the trepidation of the spheres creates a blend

that signifies the innocence and purity of love, even in the face of greater cosmic disturbances. Love is presented as a force that transcends earthly concerns, existing in a realm untouched by external influences. The poem further explores the contrast between ordinary lovers and the speaker's unique bond. The blending of the conceptual domains of refined love and the limitations of ordinary human connection highlights the exceptional nature of the speaker's love. This blend creates a mental space in which love is elevated to a higher plane, surpassing the mere physical and sensory aspects associated with typical human love. The final stanzas of the poem depict the unbreakable connection between the two souls. The blending of the conceptual domains of two souls becoming one and the imagery of twin compasses creates a new mental space in which the inseparability and mutual dependence of the lovers are emphasized. The blend constructs a powerful image of love as a guiding force, where one soul remains fixed while the other explores the world. The blending of the conceptual domains creates a mental space in which the fidelity and unity of love are celebrated.

When analysing Donne's poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" using the interaction view of metaphor, we discover the underlying metaphorical dynamics and observe how the primary and secondary subjects interact to convey a deeper meaning. In this analysis, the primary subject pertains to the love shared between the speaker and the addressed person, while the secondary subject refers to a system of virtuous men and their departure from life. The secondary subject is viewed as a collective entity symbolizing departure or separation. The metaphorical utterance functions by projecting associated implications of the secondary subject onto the primary subject, suggesting a gentle and peaceful parting devoid of sorrow or disturbance. Through selective emphasis and organization, the speaker applies statements isomorphic to the characteristics of virtuous men's departure to describe the nature of their love. The interaction between the two subjects occurs in various ways, including the hearer selecting properties associated with the secondary subject, constructing a parallel implication-complex that aligns with the primary subject, and inducing reciprocal changes in the secondary subject. This analysis reveals the poem's exploration of love's transcendence and steadfastness in the face of physical separation, where the

blending of love and departure allows for the expression of a profound connection between two souls. The metaphorical projection of implications from the secondary subject onto the primary subject deepens the meaning and highlights the enduring nature and unity of the lovers' souls. By examining the poem through the lens of the interaction view of metaphor, we gain insight into the intertwined metaphorical construction of love and departure, which evokes a profound sense of connection, endurance, and circularity. Donne's skilful use of metaphorical language enables a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and depths of love beyond mere literal descriptions.

"The Ecstasy" by Donne explores the theme of spiritual union and the interconnectedness of the physical and metaphysical realms. In this poem, Donne uses metaphors to describe the merging of two souls and the transcendence of earthly limitations. One metaphorical link between the physical and metaphysical in "The Ecstasy" can be found in the lines: "Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread/ Our eyes upon one double string;"(Donne, Lines 7-8). Here, Donne uses the image of intertwining "eye-beams" and a "double string" to symbolize the merging of two souls into one. The eyes, which are physical organs, become metaphors for the souls' connection and unity. The intertwining beams suggest a deep and intense gaze, where the two individuals become so closely connected that their vision and perception align. Donne further explores the connection between the physical and metaphysical realms in the lines: "And whilst our souls negotiate there, we like sepulchral statues lay;"(Donne, Lines 7-18) In these lines, the poet compares the state of their souls during their spiritual union to that of "sepulchral statues." This metaphorical link implies a temporary suspension of the physical realm as their souls transcend ordinary earthly experiences. By referring to themselves as statues, Donne suggests a stillness and a departure from the limitations of the material world, as statues are often associated with permanence and immobility. Donne compares the gentle slope of a riverbank to a pillow upon which the delicate violet flower rests:

Where, like a pillow on a bed,

A pregnant bank swelled up to rest

The violet's reclining head,
Sat we two, one another's best. (*Donne, Lines 1-4*)

The metaphor suggests the sensual and comforting atmosphere created by nature, setting the stage for the lovers' ecstatic union in the realm of the transcendental or the soulful.

Donne portrays the lovers' hands as meeting rivers, merging together like the convergence of two water bodies. This metaphor beautifully captures the sense of union and flow, emphasizing the seamless connection between the two individuals. The poem compares the lovers' breathing to a language, suggesting that they communicate through their very essence and bridging the physical to the metaphysical. This metaphor highlights the intimate connection they share, with every inhale and exhale representing a form of communication between their souls. Thus, "Unperturbed as a holy sphere,/So, souls together placed here" the union of the lovers' souls gets connected to the peaceful and harmonious movement of the heavenly spheres. It emphasizes the transcendental nature of their connection and suggests a state of bliss and divine alignment. The metaphoric language in "The Ecstasy" helps to paint a vivid and passionate image of the lovers' intense desire for unity, highlighting the ecstasy and spiritual significance of their union. Throughout the poem Donne uses metaphors to bridge the gap between the physical and metaphysical, portraying the transformative and spiritual nature of love. These metaphors illustrate the profound and mystical connection between the lovers, transcending the boundaries of the material world and delving into the realm of the divine.

In "The Flea" by John Donne, several lines establish metaphorical links between the physical and metaphysical realms. One example is found in the following lines:

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be. (lines 1-4)

These lines present the flea as a metaphorical representation of the physical act of sexual union. The speaker argues that the flea, having first bitten him and then his beloved, symbolizes the mingling of their blood in a shared physical experience. This physical act of the flea-sucking blood becomes a metaphor for the blending of their bodies and the intimate connection between them. Donne employs the flea as a vehicle for discussing the metaphysical dimension of their relationship, emphasizing that the act of mingling blood and sharing physical intimacy is consequential beyond its physical manifestation. The metaphor goes beyond the literal bite of the flea and highlights the deep connection between the lovers, suggesting that their physical union carries profound metaphysical significance.

In "The Canonization," the concept of canonization—generally connected to the act of canonising someone—becomes a means of conferring a celestial status on the lovers' connection. This allegorically built bridge unites the spiritual domain of transcendence and purity with the earthy domain of human emotions and experiences. Donne emphasises the transformational potential of love to transcend ordinary concerns and acquire a greater, more deep meaning by drawing a metaphorical space where the borders between the physical and metaphysical are blurred. He does this by equating love to a holy devotion deserving of adoration.

"The Relic" delves deeper into the idea of love's transcendence by employing symbolic imagery. Traditionally a tangible artefact connected to religious awe, the relic now represents the lingering effects of a previous connection. The persistent effect of love on the human mind is encapsulated by this metaphorical bridge between the material relic and the metaphysical domain of memory and emotion. Donne encourages readers to ponder the eternal quality of love and its capacity to transcend time and place, echoing in the metaphysical realm long after its outward manifestations have gone, using the metaphor of relics.

"Holy Sonnet 10: Death, be not proud" introduces another dimension to Donne's metaphoric bridge, focusing on the theme of mortality and the afterlife. The

personification of death as a proud entity is countered by Donne's metaphorical defiance, portraying death as a transient state devoid of ultimate power. This metaphorical bridge between physical mortality and the metaphysical realm of spiritual existence challenges conventional notions of life and death, emphasizing the eternal nature of the soul beyond physical cessation. Through metaphorical transformation, Donne bridges the gap between the tangible reality of mortality and the intangible realm of spiritual transcendence, offering a perspective that transcends mere physicality.

The speaker in John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 14," "Batter my heart, three-person'd God," uses potent metaphors to connect the metaphysical world of divine intervention and spiritual development with the concrete world of human experience. The idea of the "three-person'd God," which alludes to the Christian concepts of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—further emphasises the metaphorical link between the material and the metaphysical. Donne connects the divine sphere of spiritual redemption with the earthy field of human suffering by using this theological framework. The speaker refers to God as a triune entity in a metaphorical way, implying a complex plan of salvation that includes the speaker's body, intellect, and soul.

Furthermore, the speaker uses analogies of imprisonment and escape to convey her request for divine intervention. The image of being taken prisoner by God's love and "ravish'd" from sin communicates a sense of capitulation and subjection to heavenly power. The physical sensation of being enslaved to worldly pursuits and the metaphysical longing for spiritual freedom and rejuvenation are connected by this metaphorical imagery of imprisonment and release. The speaker begs God to "batter," "break," and "burn" his heart in the poem's opening metaphor, which depicts the speaker's heart as a battlefield. The speaker's fervent appeal for a significant and drastic transformation is conveyed through these strong and violent metaphors, which conjure images of physical devastation. Here, the metaphorical acts of beating and shattering represent the need for a transformational intervention that goes beyond typical human capabilities, while the physicality of the heart represents the essence of human life, emotions, and wants. The metaphor in "Reason, your viceroy in me, me

should defend,/ But is captived, and proves weak or untrue." revolves around reason, depicted as a viceroy or ruler within the speaker's mind. However, it is portrayed as weak and captive, unable to resist the overwhelming power of love. This metaphor symbolizes the triumph of passion and desire over logic and reason, showcasing the dominance of the metaphysical realm over the physical.

Through these examples and others within the poem, Donne establishes a metaphorical link between the physical and metaphysical, suggesting that the physical union of bodies in love is a reflection or manifestation of a deeper, spiritual connection between the souls of the lovers.

Conclusions

One of the key themes that emerges from Donne's poetry is the exploration of love as a transformative force that transcends the physical realm. His metaphysical conceits often compare love to celestial phenomena, such as the merging of two souls in a cosmic union. Through these metaphors, Donne elevates love to a spiritual and metaphysical plane, emphasizing its profound impact on the human experience. Donne's poetry delves into religious and philosophical themes, offering insights into the nature of faith and the existence of the divine. Through his exploration of religious concepts and his questioning of traditional religious norms, Donne challenges readers to consider the metaphysical aspects of their own spirituality. He seamlessly intertwines the physical and metaphysical realms, demonstrating the inseparable connection between earthly existence and spiritual contemplation.

In conclusion, the selected poems of John Donne exemplify the metaphorical link between the physical and metaphysical realms. Donne's metaphors act as windows into a world where the boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical blur, encouraging readers to ponder the timeless questions of existence and transcendence. His poetic language transcends the limitations of mere description, weaving a tapestry of meaning that resonates with readers on emotional, intellectual, and spiritual levels.

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