

Deconstructive Analysis of Metaphysical Conceits in John Donne's Select Poems

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Abstract

John Donne is acknowledged for his mastery of *metaphysical conceits*. A metaphysical conceit is a complicated and highly astonishing literary device that creates a far-fetched and odd comparison between a nonphysical feature of a person and a physical entity in the world. It is an extended simile and metaphor to catch the interest and attention of the readers towards the *text*. *Deconstruction* is a term coined by the French philosopher *Jacques Derrida* that refers to an approach to reading a *text*. One of the philosophical principles of deconstruction is to disperse thoughts of *binary oppositions*, to break down the old style of a *hierarchical model*, and rejects the *inflexibility of metaphysics*. Deconstruction is the process of reversing the hierarchies in order to uncover the whole ideological process of making hierarchies. It believes that a *text* has *multiple meanings*. In John Donne's *poetic work*, this is the only practical and technical way by which his poetry can be understood, as the relations between 'ideas' and 'words' are almost constantly complex and manifold. The paper is an attempt on Donne's *metaphysical conceits* in his select poems to explore internal contradictions, inconsistencies, and multiple layers of meaning through a deconstructive lens.

Key Words: *Binary opposition, Deconstruction, Donne, Inconsistencies, Metaphysical conceits.*

Introduction

Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) star has mounted impulsively as a result of his participation in the *International Symposium*, at Johns Hopkins University, in 1966 where he took *structuralism* and installed *Deconstructive Criticism* in America. The *title* of the International Symposium was "The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" in which Derrida presented his most important work "Structure, Sign and play in the Discourse of Human Sciences." A deconstructive analysis is a way of close reading of a *text* and *word-based analysis*. Both, new critics and the deconstructionists give more importance to a *text*; not is likely to understand the text by connecting it to happenings in the author's past age, culture, and lifespan. It doesn't agree that a *text* has a *static meaning* or *univocal meaning*. Deconstruction aims to read beyond a text's straightforward content and bring to the fore new *meanings* and *truths*. Deconstruction is a critical philosophy, states that language is a *sign system* and more exactly, a system of *oppositions*, *differances*, and *contradictions*. It is a technique of break down to seek the core mechanism of language, and the assumption inherent in methods of expression. Deconstruction suggests that the interpretations as approached via language are not absolute, because language itself is not absolute. Language is a system of 'signifiers' which can never completely *mean*: a *term* which can indicate to an object but can never be

exactly that object". Jacques Derrida took the term *Deconstruction* from Martin Heidegger's book *Destruktion*. It is a close reading of a text resulting in contradictory meaning and extracting hidden meanings of the text. Deconstruction traces in what way language creates meanings in cooperation, within a text, and through the texts, while asserting that such connotation can only endlessly be transient. It is a philosophy and so it can be pertinent to all spheres. The deconstruction theory in literature discovers printed manifestation in 'Of Grammatology' (Derrida) and it faces the 'linguistic theory' of Saussure as pronounced in 'Course in General Linguistics.'

Derrida's major works are: 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences', (1966), 'Of Grammatology', (1967), 'Speech and Phenomena', (1967), 'Writing and Difference', (1967), 'Margins of Philosophy', (1972), 'Specters of Marx', (1993).

His important terms are: 'Binary Oppositions', 'Metaphysics of Absence', 'Difference', 'Aporia' 'Archie-writing', 'Trace', 'Pharmakon' 'Hauntology', 'Logocentricism', 'Phonocentricism', 'Phallogocentricism', 'Supplement', and 'Iteration' and 'There is no Outside Text.'

John Donne

Donne (1572-1631), is the super-eminent representative of '*metaphysical poetry*.' His poetic work touches diverse genres comprising *love poems, epigrams, songs and sonnets, religious poems, elegies, satires, and sermons*, make considerable literary achievement. He is different and bold from his contemporary poets, rejects the equivocal poetic art of Elizabethan time and, creates novel advances in 'British poetry'. Donne's poetry breakdown the traditional constraints and unveil a philosophical outlook through conversational language. Furthermore, the inventive and metaphysical conceits and distinctive images of his poetic work also insert a new spirit into English literature. He is recognized for his mastery of metaphysical conceits. A metaphysical conceit is a complicated and highly extraordinary literary device that creates a far-fetched and odd comparison between a spiritual feature of a person and a physical entity in the world. It is an extended simile and metaphor to catch the interest and attention of the readers towards the *text*. Dr. Johnson defines a conceit as the perception of, "*an occult resemblance in things apparently unlike.*" The common cord of metaphysical poets is metaphors of a highly theoretical and philosophical nature. Their metaphors are usually ambiguous, best in comparisons to each other, however, the person who recites these highly philosophic metaphors can feel enlightened. The fashion of telling the *Metaphysical Conceit* from an ordinary metaphor is that they frequently show an analytical tenor; hold twofold connotations, display coherent reasoning, and have inconsistencies, imagery, paradoxes, and wit. The distinctiveness of the metaphysical poetry lies in the fact that: they use figures of speech excessively, their similes and metaphors are far-fetched and are often drawn from unfamiliar sources, their analogies are not obvious on the face of nature, their figures are elaborated to the farthest limit, and their images are logical and intellectual rather than sensuous or emotional.

Methodology

The study employs *Deconstruction* as a method to analyse Donne's select poems: "The Flea", "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", "The Canonization and "Sweetest Love, I Do Not Goe" to establish relevance with regard to Donne's metaphysical conceits and deconstructive reading. Deconstruction is an analysis of the association between *Text* and *meaning*. It is a criticism of structuralism. The deconstructionists study the hierarchies which are used by the structuralists and the ideologies to expose some uncomfortable instants in *text*, consequently, the reverse of the hierarchy system guides to the breakdown of prime arguments of a poem. Deconstruction is the process of reversing the hierarchies in order to uncover the whole ideological process of making hierarchies. The binary opposition system by the structuralist can be also perceived in terms of the philosophical hierarchies, for which the deconstructionists

hunt. Whereas, the structuralist searched for the binary oppositions to describe the structure of a poem, but, the deconstructionists look for the philosophical hierarchy to hunt the poet's actual understanding of the sensation illustrated in a poem. Structuralist critics believe that the first word in these binaries is privileged to the next, consequently discloses how the poem's argumentation is woven around binaries: one sets privilege over the other. But, deconstructionists reject the hierarchism of binary oppositions. Deconstructionists believe that the hierarchy reveals the fact that the first word of these binaries is advantaged in the poet's analysis of the actuality in exploration.

The study aims to focus on how to deconstruct a poem or how to make a deconstructive analysis of a poem. The deconstruction theory actually is the uprising against the foundation of structuralism by presenting, how a *Sign* becomes the sum of several *Signifiers* because the imaginary *Signified* is basically *Transcendental Signified*. The *Sign* is the key idea of a *literary text*. This idea is projected by the structuralist critics in terms of binary opposition as the one advantaged in a literary text. Deconstructing poetry of such sort involves showing how at certain points the ideas involved in binary opposition overlap. Therefore the perception of *Differance* comprising the notions of; to be deferred and to be different becomes subject to questioning. Furthermore, the *Sign* becomes the reservoir of the *Signifier* and at the same time transmits the *trace* of the supposedly non-privileged idea. The following steps can be helpful in the *deconstructive analysis* of a poem:

- a. Deconstruction as Applied to a Literary Text.
- b. Presenting the Main Argument of the Text.
- c. Finding out the Central Tension of the Literary Work.
- d. Finding out the Points in which the Hierarchy is Reversed (Aporia).
- e. Questioning the Hierarchy Itself.
- f. Deconstructing from the Technical Point of View.

Deconstructive Analysis

The Flea (*Poem*)

Donne's *The Flea* is one of his remarkable poems that can be interpreted through several different lenses and perspectives. The prospects for understanding differ based on what, what the reader reads is enthusiastically demanding to look for. Contextualizing the poem *The Flea* while using 'New Criticism', the essay will light up, exactly how a deconstructive method can explore concealed senses within the core of contradictions and discrepancies of the poem; consequently creating a diverse understanding then the innovative critical technique advances. A deconstructive analysis is a philosophical technique to analyse the poem *The Flea* under the microscopic lens and the framework of *New Critics*. The poem compares the notion of the blood-sucking of a 'flea' of two persons to the sensual union of the two persons. The poet creates the perception of likeness between the sucking of the blood of a flea of two persons to those two persons, having sexual intercourse, ingeniously and ironically. From a deconstructive point of view, the "flea" represents something else. It is the consequence of the sexual intercourse of two persons.

*It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;* (Azevedo, 16)

The person who reads the poem, understanding that a flea stinging the duo is being related to the sexual intercourse of two lovers, constructs a sense of irony in this poem. The language practiced by Donne in the poem is struggling to convince the person who reads, the satirical contrast of sexual intercourse of two

lovers to a common flea bite. Whereas the "New Critics" microscopic lens is one technique to relate sense to the poem, the deconstructive method is similarly convenient in locating all the ambiguities, impossibilities, and inconsistencies that a sharp reader would demand. The speaker relates erotic yearning to a flea. This association is contradictory because while inspecting the hidden meaning of the word flea conveys, it is obvious that fleas are uninvited, so it might be compared to unwelcomed pregnancy/undesirable child. As they are hosted in filthy beasts, have attributed to microbial epidemics, also at a base level make the carrier painful. In this verse, we read a masculine speaker endeavoring to construct an argument to persuade a female to have sexual relations with him. The stanza sets up the background for the poem and consents the person who reads to dig into the irony of a flea being related to desire. Construing into the irony of a flea being associated with desire arises to take away from the accord that the new critics appreciated in their school of thought. *The Flea* could be recited, attached with the nonexistence of the feminine voice (Metaphysics of Absence) as masculine egotism and uncertainties connecting to womenfolk in the renaissance time. In the next stanza, the feminine voice is still unremarked, though she takes an action for which the speaker responds (Man vs. Woman).

Though use make you apt to kill mee,

Let not to that, selfe murder added bee,

And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three. (Azevedo, 16)

In the last stanza of the poem, the irony is stretched more by the way of the killing of the flea. In connecting the flea's premature departure from the biosphere, the poet projects that the expiry of the flea "took life from thee", and, turn the argument entirely in a new direction. The unusual argument that sharing flea bite is similar to sexual intercourse before marriage, and not be looked down upon, is altered when the female murders the flea. Consequently, the killing of the flea the speaker skillfully relates the killing of the flea to the female taking life from herself as the flea carries her blood. It is the masterpiece of John Donne. In this poem, love is a mixture of both physical and spiritual elements. Hence, it affects both the body and soul (*Body vs. Soul*)

Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since

Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence? (Azevedo, 16)

The Binary Opposition of *Man vs. Woman*: A Deconstructive Analysis.

The metaphysical notion of the binary is, that *men and women* are in an association of disagreement and tension. It projects, that men are superior to women, hold completely a leading status in the social sphere, whereas, women are repressed, subordinated, and ruled in society. Men can give vent to their voices in the public, however, women are in the setting of the others and their right of speaking is even dispossessed. Men enforce their sexual desires and wills upon women, however, females can do zilch, just to suffer, tolerate, accept and act upon men's commands in complete muteness otherwise they will be taunted by the public. The two genders are in a hierarchical association and their entity of existence in society is not equally treated. However, in Donne's poetic work it is manifested that *Male vs. Female* binary opposition is disregarded to some degree, and more of the collaboration, concord, and accord of the duo is displayed. For instance, in the poem *The Good Morrow* the poet associates two lovers with two hemispheres of the globe which projects that these two sexes are totally alike in a love relationship.

If our two loves be one, or, thou and I

Love just alike in all, none of these loves can die. (Azevedo, 18)

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning (Poem)

In this poem, the poet compares himself and his beloved wife to a pair of legs of a compass. The comparison is totally innovative and astonishing thought to create such an odd image as an *extended metaphor*. However, it is his weird and eccentric imaginings and astuteness as well as his comprehension of scientific and technical knowledge which creates the conceit justly vibrant as well as practical. Therefore, the harmony and cooperation of the two legs of a compass projects the sweet and harmonious coexistence of the poet and his spouse (Anne) in a love bond that deconstructs the old-style binary opposition of male vs. female.

If they be two, they are two so

As stiff twin compasses are two:

Thy soul the fixt foot, makes no show

To move, but doth, if th' other do. (Azevedo, 81)

Donne states that he and his beloved wife share a single soul and they are spiritually one. Their unity and harmony is not affected by physical departure. Rather, their soul shall practice an expansion as the gap between their bodies expands. If they do not possess one soul, the poet argues, then their separate souls are strongly coupled together like two legs of a pair of compasses. Similar to the leg that draws the circle, he must trace out his course while 'she' the fixed leg, rests in one place. After his voyage, the poet has to come back to the point where he starts his journey just like the moving leg of the compass once it completes its circle.

And though it in the center sit,

Yet when the other far doth roam,

It leans, and harkens after it,

And grows erect, as that comes home. (Azevedo, 81)

The Binary Opposition of Soul vs. Body: A Deconstructive Analysis.

According to the philosophical outlook of John Donne, the love relation of maximum individuals is centered on sexual longings, which do not have soul communications. Consequently, they cannot hold their relationship anymore while staying away from their mistresses. When such lovers are unable of continuing through and having sexual intercourse for long with their lady friend, the elements and foundations upholding the relation will no longer sustain, and the relation will undoubtedly discontinue.

Dull sublunary lovers' love

(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit

Of absence, 'cause it doth remove

The thing which elemented it. (Azevedo, 80)

Now it can be understood that *Flesh* and *Soul* are divided in the spiritual and passionate life of the majority of common people. Even though of repaying the consideration to the spiritual interaction with their particular lovers, most of the physical lovers just give attention to physical love that is likely to be very

helpless because of transient separations. In this association, the love in between the poet and his beloved wife is dreadfully cemented and cannot be broken on account of their physical departure.

In one more poem "*Sweetest Love, I Do Not Goe*" presents the 'sweetest love' of the poet towards his beloved, as explains:

Sweetest love, I do not goe
For weariness of thee,
Nor in hope the world can show
A fitter love for mee;
But since that I
At the last must part, 'tis best,
Thus to use my self in jest
By fained deaths to dye. (Azevedo, 35)

It is one of the great love poems of the poet. The act starts with the poet, going abroad and Donne's beloved being very unhappy because of this. The speaker asks her beloved not to cry for his departure. He promises her lady that he will love her even more than the present and will not look for any new female outside, for the reason that, he feels his spouse be the utmost attractive and gorgeous female on the globe.

He further elucidates that she should understand that he has to die one or the other day and she should take this as a short-term departure as a mock imitation of passing away. At what time such suffering is caused, at that time she will not feel much pain and a sense of helplessness. Their departure is just transient and there is no context to mourn. The poet expresses to enjoy fully the current passion of love without thinking about upcoming problems in the future. He appeals to her not to shed tears, for the reason that, a mere departure cannot isolate them for life and they will spiritually be one even when separated physically for a short while. (Soul vs. Body)

The Canonization (Poem)

Donne in this poem *The Canonization* claims the dominance of the lover's globe is an outstandingly enigmatic and mystical understanding of adoration which marks them saints, accordingly enticing the devotion of the public sphere. Whereas, deconstructionists are going to resist, is metaphysical fiction. Donne practices with his lady as ethereal and nonphysical love is a situation of agreement between two lovers in which the external sphere and their earthly selves donate meaningfully. The Poet's mystic skill of love comes to attain some of the 'permanence allied with essence'. But deconstructionists will claim that the poet and his lady ceaselessly build the importance of the connection through experience. In another context, the implication of the association lies not in its spiritual essence, but the vibrant and active experience that it leads to the way flawlessly in time and the parameters of the day-to-day world.

For God sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
Or chide my palsie, or my gout,
My five grey hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout,

*With wealth your state, your mind with Arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe his honour or his grace,
Or the King's real, or stamped face
Contemplate; what you will approve,
So you will let me love. (Azevedo, 30)*

The Binary Opposition of *Public vs. Private*: A Deconstructive Analysis.

In this poem, “*The Canonization*” the poem’s domain is divided into two spheres: the private sphere of two lovers’ experience and the public sphere of the outer world. To state in the structuralist manner of speaking, the principal binary opposition working in this poem is the private vs. public or the lover-centered world vs. materialistic Renaissance realm, which aims at the *private* lover-centered world to be privileged to the ‘*public*’ materialistic Renaissance realm. According to deconstructionists the *private* sphere, instead of being a privileged sphere is discovered as a part of the *public* sphere. The hierarchy ‘*private vs. public*’ is thus deconstructed into a novel *public vs. private* one.

The poem is fundamentally self-contradictory, *soul* concedes the advantage of the public sphere in different slanting ways. The unduly huge part of poetic space is dedicated to the purportedly inferior public sphere. The lovers’ domain is one of dispossession. Whereas, all the positives are in the public sphere. The world has its own caustic and devastating powers that are appropriately accepted by the poet in contradiction of which he looks as if helpless. In the first stanza, not only is the speaker stuck to the socket of devastation by the powers of this universe but, the last verse appears to suggest that this universe has an actual switch over whether the speaker will be permitted to love or not.

Conclusion

Deconstructionist believes that a text has multiple meanings. Deconstruction aims to read beyond a text’s straightforward content and bring to the fore new meanings and truths. Deconstruction is a critical philosophy, states that language is a sign system and more exactly, a system of oppositions, differences, and contradictions. It is a technique of breakdown to seek the core mechanism of language, and the assumption inherent in methods of expression. Deconstruction is the process of reversing the hierarchies in order to uncover the whole ideological process of making hierarchies. The binary opposition system by the structuralist can be also perceived in terms of the philosophical hierarchies, for which the deconstructionists hunt. Whereas, the structuralist searched for the binary oppositions to describe the structure of a poem, but, the deconstructionists look for the philosophical hierarchy to hunt the poet’s actual understanding of the sensation illustrated in a poem. The deconstructive reading of Donne’s metaphysical conceits projects how a *text* undermines the old-style critics’, idea of constancy and fixed connotation. Donne was a poet of great wit and by the use of comparisons, he attempts to gratify his lady and himself just about the distinctiveness of their relationship which makes their departure insignificant. Donne has less control over analogies which he uses in his poetry. In another context, he compares a situation to one element of another situation which has various facets and associations. Donne breakdowns the constraints of the old style of binary opposition, *Soul vs. Flesh, Male vs. Female*, which are not opposite and contradictory anymore, however, are in a situation of concord and harmony under his pen. Even though his poetry was not commonly interpreted and acknowledged, particularly by most of Donne’s contemporary poets, however later it received appreciation and admiration by *T. S. Eliot* and other modernists, with its distinctive fascination and expansion through

time and space, that is also the best and solid confirmation for the expansion and admiration of Donne's poetic work. The skilled and proficient art of poetic form has been advanced by Donne and his contemporaries, even though of disapprovals of infringement of Elizabethan practice of writing. The study presents how deconstructive analysis of John Donne's metaphysical conceits in his select poems can be valuable and helpful to explore new, multiple, and hidden meanings in these metaphysical conceits.

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