

## METAPHYSICAL IMAGERY OF JOHN DONNE'S ELEGY 19: TO HIS MISTRESS GOING TO BED

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Being a contemporary poet of William Shakespeare and still stay a distinguished, original and independent author of the English literature must have been considerably challenging. The leading representative of the metaphysical school, John Donne, was able to do so, and by means of his unique poetic style and diverse artworks, he gained the reputation of one of the most influential poets throughout the world of literature. Elegy 19: to his mistress going to bed is one of Donne's most widely recognized love poems. The main poetic tools of the lyric are metaphysical conceit and metaphysical wit. By using the seliterary devices, the author, imperceptibly, abolishes the limit between physical and metaphysical worlds. His usage of religious language while talking about sexual intimacy makes the poem even more ambiguous and intriguing.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Metaphysical Conceit, Metaphysical Wit, Passionate Love, Sublime Love*

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Elegy 19: to His Mistress Going to Bed**

John Donne's life, as well as his work, was replete with unexpected events and paradoxes. From a child raised with traditional catholic principles he converted to the Anglican faith; from an inexperienced lawyer he became the secretary of Sir Thomas Egerthon. Once a passionate lover, Donne became a devoted husband of Anna Moore and once young Jack Donne-a great visitor of ladies, a great frequenter of plays [Gardner. 1965:23] – finally changed into- Donne -the dean of St Paul's Cathedral. These biographical references are clearly reflected in the changes of style and mood of Donne's poetry. His works include satires, love poetry, elegies, songs, sonnets, religious poems and sermons. John Donne's style is characterized by various paradoxes, unexpected openings and endings, deep metaphysical conceits, ironies and colloquial lexis. In his verses, the poet tries to find the connection between mind, body and soul, in an attempt to determine the relationship between God and men.

For centuries that outstanding poetics and imagery that was the basis of Donne's poetry was a subject of criticism and controversy for both readers and critics of his works. The main critic of the metaphysical school, the eighteenth century literary critic Samuel Johnson, has described the work of metaphysical poets as following: The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought and though, he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. [Johnson.1925:11.12] This very forced connection of contrasting ideas, now known as "Discordia Concors", which Andreasen explained as a combination of dissimilar images or the discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently alike.[Andreasen.1967:4] also known as metaphysical wit, has become one of the

main advantages of John Donne's poetry ever since. Two centuries later, this exact Johnsonian defect became the main source of interest in the seventeenth century literature for the modern poet and literary critic T.S. Eliot. He believed that neither previous, nor future generations of poets have ever used anything alike in their work and that the metaphysical poets were the only poets in the world who could simultaneously express thinking and feeling, emotion and intellect.

This essay discusses one of the most popular love poems of John Donne- Elegy 19: To His Mistress Going to Bed. The aim of the article is to give a thorough analysis of the verse and to discuss the main poetic means that determine the mood of the lyric.

At a glance, John Donne's nineteenth elegy "To his mistress going to bed"[Carey. 1996: 22] is a coherent description of the process expressed in the title of the poem, rich in metaphors, conceits, allusions, erotic imagery and metaphysical wit. After a one-time, superficial reading of the lyric, one might think that the author straightforwardly and quite sharply asks, or even demands from his mistress to take off her clothes and share a bed with him. However, Donne is not limited to a mere love appeal and he offers the reader far deeper, polysemantic and ambiguous work.

After a more in-depth reading, we notice that even the title of the poem "Elegy 19: To his mistress going to bed" is a metaphor. A verse-form elegy can be defined in several ways. In English literature, for instance, an elegy is a poem that usually reflects a lament for the dead. However, Greek term "elegeia" originally refers to any verse written in elegiac couplets and covers a wide range of subject matters- love, death, heroism etc. On the other hand, the Latin elegy of ancient Roman literature is mostly erotic and mythological in nature. As it turns out, such verse can tell us either about a love story, or about a bitter tragedy related to death.<sup>1</sup> If we discuss the title of the poem in this way and associate the word "elegy" with a sadness caused by somebody's death, and perceive the mistress's preparation for going to bed as a process of getting ready for sexual intercourse, which is obvious after a careful reading of the poem, we will see that Donne offers us a deep conceit of death and birth (logical result of fertile intercourse.) at the very beginning of the poem.

The lyric consists of one long stanza, stretching to forty-eight lines, which is composed in iambic pentameter. The lexically affluent plot is replete with diverse metaphors and allusions about body and soul, material and metaphysical world, religion and mythology. Such technique used by the author is obvious at the very beginning of the poem.

- Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy,
- Until I labour, I in labour lie.
- The foe oft-times having the foe in sight,
- Is tir'd with standing though he never fight.

While most of the love poets hide what they really want behind some clever puns, here Donne, without any hesitation, straightforwardly declares his passion and desire: he wants to have sexual intercourse with his mistress in the short run. In this passage the author's impatience is expressed by the word "labour", which can be perceived in several ways. On the one hand, the word shows a process of hard work, on the other, it describes the last stage of pregnancy, when the baby is about to be born and finally, it is a synonym to swinging, shaking which again implies sexual intercourse. Therefore, the sentence Until I labour, I in labour lie can be perceived as following- the author's impatience and will to win his beloved as soon as possible, resembles the restlessness of a woman in childbirth, who wants to end this agonizing

<sup>1</sup><https://www.britannica.com/art/elegy>

process and feel relieved at the earliest opportunity. Different literary critics identify this episode of the poem in several ways. For instance, modern critic Ashleigh Frayne believes that by using the word labour Donne “underlines the gender divide set forth in Genesis.” She believes that the speaker’s pun evokes the biblical sense of the word labour, according to which a man must labour in the ground (by “the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread”) and woman must labour in childbirth.<sup>2</sup> One might share this opinion considering the fact that the speaker proceeds the same topic in the final stanza of the lyric as well

- Then, since that I may know,
- As liberally as to a midwife, show
- Thyself: cast all, yea, this white linen hence,
- There is no penance due to innocence:

However, I believe that using these witty conceits the speaker merely reminds his mistress that for being in labour, (have a child) firstly she needs to experience other kind of labour (have sexual intercourse with him) and this childbirth association is a means of persuasion for the speaker to make his mistress share a bed with him.

This final conceit of labour proceeds with another metaphor, according to which the two lovers are identified with motionless foes, who are tired of being merely standing and not fighting. Here Donne’s wittiness is expressed through the word “standing”, which leads us to believe, that while talking about the standing foes, the author literally means the “standing” genitalia of the lovers; the conceit also gives us the hint of the man’s condition, who tries to get hold of the lady as soon as possible, until he is physically able to do what he is supposed to do. As it is typical of Donne, after a vulgar standing the tone of the poem unexpectedly turns into a more sublime mood and the woman’s girdle identifies with a heaven’s glistening zone.

- Off with that girdle, like heaven’s Zone glistening,
- But a far fairer world encompassing.
- Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear,
- That th’eyes of busy fools may be stopped there.

As it turns out, all of a sudden, vulgar standing is replaced with a religious metaphor heaven’s Zone, though, this heavenly atmosphere does not last long and quite soon, with a great superiority, (a far fairer world) celestial is changed into corporal again and the reader’s, as well as busy fools attention is totally drawn to the woman’s beautiful body.

After the woman gets rid of her firm, erect corset that covers her exquisite breasts, a new type of metaphor appears in the poem.

- Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals,
- As when from flowery meads th’hill’s shadow steals.
- Off with that wiry Coronet and shew
- The hairy Diadem which on you doth grow:
- The confrontation of body and soul, material and metaphysical world proceeds with a comparison of the woman’s

pubic hair and a Diadem. This episode is followed by a deep religious conceit which finally turns into a vulgar analogy again:

- Now off with those shoes, and then safely tread
- In this love's hollow's temple, this soft bed.
- In such white robes, heaven's Angels used to be
- Received by men;
- Thou Angel bringst with thee
- A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise; and though
- Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know,
- By this these Angels from an evil sprite,
- Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.

First of all, in this case, our attention is focused on to a connection of a bed, a thing that is so closely identified with a carnal life, with a love's temple. On the one hand, the author makes an association of a woman's bed and one of the main religious symbols and on the other hand, he compares the sweetness of sharing a bed with his mistress to a heavenly joy; thus, the limit between the material and the spiritual world is abolished. According to this stanza, one has to take into consideration, that here Donne, as a Christian man, deliberately uses a symbol of a Mohammedan heaven, not a Christian one; which could be conditioned because of the fact that the Moslem celestial world preaches its believers that carnal life is allowed even after their death. In this part of the poem, the author once again uses a conceit that is connected with erection. He talks about kind and evil spirits and mentions that the last ones make our hair stand on end, while the kind spirits are able to set our flesh upright.

The second part of the poem is famous because of its geographical conceits. The nineteenth sonnet is written in those years, when America was still newly discovered and was not fully explored yet, therefore, Donne's interest towards the new continent is totally understandable. He craves to learn his beloved's body just like he wishes to know more about the new land.

- Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
- Before, behind, between, above, below.
- my America! my new-found-land,
- My kingdom, safest when with one man mann'd,
- My Mine of precious stones,
- My Empirie,
- How blest am I in this discovering thee!
- To enter in these bonds, is to be free;
- Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.

The word Licence gets a double meaning here It can either indicate a mere acceptance, or it can stand for an official document that gives one a permission to own or to do something. Here the idea of Donne's conceit is the following: as ships of England needed a special licence from the queen Elizabeth to conquer some parts of the new land, so did the author need the consent of the lady to let his hands rove on each and every part of her body. Throughout the whole

poem, this is the very part where a reader might believe that the male voice of the lyric is especially distinct and tenacious. This stanza perfectly expresses a man's power and will of ownership. Repeatedly used personal pronoun *my* makes it clear that the man desperately needs to win the woman. Nonetheless, by doing so, I don't believe that the author is trying to humiliate a woman's pride or dignity. In the modern days lots of literary critics discuss Donne's love poems from feminist and sexist point of view. Such critics perceive Donne as an author who uses women as an object for his poetry and who often mocks and ridicules them. Such an attitude does not seem to be serious and professional to me and I believe that such perception of this beautiful poetry could merely be conditioned by the modern world trend, which tries to find these sexist and feminist roots in every aspect of human life. To my mind, the process that is described in the poem and the chemistry between the man and the woman, that is so tactile to a reader, is mutual and all the conceits and metaphors that the author uses in regard to his mistress are the ways of showing his ardour and admiration for the woman, not a mean of mockery and humiliation. At some point, we might even think that the man admits the woman's superiority over him; his final exclamation *How blest am I in this discovering thee!* Consolidates this idea

- The third part of the lyric starts with aeology of full nakedness:
- Full nakedness!
- All joys are due to thee,
- As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth'd must be,
- To taste whole joys.

Here our attention is drawn to carnal and spiritual confrontation again and as in the previous case, bodily desire recurrently wins over sacred principles. According to most of religions, a soul has to be free of flesh. The soul is primary whereas the body is secondary, or a temporal retreat for the spirit. In this case Donne shares a Neoplatonist point of view and believes that just like a soul needs to be untied from a body, so does a body need to be unoccupied of clothes; thus, the full nakedness of a body will equalize the feeling of religious sublimity. As an argument of this point of view, the author utilizes a mythological conceit:

- Gems which you women use are like
- Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views,
- That when a fool's eye lighteth on a Gem,
- His earthly soul may covet theirs, not them.

As the story goes, Atlanta would marry a man who would defeat her in a running race. Melanion, who is madly in love with her, asks for Aphrodite's help and, by throwing down three golden apples that distract Atlanta's attention, wins the race. The couple gets married, though their happiness does not last long, because Melanion forgets his obligation to sacrifice to Aphrodite. As a result, the furious goddess turns them both into lions, for she knows that lions can only mate with leopards, thus the couple will never experience physical love.<sup>3</sup> This witty conceit can be perceived in several ways. On the one hand, women's gems, that can be identified with Atlanta's golden apples, turn to be the main object of fools' attention. They are so fascinated by the precious jewels, that they cannot notice the real beauty of a woman's body and soul. This very reason makes the lyrical hero of the poem beg his mistress to take off her clothes and gems; this is the only way for him to see the real beauty of the woman, the beauty that is physical and incorporeal at the same time. On the other

<sup>3</sup><https://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Heroes/Atlanta/atlanta.html>

hand, according to the final scene of Atlanta's myth, we might think that the author reminds us that only carnal life is never enough for a human being and one should always take into consideration that spiritual life determines our final fate, as it happened in Melanion's case. Thus, to sum up the author's position, we can say that for Donne there is no boundary between body and soul, these two are perceived as one wholeness by him and this is the very essence of human existence to him.

In the last section of the poem the narrator compares his mistress to mystic books, which only men can see revealed. For some of Donne's critics even this passage of the poem might seem to be a humiliating one, but others, and in this specific case, the modern critic of Donne's works Karley Adney, believe that the comparison of a woman to a mystic book, that can be perceived as a Bible and therefore can be understood as the word of God, has to be the most beautiful compliment for a lady. According to Adney, The word of God is what Donne, as a Christian, would have and did live his life in accordance with. This word was law; hence, comparing the woman in the poem to God's word means that the narrator (and likewise Donne) respects, if not idolizes, the addressed woman<sup>4</sup>

- Finally, the last two lines of the poem finish with the same ambiguity as the previous stanzas of the lyric.
- To teach thee, I am naked first; why than,
- What need'st thou have more covering than a man?

The ending scene of the poem does not give us any answers. In fact, nothing is changed and, ideologically, the poem finishes where it starts; neither the narrator, nor a reader knows the woman's answer to the speaker's offer. This invariability and sameness of the beginning and ending of the poem, creates a circle that reminds us that carnal and spiritual, depraved and sublime, physical and platonic love are often very same concepts in Donne's verses. As in his sermons, in this very lyric as well, the figure of circle at once represents the perfection of God, the cycles of Nature and of the human beings caught up therein, and the solipsistic repetitions of sin.<sup>5</sup> To my mind the nineteenth sonnet covers all the issues mentioned in the quote and thus gives us the perfect example of one of the wittiest verses of Donne.

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