

Research Article

WOUNDED HEARTS AND WITTY TEARS: EXPLORING MELANCHOLIC LOVE IN JOHN DONNE

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ABSTRACT

John Donne (1572–1631), the foremost metaphysical poet of the English Renaissance, repeatedly intertwines erotic love with a pervasive sense of melancholy. This paper examines how Donne's poetry presents love not as uncomplicated joy but as an experience inseparable from anxiety, mutability, absence, and the anticipation of loss. Drawing primarily on the Songs and Sonets, Holy Sonnets, and selected elegies, and verse letters, the study argues that Donne's melancholy is neither incidental nor merely fashionable but structurally essential to his conception of love. Love, in Donne, is ecstatic precisely because it is precarious; its intensity derives from the ever-present shadow of death, separation, faithlessness, and cosmic decay. The paper concludes that Donne transforms the conventional Petrarchan melancholy of unrequited love into a metaphysical melancholy that interrogates the nature of being, time, and salvation itself.

Keywords: John Donne, metaphysical poetry, love, melancholy, mutability, death, religious devotion.

INTRODUCTION

John Donne (1572–1631), the leading Metaphysical poet, explores love in ways that are radically different from the idealized, Petrarchan tradition of his time. His love poetry is passionate, intellectual, cynical, spiritual, paradoxical often tinged with melancholy, born of transience, loss, or existential contemplation. It spans his early secular phase (the "Jack Donne" years) and his later sacred devotion, with love constantly shifting between body and soul, time and immortality. John Donne's poetry intricately weaves love and melancholy, reflecting his metaphysical style and emotional depth.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean periods inherited a rich vocabulary of melancholy from medieval medicine, Petrarchan convention, and Renaissance Neo-Platonism. Yet few poets exploited its philosophical and emotional possibilities as radically as John Donne. Unlike the courtly lovers of Sidney or Spenser, whose melancholy is largely a posture of elegant despair, Donne's speakers suffer a melancholy that is existential, erotic, and theological all at once. Donne's love poetry repeatedly stages the paradox that the highest moments of mutual love are simultaneously the most melancholic because they expose the lovers to the terror of finitude.

LOVE IN DONNE'S POETRY

Donne's treatment of love is both sensual and cerebral, blending physical desire with philosophical inquiry. His love poetry often oscillates between intense devotion and playful wit, using metaphysical conceits to elevate romantic experiences into cosmic or intellectual realms.

- **Romantic and Erotic Love:** In poems like *The Flea* and *The Sun Rising*, Donne celebrates love with bold, playful imagery. In *The Flea*, he uses the concept of a flea mixing the lovers' blood to argue for physical union, blending humor with seduction. *The Sun Rising* exalts love as a force that transcends time and

space, with the speaker commanding the sun to revolve around the lovers' bed. These poems radiate confidence in love's power, yet their exuberance often carries an undercurrent of urgency, as if love must be seized before it fades. In *The Sun Rising*, the lovers' defiant ecstasy ("She is all states, and all princes I") is framed by an irritable awareness that the sun will force them apart. The poem's bravado is a defense against melancholy rather than its absence. Similarly, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* attempts to forbid mourning only because the fear of it is so intense. The famous compass image, far from being merely ingenious, is a desperate metaphysical bulwark against the melancholy of separation: the soul's circular return mimics eternity only because linear time threatens annihilation. Perhaps the purest distillation of erotic melancholy is *Sweetest love, I do not go*. The speaker pretends to leave his beloved merely to test fate

*"When thou sigh'st, thou sigh'st not wind,
But sigh'st my soul away"*

yet the pretense barely conceals genuine terror. The poem ends with the extraordinary claim that the beloved's love has already killed him ("Yet I am not killed by thee"), turning melancholy into a kind of pre-posthumous condition. Love, for Donne, is a slow dying.

- **Spiritual and Idealized Love:** In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, Donne elevates love to a spiritual plane. The famous compass metaphor illustrates a love so profound that physical separation cannot diminish it—the lovers' souls remain connected, like the legs of a compass, moving in harmony. This poem reflects Donne's ability to intellectualize emotion, transforming love into a transcendent, almost divine force. Donne's most original contribution to the tradition of idealized love is his refusal to separate spirit from flesh. In *The Ecstasy*, often cited as his most explicitly Neoplatonic poem, the lovers' souls descend into dialogue only after their bodies have first been "laid aside" in perfect physical conjunction:

*"We see by this it was not sex,
We see, we saw not what did move,"*

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But as all several souls contain
Mixture of things, they know not what,
Love these mixed souls doth mix again,
And makes both one, each this and that."

Crucially, the poem ends not with the souls remaining in ecstatic suspension but with their necessary return to the body:

"To our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love revealed may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book."

The body is not a prison but the sacred text in which the soul's mysteries are legible. This sacramental understanding of physical love—anticipating Donne's later Anglican theology—elevates erotic union to a quasi-mystical rite. The Canonization extends the idea. The lovers' physical passion is so intense that it generates a new religion: they become "canonized for love." Their bodies, burned to "pattern" and "legend," are relics that testify to the spiritual reality produced by mutual desire. Idealization here is paradoxically achieved through hyperbole of the carnal.

- **Love's Complexity:** Donne doesn't shy away from love's darker facets. In *The Canonization*, he defends love against societal judgment, but the poem's defensive tone hints at vulnerability. Love is both a refuge and a battleground, celebrated yet precarious. Similarly, *The Good-Morrow* explores love as a transformative awakening, but its references to "sea-discoverers" and "maps" suggest a quest for stability in an uncertain world. Many of Donne's love poems imagine love as a radical dissolution of individual identity into a shared being. *The Sun Rising* famously declares:

"She is all states, and all princes I,
Nothing else is."

In *The Canonization*, the lovers become hermits, saints, phoenix, and finally the pattern of true love for the world:

"We can die by it, if not live by love,
And if unfit for tombs and hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse..."

Even in the elegy *Love's Deity*, where the speaker complains that love has become impossible in a cynical age, the ideal remains total mutual possession.

MELANCHOLY IN DONNE'S POETRY

Melancholy in Donne's work often stems from awareness of mortality, impermanence, or unfulfilled desire. Melancholy permeates the Holy Sonnets, driven by the speaker's acute awareness of sin, mortality, and the fear of damnation. This existential dread is not merely personal but universal, reflecting humanity's struggle with imperfection and divine judgment. His religious and love poetry alike grapple with existential questions, infusing even his most ardent verses with a sense of fragility.

- **Spiritual Anguish:** In *Thou hast made me, and shall thy work decay?*, sets a tone of despair, with the speaker lamenting his frail, sinful nature. The question "shall thy work decay?" reflects melancholy over human impermanence and the fear that God's creation might be lost to sin. The speaker's plea for grace is both a cry of love and a lament for his own weakness. In *I am a little world made Cunningly*, Donne uses the microcosm metaphor to

depict the speaker as a "little world" consumed by sin's "black floods." The melancholy here is cosmic, as the speaker contemplates his internal corruption and begs for divine cleansing through "burning" or "drowning." The love for God is evident in the desire for purification, but it's overshadowed by self-loathing and fear of judgment.

- **Mortality and Transience:** In *A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day*, Donne confronts profound loss, likely mourning the death of his wife, Anne More. The poem's speaker describes himself as "nothingness," reduced to a void by grief. The imagery of darkness and absence ("I am every dead thing") captures melancholy at its most desolate, with love's absence amplifying existential despair. In *Death, Be Not Proud*, Donne personifies death as a prideful entity, only to diminish it as a mere "short sleep" before eternal life. The speaker's defiance of death is rooted in love for God, whose promise of resurrection nullifies death's power. The melancholy of mortality is thus transformed into a hopeful assertion of faith. Yet, even here, Donne's intellectual rigor transforms personal sorrow into a meditation on being and nothingness.
- **Love's Fragility:** Poems like *The Anniversary* juxtapose love's joy with its ephemerality. The speaker celebrates a love that outshines "princes" and "kings," but the poem acknowledges that "all shall die," grounding the ecstasy in melancholy awareness of death. Similarly, *The Relic* imagines a future where the lovers' remains are exhumed, blending romantic devotion with macabre reflections on mortality. In *This is My Play's Last Scene* the speaker envisions life as a theatrical performance nearing its end, with death as the inevitable curtain. The catalog of sins "gluttonous" and "lustful" fuels melancholy, but the poem ends with a plea for God's mercy, tying love for God to the hope of escaping damnation.
- **Religious Melancholy:** In his Holy Sonnets, such as *Batter my heart, three-person'd God*, Donne channels melancholy into spiritual anguish. The speaker's fear of damnation and yearning for divine grace reveal a soul tormented by doubt, yet seeking salvation through love for God. This interplay of despair and aspiration mirrors the tension in his secular love poetry. In *Oh, to vex me*, contraries meet in one Donne captures the speaker's spiritual instability, oscillating between devotion and doubt. The "contraries" of love for God and melancholy over sin create a dynamic tension, as the speaker laments his fickle faith yet seeks divine constancy. The poem's intellectual vigor reflects Donne's metaphysical style, turning personal turmoil into a universal meditation.

INTERPLAY OF LOVE AND MELANCHOLY

Donne's genius lies in how he intertwines love and melancholy, rarely allowing one to exist without the other. His love poems often carry a shadow of loss or impermanence, while his melancholic verses find solace in love's redemptive power. The most startling feature of Donne's love poetry is that melancholy does not vanish even when love is reciprocated and consummated.

- **Tension and Balance:** In *The Ecstasy*, love is both a mystical union of souls and a reminder of the body's limitations. The poem's elevated tone, describing souls mingling "as one," is grounded by the acknowledgment that physicality anchors their love. This duality reflects Donne's view of love as both exalting and fleeting, a source of joy shadowed by melancholy. *The Anniversary* pushes this logic further. On the first anniversary of

falling in love, the speaker celebrates that “Only our love hath no decay,” yet immediately qualifies the claim:

*“All other things to their destruction draw,
Only our love hath no decay;
This no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday.”*

The very need to assert permanence reveals the pressure of mutability. The poem’s triumphant tone is purchased at the cost of obsessive vigilance against time.

- **Metaphysical Conceits:** Donne’s use of conceits often bridges love and melancholy. In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, the compass image resolves the pain of separation by affirming love’s endurance, turning potential melancholy into triumph. Conversely, in *The Funeral*, the speaker’s preserved lock of hair becomes a symbol of both devotion and mourning, encapsulating love’s persistence amid loss. *The Canonization*, similarly turns the lovers’ withdrawal from the world into saintly martyrdom, but the melancholy undertone is unmistakable: only by dying to the world can they live in love, and even then, they remain “die and rise the same” in an endless cycle that mimics both resurrection and exhaustion.
- **Emotional Authenticity:** Donne’s personal experiences—his clandestine marriage, financial struggles, and eventual turn to religion—infuse his poetry with raw emotion. The melancholy in his work feels lived, not merely philosophical, while his celebrations of love carry the weight of someone who knows its cost. This authenticity makes his exploration of both themes resonate deeply. *The Good-Morrow* begins with a dismissal of the past

*“I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved?”*

only to introduce, in its final stanza, the haunting possibility that the lovers’ perfect world might “die” if their faces are not perfectly balanced in each other’s eyes. The fear of imbalance the fear that love might not be absolutely equal is the melancholy that perfect love cannot escape.

DONNE’S UNIQUE APPROACH

Donne’s metaphysical style, marked by wit, intellectual rigor and startling imagery sets him apart. Unlike the Petrarchan tradition, which often idealizes love in flowery terms, Donne’s love is grounded in real-world complexities, laced with melancholy yet defiant. His use of paradoxes (e.g., love as both eternal and transient) and dramatic monologues creates an intimate, conversational tone, as if the speaker is wrestling with these emotions in real time. This immediacy makes his poetry timeless, capturing the universal push-pull of joy and sorrow.

Donne’s Holy Sonnets resonate because they capture the universal struggle for meaning in the face of doubt and death. The speaker’s raw vulnerability, combined with intellectual rigor, makes these poems both personal and philosophical. The love for God is not a serene devotion but a desperate, almost combative yearning, while the melancholy is not mere sadness but a profound reckoning with existence. This duality reflects Donne’s own life—his transition from a rakish poet to a devout preacher—lending authenticity to the sonnets’ emotional depth.

CONCLUSION

In John Donne’s poetry, love and melancholy are inseparable, each intensifying the other. His love poems pulse with passion and wit but are haunted by awareness of loss, while his melancholic verses find meaning through love’s transformative power. Through metaphysical conceits and emotional honesty, Donne crafts a poetic world where love and melancholy coexist, reflecting the human condition’s complexity. Donne’s love poetry refuses simple categories. His lovers are simultaneously fleshly and spiritual, constant and threatened by change, autonomous individuals and a single soul in two bodies. Love is sacred yet blasphemous, eternal yet fragile, intellectual yet violently physical. This complexity arises from Donne’s own life and from his metaphysical temperament that saw the universe itself as an intricate, interconnected whole. For Donne, love is the supreme human mystery: the place where body and soul, time and eternity, self and other most intensely and paradoxically meet.

John Donne’s Holy Sonnets are a masterful exploration of love for God and the melancholy of human imperfection. Through metaphysical conceits, dramatic monologues, and paradoxes, Donne transforms personal spiritual struggles into universal meditations. The sonnets’ interplay of fervent divine love and existential despair captures the complexity of faith, making them enduring works of emotional and intellectual power.

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