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UNDERSTANDING JOHN DONNE'S METAPHYSICAL LOVE POETRY IN THE  
LIGHT OF IMMORTAL NEO-PLATONIC LOVE

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**Abstract:** Love is one of the most predominant themes of John Donne's poetry. Apart from John Donne, also Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare practiced and defined love through their poetry in the Elizabethan era. But strikingly, Dr. Samuel Johnson applied the term 'metaphysical poetry' to John Donne and Abraham Cowley and categorized their poetry from the rest. John Donne is especially admired for his colossal contribution to metaphysical poetry. The very term 'metaphysical' gives us a sense of 'beyond physical'. Merriam Webster dictionary defines 'metaphysical' as "of or relating to the transcendent or to a reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses." By tracing some fundamental characteristics of metaphysical poetry, this paper aims to analyze the metaphysical love poetry of John Donne where he makes a great fusion of Neo-Platonic love in his poetry. The Neo-Platonic concept of love where physical relation must be needed to make the soul immortal constitutes John Donne's philosophy of love. The genesis of metaphysical love poetry is found in the Platonic concept of Devine love and the

Aristotelian concept of physical love. By narrating the genesis of metaphysical love, this paper shall highlight John Donne's adoption of Leon Ebreo's concept of Neo-Platonic civil love. Thus, this paper focused on the genesis of metaphysical love and how John Donne generates the Neo-Platonic concept of love in his poetry.

**Keywords:** Metaphysical, Devine love, Physical love, Immortal, Soul, Absolute beauty.

**Introduction:**

Metaphysical poetry makes its origin through the hand of John Donne and interestingly lasting almost one century from 1590 to the end of the seventeenth century. John Donne started the tradition of Metaphysical poetry in the Elizabethan era and continued in the Jacobean era, Caroline era, and also in Puritan era by George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw, Abraham Cowley, Thomas Carew, and Andrew Marvell. Although John Donne

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started writing in the Elizabethan era, the term 'metaphysical' came long after the tradition of writing metaphysical poetry at the age of John Dryden. Dryden said about Donne that he- "affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign." By using the phrase "affects metaphysics" Dryden means that Donne employs the terminology and obscure arguments of the medieval scholastic philosophers. Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1779 gave the particular term metaphysical poetry to a school of poets, especially to Donne, Cowley, and Cleveland. Gerald Hammond in *The Metaphysical Poets* discussed the origin of the term 'metaphysical'. Hammond says "Metaphysical' had been a term applied to witty, conceited poetry, but in the vaguest possible way."

In the Elizabethan era, there are two schools of poetry- The love songs of the Elizabethan era and the Metaphysical poetry of the Elizabethan era. John Donne and William Shakespeare are almost contemporary, but their poetry is different from each other, both in style and particularly in content. Donne set the mode of writing metaphysical poetry which sharply opposed the idealized view of human nature, which had constituted a central tradition in Elizabethan poetry, especially in Spencer, Sidney, and Shakespeare. The love sonnets of the Elizabethan age basically speak about the

description of beautiful beloved but the metaphysical poet did not do that. The metaphysical love poetry makes complete isolation from their predecessors or contemporaries. The metaphysical poetry especially John Donne instead of describing the beloved's charming beauty started analyzing the feelings of love. They started to define love. They started anatomy on love.

The metaphysical poets have had admirers in every age, but the beginning of the Neo-Classical period proves to be a dark age for metaphysical writing. John Dryden criticized this type of poetry by saying that metaphysical love is not the actual love as this love strikes in our intellect, not in our emotions. John Dryden is the person who stopped the tradition of metaphysical love poetry. From 1700 to 1912 there was no attempt to write metaphysical poetry. The revival of analyzing metaphysical love poetry found in H.J.C. Grierson's "Introduction to Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century" (1912) and T.S. Eliot's seminal essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921). So, Dryden was the poet who stopped the tradition of writing the metaphysical poem and in the strict sense, T.S. Eliot was the poet who revived the metaphysical tradition.

Elizabethan love poetry, though it was famously suffered from some

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weakness. It was artificial. Donne led a revolt against the Elizabethan poets. He disliked the Petrarchan convention of the glorification of the beloved's beauty. Thus, he may be said to be the founder of a new type of poetry. The metaphysical poetry is characterized by some special features-

- Passionate thinking is one of the most important features combined with intellectual activity. T.S. Eliot considered 'passionate thinking' as an epitome of metaphysical poetry. John Donne's "The Sun Rising", "The Canonization", "The Ecstasy", etc. build up with full of passion. In "The Sun Rising" Donne says:

"Love, all alike, no  
season knows, nor clime  
Nor hours, days, months,  
which are the rags of the  
time."

Again in

"The Sun Rising" he says:

"I could eclipse and could them with a  
wink,

But that I would not lose her sight so long."

- The metaphysical verse is well recognized by the use of conceits. Conceit is also a simile but unlike a simile, it surprised us and gives us a sense of violence. Dr. Samuel Johnson in his *The Lives of the Poets* (1779) defined conceits as "the heterogeneous ideas are yoked

together with a sense of violence." While Donne comparing him and his beloved as 'twin compasses'- where the beloved is a constant part of the compass and the lover round her for various works and ultimately at the end of the day the lover again comes back to his beloved just like another part of the compass, gives us a striking sense of violence. Again he compared him and his beloved with a 'phoenix' bird. Phoenix is the bird that dies and is born by its ashes. Similarly, Donne and his beloved after making physical love may die but their soul will be reborn and will go to Meta-state because of their pure love.

This is the conceit that makes the poem very difficult to understand for the common reader. Alexander Pope is not in favor of conceits. Particularly, John Dryden criticized metaphysical poetry by saying "Love is the emotion of heart. The emotion of heart not guided by reason". According to him, metaphysical poetry strikes in our intellect, not in our heart, where love possesses. But one of the most famous Caroline poets Thomas Carew wrote Donne's epitaph: "Here lies a king, that rul'd as he thought fit / The universal monarchy of wit." Helen Gardener in the book *The Metaphysical Poets* said: "It was the 'wit' of Donne, nor his music or his passion, or his dramatic force, that the

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Caroline poets tried to emulate, and it was because of a change in the notion of what 'true wit' was that Donne sank in repute".(Gardener,2)

**The Genesis of Metaphysical love:**

John Donne started the tradition of writing Metaphysical poetry in the Elizabethan era, known as the age of Renaissance. In this era, we find the rebirth of classical learning, the revival of ancient Greece and Roman literature. The very concept of metaphysical love has also its origin in the classical literature of Plato and Aristotle. And in the age of Renaissance, the Platonic love is revived and altered as Neo-Platonism from which Donne's conception of love awoke. So in order to understand the genesis of metaphysical poetry we have to dates back to the Platonic concept of love.

It is widely acknowledged that Greek philosopher Plato laid the foundation of Western philosophy. Any discussion about literature must begin with Plato. Most of Plato's philosophy is in dialogue form, where Socrates plays the role of the main speaker. Plato's concept of love is present in two dialogues- *Timaeus*, and *The Symposium*.

In 360 B.C. Plato wrote a book called *Timaeus* which is a dialogue among Socrates, Critias, Timaeus, Hermocrates. In the discussion of Love, Plato puts emphasis on absolute beauty (God). He considered

that human attraction for Absolute beauty as love. Absolute beauty is imaginary beauty that is ever-lasting, imperishable which cannot be touched, and far beyond decay. This absolute beauty is ideal. This absolute beauty is God. The human attraction for God, according to Plato, is love.

Plato wrote another book called *The Symposium*, which is again a discussion among five philosophers. Socrates defined love in *The Symposium* as "Love is the love of beauty" (32). He clearly emphasized the everlasting beauty, i.e. God. But one of them a lady philosopher Diotima questions the subject of human attraction for human beauty. Socrates logically defended Diotima's question. Socrates said that human attraction for absolute beauty is love and human attraction for human beauty is love too. As human beauty is the replica of absolute beauty, those who are attracted towards absolute beauty, he or she attracted towards absolute beauty. But, Socrates gives a very critical condition that although human beings are attracted by human beauty, it does not necessarily lead to physical love. Human beauties are almost like the image of absolute beauty. According to Socrates, as human beauty is the replica of absolute beauty, if anyone makes physical love with human beauty it means he or she makes physical love with the part of absolute beauty. So, Plato's philosophy of love teaches us to close our

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eyes and realize love. Platonic love is spiritual love where there is no scope for sexual intimacy.

What Plato theorized about love, is starkly questioned by Aristotle? In his book, *De Anima* Aristotle creates a big fundamental difference between human beauty and absolute beauty. Absolute beauty is immortal, imperishable but human beauty is mortal and subject to decay. So, how can human beauty be the replica of absolute beauty? Aristotle himself took the responsibility to prove that human beauty is the replica of absolute beauty and can be immortalized. In *De Anima* Aristotle argued that in order to make human beauty immortal one must need physical love. He emphasized the value of procreation where parents' beauty is transformed into children's beauty. Children carry their parents' beauty and make their parents' beauty immortal. Aristotle obeyed Plato's conception of love but on one occasion he deviates from Plato's philosophy (i.e. importance of physical love to make human beauty immortal).

**Neo-Platonic love during Italian Renaissance:**

The concept of Platonic love and Aristotelian love, later during the Italian Renaissance revived through the hand of Renaissance scholar Leon Ebreo. Renaissance is usually said to be begun in Italy in the late fourteenth century and to

have continued in the other countries of Western Europe. In this era European art of painting, sculpture, literature reached its peak. The development came late to England in the sixteenth century. In the age of the Renaissance, Leon Ebreo revived and changed the Platonic ideas of love. In the book *Diologhi D' Amore* ("Dialogues of Love"). In this book Leon Ebreo categorized love in three ways: i) Divine love ii) Civil love iii) Vulgar love.

Divine love: Divine love is just like Platonic love, where there is no scope for physical intimacy.

Civil love: The love which John Donne exactly conveyed in his poem. According to Leon Ebreo, Civil love is the love where one makes physical union and during the extreme point of lover beloved physical satisfaction the souls detached from the body and go to Meta state, which is far beyond physical decay. This love never ends but remained in Meta states and becomes immortal.

Vulgar love: Vulgar love or what we call 'lust' is a kind of love where love dies after the physical union. This kind of love stands for the satisfaction of the body. There is no place for the marriage of true minds.

**John Donne's use of Leon Ebreo's Civil love in "The Canonization", "The Ecstasy", and "The Anniversary":**

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Based on Ebreo's civil love, John Donne implemented his philosophy of love especially in "The Canonization", "The Ecstasy", and "The Anniversary", where he clearly showed how the Neo-Platonic concept of physical love is necessary in order to make the soul of the lover-beloved immortal. Born in 1572 into a London merchant family with a Roman Catholic ancestry, he studied at the University of Oxford, followed by the University of Cambridge. In 1592 Donne begun to study Law. He was appointed as chief secretary to the Lord keeper of the Great Seal, Sir Thomas Egerton. During this time he fell in love with Egerton's niece Anne More, daughter of Earl of Pembroke. As Donne belonged to a very poor family their relationship is not accepted favorably by society and Anne's family. So, Donne and More eloped and secretly married without the permission of his patron in 1601. They were caught and Donne was imprisoned for a little time for this elopement. After his release, Donne started to convert his critical thought in poetry about society and his love for his beloved which is superior to all other earthly pleasures of the world.

The concept of Neo-Platonic physical love is finely expressed in the poem "The Canonization" where Donne and his beloved became canonized and their love becomes a symbol of immortal love from which the common lover takes the inspiration of ideal love. Donne in this

poem favorably accepts his physical deformity, defects of bone, what the society called health or wealth. But he indirectly hints at the mortal and perishable nature of those things which can't touch the immortal love of the poet. Nobody enjoys fortune after death. The poet says:

"Take you a course, get you a place,

Observe his honour, or his  
grace,

Or the King's  
real, or his stumped face

Contemplate; what you will, approve,

So you will let me  
love". ("The Canonization")

The third stanza of the poem vividly depicts the Neo-Platonic concept of love where the body of the lover-beloved die but their soul becomes immortal. Donne compares him and his beloved, and their love with fly and tapers- "Call her one, me another fly, / We're tapers too, and at our own cost die," ("The Canonization"). It is natural that in a dark room where one single candle is burning, despite knowing that the fire of the candle might kill them, the flies come to touch the fire. They moved towards the light and burnt together in the fire. Donne and his beloved are like two flies moving towards the fire to die but interestingly they are tapers (candle) too.

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The fire for which they die is the passion of love. The poet and his beloved are like "Phoenix bird" who dies and is born by its own ashes. They are the cause of death and they are the consequence of death. The imagery of the phoenix bird is the repetition of the metaphysical condition of love. When their body dies their soul is reborn and goes to Meta-state. It is a rebirth of the soul. So, Phoenix dies and a pure spiritual Phoenix born out of its own ashes- "We die and rise the same, and prove/ Mysterious by this love" (The Canonization")

In order to make beauty immortal, Prof. Leon Ebreo showed the importance of physical relation in love, and John Donne by using Ebreo's concept of love Shows how the soul becomes immortalize.

In the poem "The Ecstasy" when the two lovers get the utmost satisfaction of love their soul comes out from their bodies. According to Donne love is about the soul. It is a matter of soul not of the body- "This ecstasy doth underplex,

We said, and tell us what we love; We see by this, it was not sex" ("The Ecstasy")

But the importance of the body can't be ignored. When a soul wishes to love another soul it can contact only through the medium of the body. "The Ecstasy" shows how the body and the soul are mutually dependent and that one cannot unite with the other except through the medium of

love. Hence, for a union of souls the contact of bodies is the first priority- "On man heaven's influence works not so, / But that it first imprints the air; / So soul into the soul may flow, / Through it to body first repair" ("The Ecstasy")

In the poem, "The Anniversary" Donne glorifies the immortality of love. All the things of the world are ruled by the rule of destruction but only love is imperishable. Like all other human beings, their dead bodies would be buried in two separate graves. If they were buried in the same grave, death even would not be part of them because they will be united even after the death in the grave. For their pure love, death cannot part the two lovers. Their love is so deep that their souls will detach from the body at the time of burring in the grave and their souls would be released from the prison-house (graves of the body) and goes to Meta states in order to make a union of their souls-

"Two graves must hide thine and mine corse; If one might, death were no divorce.

Alas, as well as other princes, we

(Who princes enough in one another be)

Must leave at last in death,  
these eyes, and ears, Oft fed with true oaths,  
and with sweet salt tears; But souls where  
nothing dwells but love

(All

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other thoughts being inmates) then shall  
prove

This, or a love increased their  
above, When bodies to their graves, souls  
from their graves remove". ("The  
Anniversary")

**Conclusion:**

Based on Leon Ebreo's Neo-Platonic love, John Donne satirized society as his love is immortal when all other things are mortal. His love builds up with passion. Though John Dryden criticized Donne's poetry as it strikes in intellect, not in heart, yet Donne's love achieves the place of immortality. The function of poetry is 'to instruct and delight' as expressed by The Roman poet Horace in *Ars Poetica*. Donne's intellectual thought, passion, his devoted love to his beloved fully enchanted the readers with sensual pleasure, delight and also rightly instructs the way to achieve immortality after the death of the body. His poetry discusses both physicality and spirituality. It is very difficult to give an exact definition of Donne's philosophy of love, yet it can be said that love is properly fulfilled only when it embraces both body and soul. Donne's poetry sounded some enchanting notes which touch the soul of every human and it gives the reader a role of active participation while interpreting the poem. Unlike other Elizabethan poets, he doesn't glorify the lover but the love.

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