

## Semiotic and Symbolic Aspects of Language in John Donne's Selected Poems

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### Abstract

Julia Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic poles of language deal with the affective and denotative aspects of language. Through the semiotic aspect of language, the inner desires and impulses are expressed whereas the linguistic and grammatical aspects are revealed through the symbolic aspect of language. These two poles of language are inseparable and their meaning can only be conveyed when juxtaposed. The current article will shed light on John Donne's three selected poems, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, *The Canonization* and *The Good Morrow* in the light of Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic. Through his poems, Donne expresses his love for his beloved through the language of poetry which allows the expression of unspeakable emotions. The paper will indicate how language of poetry and the two poles of semiotic and symbolic helped Donne to vocalize his inner self. As a result, metaphor, alliteration and other poetical devices which are part of the semiotic aspect of language, will be analyzed in these three selected poems.

**Keywords:** Julia Kristeva, Semiotic and symbolic, poetic devices, John Donne's poems.

### 1. John Donne and Metaphysical Poetry:

Unquestionably, every era in literature has its pioneers and representatives in all genres. Like fiction and drama, poetry too has many schools with varying features and characteristics since the time of Geoffrey Chaucer until the modern era. The school of metaphysical poetry emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This school of poetry is more difficult than most because it questions the nature of reality in a philosophical manner. Metaphysical poets on the other hand, made their poetry very different from other genres of poetry by inserting strange imagery, frequent paradox, complicated thought and shaping their poetry in a highly intellectual way. Bradford Smith in his article "What is Metaphysical Poetry" offers a definition:

Metaphysical Poetry is a paradoxical inquiry, imaginative and intellectual, which exhausts, by its use of antithesis and contradiction and unusual imagery, all the possibilities in a given idea. This idea will predominantly be a psychological probing of love, death, or religion as the more important matters of experience in the life of the poet, and will be embodied in striking metaphorical utterance or in the use of the common (familiar) or the scientific word. (Smith, 1934)

Metaphysical poetry flourished in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, although it was not an organized school and some poets did not know that they were writing in a certain stream. Some of them did not even know one another, much less read each other's work. But, they shared common ground which made it easy for later critics, such as Dr. Johnson, to group them under one school. The important figures comprising this group were: George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan and the exemplar John Donne.

John Donne (1572-1631) described by Ben Jonson as "the first poet in the world in some things" (quoted in Guibory, 2006), was an English poet born in London. He was brought up in a Roman Catholic family at a time "when Catholics were being persecuted in England and even harassed by the authorities" (Bloom, 1999). In Donne's lifetime, Catholics could not practice their religion openly, otherwise they would be deprived from pursuing successful careers. His loyalty to his religion barred him from public life and deprived him of a university degree. Donne's predicament finally led him to abandon Catholicism and embrace Anglicanism in the 1590s. Thereafter his life flourished, he started to write sermons and became a successful preacher. Preaching "afforded him an opportunity to write and speak publically in spiritual and intellectual matters" (Bloom, 1999) which are obvious characteristics of the metaphysical poetry.

Donne, as a leading exemplar of metaphysical poetry, focused on many things that categorized him as the father of this school. His poetry is characterized by wit and intellect lurking in almost every line of his poems. While his focus on imagery is suitably attributed to the ideas he thrusts, it has no bearing to beauty or interest. The metaphysical poet, Donne, "has a way of making his image and his idea become one, the image an explanation rather than an embellishment. Metaphors are not highly flown, however ingenious they may be. [He] ... prefers ... a type of common imagery peculiar to himself ... He delights in physical concepts and somatic terms" (Smith, 1996).

William Minton, a critic and scholar, spoke of Donne saying that his knowledge, subtlety and capacity of intellect, the wide range of his thought, sadness of his life, all these elements incorporated in giving a vivid meaning and interest to his poems. Minton confirms that "Dr. Donne is one of the most interesting personalities among our men of letters" (Bloom, 2008). The current article intends to apply Julia Kristeva's concept of semiotic and symbolic to Donne's selected poems *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, *The Canonization* and *The Good Morrow*.

## 2. Semiotic and Symbolic

Julia Kristeva wrote about semiotic and symbolic for her doctoral thesis and later on, her thesis was published as *Revolution in Poetic language* (1984) in which she elaborately explained her theory and analyzed some poems. Kristeva believed that the meaning of a text is not made only through its denotative aspect but also the poetic and artistic aspects as well. As such, she defines two modes in language. The semiotic aspect of language evokes the subject's inner impulses and desires; whereas, the symbolic mode is related to the orderly meaning. However, these two modes are not separate; moreover, "the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse involved" (Kristeva, 1984).

The semiotic aspect of language is channeled into the symbolic aspect of language. The semiotic aspect beats into the symbolic aspect of the text and makes it tangible. Before a speaking being starts to use grammatical and linguistic structures, he coos and babbles, which are rhythmic imitation of the parents' speech. The cooing and babbling are the semiotic aspects of language. According to Kristeva, a baby starts to use grammar which precedes the two aspects of language. She uses the term *chora* which she borrows from Plato. In Plato's view, *chora* was a receptacle but Kristeva defines it as a rhythm which precedes language. For Kristeva, the *chora* "is the site of continual displacement and fragmentation from which the semiotic bursts forth" (Stokes- King, 2006).

At this point, the child does not know that each word can point out to something and that in order to communicate he needs to use language. He should learn grammar and syntax in order to name things. By this time, the child enters the symbolic realm of language. Therefore, in the *chora*, the child expresses his inner feelings and energy and later on he perceives that he should use language in order to express himself. Though the child enters the symbolic realm of language, the semiotic still remains as a part of the language. As Stokes- King notices "the semiotic is a language 'preceding meaning and signification, mobile, amorphous,' the language that exists before linguistic structure" (Stokes- King, 2006). Semiotic means trace and Kristeva uses the term semiotic in order to emphasize its trace within language which makes language meaningful and lively. In poetry, the semiotic "is associated with the rhythms and tones that are meaningful parts of language" (Thomas, 2008).

The current article intends to apply Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic aspects of language to John Donne's selected poems as "in kristevan terms, poetry is reassertion of the semiotic within the symbolic" (Sutcliffe, 2003) and "the highest incidence of semiotic language is poetry" (Stokes- King, 2006). As a result the traces of the semiotic within symbolic mode in Donne's selected poems will be discussed in detail. Here, poems are the focus of the study as highlighted by Stokes- King:

Poetic language is defined by its infringement of the laws of grammar and prose.' The function of poetry is to create, to 'make it new' and this creativity must come from drives outside the prosaic, the structured, the symbolic. (Stokes- King, 2006)

## 3. Analysis

"*A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*" was written somewhere between 1611 and 1612. The poem starts with a simile in which the speaker likens the departure of virtuous men's souls to the separation of lovers.

*As virtuous men pass mildly away,  
and whisper to their souls, to go  
whilst some of their sad friends do say,  
the breath goes now, and some say, no* (Smith, 1982)

The alliteration of /s/ sound in the first stanza highlights the silence of death which dominates the first stanza and also adds to the mild and calm atmosphere of the poem as the speaker intends to pacify his beloved about their impending separation. Alliteration is considered as semiotic aspect of language as the real language is not shaped by the child yet; Rice and Waugh notice that alliteration is part of semiotic aspect of language (Rice and Waugh, 1989).

By comparing himself to virtuous men, the speaker emphasizes the sanctity of his love; moreover, he believes that it will be easier for them to be away from each other as their love is different from other lovers. There is no need to have "tear- floods" or "sigh-tempest" as these are not the true lovers' reactions toward a simple separation. In addition, he compares the shock of separation of lovers to an earthquake which can be destructive and harmful to their love; but their separation is likened to the trepidation of spheres, which is harmless. He compares the lovers to spheres that can complete each other and which are not affected by their movement. This stanza has alliteration and simile which are part of semiotic aspect of language. Poetry is "the reassertion of the semiotic within symbolic" (Thomas, 2008) and this stanza has two aspects of the language together.

Those worldly lovers whose love is physical like cuddling, hugging, kissing, will be influenced by distance in their relationship; however, the love between the speaker and his beloved, will not be affected as it is celestial and virtuous. Though they may be far apart, they would still love each other as their love is not only physical but has a spiritual connection as well. The distance between them may only grow their relationship, but it cannot break it. The speaker uses metaphor and compares their relationship to gold which when beaten softly, will not break but expands. Likewise distance may change their relationship, but it cannot separate them. "Metonymy and metaphor indissociable from drive economy" express whatever the speaker has in his mind unconsciously (Kristeva, 1984). Here, the speaker by using gold as a metaphor intends to say that their relationship is so strong that nothing can destroy it.

*In the next stanza,  
If they be two, they are two so  
As stiff twin compasses are two,  
Thy soul the fixed foot, makes no show  
To move, but doth, if the' other do. (Smith, 1982)*

The speaker emphasizes that the lovers are two individual people and he chooses not to express them as one; however, the way they treat each other unifies them. He uses conceit to show their support for one another in their relationship. He compares them to the two feet of a compass. The husband is the moving foot and body that works outside on all activities while the wife is the fixed foot and soul. Therefore, he keeps returning to the soul again and again. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker mentions that the soul of the virtuous man is departing and here by the use of conceit, he compares the wife to a soul, as a fixed foot of the compass to highlight the fact that distance will not affect them. They are similar to the two feet of a compass which adjoin one another despite their distance. They might be far, but they work together for the sake of their love. The wife as the fixed foot will move only when the flexible foot starts moving. Just as the wife is firm and powerful and supports her husband, so too does he complement her, and return to her in their relationship.

In this poem, the speaker uses metaphor, simile and conceit which are part of semiotic aspects of language in order to emphasize the fact that their true, virtuous and spiritual love will not be affected in any way as their love goes beyond those of others. With poetic devices, he assures his wife that their love is too strong to be affected by any distance.

In addition to metaphor, simile and conceit, rhythm and rhyme are also considered as part of semiotic as well. The poem has nine quatrains and each has its alternating ABAB rhyme scheme. The rhyme scheme can indicate the speaker's instinctive articulation which remained silent for a long time (Stokes- King, 2006). The rhyme scheme remains the same throughout the poem, as the poet intends to specify that their relationship will stay the same and it will not change. Even in the stable rhyme scheme he emphasizes the harmless separation which cannot be articulated in symbolic language. Moreover, rhyme adds to the musicality of the poem and "musicalization pluralizes meanings" (Kristeva, 1984). The rhyme scheme provides music within this poem and "music expresses the unspeakable... that language leaves out" (Iannetta, 2002). Besides all the poetic devices, the title of the poem merits attention as Gaskill notices that "Donne's invented word 'valediction' reflects his preoccupation with the anticipation of parting and reunion both between lovers and between his soul and body" (Gaskill, 2015). The soul and body may be separated for awhile, but finally they will join each other just as these lovers too will join each other after a short separation.

While "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is about virtuous love, "The Canonization" is also about cherishing the spiritual aspect of love. In the latter, the speaker starts his argument in defense of his love by addressing another person

who criticizes his old age and his opinion of love.

*For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,  
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,  
My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune flout,  
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,  
Take you a course, get you a place,  
Observe his honor, or his grace,  
Or the king's real, or his stamp'd face  
Contemplate; what you will, approve,  
So you will let me love.*

The set of images he brings within his poem such as palsy, gout and gray hairs reflect the fact that he is aware of his age and he does not pretend to be young. Through poetic language, the speaker shows his inner yearnings as "poetry has opened itself to the basic impulses of desire and fear which operate outside the 'rational' system" (Selden, 1997). He also asks them to mind their own business and let him love the way he intends. After his argument, he raises rhetorical questions to emphasize the fact that his love did not harm anyone. He was rational in his love; he did not shed many tears nor sigh a lot.

*Call us what you will, we are made such by love;  
Call her one, me another fly,  
We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,  
And we in us find the eagle and the dove.  
The phoenix riddle hath more wit  
By us; we two being one, are it.  
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.  
We die and rise the same, and prove  
Mysterious by this love. (Smith, 1982)*

He compares his beloved and himself to flies and candles in order to highlight that they will die at any point in time; therefore, they should enjoy each other's presence as much as they can. Then, he uses bird imagery of eagle and dove. They can fly and soar towards heaven. Just like the phoenix which is neutral in gender and whose unification is unsexed, he intends to imply that sexuality is not that important in their relationship. Furthermore, the intentional use of phoenix as metaphor alludes to their love as that of a phoenix borne of its ashes. If they cannot live with this love, they can die for it and their love will remain forever eternal and saintly; commemorated within poems. The metaphors which are dominant in this stanza are considered as semiotic aspect of language by Kristeva (Kristeva, 1984). The title of the poem becomes meaningful here. The reader expects to read a poem about saints and religious figures but the speaker discusses love. The repetition of the word 'love' at the beginning and ending of each stanza not only adds to the musicality of the poem but also emphasizes the speaker's ideas about love. The speaker defamiliarizes the reader's expectations by the choice of title.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker claims that they will be saints of love as their love is virtuous.

*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;  
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,  
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;  
As well a well-wrought urn becomes  
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,  
And by these hymns, all shall approve  
Us canonized for Love. (Smith, 1982)*

The future generation will appreciate the way the speaker and his beloved love one another. Furthermore, the rhyme scheme in the poem is a deviation from the norm as it is ABBACCCDD. And like the rhyme scheme, the title of the poem too does not follow the norm. Instead of talking about religious matters, the speaker likens himself and his beloved to saints of love. As the content transgresses the norm, so does the rhyme scheme. The irregular rhyme scheme reflects the inner anger and impassion of the speaker as he defends himself and his love against all accusations. The rhyme

scheme shows the drives that language leaves out. This transgression is part of semiotic as the semiotic itself is the repressed language which surfaces symbolic once in a while (Stokes-king, 2006).

*The Canonisation* comprises five stanzas of nine lines. The number nine is a holy number which denotes spirituality. These nine lines indicate the sanctity of their love. *"A Valediction Forbidding Mourning"* has nine stanzas whereas *"The Canonisation"* has five stanzas of nine lines each; both poems focus on the importance of spirituality in the realm of love. In addition to these two poems, *"The Good Morrow"* will be discussed in detail as well.

*"The Good Morrow"* is one of John Donne's more prominent poems. Donne's *"The Good Morrow"* was published in 1633 in his collection of *Songs and Sonnets*. Even though it is included in his sonnet works, the poem does not follow the regular sonnet pattern of a 14 line poem with eight line stanzas followed by a six line conclusion with a specific rhyme. Instead, it includes 21 lines divided into three stanzas.

This poem can be described as a love poem wherein we encounter a discourse conducted between two lovers. It begins with the narrator questioning his life before encountering true love. Then it goes into narrating the lover's experiences with his beloved and how their love is born anew as the title of the poem suggests. The poem focuses on real love after the lovers go through a childish and lustful phase. That is why it is considered as an "extremely personal, confidential, and vivid" (Bloom, 2008) poem because it is mainly inspired by his wife. "The Good Morrow" is perfectly contended and serene record of an illicit and doubtless of an ephemeral, adventure" (Smith, 1996).

Kristeva's semiotic, as it has been explained earlier, refers to a hidden meaning which has not been made clear through the symbolic. Many tools employed in semiotic can explain hidden meanings especially in Donne's 'The Good Morrow'. The poem begins with a sense of wonder in which the narrator inquires about his and his beloved's past. He questions their endeavor at love and how it was before they reached a moment of awakening.

*I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I  
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?  
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?  
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?  
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.  
If ever any beauty I did see,  
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee. (Smith, 1982)*

The musicality of the first line is present in the assonance inherent in (my, I) which echoes a rhyming scheme that appeals to the ears. The alliterations are eminent in "were we weaned till then" in the sound /w/ which intensifies the hyperbolic meaning that questions the lovers' ability to acclimatize themselves to the current situation. "The semiotic takes us back to the pre-linguistic states of childhood where the child babbles the sounds s/he hears, or where s/he articulates rhythm, alliteration, or stresses, trying to imitate her/ his surrounding" (Rice and Waugh, 1989). In the aforementioned line, alliteration is part of the semiotic aspect of language. He further confirms their lustful insatiability which he likens to childish pleasures. The narrator then moves to an allegorical imagery in which he compares his and the beloved's situation to the catholic tale of the seven sleepers. Those sleepers, children, fled persecution in their town and rested in a cave where they fell asleep for 200 years. A long sleep here promises a better life, a better tomorrow as experienced by the seven sleepers who matured physically and spiritually. This allegorical image compares the lovers' life to the 200 years of a childish life, perchance to gain spiritual love and a new beginning, despite a long interval. It also carries a hidden meaning which the poet thrusts, referring to the innocence of this love, a spiritual one, through associating it with a religious reference.

The alliteration available in (snorted, seven, sleepers) the fourth line represented in the sound /s/ is associated with the soothing sound of sleep. This alliteration is related to the sleep of the two lovers who will wake up one day to a 'good morrow' and find themselves matured physically and spiritually. The musicality of the 6<sup>th</sup> line present in (any, see) is embodied through this assonance and incorporated in the hyperbolic image which the narrator presents. He claims that the beauty of his beloved supersedes any beauty on earth and whatever beauty he sees will not match that of his beloved:

*If ever any beauty I did see  
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee (Smith, 1982)*

The hyperbole in these two lines is evidently present; whereby the narrator idolises his beloved whose beauty is superior to anything in the world. The first stanza of this poem celebrates the lovers' sexuality in its childish phase of life which offers them nocturnal pleasures before they awaken to a new day.

The second stanza offers a new promise, the beginning of a new life, a 'good morrow,' which should be different from the sensual childish one he has experienced with his beloved. The narrator refers to a new beginning as "our waking souls" in reference to the allegorical image of the seven sleepers.

*And now good-morrow to our waking souls. (Smith, 1982)*

The lovers' souls were also sleeping because they were involved in sensual love and they needed to wake up to a new dawn in order to feel the spiritual love. This is deeply reflected through the personification of souls as human beings who sleep and wake up. These two souls do not watch each other in fear just like the 'seven sleepers' who fled religious persecution.

*Which watch not one another out of fear;  
For love, all love of other sights controls. (Smith, 1982)*

Otherwise, these two souls watch each other "for love." The repetition of the word love is significant in that it emphasizes and intensifies their love for one another. This pure and spiritual love which is represented in the hyperbolic image, will turn the small room they used to fulfill their desires, into an expanded space, a world or universe in which they feel spiritual love.

*And makes one little room an everywhere. (Smith, 1982)*

The narrator's hyperbole dismisses the exploration of other worlds, for all he needs is one world with two hemispheres to share with his beloved. The narrator indicates that he does not need any sea discoverers to find new worlds because he has discovered what he needs in the world that he shares with his beloved. The anaphoric expressions in this stanza represented by the word 'let' emphasize the narrator's intention to be united with his beloved in their world.

*Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,  
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,  
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one. (Smith, 1982)*

So, the second stanza with its personification, imagery, anaphoric expressions and metaphors, all refer to a gradual change in the narrator's love, from sensual to a more spiritual one. The geographical representations such as sea discoverers, new worlds, maps mirror the narrator's rejection of new worlds as he is perfectly contented to exist in spiritual harmony with his beloved in their own world.

The third and last stanza opens with the narrator's emphasis on being face to face with his beloved as they see each other's reflection in their eyes.

*My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,  
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;  
Where can we find two better hemispheres,  
Without sharp north, without declining west?  
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;  
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I  
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die. (Smith 1982)*

The metaphor inherent in comparing the two hearts as hemispheres, halves of a planet which do not have "sharp north," a metaphor denoting bitterness and discord, neither a "declining west" another metaphor for death. These two hemispheres do not include bitterness or death because their love for one another is pure, strong and unifying. The spirituality and purity of this love is at its zenith in this stanza, as can be seen through the clear imagery and metaphors of the cosmographic elements. Their love is axiomatic and will never diminish because of its intensity and depth. This love will feed them and keep them alive. The third stanza highlights the perfection and autonomy of the two lovers. Their harmonious union is apparent in their unity as lovers. While using cosmographic metaphors, the poem ends with a claim to their immortality, the spiritual power, and the pure undying love and devotion.

#### 4. Conclusion

Metaphysical poems deal with different subject matters in intellectual and witty ways. John Donne was a metaphysical poet whose expression of poetry shocked readers. He chose his comparisons based on the suitability of ideas. As has been mentioned in the analysis, Donne's selected poems deal with his nature of love and its spirituality. By applying Kristeva's concepts of semiotic and symbolic to these selected poems, the article sheds light on the vital and meaningful ways in which Donne expressed his ideas. The semiotic aspect of language adds to the layers of meaning and its beauty. Therefore, by focusing on the semiotic aspect of language in Donne's selected poems, the reader perceives the reasons behind the liveliness in Donne's poems. This paper also shows the significance of applying semiotic to metaphysical poems in a manipulative way. It may seem odd to apply Kristeva's semiotic to such old poetry but semiotic has a latent ability to reveal the poet's ideas indirectly. It is a second language employed by the poet, through which he does not have to state everything directly, and herein lies the intellectuality of metaphysical poetry.

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