

Warming the world
with the stroke of a
pen: how donne's
powerful poetry can
allev...

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



In many of the metaphysical poems in John Donne's literary canon, the poet assumes a voice that, as John Carey describes "...communicates itself through the dictatorial attitudes [he] adopts, through the unrelenting argumentativeness of his manner, and through the manipulation and violent combination of the objects of a sensed world in his imagery." Carey characterizes this tone as evidencing Donne's fascination with power as a central medium for thought-based expression. In "The Sun Rising" and "Death Be Not Proud" ("Holy Sonnet X") from Donne's "Songs and Sonnets" and "Holy Sonnets," respectively, the poet attempts to discredit commonly held beliefs regarding existential, philosophical, astrological, and religious principles and values to which most individuals throughout the history of human civilization have subscribed. Specifically, Donne resists the notions that the sun is the single most powerful entity and central to our cosmological framework, and that death is "mighty and dreadful" ("Holy Sonnet X") and therefore of grave import in understanding the purpose of life. He does this by personifying "the sun" and "death," subjugating each to human status and, therefore, undermining the reader's belief in the inherent power of each entity. Nevertheless, it is not merely Donne's utilization of seemingly outlandish, exaggerated, and highly contested claims that affords his poetical works with its intrinsic notoriety. Rather, as Clements argues in his critical analysis, Donne's unique ability to successfully employ assertive and manipulative argument, and invert commonly held conceptions, renders his seemingly ludicrous claims "not only figuratively, but literally true," to quote Sir Thomas Brown (239). Donne's technique is one of the most tangible elements that has guided

many critics to conclude that Donne's tone manifests an obsession with power. Moreover, quoting Brian Vickers, Clements points out that "[Donne's] hyperbole ' asserts the incredible in order to arrive at the credible'" (239). It is this very " rhetoric of hyperbole" (239), that, in concert with Donne's thought-based aggressive persuasiveness, qualifies the feeling and true essence of his poetry. It adds levels of emotional complexity to otherwise straight-forward rationalizations of the poet's somewhat simplistic-though occasionally contentious-lyrical verse. In " The Sun Rising," Donne utilizes assertive argument, hyperbolic imagery, and a persuasive tone to elevate the status of his lover to that of the divine. Simultaneously, he endeavors to downplay and/or question any claim of substantial import to which the sun is characteristically credited. In the first stanza, Donne resorts to name-calling, criticizing the sun as " busy," " old," " fool[ish]," " unruly," " saucy," and " pedantic." Thus, he attempts to characterize the rising sun, which calls on him and his lover in bed, " through windows, and through curtains," as petty and irritating. He argues that true love (such as that which he shares with his lover) contrasts the pseudo-love of " seasonal" lovers and of the sun itself, which rises and sets in accordance with certain systematic restraints "...all alike, no season knows, nor clime, / Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time" (" The Sun Rising"). Thus, while most entities under (and including) the sun are subject to physical, geographical, spatial, temporal, quantitative, and/or practical limitations, he claims that true love is extra-worldly in these regards. It is incomprehensible, immeasurable, limitless, and boundless-even in relation to the enormity and strength of the sun, which no longer appears so impressive when juxtaposed against love's power. In the

second stanza, Donne questions the power of the sun's rays, arguing that " I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink / But that I would not lose her sight so long;" (" The Sun Rising"). Thus, he could easily escape from the sun's rays by closing his eyes, but so simply in order to see his lover in every waking moment, he chooses not to. Moreover, Donne asks the sun to: Look, and tomorrow late, tell me Whether both the Indias of spice and mine Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with me. Ask for those kinds whom thou saw'st yesterday, And thou shalt hear, all here in one bed lay (" The Sun Rising"). If his lovers' eyes have not blinded the sun by tomorrow, an inversion of the natural threat of sun's damaging properties, Donne asks the sun to look to the East Indies, the source of spices, and the West Indies, the source of precious metals. He also asks it to see the kings that he shone on yesterday. Donne claims that all of these can be found in no place other than in bed with his lover: In the third stanza, he writes that " She's all states, and all princes I, / Nothing else is" (" The Sun Rising"). Clements lends some insight into the significance and power of these bold statements as he explains that Donne's love is " infinitely delightful...infinitely high...infinitely great in all extremes" (239) and has the effect on the poet to arrive at a provincial mindset, which effectively works "...to despatialize the world, reduce the macrocosm to the microcosm, the redeemed latter being in any event of greater value and significance than the fallen macrocosm" (239). These claims are further exemplified by Donne's assertion in the final stanza that " Thou, sun, art half as happy as we" (" The Sun Rising"), thus setting up a simple proportional relationship between himself and his lover and the personified sun. The comparison quantifies the inconceivable amount of love

and contentment the couple possesses as being twice that of the sun's. Having said all of this, Donne's final statement is even more provocative. He states that " To warm the world, that's done in warming us. / Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere; / This bed thy center is, these walls thy sphere" (" The Sun Rising"). Thus, Donne assertively and logically (though somewhat crudely) argues that the sun is no longer the most sublime feature within the cosmos, but rather assumes a secondary role to the bedroom in which Donne and his lover consummate their feelings for one another. His bedroom, not the sun, is the most illustrious and important place in the natural or civilized world. This poem, which is constructed in three ten line stanzas, maintains the strict rhyme scheme A-B-B-A-C-D-C-D-E-E of two rhyming quatrains as inverted rhyming patterns followed by a section-ending rhyming couplet throughout the first two stanzas. In the third stanza, this same rhyme scheme is repeated, but is much more loosely observed, allowing for less discreet rhymes (i. e. I to alchemy, is to this, everywhere to sphere, etc.) to persist. Perhaps, through this unfettering of the lyrical rhyming schematic constraints in concert with his concluding argument, Donne is both literally and symbolically deconstructing the readers' preconceived assumptions regarding the sun's hegemony in relation to all else. It is these very linguistic, syntactical, grammatical, rhythmic, and image-based considerations that I hope to have highlighted, which grant " The Sun Rising" a definite claim to inclusion within the realm of Donne's archetypically power-obsessed metaphysical canon. Likewise, in " Death Be Not Proud" (" Holy Sonnet X"), Donne's most famous and deeply scrutinized piece, the poet assumes a controversial ideology at odds with mainstream

doctrine. In the brief span of a standard sixteen line Sonnet with a regular A-B-B-A-C-D-C-D-E-E Petrarchan rhyme scheme and iambic pentameter metric construction, Donne powerfully asserts his belief that death is relatively unimportant in the grand scheme of the soul's existence through carefully constructed argument, hyperbolic imagery, and a persuasive tone characteristic of his noted power-infused metaphysical lyrical verse. "Holy Sonnet X" begins with the poet playfully and wittingly poking fun at the central object of scrutiny. The poem opens with "Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so," telling personified death that it should not display hubris in its ability to instill awe and terror. Donne's argument logically moves to reasons for death's relative insignificance, as he contends that "For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow / Die not, poor death, nor yet can'st thou kill me ("Holy Sonnet X"), suggesting that one's soul cannot be terminated simply by the act of dying, but conversely, after one's body perishes, the soul assumes a different, and in many cases, elevated status. The poet then states: From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be, More pleasure; then from thee much more must flow, And soonest our best men with thee do go, Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery ("Holy Sonnet X) Here, Donne compares rest and sleep to small-scale imitations of death, which generally provide individuals with substantial comfort and solace. Thus, he implies, death must provide similar consolation. Moreover, in an attempt to justify why the good die young, a microcosm of the existential quandary of why bad things happen to good people, Donne plainly explains that the divine affords the good with eternal relief from pain and enables them to reach salvation with

the gift of premature death. Donne refers to the spiritual salvation one achieves in death as the "soul's delivery. A wryly intended wordplay, the phrase evokes images of childbirth, symbolizing the soul's rebirth in harmony with its earthly demise. Donne then proceeds to characterize the tragic plight of death's persona, that "Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, / And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;" ("Holy Sonnet X"), being subject to the whims of individuals, and constantly in the presence of the ailing, aged, diseased, and suffering, a plight for which Donne articulates his genuine sympathy. The poet thereafter rhetorically asks, "...poppy or charms can make us sleep as well [as death], / And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?" ("Holy Sonnet X") Donne suggests that because drugs and magic charms can make individuals sleep as well, or better than death, why should death puff up with pride? Finally, in a concluding couplet that parallels the punch line of "The Sun Rising," in which Donne advises the rising sun to "Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere; / This bed thy center is, these walls thy sphere," the poet threatens death's personified form by claiming that "One short sleep past, we wake eternally, / And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die" ("Holy Sonnet X). Donne convincingly argues that it is death that should feel threatened by its own "stroke." After all, once an individual's body falls subject to death, his soul will wake eternally. The only element that will cease to exist is death, which itself, ironically, dies. With the careful format, articulation, and logic of both of these concluding statements, Donne drives home his propagandistic dogma and narrowly framed values. Donne attempts to turn commonly held beliefs on their head through his

assumption of a simultaneously authoritative, potent, and witty tone. It is this powerful, ego-driven lyrical voice that disregards the countering perspective to which Carey alludes when he, describing Donne's poems, states: "...they resemble monodramas, in which the figure of Donne, cajoling, demanding, enunciating, occupies so much of the foreground that we only catch a glimpse...at some anonymous figure at whom the flow of language is being directed." This aggressive *modus operandi* within a narrowly structured lyrical framework acknowledges Donne's personal beliefs, and manifests itself through a close analysis of the poet's manipulation of words. This stylistic component has been the central focus of much critical analysis by writers who characterize his tone as principally shaped by his rhetoric of power. This practice of verbal wit for the advancement of some moral principle or narrowly conceived belief of the poet leaves Donne's poems, as Redpast explains in his critique, "...liable to give the impression of being merely brain-spun" (217). Put differently, Donne's thoughts can seem too wild to preclude feeling. Nevertheless, Redpast argues that this is, in fact, "...very seldom the case, since they also come from a passionate heart" (217). Redpast, thus, denies the principle that Donne's verbal expression of complex thought, which I have heretofore characterized as the essence of power as a shaping principle for the poet's verse, precludes feeling, for a position more in line with that of T. S. Eliot, who explains that Donne's poems achieve a "recreation of thought into feeling" (161). Thus, while it might appear at first that the intrinsic feelings of Donne's poems are sacrificed by the "power of thought," or by the aggressively persuasive force they possess, they are not. Rather, their

feeling is qualified, by carefully conceived linguistic expression through witty poetic commentary, by the poet's genuine and passionate articulation.