

## Conceit in Poetry

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### Abstract

*This research paper delves into the exploration of the poetic device known as 'conceit' and its significance in the works of John Donne, a prominent Metaphysical poet. This study aims to establish the ontological status of a poem as an artifact, analyzing how conceit functions as a mechanism of communication and a transformative element in poetry. This paper traces the historical evolution of conceit as a poetic device, comparing it with other literary forms such as simile, metaphor, and symbol. The focus remains on John Donne's innovative use of conceit, drawing from various fields like astronomy, cosmology, religion, and natural philosophy. Additionally, the paper ventures into a comparative analysis with Sanskrit literature, particularly exploring the literary form of 'vakrokti' in Kalidasa's poems. The ultimate goal is to underscore the intellectual depth and critical appeal of conceit as a literary form, emphasizing its role in Donne's unique and dramatic poetry.*

**Keywords:** *Aesthetic Significance, Conceit, Ontology of Poem, Comparative Analysis, & Vakrokti in Kalidasa Poetry.*

Archibald Mc Leish in his 'Ars Poetica' defines poem as an artifact. A poem is predominantly 'a being.' To put it philosophically, a poem has its own ontology. "A poem should not mean but be." In other words, a poem exists as an artifact and its efficiency is its entelechy, which is the critics' term for actualization of the ideal. The employment of different devices by the poet in order to achieve 'entelechy' gives the poem an internal structure made up of similes, metaphors, rhyme and rhythm. This idea in the structure of the poem makes it a system of norms or in the words of Welleck and Warren, 'a structure of norms' and because of this structure the poem communicates at different levels. The hermeneutic critic is able to probe a poem through the devices that a reader who enquires what the central metaphor of a poem is, is more likely to arrive at the meaning of the poem than one who begins elsewhere. A poetic device while being a mechanism of communication for the poet is a convenient point of entry for the reader. A poetic device presents a furthering of the

creative powers of the poets, and to the critics, it provides an interpretative key. It is a mechanism of transformation from immediacy of demand into plasticity of conceptual device. A poet employs poetic devices like a simile or a metaphor, or a symbol, or an image. Of these devices, a particular kind called 'conceit' was used by the poets of Metaphysical School. It has been subjected to much criticism, from the days of Johnson through Dryden to T.S Eliot. While Dr Johnson and Dryden believed that in conceit, different things were yoked together by violence, Eliot thought, that it was an amalgamation brought about by the unificatory ability of the poet's mind to integrate disparate images. He believed that such a technique is ubiquitous in poetry. When the poems of the metaphysical schools are studied from this point of view, the conceit not only accentuates the experience but also provides aesthetic delight. The nature of metaphysical poetry has been elaborately enquired into by generations of poets and critics.

As a teacher and an ardent student of English poetry, this metaphysical poems of John Donne, inspired me to study in depth, the poetic forms. But so far, no study of "conceit" as a poetic device has been made – nor has there been a comparison of conceit in English Poetry. Before going deep in depth to analyse Metaphysical poems, particularly of John Donne, the ontological status, it is essential to study more about "conceit".

Ontology of a poem is a recent concept in Literary Criticism, the term having been imported into literature by Allen Tate and T.S. Eliot. A poem is examined as the sum of total of the experience expressed through the devices which are integrated into the poem; the organic nature of the devices and their contribution to the ornamentation of the poem; the superiority of the certain devices over the others. The nature of the conceit and the effectiveness of its communication are worth discussing.

The history of a conceit as a poetic device is a Pre-Metaphysical poetry especially the cowitly poetry of the Elizabethan poets like Spenser and Shakespeare. The conceit is a more comprehensive and suggestive forms of metaphor, transcending the factual truncation that limits the simile, the traditional circumscription that restricts the metaphor and personalization that confines the symbol. A simile by spelling out the actual qualities to the compared, limits the comparison to specifically mentioned qualities.

A metaphor is again a multilateral simile which takes in all the qualities of the object compared, the only restriction on it being the association of the objects in literary tradition.

A symbol has a unique measuring in the awareness of the poet and becomes isolated from the traditional associations of the object concerned. Encompassing all these and exceeding them, the "conceit" as a poetic device becomes more comprehensive than others. Aesthetically, the conceit

is able to see similarity between dissimilar things and thereby establishes a new artistic experience.

With the intention of establishing superiority of a conceit as a poetic device, a study was made on the width and the depth of conceit, their sources and their employment in the poetic process in some of the poems of John Donne, the Metaphysical poet. The metaphysical poets have drawn their "conceit" from such varied fields as astronomy, cosmology, religion, theology and natural philosophy. They appeal to all because of their universality. The poet's ability to use the appropriate "conceit" gives it a depth unprecedented in the conventional metaphors. Such "conceits" and their poetic and aesthetic significance are enjoyable even today.

For a thorough analysis of the use of conceit, a few poems can be considered. As mentioned earlier, any work of art is an artifact and a poem is verbal artifact. Any art has its own internal structure and poetry has not only verbal structure in a syntactic sense or a lexical structure in semantic sense but also a structure of poetic devices employed to enhance its ability to communicate and invest it with an aesthetic quality. The imagery of a poem on the metaphor in it may be circumscribed by the literary and social parameters and by their very nature and definitions restrict their communication.

John Donne, who was looking for a poetic idiom or device to invest his poetry with an unprecedented width and depth, came upon "conceit" as a device. It enjoys a two-fold efficacy. As a device it transcends the imitations of courtly heritage of English Poetry and the literary heritage of the earlier masters who had been influenced by classical writers. By using the newer frontiers of knowledge into which man had trodden, Donne was able to combine the unknown, the novel and the cosmic into the universal and ageless parameters of his poetry.

His achievements in the use of conceit and the deprecatory criticism, which tried to confine the

conceit in the caverns of the obscure and heterogeneousness, had always mystified me and while trying to see the justification of the deprecators, the greater beauties of the conceits as a device revealed themselves to me. A vigor and originality which the Elizabethans lacked mainly because of the devotion to either the courtly poetry of England or the highly formalized poetry of classical tradition like the pastoral was made up by Donne's 'conceits.' the breath taking originality that made the genius see a underlying similarity between superficially dissimilar things was the one thing that made this study of Donne and his device rewarding both as an intellectual effort and an emotional experience.

Out of curiosity, I happened to meet one of my friends in the department of Sanskrit and discussed with him regarding the use of conceit and asked him, whether they have any literary form that could be compared to "conceits". It was a great surprise to me to learn that in Sanskrit literature also, attempts were made by the Sanskrit poet using different devices for writing poems. He gave me a copy of Sanskrit poems with English translation. When I read the translation, it was a new experience for me. In the poems of Kalidasa, a famous Sanskrit poet, a literary form known as 'vakrokti' is used. My study of the translations of Kalidasa's poem was a sheer pleasure. I felt that a comparative study of Donne and Kalidasa would be a meaningful research study. This study revealed that there can be a fruitful study of comparisons.

### Conceits of John Donne

An analysis of variety of conceits reveals to us its beauty as a poetic device. "Conceit" has its own uniqueness. Conceits as a literary form is more intellectual. The poems of John Donne are more exclusive and critical and intellectual in their appeal.

One more point of excellence in Donne is that, his poems do not project Donne's personality but

projects the poetic excellence of him. The Elizabethan and lyrics are uniform and repetitive in their method not withstanding the intellectual eminence, certain anonymousness in them. Invention with and paradox form the basis of Donne's poetry.

The poetry of Donne is dramatic in tone. There is no description in the poems of Donne but there is action. The poems of Donne can be described as dramatic monologues. They (poems) may appear autobiographical but or not. His poems have an ontological status as a linguistic artifact. His poems do not convey any background of the poet but are detached from him. F.W. Bateson speaks of the literary context and literary background.

Donne cannot be described as an innovator but created a sensation in poetry. The tone of his poems is structured logically and his device is scholarly. Whether dance poems are religious or love the tenor of the 'metaphysical' is conspicuous in his poems. 'The Conceits' proceeds from different conceptions of the function of imagery in a poem.

### Conceits of Donne

The peculiarity of the metaphysical poets is the relations they perceive. They are more logical and connect the abstract with concrete. The term metaphysical refers to the style and not the subject matter. Donne's poems bring out the attitude of the experience.

Joan Bennett quotes the example of 'An anatomy of the world' from Donne to explain how a newly found astronomical thought is exploited and examine the mortality of men and the decay of morals. The disintegration of the society seems a reflection of one such in the newly ordered cosmology of the astronomers.

"And new philosophy calls all in doubt  
The Element of fire is quite put out;

The Sun is lost, and the earth and no man's wit  
Can well direct him where to look for it  
And freely men confess that the world's spent

When in the planets, and Firmament They seek  
so many new, they see that this is crumbled out  
again to his Atomica”.

(An Anatomie of the World 11205)

In this poem one can notice the breaking up of the medieval world order is described through a new enunciated theory of astronomy and natural philosophy. Though the new philosophy revises more doubts than it can clear. The Sun and the Earth and all the planets and the stars in the Firmament are all far too complex for man to comprehend. The entire conceit is based on the fashionable philosophy of cosmology.

In ‘Good Friday’ Donne uses the primitive cosmology of the Earth being the centre and the Sun and the planets gyrating round it like gems set in hollow spheres. In this system the motion to the spheres is important by the ‘crystalline spheres,’ often called ‘primum mobile’. Donne uses an English equivalent of it, ‘the First Mover’

“Man's soul be a sphere

Pleasure or business show our souls admit  
For their First Mover and are whirled by it  
Hence is that I am carried towards the west

This day when my souls form vends towards east”  
(Good Friday 1613 – Riding West)

Donne was first expressing a wish to obtain the post of ambassador to Venice. His hanke ring after worldly distinction seems repeatedly to have collided with an equally powerful impulse towards self abrogation and religious discipline. ‘The Prima Mobile’ finds a repeated use as considered to speak of man's total dependence or rather and intelligent adaptation of all powerful law of nature and obedience to the First Mover.

“But oh alas so long so farre Our bodies why  
dowe for bear?

They are ours, Though they are not wee, wee  
are

In intelligence, they the sphere”

(Extasie-stanza 13)

In another poem ‘Air and Angels’ the idea that the sphere controls our movements as it does the movement of the cosmos is pain, but only on understanding the cosmology. Helen Gardner adds in a foot note that the word ‘Sphere’ implies the whole physical cosmos, made up of concentric spheres moved by the intelligence or angels in ‘Air and Angels.’ Le again refers to the sphere.

"Then as an Angel, face and wings

Of aire, not pure as it, yet pure doth we are So  
they love may be may loves sphere.

Just such disparitie

As It twixt Airand Angels'puritie

Twixt women's love and man's will ever be”.

(Airand Angels 11-23-28)

Apart from theology which he employs in this poem, it is the use of ‘the sphere’ that is of interest. The beloved’s love is the ‘Prime Mover’ of that emotion in his heart. J. B. Leishman in his “Monarch of Wit” asks who shall say which was the initial impulse? Was it intellectual or emotional did a mood of tenderness supervene as it were, upon a desire to write an impudent and witty poem or did wit and impudence super venes upon a mood of temperance?

In another poem ‘Sunne Rising’ the sphere occurs in the concluding lines,

"Shine here tous and thou art everywhere

This bed thy centre is, this walk, the spheres”

(The Sunne Rising 11-29-30)

In the Sunne Rising, there is a considerable element of one might be tempted to call literary inspiration... Though more light hearted perhaps less deeply impassioned, then some other poems on the recurring theme on the all sufficiently of two lovers and the recurring image that together they form one world, it nevertheless contains that theme and that image and if we are to group Donne’s poems at all, this clearly belongs to the group in which that the theme and image occur.

A peculiar astronomical phenomena observed by the Babylonians and the Phoenicians is the procession of the equinoxes.

“Moving out of the earth bring harmes and fears  
Men reckon what it did and meant

But trepidation of the spheres

Do greater farre is innocent”

(A Validiction Forbidding Mourning—Stanza III)

In ‘Go and Catch a Falling Star,’ Donne describes the impossibility through the deed. Art by its nature and definition is something that is artificial and though rooted in life, stylizes life into the norms of art. Poetry especially is an artifact that has a socio-cultural dimension; a linguistic dimension, a verbal dimension and aesthetic dimension. These cannot be separated. Thus Donne has successfully utilised these dimensions and successfully used ‘conceit’ as a literary form.

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