

Donne's Literary Techniques Conveying Love's Constancy and Inconstancy

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John Donne wrote many poems, and among his most famous is *A Valediction: forbidding mourning*. Donne stuns us with his ability to convey the holiness of the love described therein, but it should be noted that Donne did not only write about love's perfection. An example of his poems on love's ephemerality is *Womans constancy*¹. A comparison of the literary themes and techniques used in these two poems can help us understand each one better.

A Valediction: forbidding mourning.

The main themes of *A Valediction: forbidding mourning* are the connectedness of the lovers, and the holiness of their love. The holiness theme is put forth mainly by the first four stanzas of the poem. Donne uses many techniques to convey his themes. The word choice, for one,

¹I have reproduced the spelling and grammar as they appear in my source book, *Four Metaphysical Poets* by Joan Bennett, published in 1960 by Vintage Books in New York.

emphasizes the difference between the speaker's love and "Dull sublunary lovers love". One instance of very deliberate word choice may be found in lines 7–8 (emphasis added): "T'were *prophanation* of our joyes/To tell the *layetie* our love." *Prophanation* and *laity* are both words with religious meanings, and their use gives the reader the idea that the love is holy.

The first three stanzas form a unit that talks about the laity not knowing of the love, furthering the theme of holiness and separateness. The first two stanzas are a conceit comparing the parting of lovers to the parting of the body and soul. The relevant quality is that only those involved know just when it happens, as evidenced by Donne's request to "make no noise" in line five and his assertion that "T'were prophanation of our joyes/To tell the layetie our love." The third stanza makes reference to the movement of the spheres, which was thought at the time to create the music of the spheres², which, obviously, the normal people could not hear, not being innocent like the spheres.

The next two stanzas, lines 13–20, make a contrast between "dull sublunary lovers love" (l.13) and the speaker's love, "so much refin'd,/That our selves know not what it is" (l.17-18), furthering the division between regular love and the super-special kind that the speaker and his mistress enjoy.

The fifth stanza makes a transition between the two themes, drawing them together.

But we by a love, so much refin'd,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.

²<http://www.edenpr.k12.mn.us/ephs/ArcadiaWeb/Math/mathandmusic.html>

This stanza takes the specialness of the love and uses it to move to a consequence, the lovers' connectedness.

The connectedness theme is mainly brought out in the last four stanzas, through the conceits comparing the lovers to beaten gold and to a compass. Donne uses the compass to symbolize connectedness. In the last stanza, he writes, "Thy firmnes drawes my circle just,/And makes me end, where I begunne." Circles were what formed the cosmos, according to the dominant view of the day, and were thought of as the perfect shapes³. Love makes the speaker perfect, and draws him back home.

A Valediction: forbidding mourning contains a good deal of figurative language and is carefully divided exactly in half in theme. It is written as an address to a lover, who does not seem to respond during the poem. Each stanza has an a b a b rhyme scheme.

Womans constancy.

Donne's poem *Womans constancy* is about inconstancy, and its theme is that inconstancy drives you crazy. In contrast to *A Valediction's* extremely balanced structure and regular rhyme scheme, *Womans constancy* generally grows more complex as it goes on. The sentences are longer at the end than at the beginning, and the rhyme schemes more complex. The poem has 17 lines, rhymed a a b b c c c d e e d f f g g f f, making chunks of 2, 2, 3, 4, and 6 lines. The ideas grow more complex, as well. After the first two lines, which set up the idea of the poem, the next three lines are very standard excuses: "Wilt thou then

³Circles were important according to many sources, including "<http://casswww.ucsd.edu/public/tutorial/History.html>". All of the web sources that I have found have been consistent.

Antedate some new made vow?/Or say that now/We are not just those persons, which we were?" The next two lines are more abstract, personifying Love and saying that confessions (even of love) made under duress are invalid.

Lines 8–10 are more complicated yet, making the analogy that, just as marriages bind until death, lovers' contracts bind until sleep. Lines 11–13 are a paradox:

Or, your owne end to Justifie,
For having purpos'd change, and falsehood; you
Can have no way but falsehood to be true?

The paradox is explainable by adding the words "to your own ends" after "true." It is rather farfetched that this be a justification for inconstancy, and intentionally so. There are no paradoxes anywhere near as blatant as "you can have no way but falsehood to be true" in *A Valediction: forbidding mourning*.

The arrangement of the poem, from simpler and more plausible to more complex and harder to believe, suggests that the poem is written in anticipation of a conversation, where the inconstant one is forced to come up with more and more complex excuses. The conversation ends with the speaker of the poem calling the woman a vaine lunatique and saying she drives him crazy: "Vaine lunatique, [...] by to morrow, I may thinke so [like that] too." Indeed, the very second line confirms this idea: "To morrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?"

Donne's overall technique in *Womans constancy* contrasts with *A Valediction's* largely because *Womans constancy* is written in anticipation of a conversation, while *A Valediction: forbidding mourning* is written without any reference to how the lover will likely respond, but

only how the speaker thinks she should. Donne's contrasting techniques reflect effectively the differing themes of the poems, and analysis of them adds an important element to any interpretation of his poetry.