

Phases of Love in John Donne's Poetry

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I. Introduction

John Donne's love poetry was barely known in his age but nowadays it is highly appreciated by critics and readers alike. Also, his poems are considered to be unique because Donne introduced a new approach to the mysteries of love. In the 16th -17th centuries the traditional view of love was that every marriage should be made for the society's benefit. In contrast with this traditional view, Donne's poems contemplate on true love and its various aspects such as the enriching ability of love, the never ending power game in relationships, the dangerous power of love. His themes include the loss of the lover, the overwhelming grief, and also the importance of body, seduction and sexuality. According to Guibbory, "part of Donne's freshness comes from his intense analysis of important aspects of human experience – the desire for love, the desire to be purged of imperfection or sinfulness, and the longing to defeat mortality. He explores erotic love and human spirituality and the relation between them."¹ Each of his poems concentrates on an individual topic: in some the persona views love as a mystical element which strengthens the lovers' identity such as in the poems *Loves Growth* and *The Canonization*; other times it is described as a very unhealthy and destructive state, where the participants are destroyed by love, e.g. in the poems *A Valediction: of Weeping*, *The Dissolution* or *The Expiration*. One of the most well-known poems of John Donne is *The Exstasie*, which highlights the importance of simultaneous spirituality and sexuality in a relationship. In the poem the persona contemplates about the inseparable connection between body and soul as well as between physical and spiritual desires. As Lewis pointed out, Donne's poems are centered on five topics: "on the sorrow of parting (including death), the miseries of secrecy, the falseness of the mistress, the fickleness of Donne, and

¹ Guibbory, Achsah. "John Donne." Ed. Thomas N. Corns. *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry Donne to Marvell*. Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1993. 123-147. 123.

finally on contempt for love itself.”²

In many poems both the man and the woman are too occupied with their own life and love which is disruptive for society because it has no benefit for it. It has to be mentioned that in Donne's era the traditional view of life was to be beneficial for society where individual motivation had to be subordinated to society's interest. According to Lewis, “the great central movement of love poetry, and of fiction about love, in Donne's time is that represented by Shakespeare and Spenser. This movement consisted in the final transmutation of the medieval courtly love or romance of adultery into equally romantic love that looked to marriage as its natural conclusion.”³ Consequently, as Lewis states, Donne's love poetry was unique because of his basic concept and view of love: for him marriage was not the only opportunity for love, so Donne's poetry equally values every relationship where love or at least sexual attraction is present. Therefore, the poet's seduction poems represent a new kind of love poems.

In my thesis I would like to interpret John Donne's poetry, more precisely six of his poems from *Songs and Sonnets*, through the phases of love. First of all, the burgeoning and developing state of love, later its consummation and at last the painful separation. My thesis's aim is to represent a new interpretation of Donne's love poems through the stages of love; the choice and sequence of the poems in this essay serves as an attempt to illustrate this interpretation. Dating Donne's poems poses a serious philological problem e.g. Helen Gardner organizes the poems in their supposed formation date whereas A. J. Smith reprints the poems in an alphabetical order. My attempt is to date some of Donne's poems from *Songs and Sonnets* through love's metaphysical aspect. However, it has to be mentioned that Donne wrote his love poems for more than 20 years. My work is based on *The Collected Poems of*

² Lewis, C. S.. "Donne and Love Poetry in the Seventeenth Century." Ed. Helen Gardner. *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. 90-99. 93.

³ Lewis: 90.

John Donne which is a Wordsworth Edition from 2002.⁴

Interestingly, in the last decade Gender Studies brought a new approach for the interpretation of Donne's poems. Critics re-analysed the poems based on the gender question: what significance the sexes have and how does Donne deal with women in his poems. As Bell suggests in her essay *Gender matters: the women in Donne's poems*, the poet devotes an important role to women whether they are represented as only physical embodiments of men's need or they are true individual beings who are capable of emotions. Feminist critics put strong emphasis on the homosexual (such as in the lesbian love poem "*Sappho to Philaenis*") reading of the poems and on the reinforcement of women's figure.⁵ In my essay, however I intend to analyse the poems from a different viewpoint.

The choice of poems was strictly based on my own interpretational sights. My attempt was to represent the phases of love in its metaphysical essence. Such poems as *The Flea*, *The Indifferent*, *Womans Constancy*, *Elegy XIX To His Mistress Going to Bed* were left out deliberately due to either their ambiguity or different emphases. Moreover, as mentioned above my interpretation concentrates on love's metaphysical atmosphere, therefore all the analyzed and selected poems are in connection with true love's idea. (Cf. Donne's women hater poems' do not fit into this approach.) The method I intend to use in my thesis is close reading with occasional comparisons of the poems.

The phases of love in John Donne's poetry reveal their own specific features. However, it has to be mentioned that Donne's paradoxes are always present. The poet expresses a strong dichotomy in his love poems because almost in his every piece of work love is represented as unresolvable duality: its positive and negative features are irretrievably

⁴ Cf. I am aware of the different variations of John Donne's poems. Each interpretation and textual version highlights a new approach to his poems such as from historical, linguistic or gender aspects. In my paper I rely on the Wordsworth edition.

⁵ Bell, Ilona. "Gender matters: the women in Donne's poems." Ed. Achsah Guibbory. *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 201-216.

bound together such as the two sides of the same coin. This dichotomy is usually represented by love and lust, purity and impurity, superiority and equal balance, body and soul, everything and nothing. Donne in his poetry contemplates on these topics as well as on the figure and character of a woman. The poet describes the woman from different aspects, e.g. in the poem *A Valediction: of Weeping*, she is represented as femme fatale.

I would like to analyse the phases of love as represented in its developing stages. First of all, in *Loves Growth* love's birth and expansion plays the main role. The following phase contemplates on love's spiritual consummation, which can be seen in the poem *The Canonization*. After the lovers' spiritual connection their relationship is strengthened in its materialistic spheres as well. By sexual interaction and bodily union partners achieve the highest peak in their relationship as described in the poem *The Extasie*. The following stages represent love's dark aftermaths and its painful consequences. The poem *A Valediction: of Weeping*, *The Dissolution* and *The Expiration* reveal various effects in post-separation phases. In case of every poem I intend to use close reading and also comparisons. All the poems were chosen in order to represent the phases of love precisely and thoroughly.

II. Phases of love

1. *Loves Growth*

True love's first phase concerns the evolving feeling toward the other one and the strengthening of emotions. In Donne's poetry this first stage of love is usually described with images of purity, spring, alteration and love's positive effects. In case of the poem *Loves Growth* the title refers to the developing state of love where the most dominant feature is changing. Also, the word 'growth' can refer to the strengthening and empowering state of love because growing usually refers to changing, more specifically to enriching.

The poem starts with a statement that "*I scarce believe my love to be so pure*"⁶. First of all, love is described as a complex phenomenon which is believed to be pure and honest. The word 'pure' plays an important role in the poem. At the beginning of a relationship usually only good features are seen, so purity infuses the lovers' beliefs as well as the atmosphere of the relationship. Moreover, love has many characteristics such as the ability to endure hardships but as everything else in the world, it changes. In connection with this, spring can be viewed as the basic motif for both alteration and of a burgeoning love which only strengthened the lovers' feelings: "*My love was infinite, if spring make 'it more.*" According to Roston, "despite the momentary pretence of seasonal change, love – as so often in Donne's poetry – stands outside the four dimensional restrictions of the universe, and the difference can be felt in the cosmic range of the imagery as well as in the very texture of the verse itself."⁷ As Roston emphasized, love can be viewed as a state beyond the usual concepts of the world where such basic things as seasonal changes do not affect love's identity. Also, he emphasized that love is described as a too powerful emotion; therefore to precisely describe it

⁶ Donne, John. *The Collected Poems of John Donne*. Ed. Roy Booth. New ed. Eldorado: Wordsworth Editions, 2002. All references are to this edition.

⁷ Roston, Murray. *The Soul of Wit: A Study of John Donne*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974. 119.

will not be easy.

The second stanza says, "*But if this medicine, love, which cures all sorrow / With more, not onely bee no quintessence, / But mixt of all stoffes, paining soule, or sense*". The persona states that love is a mysterious phenomenon which helps its participants to bear with the problems of life. Also, Roston's idea suggests a similar view that love is beyond normal concepts and because of this love encompasses a great amount of power. However, in many cases love cures with pain, which can be understood as the opposite of traditional medicine which aims at pain relief. The persona represents love both as medicine and poison. Also, the following verses state that "*Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use / To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse*". On the one hand, the persona says that love is often viewed as 'pure'; on the other hand, this idea is annulled by the following line. Furthermore, the word 'pure' is in rhyming position with 'endure' which also invokes paradox: "*I scarce beleieve my love to be so pure / (...) / Because it doth endure*". At first the persona says that his love is pure from which the reader would associate with innocence, kindness and positive ideas. However, later the word 'endure' suggests a completely different aspect for the idea of love: this word is rather associated with negative feelings and unwilling sacrifice. Moreover, Donne's paradox and dichotomy is present again because in the former verse the persona states that it is 'not pure' and in the next verse he changes this opinion: at first the persona uses 'Mistress' for his lover but then immediately switches to 'Muse'. The connection between 'Mistresse' and 'Muse' can be paralleled with the relation between lust and love.

These lines can be interpreted from a different aspect as well if the persona states that only those know the true meaning of love who had been in love and had their own 'Muse'. In contrast to them, those who had only 'Mistresses' are not able to understand the concept of love; they are only familiar with lust.⁸ This complexity can highlight different aspects and

⁸ Cf. Bennett, who emphasizes that "Donne is not saying that love is unclean, or less clean than he had supposed;

effects of love. Moreover, love's complexity also entails that a very slight feature or ingredient of it will gain more power and will affect the whole state.

Love is a complex phenomenon so it can be viewed as a paradox in itself. This paradox is strongly present in Donne's poetry, e.g. in *The Extasie*, where body and soul are united and the sexes disappear, and love is represented as an ungendered idea; in *Loves Growth* love's power is paralleled with purity and pain. As Stein summarized, "in 'Loves Growth' the mind's desire for purity is crossed by the heart's firm knowledge that love increases, and the solution of the poem must come to terms with that intimate evidence."⁹ Therefore, we may conclude that love is a process where mind and heart together form love's final version. Moreover, a paradox is present not only in the poem but in Stein's argument as well. In his view, the mind and heart are two competing participants for the final word to create love.

In addition, the persona says that with time passing his love is constantly growing; each spring adds something new to his love and makes it stronger. Moreover, the persona compares his love to water circles: "*If, as in water stir'd more circles bee / Produc'd by one, love such additions take, / Those like so many spheares, but one heaven make*". Even though love is a far too complex phenomenon to describe, there has always been a powerful desire to capture and represent love by natural and biological images. The persona compares his love to concentric circles which are usually associated with symmetry. However, the core of the water circles is the same and by the persona's comparison it can be concluded that his core feelings towards the beloved one always remain the same. These lines suggest that in due time many different levels and sides of love may be experienced but its basic idea remains the same. It

we have already seen that he does not think of the flesh as impure in that sense, but that, like everything else on earth, it is composed of diverse elements." 191.

⁹ Stein, Arnold. *John Donne's Lyrics: The Eloquence of Action*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962. 154.

has to be mentioned that because of love's complexity it cannot be divided into spheres because than the spheres could not be understood perfectly in their individuality.

Consequently, love's first phase is about changing, empowering and strengthening. Also, love is constantly questioned, enquired whether it can be fully understood by its participants or love could be understood itself at all. Its overwhelming power is enhanced by time. Simultaneously, at the beginning of a relationship everything is simplified and only by changing and time passing love gets complicated and achieves its final complexity. At first, love's influence and special effect will play an important role such as represented in the poem *The Canonization*, later love's full consummation, and its spiritual as well as sexual connection, will be the key aspect as described in the poem *The Extasie*.

2. *The Canonization*

First of all, love's true power in the poem *The Canonization* is viewed as the ultimate force which has a destructive and also a resurrective power. The poem contemplates on love's might and more importantly, its main influence on the lovers.

As Brooks points out, "the basic metaphor which underlies the poem (and which is reflected in the title) involves a sort of paradox. For the poet daringly treats profane love as if it were divine love."¹⁰ According to him, the title itself recalls some kind of duality because canonization refers to saints who led a respectful life and therefore they were canonized. The persona equates the lovers' lives with saints' lives, which was considered scandalous in the 16th - 17th centuries.

The title evokes the divine atmosphere partly because of the direct reference to saints' lives and their canonization. Moreover, the Bible is also known as the books of the canon

¹⁰ Brooks, Cleanth. "The Language of Paradox: "The Canonization"." Ed. Helen Gardner. *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. 100-108. 101.

because it was the first canonized (precisely selected) book. First of all, it has to be mentioned that the title is not in harmony with the first stanza which consists of mainly colloquial phrases. This choice of title evokes attention and provokes the reader.

At the beginning of the poem the persona wants to confess his great love to her lover and because of this he does not want to be interrupted. According to Roston:

[t]he technique of surprise takes on greater seriousness both in weakening an established mode and in preparing the way for a subsequent assertion of new values. 'For Godsake hold your tongue and let me love...' is intended to disrupt that gentle, melodious tradition of the lyric in which the wan lover querulously pines away in fashionable passivity. It presents with welcome freshness the image of a more aggressive, volatile, and altogether more virile male angrily protecting the privacy of his love against the meddle-some incursions of inquisitive outsiders.¹¹

Roston's thoughts on the beginning of the poem are very straightforward and call for some further questions. Firstly, the catchy beginning immediately awakens the reader's attention because nobody expects a love poem to start with a swearword and a direct command towards the lover: "*For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love, / Or chide my palsie, or my gout*". Also, the commanding attitude on the part of the persona evokes the atmosphere of a power game where man is the superior. Moreover, the persona's act to get attention and to be active further supports his masculinity and controlling role in the relationship, which extends to the outside world. He does not want to be interrupted by anyone; their relationship is too private to be disturbed by outer circumstances.

In the second stanza he states that "*Soldiers finde warres, and Lawyers finde out still / Litigious men, which quarrels move, / Though she and I do love.*" These lines suggest that everybody has its place in the world; also everybody has somebody waiting for him/her. As opposed to lawyers and soldiers the persona's main aim and fulfillment of his life is to love

¹¹ Roston: 158.

his partner.

In the third stanza the persona says that “*Call us what you will, wee are made such by love; / Call her one, mee another flye, / We're Tapers too, and at our owne cost die, / And wee in us finde the 'Eagle and the Dove'”*. These lines reaffirm the idea that lovers transform to something new and greater through the power of love. Also, love does not only help them to transform but also they unite on a new level. Their mutual love enables them to become something greater. Interestingly, Donne uses the word 'die', which in the 16th - 17th centuries had two meanings: one referred to death and the other to sexual orgasm.¹² In this poem and context 'die' can refer to both meanings because whether it is death or orgasm these two states represent a rite of passage, also a greater change in state. In addition, the word ‘dye’ has another meaning than death because as Brooks summarizes “in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ‘die’ means to experience the consummation of the act of love. The lovers after the act are the same. Their love is not exhausted in mere lust. This is their title to canonization. Their love is like the phoenix.”¹³ As mentioned above, lovers find out new spheres of love such as they discover their own masculinity and femininity in themselves. Either this discovery is through near-death-experience or sexual excitement, the result is the same: they become more conscious of themselves and later of the mysteries of love as well. In my opinion, one of the key ingredients in a true relationship is to know oneself and the other one as best as someone can. After this discovery, which equals a revelation of their true identity, the lovers will be able to discover the hidden mysteries of love.

According to Guibbory, “Donne’s interest in discovery links him with important concerns of his age. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a time of exploration, both

¹² According to Partridge, the word die means “to experience a sexual orgasm”. Partridge, Eric. *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. London: Routledge Classics. 2002. 118.

¹³ Brooks: 105.

scientific and geographical.”¹⁴ Interestingly, Donne refers to the “*merchant ships*” which further supports the critic's point of view. Besides Guibbory many critics agreed with the idea and impact of discovery which may suggest that John Donne applied it in interpersonal relationships. This involvement of discovery can be further seen in *Elegy XIX To His Mistress Going to Bed* where the persona states that “*Licence my roaving hands, and let them go, / Before, behind, between, above, below. / O my America! my new-found-land*”. In these verses the persona compares the woman's body to America and believes that it is his duty to conquer both of them. In *Elegy XIX* the woman is represented as the item of discovery. However, discovery does not always entail positive features, so in case of a relationship its dangerous sides are revealed as well.

The third stanza contemplates the unifying power of love.¹⁵ The lovers' relationship may not be accepted by society because their love is too powerful and risky to fit in normal conventions. Moreover, the lovers take chances with their feelings such as it is represented in the verse: “*Wee can dye by it, if not live by love*”. For them there are only two options: to live fully together and take risks in their uncontrollable relationship or to die without love. The persona knows that they may pay the consequences of their love but they are willing to do it because he sees it as their only way to live.

In addition, lovers can be described as the two sides of the same coin, they cannot exist without the other one. (This paradox can be seen in *The Extasie* and *Loves Growth* as well.) The persona compares themselves to “Eagle and the Dove”, which represent masculinity and femininity respectively. Moreover, the Eagle can be further associated with protection and guardianship, while Dove may refer to the holy spirit according to Christian iconography. Eagle and Dove can be interpreted as the different sides of the same coin, which

¹⁴ Guibbory: 129.

¹⁵ Cf. Lewis as cited in Guibbory, who suggested that “the lovers in becoming hermits, find that they have not lost the world, but have gained the world in each other, now a more intense, more meaningful world.” 104.

love, the mysterious power, helps to unite and become one. The persona introduces the image of the 'Phoenix' and compares their love to it: “*The Phoenix riddle hath more wit / By us, we two being one, are it. / So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit, / Wee dye and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love.*” The Phoenix was usually described as bisexual or, as in the poem mentioned, a neutral animal, so the choice to describe the lovers with a Phoenix image further supports the idea that man and woman can wholly unite and become one. Moreover, the Phoenix can be associated with immortality, creation and destruction. Although even after becoming both a phoenix, the lovers do not lose their own identity because the neutral animal preserves both sexes. However, it can be questioned whether the sexes are preserved or annulled. This is a typical Donnean paradox where both interpretations may be valid at the same time.

Moreover, the lovers' image as they rise from their death due to love's exquisite power can be viewed in parallel with Jesus' Resurrection. Not only the lovers' rise can be paralleled with religious motifs but the title itself because, as mentioned above, saints were canonized after their deaths, earning a place in the heavenly Jerusalem close to God and Jesus. In the fourth stanza, where the persona says that “*Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse*” can be seen that lovers are guilty of *hybris*¹⁶. They want to show the world how powerful their love is and how unique they became by this mutual love. Also by mentioning 'legend', 'Chronicle', 'sonnets', 'hymnes' the persona suggests the idea of love as being equal with poetry, history and religion. However, it has to be mentioned that after the lovers' return they might not be the same as they were before their death, which suggests a darkening mood and a warning as well. The poet creates this dark atmosphere by using words such as 'tombes', 'heares' and 'ashes', which immediately evoke the image of death. Having too much power is never a good

¹⁶ Cf. in *The Extasie* the lovers can be guilty of *hybris* because they think that with the help and power of love they can become more powerful than an ordinary man in their era.

sign for anything even if it is made in the name of an honorable act such as true love. Furthermore, overwhelming power can poison one's sober thinking, as a good number of biblical and contemporary examples illustrate from the Tower of Babel to Doctor Faustus.

Donne's *The Canonization* captures love's positive and negative affects precisely. The persona's dichotomy constantly suggests love's empowering and destructive abilities. As Winkelman states, it is a "tricky poem involving speculation about private vs. public realms and concomitant biographical interpretation."¹⁷ Generally, the private world cannot exist without a public one, and vice versa. Each and every private world will affect and form the public but without the approval of the public one the private realm is lost. Winkelman's statement can be applied to the lover's future, so if they are accepted by the society they are free to do whatever they want but if they are to be considered suspicious and disobedient then their destiny is ruined forever. However, the poem suggests that people in love should acquire courage and discover love together, also they ought to let love overwhelm them and influence their path but the persona warns lovers of the dangerous consequences. As everything in the world, love has its good and bad qualities, and it may lead to great happiness or pain. However, the persona suggests that too much power can be dangerous because it may influence sober thinking. Although the lovers' intentions are considered to be harmless, due to the overwhelming power which comes from their mutual love, they will be guilty of *hybris*.

3. *The Extasie*

One of John Donne's most well-known poems is *The Extasie*, where the persona contemplates on the necessary bond between soul and body. In my opinion, this poem represents the highest peak in a relationship where love can achieve its consummation. So far,

¹⁷ Winkelman, Michael A. "Sighs and Tears: Biological Signals and John Donne's 'Whining Poetry'." *Philosophy and Literature*. 33.2 (2009): 329-344. 340.

in the first phases of love emotions and feelings played the most important role but at its highest peak the body becomes equally essential.

In *The Extasie* the title refers to a specific state of mind and body which makes people able to become exceptional and more sensitive to perceive the undergoing events in life and love.¹⁸ The whole poem contemplates on the inseparable connection between soul and body. The lovers' souls connect to undergo the state of 'extasie' but to fully consummate the act of love they need their bodies. Furthermore, the title has a religious interpretation as well. Bernini's statue *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (1647–1652) portrays St. Theresa at the precise moment when she reaches the state of ecstasy and sees the Holy Spirit. It has to be mentioned, that the statue gives a very erotic impression.

The poem begins with a usual scene from everyday life: a woman and a man are sitting next to each other, holding hands and staring into each other's eyes. In their surroundings we see violets, more precisely "*The violets reclining head*". On the surface, this action can be seen as an ordinary event between lovers but both hand and eye connections allude to an underlying motif: hands may refer to sexuality and eyes to spiritual connection. Moreover, their surroundings acquire an additional meaning, referring to their love's phase, which will be discussed later.

First of all, right at the beginning of the poem the persona mentions hands: "*Sat we two, one anothers best. / Our hands were firmly cimented*". In Donne's age hands and palms often referred to sexuality.¹⁹ However, in the case of this poem holding hands may further refer to the connection between the lovers. As bodily presence is represented by hands, the eye connection can refer to the souls' integration. In the conceit "*Our eye-beames twisted,*

¹⁸ Cf. Guibbory, who states that "the first half of the poem emphasizes transcendence and the spiritual nature of love as it describes how the lovers' souls have left their bodies and experienced an 'extasie' illuminating the mystery of their love as a mixture of souls." 137.

¹⁹ According to Partridge, 'moist palms' refer to lecherousness, e.g. in *Othello* III.4.35-39. 193.

and did thred / Our eyes, upon one double string;" the eyes, so the souls' connection is described. Interestingly, Donne's paradox is present here as well because through the lovers' connection not just their hands connect but their sights too. Even though they will be united, each of the participants preserves their own identity, like pearls on a string, such as represented in other poems for example *The Canonization*. Also, the persona suggests that these two ways of connection are needed to form a union between the woman and the man.

In this poem, bodies play a very important role. Selleck states that "Donne's emphasis on the fluid body figures not just change, but exchange – not just *personal* flux, but *interpersonal* flux."²⁰ The persona always highlights the interaction of the bodies such as holding hands. Selleck's point of view can be connected to other critics' ideas because many of them support the idea of spiritual and physical exchange in Donne's poetry. Also, he views them as essential and necessary things in life as well as in a relationship between men and women.²¹ Bodies are necessities in experiencing life and love. Bodies enable people to act, moreover give them the opportunity to discover the gifts of world. By comparing bodies to exquisite elements they acquire a more and more mystical atmosphere.

Donne's seduction poem *Elegy XIX To His Mistress Going to Bed* deals with straightforward sexuality and the sexual body as well. As Guibbory summarizes, "sexual love itself, defined in this poem from the man's point of view as a process of seduction and conquest, engages and expresses his contrary desires for control and intimacy."²² In this poem discovery can be understood as discovery of the body and sexuality, while in the case of the poem *The Canonization* it is strictly spiritual. These two types of discoveries are combined in

²⁰ Selleck, Nancy Gail. "Donne's Body." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. 41.1 (2001): 149-174. 157.

²¹ Cf. Greteman, who emphasized that "physical bodies are at the core of Donne's most striking poetic moments, representing a range of human emotions and experiences. Not merely flesh and blood, Donne's bodies share important qualities with metals, liquids, and crystals, and imbue his poetry and prose with dazzling imagistic density."

Greteman, Blaine. "'All this seed pearl': John Donne and Bodily Presence." *College Literature*. 37.3 (2010): 26-42. 27.

²² Guibbory: 134.

The Extasie where both spiritual and sexual discoveries are present and their balanced mixture is highlighted.

In addition, not only hands have an important role but posture as well. The persona says that “*We like sepulchral statues lay: / All day, the same our postures were, / And wee said nothing, all the day.*” It has to be mentioned that in Donne’s age spouses after their death had a funeral monument which was very similar to their marital bed. These statues tried to preserve the bond between wife and husband even after death. Spouses were usually lying on the marital bed and were surrounded by their own world.²³ According to Carey, “the strung-together, cemented lovers acquire a stony remoteness. The fact that they are inanimate (vacated by their souls) is part of the poem’s point, and that deadness allows them to materialize more heavily (‘like sepulchrall statues’, as Donne says). But the image of the threaded eyes will not stay dead.”²⁴ Even after death lovers wanted to preserve the facade of marriage and relationship in order to look alive in their death or to preserve an image of life. In my opinion, these statues used to serve to annunciate for the outside world that their relationship is so strong that even death cannot take them apart.

Moreover, this never ending connection and love between man and woman, even after their death, can be viewed in parallel with words and body language. In life they express their love with words, in death with postures. As their statues capture the state of the relationship and sacred bond of marriage, sometimes between lovers words are unnecessary and instead of them lovers use body language. Even though they can express their feelings without words, ‘soules language’ is an essential ingredient in love. In the lovers' case their souls are the superiors which are able to control body and its language. The persona says that “*If any, so by*

²³ Cf. the funeral monument of Sir Francis Knollys and his wife. 1596.

[http://www.tudorplace.com.ar/images/Knollys,Francis\(Sir\)tomb.jpg](http://www.tudorplace.com.ar/images/Knollys,Francis(Sir)tomb.jpg) retrieved 15.3.2012. See the picture in the appendix.

²⁴ Carey, John. *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*. London: Faber and Faber, 1981. 138.

love refin'd, / That he soules language understood, / And by good love were grown all minde” suggesting the beloved's soul will completely understand the other one and vice versa. He suggests that if two souls desire for the same thing, they will speak the same language and understand the other.

Furthermore, when lovers reach the state of extasie they will have the opportunity to understand love's idea and influence. This desire to discover and understand something unknown is present in Donne's other poems for example the previously interpreted *Loves Growth* and *The Canonization*. However, even if understood by the lovers, the concept of true love is ambiguous. On the one hand it makes participants purer, gives them the ability to become greater; on the other hand love makes them constantly crave for the other, which can also be seen as a sin. Interestingly, love's dangerous affects are present in every phase of a relationship not just after the separation. It must be pointed out that towards the end of the affair these negative aspects gain more importance such as in poems *A Valediction: of Weeping*, *The Expiration* or *The Dissolution*.

In the middle of *The Extasie* the persona points out that “*A single violet transplant, / The strength, the colour, and the size, / (All which before was poore, and scant,) / Redoubles still, and multiplies.*” At the beginning of the poem the description of violets abounded in negative features; they had a “reclining head”, which suggests that in the lovers' case this plant represents unhappy love and memory as well. The “reclining head” may further refer to a tired and long relationship, which has come to its end. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (IV.5.) Ophelia is giving away violets, which also represents faithful love and remembrance. Interestingly, Ophelia is turned into a mad woman at this point of the drama so the symbolic meaning of the violets can be interpreted paradoxically. In one interpretation, violets may represent the memories of their love. However, by giving the flowers away Ophelia may take

farewell from her love, life and past.

The word 'interanimates' plays an important role in the poem because it gives a perfect description of the mutual desire towards the other in a relationship. Interestingly, the word 'interanimates' means to give life to something and originates in 'anima', which means spirit. It can be said that this double presence of the anima/spirit makes the word more powerful. Moreover, this key expression is used in a context where the importance or dominance of souls is highlighted: "*When love, with one another so / Interanimates two soules, / That abler soule, which thence doth flow, / Defects of loneliness controules.*" In connection with the 'interanimating' power of love Plato's *Symposium* has to be mentioned, which deals with love's mysteries as well with the help of this metaphor. Moreover, these lines suggest that souls are the superior ones in a relationship not the body. However, it is crucial to mention that without bodies love could not be fulfilled. The role of bodies could be seen as tools which help souls to burgeon, which is pointed out in the poem as "*They' are ours, though they' are not wee, Wee are / The intelligences, they the spheare.*" This paradox between soul and body 'interanimates' the poem.

The poem suggests that the sexual act is necessary in every relationship because people have not only mental but physical needs as well. It has to be mentioned that sex is important not only because of mutual desire but because of reproduction in equal measure, mainly for the society's benefit. In the state of 'Extasie' lovers see that "*Loves mysteries in soules doe grow, / But yet body is his booke.*" As Martin summarizes, "'The Exstasie' seems seriously to propose that the material 'key' to the mystic 'book' – the revealed female invisibilia – is not the 'spirit' of male desire but vice versa: the masculine 'letter' or lover finds his natural 'sphere' and perfect 'orbit' in the feminine spirit of angelic freedom."²⁵

²⁵ Martin, Catherine Gimelli. "The Erotology of Donne's 'Extasie' and the Secret History of Voluptuous Rationalism." *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. 44.1 (2004): 121-147. 138.

Martin's summarizes the pattern of every relationship (the idea comes from Plato): the two participants complete each other. Men have to find their own "sphere" where they can freely evolve; women serve as the final consummation for men. Interestingly, as many other poets and critics, Martin also associates women with angels (in *Elegy XIX To His Mistress Going to Bed* they are represented in a bawdy context) and highlights their spirituality whereas men represent the more naturalistic and materialistic sides of life. Also, the paradox between union and separation is strongly present in this verse as well, which suggests that soul and body are two separate things but they have to be united.

Interestingly, Donne uses a male pronoun for love. It can be said, that love is too powerful to bear feminine features. Moreover, by using the word 'his' for love perhaps Donne perhaps wanted to highlight man's dominance in the world and in a relationship as well. However, it can be concluded that despite the fact that men are the dominant ones in the world, they need women to fulfill their destiny.²⁶ In conclusion, we may say that men need women as souls need bodies.

4. *A Valediction: of Weeping*

After love's highest peak, which is its consummation, relationships usually become stabile. However, sometimes lovers are forced to separate, which may have several reasons. *A Valediction: of Weeping* is a poem about separation. One of the poem's key motifs is a tear, which symbolizes the separation. Every tear has its own story about the past events and the lovers. According to Empson, "*A Valediction: of Weeping*" weeps for two reasons, which may not at first sight seem very different; because their love when they were together, which they

²⁶ Cf. Bennett, who emphasized that "the point Donne wishes to make in *The Exstasie*, as in so many of his serious love poems, is that man and a woman united by love may approach perfection more nearly than either could do alone." 187.

must lose, is so valuable, and because they are 'nothing' when they are apart."²⁷ As Empson concludes in his essay, both causes are serious reasons for the break up. Either the lovers' love is too valuable and overwhelming for them to deal with or because without the other one they feel lost. Therefore, love is represented in its dark aspects because neither of the causes has any good for the partners. Moreover, as it can be seen in the poem *The Canonization*, too much power can destroy its owner.

The poem has an overarching minting imagery. In case of *A Valediction: of Weeping*, the power game can only be understood in a royal prerogative way where the superior one is the royal person. In England in the 16th - 17th centuries (such as before and after this era) only kings and queens had the right to make their own coins with their pictures on it. In the lines "*For thy face coines them, thy stampe they beare, / And by this this Mintage they are something worth*" the persona states that every coin has the beloved one's face and thus he cannot escape from her memory. Moreover, tears and coins can further create a unifying image of a world where every little detail resembles his past love.

Moreover, these tears can further reflect the woman who is represented as a 'femme fatale'.²⁸ Men are usually the victims of love, more specifically the prey of 'femmes fatale'. Interestingly, by being ruined men lose their masculinity and superiority, which is usually present very strongly in Donne's poems, while women become the controlling ones. In *A Valediction: of Weeping* the woman 'poisoned' the man, she had too much influence over the persona and after her leaving the man feels destroyed. Interestingly, in poems which deal with the first phases of love women are represented as angelic figures and their importance is constantly highlighted whereas in separation poems this angelic figure is questioned, moreover, they are described as harmful demons who after a few months' happiness ruin

²⁷ Empson, William. "'A Valediction: of Weeping'." Ed. Helen Gardner. *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Engelwood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. 52-60. 52.

²⁸ Cf. Winkelman, who emphasized that "in Donne's poetic universe, it is typically females who dissemble." 332.

men's life.

In addition, without the woman's figure and presence the poem, as every tear, could not be understood. In the first stanza the persona says that "*For thus they bee / Pregnant of thee: / Fruits of much griefe, they are, emblemes of more*". The separation has done a great damage on the persona and he regards every tear with nostalgia and grief. According to Grierson as quoted in Empson, Donne uses the word "*pregnant* because they are like her, in that they *fall* and are *emblems of grief*, and give true information about her (as in 'a pregnant sentence'), because they are round and large like pregnancy, because they hold a reflection of her inside them and because, if they are wept in her presence, they will carry her more completely with them, and so do him more good."²⁹ In my opinion, this description of a woman can be further interpreted if the tears stand for her would-be children whom she left for the persona after the separation. Also, break-up itself can be substituted with the birth of tears and their relationship as pregnancy: the lovers together created their would-be 'child' and the separation birthed it. The 'femme fatale' figure supports the destructive aspects of love because not only the break up tears the lover apart, but later his tears which are the leftovers from the relationship and do not let him move on and forget her beloved one. So the woman's presence is not necessary because she had already poisoned her man, who is constantly remembering and not forgetting.

In addition, the separation of the lovers did not only mean the end of their relationship but the end of everything for the persona. As Winkelman summarizes, "part of the uneasiness stems from the valediction's echoes of Genesis, particularly the creation of a world and the flood, which culminates in that downbeat, disquieting rhyme of *breath*, reminiscent of the numinous giver of life, and *death*, the ultimate quietus and farewell for fallen mankind."³⁰ As

²⁹ Empson: 53.

³⁰ Winkelman: 341.

the critic says, by evoking a Biblical motif the poem gains a more powerful underlying power because ordinary events take another meaning. Also, these scenes refer to Genesis which means that even though the events are too powerful and overwhelming, after the fall a new era begins.

Furthermore, in the second stanza the persona states that “*An Europe, Afrique, and an Asia, / And quickly make that, which was nothing, All*”. The 'All' can refer to the persona's everything: not only to his surroundings but also to his inner world. The minting imagery is prevalent in these lines as well. Mints, which are 'stamped' with the woman's face, are used in every place in the world so there is no place for the persona where he could forget her. According to Empson, the verse “*Which thee doth weare*” suggests by the order of the words a more normal meaning, that her *tears* are jewels and she is *wearing* them; this is inverted by the grammar, so as to leave an impression that she is uniquely and unnaturally under control of her tears, or even has no existence independent of them.”³¹ So Donne uses the text in order to further support the idea of the woman's controlling role. The persona says that “*my heaven dissolved so*”, which suggests that his life and hopes for the future disappeared. In this line the word 'heaven' further refers to their relationship because he gave up hope in afterlife. Each tear represents a dissolving piece of life around the persona.

The end of the poem deals with the results of the separation and the woman's character. According to the persona, she did not intend to hurt him like this such as it can be seen in the verse that “*To doe me more harme, then it purposeth*”. The woman may not be a 'femme fatale' but for the persona she is clearly seen as the woman of power and destruction. As mentioned above, in order to protect his remaining masculinity and superiority the persona accuses the woman of everything. The last verse of the poem suggests that the typical power game never ends because “*Who e'r sighes most, is cruellest, and hasts the others death.*”

³¹ Empson: 54.

This rivalry became more than a fight for superiority; its main goal is to protect their own honour: in retrospect their relationships' candor can be questioned.

5. *The Dissolution*

While the poem *A Valediction: of Weeping* deals with a separation where the main reason for it is power game, Donne's *The Dissolution* contemplates on the death of the persona's beloved one. Interestingly, there are some similarities between the two poems concerning the persona's feelings and the outcome of the separation. It is worth pointing out that it is a mourning poem so the reader may suppose the atmosphere of the poem.

As mentioned above, *The Dissolution* is a poem about separation and contemplates on the persona's feelings towards his lover after their separation. At the beginning of the poem the persona states that “*And wee were mutuall Elements to us, / And made of one another. / My body then doth hers involve*”. He suggests that they were not only physical counterparts to the other one but spiritual ones as well. The persona uses the word 'Elements' to describe their function for the other one. This word has a mystical, also an alchemical reference; in both cases its true meaning remains hidden. However, this hidden meaning may lead the reader to the conclusion that love cannot be captured by biological or materialistic ideas. Moreover, the persona uses the four basic elements (fire, air, earth, water) and their union to describe the concept of love. Their relationship was very strong precisely because they formed the other one and made a union. Moreover, it can be seen from these lines that the love which they shared was very passionate because the lovers lived in each other, from which it can be concluded that their separation will do more harm.

Fire plays an important role in the poem. It is usually associated with destruction and renewal as well. As Albrecht points out in her essay, the poet “considered fire to be the center

of sexual love. Moreover, his poems argue that the dual function of fire is to destroy and renew, an argument straight from Heraclitus.”³² Donne uses the word fire in order to describe love in the lines “*My fire of Passion, sighes of ayre, / (...) / But that my fire doth with my fuell grow.*” In my opinion, passion's primary feature is fire, which fuels love and when it reaches its highest point, love's consummation takes place. The persona uses other materials for description: “*Water of tears, and earthly sad despair, / Which my materialls bee*”. Donne uses the four basic elements to demonstrate the persona's grief: fire which fuels passion and sanguine disposition, air stands for sighs and phlegm, water that appears in form of tears and earth for sadness and melancholy. Although love is described as a spiritual emotion, the persona exemplifies his feeling in materialistic images. Moreover, the persona needs all of the four basic elements to understand his pain after the separation.

As it can be seen in *A Valediction: of Weeping* Donne again uses the tear as the symbol of grief, pain and separation. In contrast with *A Valediction: of Weeping*, in *The Dissolution* the woman is innocent; it is her death that causes the pain, not her intention to end the relationship. However, the results of the 'separation' remain the same: the persona is in much grief and pain which can be seen in the verses “*This (which I am amaz'd that I can speake) / This death*”. It can be said that despite the means of separation the results will always be the same. The persona's whole being has been worn out; the most effortless acts seem very hard for him. The loss of the beloved woman is overwhelming, after her death the persona is destroyed. At the beginning of the poem, the persona said that thanks to their passionate love since they lived and made each other, so the two sexes were mixed and present at the same time as is characteristic of the phoenix's identity.³³ Also, not just the two sexes but fire as well

³² Albrecht, Roberta. "Alchemical Augmentation and Primordial Fire in Donne's "The Dissolution"." *Studies in English Literature*. 45.1 (2005): 95-115. 97.

³³ Cf. Albrecht, who stated that “Donne’s poem contrasts the male impulse to die with the female impulse to revive. (...) Since the very nature of the phoenix is bisexual, it follows that the lovers in Donne’s poem will be the same.” 100.

suggests the presence of this mythical creature which rose from its ashes renewed.

Donne's views on love's ambiguity can be clearly seen in this poem. At the beginning of the poem the persona adores love's power, regards it as a mysterious phenomenon which connects lovers in a special way. However, almost in each of his poems Donne highlights the negative aspect of love as well, which is usually connected to too much power, danger and destruction. In *Loves Growth* love is described as an intoxicating elixir, in *The Canonization*, as the uncontrollable power that unbinds lovers from their ordinary circumstances. Furthermore, the persona usually sees love as a power game where either man or woman is superior to the other one. Also, in the case of separation the more dominant one will not be hurt. In conclusion, Donne in his love poems represents and contemplates on each aspect of love.

6. *The Expiration*

The poem *The Expiration* deals with another type of separation, the ordinary break up and also contemplates on the results of it. The title of the poem refers to the end of something; it also means that the air is leaving. The word itself means that not only the air but the spirit as well leaves the body (ex-spirit). Both meanings suggest a dark atmosphere or even death. The poem starts with the last kiss before the separation which has an overwhelming and destructing power: “*So, so breake off this last lamenting kisse, / Which sucks two soules, and vapors Both away*”. When the lovers are kissing, they exchange their souls as well. The first part of the verse describes the unwillingness to end the kiss, while the second part represents the effects of the last kiss as well as those of the relationship. Interestingly, Donne uses the word 'sucks' for a negative description of the kiss. First of all, 'suck' is an ambiguous verb because it has its positive and negative aspect as well: the mothers' breast feeding in order to

feed to a child and taking away something which can be understood in a pornographic way as well. Moreover, Donne uses the verb 'suck' in his poem *The Good-Morrow* where he uses it for a highly erotic purpose: “*Did, till we lov'd? Were we not wean'd till then? / But suck'd on countrey pleasures, childishly?*” In the case of the poem *The Expiration* 'sucks' is used in order to contribute to a negative atmosphere, also it can further refer to the lovers' sexual history.

In addition, the word “Goe” plays an important role in the poem. According to Carey, “Donne uses the word ‘Goe’ like a bullet. He produces it and shows it to the girl at the end of the first stanza. At the start of the second, he fires it.”³⁴ The poem describes the word as if it were the cruellest verb in the world and by saying it out loud the separation is confirmed. In the second stanza the persona says, “*Goe; and if that word have not quite kil'd thee, / Ease mee with death, by bidding mee goe too.*” These lines suggest that the persona is willing to die after the break up because he feels destroyed when alone. Moreover, the persona feels that only death could help him to move on after the separation but at the end of the poem he says that “*Except it be too late, to kill me so, / Being double dead, going, and bidding, goe.*” It can be seen, that not only the separation caused the persona's “death” but the lovers' fallacies as well. Although he yearns for death, at the bottom of his heart he knows that death could not help him because inside he has been dead for a long time. Interestingly, the persona's state of being long dead can be compared to the poem *Loves Growth* where the persona's love was complete before spring. These two states can be viewed as perfect opposites: at the beginning of a relationship the lovers' feelings are pre-ordained and nothing can change it very much; whereas by the end of love the persona has been dead in his soul for a long time and by saying the word 'goe' out loud his feelings did not change.

In case of the poem *The Expiration* the idea of suicide needs further investigation.

³⁴ Carey: 215.

According to Carey, “the right to cut your own throat may not seem a particularly liberating goal to contend for, but it was correctly seen as part of the struggle between authoritarianism and the individual reason which was to convulse the seventeenth century.”³⁵ As it is pointed out by Carey, suicide gives a person the thought of individuality and control. In this case, Donne’s other work *Biathanatos* is worth mentioning because contemplates on suicide. The need and desire to control your life is remarkably typical for men whose masculinity is usually represented via their acts and words. For them the thought of vulnerability caused by a woman is unbearable, so suicide can be a solution for their problems.

³⁵ Carey: 205.

III. Conclusion

My thesis's aim was to represent the phases of love through one of the most well-known metaphysical poet's, John Donne's poems. As it can be seen at the beginning of a relationship love's evolving process has the most important role in the lovers' life. Also, the poems *Loves Growth* and *The Canonization* deal with the mysteries of love, its empowering influence. However, there are some suggestions for love's negative abilities such as described in *The Canonization* where man and woman united by love are able to rise from their death. As love is evolving eventually it reaches its highest point, which is the consummation. Donne's *The Extasie* describes this state of love where not only souls and emotions but bodies and sexuality have equal importance. Sexuality is viewed as an essential ingredient in a relationship. The last state of love concerns separation, which may have different reasons: either the death of the loved one or due to the relationship's overwhelming quality. As represented by poems *A Valediction: of Weeping*, *The Dissolution* and *The Expiration*, separation usually marks the lovers and their emotions, which are dominated by pain, loss and grief. This last phase of love concentrates on remembrance, destruction and pain. Donne's poems help the reader to discover love's mysteries through the persona's eyes where both positive and negative aspects are present. The poet states that love is a very complex phenomenon and its various spheres cannot be separated.

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Appendix



Monument in the church of Rothamsted Greys, near Henley, to Sir Francis Knollys and his wife, Catherine Carey. Above the recumbent effigies of Sir Francis and Lady Catherine are the kneeling figures of his eldest surviving son, Sir William Knollys, Comptroller of the Household, and the wife from whom he longed to be free. At the foot of the tomb are shown the daughters of the family headed by the fascinating Lattice.

Sir Francis Knollys' funeral monument

Source:

[http://www.tudorplace.com.ar/images/Knollys,Franis\(Sir\)tomb.jpg](http://www.tudorplace.com.ar/images/Knollys,Franis(Sir)tomb.jpg) retrieved 15.3.2012.