

John Donne: Metaphysical Poet

**“Now thou hast
loved me one
whole day,
Tomorrow when
thou leavest,
what wilt
though say?”**

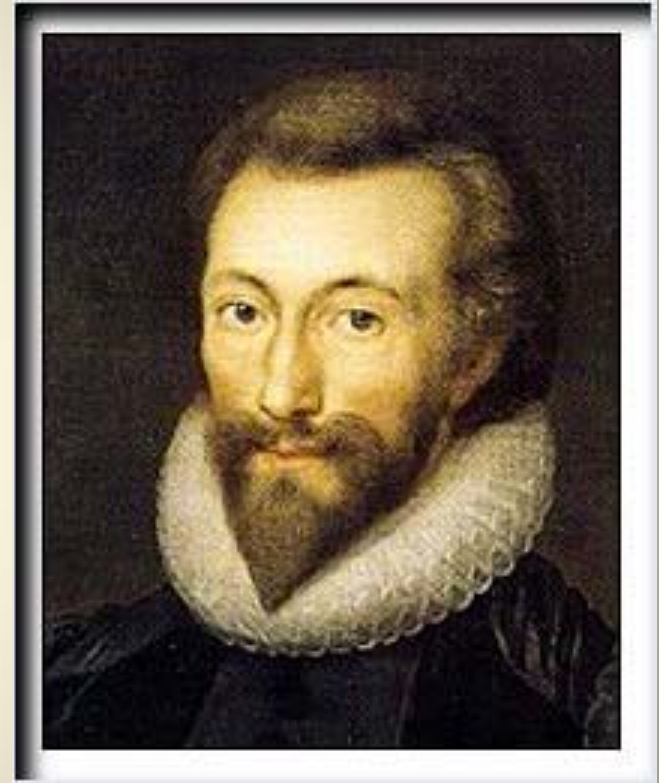
- “Woman’s
Constancy” (ll. 1-2)

1572-1631

The Metaphysical Poets are known for their ability to startle the reader and coax new perspective through paradoxical images, subtle argument, inventive syntax, and imagery from art, philosophy, and religion using an extended metaphor known as a conceit.

The term "metaphysical," as applied to English and continental European poets of the seventeenth century, was used by Augustan poets John Dryden and Samuel Johnson to reprove those poets for their "unnaturalness." As Goethe wrote, however, "the unnatural, that too is natural," and the metaphysical poets continue to be studied and revered for their intricacy and originality.

John Donne, along with similar but distinct poets such as George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughn, developed a poetic style in which philosophical and spiritual subjects were approached with reason and often concluded in paradox. This group of writers established *meditation*—based on the union of thought and feeling sought after in Jesuit Ignatian meditation—as a poetic mode.



Woman's Constancy

Background

Donne entered the world during a period of theological and political unrest for both England and France; a Protestant massacre occurred on Saint Bartholomew's day in France; while in England, the Catholics were the persecuted minority. Born into a Roman Catholic family, Donne's personal relationship with religion was tumultuous and passionate, and at the center of much of his poetry. He studied at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities in his early teen years. He did not take a degree at either school, because to do so would have meant subscribing to the Thirty-nine Articles, the doctrine that defined Anglicanism. At age twenty he studied law at Lincoln's Inn. Two years later he succumbed to religious pressure and joined the Anglican Church after his younger brother, convicted for his Catholic loyalties, died in prison. Donne wrote most of his love lyrics, erotic verse, and some sacred poems in the 1590s, creating two major volumes of work: *Satires*, and *Songs and Sonnets*.

Woman's Constancy

Background (cont.)

In 1598, after returning from a two-year naval expedition against Spain, Donne was appointed private secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton. While sitting in Queen Elizabeth's last Parliament in 1601, Donne secretly married Anne More, the sixteen-year-old niece of Lady Egerton. Donne's father-in-law disapproved of the marriage. As punishment, he did not provide a dowry for the couple and had Donne briefly imprisoned.

Woman's Constancy

Background (cont.)

This left the couple isolated and dependent on friends, relatives, and patrons. Donne suffered social and financial instability in the years following his marriage, exacerbated by the birth of many children. He continued to write and published the *Divine Poems* in 1607. In *Pseudo-Martyr*, published in 1610, Donne displayed his extensive knowledge of the laws of the Church and state, arguing that Roman Catholics could support James I without compromising their faith. In 1615, James I pressured him to enter the Anglican Ministry by declaring that Donne could not be employed outside of the Church. He was appointed Royal Chaplain later that year. His wife, aged thirty-three, died in 1617, shortly after giving birth to their twelfth child, a stillborn. The *Holy Sonnets* are also attributed to this phase of his life.

Woman's Constancy

Background (cont.)

In 1621, he became dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral. In his later years, Donne's writing reflected his fear of his inevitable death. He wrote his private prayers, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, during a period of severe illness and published them in 1624. His learned, charismatic, and inventive preaching made him a highly influential presence in London. Best known for his vivacious, compelling style and thorough examination of mortal paradox, John Donne died in London in 1631.

Woman's Constancy

Techniques



In “Woman’s Constancy” the speaker addresses a woman with whom he has just spent the night. The speaker believes that the woman will want to leave him in the morning. He argues with her by suggesting the excuses that she will use when she tries to leave. The speaker’s argument possesses three persuasive techniques:

1. Disdainfully framing the response;
2. Systematically proving claims through the use of contract law;
3. Choosing not to refute the opposing argument.

Woman's Constancy

Technique 1



The first technique that the speaker employs is to present the woman's arguments in a derisive way. The speaker is able to do this since he delivers the arguments of the woman when he says, *Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day, To morrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say? Wilt thou then Antedate some new made vow? Or say that now We are not just those persons, which we were?* (ll. 1-5) The speaker's opening line sets up a sarcastic tone for the poem by suggesting that the woman thinks one day is a significant period of time. This tone carries over to when he presents the woman's possible excuses and makes them sound absurd. The speaker's use of rhetorical questions also disparages the woman's argument, since a tone of disbelief accompanies each question. "Woman's Constancy" is unique amongst Donne's poems in that the counterargument gets the majority of lines. Since the speaker disdainfully frames the arguments, however, he is in control and the reader never is swayed by any of the excuses the woman could make.

Woman's Constancy

Technique 2



Yet in turning to the excuses themselves, some of them are pretty good and would make valid counterarguments for the woman if she were to use them. Two possible excuses in particular are very logical: *Or, that oathes made in reverentiall feare Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear? Or, as true deaths, true maryages untie, So lovers contracts, images of those, Binde but till sleep, deaths image, them unloose* (ll. 6-10). The logic in these excuses is based on contract law. Contracts are considered binding, unless an exception clause is met. The focus on arguing a contract is to prove the exception has occurred. In the first excuse, the speaker claims that the lovers' contract can be invalidated since it was made in fear of the god of love. A common aspect of any contract is that it is not binding if it was signed out of fear. The woman's excuse, therefore, seems valid since she shows that she has met the exception.

Woman's Constancy

Technique 2



In the second excuse, an agreement to spend the night is likened to an imitation of marriage. If marriages are no longer binding at death, then sleep, which is like death, should end the lovers' contract. This excuse is sound since she would make her argument in the morning when sleep would have occurred so the exception would be met. In looking at the language of the excuses and leaving out the condescending way the speaker delivers them, the excuses are persuasive since they are logically sound.

Woman's Constancy

Technique 3



The final persuasive technique occurs when the speaker does not bother to refute the excuses. The speaker says, *Vaine lunatique, against these scapes I could Dispute, and conquer, if I would, Which I abstaine to doe, For by to morrow, I may thinke so too* (ll. 14-17). The speaker claims that he could refute each of these excuses if he wanted to. This assertion is true since the speaker framed the excuses with sarcasm and disbelief that made them seem ridiculous. Also, the speaker came up with the excuses, and he would not have suggested them to the woman if he did not have responses for them. By refusing to dignify the excuses with a response, the speaker portrays the excuses as insignificant.

The speaker's control is further evidenced when he suggests the possibility of using the excuses himself in the morning. The speaker may not even like the woman, so he does not care about winning the argument. Regardless of whether he cares or not, the control and indifference he shows by not refuting the excuses cause him to win anyway.

Woman's Constancy

Summary



The three persuasive techniques of framing the counterargument, systematically proving claims, and choosing not to refute the opposing argument are found in the poem though they fall on different sides of the debate. By the end of the poem the reader is convinced that the speaker has won the argument. Initially it seemed foolish for the speaker to suggest such good excuses for the woman to use. The woman was not going to come up with those excuses herself, since no one but Donne could think of them. At the end of the poem, however, the reader realizes that there was no risk in providing the woman with these excuses since the outcome of the argument was never in doubt.

Woman's Constancy

Bibliography

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