

## Unpacking Feminist Themes in John Donne's Poetry: An Analysis of “Go and Catch a Falling Star” and “To His Mistress Going to Bed”

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### Abstract

This study conducts a critical analysis of feminist elements in John Donne's poems "Go and Catch a Falling Star" and "To His Mistress Going to Bed", employing a rigorous close reading methodology to uncover the poet's attitudes towards women. Through a nuanced examination of the poems' language and structures, this research reveals a patriarchal mindset characterized by misogyny, sexism, and oppression. By scrutinizing the poems' titles and texts, this study moves beyond existing scholarship to expose Donne's depiction of women as sexual objects, disloyal, and unfaithful. Drawing on the insights of Tyson and Barry, this research provides a deeper understanding of feminist elements in Donne's work, shedding light on the poet's troubling gender dynamics.

**Keywords:** sexual object, disloyalty, unfaithfulness, misogyny, patriarchy, gender representation, John Donne

### 1. Introduction

John Donne, the renowned metaphysical poet, stands as a beacon of literary brilliance within the Renaissance period, characterized by a resurgence of humanism, classical education, and shifting sociopolitical landscapes. His works occupy a central position within the Metaphysical poetry movement of the 17th century, captivating readers with their linguistic prowess, emotional depth, and profound contemplations. Amidst the thematic tapestry of Donne's oeuvre, women emerge as a recurrent motif, occupying a central role in his exploration of human experience.

Despite Donne's prominence and the thematic significance of women in his poetry, the feminist elements within his works have often been overshadowed. This research endeavors to rectify this oversight by delving

into the feminist undercurrents present in Donne's poems "Go and Catch a Falling Star" and "To His Mistress Going to Bed." By scrutinizing Donne's portrayal of women through a feminist lens, this study aims to illuminate the complexities of gender dynamics during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Through this analysis, we seek to bridge the gap in existing scholarship regarding Donne's feminist perspectives and contribute to a nuanced understanding of his portrayal of women. By shedding light on Donne's depiction of women and their societal roles, this research endeavors to paint a vivid picture of gender relations during the Renaissance era. Ultimately, this exploration aims to enrich our comprehension of Donne as a poet and his contribution to the literary landscape of his time.

### **Contextualizing Feminist Themes in 17th Century Literature**

In order to uncover the feminist elements in Donne's poetry, it is imperative to contextualize the societal norms and expectations prevalent in 17th-century literature. During this period, women faced pervasive degradation and were often relegated to the role of mere objects for male gratification. They were frequently depicted as the primary subjects of literary works, yet their voices and agency were marginalized.

### **Poetic Analysis: Exploring Feminist Themes**

1. **"Go and Catch a Falling Star"** Thought to have been composed in the early 17th century amidst a backdrop of social, political, and cultural upheaval, this poem is emblematic of Donne's critique of contemporary gender dynamics. Through the lens of satire, Donne lambasts the perceived lack of loyalty among women in matters of love, reflecting societal attitudes towards female fidelity.
2. **"To His Mistress Going To Bed"** Penned towards the close of the 16th century and the onset of the 17th century, this poem delves into themes of sexuality and desire. Donne's adept manipulation of language and imagery serves to highlight the objectification of women as instruments of male pleasure. The poem's explicit invitation to intimacy underscores the prevailing societal notion of women as mere objects of male desire, devoid of agency or autonomy.

By analyzing these poems within the historical context of 17th-century England, we can gain deeper insights into Donne's portrayal of gender relations and the societal attitudes towards women during his time.

## **2. Literature Review**

Scholars have extensively explored John Donne's depiction of women in his poetry, offering diverse perspectives on how he reflects and reinforces

societal norms. Critics like Susan Gabar and Sandra Gilbert argue that Donne's representation of women mirrors the prevailing societal attitudes and norms of his time. They contend that Donne portrays women primarily as objects of desire, reflecting the patriarchal ideologies prevalent in Renaissance England.

McMahan further delves into Donne's treatment of women, particularly in his songs and elegies, emphasizing their objectification as tools for male gratification (1986). Donne's early works often depict women solely as objects of sexual desire, devoid of agency or autonomy.

Moreover, Donne's portrayal of women as mindless creatures and unfaithful beings has been a subject of scrutiny. Scholars like Kandle argue that Donne perpetuates negative stereotypes, portraying women as lustful and lacking in intellect, suitable only for fulfilling men's sexual desires (Kandle, 2007).

Robert C. Evans offers a critical perspective on Donne's poem "To His Mistress Going to Bed," highlighting its male-dominated fantasy of sexual conquest. The poem's focus on the woman's body serves to objectify her, reducing her to a vessel for male pleasure without any consideration for spiritual or emotional connection (2020).

This portrayal of women in Donne's poetry is indicative of patriarchal ideologies that dominate society, relegating women to traditional roles and perpetuating their oppression. Tyson argues that patriarchy serves as a mechanism to maintain male dominance, imposing rigid societal norms and suppressing women economically, socially, and psychologically (Tyson, 1999).

The literature review underscores the complexity of Donne's portrayal of women and the broader societal implications of his work. It serves as a foundation for this study's examination of feminist elements in Donne's poetry and their reflection of gender dynamics in Renaissance England.

### **3. Research Question**

Question: How do the poems "Go and Catch a Falling Star" and "To His Mistress Going to Bed" by John Donne reflect patriarchal attitudes towards women, and in what ways do they portray women as sexual objects, disloyal, and unfaithful?

### **4. Theoretical Framework**

Women have struggled for centuries, fighting for their rights and representation against men. The term feminism encapsulates their oppression across various aspects of life, often utilized in campaigns

advocating for women's rights. It stands as one of the most influential movements and philosophies of the last century, leaving a profound impact on literary works of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as shaping political and societal landscapes. The rise of feminism gained momentum with the literary contributions of figures like Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Olive Schreiner. Notable works such as "Women and Labour" by Olive Schreiner, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" by Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Room of One's Own" by Virginia Woolf, and "The Second Sex" by Simone de Beauvoir played significant roles in initiating this movement.

Feminism concerns itself with scrutinizing how literature either reinforces or undermines the social, economic, political, and psychological oppression of women. It critically examines patriarchal societies where men dominate, aiming to expose the misogyny prevalent in literary depictions of women (Nasr, 2021).

Women have been marginalized in every sphere of life, often portrayed as 'others' in patriarchal domains. They are defined solely by their contrast to male values and norms, emphasizing what they lack in comparison to men. Gender issues permeate every facet of human experience, including literature, where women are often depicted as mere objects of male pleasure (Tyson, 1999). Throughout history, men have portrayed women as inferior beings or as part of nature, highlighting their differences from men biologically and psychologically. The notion of 'Penis Envy,' suggesting the male physical organ symbolizes social power, further perpetuates male dominance, as evidenced by advertisements prioritizing men over women and depicting women as sexual objects (Barry, 2002).

## **5. Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing close reading as a primary methodology for in-depth textual analysis. Close reading is a systematic and meticulous technique used to uncover subtle meanings and themes within texts. In this research, close reading is applied to John Donne's poems "Go and Catch a Falling Star" and "To His Mistress Going to Bed" to identify and analyze elements of feminism. These poems were selected specifically because they were written during the time of Queen Elizabeth I, a period marked by patriarchal oppression and gender inequality. Women were marginalized, denied education and employment opportunities, and treated as inferior beings, even under a female monarch. Moreover, "Go and Catch a Falling Star" is a renowned work of John Donne, published posthumously, making it a significant and relevant text for this study.

## 6. Textual Analysis

"Go and Catch a Falling Star" and "To His Mistress Going To Bed" stand out as the most significant works of John Donne, both penned in the early 17th century. These poems critique the women of the time, highlighting their perceived disloyalty and portraying them as mere instruments for men's pleasure. Within these two poems, various elements of feminism can be identified. In "Go And Catch a Falling Star," Donne articulates:

*"If thou be'st born to strange sights,  
Things visible to see,  
Ride ten thousands day and night,  
Till age snow whites hairs on thee,  
Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me,  
All strange wonders that befell thee,  
And Swear, Nowhere Lives a Woman true, and Fair"* (Lines 10-18).

Similarly, this poem is replete with mocking remarks by John Donne, suggesting an impossible task — finding a woman both faithful and beautiful. He implies that even after traversing the world for thousands of days and nights, aging, and witnessing strange wonders, one will not encounter such a woman. Donne underscores the notion that while unforeseen events may occur, finding a genuinely loving and faithful woman remains unattainable.

As Kandle observed, women in John Donne's poetry are portrayed as disloyal and untrustworthy toward their partners. Donne depicts them as creatures who cannot be relied upon under any circumstances, reflecting his disdain for them. This portrayal reveals elements of feminism such as sexism and misogyny, wherein women are depicted as inferior and hateful. Donne reinforces the notion of women's inferiority by asserting that they cannot be loyal or true. He suggests that even if men were to travel extensively, they would not encounter loyal women anywhere in the world. However, this portrayal is contested, as it is evident that there are indeed loyal women who make significant sacrifices for their partners.

Furthermore, Donne states:

*"Though she were true, when you met her,  
And last till you wrote your letter,  
Yet she will be false, ere I come, to two or three"* (lines 23-27).

According to John Donne, even if one were to encounter a truly faithful woman, her loyalty would not endure. She would eventually betray that trust, engaging in infidelity with two or three other individuals. This assertion

highlights Donne's skepticism regarding the consistency of women's fidelity and implies that they are inherently prone to deceitfulness.

"Misogyny is the death of hearts"; it kills many women if they are hated by men." In the above lines, we can discern elements of feminism. Women are depicted as inferior; they are portrayed as incapable of genuine love for men. They are presented as unfaithful, often having multiple lovers simultaneously. As Kandle argued, Donne's poem is crafted to portray women as inherently negative and disloyal members of society. In the lines above, Donne labels women as disloyal to men, suggesting that even if a woman is initially faithful and true, her loyalty will inevitably wane. He expresses his lack of faith in women's fidelity, asserting that he would not trust her even if she were standing next door, as he believes she would eventually betray him for someone better. This highlights Donne's deeply negative view of women and reinforces the idea that his poems depict women as untrustworthy and disloyal beings, despite any outward displays of faithfulness. Women in this poem are portrayed as inferior and disloyal. "To His Mistress Going to Bed" is another masterpiece by John Donne, featuring the theme of women. In this poem, Donne portrays women as objects of sexual gratification for men. The men eagerly await their women in bed to fulfill their desires and engage in sexual activity. Various elements of feminism can be observed in this poem as well.

The title itself contains a feminist element, as the speaker summons his mistress to bed for sexual intercourse. By calling her to bed, the speaker expresses his desire and objectifies his mistress. McMahan argued that Donne depicts women as mere sexual instruments in his songs and sonnets, used solely to satisfy male desires. This objectification is evident in the title of the poem, where Donne portrays his mistress as a tool for sexual pleasure. John Donne begins his poem with the lines:

*"Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy,  
Until I labor, I in labor lie.  
The foe oft-times having the foe in sight,  
Is tir'd with standing though he never fight"* (Lines 1-4).

Here, Donne is summoning a lady to engage in sexual activity with him. He expresses the consequences of not engaging in sexual intercourse, stating that he will be unable to sleep for the entire night. Donne emphasizes his discomfort in the absence of sexual gratification, likening it to a soldier who, despite being prepared for battle, grows weary from waiting without engaging in combat.

As argued by Robert C. Evans, the poem "To His Mistress Going to Bed" portrays women as oppressed and subject to male dominance, depicting them as mere tools for men's pleasure. The focus of the poem is on the woman's

body, highlighting the writer's desire to fulfill his own sexual desires. Similarly, we observe themes of oppression and hegemony within the poem, with the speaker depicting women solely as objects of pleasure and sex. If denied sexual gratification, the speaker compares himself to a weary soldier awaiting battle, emphasizing the metaphorical conflict inherent in sexual intercourse. This portrayal of the bed as a battleground underscores the unequal power dynamics at play, wherein the woman is objectified and relegated to the role of satisfying the man's desires.

Furthermore, this depiction reflects misogyny and sexism, as highlighted by Peter Barry. Women are portrayed as "other" from a biological perspective, with male physicality symbolizing societal power. Donne reinforces male dominance by illustrating the act of calling a woman for sex as an assertion of social power, emphasizing the speaker's male dominance. This perpetuates a cycle of inequality, wherein women are marginalized and reduced to objects of male desire, contributing to the broader discourse of misogyny and sexism within society.

Moreover, John Donne states:

*"My Mine of precious stone, My empire  
How blest am I in this discovered thee!"* (Lines 29-30)

In these lines, Donne depicts women as possessions of men, likening them to precious stones. By referring to the woman as "mine," he asserts ownership and control over her, viewing her as a valuable commodity to be possessed. Additionally, he equates her to an empire, further emphasizing his dominance and authority in the relationship. Donne suggests that the woman's value lies in her discovery by men, implying that she is nothing without their recognition and possession.

This portrayal reflects elements of patriarchy, wherein men exert dominance and control over women, relegating them to subordinate roles. Donne's comparison of women to inanimate objects reinforces the idea of their objectification and subjugation within patriarchal society. The concept of women being "discovered" by men reinforces traditional gender roles and perpetuates the notion of male superiority. As Tyson discusses regarding patriarchal ideology, men use their power to confine women to traditional roles and oppress them socially, economically, and psychologically. Donne's depiction aligns with this ideology, illustrating the dominance of men over women and portraying women as passive entities to be possessed and controlled by men.

## **7. Discussion**

John Donne is a prominent figure of the Renaissance period and a pioneer of the metaphysical movement. He is known for his use of paradox and

conceit to convey complex ideas in his work. Women are a recurring theme in his elegies and songs, which often incorporate feminist approaches. However, his poems "Go and Catch a Falling Star" and "To His Mistress Going to Bed" are masterpieces of his feminist critique. In these poems, Donne critiques the honesty and loyalty of women, portraying them as objects of men's sexual pleasure. He argues that even if a man travels for thousands of days and nights, he will not find a loyal woman. Through these poems, Donne reflects the societal attitudes towards women during his time, depicting them as inferior, disloyal, and untrustworthy. Women were treated as inferior beings, devoid of rights, and born solely to serve men, as seen in Donne's poetry, where they are portrayed as sources of men's sexual pleasure.

## 8. Conclusion

John Donne's poems "Go and Catch a Falling Star" and "To His Mistress Going To Bed" offer a revealing insight into the portrayal of women in the early 17th century. Through his verses, Donne critiques the societal norms of his time, depicting women as objects of male desire and pleasure. Despite the romantic themes present in his poetry, Donne's portrayal of women is often marked by themes of disloyalty, inferiority, and objectification.

Analyzing these poems through a feminist lens reveals prevalent elements of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy. Donne's depiction of women as untrustworthy and fickle perpetuates stereotypes that undermine the agency and autonomy of women. Furthermore, his comparison of women to inanimate objects and his assertion of male dominance reflects the patriarchal attitudes prevalent during his era.

By exploring the societal constructs and gender dynamics embedded in Donne's poetry, we gain a deeper understanding of the historical context in which these works were written. Moreover, it prompts us to critically examine the persistent themes of gender inequality and discrimination that continue to resonate in contemporary society.

In essence, while Donne's poetry remains a literary masterpiece, it also serves as a reflection of the gendered power dynamics and societal norms of his time, urging us to challenge and reassess our perceptions of gender roles and relationships.

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