

Explore the ways in which John Donne's poetry makes use of unusual comparisons, by referring to A Valediction Forbidding Mourning and one other poem. You must discuss relevant contextual factors.

Literary context is used for AO3 marks and to focus on the key words of the question

Clear sense of what the poem is about. Deft, integrated quotations are used to help explain.

Brackets are used for economy and precision

Close analysis of language (AO2.)

Features under discussion are underlined for clarity.

No 'to conclude/in conclusion/ conclusively!' to signal last paragraph. List of technical features gives overview of essay. Last part of sentence ends on 'big note.'

When later critics look back at metaphysical poetry, it is the use of unexpected arguments they often comment on. Samuel Johnson, in his book Lives of the Poets, claimed that in metaphysical poetry, 'The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.' Helen Gardner, in her preface to the Oxford edition of metaphysical poetry, declared, 'a conceit is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness.' Of all the metaphysical poets, John Donne is the most daring in his use of comparisons, and of all his poems, *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning* contains the most famous conceit, the well known 'compass image.' Although we might expect literary audacity in Donne's secular poems, what is really interesting is that his religious poetry is no less daring in its use of comparisons, *Holy Sonnet XIV, Batter my heart*, being a good example.

→ Believed to have been written in 1611 to console his wife Ann on Donne's departure for a European tour, the valediction is a tender and heartfelt poem. It seems strange then, that Donne uses it to show off his technical ingenuity to compare their relationship to a pair of mathematical compasses. Yet the compass image is so well thought through that it extends over three quatrains, allowing a complete development of the comparison. Her soul is the 'fixed foot'; she stays strong for him at home, yet, like the sharp element of the compass, she 'move[s]' to lean after Donne when he is away on his travels ('far doth roam.'). As if the comparison is not clear enough, Donne makes the conceit more personal in the last stanza: 'Thy firmness makes my circle just.' The intimate second person pronoun enhances the tenderness of the scene, although there is also encoded a mild warning. He will only 'end where I begun' if she demonstrates 'firmness.' His successful return is dependent on her loyalty. Thus the compass image is both affectionate and cautioning.

→ Yet it appears that Donne's communication with God is equally subject to his linguistic cleverness. In *Holy Sonnet XIV*, written after Ann's death and after he had become dean of St Paul's, he is desperate and frustrated (I, like a usurpt town, to another due/ Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end.) Donne's energy and passion is now concentrated on his attempts to become more obedient to God. He commands God to

→ 'Break, blow, burn' him to destroy his sins; the plosive alliteration and stark monosyllables reinforcing his urgency and desperation. The line appears as arrogant as those we find in the Songs and Sonnets, yet the meaning of the poem - his desire for God to remould him into a humbler, purer human being - reveals an inner desperation that belies his confidence. In *Holy Sonnet XIV*, the comparisons are no less unusual. He describes himself variously as a town under siege, an engaged man, a would-be prisoner, and finally, and most shockingly, someone requesting to be raped. Yet these unusual comparisons are all highly effective in illustrating Donne's feelings of being constantly seduced and besieged by an 'enemy' (Satan) whose power over him needs to be broken by an avenging God, who is himself compared to a metal worker, hence Donne's imperative, 'Batter my heart,' in order that he may 'rise and stand.' Although the comparisons are complex, the language isn't: the monosyllables, simple verbs and sense of spontaneity (but oh, to no end) communicate clearly his unusual ideas.

→ Although the compass image is the most well-known, Donne uses other unusual comparisons in *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*. There is his usual arrogance in placing them above 'dull sublunary lovers,' claiming their love is so 'refined' it does not require 'eyes, lips and hands' to sustain it. Just as in *Holy Sonnet IV*, Donne uses metalwork imagery in his valediction, claiming their 'two souls' will not be separated by his parting but will just expand to fill the gap - 'like gold to airy thinness beat.' Although Helen Gardner might label this conceit as placing 'ingenuity' above 'justness,' Donne seems at pains to make the comparison seem apt. He presents it as a simile (like gold...) rather than a metaphor in order to make it easier to relate. He also uses enjambment ('...an expansion/like gold...') so that the syntax overflows the line, subliminally reinforcing the sense of how their separation can be bridged.

→ In both poems Donne uses unusual comparisons, plundered from the his seventeenth century world of craft, marriage, mathematics and war. Yet his careful language, sustained explanations and use of structure help to make these comparisons both plausible and memorable.

Introduction launches an angle on the question which sets up a debate for the rest of the essay.

Personal, biographical and relevant context helps to position the poem within Donne's life.

Strong topic sentence that expands argument established in the introduction.

More context ('sprinkled not dumped!')

Critical terminology (AO1) used relevantly and unselfconsciously.

Key words of question frequently returned to to stress relevance of answer.

Not claiming too much for technical features - they support rather than create meaning.