

Explore the ways in which Donne presents the connection between the soul and the body which by referring to 'The Ecstasy' and one divine poem

Donne presents the connection between the soul and body differently in 'The Ecstasy' and 'Good Friday: Riding Westward'. Donne's obsessive ~~imagining~~ imagining of both the natural union and the inevitable division between body and soul is the most continuous and abiding subject of his writing, hardly surprising given the religious turbulence of his time: a time when Donne's own brother was willing to die for the salvation of his soul.

In 'The Ecstasy', Donne demonstrates that his poetry plays on and stands in contrast to Neoplatonic and Petrarchan dualism where it was believed that the soul wanted nothing to do with the body. Donne, on the other hand, typically maintains that the soul depends on the body in order to fully express itself and that the spirit can only be reached through the body. The idea of erotic love as a transcendent, spiritual experience was revolutionary at the time as it contradicted the Christian tradition of associating the body and sexuality with sin. Therefore, 'The Ecstasy' is the masterful bringing together of juxtaposition.

Containing nineteen separate quatrains of iambic tetrameter, the form seems to reflect the movement of the lover's souls harmoniously from their bodies into a heavenly state. The ~~easy~~ easy abab rhyme scheme reinforces this sense of harmony, while Donne's use of the dialogue of one

ensures that there is no uncomfortable shift in form that would otherwise disrupt the 'ecstasy' of both the speaker and the reader.

Similarly, Donne also employs language in 'The Ecstasy' to describe physical love that transcends the physical, while at the same time depending on the body. Here, the speaker claims that 'love's mysteries in souls do grow, / but yet the body is his book', where the use of open vowels and a plethora of monosyllables reflect the gentle transformation of the soul. Rather than using words that debase the body, Donne instead describes the physical contact of the lovers as something that is essential in order to make their love complete. Even though the lovers have experienced an 'ecstasy' and their souls have 'gone out' of their bodies, they still find themselves turning to the bodies at the end of the poem. The reader can see that Donne's clever use of adjectives are crucial in the way the speaker argues that the bodies are not 'dross' but 'quay' - inferring to the more learned reader (as Donne's poems were intended for his well-educated male contemporaries) that embracing both the physical and the spiritual aspects of the soul ~~not~~ relieve pain and make the love longer lasting. However, other readers may argue that there is a marked structural shift in tone halfway through the 'epic' poem with the vocative voice: 'But, O, alas'. Here, the poem shifts (arguably) into a poem of seduction. It could be argued that this is evident even

In the
end
of the
poem

(turn it
from base
metal to
gold!)
Yes.

Erin
Lynn

* where the sibilance reflects Donne's obsessive focus on the spiritual.

from the beginning of the poem, when on the surface Donne's emphasis appears to be on the negotiation between the soul and the body, yet on closer inspection his language is heavily corporeal: 'a pregnant bank sweu'd up to rest / the violet's recuning head'. Perhaps, then, 'The Ecstasy' beautifully reflects the transition of Donne's life from focusing on his physical relationship with women to, after his wife's death, his spiritual relationship with God. In this poem, the two dominating halves of Donne's life, body and soul, briefly join together in ecstasy.

From the beginning of 'Good Friday: Riding Westward', Donne's words suggest turning the non-visible to perceptible form: 'let man's soul be a sphere':* Here, Donne begins his poem with a typical metaphysical conceit: the human soul is made physical by being pictured as a sphere, in space, surrounded by other spheres. Whether Donne was acutely aware of recent Copernician theories about the arrangement of the solar system when he was writing the poem is difficult to say - it could be argued that the arrangement of Donne's spiritual spheres reflects the more traditional geocentric understanding of the universe. This battle between the traditional and reformed version of the soul in the poem could be a satirical account on the battle between Catholicism and Protestantism of Donne's times. This lack of free will when determining the destiny of the soul is reinforced by Donne's

* his body gallops away from his soul.

extended conceit of the soul, much like a planet in orbit, must obey the laws of the universe and cannot move freely - much like the speaker is forced to 'ride westward', even though his soul is yearning for the religiously-significant 'east'. // The poem contains profound religious insights and a sincere expression of personal penance. Its jogging rhythm (a slightly irregular pentameter, punctuated by largely end-stopped rhyming couplets) ~~per~~ perhaps mimics the gait of the horse the speaker is riding*. But, any poetic effect like this takes a subordinate role to the intricacies of the poet's religious logic and his own understanding of himself in relation to the Divine. This can be seen through the allegory of the devotion of a human soul to the force of gravity on a planet rotating around the sun (inspired by the recently accepted heliocentric theory). The gravity of the larger body keeps the planets in orbit; therefore the speaker's devotion to God keeps the relationship between the soul and body free of sin. This is further reinforced by the structure of the poem, which too moves towards a discernible shape perhaps best explained as a circle or ring composition. Here, Donne places similar topics in stanzas containing a similar number of lines; through this structural symmetry, Donne creates his formal trope of a poem as a circle, corresponding to his conceit of the soul as a sphere. Other readers may argue that the three-part structure corresponds to the tripartite ideal of

1 really
understanding

Evie
Lunn

the soul, which could be explained by the fascination with the rediscovery of Aristotle's works during the Renaissance. Ultimately, the structure of "Good Friday: Riding Westward" marks man's path to resurrection - Donne creates a figure of poetic unity where man's soul, his body and his verse are all envisioned as corresponding circles.

Some wonderful understanding & analysis here Evie & written in your beautiful eloquent style - well done!

To improve

- mention of his being ordained (i.e. ~ priest)

- Perhaps the last paragraph could include some reference to the end of the poem and its language, unpicked using more poetic CT? It is rather a lot about form, although interesting in itself

(But all excellent; I have to say something!)