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## **Cognitive Mapping and the Utopian Solution in the Metaphysical Poetry of Donne and Marvell**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the metaphysical poetry of John Donne and Andrew Marvell through the lens of Fredric Jameson's theory of cognitive mapping. It argues that both poets, writing amidst political, religious, and existential crises, offer utopian solutions by transcending the immediate conditions of their time through metaphor, paradox, and speculative imagination. Donne's "Holy Sonnet X" and Marvell's "The Definition of Love" are analyzed not only for their theological and philosophical content but also for their structural capacity to map a fragmented world into a coherent, albeit imagined, totality. This analysis demonstrates how metaphysical poetry, far from being merely introspective, becomes a site for political and existential resistance, offering a vision of unity that defies the historical limitations of early modern England.

**Keywords:** Metaphysical poetry, Cognitive mapping, Utopian solution

### **Introduction**

The 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical poetry has been a focus of interest for many literary critics of the British literature. This stems from the fact that it has an enriched content that reflects the political, social and religious concerns of its era as well as that of individuals. John Donne and Andrew Marvell appear as two of the most notable poets of the metaphysical genre addressing to the turbulences of their society. This paper aims at showing how, Jameson's Utopia in his theory of Political Unconscious can be used as a method to carve into two of their poems Donne's "Holy Sonnet X" and Marvell's "The Definition of Love" and show how they respond to and also challenge the dominant turbulences taking place in the era by showing the connections between ideology and poetry and also linking it to a Post-modern critical theory.

The century was characterized by a lot of revolutionary transformations that changed the society's dynamics politically, religiously as well as scientifically. Not only the challenging of the long-existing power of the Church but also the changes in the science and thought and the replacement of the King's by the establishment of Cromwell and a civil dispute were of great effect on the individuals in society, mostly resulting in a feeling of confusion of transition as well. However, also as suggested by Jameson, literature can act as a domain for negotiation in these times of turbulences offering a safe ground for human psyche. The attempt to use conceits, metaphors, paradoxes and wit is an attempt to offer a mediation between these conflicts and reconcile the fragmentations in both society and members of it.

Donne's "Holy Sonnet X" and Marvell's "The Definition of Love" illustrate how metaphysical poetry can function as a ground for utopian ideas as suggested by Fredric Jameson by using his concept of cognitive mapping. This paper aims at showing how human artifact, specifically poetry can offer alternative ways of mediation in times of conflict and turbulence, and also pinpointing that this is beyond the limitations of time as one can prove so by applying a contemporary theory to the cultural products of 17<sup>th</sup> century. These poems address the political unconscious of their era but they are not limited to it in the sense that they reflect, challenge and offer alternative solutions to the problems to it that by applying Jameson's theory, one can see, thanks to their poetic and thematic handling of those solutions, they represent a bigger reality of human conscious.

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As prominent figures in the seventeenth-century metaphysical genre, John Donne and Andrew Marvell wrote during a historical period defined by religious division, the rise of scientific thought, and political turmoil. Their poetry, characterized by elaborate metaphysical poetry's artistic devices combined with form, serves not only as a literary production but also as a venue for ideological negotiation. By using Fredric Jameson's cognitive mapping and the idea of Utopia as suggested by him, this paper aims to prove how these poems not only mirror but also deal with and process the political and individual crisis both ideologically and symbolically. In their metaphysical maneuverings, these poets craft utopian moments that offer symbolic resolutions to social contradictions, rendering metaphysical poetry not only introspective but also politically and historically significant (Jameson, 1981; Shankar, 2008).

## **Method**

This paper employs Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping, as outlined in his *Political Unconscious* theory, to analyze class conflicts in societies through his three-layered approach to history, which advocates for historicizing everything. Cognitive mapping in this context involves identifying the ideological coordinates of metaphysical poetry and demonstrating how poetic conceits, paradoxes, and dialectical inversions resolve otherwise unrepresentable conflicts (Jameson, 1991). His theory, though inspired by but different than that of Marx, looks at the smallest unit of ideologies which are originally agnostic, in discourses to shed light on the complex ideological and collective discourses of social classes and this paper aims at using his method to the selected metaphysical poetry of John Donne and Andrew Marvell to reveal how poetic forms both reflect and challenge and offer alternatives to these discourses, alternatives of Utopia in literature. The analysis is based on the analysis of Donne's "Holy Sonnet X" and Marvell's "The Definition of Love," supplemented by historical scholarship on seventeenth-century England and critical commentary from both literary and political theorists (Ng, 2007; Rumrich, 1995; Hill, 1972).

## **Results and Discussion**

John Donne's "Holy Sonnet X," also known as "Death, be not proud," has generally been looked at as a poem in a dialogue between mortality and the afterlife by many literary critics traditionally. However, when looked at from Jameson's theoretical lens, the ideological dynamics could be observed as untraditionally restructuring death in parallel with the social, political and religious changes in society.

Donne's "Holy Sonnet X" in this sense shows how authority of Death is challenged as a reflection of the challenging of power of one of the biggest causes of human fear as a reflection of other forms of power being challenged both politically and spiritually as well. The poem is based on the premise that Death is not the ultimate stop but instead an opening to an eternal opportunity. The opening lines, "Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so" (Donne, 1996, p. 281), show the attempt to demystify and defeat its authority. From Jameson's cognitive mapping in his *Political Unconscious* theory, it can be read as an attempt to free the individuals from the captivation of fear of authority, which also mirrors the political upheavals happening in society simultaneously. By saying Death is "slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men" (Donne, 1996, p. 281), the poet strips it of its ideological power by literature, almost undermining it by saying its effect is subject to many factors and implying that it is almost human creation, which also points at human mind's liberation from the fear it creates itself. When it is seen as human production, it is also possible to control and defeat it. In other words, it is in human beings' capacity to "kill" death by just not believing in its power or seeing it as the ultimate address.

The final lines "One short sleep past, we wake eternally / And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die" (Donne, 1996, p. 282) propose that Death itself is subjected to death. Donne's metaphysical approach does more than comfort people by relocating them in a realm governed by human control, which illuminates a path toward spiritual freedom, and this exemplifies the Utopian solutions to real problems as suggested by Jameson. Donne shakes Death's authority, therefore that of the one religious and political mechanisms in society that use Death to govern individuals by means of the rituals, traditions, and rules of religion and royalty.

In this sense, by resisting the power of death through humans' free will symbolically, the poem becomes an example of a "symbolic act" that responds to the disorientation and alienation of the individual in a society full of turbulence by reconfiguring the individual's position in a fractured world (Jameson, 1981). It offers a liberating alternative to humans, though intellectually. Donne almost humiliates power through his conceit, likening it to a "short sleep," which reconfigures the power dynamics between humans and their most feared

idea. He says, “One short sleep past, we wake eternally / And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die” (Donne, 1996, p. 282). This also offers intellectual liberation to humans as the dynamics of power and subjugation are reversed and a new symbolic order is created. The fear of totalizing authority, this time in the form of Death is challenged and humans are offered a relief. As scholar John Rumrich notes, “Donne’s poetry often dramatizes the instability of identity in a world where theological certainty is unraveling” (Rumrich, 1995, p. 372). Donne, through poetic devices and imagination, creates a Utopia where in the time of uncertainty, individuals can transform fear.

Furthermore, the challenge to Death’s authority also applies to the materialistic habits and philosophy of individuals who experience the early stages of the scientific revolution, which initiated the process of challenging metaphysical power and fear with empirical thinking. He does so by transforming Death into death, and redefining it as a natural, biological occurrence that can be questioned by reason. Its authority is confronted because of its contradictory nature through poetry, and this is of importance in that utopia “emerges from contradiction” (Jameson, 2005). Death “dies” and therefore humankind is placed in a new reality, finds a new cartography.

Donne’s poem not only reflects the turbulence of its time and their effects on individuals, but it also transcends the ideology that “is not false consciousness” (Jameson, 1981, p. 78) through Utopia by reordering the dynamics of power. Marvell’s poem, “The Definition of Love,” on the other hand, is parallel to Donne’s in that it also challenges one of the biggest sources of power: love. The poem opens by introspective lines in which the poet questions the nature of love by saying “begotten by Despair / Upon Impossibility” (Marvell, 2005, p. 84).

The opening line “My Love is of a birth as rare / As ’tis for object strange and high” (Marvell, 2005, p. 84) immediately establishes the symbolic order between love and satisfaction. This distance is not simply emotional but ontological, and the obstacle is underlined by the lines where the speaker says, “Fate did conspire / To join our hands, but never to unite our hearts” (Marvell, 2005, p. 84). However, not only Love itself, but even when it is unattainable, just like Donne’s approach to Death, is not a tragic end, but an opportunity for transformation and transcendence. The lovers, like “the oblique lines” (Marvell, 2005, p. 85), can never intersect; however, it does not signify hopelessness, offering reunion between lovers in a symbolic land. This metaphor again goes hand in hand with Jameson’s suggestion of literature as a symbolic landscape where real-world problems find Utopian solutions, and it provides mediation for human beings’ paradoxes in real life. By saying “Therefore, the love which us doth bind, / But Fate so enviously debarr’d, / Is the conjunction of the mind, / And opposition of the stars” (Marvell, 2005, p. 85), Marvell places love in the cognitive terrain, almost on a rational level.

This also goes hand in hand with the developments in terms of science and philosophy in the era. Love is not controlled by Fate’s power either, and it once again challenges authority, that of Fate, this time. The cognitive mapping as suggested by Jameson can be applied to the poem in this sense where Love is rationalized, the impossibility of a reunion does not mean absolute disappointment and it is not in the power of the cosmic (heavenly) power for lovers to whether be together or not as this reunion is beyond physical, religious, or class-related obstacles. It once again underlines humans’ freedom in front of authority, and again, the lovers’ meeting symbolizes an idealized vision of love: one achieved through intellect rather than corporeal union. Marvell underlines how individuals are not influential when confronted with separation. Rather than mourning the absence of physical togetherness, he rationalizes it. The poem depicts love as “the conjunction of the mind, / And opposition of the stars” (Marvell, 2005, p. 85). Once again, it offers a Utopian solution to a real-life problem by attempting to overcome an obstacle in the time of a contradiction through poetic configuration.

Similar to Donne’s poem, Marvell’s poem also exemplifies what Jameson (1981) calls a “symbolic act,” refiguring historical conditions into imaginative resolution. The lovers are represented as “oblique lines” (Marvell, 2005, p. 85) that can come closer to each other but never totally unite. This imagery not only represents the geometrical ordering in parallel with the scientific developments of its era but also stresses the distance between the lovers. Scholar Su Fang Ng observes that “Marvell recasts metaphysical separation as a form of perfection rather than privation” (Ng, 2007, p. 605).

Furthermore, on the ideological level, the poem also can be interpreted as a critique of the determinism of the century as it was written in the aftermath of the English Civil War, its depiction in which it challenges the power of Fate is also a metaphor for holders of power such as monarchy, religion and even cosmic power that govern individual agency.

To sum up, like Donne’s poem, Marvell’s “Definition of Love” does redefine love when faced with impossibilities and the power of Fate, and creates a Utopian solution as in Jameson’s theory, by not yielding to

dismay, but by challenging dynamics of power and Fate and intellectualizing love. Love, just like death in Donne's poem, becomes a realm of transcendence and transformation in literature's symbolic act, as it denies an idealized version of it but is reinterpreted in Utopia.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examines how John Donne's "Holy Sonnet X" and Andrew Marvell's "The Definition of Love" can be read through Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping thanks to their artistic devices and content. Both poems are manifestations of symbolic acts that resist ideological and political power dynamics, as they transform contradictions and offer alternative solutions to established dominant discourses. Donne achieves this by challenging and redefining Death and offering freedom from this theological and existential fear. Marvell achieves this by challenging and redefining unattainable love due to physical constraints and offering freedom through a more intellectual and rationalized form of love, which outweighs physical completion. Both poets construct an imaginative utopian space in their works that offers symbolic solutions to the fragmentation and unrest caused by the turbulence of early modern existence. This study underlines the ever-lasting significance of metaphysical poetry as a ground for mediation between ideological discourse and utopian reflection, stressing literature's lasting importance in shaping the historical impacts on individuals' psyche and existence as a realm of social act.

## **Scientific Ethics Declaration**

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