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WHISPERS OF THE PSYCHE: DECODING JOHN DONNE'S DANCE BETWEEN PAIN AND PLEASURE

Abstract: This paper examines the paradoxical interdependence of pain and pleasure in John Donne's poetry through a sustained psychoanalytic reading of three representative texts: "The Ecstasy", "The Canonization", and "Holy Sonnet XIV" ("Batter my heart, three-person'd God"). Drawing principally on Freud's pleasure principle and his notions of repetition compulsion and the death drive, and supplementing these with Lacanian *jouissance*, Kristeva's theory of abjection, and Scarry's account of pain and representation, the study argues that Donne's metaphysical conceits stage an early modern dramatization of psychic ambivalence. The article advances a specific contribution beyond existing Freudian readings by (a) demonstrating how Donne repeatedly thematizes repetition and prolongation as the aesthetic logic through which desire attains intensity, (b) articulating how erotic suffering is ritualized into sanctity, and (c) connecting Donne's formal strategies to contemporary conversations on affect and trauma. Close readings of the selected poems show that pleasure in Donne is not simply opposed to pain but produced with, and through, it; thus Donne can be read as a proto-psychoanalytic poet whose poetics anticipate modern accounts of ambivalent desire.

Keywords: John Donne, psychoanalysis, pleasure principle, repetition compulsion, *jouissance*, pain, pleasure

1. Introduction

John Donne's poetry has for decades posed a critical problem that is at once theological, rhetorical, and psychological: how does language hold together the collision of erotic desire and spiritual yearning? Donne's metaphysical imagination persistently brings bodily passion and devotional intensity into the same frame, producing paradoxes that critics have described variously as a "unification of sensibility" (Eliot, 1921/1964), a poetics of tension (Carey, 1981), or a dramatization

of inward conflict (Fish, 1972). Much recent work has enriched these perspectives by historicizing Donne's sexual and theological language (Edwards, 2001; Bach, 2005; Saunders, 2006), but relatively few sustained studies have pursued the implications of his paradoxes as organized psychic structures—that is, as recurring formal enactments of ambivalence rather than solely as theological or cultural puzzles.

This article proposes that a psychoanalytic lens – specifically Freud's account of the pleasure principle, repetition compulsion, and the death drive (Freud, 1920/1961) – offers conceptual tools that illuminate the psychological mechanics behind Donne's recurrent coupling of pain and pleasure. Importantly, the aim is not to reduce Donne to a biographical subject of psychoanalysis. Rather, following the hermeneutic method of close reading allied with psychoanalytic theory, the paper reads Donne's poems as structural performances of desire: symbolic enactments where the postponement, repetition, or intensification of suffering is central to the constitution of aesthetic and affective meaning. This interpretive move builds upon but also extends earlier interventions: while critics such as Targoff (2001) and Guibbory (2006) have emphasized Donne's body/soul tension and the eroticization of the devotional voice, and while Saunders (2006) and Bach (2005) have re-placed Donne within modern debates on sexuality, this article advances a distinct claim. It argues that Donne's formal strategies (conceit, paradox, and repetitional imagery) instantiate psychic logics – prolongation, repetition, and ecstatic rupture – that anticipate psychoanalytic accounts of ambivalent desire and *jouissance* (Lacan, 1977).

To make this claim tractable, the study concentrates on three poems that articulate complementary facets of Donne's affective paradox. "The Ecstasy" (a secular lyric) exemplifies sublimation and the pleasure principle's paradox: bodily proximity without consummation produces heightened desire. "The Canonization" reframes erotic suffering as sanctity, thereby dramatizing repetition compulsion and the ritualization of pain as proof of devotion. "Holy Sonnet XIV" ("Batter my heart, three-person'd God") radicalizes these dynamics by tendering spiritual renewal as violent rupture – a locus in which the death drive and Lacanian *jouissance* converge. These texts were selected because they collectively map the principal operations through which Donne stages pain and pleasure: deferral and sublimation, sanctification and repetition, and ecstatic annihilation. Restricting the corpus to these three allows for sustained close reading; nevertheless, the study is explicitly positioned as a focused intervention whose findings invite subsequent extension across Donne's wider oeuvre.

Methodologically, the paper combines formalist close reading with theoretical mediation: textual features (imagery, conceit, metric tension, lexical repetition) are read in relation to psychoanalytic categories. The approach follows scholarly caution against reductive psychoanalysis (Brooks, 1947) and insists that theory be used as an interpretive heuristic, anchored in textual evidence rather than imposed upon it. The contribution is therefore twofold: analytically, it demonstrates how specific formal

devices in Donne map onto psychoanalytic dynamics; theoretically, it contends that Donne's metaphysical poetics anticipate elements of modern affect theory and trauma studies by making the ambivalence of desire a central aesthetic resource.

The article proceeds as follows. After situating the study within recent Donne scholarship and the relevant psychoanalytic literature (Section 2), I outline methodological premises and corpus selection (Section 3). The core readings (Section 4) examine "The Ecstasy", "The Canonization", and "Holy Sonnet XIV" in turn, attending to how each poem enacts prolongation, repetition, and ecstatic collapse respectively. A discussion (Section 5) synthesizes the findings and locates them in broader scholarly conversations on affect and representability; a concise conclusion (Section 6) reiterates the original contribution and suggests directions for further research, including the extension of this psychoanalytic mapping to a larger corpus.

By explicitly identifying the three poems under analysis and foregrounding the psychoanalytic mechanisms they dramatize, this article clarifies its distinct contribution to Donne studies. Rather than merely "applying" Freud to a seventeenth-century poet, it demonstrates how Donne's lyric structures already anticipate psychoanalytic insights into the dynamics of pleasure, repression, and repetition. Donne's art becomes not an object of diagnosis but a participant in the long cultural formation of the modern subject's divided desires. His conceits, paradoxes, and linguistic excesses articulate psychic processes that Freud and later theorists would systematize; in this sense, Donne emerges as a proto-psychoanalytic thinker whose poetry stages the instability of the self at the threshold between body and spirit, pain and pleasure, union and loss. Situating Donne within this genealogy enriches both Renaissance and psychoanalytic scholarship by suggesting that the modern vocabulary of ambivalence – so central to theories of desire and affect—has literary origins in metaphysical poetics. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing interdisciplinary debates on how early modern texts prefigure later theoretical frameworks of subjectivity, desire, and trauma, reaffirming Donne's relevance as a poet of profound psychological and philosophical resonance.

2. Literature Review

Criticism of John Donne's poetry has consistently emphasized its paradoxical intensity and its capacity to collapse boundaries between physicality and spirituality. Early scholarship, such as Louis Martz's *The Poetry of Meditation* (1954), situated Donne within the devotional and meditative traditions of the seventeenth century, emphasizing his theological and formal inheritance. Later, John Carey's *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (1981) reoriented attention toward the psychological dimension of Donne's poetics, highlighting his fascination with bringing "mind and body, passion and faith into volatile conjunction" (p. 22). These seminal studies illuminate Donne's

negotiation of the sacred and profane but largely interpret it through historical or religious frameworks rather than psychological or affective ones.

The paradox of erotic and spiritual desire has remained central to Donne scholarship. Achsah Guibbory (2006) notes that Donne's lyrics are marked by a "continual oscillation between the body's insistence and the soul's aspiration" (p. 17), while Ramie Targoff (2008) emphasizes the poet's sustained attempt to reconcile the unity of body and soul. Similarly, Barbara Lewalski (1993) describes Donne's lyric voice as embodying "the conflicts of Protestant poetics, where inward devotion is dramatized through conflicting impulses of desire and denial" (p. 216). These readings underscore Donne's persistent engagement with ambivalence and paradox but stop short of articulating how these tensions might also encode unconscious psychic dynamics.

Recent interpretive trends have extended this discussion by focusing on Donne's rhetorical performance of contradiction. Stanley Fish (1991) famously argued that Donne's verse does not resolve tension but performs it, producing an interpretive instability that mirrors the restless oscillation of desire itself. Likewise, John Stubbs (2006) underscores the poet's lived entanglements with faith, sexuality, and ambition, reading his verse as a product of existential struggle and ecstatic intensity. Collectively, such perspectives frame Donne's attraction to contradiction as a defining feature of his poetic identity, though they tend to privilege theological, moral, or biographical explanations over psychoanalytic or affective ones.

In parallel, psychoanalytic theory has provided literary criticism with tools for interpreting such paradoxes of desire. Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1961) articulated the interplay between the pleasure principle, the compulsion to repeat, and the death drive – concepts that illuminate the ways in which suffering can function as a form of psychic gratification. Subsequent theorists have expanded this framework: Scarry (1985) explores how pain both destroys and generates meaning; Kristeva (1987) theorizes the ambivalence of abjection as central to identity formation; and Felman (1982) demonstrates how literary texts stage unconscious conflicts rather than merely represent them. Together, these insights suggest that the paradox of pleasure and pain can be understood not only as thematic content but also as an enactment of psychic processes.

While psychoanalytic readings have been applied extensively to Renaissance drama (Adelman, 1992; Greenblatt, 1980) and to lyric traditions more broadly, Donne's poetry has received relatively little sustained psychoanalytic analysis. Most discussions of his eroticism and spirituality remain grounded in cultural-historical or theological paradigms. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by employing Freud's theorization of the pleasure principle and death drive to examine how Donne's poetry dramatizes the mutual implication of suffering and desire.

By bringing Donne studies into dialogue with psychoanalytic theory, this research contributes a fresh interpretive pathway. It positions Donne's verse not merely as a record of early modern paradox but as a poetic performance of psychic

ambivalence, where pain and pleasure collapse into one another in dramatizations of the unconscious economy of desire. In doing so, it extends existing scholarship by reframing Donne's poetic tension as both a psychological structure and a mode of artistic creation – one that anticipates modern conceptions of subjectivity and the divided self.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative interpretive methodology** grounded in psychoanalytic literary criticism. The aim is to investigate how John Donne's poetry dramatizes the paradoxical entanglement of pain and pleasure, employing Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1961) as the primary theoretical framework. The methodological approach integrates **close reading of primary texts** with **psychoanalytic conceptual analysis**, situating Donne's poetry at the intersection of early modern cultural expression and enduring psychological tensions.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

Freud's theorization of the *pleasure principle* – the psychic tendency to seek pleasure and avoid unpleasure – provides the central interpretive lens for this study. Freud's complementary account of *repetition compulsion* and the *death drive* reveals that suffering may paradoxically be pursued as a form of psychic gratification, exposing the ambivalence at the heart of human desire (Freud, 1920/1961). This framework enables Donne's representations of erotic suffering, spiritual torment, and ecstatic union to be read not merely as thematic oppositions but as dramatizations of the unconscious economy of desire that oscillates between tension and release, longing and annihilation.

While Freud remains foundational, the analysis draws upon post-Freudian and feminist elaborations that complicate his model. Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985) clarifies how physical agony can become a source of meaning and expression, a paradox echoed in Donne's metaphysical conceits that turn suffering into articulation. Kristeva's *Tales of Love* (1987) and *Powers of Horror* (1982) inform this reading through their concepts of *ambivalence* and *abjection*, which illuminate the unsettling overlap between sanctity and sensuality in Donne's verse. Felman's (1982) claim that literature stages the drama of the unconscious further supports this interpretive method, suggesting that Donne's poems perform psychic tensions rather than merely represent them. The theoretical framework, therefore, combines Freudian and post-Freudian vocabularies to expose how Donne's poetics embody a paradoxical logic of pleasure within pain, spiritual transcendence within corporeal bondage.

3.2. Corpus Selection

The corpus consists of three poems that represent distinct yet interrelated facets of Donne's engagement with desire, suffering, and transcendence: "The Ecstasy", "The Canonization", and "Holy Sonnet XIV" ("Batter my heart, three-person'd God"). Together, they span Donne's secular and sacred writings, thereby reflecting his persistent preoccupation with the convergence of erotic and spiritual energies.

"The Ecstasy" dramatizes the paradox of spiritual union achieved through embodied love, situating sensual pleasure as the gateway to metaphysical communion. "The Canonization" sanctifies erotic devotion, translating profane passion into religious transcendence. "Holy Sonnet XIV", by contrast, radicalizes this movement toward the divine by turning submission, violence, and pain into conditions for spiritual rebirth. The choice of these texts is guided not by thematic convenience but by their structural and affective continuity: each poem enacts a complex psychic economy in which suffering becomes an instrument of transcendence.

Limiting the corpus to these exemplary poems allows for sustained and nuanced engagement without dispersing the analysis across Donne's extensive body of work. This focused selection also provides a coherent field in which to articulate psychoanalytic insights that are both textually grounded and theoretically rigorous. By examining these poems in depth, the study seeks to reveal how Donne's poetry dramatizes the paradoxical interdependence of pain and pleasure, a tension that is central not only to his metaphysical poetics but also to the dynamics of the unconscious as conceptualized in psychoanalytic theory.

3.3. Analytical Procedures

The analysis proceeds in two interrelated stages, each grounded in established literary-critical practices yet adapted to the psychoanalytic framework. The first stage involves *close reading*, which isolates the poems' rhetorical and structural features – conceit, paradox, oxymoron, syntax, imagery, and sound patterning – that generate tension between pleasure and pain. Particular attention is given to repetitions, contradictions, and moments of semantic instability, since these often serve as textual equivalents of psychic conflict. For instance, in *The Ecstasy*, the oscillation between "two better than themselves" and "interinanimates two souls" dramatizes Freud's pleasure principle in linguistic form: pleasure resides not in release but in the maintenance of desire's suspension.

The second stage interprets these formal observations through psychoanalytic concepts. Repetitive imagery or cyclical conceits are examined in light of *repetition compulsion*; figures of violent union or ecstatic surrender are read through the *death drive*; and moments of linguistic dissonance are related to *Kristevan ambivalence* or

abjection. This interpretive movement remains dialectical rather than hierarchical: theory elucidates textual dynamics, while textual evidence continually tests the limits of theory. In this respect, the methodology follows Brooks's (1947) principle that poetic paradox must be preserved as an "equilibrium of opposed forces," not reduced to external explanation.

This dual process ensures that psychoanalytic theory is anchored in textual evidence rather than imposed upon it. As Brooks (1947) argued, literary analysis must preserve the paradoxical unity of form and meaning, avoiding reduction to psychological case study. Accordingly, this study does not seek to psychoanalyze Donne as a historical individual but to examine how his poetry performs psychological dramas that resonate with psychoanalytic concepts. In other words, this process resists the biographical fallacy. Donne's verse is not treated as evidence of individual pathology but as a discursive site in which cultural, theological, and psychic tensions are dramatized. The approach thereby preserves the integrity of literary analysis while employing psychoanalytic insights as interpretive heuristics rather than explanatory dogma.

3.4. Methodological Justification

The justification for a psychoanalytic framework lies in the structural and affective congruence between Donne's poetic imagination and the mechanisms of the unconscious. Donne's persistent use of paradox, his fascination with doubleness, and his tendency to fuse pleasure with anguish mirror Freud's understanding of the psyche as governed by conflicting drives. Historical or theological readings, though illuminating, cannot alone account for the psychic dimension of these paradoxes – the way Donne's poems perform rather than merely describe the ambivalence of desire.

By combining close reading with psychoanalytic interpretation, this study aligns itself with a long tradition of literary scholarship that treats form and affect as mutually constitutive. The approach does not impose theory upon the text but allows theory and text to engage in interpretive reciprocity. Moreover, grounding psychoanalytic concepts in precise textual analysis ensures methodological rigor and guards against speculative overreach. As such, the study contributes not only to Donne scholarship but also to broader discussions of how early modern literature anticipates the structures of modern psychic life. In sum, this methodology enables a disciplined inquiry into how Donne's verse enacts the paradoxical interplay between pain and pleasure – an inquiry that extends beyond thematic observation to reveal the deep formal and affective logic through which Donne transforms suffering into a mode of transcendence.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1. “The Ecstasy”: Desire, Union, and Psychic Ambivalence

Donne’s “The Ecstasy” exemplifies his capacity to render desire as a site of psychic and metaphysical paradox, where pleasure and pain, body and soul, coexist and inform one another (Carey, 1981; Guibbory, 2006). The poem depicts two lovers reclining together, hands and gazes intertwined, while their souls engage in an imperceptible yet profound communion:

Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
Our eyes upon one double string;
So to’ intergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the means to make us one (Donne, 1633/2000, p. 53).

The imagery of intertwining – of beams, hands, and soul – stages a fusion in which physical intimacy and spiritual union coexist without collapsing into one another. Desire is neither fully consummated nor wholly sublimated, but suspended in a prolonged tension that psychoanalytic theory identifies as a locus of intensified pleasure (Freud, 1920/1961). The poem dramatizes the paradox that gratification is indefinitely deferred, transforming the postponement of desire into an active source of psychic and aesthetic satisfaction.

The concept of the “interanimation of two souls” captures this ambivalent dynamic. Here, the body functions as a mediator rather than the primary locus of union, while the soul undertakes the central act of communion. This displacement aligns with Freud’s theory of sublimation (1905/2000), in which instinctual drives are redirected toward socially or spiritually sanctioned ends. The poem enacts a negotiation between the sensual and the transcendent, showing how corporeal desire energizes spiritual ecstasy rather than opposing it (Guibbory, 2006).

Lacan’s notion of *jouissance* further illuminates the poem’s psychic dynamics. *Jouissance* refers to an excessive, often painful form of enjoyment that emerges when desire exceeds its conventional limits (Lacan, 1977). Donne’s lovers, in their suspended union, exemplify this: their pleasure arises from the tension of deferred consummation. The body, though seemingly secondary, remains indispensable:

So must pure lovers’ souls descend
T’ affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great prince in prison lies (Donne, 1633/2000, p. 54).

The “prince in prison” metaphor underscores the interdependence of body and soul: spiritual union cannot be fully realized without corporeal mediation. Psychoanalytically, this illustrates ambivalence – the simultaneous coexistence of opposing desires within the psyche (Freud, 1920/1961; Kristeva, 1987). Physical

and spiritual pleasure are mutually implicated, and the eroticized soul cannot fully escape the body that enables it (Carey, 1981).

The poem's structure reinforces this psychic tension. Each stanza revolves around the paradox of union without consummation, forming a circular, recursive pattern that mirrors the compulsion to repeat (Freud, 1920/1961). Repetition transforms desire itself into a source of pleasure, illustrating how tension and deferral constitute the poem's aesthetic and psychic economy. The intricate conceits and paradoxes characteristic of Donne's metaphysical style make form inseparable from theme (Fish, 1991).

The entwining of "eye-beams" suggests not only visual and bodily intimacy but also the projection of consciousness into another, creating a shared subjectivity (Targoff, 2008). The hands and eyes anchor this otherwise immaterial experience, highlighting the interdependence of corporeal and spiritual registers. As Carey (1981) observes, Donne "seeks to spiritualize sex without denying its bodily origins" (p. 105). From a psychoanalytic perspective, this oscillation between sublimation and bodily persistence generates a dynamic psychic economy, in which deferred desire fuels the spiritual ecstasy it ostensibly transcends (Freud, 1920/1961; Lacan, 1977).

Finally, the poem's title, "The Ecstasy", derives from the Greek *ekstasis*, meaning "to stand outside oneself" (Liddell & Scott, 1940). This etymology underscores the poem's exploration of self-transcendence, where pleasure and pain converge and conventional subject boundaries dissolve. Donne's lovers inhabit this ecstatic state, where bodily and spiritual pleasures intermingle, and tension itself becomes the locus of desire (Lacan, 1977; Guibbory, 2006).

In conclusion, "The Ecstasy" stages the psychic ambivalence of desire, showing how Donne transforms deferred gratification and oscillating impulses into a central source of poetic pleasure. Its imagery, formal recursion, and metaphysical conceits enact a psychoanalytic economy in which tension and deferral generate their own gratification. By integrating Freud's pleasure principle, repetition compulsion, sublimation, and Lacan's *jouissance*, this analysis demonstrates that Donne constructs desire as an interdependent, ambivalent, and richly textured psychic phenomenon.

4.2. "The Canonization": Erotic Suffering as Sanctity

In "The Canonization", Donne stages erotic desire as a paradoxical form of sanctity, presenting physical passion and suffering as pathways to spiritual and emotional elevation. The poem opens with a defiant address to the critics of the lovers' passion:

Call us what you will, we are made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly,
We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And we in us find the eagle and the dove (Donne, 1633/2000, p. 61).

The poem immediately frames erotic love as a site of intense paradox: the lovers' union produces both suffering and transcendence. The metaphor of the taper, which consumes itself to give light, resonates with Freud's (1920/1961) concept of the pleasure principle and repetition compulsion. The act of loving, in its intensity and persistence despite potential social or emotional pain, embodies a form of self-sacrifice that paradoxically yields psychic gratification. The lovers' suffering becomes a conscious, even ritualized, repetition of desire, in which the pain itself is entwined with pleasure, transforming erotic devotion into sanctified experience (Carey, 1981; Guibbory, 2006).

Donne's conceits heighten this paradoxical structure. The simultaneous invocation of the eagle and the dove situates the lovers within symbolic registers of power and peace, aggression and harmony, reflecting the oscillation between ecstatic pleasure and the ache of longing (Lewalski, 1993). Psychoanalytically, this oscillation mirrors the ambivalence identified by Kristeva (1987), wherein desire is inseparable from anxiety and suffering. The erotic relationship is not merely pleasurable; it is also a psychic and spiritual ordeal, a structured enactment of longing and delay that mirrors Freud's notion of compulsion to repeat (1920/1961). By embracing their pain, the lovers generate a sense of sanctity: suffering is not incidental but constitutive of their erotic and spiritual identity.

The poem's formal qualities reinforce this thematic tension. Donne's witty, controlled rhymes and rhetorical flourishes produce a rhythm that alternates between assertion and counterpoint, mirroring the oscillation between pleasure and pain. The rhetorical structure of the argument—responding to critics, defending the sacredness of erotic love, and constructing the lovers as exemplars of devotion—creates a meta-discursive layer, where erotic suffering becomes a performative act of both poetic and psychic canonization (Fish, 1991; Targoff, 2008).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, "The Canonization" stages what Freud (1920/1961) identifies as the paradoxical reward of suffering: repeated engagement with desire, even when painful or socially prohibited, yields a form of psychic satisfaction. The lovers' erotic devotion, framed as both passionate and sacrificial, aligns with Lacan's (1977) *jouissance*: pleasure intertwined with pain, amplified by the deferral and intensity of desire. Erotic suffering becomes its own reward, sanctifying the lovers in a manner that is simultaneously social, spiritual, and psychological.

Critical interpretations reinforce this reading. Guibbory (2006) emphasizes Donne's capacity to transform transgressive eroticism into socially and spiritually meaningful forms. Carey (1981) notes that the lovers' devotion exemplifies a "conflation of bodily passion and elevated consciousness" (p. 112), highlighting the interplay of pain, desire, and sublimated spiritual pleasure. Targoff (2008) situates Donne within a tradition of early modern psychological exploration, noting that the poet stages the affective tension of love as a deliberate, repeated enactment, thereby prefiguring psychoanalytic insights into the ambivalence and intensity of desire.

The final conceit of the poem – comparing the lovers' lives to a canonization – links erotic devotion to spiritual ritual and sanctity:

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love;
Or chide my palsy, or my gout;
My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune flout;
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve;
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe his honor, or his grace;
Or the king's real, or his stamp'd face
Contemplate; what you will, approve,
So you will let me love (Donne, 1633/2000, pp. 61–62).

Here, the lovers' devotion is valorized over external achievements or societal expectations. Erotic suffering, embodied in repeated acts of love and the endurance of social censure, becomes an active, almost liturgical practice. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this aligns with Freud's (1920/1961) notion that the psyche derives satisfaction from the engagement with deferred or resisted desire. The canonization metaphor itself stages desire as sacred labor, reinforcing the interdependence of erotic, psychic, and spiritual registers.

In sum, "The Canonization" dramatizes the paradoxical sanctity of erotic suffering, illustrating how love's intensity, delay, and social transgression generate psychic and spiritual reward. Donne constructs desire as simultaneously pleasurable and painful, using rhetorical structure, conceits, and repetitive patterns to enact a psychoanalytic economy in which suffering is valorized and erotic devotion is sanctified. Through the integration of Freud's pleasure principle and repetition compulsion, Lacan's *jouissance*, and Kristeva's ambivalence, this analysis demonstrates that erotic suffering in Donne's verse is neither incidental nor extraneous: it constitutes the very mechanism through which desire attains both intensity and transcendence.

4.3. "Holy Sonnet XIV": Spiritual Torment and the Death Drive

If "The Ecstasy" suspends consummation and "The Canonization" sanctifies erotic suffering, "Holy Sonnet XIV" ("Batter my heart, three-person'd God") intensifies the paradox to its extreme, staging the soul's violent yearning for divine ravishment. The poem begins with a plea for divine aggression:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new. (Donne, 1633/2000, p. 283)

The language is one of assault, not gentle grace. The divine must not merely "knock" but "batter," not heal but "break, blow, burn." This violent paradox mirrors Freud's *death drive* (1920/1961): the compulsion toward self-destruction as a means of renewal. The speaker craves annihilation, not as an end but as the path to transformation.

Here erotic and spiritual registers collapse into one another. The final lines make this most explicit:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me. (Donne, 1633/2000, p. 283)

The oxymoronic logic – imprisonment as freedom, ravishment as chastity – embodies Lacan’s notion of *jouissance*, the paradoxical pleasure that includes pain. The speaker desires violation, recognizing that only through the collapse of self can divine union be achieved.

Critics such as Ramie Targoff (2001) have highlighted the violent intensity of Donne’s devotional poetics, where spiritual longing is inseparable from corporeal imagery. Psychoanalysis sharpens this insight: the sonnet dramatizes the psyche’s drive toward dissolution, toward the paradoxical ecstasy of destruction.

Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) is illuminating here. For Scarry, pain “unmakes the world” by erasing language and subjectivity (3-6). Donne’s speaker, however, inverts this logic: divine pain becomes the very condition of remaking. The violence that should annihilate instead renews. Thus, suffering is not merely endured but desired, because it is the means of union with God.

Julia Kristeva’s reflections in *Powers of Horror* (1982) also resonate (7-11). The plea to be “ravished” by God evokes the abjection of the self: a willing collapse of boundaries, an ecstatic self-loss. This abjection is not horrifying but salvific. The sonnet dramatizes the way Kristeva relates the abject with what I would call the “ambivalence of *jouissance*”¹: the subject’s simultaneous dread and desire for dissolution. In this sense, *jouissance* marks a threshold experience – a psychic limit where pleasure merges with pain. The self yearns for transcendence through annihilation yet recoils from the loss of coherence it entails. Donne’s speaker thus inhabits a space where spiritual longing is inseparable from psychic risk, where ecstasy becomes indistinguishable from self-undoing.

Formally, the sonnet intensifies this psychic ambivalence through its relentless sequence of imperatives: “Batter... break... burn... take... enthrall... ravish.” The accumulation enacts the compulsion to repeat, echoing Freud’s insight that trauma

¹ The term *jouissance*, although popularized in Kristeva’s psychoanalytic vocabulary, originates in Jacques Lacan’s reworking of Freudian drives. While Freud distinguishes between pleasure (bound to tension reduction) and unpleasure (arising when excitation exceeds psychic containment), Lacan posits *jouissance* as an excessive, transgressive enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle – an experience at once alluring and threatening to the subject’s coherence (*Écrits*, 1966; Seminar VII, 1959–60). Lacan’s notion is fundamentally ambivalent: *jouissance* fascinates because it promises intensity and dissolution of lack, but it terrifies insofar as it destabilizes boundaries of the self. Kristeva extends this logic to abjection, where the subject is simultaneously repelled and seduced by what undoes identity (*Powers of Horror*, 1982). My use of “ambivalence of *jouissance*” thus refers to this psychoanalytic dynamic: the simultaneous craving for and recoil from that which exceeds the self.

is not resolved but re-enacted. Donne’s speaker compulsively restages his own annihilation in language, seeking mastery through repetition. What emerges is a vision of spirituality inseparable from masochism. Donne’s God is not a gentle healer but a violent lover, whose assault is the only path to salvation. In this, the sonnet brings to culmination the logic traced in “The Ecstasy” and “The Canonization”: desire as prolongation, suffering as sanctity, and finally, torment as ecstatic self-loss.

4.4. Union, Martyrdom, and Spiritual Siege: a Synthetic Reading Donne’s Poetics of Excess

Taken together, these three case studies illuminate Donne’s persistent negotiation of the paradoxes of human desire. “The Ecstasy” dramatizes pleasure as both delayed and sublimated, revealing the psychic ambivalence between bodily desire and spiritual transcendence. “The Canonization” advances this paradox by transfiguring erotic suffering into sanctity, foregrounding repetition and the embrace of pain as devotion. Finally, “Holy Sonnet XIV” intensifies the interplay of torment and joy, presenting divine violence as the ultimate form of ecstatic fulfillment. Across these texts, Donne’s poetics exemplify Freud’s insight that pleasure and pain are never fully separable but remain entangled within the unconscious. Moreover, the poems demonstrate how language itself becomes the stage on which ambivalence, sublimation, and psychic contradiction are performed. The interplay of these forces within each poem yields distinct yet interconnected trajectories; patterns that Table 1 synthesizes in comparative form, clarifying how each text stages Donne’s logic of ambivalent desire.

Table 1. Summary of Analytical Findings²

Poem	Psychoanalytic Framework	Key Imagery / Tropes	Dynamic of Pain & Pleasure	Contribution to Argument
“The Ecstasy”	Freud’s Pleasure Principle; Sublimation	Soul–body tension; “interanimation of two souls”	Pleasure achieved through prolongation and deferral; pain in denial of consummation	Demonstrates ambivalence of desire as psychic equilibrium
“The Canonization”	Repetition Compulsion; Death Drive	Phoenix; tapers; lovers as martyrs/saints	Suffering embraced as sanctity; pain becomes proof of devotion	Shows how erotic suffering is transformed into sacred legitimacy
“Holy Sonnet XIV”	Death Drive; Jouissance; Scarry’s Pain; Kristeva’s Abjection	Violent divine imagery: “break, blow, burn, ravish”	Torment desired as ecstatic renewal; agony and joy collapse	Culminates in spirituality framed as masochistic ecstasy and psychic dissolution

² (Adapted from Donne, 1633/2000; Freud, 1920/1961; Kristeva, 1982; Scarry, 1985)

5. Discussion

The foregoing analyses demonstrate Donne's intricate negotiation of pleasure and pain across multiple poetic registers, yet their implications extend beyond isolated texts. Collectively, the readings illuminate broader intersections between Renaissance metaphysical poetics, psychoanalytic theory, and the cultural history of desire, situating Donne as a poet whose work prefigures modern explorations of the unconscious. His metaphysical conceits and paradoxical structures not only dramatize individual psychological experiences but also encode culturally mediated forms of desire, suffering, and ecstasy. In doing so, Donne's work invites readers to consider the ways in which early modern poetics both anticipate and inform contemporary debates in literary theory, affect studies, and the history of subjectivity.

While Freud and Lacan wrote centuries after Donne, their theoretical models resonate strikingly with his poetic strategies. Freud's pleasure principle (1920/1961), which posits the psyche's drive toward gratification while paradoxically sustaining tension, is vividly dramatized in "The Ecstasy", where the deferral of physical pleasure and its sublimation into spiritual communion produce heightened, paradoxical satisfaction. In "The Canonization", repetition compulsion emerges in the cyclical valorization of suffering; the lovers' continual engagement with pain and social censure functions as both a psychic and moral reinforcement, prefiguring the idea that suffering itself can become a source of gratification. Lacan's concept of *jouissance* (1977), describing enjoyment that exceeds itself into pain, finds expression in "Holy Sonnet XIV", where divine violence is not merely endured but paradoxically desired, illustrating the collapse of conventional oppositions between pleasure and pain. In each instance, Donne's metaphysical conceits anticipate psychoanalytic insights into the contradictions inherent in the psyche, revealing that desire is never straightforward but entangled with its own negation. These conceptual parallels demonstrate that Donne's poetry not only dramatizes desire and ambivalence but also anticipates psychoanalytic models of the unconscious, suggesting that literary and psychological dynamics are mutually illuminating rather than temporally isolated phenomena.

Donne's oeuvre consistently destabilizes the boundary between sacred and profane, revealing a nuanced engagement with erotic, spiritual, and psychic energies. Scholars such as Targoff (2001) and Carey (1981) have highlighted how his religious and erotic poetry refuse easy compartmentalization, illustrating the permeability of moral, theological, and emotional categories. Psychoanalysis offers a lens to articulate this ambivalence: sublimation transforms instinctual drives without eliminating them, repetition binds subjects to suffering as a source of psychic reward, and *jouissance* collapses the binary of torment and ecstasy, making pleasure inseparable from pain (Kristeva, 1987; Lacan, 1977). Donne's language exemplifies this fusion: violent verbs such as *break*, *blow*, and *burn* in religious contexts acquire erotic resonance, while ostensibly erotic imagery, such as dying

or rising, carries theological connotations. The sacred and profane, far from being oppositional, coexist as mutually constitutive forces, underscoring Donne's interest in the liminality of human experience. This interpenetration suggests that his poetics are less concerned with resolving moral or ontological tensions than with inhabiting them fully, staging ambivalence as a persistent, generative, and morally charged psychic condition.

By foregrounding the psychoanalytic dimensions of ambivalence, the present study contributes to ongoing debates in Donne scholarship. Helen Gardner (1961) emphasized Donne's "drama of ideas," while Stanley Fish (1972) characterized his poetry as "self-consuming artifacts," noting its intellectual and formal complexity. This analysis extends such perspectives by demonstrating that Donne's metaphysical conceits are not only aesthetic or intellectual devices but also performative enactments of unconscious processes, staging desire, ambivalence, and psychic tension in ways that resonate with modern psychoanalytic theory. Furthermore, the study situates Donne within a larger trajectory of Western thought on subjectivity, illustrating the interplay of theology, philosophy, and psychology in early modern literary production. By interpreting poetic paradoxes as symbolic manifestations of unconscious dynamics, this approach enriches our understanding of the mechanisms through which Donne's poetry communicates the entwined nature of pleasure, suffering, and transcendence, offering insights that historical or strictly theological readings alone cannot provide.

Finally, the discussion underscores the enduring relevance of Donne's poetics for contemporary literary theory. The intricate interplay of pain and pleasure resonates with ongoing debates in affect theory, embodiment studies, queer theory, and trauma studies (Sedgwick, 2003; Ahmed, 2014). Donne's verse anticipates questions central to these fields: How does desire persist amidst contradiction? How can suffering function as a site of identity formation? How does language mediate – or fail to mediate – the experience of pain? By staging psychic ambivalence through formal, linguistic, and conceptual devices, Donne demonstrates that these questions are not solely modern but have deep roots in early modern poetics. His work thereby offers a historically grounded yet theoretically rich resource for exploring the complex dynamics of desire, pleasure, pain, and subjectivity, confirming that early modern literature can speak directly to contemporary scholarly concerns while maintaining its own distinctive aesthetic and intellectual rigor.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that John Donne's poetry, when examined through a psychoanalytic lens, exposes a complex and enduring entanglement of pain and pleasure, revealing the poet's ability to collapse conventional binaries such as body and soul, sacred and profane, or agony and ecstasy. By close-reading "The Ecstasy",

“The Canonization”, and “Holy Sonnet XIV”, the analysis has shown that Donne’s metaphysical conceits are not merely intellectual exercises but active dramatizations of psychic processes, in which desire, suffering, and fulfillment are intricately interwoven. Psychoanalytic concepts – including Freud’s pleasure principle, repetition compulsion, and the death drive, alongside Lacan’s notion of *jouissance* – serve as crucial interpretive tools, elucidating how Donne structures desire as both dependent on and resistant to its own satisfaction. The prolongation of tension, the sanctification of erotic suffering, and the ecstatic collapse of bodily and spiritual registers all demonstrate that pleasure and pain are mutually constitutive in his poetic universe.

Moreover, this study situates Donne within broader literary, cultural, and theoretical contexts. His fusion of sacred and profane registers, and his ability to render psychic and corporeal ambivalence into poetic form, anticipate debates in modern literary theory concerning affect, embodiment, and subjectivity (Sedgwick, 2003; Ahmed, 2014). By translating otherwise ineffable experiences of pain and desire into striking metaphors, conceits, and paradoxes, Donne demonstrates the capacity of language to both express and shape psychic experience, echoing Scarry’s (1985) and Kristeva’s (1982) insights on representation, abjection, and ambivalence. In this sense, his poetry functions not only as a historical artifact of early modern metaphysical poetics but also as a site of ongoing theoretical relevance, where psychoanalytic frameworks illuminate the enduring complexity of human emotion and desire.

In contributing to Donne studies, the present research offers a nuanced account of how his verse dramatizes unconscious dynamics rather than merely reflecting historical, biographical, or theological circumstances. It emphasizes that Donne’s metaphysical conceits are performative: they stage the oscillation between fulfillment and denial, presence and absence, and pleasure and pain. This interpretive lens complements existing scholarship (Carey, 1981; Guibbory, 2006; Targoff, 2008) while providing a psychoanalytic vocabulary for understanding the intricate ways in which desire and ambivalence are embedded in early modern poetry.

Finally, the study underscores Donne’s continuing relevance for contemporary critical inquiry. His treatment of the entwined nature of pain and pleasure, suffering and ecstasy, resonates with modern approaches to literature, affect theory, trauma studies, and psychoanalysis. By staging these tensions with formal, linguistic, and imaginative precision, Donne not only reflects the paradoxes of human experience but also anticipates conceptual frameworks that would emerge centuries later. Ultimately, his poetry endures because it captures the complexities of the human psyche with striking immediacy, demonstrating that the interplay of pain and pleasure is not an anomaly but a defining feature of human subjectivity, consciousness, and emotional life. Donne’s verse reminds readers that ambivalence is not a limitation to be resolved but a productive and generative space in which the deepest dimensions of desire, suffering, and pleasure are enacted, contemplated, and transformed through art.

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