

John Donne's "The Sunne Rising"

Introduction:

One of John Donne's contributions to love poetry is his celebration of mutual, reciprocal love. While such celebration challenges Petrarchan formulations of unreciprocated love, it also opposes the transitory, material world. The private little room of love is the only world worth exploring and possessing. 'The Sunne Rising', written to Anne, strikes an almost similar note.

Ptolemaic Geocentrism:

The Copernican heliocentric system placed the sun at the centre with the Earth and other heavenly bodies in orbit around it. 'The Sun Rising' attempts at undercutting this triumphant ascent of the sun to centrality, with the lovers playing the part of the decentred earth, asserting their former supremacy in the geocentric Ptolemaic context.

Tradition of the 'Aubade':

'The Sun Rising' is also an imitation of Ovid that combines a reworking of the medieval European tradition of the 'aubade' poems, appropriate to the dawn or early morning. Lying in bed with his lover, the speaker chides the rising sun, calling it a "busy old fool," and asking why it must bother them through windows and curtains. But here the speaker's irreverence and the use of extravagant conceit are without precedent.

Conceit:

A conceit, Helen Gardner observes, "is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness". The sun is like a person, while Donne is like a celestial body: he and Anne, together, replace the Earth. Since the lovers in their bedroom contract all the world's riches, the sun should accept their bed as the centre of the universe and the walls of the lovers' room as the new course of the sun's orbit around the centre. "This bed thy centre is," the speaker tells the sun, "these walls, thy sphere."

Conversational Tone:

The conversational tone that is dominant in the poem is also typical of the metaphysical character of the poem. In fact, the essence of metaphysical poetry lies not in the matter, but in the manner of expression. The entire theme of the poem is expressed in a starkly singular and suggestive way. That's why the lover can admonish the sun —the “Saucy pedantic wretch”—to go and bother late schoolboys and sour apprentices, to tell the court-huntsmen that the King will ride, and to call the country ants to their harvesting.

Superiority of Love

The sun is supposed to be the accurate keeper of diurnal and seasonal time. Ironically, here his accuracy is deemed tardy, or ‘unruly’ by the lovers, as it runs counter to their timekeeping. Love is not subject to season or to time, he says. The Sun, the poet says, will find all Kings of the world “All in one bed lay”. He tells the Sun that he, the lover, is all Kings.

Wit:

The poet's wit is apparent when he says that he could eclipse them simply by closing his eyes, except that he does not want to lose sight of his beloved for even an instant-

‘I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,
But that I would not lose her sight so long’

Intellectual flashes are not unmarked here. Popular philosophers, including René Descartes, were considering the subjective nature of reality. Do we make things exist simply by seeing them? Does the sun exist if we can't see it, or is it all in our minds?

Intellectualism:

The progress in navigation, the discovery of America, Walter Raleigh's going round the world, etc., during the Renaissance widened the horizon of man's knowledge. Donne profited from this new knowledge. In his poems, we come across allusions to the latest developments in knowledge utilised to express his

thoughts. The Indias of spice and mine imply both India in the east and the Red Indians in the west.

Renaissance science and technology:

Fancy metaphysical conceits often bring in the latest in Renaissance science and technology. "Sphere" comes from the old, Ptolemaic cosmology (the one Galileo and Copernicus disproved), in which the sun supposedly went round the Earth (as did all other planets, each in its own "sphere"). In Donne's time, astronomers (and astrologers) still argued about what went around what. His interest in scientific controversy gave him metaphors for his poems.

Compression:

The compression of imagery and expression is typical of Donne's metaphysical love poetry-

She's all states, and all princes, I,
Nothing else is.

His beloved is like every country in the world, and he is like every king; nothing else is real. Princes simply play at having countries; compared to what he has, all honour is mimicry, and all wealth is alchemy. The sun, the speaker says, is half as happy as he and his lover are, for the fact that the world is contracted into their bed makes the sun's job much easier—in its old age, it desires ease, and now all it has to do is shine on their bed, and it shines on the whole world.

Hyperbolic Assertions:

“The Sun Rising” is built around a few hyperbolic assertions—

- a) First, that the sun is conscious and has the watchful personality of an old busybody;
- b) Second, that love, as the speaker puts it, “no season knows, nor clime, / Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time”;
- c) Third, that the speaker's love affair is so important to the universe that kings and princes simply copy it, that the world is literally contained within their bedroom.

Of course, to the wakeful lover, the rising sun does seem like an intruder; the bedroom can seem to enclose all the matters in the world. The inspiration of this poem is to pretend that each of these subjective states of feeling is an objective truth.

Summing up:

Critics of John Donne's "The Sun Rising" often note that the poem's displacement of the outside world in favour of two lovers' inner world serves to support its overall theme: the centrality of human love amidst a permanent physical universe. In an essay entitled "John Donne," Achsah Guibbory states, "The world of love contains everything of value; it is the only one worth exploring and possessing. Hence the microcosmic world of love becomes larger and more important than the macrocosm".