



# A Study on the Harmonious Relationship between Men and Women in John Donne's Poem "The Good Morrow"

Qingqing Zhang, Yuyang Chen

School of Foreign Studies, Hebei University, Baoding, China  
Email: qingnjhappy@163.com

**How to cite this paper:** Zhang, Q.Q. and Chen, Y.Y. (2022) A Study on the Harmonious Relationship between Men and Women in John Donne's Poem "The Good Morrow". *Open Access Library Journal*, 9: e9043. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1109043>

**Received:** June 23, 2022

**Accepted:** July 16, 2022

**Published:** July 19, 2022

Copyright © 2022 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

## Abstract

John Donne, a great poet in English Renaissance, created a relatively fixed poetry pattern and was the founder of English metaphysical poetry. There are many negative descriptions of women in his early works, which reveal men's dominant position and show his deep-rooted patriarchal ideology. However, it is worth noting that Donne's later poetry works also show the thought that is inconsistent with patriarchy, that is, the pursuit of gender equality and harmonious relationship between man and woman, which has great significance beyond the limits of time and space. Therefore, through analyzing the poem "The Good Morrow", this paper aims to reveal the harmonious relationship between man and woman pursued by John Donne, hoping to help readers further grasp the view of harmonious and equal love in Donne's poetry world.

## Subject Areas

Literature

## Keywords

"The Good Morrow", John Donne, Harmonious Gender Relations

## 1. Introduction

John Donne is one of the most famous poets of the English Renaissance. John Donne's poems open a new page for 17th-century English poetry, setting off a new wave and breaking the Renaissance literary convention. His style of poetry, a new way of making comparisons, and defamiliarization in poetic form fully prove his individuality and modernity which go beyond some centuries [1].

Quoted from classics, his poetry is logically rigorous, cleverly designed and full of strange ideas and metaphors, thus difficult for people to understand. Therefore, he was not appreciated by people in the 17th century and was excluded by writers who represented the mainstream of poetry. With the publication of "John Donne's Poetry" in 1912, his poems hove into sights of people, and readers began to explore the profound connotation of poems from a different perspective.

There are many detailed descriptions of love in Donne's poems. On the one hand, based on male dominance, Donne's love poems create colorful images about women, which reflect the traditional view of male-centrism. On the other hand, Donne also expresses his appreciation for women in that a large number of metaphors in his poems reflect his view of love: a love full of equality and harmony, which makes his poems ahead of their time. Indeed, Donne's early work is mostly about "man's woman", in which many negative descriptions of women reflect his deep-rooted patriarchal ideology. For example, in his poem "Love's Alchemy", women are belittled as "mummy". However, his later work is mainly about "man and woman", which reflects Donne's desire to pursue harmony and equality in gender relations. There is no doubt that patriarchy is prevalent in most of Donne's poems, because Donne can't be separated from society. However, factors such as his early religious thoughts and precious love experiences finally contribute to Donne's view of harmonious and equal love. Therefore, Donne's later work usually shows the thought of anti-patriarchy such as expectation of harmonious relationship between man and woman, all of which reflect his advanced thoughts in the enduring poems. Among them, the poem "The Good Morrow" profoundly reveals his view of love. In the poem, the relationship between man and woman is very harmonious and equal, which has the significance beyond the limits of time and space. Therefore, taking the poem "The Good Morrow" as a case study, this paper explores the relationship between man and woman in the poem, hoping to help readers further understand the view of harmonious and equal love displayed in Donne's poetry world.

## 2. The Equal Status of Women in "The Good Morrow"

Donne praises women in his poem "The Good Morrow", which is obviously different from patriarchal ideology. He constructs ideal love, in which both sides enjoy equal status in the poem. He regards women as equal individuals and tries to improve their status through showing his admiration of their abilities in the poem, especially in the third stanza as follows:

“My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,  
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;  
Where can we find two better hemispheres,  
Without sharp north, without declining west?  
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;  
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I

Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.”

The poem contains many pairs of images in the third stanza such as my face and your face, my eyes and your eyes, and north and west, etc. Donne employs the most impressive fancy metaphor “two better hemispheres” to describe both man and woman. Man is one hemisphere, while woman belongs to the other, so that man and woman form a perfect sphere without edges and corners, in which woman is entitled to the respect and love from man. In this metaphor, man and woman represent one hemisphere respectively, combining to form a perfect circle of love, where each part of the circle is indispensable. Therefore, in the circle of love, the status of man and woman is absolutely the same. From the perspective of ecological holism, there are no differences between these two parts of a circle, because if one part disappears, the circle of love is destined to vanish, which means that the basic premise of ecological holism is decentralization. The fantastic metaphor of “two hemispheres” embodies the basic idea of ecological holism, that is “decentralization. Donne does not choose to promote a certain part of the whole. Instead, he advocates the whole instead of a small part, because the stress of edges implies the establishment of centralism [2]. It is the most precious in love that there is no center or edge, in that man and woman are absolutely independent and equal to create an ideal world for love. This ideal world has neither sharp north nor declining west, which is better than the real world. The fantastic metaphor of “two hemispheres” not only emphasizes the equal status of man and woman, but also highlights the beauty of the ideal world for love, thus praising the greatness of love. In the poem “The Good Morrow”, Donne expresses his desire to balance the relationship between man and woman. The status of woman in the poem has been greatly improved, which is totally opposite to the low status of woman in real patriarchal society, thus challenging the deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes and cultural traditions in that time. Therefore, the popularity of the poem “The Good Morrow” lies not only in Donne’s use of the fantastic metaphor, but also in the profound connotation, in which Donne intends to construct the image of independent woman and establish equal relationship between man and woman. This ideology is similar to feminism today, that is, to pursue equality between man and woman.

### 3. Harmonious Gender Relations in “The Good Morrow”

The poem “The Good Morrow” represents the perfect love relationship between man and woman. In this poem, Donne employs metaphysical writing skills to describe the occurrence and change of love. In the first stanza, Donne uses the word “Wonder” to express his feelings of not meeting his soulmate in his past life, and conveys some negative views about his present life experience. Before he met his soulmate, he thought life was boring. After he encountered his soulmate, the dull days he spent alone before became more and more meaningless and vapid. In the poem, Donne compares himself and his lover to innocent children playing in the country, because the happiness of innocent children is pure and

natural. However, Donne thinks that this is not true happiness. Now they meet and fall in love, which brings real happiness. The poet may think that it is not powerful to compare lovers to children in an analogy, so he also introduces the story of seven sleepers in mythology to show that his life before he met his lover is just a dream, a meaningless dream. In the second stanza, Donne explains his world view from both narrow and broad aspects. He thinks that love makes the narrow world much wider than the broad world. In this poem, others sail to explore the world, while he and his lover stay in the world created by themselves, where nothing else will disturb them. The world built by them is much broader and richer than the real world. The line “And now good-morrow to our waking souls” [3] reveals the theme of this poem, and indicates the awakening of lovers from meaningless life. Most importantly, the awakening of souls symbolizes the awakening of love, representing that the love Donne pursues is the fit of souls. In sum, the sacred love of soul is Donne’s ultimate pursuit. After awakening, two lovers (two souls) trust each other without hesitation, doubt, fear, and betrayal. In this stanza, Donne treats woman tenderly and equally, and no longer regards woman as the angel in family, nor as disgraceful monster. In the poems, the man and woman live forever and trust each other, thus constructing a harmonious gender relationship.

Donne believes in the concept of “integration”, which coincides with Plato’s theory. Plato thinks that man and woman combine to form paragons in the world before birth or after death, but they are divided in two when they come to the world. Influenced by the concept of “integration”, Donne thinks that unbalanced things will not last long. Similarly, unequal love will soon disappear. Consequently, Donne creates the harmonious gender relation in ideal love by defending the equality between man and woman. In addition, Donne highlights the importance of harmonious gender relation by creating the image of a round sphere in third stanza of the poem. The sphere, composed of two parties, represents continuity in love. Two better hemispheres are equal and interdependent. If either one separates, love will become fragments. The absence of hemisphere or any imbalance between two parts will damage their ideal love, which is based on integrity, harmony and unity. In the last stanza, Donne thinks that if man and woman love each other and are loyal to each other, then this true love and beauty is eternal, surpassing life and death. In the poem “The Good Morrow”, man and woman are equal halves in a harmonious whole, in which they realize the mutual trust in spirit and body. In fact, the Chinese people’s pursuit of perfection is the same as Donne’s. For example, “The Book of Changes”, one of the three great books of ancient China, emphasizes that man and woman are a complete and harmonious unity, with man as Yang and woman as Yin in harmony, just like the intersection of heaven and earth to create everything [4]. The love relationship between man and woman in the poem “The Good Morrow” is similar to the traditional Chinese Yin-Yang relationship. Yin and Yang constitute an inseparable whole just like the harmonious gender relation.

## 4. The Source of Donne's Thought of Harmonious Gender Relations

John Donne expresses his inner feelings through poetry, and his pursuit of harmonious gender relationship is also deeply reflected in his poetry. His early religious thoughts and unique love experience all influence Donne's understanding of ideal love. On the one hand, the family education Donne received in his early years is nearly Catholic thoughts, which lead to Donne's thought of gender harmonious relationship. On the other hand, Donne's dramatic love experience also shapes his own unique view of love. Donne's marriage with his soul mate deepens his multi-dimensional thinking on love and stimulates his pursuit of harmonious gender relations.

### 4.1. Donne's Early Religious Thoughts

Born in London in 1572, influenced by his family, John Donne believes in Catholicism. At that time, anti-Catholicism was prevalent in Britain, and Catholicism was not recognized by the mainstream. Catholicism regards marriage as a very sacred thing, and Christians refuse to marry followers of other religions. They believe that such marriage will not be blessed by God, and there will be an insurmountable gap between husband and wife. Catholics regard life and death as fate. They pray devoutly to the Virgin Mary and follow God's will. The existence of Virgin Mary adds femininity to Jesus' salvation. Therefore, Catholics have certain special feelings for women represented by the Virgin Mary. Under the subtle influence of early religious thoughts, Donne inadvertently reveals his appreciation for women in his poems. Although Donne once belittled women in his poems, he was forced to cater to the thoughts of the mainstream. Donne converted to the Anglican Church for his livelihood in middle age. After that, he has been trapped in contradictions all his life [4]. In fact, Donne appreciates and respects women in his heart, so he can't help showing respect for women even under the negative influence of external factors. His early religious thoughts construct Donne's ideal love, making him believe that women have the same strength as men.

### 4.2. Donne's Unique Love Experience

Donne's love story is unique and full of drama. When he was young, he liked to play with women. His poem "The Flea" reflects his hostile attitude towards women. He despises women's chastity, questions women's loyalty and ignores women's love in his early poems. However, after he got married, Donne begins to praise women for their faith and beauty in poems. One important person in Donne's love experience is Anne More. After meeting his soul mate Anne More, under the secular pressure and the strong opposition of his father-in-law, Donne insists on falling in love with Anne and finally marries Anne More. Instead, Donne is not only opposed to his father-in-law, but also to the power on behalf of the patriarchy at that time. In this respect, both Donne and his wife defy the

will of the patriarchy in that they persist in their own pursuits despite the opposition of their families. As a result, after got married, Donne and his family live in hardship and suffer financial distress, with almost no source of supportable income. However, poverty does not hinder their love. Donne and Anne More encourage each other, support each other, and live in a harmonious life together. This simple but sweet marriage makes Donne form a unique view of harmonious love, which inspires him to compose many love odes, in which “The Good Morrow” is one of the most representative poems. In the poem “The Good Morrow”, Donne makes the best interpretation of ideal love: When the fame is far away and the glitz is gone, only the true love exists in the world and is hidden in people’s hearts. Love is the God of the universe, and all the complicated things in the world should be its servants.

## 5. Conclusion

John Donne’s marriage experience and religious thoughts contribute to his deep pursuit of a harmonious and unified gender relationship. He expresses his desire for ideal love in his poems, which are the best illustration of the equal relationship between man and woman. The ideal love portrayed by John Donne in the poem “The Good Morrow” embodies harmonious and equal gender relations. In this poem, some feminist thoughts can be seen, which is one of the most important reasons that his poems have unique charm so far. By analyzing the poem “The Good Morrow”, this paper traces the source of Donne’s understanding of harmonious gender relation, and finds that Donne’s early religious thought and unique love experience shape his view of ideal love. In a word, the poet and his works are closely related. Donne’s poems reflect his ideology and his innermost desire, that is, the ideal love full of harmony and equality. Taking Donne’s poem “The Good Morrow” as a case study, this paper explores the harmonious gender relationship in Donne’s love poems, hoping to help readers further understand the view of love displayed in Donne’s poetry world.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Post-graduate’s Innovation Fund Project of Hebei Province “Discursive Strategies of Hebei International Tourism Based on Multimodal Corpus” (HBU2022ss048) for the support of this research.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## References

- [1] Li, Z.S. and Li, D. (2016) Individuality and Modernity in John Donne’s Poetry. *Foreign Literature Studies*, **38**, 41-45. (In Chinese)
- [2] Li, Z.S. and Sun, W. (2017) An Ecological Interpretation of John Donne’s Poem “The Good Morrow”. *Foreign Language Research*, 115-120. (In Chinese)

- [3] Hu, J.L. (2003) Annotated Classic British Poems. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing, 42 p. (In Chinese)
- [4] Li, Z.S. and Zhao, X.M. (2017) The Dramatic Features in John Donne's Poems. *Foreign Language and Literature*, **33**, 26-30. (In Chinese)