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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**How Conceited Is Donne's Metaphysical Conceit? A Possible World Perspective With Multiverse Commendation**

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**ABSTRACT**

Metaphysical conceit as popularized by John Donne has remained a narratological enigma considering the truth value of the eccentric stretched metaphorical ideas presented in this category of poetry. Narratologists like Lewis (1986) have successfully made use of the Possible World (PW) theory and the accessibility principle to weigh the logical validity of fictitious text worlds. However, the Possible World theory is a philosophical theory that capitalizes on ontological considerations. This study, in addition to Possible World Theory, makes use of the scientific Multiverse (MV) Theory from Quantum Physics to gauge the logical and potential worth of the metaphysical conceit presented by John Donne; there is a reconciliation of PW and MV theories and their narratological frameworks to explore text worlds, and to weigh the veracity of text worlds presented in the metaphysical poetry of John Donne. The study explored the text worlds of metaphysical conceit as possible worlds, and as plausible worlds in the outer cosmic space, and concluded that the logical value of text, in a greater part, is provided by both the cognitive and scientific realities.

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**Introduction**

The dilemma surrounding the logical value of fiction is an important consideration in narratology. Is fiction a non-intellectual entity, or is it logically consistent? This philosophical question can be dealt through multifaceted perspectives, Possible World theory being one of them. This lucrative theory grabbed the attention of cognitive poetics to access fictional worlds through logical perspectives. Furthermore, the access to some of the more outlandish fictional worlds is also possible via Multiverse theory. The present study uses both these theories to access the worlds of metaphysical conceit to access its logical and scientific aspects.

## **Possible World Theory**

Possible world (PW) theory entertains the possibility of cross-worlds identities of entities that may or may not exist in our world. The idea was originally propounded by the logician Leibniz (Semino,1995:79), but it was adapted by cognitive poetic experts to establish a model to access fictional worlds (Khakpour, 2015:18). Possible Worlds theory argues that the truth value of propositions within a text world should be conceptualized according to the *possible world* that each text projects, instead of the world that we inhabit (p.5).

According to this theory, the worlds of hypotheses, prediction or fiction, are as real as the existent ones and merely tangible existence does not give any more credence to the actual world. (Lavocat, 2013:431). This world is as truthfully real in the philosophical domain as the actual world. This notion also proposes that properties of real objects may alter at the fuzzy borders of these fictitious worlds. (Khakpour,2015:5) as all possible worlds can be referential for the other possible worlds (Lavocat, 2013:431). To elaborate, since the actual world is just referential, when the object crosses borders from actual to textual world, using the license of alternate textual reality, some features may not be exactly the same. This allows the textual worlds to remain accessible yet slightly different from referential reality.

The possible world narratologists explain fictional text as "[a] machine for producing possible worlds" (Ryan, 2006:644), which implies that texts produce numerous possible worlds which exist as propositions in modal logic; a branch of formal semantics dealing with the ontological value of narrative. The notion explicates that reality in fiction is a sum of all imaginable possibilities rather than only the existent possibility (p.14). Possible world theory demands two pre-considerations: the possible world must be held as real as the existing world; and the modal operators should not be counterfactual. They have to follow the facts and logics that we accept as non-contradictory or apt. As soon as they cross boundaries of logic or non-contradiction, they become *impossible worlds*. The ground distinction between possible and impossible world is the notion of "accessibility relation" (p.645). In impossible worlds, accessibility relationship is violated through contradiction of facts and logics.

PW is a successful narratological framework to make cognitive poetic analyses of fictional world. There are multiple examples of the theory being deployed successfully onto works of fiction like Maryam (2017)'s explorations of Possible worlds of in tales of macabre written by E.A.Poe, or the extraordinary work of Chinn (2020) in which she explored the possibilities in the worlds presented in Science-fiction. Both researchers elaborated that PW theory legitimizes the fictional worlds through logical existence.

## Multiverse Theory

Physical sciences, specifically Quantum Mechanics have a version of the multiple realities known as *Multiverse Theory* (MV henceforth). The theory was originally devised by Hugh Everett III in the mid 1950's (Byrne, 2007:98). The multiverse phenomenon is highly controversial. Scientists like John S. Bell and Martin Gardner dismissed it as absurd (Ryan, 2006:6344). In 2004 physicist Max Tegmark, revived the theory, further constituting four levels of multiverse. These levels exist parallel to each other and encompass a "global scheme" and existence in its entirety (p.634).

The four levels of universes are:

- Level 1: Regions beyond our cosmic reality
- Level 2: Other post inflation bubbles
- Level 3: Many worlds of Quantum Physics
- Level 4: Other mathematical structures (Tegmark, 2004:467-488).

### Level 1: Regions beyond our cosmic reality

Everett III and his followers believe that our universe, known as 'Hubble Universe' is like a soap bubble. This soap bubble is expanding, the cosmic inflation phenomenon. Previously it was believed that the expansion will eventually slow down, however, the expansion is growing faster due to a force called the *dark energy*. The expansion is occurring on a space sheet that extends through and beyond the universe called the 'time-space continuum'. This implicates the possibility of furthermore cosmic matter beyond our space bubble. The possibility is quite promising: "A generic prediction of cosmological inflation is an infinite "ergodic" space, which contains Hubble volumes realizing all initial conditions – including an identical copy of you about  $10^{10^{29}}$ m away" (Tegmark, 2010: 554).

The essential assumptions here are: the three-dimensional space as we know it is infinite; our observable universe is limited and there is matter beyond this universe; and there are copies of our universe that exist beyond our universe. (Ryan, 2006:635). The term ergodic refers to the assumption that the multiple universes existing on this cosmic sheet follow the same laws of physics. This level of multiverse is in perfect alignment with the possible world theory.

### Level 2: Other post inflation bubbles

The cosmic inflation has a second implication. The rate of this inflation is alarmingly high, to the extent that it may cause a burst of the universe bubble. This

possibility of the universe dying at the hand of inflation inspires the second level of multiverse. When the bubble finally bursts, it stops existing on our three-dimensional spatial sheet. With the leftover matter, it creates a space of its own with slightly different laws of physics. Tegmark (2004) believes that at this level, basic equations applicable to our space are still valid; however, the constants are different because, there are different number of particles, and different set of dimensions that require different sets of physical laws.

The formation and ending of these bubbles is a perpetual phenomenon. "Indeed, if this exponential growth of the number of bubbles has been going on forever, there will be an uncountable infinity of such parallel universes" (Tegmark, 2004: 466). This essentially means that just like many universes on level 1, many universes exist at level 2.

In poetics, this level of MV can be utilized to access the logical veracity of scientific-fiction dealing with aliens and cosmic extra-terrestrial life forms, as well as the existence of magical creatures. The oddly shaped, oddly built strange creature evolve in different universes from level 2 where the conditions of living, and laws of physics are slightly different.

### **Level 3: Many worlds of Quantum Physics**

The idea of level 3 universes has its origin in the behavior of light. Light functions both as a wave and as a particle, but a photon, when closely observed, gives up its status as a wave. Neil Bohr explained this phenomenon, known as Neil Bohr's idea of Complementarity, that sometimes light behaves as particles, while at others it acts like wave (Ryan, 2006:641). The behavior of the subatomic particles is altered by mere observation. Hence, it was concluded that the duality *collapses* every time the light is observed.

This behavior of light precedes the level 3 MVs. At level 3, every time a quantum decision is made and observed at a subatomic level the universe branches out into two MV's: "whenever a quantum event appears to have a random outcome, all outcomes in fact occur, one in each branch" (p.473). These split universes are existing parallel to each other, unitary in their physical laws. We cannot access them because we are observing only one of these universes in a broad three-dimensional space-time continuum, whereas at level 3 other multiple universes exist in very tight smaller multiple dimensions making them invisible to us.

To verify level 3 MV, Schrödinger (1935) performed a thought experiment assuming there is a cat inside a box with a fatal radioactive source that has a non-zero probability of emitting radiation which may kill the cat. To the spectator outside the box the cat is both dead and alive, but as soon as the box is opened, mere observation can alter the possibility of this duality.

Tegmark credits this experiment suggesting that to an observer outside the level 3 multiverse, the probability of various universes based on split decisions is like

a wave function. For them the view is that of a *bird perspective* or what he calls *Platonic paradigm*. They do not see a split but a wave with its crest and trough. However, since we observe it closely, we make a reality concrete for us. This is what he refers to as the *frog perspective* or *Aristotelian paradigm* (p.478) through which everything can be seen at only level 1 universe (2004:478).

#### **Level 4: Other mathematical structures**

All sets of physical laws take support from mathematical structures and all mathematical structures are essentially one or the other case of the same thing known as the *formal system* which contains elementary axioms and theorems composing and complementing the entire mathematical system (Tegmark, 2004:480). Tegmark demands a mathematical democracy at this level. In simpler terms any universe from all levels that has a mathematical structure can exist at this level. This is the ultimate ensemble where everything is possible if sufficient mathematical proof is provided in its support.

Multiverse theory is a legitimate theory of text world analysis, specifically in Science-Fiction genre. Buren (2021) went as far as claiming that not only popular works like Spiderman (2018) or Avengers Endgame (2019) but works like Chronicles of Narnia (1950) can also be explained through the MV theory. Vergara (2020) also utilized the theory of MV and the Double-slit experiment to frame his discussion around the characters and storylines elaborated by Borges.

#### **Multiverse, Possible Worlds and Worlds of Fiction**

The study at hand is an effort to reconcile Possible World Theory with Multiverse Theory through Cognitive poetics to access John Donne's *Metaphysical Conceit*. The blending of these two theories has already been done by Ryan in 2006. However, the focus of this study is metaphysical conceit and the unlikely worlds that Donne builds up.

The selection of his work is based on his status as a pioneer in metaphysical poetry; and the parameters of eccentricity. Metaphysical conceit is quite unconventional in its ontological, epistemic and deictic depiction and encompasses an array of probable impossibilities and anomalies that appear to defy reality on multiple levels. Moreover, most of the work on Possible World Theory is woven around novel and fiction in drama, leaving poetry a rather neglected area. This paper is an attempt to apply the two theories on metaphysical conceit as it is exploited by Donne.

#### **Discussion**

Traditionally, Possible World theory and Multiverse theory do not blend, because PW is concerned with fictional actualities surrounding one reality whereas Multiverse is not concerned with possible or impossible actualities at all. It talks

about matter, planets and stars and galaxies (Ryan, 2006:651). Nevertheless, while dealing with the ontological predicaments of logical value in fiction, we can benefit from one or another or both of these theories.

### **Access to the Worlds of Metaphysical Poetry by Donne**

John Donne (1572–1631), better known as the father of metaphysical poetry is known for the use of poetic tools such as extended metaphors and satire, as varied as his fertile imagination could provide. When it comes to understanding Donne, his poetry has been a subject of stylistic analysis and study in metaphor, however, the philosophical possibilities of his multiple or different realities, and a possibility of parallel worlds have remained relatively ignored. This study is an attempt to gauge his selected poems from this perspective.

Donne's shortest poem is *A Burnt Ship*:

Out of a fired ship, which, by no way  
But drowning, could be rescued from the flame,  
Some men leaped forth, and ever as they came  
Near the foe's ships, did by their shot decay;  
So all were lost, which in the ship were found,  
They in the sea being burnt, they in the burnt ship drowned.

(Donne, 1994:53)

Donne has presented an irony of situation. A ship caught fire and drowned killing everyone on board. A few passengers escaped but they were shot by enemies. Those on board drowned on the burning ship, the refugees were burnt when they escaped the drowning ship.

Through this poem Donne answers the ontological question of avoiding death, with alternative ways of dying. We all entertain the notions related to death of a beloved, the questions related to saving lives by alternating the possibilities. In this poem the ship catches fire and people die. Donne seems to present the idea that death is inevitable. The methods may alter, time may alter but the logical conclusion is an end after all. Let us extend this scenario of the burning travelers in other possible worlds:

- In an attempt to escape, they caught fire on ship
- they escaped and avoided the enemy ship, but they received sharp stings from a pack of jelly-fish which burnt away their flesh

- they kept travelling and died on sea due to dehydration and sun burn
- they landed on a deserted island where they died of hunger and sun burn

All in all, the possibility of them dying by burning cannot be refuted. This is in accordance to the scenario presented by Donne.

In this same poem, Donne presents the answer to the dilemma pertaining to quantum immortality. Death is inescapable. Even in all parallel universes, life must end at some point. If a universe cannot sustain itself forever without bursting, how can we expect something as short as human life to persist forever? Although physics does not entertain moral or philosophical possibilities but even in the expansion of universe and the presence of blackholes, which are essentially dead stars, we can see death taking its toll in the end.

Another remarkable poem by Donne is the "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star":

Go and catch a falling star,  
Get with child a mandrake root,  
Tell me where all past years are,  
Or who cleft the devil's foot,  
Teach me to hear mermaids singing,  
Or to keep off envy's stinging,  
And find  
What wind  
Serves to advance an honest mind.

If thou be'st born to strange sights,  
Things invisible to see,  
Ride ten thousand days and nights,  
Till age snow white hairs on thee,  
Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me,

All strange wonders that befell thee,  
And swear,  
No where  
Lives a woman true, and fair.  
If thou find'st one, let me know,  
Such a pilgrimage were sweet;  
Yet do not, I would not go,  
Though at next door we might meet;  
Though she were true, when you met her,  
And last, till you write your letter,  
Yet she  
Will be  
False, ere I come, to two, or three.

(Donne, 1994:16)

The poem enlists a number of impossibilities asking an unknown listener to try to achieve those tasks, emphasizing in an ironic tone, the idea that all these impossibilities can become possible but finding a loyal woman is absolutely impossible.

In a PW perspective, the song is a classic example of the potentiality offered by the theory. Though in this world of ours, catching a falling star, getting an offspring of the mythological mandrake plant, keeping a record of temporal dynamics, learning the songs of the mythological beings 'mermaids' and finding the perpetrator who left a cleft in devil's foot are impossible but these are possibilities in ontological worlds where the physical features of entities alter on cross-world border. Falling stars are falling cosmological bodies, catching them is a possibility in a *wish world*. Mandrake is an infertile plant, but the plant itself is a myth. On a *mythological* plane, there is a possibility of getting a baby plant, so is the case with *belief worlds* where mermaids and devil dwell.

Through MV perspective, these possibilities have already been achieved. Catching a falling star means seizing a falling meteor, which is difficult on our planet owing to the moderate to extremely cold cosmic bodies randomly catching fire while entering the earth's atmosphere. The temperature of these meteors ranges between +9000k to -9000k (Jenniskens et.al, 2000:68). But the possibly of catching a falling meteor is easier on a planet with less gravity owing to less friction lessening the



chances of spontaneous combustion of celestial objects after entering the stratosphere, which happens on our planet. Moreover, as a species we are more sensitive to hot and cold temperatures. However, on a level 2 multiverse plane, we can see a species evolving on another planet, which is exactly like us but less sensitive to extreme temperatures. So just like spectators catch a baseball during a match, may be somewhere, in some parallel universe the addressee can catch a meteor.

Similarly, Mandrake may even be an alien species of a plant which requires a specific growth environment unavailable on earth. That is why it never produced a baby sapling here but in a parallel universe, it gets a baby mandrake.

Through a study of stars and celestial bodies, we know that the stars that we see now are probably already dead for millions of years. But we see them blinking in the night sky. In a way, we see their past. So theoretically, if we start keeping track of this light, we can keep track of their time. Similarly, there is light reflected by earth in space which is travelling to unknown dimensions, carrying information about our time since the big bang, which is the beginning of our space-time. So, the answer to the question of time is in the wilderness of space. In a parallel universe the addressee has access to our time and keeps a record of events on earth.

Finally, Devil and mermaids may even be aliens for all we know. They have possibly been living on other planets and might be hostile or friendly towards the human civilization. All these impossibilities that Donne has enlisted are achievable only through accessibility to wormholes; a connective passage between this universe and the multiple parallel universes.

If we look at the last part of the poem, it balances the epistemological experiences of the addressee on an ontological base. A number of possible worlds are presented within the chief domain of supposition. If the traveler is born again with the knowledge he (we suppose it is a *he* owing to the misogynistic message at the end of stanza) has gained so far, and further sees stranger, more impossible things and travels day and night without stopping for at least twenty-seven years with the purpose of seeing everything around the globe he will still be unable to report a fair and true woman.

The picture is equally anti-feminist in a multiverse perspective. Being born again can suggest to getting born in the tightly packed dimensions in a level 3 multiverse. Once access is gained, an observer can see the multiple possibilities constantly branching out and observe each and every possibility through a *bird perspective* (Tegmark, 2004: 4778) for as many as twenty-seven years, things that are invisible to witness because they are in tightly packed smaller dimensions, according to Donne, even at level 3 multiverse there are zero prospects of finding a loyal woman. This turns out to be a brazen insult for women on a cosmological scale.

Another poem of Donne, *The Apparition* presents a remarkable phenomenon of an impossible world along with a possible world, strengthening the multiverse perspective. The poem states:

WHEN by thy scorn, O murd'ress, I am dead.  
And that thou thinkst thee free  
From all solicitation from me,  
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,  
And thee, feign'd vestal, in worse arms shall see  
Then thy sick taper will begin to wink,  
And he, whose thou art then, being tired before,  
Will, if thou stir, or pinch to wake him, think  
Thou call'st for more,  
And, in false sleep, will from thee shrink:  
And then, poor aspen wretch, neglected thou  
Bathed in a cold quicksilver sweat wilt lie,  
A verier ghost than I.  
What I will say, I will not tell thee now,  
Lest that preserve thee: and since my love is spent,  
I'd rather thou shouldst painfully repent,  
Than by my threatenings rest still innocent. (Donne, 1994:32)

As far as the presence of ghosts and other super natural beings is concerned, possible world theorists are divided on the subject. According to Lewis, possible worlds are real for three basic reasons:

- 1) Everything is actual
- 2) Actuality means everything linked to us "spatiotemporally" coherent with what we are accustomed to
- 3) Possibilities identify alternatives to actualities (1986: 99)

Therefore, on ontological grounds of possibilities we can consider existence of ghosts seeking revenge and stalking their lovers as a possible world. But from an extreme-realist standpoint, ghosts are not a part of our spatiotemporal actuality, hence rendering them dwellers of impossible world, ultimately implying that the text world in this particular poem, much like Schrödinger's cat, is possible and impossible at the same time until observed from a respective point of observation.

In a multiverse perspective, the tale of this textual world of vengeful ghosts pestering young ladies and their partners is surprisingly more plausible. As a biological phenomenon, death means transformation from one form into another; from human body to fertilizer; from human to food for insects; in short from one world to another. Hence, becoming a ghost means transfer from this world into another with an ability to maneuver around this world. Scientifically speaking we can manipulate light and shadows if we get access to the folds of a tightly packed fourth dimension which others cannot see; rendering us invisible (Beech, 2012:9). In such a state of invisibility, a person can impersonate a ghost and stalk anyone they will. Regardless of the extremely disturbing obsession and psychological disorders they display, invisibility and ghost-like behavior is not impossible in a multiverse perspective, also rendering the PW duality a singular truth value.

### **Conclusion**

Through this study we concluded that worlds of fiction, even in metaphysical conceit, are logically consistent, both philosophically and scientifically. Logic resides in conceit. Hence to answer the question, the metaphysical conceit is not nearly as conceited as we imagine. In fact, the conceit has its roots in both logic and science.

Human cognition has infinite potential not only to imagine far-fetched ideas. When we conceive impossibility, we are developing a precept about a future possibility and developing a possible world. Fiction provides a cognitive road map for human development and civilization, because fiction is the stepping stone of creativity. Thus, when we map the logical projection of fiction, we question a creative possibility. It is the paradoxical status of truth in works of fiction, corresponding to the *possible, impossible and multiverse* worlds, that helps us process these narratological ventures and achieve verisimilitude both in our mind and in reality.

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