Reading, Meaning, and Machines: Ethical Questions of AI in Poetry Education

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Abstract: The increasing use of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in literature classrooms has changed how students read and analyse poetry. While AI tools can summarise poems and identify themes or stylistic features, this paper argues that they cannot truly interpret poetry, especially metaphysical poetry. The meaning of metaphysical poems often emerges through ambiguity, philosophical reasoning, religious ideas, and historical context, which AI systems cannot fully understand. By focusing on metaphysical poetry, the paper shows that interpretation requires awareness of literary theory, cultural background, and ethical sensitivity—capacities that AI does not possess. Elements such as complex conceits, paradoxes, and theological debates in metaphysical poetry resist simple explanation and cannot be reduced to patterns or formulas. AI-generated readings often simplify these features or present fixed meanings, overlooking the layered and argumentative nature of the poems. In such cases, AI relies on patterns drawn from existing interpretations and frequently repeats dominant readings without critical reflection or interpretive responsibility. The paper concludes by suggesting that AI should be used carefully and ethically in the study of metaphysical poetry, as a supportive learning aid rather than an authoritative interpreter, in order to preserve close reading, critical thinking, and students' interpretive agency.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Poetry Interpretation, Metaphysical Poetry, Ethics, generative AI

I. INTRODUCTION

The abilities and indulgence of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the life of academicians has brought significant changes to higher education, particularly in the ways students read, write, and engage with literary texts. The process of understanding the literary texts passes through the lens of AI-based tools, which are increasingly used in literature classrooms for tasks such as summarisation, thematic analysis, and stylistic explanation. (Kobierski, 3) While these tools offer convenience and support, their growing presence raises important questions about interpretation, ethics, and the nature of literary understanding. AI tools take data from the cloud and available resources on the web, which limits the sight of students and they are always focused upon the same-repetitive analysis all the time.

In the study of poetry—especially metaphysical poetry—interpretation is not merely an act of identifying themes or devices. It is a complex intellectual process that involves close reading, philosophical reasoning, historical awareness, and ethical sensitivity. Metaphysical poets employ intricate conceits, paradoxes, and theological arguments that demand reflective and theoretically informed engagement from the reader. This paper argues that although AI can explain such poetic features, it cannot genuinely interpret metaphysical poetry because it lacks consciousness of theory, cultural situatedness, and ethical accountability.

By examining selected metaphysical poems, the paper explores the limitations of AI-generated literary readings and highlights the risks of treating AI as an interpretive authority in literature education. The study ultimately advocates for a responsible and ethical use of AI, positioning it as a supportive pedagogical tool rather than a replacement for human interpretation, critical thinking, and interpretive agency.

II. METAPHYSICAL POETRY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Metaphysical poetry refers to a group of seventeenth-century English poems characterised by intellectual complexity, philosophical inquiry, and

innovative use of imagery. Though never well-defined by any scholar in any age, it still exists as one of the important and highly intellectual forms of poetry. (Smith 263) Associated mainly with poets such as John Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell, this poetic tradition is known for its striking use of conceits—extended and often surprising metaphors that link abstract ideas with concrete images. Metaphysical poets frequently explore themes of love, religion, death, and the nature of existence through paradox, argument, and wit.

Unlike earlier lyrical poetry that emphasised smooth expression and emotional flow, metaphysical poetry engages the intellect as much as the emotions. Its poems often resemble philosophical debates or logical arguments, requiring active participation from the reader. Historical and religious contexts, especially early modern theological concerns, play a crucial role in shaping meaning. Because of its reliance on ambiguity, irony, and complex reasoning, metaphysical poetry resists straightforward interpretation, making it particularly demanding of close reading and theoretical awareness. This study examines three representative metaphysical poems to explore the ethical and interpretive limits of AI in poetry education. These poems are chosen for their intellectual complexity, philosophical depth, and resistance to simplified interpretation.

III. COMPARISON OF THE INTERPRETATION BY AI AND HUMAN-BASED ANALYSIS

1. *The Canonization* – John Donne

"The Canonization" by John Donne presents a bold and emotionally charged comparison between human love and religious sainthood. Through this extended conceit, Donne does not merely decorate his poem with religious imagery; he deliberately brings together love, faith, desire, and belief in a way that was culturally and theologically risky in his historical context. The poem's irony lies in this tension, as it challenges accepted boundaries between the sacred and the secular, forcing the reader to reflect on the emotional intensity and moral complexity of private love.

AI-generated readings of *The Canonization* usually explain the poem by stating that the speaker compares his love to sainthood and uses religious language to defend it. While such explanations follow the words of the text and are factually correct, they remain superficial. They fail to engage with the emotional depth of the poem and overlook the historical and cultural sensitivity of using sacred religious concepts to justify erotic love. As a result, the ethical tension at the heart of the poem is reduced to a simple metaphor, as mentioned below,

> "In "The Canonization," John Donne compares his love for his beloved to religious sainthood. The speaker uses sacred imagery such as saints, miracles, and hymns to suggest that true love is pure and worthy of honour. By calling himself and his lover saints, the poet argues that their love should not be judged by society. The poem shows how love can transcend worldly criticism and become spiritually meaningful. Donne's use of religious language highlights the intensity and seriousness of his feelings and presents love as something eternal and admirable." - Generative AI output

In contrast, human critics such as Cleanth Brooks recognise that Donne's poem works through paradox rather than clarity. Brooks argues that meaning in Donne's poetry emerges from the "resolution of opposites," where conflicting ideas are held together rather than simplified (Brooks 213). This reading acknowledges the poem's emotional intensity, theological risk, and cultural context, demonstrating that literary interpretation requires ethical awareness and historical understanding—qualities that AI-generated interpretations cannot fully achieve.

2. *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* – John Donne

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning by John Donne presents love not as an outburst of emotion but as a thoughtful and disciplined bond grounded in reason and philosophy. Through the well-known compass conceit, Donne suggests that true love remains stable even during physical separation. However, this calmness is not emotional coldness; it reflects a conscious control of feeling shaped by early modern philosophical and cultural beliefs about harmony, balance, and intellectual order.

AI-style interpretations of the poem usually explain the compass image by stating that it symbolises the spiritual unity of lovers who remain connected despite distance. While such explanations correctly follow the words of the poem, they remain limited. They focus on reassurance and ideal love, but fail to engage with the emotional restraint and cultural context that inform Donne's choice to replace sentiment with logic, as mentioned below,

In "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," John Donne describes the separation of two lovers and reassures his beloved that their love will remain strong. The speaker uses the image of a compass to show how the lovers are connected even when they are apart. Just as one leg of the compass stays fixed while the other moves, the lovers remain united in spirit despite physical distance. The poem presents love as calm, stable, and spiritual rather than emotional or dramatic. Donne suggests that true love does not depend on physical presence and can endure separation with patience and understanding. - Generative AI output

In contrast, human critics such as Helen Gardner emphasise that Donne's poetry is argumentative rather than merely expressive. Gardner observes that Donne's poems "persuade rather than merely express," using reason to discipline emotion (Gardner 98). This reading recognises that the compass conceit is not decorative but philosophical, shaped by historical ideas of order and proportion. AI may describe the image accurately, but it cannot understand why emotional restraint becomes an ethical and intellectual choice—an understanding that emerges only through human awareness of emotion, history, and cultural context.

3. *The Collar* – George Herbert

The Collar by George Herbert expresses a deeply personal moment of spiritual anger and rebellion, followed by a sudden and quiet return to faith. The poem's broken structure, emotional outbursts, and abrupt ending reflect the speaker's inner struggle with religious duty, doubt, and obedience. This struggle is shaped by the religious culture and spiritual expectations of Herbert's time, where faith was not only belief but a lived moral discipline.

AI-generated readings of *The Collar* usually describe the poem as a simple movement from frustration to acceptance, noting the speaker's anger and his eventual submission to God. While this explanation follows the surface narrative of the poem, it overlooks the emotional weight and historical depth of the speaker's crisis. By treating the ending as a clear resolution, AI interpretations miss the tension, silence, and hesitation that give the poem its ethical force.

In "The Collar," George Herbert expresses frustration with religious life and the restrictions placed upon him. The speaker feels trapped and angry and complains about the lack of freedom he experiences. As the poem progresses, the speaker realises that obedience to God is important and accepts his role as a servant. The poem ends with the speaker responding to God's call, showing that faith ultimately brings peace and resolution. Herbert's poem illustrates the struggle between rebellion and obedience in religious life. - Generative AI output

Human critics, however, recognise *The Collar* as a moment of profound spiritual conflict rather than a neat conclusion. As T. S. Eliot observed, Herbert's poetry captures "the experience of the soul in conflict with itself" (Eliot 289). The final exchange—"Child!" and "My Lord."—is not simply an ending but an ethical surrender shaped by struggle, grace, and silence (Herbert 34–36). Unlike AI-generated explanations, human interpretation understands that such moments of faith cannot be reduced to logical resolution, as they arise from emotional experience, cultural context, and historical understanding.

IV.   FINDINGS OF THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Across all three poems, AI-generated responses operate at the level of explanation and pattern recognition, while human critics engage with paradox, theology, philosophy, and ethical responsibility. As metaphysical poetry demands historically situated and theoretically conscious interpretation, this comparison demonstrates that AI may assist understanding but cannot replace human critical judgement in the interpretation of poetry, as explained in the table mentioned below.

Sr. No.	Metaphysical Poem	AI can explain the conceit, but cannot:
1	"The Canonization" – John Donne	• Sense the emotional intensity and risk involved in equating erotic love with religious sainthood • Understand the cultural and historical sensitivity of using sacred Christian language for secular love in a seventeenth-century context • Grasp the poem's irony as an emotional and cultural challenge, not merely a stylistic feature • Recognise how Donne's personal emotion interacts with religious belief systems of his time, producing tension rather than celebration
2	"A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" – John Donne	• Feel the controlled emotion and deliberate restraint behind the calm tone of separation • Understand why emotion is disciplined through reason within early modern philosophical and cultural frameworks • Relate the compass conceit to historical ideas of harmony, order, and intellectual love • Recognise that the poem reflects a culturally shaped emotional ethic, not just an abstract image of unity
3	"The Collar" – George Herbert	• Experience the inner emotional turmoil of spiritual anger, doubt, and rebellion • Understand the poem's struggle within the religious culture and devotional practices of Herbert's time • Interpret silence, obedience, and submission as emotionally charged spiritual experiences, not neat resolutions • Recognise how historical religious discipline shapes the speaker's emotional conflict and surrender

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR POETRY EDUCATION AND ETHICAL AI USE

The findings of this study have important implications for the responsible use of AI in literature and poetry education. Poetry, particularly metaphysical poetry, relies on "compelling content with aesthetically pleasing wordplay (metaphor and other varieties of symbolism), coupled with the various types of sound similarities and constraints of form" (Holyoak, 87). Such elements demand careful attention to emotion, culture, history, and form—dimensions that cannot be fully grasped through algorithmic explanation alone. While AI can be ethically and productively employed as a supportive pedagogical tool—for instance, to provide preliminary summaries, clarify historical references, or assist learners with language difficulties—it should not replace close reading, classroom discussion, or critical interpretation. As mentioned in the table below, the core difference between 'human reading' and 'AI-reading' is significant.

Interpretive Dimension	Human Critical Reading	AI-Generated Reading
Cultural Context	Interprets texts in relation to lived cultural practices, belief systems, and value structures of a specific period and community.	Lacks lived cultural awareness; relies on textual patterns drawn from existing corpora without experiential understanding.
Historical Context	Situates the text within its historical moment, including religious, political, and social conditions that shape meaning.	Identifies historical references only when explicitly stated; cannot meaningfully situate the text within historical consciousness.
Social Context	Examines class, power relations, gender roles, and social tensions influencing the text and its reception.	Tends to overlook implicit social structures; focuses on surface meanings rather than underlying social dynamics.
Ethical Implications	Engages with moral dilemmas, responsibility, and ethical consequences of interpretation for society.	Cannot evaluate ethical impact or take responsibility for interpretive choices.
Theoretical Awareness	Applies and critiques literary theories (e.g., feminist, postcolonial, theological) with reflexive judgment.	Mimics theoretical language without understanding or critical positioning.
Interpretive Agency	Accepts that meaning is plural, contested, and open to debate.	Often presents interpretations as stable or definitive.
Mode of Reading	Reads beyond the words, engaging subtext, silence, irony, and contradiction.	Follows the words of the text and interprets patterns rather than contextual meaning.
Accountability	Can justify, revise, or ethically defend an interpretation.	Lacks accountability or self-correction beyond data updates.

Educators must remain attentive to the ethical risks of over-reliance on AI, particularly the tendency to treat algorithmic outputs as neutral or definitive interpretations. In the study of metaphysical poetry, such practices may discourage interpretive struggle, philosophical questioning, and engagement with theological and ethical complexity. As scholars have noted, the meaningful and fruitful use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT requires reflection, awareness, and digital literacy on the part of learners (Dahlkemper et al. 2). Without such critical awareness, students may rely on AI-generated explanations that prioritise surface meaning over emotional depth and contextual understanding.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the need to preserve the human dimensions of literary study—judgment, reflection, emotional sensitivity, and ethical responsibility—while thoughtfully integrating AI in ways that support, rather than diminish, the interpretive practices at the heart of poetry education.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that while generative Artificial Intelligence can assist in explaining poetic devices and summarising themes, it cannot genuinely interpret metaphysical poetry. Through a comparative analysis of AI-style readings and established human criticism of selected metaphysical poems, the study has demonstrated that literary interpretation is not a purely technical or informational task. Rather, it is a historically situated, theoretically informed, and ethically accountable act. Metaphysical poetry, with its complex conceits, paradoxes, theological debates, and argumentative structure, demands reflective judgment and interpretive responsibility—capacities that AI systems do not possess.

The comparison reveals a fundamental difference between explanation and interpretation. AI operates through pattern recognition based on existing discourse and tends to offer stable, simplified meanings. Human critics, by contrast, engage with ambiguity, irony, and tension, recognising meaning as provisional and contested. This distinction is particularly important in poetry education, where the aim is not to arrive at a single correct interpretation but to cultivate critical thinking, close reading, and intellectual independence. Treating AI-generated responses as authoritative risks flattening poetic complexity and undermining the interpretive agency central to the humanities.

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