

CHIAROSCURO FAITH:
ILLUMINATING THE SHADOWED CATHOLIC SELF IN
DONNE'S "PSEUDO-MARTYR"

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Abstract: This paper endeavours to present an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the literary work *Pseudo-Martyr* by John Donne, with the primary objective of unveiling and elucidating his repressed Catholic identity through a thorough exploration of the intricate layers of his personality. In light of the concept of "chiaroscuro", the core aim of this critical examination is to unravel the interwoven multifaceted dimensions of Donne's internal conflict and the intricate process of self-negotiation, all within the broader context of his religious identity. The title of this article succinctly encapsulates the central theme, *i.e.* exposing the suppressed and concealed aspects of Donne's identity as manifested in his literary opus. Through a meticulous and detailed scrutiny of the text *Pseudo-Martyr*, this work delves into the profound themes of religious emancipation and self-discovery, thereby shedding illuminating insights on the poet's profound internal struggles and the eventual liberation of his covert Catholic identity, all examined through the lens of "chiaroscuro" as both a literary and an artistic technique.

Keywords: Catholic, Donne, identity, Pseudo-Martyr, chiaroscuro

1. INTRODUCTION

In the intricate tapestry of artistic and literary expression, a myriad of specialised terms and connotations converge, often posing challenges for those less familiar with their intricacies and particularities. Drawing and painting harbour a lexicon replete with words whose meanings may elude those not immersed in artistic

discourse, while literature boasts its own set of esoteric terms that transcend everyday usage. Yet, these words may serve as portals to deeper understanding, unlocking layers of meaning and enriching the literary, aesthetic and analytical experience. Amidst this linguistic complexity, ambiguity shrouds many aesthetic connotations, infusing terms like “chiaroscuro” with other domains of interpretations, like literature, resulting in varied analytical resonances. Moreover, the symbiotic relationship between art and literature manifests in shared technical lexicons and key concepts, such as “chiaroscuro”, which permeate both visual and literary forms of expression. By elucidating unfamiliar terms, unravelling ambiguous connotations, and highlighting cross-disciplinary connections, this paper endeavours to foster a more profound appreciation of human creativity, inviting readers to embark on a journey where words illuminate worlds and boundaries between disciplines dissolve.

This article engages with the use of chiaroscuro, a technique in art and literature that creates contrast between light and shadow, in John Donne’s own religious portrait from his prose work *Pseudo-Martyr*. For the latter reason, it is essential to begin by defining the concept of “chiaroscuro” in both art and literature to highlight the relevance of its connotation to John Donne’s religious identity. Indeed, one of the definitions has been provided by Helen Gardner, who refers to “chiaroscuro” as something that is “literally clear-obscure” and that refers more specifically to “the treatment of light and dark in a work of art” (Gardner 1961, 754). In her definition, Gardner has associated the key concept in question with the artistic domain of painting and considers this association as the basic usage of the term. For instance, Shearman reckons that, in painting, the technique makes strong contrasts between light and darkness to model three-dimensional forms (Shearman 1962, 27). One of the painters with whom Shearman associates the birth and use of the chiaroscuro technique is Leonardo da Vinci, who is an early Renaissance painter and one of the pioneering figures in the use of the aforementioned technique (Heydenreich 2024)¹.

In his treatise *De L'Art d'Ecrire*, published in 1775, Condillac aimed to impart the fundamental principles of textual composition to the Infante of Parma through a comprehensive guide. Within this instructional work, Condillac draws a parallel between the artist and the man of letters, highlighting the similarities and connections between the two creative entities. He reckons that:

The artist utilises three distinct tools in their craft: drawing, colours, and chiaroscuro. Similarly, the author also employs three essential elements: precision in structure parallels drawing, metaphorical language mirrors colours, and the organisation of words reflects chiaroscuro (Condillac 1947, 576)².

The similarities between the artist and the man of letters, as delineated by Condillac, arise from the mutual principles that govern their respective practices. Just as the artist utilises three fundamental tools—drawing, colours, and chiaroscuro—the writer, in a similar fashion, wields three equivalent instruments: precision in composition, metaphorical language, and organisation of textual elements. This analogy serves to highlight the common essence of artistic production, underlining the structural, expressive, and aesthetic components that are inherent in both visual and written forms. Hence, Condillac's analogy sheds light on the interconnection of artistic pursuits, going beyond the specific medium to unveil the overarching principles that underpin creative expression.

Therefore, it can be said that, in literature, chiaroscuro refers to the use of contrasting images and symbols to create an overarching narrative. In alignment with the research problem under scrutiny, this paper aims to scrutinise how chiaroscuro, functioning as both a visual and literary device, shapes the portrayal of the veiled Catholic identity within the religious discourse presented in Donne's text, while simultaneously illuminating aspects of Donne's multifaceted persona. The introduction further delves into the religious and political milieu surrounding the text, situating it within the broader narrative arc of *Pseudo-Martyr*. The use of chiaroscuro in art and its

symbolism are also analysed in detail, especially how it reflects the opposing natures of light and darkness, which may be reflective and signifiers of truth and deceit. Moreover, the article explains how the use of light and dark in *Pseudo-Martyr*, both literally and metaphorically, conveys the internal and external struggle in maintaining equilibrium, secrecy and religious identity. Therefore, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Donne's literary creations and the concept of "chiaroscuro" embedded within them, it is necessary to explore the historical background of the Counter-Reformation.

The Counter-Reformation as a historical epoch holds significant importance as it intertwines with the continuous discourse regarding the impact of European visual and literary customs on the English Catholic identity, where "the various combinations resulted in different understandings of their situation, and ultimately in a different memory and knowledge" (Corens 2019, 192). Being a covert Catholic amidst a predominantly Protestant society, Donne was confronted with the profound dilemma associated with this context. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr* using chiaroscuro as a framework. It will explore how chiaroscuro is depicted visually and in literature. The following sections will start by examining chiaroscuro in art, delving into its background and symbolic meanings. The analysis will then focus on how Donne incorporates chiaroscuro in his writing, particularly looking at passages in *Pseudo-Martyr* where light and shadow symbolise identity and spiritual struggles. The final section of the paper will synthesise these findings. It will explore the significance of chiaroscuro as a recurring motif in early modern literary works, namely Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr*, underscoring its pertinence in ongoing dialogues concerning art and spirituality. Through this systematic methodological approach, the study endeavours to offer readers a comprehensive exploration of the interconnectedness of visual aesthetics, spiritual themes and textual representations in Donne's oeuvre.

2. GENERAL BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section shall furnish the reader with a comprehensive overview of the historical backdrop within which John Donne composed his work, *Pseudo-Martyr*. Furthermore, it delves into the ideologies of the “religious self” and the “religious other” through the lenses of chiaroscuro, elucidating how grasping these ideologies can enrich the readership’s comprehension of Donne’s religious persona.

2.1. Background of John Donne’s *Pseudo-Martyr*

Pseudo-Martyr is the prose text authored by John Donne and published in 1610. He wrote it with the intent of contributing a defence of King James I’s *Oath of Allegiance*, and implicitly the new king himself, from a Catholic perspective (Oliver 1997, 171). Literary critics and historians like North, Oliver, Carey and others recognise the work as evidence of Donne’s formal declaration of his departure from Roman Catholicism, though his official and much-needed conversion to Anglicanism was yet to take place. The significance of this text lies not only in its religious arguments and the opportunity it presents for a closer examination of Donne’s theology, but also in its effect on his contemporary public image in literary criticism.

By writing an interpretation of this work through the lens of Baroque art and Counter-Reformation spirituality, the deeper complexity of Donne’s presentation of a shadowed Catholic self is revealed and can contribute to a move away from traditional analyses of his religious history and motivations. It is important to note that terminology and concepts such as “chiaroscuro” and ideas such as “martyr” and “the Church militant” were not contemporary to the time in which Donne wrote or published this text, and so the reader would be encouraged to reflect on how such ideas contribute to the interpretation of a posthumous understanding and conception of John Donne in a modern critical context.

2.2. Significance of chiaroscuro in art and literature

The utilisation of chiaroscuro, an approach to depicting the dynamic nature of light and shadow, is a widespread visual and mental technique. This technique is characterised by a focus on light in the centre of the work, with everything else leading to it, while shadow adds depth and contrast (Gardner 1961, 409). According to the same source, the chiaroscuro method is commonly used in fresco and mural artwork to better exemplify the reality of the figures, which are inherently two and sometimes three-dimensional. By employing this method, artists are able to bring out the physical presence of their subjects. For example, the vivid interplay of light and shadow, as well as the changing hues, cannot be fully appreciated through written description alone. With chiaroscuro, painters provide viewers with a unique visual experience within the realm of the “clair-obscur”.

The artistic technique known as chiaroscuro, which involves the complex interplay of light and shadow, maintains a position of significance not only in the area of visual arts but also reaches its influence into the sphere of literature. Within the context of literature, chiaroscuro assumes a metaphorical role, serving as a tool to intricately depict and communicate layers of depth and complexity within the narrative structure (Plante 2014, 470). Indeed, Condillac claims that just like painters play on lights and shadows, writers build visual illusions through playing on words, imageries and metaphors (*Ibidem*, 577). Moreover, the essence of chiaroscuro is intricately intertwined with the thematic elements of concealment and revelation, a parallel that echoes the fundamental purpose of this technique within the visual arts (Willett 1991, 3-4). In other words, in the realm of literature, the application of chiaroscuro as a form of literary device operates to inject multiple strata of meaning into the text, akin to the manner in which chiaroscuro in art functions to imbue visual compositions with layers of depth and stark contrasts between light and shadow.

Additionally, one cannot disregard the fact that the term “clair-obscur” has been deftly utilised by esteemed literary figures such as

Diderot and Retif de la Bretonne, who have skilfully tapped into the vast reservoir of metaphorical significance that this technique embodies and conveys (Plante 2014, 474). Diderot, a prominent figure of the Enlightenment period, integrates clair-obscur in his work, *Jacques the Fatalist*, to delve into the intricate relationship between destiny and personal choice, shedding light on the uncertainties of human existence (*Ibid*). Similarly, Retif de la Bretonne employs this technique in *Les Nuits de Paris* to contrast the allure of urban life with the underlying shadows of destitution and immorality, exposing the ethical dilemmas and societal disparities of his era (*Ibid*). By drawing upon the symbolic implications of clair-obscur, these writers imbue their stories with allegorical meanings and poignant emotions, thereby establishing a lasting impact on the literary heritage.

Tracing the relationship between the use of chiaroscuro by literary figures like Diderot and Retif de la Bretonne and its significance in examining John Donne's portrayal of what the researcher may call "shadowed Catholic self" in *Pseudo-Martyr* reveals a thematic resonance that goes beyond time and genre boundaries. Just as chiaroscuro involves the interplay of light and darkness, Donne's exploration of his Catholic identity uncovers layers of complexity and uncertainty. Diderot, in his exploration of the ambiguities of human existence through contrasting narratives, mirrors Donne's struggle with the conflicting aspects of religious faith and political pragmatism. Similarly, Retif de la Bretonne's juxtaposition of urban charm and societal shadows resonates with Donne's navigation of personal beliefs within the socio-political landscape of early modern England. By looking at Donne's "shadowed Catholic self" through the lens of chiaroscuro, we see a multifaceted depiction of inner conflict and external pressures, echoing the thematic richness and symbolic depth found in the works of Diderot and Retif de la Bretonne. Consequently, the concept of chiaroscuro enhances the exploration of Donne's intricate identity, shedding light on the complexities of religious and cultural negotiations in the early modern era.

2.3. The “Shadowed Catholic Self” in light of the chiaroscuro

The term “shadowed Catholic self” as introduced by the scholar within the context of this scholarly article holds significant importance when delving into the religious persona of John Donne. This term alludes to the complex interplay of psychological and physical ordeals faced by individuals adhering to the Catholic faith amidst the socio-religious milieu of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, characterised by prevalent discrimination against Catholics in the English society (Carey 1981, 16-21). A profound comprehension of the underlying essence encapsulated by the notion of the “shadowed Catholic self” proves indispensable in unravelling the intricate power dynamics and persecutions that transpired during the era of the Counter-Reformation, a time when Catholicism faced active suppression within the English realm (*Ibid.*). Thus, a meticulous examination of the portrayal of Catholics necessitates a comprehensive grasp of the concept of the shadowed Catholic self to enable a holistic understanding and profound appreciation of the myriad dimensions embedded within such a representation.

As previously alluded to, the term “shadowed Catholic self” denotes a concept of self-identity that has been tainted, uneasy, and deprived of its essence. This pertains to an internal and psychological journey, transcending beyond mere physical persecutions that may ensue from such an experience (Najjar 2022, 74-8). The apprehension of persecution, the harsh reality it brings forth, and the imperative demand for concealment and reticence all form integral components of what constitutes “the shadowed Catholic self”. This focus on the internal turmoil and the complex psychological and emotional states associated with the idea of “living in obscurity” not only imbues it with profound meaning but also renders it a versatile metaphor that is well-suited for thorough literary analysis. Moreover, this exploration of the concept of “chiaroscuro” proves to be particularly fitting for dissecting the depths of this portrayal.

As it will be further developed in the analysis, the different facets of “the shadowed Catholic self” lend themselves to examination in relation to various themes, including the notions of secrecy and susceptibility. It showcases how the discreet, covert, and precarious nature of navigating life with a shadowed Catholic self can be portrayed to be, rightfully, comprehended. This particular psychological approach, incorporating well-established icons, symbols, and metaphors, has unveiled a rewarding and enlightening avenue for comprehending the beliefs and self-representation of Catholics in 16th century England. Above all, it has significantly contributed to broadening the comprehension of the emotional and psychological conditions experienced by Catholics during the early modern era.

3. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The religious landscape of Elizabethan England was characterised by profound tensions and divisions stemming from the Reformation and, more precisely, from “religious swinging” (Najjar 2022, 78). With the ascension of Elizabeth I to the throne in 1558, England experienced a shift from Catholicism to Protestantism as the official state religion. However, this transition was far from smooth, and religious tensions persisted throughout Elizabeth’s reign (Shell and Hunt 2006, 68-70). One major source of tension was the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, fueled by ideological differences and political ambitions. Catholics who remained loyal to the Pope faced persecution and discrimination, as they were viewed with suspicion by the Protestant authorities (*Ibid*). This led to clandestine Catholicism, with many Catholics practising their faith in secret to avoid persecution.

The issue of religious conformity also contributed to tensions within English society. The Elizabethan government enacted laws requiring outward conformity to the established Protestant Church of England, leading to the persecution of dissenters, including

Catholics and Puritans. Non-conformists faced fines, imprisonment, and even death for refusing to adhere to the official religious doctrine (Sanders 1994, 83-102). Furthermore, religious tensions were exacerbated by external threats, particularly from Catholic powers such as Spain and France (Morill 1996, 15-16). Elizabeth's Protestant England found itself in conflict with Catholic nations, leading to fears of invasion and subversion. This geopolitical dimension further heightened religious anxieties and reinforced the perception of Catholics as potential traitors. For instance, Morill reckons that "the international and national security crises engendered by the Reformation merely quickened and intensified the processes of interaction between the peoples of the British Isles which were already in train for reasons that were sufficient unto themselves" (*Ibidem*, 15). In other words, the security challenges arising from the Reformation did not fundamentally alter the underlying dynamics driving interaction among the peoples of the British Isles, implying that such interactions were motivated by intrinsic factors rather than solely reactive responses to crises. It underscores the complexity of historical developments, highlighting how broader social, economic, and cultural forces played significant roles alongside geopolitical events.

During the period of Protestant rulership, individuals of the Catholic faith were subject to persecution, and conversely, the situation was reciprocated. It is noteworthy that Richard Sugg concurs with Eamon Duffy's proposition that these transitions between religious affiliations and forms of governance played a significant role in shaping collective and individual religious identities in England at that time (Najjar 2022, 78). Indeed, Sugg claims that "many of the Catholic faithful view the new religion [Protestantism] as a passing—if traumatic—aberration" (Sugg 2007, 8). In other words, Protestantism was no more than a traumatic experience that shall end one day or another and shall, one day and according to the concept of the chiaroscuro, move from the lights to the shadows. Overall, religious tensions in Elizabethan England were characterised by a complex interplay of political, social, and

religious factors. The conflict between Catholics and Protestants, coupled with the government's efforts to enforce religious conformity, created a climate of fear and suspicion that permeated English society during this period. The conflict not only fostered fear and suspicion, but it also cast a profound chiaroscuro effect over society. Just like the interplay of light and shadow in art, the contrasting forces of religious tension and government enforcement created a dramatic atmosphere. This atmosphere revealed both the dark depths of societal division and the flickers of hope and resilience amidst the turmoil. The chiaroscuro metaphor perfectly captures the nuanced complexities of the era. Stark contrasts between religious factions were interwoven with moments of illumination and obscured truths, reflecting the multifaceted nature of historical narratives shaped by conflict and conformity.

4. CHIAROSCURO IN DONNE'S *PSEUDO-MARTYR*

As early as his "Advertisement to Reader" in *Pseudo-Martyr*, John Donne strategically prepares his canvas by acknowledging the interplay of light and shade within religious identity, particularly his own "shadowed Catholic self". By openly addressing the complexities of religious allegiance and conformity in a time of religious conflict, Donne sets the stage for an exploration of conscience, conviction, and societal expectations. His declaration to readers serves to reveal the hidden layers of his own religious identity, casting light on the internal struggle and shadowed dimensions of faith that permeate his work. Through this transparency, Donne invites readers to navigate the chiaroscuro of religious identity with him, highlighting the intricate dance between public conformity and private beliefs in the tumultuous religious landscape of his era. For instance, Donne makes the following claim:

And for myself, (because I have already received some light, that some of the
Romane profession, having only seen the Heads and Grounds handled in this

Booke, have traduced me, as an impious and profane under-valewer of Martyrdom). I most humbly beseech him (till the reading of the Booke, may guide his Reason) to believe that I have a just and Christianly estimation, and reverence, of that devout and acceptable Sacrifice of our lives, for the glory of our blessed Saviour. For, as my fortune hath never been so flattering nor abundant, as should make this present life sweet and precious to me, as I am a Moral man: so, as I am a Christian, I have been ever kept awake in a meditation of Martyrdom, by being derived from such a flock and race, as I believe, no family (which is not of far larger extent and greater branches), hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine, than it had done. I did not, therefore, enter into this as a carnal or over-indulgent favourer of this life, but out of such reasons as may arise to his knowledge, who shall be pleased to read the whole work.

4.1 Analysis of light and shadow imagery in the text

Laura Lee Willett also notes that the literary chiaroscuro Donne employs is “a metaphorical structuring of inner reality”—a deliberate aestheticization of religious tension characteristic of the Baroque period (Willett 1991, 4). This mode of representation allows Donne to translate doctrinal conflict into a visual and psychological economy in which illumination corresponds to inward conviction rather than outward conformity. Much like Baroque tenebrism—exemplified in Caravaggio’s dramatic canvases, where figures emerge from darkness through sharply focused light—Donne’s prose isolates moments of moral clarity against a surrounding field of uncertainty. Illumination, here, does not erase shadow but gains its force precisely through contrast, reinforcing the sense that faith is apprehended partially, under pressure, and within obscured conditions.

By associating martyrdom with personal spiritual vision rather than visible ritual or politicised defiance, Donne fundamentally reframes what it means to die for faith. Martyrdom is no longer authenticated by public spectacle, institutional endorsement, or corporeal extremity alone, but by the integrity of conscience and the capacity for sustained ethical discernment. As in Caravaggesque composition, where meaning is concentrated in a single illuminated

gesture rather than diffused across the whole scene, Donne relocates religious authenticity to the interior forum, where belief must withstand ambiguity, fear, and moral negotiation.

This inward turn displaces the traditional iconography of martyrdom, shifting emphasis away from the scaffold and toward the soul's private arena of struggle. The authentic martyr thus emerges not from the theatre of execution—where suffering risks becoming performative or ideologically instrumentalised—but from the shadowed interior space in which faith is tested without the assurance of public recognition. Such an understanding prepares the ground for Donne's later symbolic judgments, in which visible acts of zeal are scrutinised for their true moral substance. The reader is thereby trained to distinguish between genuine illumination and deceptive brightness, between symbols that signify divine authority and those that merely mimic it.

In this way, Willett's insight anticipates Donne's use of animal imagery—most notably the opposition between the Lion of Juda and the Weasel—where symbolic luminosity and obscurity are redistributed along ethical rather than institutional lines. Chiaroscuro thus becomes not merely a stylistic feature but a moral epistemology: it conditions readers to question appearances, to seek inward light beneath outward forms, and to recognise that in an age of confessional conflict, religious truth often reveals itself obliquely, through contrast, tension, and shadow rather than through unmediated brilliance.

4.2. Examination of contrasting symbols and motifs related to religious identity

One of the most compelling metaphorical contrasts in *Pseudo-Martyr* is Donne's deployment of the "Lion of Juda" versus the "Weasel" to expose and critique the misplaced zeal of self-declared Catholic martyrs. Donne writes: "It is not the Catholic faith which you smart for, but an unjust usurpation... it is not the Lyon of Juda... but it is for a Weasel, which crept in at a little hole, and since is grown to full and pampered" (*Pseudo-Martyr*, Preface, np). This striking zoological

opposition functions as a moral diagnostic tool, enabling Donne to distinguish between authentic spiritual authority and its corrupted, opportunistic imitation. Rather than rejecting martyrdom outright, he interrogates the grounds upon which suffering is claimed as sacred, thereby reframing the debate in ethical rather than confessional terms.

This animalistic dichotomy powerfully dramatises the chiaroscuro framework underpinning Donne's religious thought. The lion—majestic, visible, and scripturally sanctioned—embodies truth, divine authority, and legitimate sacrifice, radiating a symbolic luminosity grounded in Christological lineage. The weasel, by contrast, is defined by stealth, parasitism, and intrusion; it “crept in at a little hole”, suggesting illegitimate access, moral concealment, and doctrinal corruption. In casting the Catholic Church's temporal jurisdiction in such shadowed terms, Donne performs a deliberate inversion of expected sanctity: what appears holy on the surface is revealed, under ethical scrutiny, to be animated by obscure and self-serving motives. Chiaroscuro here operates not merely as a stylistic contrast but as a method of moral exposure, revealing the disjunction between appearance and essence.

John Carey's observation that Donne's prose thrives on “rhetorical oppositions that both clarify and confuse” is particularly apposite in this context, for the lion/weasel binary exemplifies what Carey terms a “moral chiaroscuro” in which certainty is persistently destabilised by complexity (Carey 1981, 104). While the opposition seems clear-cut, its rhetorical force lies in its capacity to unsettle inherited assumptions about religious authority and suffering. The lion's radiance is not automatically guaranteed by institutional alignment, nor is the weasel's obscurity confined to overt corruption; instead, Donne invites readers to question how easily symbolic brilliance can be appropriated by power. The binary thus resists doctrinal simplicity, compelling readers to engage in ethical discernment rather than passive assent.

This symbolic layering aligns closely with what Laura Willett identifies as a Baroque sensibility in Donne's prose—“a

simultaneous embrace of brilliance and decay” that mirrors the visual logic of chiaroscuro painting (Willett 1991, 5). As in Baroque art, where illuminated figures often emerge from enveloping darkness, Donne’s metaphors intensify meaning through contrast, sharpening perception while foregrounding what remains obscured. The lion’s luminosity gains definition only in relation to the weasel’s shadowed presence, just as moral truth in *Pseudo-Martyr* is apprehended through its proximity to error and disguise. Donne’s metaphoric language thus functions as the literary equivalent of light–shadow rendering in painting: it directs attention, controls interpretation, and exposes the ethical textures beneath theological claims. In doing so, it reinforces the broader argument of *Pseudo-Martyr* that religious identity, like faith itself, must be read not in absolutes but through gradations of light and shadow shaped by conscience, history, and power.

4.3. Discussion of internal and external struggles in maintaining secrecy and religious identity

Donne’s sustained critique of the temporal jurisdiction of the Roman Church further complicates his already precarious religious self-positioning. In a densely figurative passage, he writes: “It becomes not me to say, that the Romane Religion begets Treason; but I may say, that within one generation it degenerates into it... it is oppressed with such heapes of ashes, and dead Doctrine” (*Pseudo-Martyr*, Preface, np). The carefully hedged syntax—“it becomes not me to say”—signals Donne’s acute awareness of the political danger surrounding religious speech, even as he advances a forceful indictment of institutional decay. His prose here literalizes the *shadow* of doctrinal corruption, mobilising imagery of ash, burial, and suffocation to suggest that spiritual vitality has been smothered by the accumulation of temporal power. The once-radiant authority of the early Church is no longer extinguished outright but rendered dim and inert, buried beneath the residue of politicised religion.

This metaphor of ash resonates powerfully with Donne’s broader chiaroscuro aesthetic, both visually and symbolically. Ashes

signify the aftermath of extinguished flame—what remains when light has been consumed but not entirely erased. In this sense, Donne does not deny the historical or theological legitimacy of Roman Christianity; rather, he mourns its occlusion. The image of spiritual light “lost beneath heaps” dramatises the tension between internal faith and external religious performance, reinforcing Donne’s earlier insistence that authentic belief resides not in institutional ritual but in inward assent. Chiaroscuro here becomes a means of expressing gradation rather than absolution: faith persists, but only in partial illumination, dimmed by the shadows of worldly ambition and coercive authority.

Donne’s comparison of the Church to a diseased body diagnosed through “*actiones læsas*” (failing faculties) intensifies this critique through the language of medical pathology: “[We] may well discern *Actiones læsas*, by her practice... when she took this staff and crouch to sustain herself, having lost the ability of those two legs, whereon she should stand, The Word and Censures” (*Pseudo-Martyr*, Preface, np). This striking image of spiritual paralysis casts the Church as a body no longer capable of standing on its proper supports—scripture and moral authority—now forced to lean on the artificial crutch of temporal power. The metaphor simultaneously invokes vulnerability and distortion: the Church remains upright, but only through compromised means. The visual economy of partial light and partial collapse once again dramatises chiaroscuro’s capacity to render internal conflict legible.

Crucially, this metaphor also mirrors Donne’s own internal struggle. The failing ecclesial body becomes a displaced reflection of the author’s divided conscience, caught between inherited Catholic allegiance and the demands of political survival. As Knoppers observes, Donne’s prose registers a “theological doubleness” characteristic of recusant and post-recusant identity—an existence defined by outward conformity to the crown and inward fidelity to ancestral belief (Knoppers 2004, 83). Donne’s careful performance of obedience is thus inseparable from anxiety; his rhetoric is calibrated to signal loyalty while simultaneously preserving ethical

autonomy. Secrecy becomes not merely a defensive posture but a condition of faith itself, shaping how belief is articulated, concealed, and negotiated.

In this light, Donne does not simply argue for a *via media* between Catholicism and Protestant conformity; rather, he enacts that middle space rhetorically through qualification, metaphor, and controlled ambiguity. As Morrissey explains, *Pseudo-Martyr* “is not a stable manifesto but a text of transition, where Donne rehearses competing claims and finally chooses loyalty to conscience over institution (Morrissey 2019, 143). The text’s hesitations, disclaimers, and figurative detours are not weaknesses but structural expressions of Donne’s chiaroscuro faith—a faith defined by muted illumination and acknowledged shadow. What emerges is not doctrinal certainty but ethical complexity, a religious identity forged in secrecy, negotiation, and moral vigilance within a landscape where full visibility is neither possible nor safe.

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: VISUAL VS. LITERARY CHIAROSCURO

5.1. Chiaroscuro in Renaissance painting vs. Donne’s rhetorical imagery

The chiaroscuro technique in Renaissance painting—particularly in the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Caravaggio—revolutionised the representation of spiritual and corporeal realities by exploiting stark contrasts between light and shadow. Rather than illuminating figures evenly, chiaroscuro concentrates light selectively, compelling the viewer to engage actively in the process of perception and interpretation. As one art historian notes, this technique evokes an “affective darkness”, wherein spiritual truth emerges not through full visibility but through the tension between obscurity and radiance (Arts 2024, 17). In Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, for instance, the surrounding darkness does not negate faith but conditions it: belief is achieved through tactile encounter and contemplative struggle rather than immediate visual certainty. Darkness, in this sense, becomes epistemologically productive.

Donne mirrors this visual logic in his rhetorical strategies in *Pseudo-Martyr*, translating painterly chiaroscuro into a verbal and ethical register. His deployment of antithetical imagery—most notably the illuminated “Lion of Juda” set against the shadowy figure of the “Weasel”—functions as a form of textual chiaroscuro, in which moral clarity is achieved only through contrast (*Pseudo-Martyr*, *Preface*, np). As in Renaissance painting, light in Donne’s prose does not operate independently; it gains intensity precisely through its proximity to darkness. The lion’s symbolic luminosity is sharpened by the weasel’s obscurity, just as Caravaggio’s illuminated figures emerge forcefully from enveloping shadow. Religious identity, therefore, is rendered not as a static doctrinal position but as a contested visual field shaped by tension, opposition, and selective illumination.

Moreover, just as Renaissance chiaroscuro guides the viewer’s gaze—directing attention to specific gestures, wounds, or expressions—Donne’s rhetorical imagery disciplines the reader’s ethical vision. He trains readers to discern between authentic spiritual authority and its corrupted imitations, encouraging a mode of interpretive vigilance rather than passive acceptance. The visual intensity of Renaissance chiaroscuro thus finds a verbal counterpart in Donne’s prose, where meaning is concentrated rather than diffused, and where religious truth must be sought beneath surface appearances. Faith, in both artistic and literary contexts, is apprehended obliquely: it emerges through shadows that complicate perception rather than through uniform illumination.

In aligning rhetorical practice with visual aesthetics, Donne participates in a broader early modern sensibility that treats obscurity not as a failure of representation but as a necessary condition for ethical and spiritual insight. His literary chiaroscuro, like its painterly analogue, resists transparency and instead foregrounds the process of discernment itself. The result is a mode of religious expression in which belief is not merely asserted but rendered visible through struggle, contrast, and controlled revelation—an approach that underscores Donne’s commitment to

conscience over spectacle and inward illumination over outward display.

5.2. Nuances of expression: visible vs. interpretive chiaroscuro

Visual chiaroscuro operates primarily at the level of perception: viewers are confronted with illuminated forms set against obscured edges, and meaning is guided by the artist's manipulation of light and shadow within a fixed visual field. The act of seeing precedes interpretation. Rhetorical chiaroscuro, by contrast, functions interpretively rather than perceptually; it does not present meaning fully formed but instead invites readers to *discern* it through metaphor, contrast, and controlled ambiguity. As Willett observes, literary chiaroscuro "functions as a metaphorical mode of ambiguity, dramatising concealment and revelation within the textual fabric" (Willett 1991, 4). This distinction situates Donne's prose within a broader early modern aesthetic that treats ambivalence not as a flaw but as a deliberate expressive resource, capable of registering ethical and theological complexity.

In *Pseudo-Martyr*, Donne repeatedly mobilises linguistic shadow to signal theological erosion without resorting to overt doctrinal condemnation. His description of the Church's degeneration into "heaps of ashes, and dead Doctrine" (*Pseudo-Martyr*, *Preface*, np) exemplifies this strategy. The image of ash does not merely denote destruction; it suggests residue, aftermath, and partial extinction—a semantic grey zone in which vitality has been dimmed rather than obliterated. This rhetorical shadowing compels readers to infer decline through implication rather than declaration, mirroring the way visual chiaroscuro implies depth and form through darkness rather than through explicit outline. Meaning, in Donne's prose, emerges obliquely, demanding interpretive participation.

John Carey's insight that Donne's writing frequently constructs "oppositions that collapse into one another" further clarifies the function of rhetorical chiaroscuro in destabilising binary systems of belief (Carey 1981, 104). Light and darkness, orthodoxy and error, loyalty and treason are not presented as mutually exclusive

categories but as interpenetrating states. Certainty, once illuminated, is immediately cast into suspicion by the surrounding shadow of ethical complication. In this way, rhetorical chiaroscuro resists fixed doctrinal resolution, replacing it with a mode of reading attuned to gradation, contingency, and moral tension.

Donne's imagery of the Church relying on a "staffe and crouch" for support (*Pseudo-Martyr*, *Preface*, np) reinforces this interpretive dynamic. The figure evoked is neither wholly upright nor fully collapsed, but suspended in a state of visible infirmity—half-lit and half-shadowed. As a rhetorical analogue to a chiaroscuro painting, this image captures the tension between solidity and dissolution, authority and dependency. The reader is not simply shown institutional weakness but is asked to *see into it*, discerning its implications through metaphorical contrast. Rhetorical chiaroscuro thus transforms reading into an ethical act, training readers to navigate uncertainty and to recognise that religious truth, like visual form in shadow, must be apprehended through careful and reflective interpretation rather than immediate clarity.

5.3. Convergence of visual and textual chiaroscuro in Donne's self-representation

Donne's prose in *Pseudo-Martyr* ultimately emerges as a literary canvas upon which spiritual identity is rendered through alternating strokes of illumination and obscurity. His self-representation is neither confessional nor declarative; instead, it unfolds through contrast, hesitation, and carefully modulated visibility. As Morrissey observes, *Pseudo-Martyr* functions as "a text of transition, in which Donne rehearses competing claims and resolves them only partially" (Morrissey 2019, 143). This partiality is not a failure of resolution but a constitutive feature of Donne's chiaroscuro faith—one that resists full clarity precisely because such clarity would collapse the ethical and political tensions that shape religious identity in a climate of persecution.

Condillac's aesthetic theory offers a productive lens through which to understand this convergence of visual and textual techniques. By analogising word order to chiaroscuro, Condillac suggests that meaning, like visual form, emerges through relational contrast rather than through isolated elements (Condillac 1947, 576). Applied to Donne's prose, this insight illuminates how syntactical layering, qualification, and delayed assertion function as verbal equivalents of light and shadow. Affirmation is repeatedly tempered by negation, conviction by caution, producing a rhetorical depth in which faith is brought into relief not through direct assertion but through carefully orchestrated tension. Donne's sentences, like Baroque compositions, direct attention selectively, illuminating certain ethical positions while allowing others to recede into productive obscurity.

The juxtaposition of spiritual light and shadow in Donne's imagery thus serves not a decorative but a hermeneutic function. By rendering his inner struggle visible through emblematic contrasts—the Lion of Juda set against the Weasel, the luminous authority of the Word weighed down by “heapes of ashes”, or the Church standing precariously on a “staffe and crouch”—Donne stages his religious self at the threshold between revelation and concealment. These figures do not merely illustrate doctrinal positions; they externalise a divided conscience negotiating loyalty, survival, and integrity. Chiaroscuro becomes a mode of self-writing, enabling Donne to speak from within constraint while preserving ethical agency.

This convergence of visual and textual chiaroscuro mirrors the perceptual dynamics of Renaissance painting, where controlled contrasts of brightness and darkness convey psychological depth and moral ambiguity rather than narrative closure (Arts 2024, 17). Just as Caravaggesque figures emerge from shadow without fully escaping it, Donne's religious identity remains suspended between inherited Catholic allegiance and emergent political conformity. His prose invites readers to apprehend not only the

argumentative structure of *Pseudo-Martyr* but also the layered psychology of a recusant navigating early modern pressures of surveillance, accusation, and doctrinal realignment.

Tellingly, the following table offers a schematic summary of the major chiaroscuro patterns operating throughout *Pseudo-Martyr*, mapping the interplay between illumination and obscurity that shapes Donne’s shadowed Catholic self. Rather than resolving these tensions, the table makes visible the structural logic of Donne’s rhetoric, reinforcing the central claim of this study: that Donne’s religious identity is articulated not through certainty but through contrast, negotiation, and the disciplined management of light and shadow.

Table 1: Chiaroscuro patterns and the *Shadowed Catholic Self* in *Pseudo-Martyr*

Element	Light (Illumination / Positive)	Shadow (Obscurity / Tension)	Function / Interpretation
Metaphorical Figures	Lion of Juda	Weasel	Contrasts authentic faith with distorted zeal; moral and theological evaluation
Spiritual Virtue	Meditation on martyrdom, inherited devotion	Fear of persecution, secrecy	Depicts internal conflict and negotiation of religious identity
Institutional Critique	Word and Censures (scripture, moral authority)	Heaps of ashes, dead Doctrine	Highlights the decay of temporal church power; differentiates internal faith from external practice
Rhetorical Strategy	Measured ambiguity,	Moral doubleness, tension	Conveys the complexity of conscience and

	balanced argumentation	between loyalty and conscience	public conformity
Visual/Textual Parallel	Illuminated faith and spiritual clarity	Concealed motives and obscured truth	Mirrors Renaissance chiaroscuro; creates a literary aesthetic of contrast

6. SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Donne's deployment of literary chiaroscuro achieves several critical functions. First, it exposes the complex negotiation of identity inherent in living as a covert Catholic in a predominantly Protestant society, where outward conformity and inward conviction were often at odds. Second, it situates Donne's prose within a broader artistic and intellectual continuum, linking early modern rhetorical practice to visual aesthetics and showing how literary form can serve as a mirror of internal experience. Finally, this approach underscores the thematic resonance of light and shadow, which emerges both as a structural device and a symbolic lens for interpreting spiritual tension, moral ambiguity, and the contingencies of faith.

By reading *Pseudo-Martyr* through a chiaroscuro framework, one recognises Donne's work as an act of self-representation as much as theological or political argumentation. The text enacts what might be called a "performative illumination" — exposing some aspects of the Catholic self while leaving others deliberately obscured. This strategy reflects a broader Baroque sensibility in early modern literature, wherein ambiguity, tension, and paradox were valued as aesthetic and ethical tools. Consequently, the concept of "chiaroscuro faith" illuminates not only Donne's inner conflicts but also the cultural and psychological dynamics that shaped recusant Catholic identity in early seventeenth-century England.

Table 2: Light vs. shadow in Donne’s chiaroscuro faith

LIGHT	SHADOW
Illumination, clarity, and divine presence	Darkness, obscurity, and doubt
Revelatory power of divine grace	Human fallibility and sin
Hope and salvation	Fear and despair
Divine love and mercy	Human frailty and suffering

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the investigation into John Donne’s “shadowed Catholic self” demonstrates how *Pseudo-Martyr* functions as a literary canvas painted in chiaroscuro. Donne’s rhetorical contrasts—between the noble “Lion of Juda” and the parasitic “Weasel”, between the vitality of the “Word and Censures” and the “heaps of ashes, and dead Doctrine”, between the light of spiritual devotion and the shadow of temporal jurisdiction—expose the tensions of a religious identity caught between allegiance and dissent. These images render visible the interplay of brightness and obscurity that shaped Donne’s self-fashioning, revealing the paradoxes of a faith negotiated in secrecy and expressed through indirection.

This study has argued that such textual strategies exemplify what may be called Donne’s “*chiaroscuro faith*”—a mode of belief articulated in contrasts, where affirmation and denial, loyalty and critique, clarity and concealment coexist without full resolution. In appropriating a visual aesthetic to a literary and theological framework, Donne’s prose becomes a rhetorical equivalent of Renaissance painting: shadows do not obscure truth but rather define and sharpen its contours.

By situating Donne within both the artistic practice of chiaroscuro and the religio-political crisis of early modern England, this article has emphasised the interpretive power of

transdisciplinarity. Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr* emerges not only as an intervention in the debates over the Oath of Allegiance but also as a profound meditation on the layered nature of religious selfhood. Ultimately, the chiaroscuro lens reveals a persona that is at once fragmented and unified, fragile yet luminous—a testament to literature's enduring capacity to illuminate the complexities of human identity under pressure.

NOTES

1. Conversely, Gardner considers Giotto to be the one who built the stepping stone for other painters, like da Vinci, in the development of the chiaroscuro technique (Gardner 1961, 409).
2. Translation of the author, the original text reads as follows: “Le peintre a trois moyens: le dessin, les couleurs et le clair-obscur. L'écrivain en a trois également: l'exactitude des constructions répond au dessin, les expressions figurées au couleur, et l'arrangement des mots au clair-obscur”.

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