Selected Love Poetry

of

John Donne

(metaphysical poet 1572-1631)

“more than kisses, letters mingle souls”
During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war, and such a war as is of every man against every man... In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; ... no arts; no letters; no society; and, which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Of Man, Being the First Part of Leviathan.

Thomas Hobbes pictures the terrible condition of people who lived before there were kings to bring about order of society. Without rulers to keep people in awe, Hobbes insisted that society would dissolve into chaos and life would be poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Hobbes claimed to be writing about a time that existed before the dawn of history, but in fact, he may have been worrying about the breakdown of English society around him – civil war was happening; the king was beheaded; the monarchy was abolished; long-held beliefs and ideas were being discredited; optimism and confidence gave way to questioning, uncertainty, even pessimism. These changes all lead scholars to proclaim that the Seventeenth Century was indeed a time of intense political and religious unrest for England.

The literature of the turbulent years from 1625-1660 in part continued the styles of the Renaissance, and in part reflected the conditions of the time. The writers of this period can be divided essentially into two groups: the metaphysical poets, and the Sons of Ben. Although Ben Jonson and others wrote plays that were often more popular than Shakespeare’s, the period is not remembered for its drama. Rather, it is an age that produced many memorable poems by John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and John Milton, for example. In this era of unrest and change, John Donne stands out for his often brilliant and intellectually amorous and religious poems and verses. For many, Donne is the most popular of the metaphysical poets, and within his often difficult and demanding writing one finds a great deal of love, passion, seduction, and sorrow. Donne’s Songs and Sonnets are among the finest collections of lyrics in the English language, and although these lyrics refer to a multitude of diverse thoughts, images, conceits, paradoxes, and allusions, all which characterize metaphysical poetry, at their core is a sense of love.
What exactly is *metaphysical poetry*?

Samuel Johnson first used the term ‘metaphysical’ in an attack on writers who fill their works with far-fetched conceits and who make poetry a vehicle for displays of learning. Johnson writes:

> Wit, like all other things subject by their nature to the choice of man, has its changes and fashions, and at different times takes different forms. The Metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour . . . Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious . . . and the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found . . .

> . . . Ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs and surprises; but the reader, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.

[From Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* series, published between 1779-1781]

Well, it looks likes Johnson was undeniably not a fan of the metaphysical poets, so here’s our quest(ion):

> Does John Donne love poetry truly and genuinely express real love in its many experiences, allowing the reader to be moved and to feel?

 or

> Is John Donne merely a talented poet who uses his wit and ingenuity to create love poems?

Metaphysical poetry arose as a reaction to the extremes of Petrarchism; one problem with Petrarchan poems is a kind of predictability -- mellifluous madrigals, charming love lyrics and such. The conceit is found, presented, elaborated, but there are few subsequent surprises. Metaphysical poets were far more intellectual, and their intellectuality is expressed in the matter and the manner of their poetry. Donne and his followers (Andrew Marvell, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan) like to catch us off-guard, change direction, foil expectations. Reading poems by the metaphysical poets is often an academic, intellectual exercise. Above all, metaphysical poets are characterized by their use of wit, often revealed in the unusual or ingenious use of words rather than in the subject matter.
Various characteristics of metaphysical poetry

- cleverness of wit displayed through subtle and brilliant images or conceits, associated with things that at first seem incongruous; the development of the conceit is the development of the thought; demands concentration, and emotional, intellectual, and sensory response from the reader

- imagery based on perception of similarity between different things

- scorn for conventional poetic themes and images; strong realism

- lots of images from learning: geography, maths, alchemy, theology . . .

- lots of images from everyday life

- use of images which contain other things in some way; for example, reflections

- keen perception and cleverly apt use of words, ideas, connections

- dramatic, colloquial tone

- startling openings; energy, movement

- freedom of rhythm in which we can hear stresses, pauses, tempo

- frequent use of puns and paradoxes

- tendency to develop themes by use of argument, often through syllogistic proofs – two statements and conclusion drawn from them – (eg. all plants have roots; a tree is a plant; therefore, trees have roots); may be based on false analogies though (she is heavenly; heaven is unchanging; therefore, she can not die)

- a fusion of emotion and intellect – typically, metaphysical poetry requires deep and difficult thought as well as feeling from the reader

- uses words which call the mind into play, rather than words which appeal to the senses or evoke an emotional response (through memory)

- involves a perceived likeness

- emotions are shaped and expressed by logical reasoning; Intellect was at the tip of the senses – T. S. Eliot
John Donne, his love poems, and SPACE / PLACE

In many Donne poems, the use of space and place is significant. Some characteristics are as follows:

- **discoveries**: the delight of discovery is often profound
- **spatial imagination**: many unique images are used; boundaries are pushed
- **sense of place**: awareness of a physical setting is important
- **circles (concentric circles)**: may be symbolic, loving, social, spiritual
- **cosmos**: centered upon Earth and arranged in concentric spheres; sublunary sphere (sphere enclosed by the moon) is always changing, living / dying; composed of four elements (earth, water, fire, air); celestial sphere is purer, simpler, heavenly
- **time**: often uncertain, changing

John Donne’s lovers often attempt to transform place and space, attempt to transform world. They are shut out; they shut out; they are the world.

Donne’s poems are often set at the edge of delight, written is resistance to the inevitable – forbidding sun, morning, break of day . . .

Conflicts between Time and Love occur; arguments are inevitable

Speakers assert power over Time; speakers imagine power over space.

Power of lovers is able reach beyond time into the celestial sphere.

For Donne, love:

- may be an experience of the body, the soul, or both
- may be a religious experience or merely a sensual one
- gives rise to emotions, from ecstasy to despair

Reading John Donne’s love poems gives insight into the complex range of experiences connected to love, and / yet are often contradictory.

For each poem included in your reading package, consider each of the following questions which will serve as the basis for our final exam question.

- **analyse how the speaker uses varied imagery to reveal his attitude towards the nature of love**
- **discuss how this poem is typical of John Donne and/or metaphysical poetry**
John Donne wrote his poetry in a much different climate than the Neoclassicism which sought to reformulate the literary values of ancient Greece and Rome. He was influenced by the experimentation of other contemporary poets, who were striking out against a tradition of highly stylized poetic clichés, such as bleeding hearts, cheeks like roses, Cupid’s shooting arrows. These aspects had been employed by the poetry of *courtly love*, a tradition that was nourished by literary texts and consisted of poetry written to and about the aristocracy. This poetry depicted the knight’s protestations of unworthiness and his endless pursuit of danger and adventure to prove his faithful and devoted service to his lady.

Donne was also writing against the backdrop of a religious and literary tradition, begun in the early Middle Ages, that asserted that the body and soul were distinct. This tradition believed that the present life was one of self-denial. The everlasting peace of the soul in the next world would compensate for this renunciation of passion (and sexuality). In other words, the suffering and tribulations of this world would all be rewarded by the soul’s future happiness in the world to come. Conversely, frightening images of damnations awaited those who sinned.

After the Middle Ages, literature tried to repair the divorce between body and soul. This rhetorical division between body and soul had been so persuasive that after the Renaissance, literature became deeply engaged with the effort to repair this rift. Donne’s poetry, as well as that of the other metaphysical poets, sought to establish a way of inseparably uniting the body and soul in this world; it affirmed human sexuality as a way to achieve spirituality. Indeed, Donne dared to use potentially perceived erotic images in complete opposition to what had been previously considered appropriate and decorous. Thus, in his bold and often incongruous imagery, Donne broke away from the past and offered new way to perceive reality and the spiritual nature of our (secular) existence.
The Life of John Donne: A Brief History

There are two distinct stages of writing for John Donne. First is the scandalous young spark, who wrote energetic, original verse. Then there is the gravely witty, passionately divine, who wrote verses to his God. The key to 'both' is the same: it is a kind of restless, searching energy, which scorns the easy platitude and the smooth, empty phrase. His writing is vivid, troubling, all of which makes reading Donne’s poetry an imaginative and intellectual struggle and all-absorbing experience.

John Donne was born in 1572 in London, England. He is known as the founder of the Metaphysical Poets, a term created by Samuel Johnson, an eighteenth-century English essayist, poet, and philosopher. The loosely associated group also includes George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell, and John Cleveland. The Metaphysical Poets are known for their ability to startle the reader and coax new perspective through paradoxical images, subtle argument, inventive syntax, and imagery from art, philosophy, and religion using an extended metaphor known as a conceit. Donne reached beyond the rational and hierarchical structures of the seventeenth century with his exacting and ingenious conceits, advancing the exploratory spirit of his time.

Donne entered the world during a period of theological and political unrest for both England and France; a Protestant massacre occurred on Saint Bartholomew’s day in France; while in England, the Catholics were the persecuted minority. Born into a Roman Catholic family, Donne’s personal relationship with religion was tumultuous and passionate, and at the center of much of his poetry. He studied at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities in his early teen years. He did not take a degree at either school, because to do so would have meant subscribing to the Thirty-nine Articles, the doctrine that defined Anglicanism. At age twenty he studied law at Lincoln’s Inn. Two years later he succumbed to religious pressure and joined the Anglican Church after his younger brother, convicted for his Catholic loyalties, died in prison. Donne wrote most of his love lyrics, erotic verse, and some sacred poems in the 1590s, creating two major volumes of work: Satires and Songs and Sonnets.

In 1598, after returning from a two-year naval expedition against Spain, Donne was appointed private secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton. While sitting in Queen Elizabeth’s last Parliament in 1601, Donne secretly married Anne More, the sixteen-year-old niece of Lady
Egerton. Donne’s father-in-law disapproved of the marriage. As punishment, he did not provide a dowry for the couple and had Donne briefly imprisoned.

This left the couple isolated and dependent on friends, relatives, and patrons. Donne suffered social and financial instability in the years following his marriage, exacerbated by the birth of many children. He continued to write and published the *Divine Poems* in 1607. In *Pseudo-Martyr*, published in 1610, Donne displayed his extensive knowledge of the laws of the Church and state, arguing that Roman Catholics could support James I without compromising their faith. In 1615, James I pressured him to enter the Anglican Ministry by declaring that Donne could not be employed outside of the Church. He was appointed Royal Chaplain later that year. His wife died in 1617 at thirty-three years old shortly after giving birth to their twelfth child, who was stillborn. The *Holy Sonnets* are also attributed to this phase of his life.

In 1621, he became dean of Saint Paul’s Cathedral. In his later years, Donne’s writing reflected his fear of his inevitable death. He wrote his private prayers, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, during a period of severe illness and published them in 1624. His learned, charismatic, and inventive preaching made him a highly influential presence in London. Best known for his vivacious, compelling style and thorough examination of mortal paradox, John Donne died in London on March 31, 1631.

Very little of Donne’s verse appeared in print during his lifetime, and the posthumous *Collected Poems* (1663) was by no means complete. His verse is generally divided into the love poetry of his youth and the religious poetry of later years, though both clearly belong to the same process of organic development. His love poetry is original, energetic and highly rhetorical, full of passionate thought and intellectual juggling, paradox and punning designed to work forcefully against the tired conventions of the Petrarchan school. It is often erotic and physically urgent. His poetry represents a sharp break with most of that written by his predecessors and contemporaries.

(https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/john-donne)
the early lyric poems of John Donne
metaphysical poet

acute observation
playful religious blasphemy
intellectual erudition
colloquial vigour
sensual indulgence

"poetry to be furtively shared"
Read the following John Donne poem carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the speaker uses the varied imagery of the poem to reveal his attitude towards the nature of love.

_The Broken Heart_

He is stark mad, who ever says,
    That he hath been in love an hour,
Yet not that love so soon decays,
    But that it can ten in less space devour;
Who will believe me, if I swear
    That I have had the plague a year?
Who would not laugh at me, if I should say
    I saw a flask of powder burn a day?

Ah, what a trifle is a heart,
If once into Love’s hands it come!
All other griefs allow a part
    To other griefs, and ask themselves but some:
They come to us, but us Love draws,
He swallows us, and never chaws: ¹
By him, as by chain’d shot,² whole ranks do die,
    He is the tyrant pike, our hearts the fry.³

If ’twere not so, what did become
    Of my heart, when I first saw thee?
I brought a heart into the room,
But from the room, I carried none with me:
If it had gone to thee, I know
Mine would have taught thine heart to show
    More pity unto me: but Love, alas,
At one first blow did shiver it as glass.

Yet nothing can to nothing fall,
    Nor any place be empty quite,
Therefore I think my breast hath all
    Those pieces still, though they be not unite;
And now as broken glasses⁴ show
A hundred lesser faces, so
    My rags of heart can like, wish, and adore,
But after one such love, can love no more.

¹ -- chews
² -- cannon balls chained together
³ -- small fish that the pike devours
⁴ -- mirrors
Sample Essay 1: Excellent

Throughout history, innumerable poets have commented on the nature of love. Each poet uses his own style to convey his attitude toward love. In "The Broken Heart," John Donne uses imagery to reveal his view of love as a powerful, consuming, and cruel force.

The first stanza indicates Donne's belief that Love does not occur gradually; instead, it can "devour" ten people in less space than an hour. By using the image of Love devouring the lover, the author indicates the lack of choice of the lover; falling in love is an involuntary process that occurs instantaneously. He then uses the ideas of "[having] the plague a year" and "[seeing] a flask of powder burn a day" as comparable occurrences—they are as hard to comprehend or believe.

Having shown the immediacy of Love, Donne then illustrates the power of love. He uses the image of the heart as a trifle, indicating the heart's helplessness "[i]f once into love's hands it come[s]." He compares Love to a grief, but believes that other griefs claim but portions of our souls. Love, in contrast, "swallows us" completely.

Donne also portrays Love as a force that can be cruel; in the conclusion of the second stanza, he provides two images of lovers as victims. Comparing love to "chain'd shot," he reveals his belief that love is responsible for the spiritual deaths of "whole ranks" of people. This simile also provides the image of lovers as soldiers, fighting vainly against the force of Love. The second image is that of Love as a "tyrant pike" and lover's hearts as "the fry." Again, Donne portrays lovers as vainly attempting to escape from the devouring force of Love.

In the third stanza, Donne reveals the reason for his view of Love as a cruel, consuming power. While the first two stanzas illustrate his view of Love in general and all lovers, the third stanza relates his personal experience with Love. He uses the images of "[bringing] a heart into the room" and "[carrying] none" when leaving, indicating the loss of his heart when he sees the woman in the room. However, his heart does not go to the woman, for otherwise his heart "would have taught [her] heart to show more pity" unto him. She rejects him, an event which he illustrates by the image of Love shattering his heart. He compares his heart to glass, indicating how easily the powerful force of Love can break it.

Once broken, Donne believes that the heart is no longer capable of true love. Although he feels that his breast still contains all the pieces of his heart, they are merely pieces, "not unite." Therefore, his pieces or "rags of heart" may still be capable of lesser feelings, such as liking, wishing, and adoring, but, "after one such love, can love no more."

John Donne's own experience with Love has left an emptiness in him. He realizes then how powerful Love is and how cruel and destructive Love can be. By using various images of Love, lovers, and his heart, he conveys this attitude toward the nature of love to the reader.
Love is the single most celebrated human emotion. A vast body of literature examines its nuances and explores its meanings. Typically, poets and authors champion love's myriad virtues. It is a salve for the wounded and a boon for the whole, a founder of relationships and a builder of unity. John Donne sees love differently, however, and departs from his literary comrades in his powerful description of love as the destroyer of his heart.

The poem's first verse addresses the duration of love. Donne opens by offering the impression that passion varies in length, although he states that the general perception of love is that it is a short term affair. He queries, "Who will believe me, if I swear/That I have had the plague a year?" The line informs the reader that Donne is operating from personal experience and at the same time casts a negative light on love, which Donne calls the plague. The same combination of testimony about the existence of a long love coupled with a negative connotation of the emotion is found in the neat line, which reads "Who would not laugh at me, if I should say,/I saw a flask of powder burn a day?" The striking image is of love as a flask of powder. Donne's image presses the issue of the abnormality of a long love, since love is generally explosive, like the keg of powder would logically be. At the same time, the powder image contributes to love's falling reputation in the poem. A barrel of powder conjures thoughts of war and destruction, and by using it as a symbol of love Donne associates passion and feeling with the powder's destructive capacity.

The second verse carries over the idea of love's ability to damage and destroy. Donne personifies love and draws the mental picture of it grasping a heart in the lines, "Oh, what a trifle is a heart,/If once into love's hands it come!" The idea that love has the power to grasp and hold the human heart, symbolic of man's capacity for emotion, reinforces Donne's point of love as a negative force. The poet mentions the griefs associated with love and then proceeds to weave several disturbing images together, stating, "By him, as by chain'd shot, whole ranks do die,/He is the tyrant pike, our hearts the fry." He is love, and his ability to lay waste to the hearts of men is directly stated through Donne's images of carnage and slaughter. As the pike image suggests, Donne believes that love is a predator ready and willing to devour the defenseless human heart.

The third verse moves from the realm of generalizations into the field of personal experience. The poet rhetorically asks, "If 'twere not so, what did become/Of my heart, when I first saw thee?" The line establishes the verse as the relation of a specific event. Donne simply evokes the image of a man walking into a room with a heart and leaving without it in the lines "I brought a heart into the room,/But from the room, I carried none with me." Once again, Donne is arguing his main point, this time through personal experience. Explaining the loss of his heart, he says, "More pity unto me, but Love, alas,/at one blow did shiver it as glass." No frail heart can withstand the explosive power of love.

The results of love's depredation are the subject of the last verse. Donne utilizes the entire verse to express the shattered feeling he has experienced. He says of his heart "Therefore I think my heart hath all/Those powers still, though they be not unite." The eventual result of his experience was, as the poem's name implies, a broken heart. His experience led to pain and suffering, not joy and happiness. As he states, "My rags of heart can like, wish, and adore,/But after one such love, can love no more," meaning that once true love has been experienced, it will not be experienced again. After the powder keg has exploded, all that is left to do is pick up the pieces and remember the heat of the passionate inferno.
It is a bitter and depressed attitude that the speaker in John Donne’s poem “The Broken Heart” has towards love. This is expertly revealed through the various types of imagery used in the poem.

The first two lines of the poem set the tone. It is apparent that the speaker is crushed and now ruined by flawed love because he begins harshly, doubting those who claim to be in love. Then, in line six, he refers to lovesickness as “the plague”.

The second stanza depicts love as a predator, who preys on our hearts, as Donne writes, “… us love draws, / He swallows us, and never chews…” (lines 13–14). This comparison is made more evident with a metaphor used in line 16: “He is the tyrant pike, our hearts the fry.” In order to further victimize those who have been crushed by the jaws of love, Donne compares love to “chain’d shot”, expressing how powerful love can be.

The speaker’s relationship with whoever it is who has broken his heart (with the help of love, of course) is explained in greater detail through microcosms used in the third stanza. The “room” he speaks of is used to mean the relationship, while the “heart” means the speaker’s capacity to love, his emotional capabilities. Love, however, renders him powerless, taking away the speaker’s “heart” or his capacity for love. The visual and auditory imagery of breaking glass in the final line (love hits hard) completes the stanza powerfully.

There is a resigned tone apparent in the final stanza. The speaker contends that, yes, he does still have a heart, but it is “broken glasses” that “show / A hundred lesser faces,” meaning that his love will never be quite the same: it will be varied in degrees of affection, but will never truly, deeply love again. This is more visual imagery, which is continued into the last two lines, where he refers to his now-shattered heart as his “rags of heart”. This imagery, like the rest used in the beginning and middle of the poem, is very effective in describing the bitter, ruined tone the speaker now has towards love.
Donne “Love” poems:

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*titles in **bold** are found in this guide*
I was clever enough to know that John Donne was offering something that was awfully enjoyable. I just wasn’t clever enough to actually enjoy it. – Wallace Shawn
The Indifferent

I can love both fair and brown,
Her whom abundance melts, and her whom want betrays,
Her who loves loneness best, and her who masks and plays,
Her whom the country formed, and whom the town,
Her who believes, and her who tries,
Her who still weeps with spongy eyes,
And her who is dry cork, and never cries;
I can love her, and her, and you, and you,
I can love any, so she be not true.

Will no other vice content you?
Will it not serve your turn to do as did your mothers?
Or have you all old vices spent, and now would find out others?
Or doth a fear that men are true torment you?
O we are not, be not you so;
Let me, and do you, twenty know.
Rob me, but bind me not, and let me go.
Must I, who came to travail thorough you,
Grow your fixed subject, because you are true?

Venus heard me sigh this song,
And by love's sweetest part, variety, she swore,
She heard not this till now; and that it should be so no more.
She went, examined, and returned ere long,
And said, Alas! some two or three
Poor heretics in love there be,
Which think to 'stabish dangerous constancy.
But I have told them, Since you will be true,
You shall be true to them who are false to you.
Song: go and catch

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.
Air and Angels

Twice or thrice had I lov'd thee,
Before I knew thy face or name;
So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame
Angels affect us oft, and worshipp'd be;
    Still when, to where thou wert, I came,
Some lovely glorious nothing I did see.
    But since my soul, whose child love is,
Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do,
    More subtle than the parent is
Love must not be, but take a body too;
    And therefore what thou wert, and who,
I bid Love ask, and now
That it assume thy body, I allow,
And fix itself in thy lip, eye, and brow.

Whilst thus to ballast love I thought,
And so more steadily to have gone,
With wares which would sink admiration,
I saw I had love's pinnace overfraught;
    Ev'ry thy hair for love to work upon
Is much too much, some fitter must be sought;
    For, nor in nothing, nor in things
Extreme, and scatt'ring bright, can love inhere;
    Then, as an angel, face, and wings
Of air, not pure as it, yet pure, doth wear,
    So thy love may be my love's sphere;
Just such disparity
As is 'twixt air and angels' purity,
'Twixt women's love, and men's, will ever be.
The Flea

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
Thou know’st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, w’are met,
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that, self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph’st, and say’st that thou
Find’st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;
’Tis true; then learn how false, fears be:
Just so much honor, when thou yield’st to me,
Will waste, as this flea’s death took life from thee.
I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers’ den?
’Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, ’twas but a dream of thee.

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp north, without declining west?
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.
The Triple Fool

I am two fools, I know,
   For loving, and for saying so
   In whining poetry;
But where's that wiseman, that would not be I,
   If she would not deny?
Then as th' earth's inward narrow crooked lanes
   Do purge sea water's fretful salt away,
I thought, if I could draw my pains
   Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay.
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,
For he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

   But when I have done so,
   Some man, his art and voice to show,
   Doth set and sing my pain;
And, by delighting many, frees again
   Grief, which verse did restrain.
To love and grief tribute of verse belongs,
   But not of such as pleases when 'tis read.
Both are increased by such songs,
   For both their triumphs so are published,
And I, which was two fools, do so grow three;
Who are a little wise, the best fools be.
Lovers' Infiniteness

If yet I have not all thy love,
Dear, I shall never have it all;
I cannot breathe one other sigh, to move,
Nor can intreat one other tear to fall;
And all my treasure, which should purchase thee—
Sighs, tears, and oaths, and letters—I have spent.
Yet no more can be due to me,
Than at the bargain made was meant;
If then thy gift of love were partial,
That some to me, some should to others fall,

Dear, I shall never have thee all.

Or if then thou gavest me all,
All was but all, which thou hadst then;
But if in thy heart, since, there be or shall
New love created be, by other men,
Which have their stocks entire, and can in tears,
In sighs, in oaths, and letters, outbid me,
This new love may beget new fears,
For this love was not vow'd by thee.
And yet it was, thy gift being general;
The ground, thy heart, is mine; whatever shall
Grow there, dear, I should have it all.

Yet I would not have all yet,
He that hath all can have no more;
And since my love doth every day admit
New growth, thou should'st have new rewards in store;
Thou canst not every day give me thy heart,
If thou canst give it, then thou never gavest it;
Love's riddles are, that though thy heart depart,
It stays at home, and thou with losing savest it;
But we will have a way more liberal,
Than changing hearts, to join them; so we shall

Be one, and one another's all.
The Ecstasy

Where, like a pillow on a bed
A pregnant bank swell'd up to rest
The violet's reclining head,
Sat we two, one another's best.
Our hands were firmly cemented
With a fast balm, which thence did spring;
Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
Our eyes upon one double string;
So to 'intergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the means to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation.
As 'twixt two equal armies fate
Suspends uncertain victory,
Our souls (which to advance their state
Were gone out) hung 'twixt her and me.
And whilst our souls negotiate there,
We like sepulchral statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And we said nothing, all the day.
If any, so by love refin'd
That he soul's language understood,
And by good love were grown all mind,
Within convenient distance stood,
He (though he knew not which soul spake,
Because both meant, both spake the same)
Might thence a new concoction take
And part far purer than he came.
This ecstasy doth unperplex,
We said, and tell us what we love;
We see by this it was not sex,
We see we saw not what did move;
But as all several souls contain
Mixture of things, they know not what,
Love these mix'd souls doth mix again
And makes both one, each this and that.
A single violet transplant,
    The strength, the colour, and the size,
(All which before was poor and scant)
    Redoubles still, and multiplies.
When love with one another so
    Interinanimates two souls,
That abler soul, which thence doth flow,
    Defects of loneliness controls.
We then, who are this new soul, know
    Of what we are compos'd and made,
For th' atomies of which we grow
    Are souls, whom no change can invade.
But oh alas, so long, so far,
    Our bodies why do we forbear?
They are ours, though they are not we; we are
    The intelligences, they the spheres.
We owe them thanks, because they thus
    Did us, to us, at first convey,
Yielded their senses' force to us,
    Nor are dross to us, but allay.
On man heaven's influence works not so,
    But that it first imprints the air;
So soul into the soul may flow,
    Though it to body first repair.
As our blood labours to beget
    Spirits, as like souls as it can,
Because such fingers need to knit
    That subtle knot which makes us man,
So must pure lovers' souls descend
    T' affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
    Else a great prince in prison lies.
To our bodies turn we then, that so
    Weak men on love reveal'd may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
    But yet the body is his book.
And if some lover, such as we,
    Have heard this dialogue of one,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
    Small change, when we are to bodies gone.
The Sun Rising

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
    Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?
    Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide
    Late school boys and sour prentices
    Go tell court huntsmen that the king will ride,
    Call country ants to harvest offices,
Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

    Thy beams, so reverend and strong
    Why shouldst thou think?
I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,
But that I would not lose her sight so long;
    If her eyes have not blinded thine,
    Look, and tomorrow late, tell me,
    Whether both th'Indias of spice and mine
    Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with me.
Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.

    She's all states, and all princes, I,
    Nothing else is.
Princes do but play us; compared to this,
All honor's mimic, all wealth alchemy
    Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,
    In that the world's contracted thus.
    Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
    To warm the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.
A Fever

Oh do not die, for I shall hate
All women so, when thou art gone,
That thee I shall not celebrate,
When I remember, thou wast one.

But yet thou canst not die, I know;
To leave this world behind, is death,
But when thou from this world wilt go,
The whole world vapours with thy breath.

Or if, when thou, the world’s soul, go’st,
It stay, ’tis but thy carcase then,
The fairest woman, but thy ghost,
But corrupt worms, the worthiest men.

Oh wrangling schools, that search what fire
Shall burn this world, had none the wit
Unto this knowledge to aspire,
That this her fever might be it?

And yet she cannot waste by this,
Nor long bear this torturing wrong,
For much corruption needful is
To fuel such a fever long.

These burning fits but meteors be,
Whose matter in thee is soon spent.
Thy beauty, and all parts, which are thee,
Are unchangeable firmament.

Yet ’twas of my mind, seizing thee,
Though it in thee cannot persevere.
For I had rather owner be
Of thee one hour, than all else ever.
The Funeral

Whoever comes to shroud me, do not harm
    Nor question much
That subtle wreath of hair, which crowns my arm;
The mystery, the sign, you must not touch,
    For 'tis my outward soul,
Viceroy to that, which then to heaven being gone,
    Will leave this to control
And keep these limbs, her provinces, from dissolution.

For if the sinewy thread my brain lets fall
    Through every part
Can tie those parts, and make me one of all,
Those hairs which upward grew, and strength and art
    Have from a better brain,
Can better do it; except she meant that I
    By this should know my pain,
As prisoners then are manacled, when they are condemn'd to die.

Whate'er she meant by it, bury it with me,
    For since I am
Love's martyr, it might breed idolatry,
If into other hands these relics came;
    As 'twas humility
To afford to it all that a soul can do,
    So, 'tis some bravery,
That since you would have none of me, I bury some of you.
A Valediction Forbidding Mourning

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
   And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
   The breath goes now, and some say, No:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
   No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
"Twere profanation of our joys
   To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th’ earth brings harms and fears,
   Men reckon what it did, and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
   Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers’ love
   (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
   Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined,
   That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
   Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
   Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
   Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
   As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
   To move, but doth, if the other do.

And though it in the center sit,
   Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
   And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
   Like th’ other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
   And makes me end where I begun.
Song: sweetest love

Sweetest love, I do not go,
    For weariness of thee,
Nor in hope the world can show
    A fitter love for me;
But since that I
Must die at last, 'tis best
To use myself in jest
    Thus by feign'd deaths to die.

Yesternight the sun went hence,
    And yet is here today;
He hath no desire nor sense,
    Nor half so short a way:
Then fear not me,
But believe that I shall make
Speedier journeys, since I take
    More wings and spurs than he.

O how feeble is man's power,
    That if good fortune fall,
Cannot add another hour,
    Nor a lost hour recall!
But come bad chance,
And we join to'it our strength,
And we teach it art and length,
    Itself o'er us to'advance.

When thou sigh'st, thou sigh'st not wind,
    But sigh'st my soul away;
When thou weep'st, unkindly kind,
    My life's blood doth decay.
It cannot be
That thou lov'st me, as thou say'st,
If in thine my life thou waste,
    That art the best of me.

Let not thy divining heart
    Forethink me any ill;
Destiny may take thy part,
    And may thy fears fulfil;
But think that we
Are but turn'd aside to sleep;
They who one another keep
    Alive, ne'er parted be.
Break of Day

’Tis true, ‘tis day, what though it be?
O wilt thou therefore rise from me?
Why should we rise because ‘tis light?
Did we lie down because ‘twas night?
Love, which in spite of darkness brought us hither,
Should in despite of light keep us together.

Light hath no tongue, but is all eye;
If it could speak as well as spy,
This were the worst that it could say,
That being well I fain would stay,
And that I loved my heart and honour so,
That I would not from him, that had them, go.

Must business thee from hence remove?
Oh, that’s the worst disease of love,
The poor, the foul, the false, love can
Admit, but not the busied man.
He which hath business, and makes love, doth do
Such wrong, as when a married man doth woo.
Commentaries and Activities on (Selected) Donne Love Poems

The Indifferent

This poem should be viewed as being deliberately outrageous; it suggests that marriage and monogamy are dangerous vices; one should be free to love anyone at anytime.

Go and Catch a Falling Star

paraphrase each stanza

verse 1: The poem starts off by ordering you to attempt a string of impossible feats: catch a falling star, ravish a plant that strangely looks somewhat human (seriously – search it up) find out where all the past years are, tell Donne (speaker) who gave the devil cloven hooves, teach him to hear mermaids, how to avoid envy, and finally, find out which wind helps honest men to promotion (an impossible task since, as everyone knows, being honest is not much help if you want to get ahead in life – whatever wind is blowing).

verse 2: If you have magic powers and can see things that are invisible to ordinary eyes, then journey until you are old and grey and when you come back, tell Donne about all the wonders you have seen but one thing you won't have seen is a woman who is both beautiful and true.

verse 3: If you do find one, let Donne know; he would love to make a pilgrimage to her, yet you needn’t bother; there would really be no point in him setting off because even if she had been true when you met her and had stayed true until you had written Donne about her, she would have been false to two or three men by the time he arrived even if only had to go next door.

Which of the following words do you think apply to this poem and why?

boring, dull energetic, serious, light, deep, amusing, dramatic, stilted, unfair…

Air and Angels

This poem explores the difference between real love and erotic love and perhaps contains a sexist male view. Lines 23-15: some scholastic philosophers held that angels, when they appeared to man, assumed a body of air. Such a body, though pure, was less so than the pure angel’s being. Similarly, women’s love, which Donne thinks less pure than that of men, may still serve as the receptacle (sphere) for the love of men.
paraphrasing:

I loved you before I met you, in the same way angels can influence us without meeting them. Ever since I met you, you seemed like an angel – a lovely, glorious spirit. But just as my soul has to live in a body, so my love has to live somewhere. This, I asked my love to find out about you and settle in you.

I did this to fix my love and steady it, but you are so distractedly lovely that my love cannot live in you. I will have to find somewhere else for it to settle in. It can live inside your love for me, just as an angel has to live in a body of air when it appears to man. The difference between a man’s love and a woman’s love is the difference between an angel and the pure air it inhales.

pure pure, but less pure

angels angels assume a body of air

soul soul physical body

Love needs a body too . . .

Donne’s love Donne’s love body

. . . but not balanced (too beautiful),

therefore:

Donne’s love Donne’s love

woman’s love, which Donne feels is less pure, can still serve as a receptacle (sphere) for the love a man
The Flea

Write an appreciation of the poem using the following as a guide:

- what the poem is about
- what Donne is trying to achieve
- how he tries to achieve it
- what effect the poem has on you
- whether or not the poem is successful

_The Flea_ is a seduction poem. Donne is trying to persuade a girl to be with him by convincing her that her objections are absurd. His immediate aim is to outwit her, demolish her argument, and win. His broader aim is to dazzle, entertain, amuse, shock, and upset the expectations of his audience.

The poem need not be taken seriously as the poet is going about seduction like a lawyer or a theologian arguing point by point. He does not flatter her beauty. He does not say he is dying for love of her. The poem is deliberately unorthodox. It is also a dramatic poem: there are two characters, a setting, and the argument passes from one to the other. We feel the presence of the girl; she answers back and kills the flea to make her point although the speaker, of course, turns her argument against her and gets the last word.

Thus the core of the poem is argument. See how Donne starts with the word _Mark_; this debating sort of word sets the rational mood.

The fact that the object of this measured marking is a ludicrous, unromantic insect should be amusing. The poet, the lady, and the reader are all aware that his argument is false and farcical, even though it is pursued relentlessly and persuasively.

At the heart of Donne’s argument is the image of the flea. He begins with a preposterous analogy: because the flea has sucked blood from both of them and there is nothing wrong and shameful about this, it follows that making love is just as innocent because that’s just another way of mingling blood.

When she is about to kill the flea he tries to save it by claiming that, since it contains the blood of both of them, it is their _marriage bed and temple_. Killing the flea means killing the pair of them too.

This image of the flea arises from the dramatic setting – real or imagined – and forms part of the action. It is also used in a very complex way to illustrate stages in the poet’s absurd argument, a fine example of Donne’s original and sophisticated use of imagery.
The Good Morrow

paraphrase each stanza

stanza 1: I wonder what you and I did until we loved? Were not we weaned until then? Did we just play? Were we asleep? Yes: apart form all this, all other pleasures are fantasies. Before, if ever I saw beauty and wanted it and got it, it was only a dream of you.

stanza 2: And now, good morning to our waking souls which are now watching each other, not because they are jealous but because they are in love and love cuts out others and makes one small room the whole universe. Let explorers find new lands; let maps show other worlds; let us just posses on world: each other.

stanza 3: Our reflected faces are in each other’s eyes and honest hearts are shown in those faces (ie. they look honest and true). Where could we find two better halves of a globe without the cold North or the West, where the sun goes down bringing darkness? Whatever dies had its elements mixed unequally; it follows that if we love one another with the same strength and neither of us slacken, then our love will live forever.

How is this opening / writing typical of Donne?

It starts in a striking way; he is talking to someone; he dismisses something: their old attitude to love. It ends with a wonderfully turned compliment.

Discuss the imagery in stanza 1.

I’ll focus on two key images:

...were we not wean’d till then?
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?

This first image stresses the immaturity and the carnal, physical nature of the way they used to be before they fell in love with each other.

The next image:

Snorted we in the seven sleepers den?

This image identifies this immature state with sleep. The whole poem is itself an image of awakening from that sleep to a new life.

Stanza 2 images:

This stanza starts with the image of two souls waking from sleep. Next, we’re told that they are looking at each other. This image is extended. Donne explains that they are not watching each other out of jealousy because love excludes others and makes one little room an everywhere.

Following this contrasting conceit, which comes as part of a complex image, come the complementary images which expand the idea:
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us posses one world; each hath one, and is one.

Note the way Donne dismisses the sea-discoverers and the map-makers. The effect is to make the one world of the lovers stable and significant.

Stanza 3 images and how each contributes to the theme:

Thy face in thine eye, thine in mine appears . . .

Here they are looking into each other’s eyes and seeing his/her own reflection – an image of spiritual union; one personality entering another, becoming part of it while remaining physically separate. This image of the reflections is now extended. Just as the faces appear reflected in the eyes so do their hearts appear reflected in the faces. Again we are shown one thing appearing within another. This reinforces the reflection image. At the same time we are told that the hearts are honest and sincere, so we receive two messages at once: they are within each other; they are true to each other.

Another image:

Where can we find two better hemispheres
Without sharp North, without declining West?

Again, this is an extension of the previous images. Donne is continuing to emphasize the idea of the pair of them being two halves of the same thing, like hemispheres of a globe. This is truly an expression of genuine love. Remember Donne’s earlier line Let us possess one world, each hath one and is one.

Another significant image now follows:

Whatever dies, was not mixed equally.

We know what this means, but note the way Donne uses the image; he makes a statement. Things die because their elements are mixed unequally. He then goes on to argue that if they love each other equally then none can die. It may be a strange argument, but within the context of the poem, it is for me, convincing.

Metaphysical characteristics which apply to this poem:

- plenty of conceits and clever images
- images from learning and everyday life
- images within images
- colloquial language
- startling opening
- argument based on false analogy
- fusion of intellect and emotion (passion with reason)

Is the poem convincing?

I think so. The poem shows the passionate, quick-thinking style of Donne. He asserts what he feels.
The Triple Fool

On “The Triple Fool” (Christopher Atkins)

The Triple Fool, Donne displays not only his talent as a poet, but also his skill as an ironist. Who but a master of irony could call himself a fool for writing poetry about the pain of his love, and do so within the bounds of a poem?

In our examination of this poem, we shall direct our attention to four areas: first, to Donne’s realization of the foolishness of using poetry to rid himself of his pain; second, to the reasons he gives for assuming that his stratagem should work; third, to the way in which his purpose is undermined by the actions of others; and last, to the effect this has upon him and his estimate of himself.

Donne begins:

I am two fools, I know,
For loving, and for saying so
In whining poetry;
But where’s that wiseman, that would be I,
If she would not deny?

The first three lines contain the narrator’s basic understanding of his situation, that he is foolish for being in love, and even more so for writing poetry about his condition. It is not until the fourth line that Donne reveals that, were the object of his affections to reciprocate his feelings, he would not be in his current foolish state.

The next six lines explain Donne’s reason for putting into poems the pain of his unrequited love:

Then as th’ earth’s inward narrow crooked lanes
Do purge sea water’s fretful salt away,
I thought, if I could draw my pains
Through rhyme’s vexation, I should them allay.
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,
For he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

The first two lines here conjure up images of a filtration, of a removal of some undesirable quality, leaving behind a pure, unadulterated substance. That Donne should use sea water in this section is far from surprising, for the ocean has always been, in the poetic tradition, associated with tears. By speaking of purging sea water’s fretful salt away, Donne is speaking, metaphorically, of removing his grief by having it brought to numbers, that is, expressed in verse, and thus conquered and understood, as we see in the next line’s fetters it to verse.

The passage here, then, speaks of a conquering of his pain, through the use of two images, the first alchemical (in which Donne’s works are replete) and the second, technical describing the process of writing poetry of a fettering of grief, and thus, controlling it.

Alchemically, we have two references, one implicit, the other explicit. The images of sea water’s purification (purging) is reminiscent of the process of filtration (inwards, crooked ways). When we remember that the alchemist’s goal was to imitate Nature in its operations, it becomes clear why Donne should write I thought if I could draw my pains/ Through rhyme’s vexation, I should them allay. The second, more subtle reference to the art of alchemy, is in the final word of the question, allay, which is, itself, a play on the double meaning of the term at the time. To allay a pain was to make it less felt, and to allay a metal was to combine it with some other substance in order to change its nature.

The technical references to the poet’s craft are interesting, in that they describe the expression of emotion within poetry as a sort of binding up of sentiment and the creation of a more reliant alloy. Donne would seem to be saying that in being able to express his grief metrically, he shows himself to be its master, for he can bend and shape it as he chooses; he fetters it in verse.
We come now to the third theme within the poem, that of the futility of his efforts, for he goes on:

   But when I have done so,
     Some man, his art and voice to show,
       Doth set and sing my pain;
     And, by delighting many, frees again
       Grief, which verse did restrain.

From these lines we can conclude that grief, when bound up in verse, remains inert until such time as the verse is read. In essence, a sentiment expressed poetically is trapped within the verse, line, and meter of the poem but is liberated when read. This would seem to mean that a poem is a prison of sorts, and that reading of a poem is an opening of that prison, thus releasing that which is confined therein.

The final theme of the work is expressed as follows:

   To love and grief tribute of verse belongs,
     But not of such as pleases when 'tis read.
   Both are increased by such songs,
     For both their triumphs so are published,
   And I, which was two fools, do so grow three;
   Who are a little wise, the best fools be.

By stating that To love and grief tribute of verse belongs, Donne asserts that, in the final analysis, all poetry is either an expression of the universal human emotion of love, or of suffering. We have here yet another insight into the poet’s craft as practised and understood by Donne. Perhaps unwittingly, perhaps deliberately, Donne provides two great categories into which all poems fall, and thus fulfills a descriptive role in his work, a characterization of poetry in general, and of this poem in particular.

He goes on to clearly state that the recitation of such poems as are written out of love and grief represents a victory for such emotions, in that this publishes their success against the poet who felt them.

This sentiment is very much in the spirit of Søren Kierkegaard, who in Either/Or writes: What is a poet? An unhappy person who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music. This is nothing less than the expression in prose of Donne’s complaint within his poem.

The terminal couplet, And I, which was two fools grow three / Who are a little wise, the best fools be, expresses Donne’s resignation to this state of affairs. He understood that he is foolish for loving, and foolish still for writing poetry about his love, but he sees that conditions cannot be otherwise; it is only be confining grief his love brings him in poetry that he can begin to rid himself of it. But this is, at best, merely delaying the inevitable triumph of his pain, for someone is bound to come along and liberate his pain, and, in doing so, permit it to triumph over him who has intended to defeat it. The edifice that Donne constructs for his grief is of such a nature that it invites others to open it, but it is only within the walls of such a structure as a poem that he can contain his pain. It is as if he is duty-bound to fetter his pain in such a way as to facilitate its release and triumph. As a crowning touch, Donne adds the delicious element of irony, that hygiene of the mind, as it has been called, to his work by framing his complaint in the form of a poem, which is, according to his own text, liable to be read and have its prisoner freed.

We have, then, in these few lines, a wonderfully rich and complex work, drawing on such elements as the futility of poetry as a means of conquering pain, the poets’ and alchemists’ art (which are, it would seem, very much alike), and finally, of the necessity of the futile undertaking that is the writing of poetry.
Sample multiple choice questions on *The Triple Fool*:

1. The poem as a whole is best characterized as which of the following?
   
   a. an ode  
   b. **a complaint**  
   c. a satire  
   d. a plea  
   e. a celebration

2. In context, the speaker is made a fool of for a third time as a result of
   
   a. ridicule by his mistress  
   b. his own public desire for fame  
   c. **the public response to his verse**  
   d. the wit of a rival poet  
   e. the scorn of literary critics

3. The speaker describes his poetry as “whining” (line 3) because he believes it is
   
   a. flawed in technique  
   b. unlearned  
   c. unoriginal  
   d. old-fashioned  
   e. **undignified**

4. In context, lines 4-5 suggest which of the following about the speaker’s situation?
   
   a. His love is insincere.  
   b. **His love is unrequited**  
   c. His ardour has begun to cool  
   d. He will soon abandon his mistress.  
   e. His mistress is unworthy of him.

5. In lines 6-11, the speaker suggests that he composes poetry primarily to
   
   a. inform others of his pain  
   b. experiment with poetic technique  
   c. **assuage his lovesickness**  
   d. woo the woman he loves  
   e. indulge his own grief

6. In context, “numbers” (line 10) refers to which of the following?
   
   a. “fools” (line 1)  
   b. “lanes” (line 6)  
   c. “salt” (line 7)  
   d. “pains” (line 8)  
   e. **“verse” (line 11)**
7. In lines 12-16, what happens to the poetry the speaker has composed?
   a. It is quickly published in an anthology.
   b. It is widely imitated by other poets.
   c. It is quickly forgotten.
   d. **It is publicly performed.**
   e. It is mocked by the speaker’s friends.

8. According to the speaker, the “man” in line 13 is motivated chiefly by his
   a. the promise of monetary gain
   b. **the desire to display his own talents**
   c. jealousy of the speaker’s poetry
   d. plans to woo the speaker’s mistress
   e. sympathy for the speaker’s plight

9. In the second stanza the dissemination of “such songs” (line 19) leads to which of
   the following?
   a. **A renewal of the speaker’s sorrow**
   b. The ridicule of the speaker’s love by others
   c. An improvement in the speaker’s reputation as a poet
   d. A validation of the speaker’s poetic intentions
   e. The end of the speaker’s ability to love

10. In context, line 22 is best interpreted to mean that
   a. wisdom can transcend the pain of love
   b. **wisdom can open new avenues of foolishness**
   c. only the wisest fool believes in love
   d. fools are often wiser than they appear to be
   e. even fools can become great poets

11. In the context of the poem as a whole, the speaker can be characterized as all of
    the following except
    a. lucid
    b. contemplative
    c. resentful
    d. **envious**
    e. self-deprecating
Lovers’ Infiniteness

The influence of Donne’s legal training is very clear here. The poem is a series of technical verbal quibbles of the word all. The poet is capable of giving more and more love each day (1-25) and his lady ought to be able to give ever-fresh rewards. This would be possible if the lovers themselves were infinite.

verse 1: The speaker plays with Aristotle’s definition of all that which however much you have taken, there is always more to take.

verse 2: Speaker considers possibility she has given all her love, by making her original gift of love general.

verse 3: Speaker refuses to accept ‘all’ since his love growing each day should find no corresponding new love in the lady. But the poem ends on an optimistic note: they have a more liberal way (physical union?) that makes them one another’s all and gives them a new sort of infiniteness.

The Extasie

This remarkably subtle work is perhaps the most famous of Donne’s love poems. With his characteristic blend of passion and ratiocination (reasoning), here he seeks to convey his sense of the interdependence of the spiritual and the physical in Love. Notice the range of imagery – from theories on the nature of souls to the threading of beads on a string to the transplanting of violets.

EXTASIE: the temporary departure of the soul from the body

What is the poem about?

It is about love and the nature of love. It analyses what love is. It describes a trance and explains love.

Is there a dramatic setting?

Yes. The lovers are lying down (or sitting), holding hands and looking into each other’s eyes at the start of the poem. The action then becomes spiritual and takes place between them as their souls leave their bodies.

Tone of poem?

Meditative, philosophical…

Best single word to describe the poem and love?

Souls.
Donne is saying that love between two individuals is, at its most profound, a mingling of souls by which two individuals merge into a greater soul:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{When love, with one another so} \\
\text{Interinanimates two souls} \\
\text{That abler soul, which thence does flow,} \\
\text{Defects of loneliness controls.}
\end{align*}
\]

This image is important. Donne often seems to be searching for union with someone else, with a woman or with God. The great poems of assertive love show this. Love, Donne is saying, mingles the eternal parts of two people together and makes them stronger.

**8 things (sections) to consider while reading *The Extasie***

1. reproduction metaphors (both human and plant) at the start of the poem; propagation will bring renewed strength and vitality (and harmony)

2. lovers are tightly fastened to one another – connected through the eyes (which we know is the gateway to the soul)

3. physical union – stronger bond produced; *grafting* and *graft*: consider what these words suggest

4. conflict of the soul: uncertainty, uncertain outcome

5. alchemy: refinement

6. perfect loving relationship

7. *But O alas...*

8. *we owe our body thanks*: we enter the world imperfect while at the time potential for perfection; bodies are absolutely necessary to the soul’s development; body is a living text from which others may (read and) learn.

Consider:

Initially *we = body*, then *we = soul*; therefore division between body and soul is mysterious. (Donne’s fascination with Christian doctrine – body’s resurrection, soul being eternally severed from physical body.)
The Sun Rising

paraphrase each stanza

verse 1: You meddling old, fool, boorish Sun, why do you come shining through our windows and curtains? Must lovers stick to your timetable? Insolent, nitpicking oaf, go and chase late school boys and miserable apprentices. Go and tell court huntsmen that the King wants to ride today. Tell country bumpkins to bring in the harvest. Love knows no time — everything is the same to love — no seasons, no climate, no hours, days, or months — these are just the rags of time.

verse 2: Why should you think your beams so reverend and strong? I could eclipse and cloud them just by winking, except I don’t want to lose sight of her so long. If you have not been blinded by the beauty of her eyes, go look, and tomorrow, late, tell me if both the East and West Indies are where they ought to be, or are they in here with us? Ask for Kings you saw yesterday, you’ll find them here, all in one bed.

verse 3: She is all countries in the world; I am all the Princes. Nothing else exists. Princes just pretend to be us; compared to us, all honour is a charade, all wealth a fraud. You sun, should be at least as half as happy as we are because the world has been shrunk like this. You are getting on and need to take things easy, and since your duties consist of warming the world, you can do just that by warming us. Shine here on us and you are everywhere. This bed is your centre and the walls are your orbit.

tone: clever, affirmative, cheeky, funny, contemptuous...

How does Donne succeed in making the lovers seem important and everything else unimportant in stanza 1?

He insults the sun, reasons with him for disturbing them, and sends him packing. Calling the sun busie old foole and saucy pedantic wretch is quite impertinent. In Donne’s day, it may have been outrageous. He perhaps does this for comic and dramatic effect, and because putting the sun in its place makes the lovers leap out of the poem with a sudden, startling significance. Donne often assumes a dismissive, impatient tone and the effect is to make himself, and what he is saying, dominant. Here the sun gets Donne’s imperious treatment and the effect is to make the sun, and all it stands for, subservient to the lovers. Donne also adopts a contemptuous, mocking tone towards the various people he suggests the sun should busy himself with. They are presented as subservient people; even the huntsmen are courtiers trying to suck up to the King. Notice, too, that Donne ends the stanza with a flourish of a couplet that emphatically states his theme.

Discuss the imagery in stanza 2 and 3.

It’s the sort of original, clever imagery that we have already seen in Donne. For example, he is contracting the world into a bed just as he contracted a marriage bed, a marriage temple, the lovers, and even the Trinity into the flea. Donne’s imagination often works in this condensing fashion. The effect here is to illustrate his theme: the world is less than his love.
As you read through the poem, note:

- *everything that strikes you as typical of Donne’s style*
- *all shifts in tone*
- *examples of complex imagery*

**verse 1:** The poem opens sensational like most of Donne’s lyrics. He is talking to someone and something is happening, a woman sick, perhaps dying. There is an immediate emotional response; we can’t help feeling anxious and hoping she won’t die.

**verse 2:** There is a sudden shift in thought: *But yet thou canst not die . . .* which is typical of Donne. This new thought is explained in a complicated image:

> To leave this world behind is death
> But when thou from this world wilt go
> The whole world vapors with thy breath.

He explains that she can’t die because dying means leaving the world behind, and when she leaves the world, the whole world will evaporate with her last breath; since she can’t leave the world behind, she won’t die.

This may look like an absurd argument (it is), but within the context of the poem, it is appropriate and typical of Donne in four ways:

a. it is obscure and difficult to understand
b. it is based on a false argument
c. once we understand it, we believe it in the context of the poem
d. it is used to assert what he wants to happen in the face of threats; the image expresses hope in the face of danger

**verse 3:** The image is expanded in this verse, again typical of Donne who often takes an image, extracts meaning from it, then looks at it from another angle and takes more meaning out of it. He says: if the world does remain behind when she dies, then it will only stay behind like a corpse because she is the soul of the world. The fairest women will just be her ghosts; the best men will merely be worms.

**verse 4:** Donne changes direction. He is no longer talking to the woman but attacking scholars:

> O wrangling schools that search what fire
> Shall burn this world, had none the wit
> Unto this knowledge to aspire
> That this her fever might be it?

This image relates back to the preceding image. If she is the soul of the world, her ‘fever’ is the fire by which the world will burn. Note the typically dismissive way in which the philosophers are treated and the importance of the woman and her situation emphasized. She may die, but if she does, then the whole world goes too.
verse 5: Another image arrives: *And yet she cannot wast by this* . . . supported by a new image: *For such corruption needful is / to fuel such a fever long.* Again, this image comes from an obscure branch of learning. Fever, certain authorities considered, arose from the corruption in which the elements in the body burn and consume each other. He is arguing that since her mixture of elements is almost perfect, she can't have much corruption; therefore, the fever won't last long. Again, a unique but successful argument when viewed in context.

verse 6: This confidence is reinforced by a related image: *These burning fits but meteors be.* Meteors are, of course, burning things that shoot through the heavens. Donne believed that everything in the heavens was eternal, unchangeable, and perfect. Here he is saying that she is perfect like the heavens and like the heavens is eternal:

\[
\text{Thy beauty, and all parts, which are thee} \\
\text{Are unchangeable firmament.}
\]

verse 7: Having struck this positive note, Donne explains to her why it crossed his mind that she might die – even though the fever can't carry on long; she means so much to him that he would rather have her for only one hour than all else ever.

This quick movement of thought, as if we are hearing the thoughts flit through his head, is typical of Donne. So too is the magnificent assertion of the final declaration:

\[
\text{For I had rather owner be} \\
\text{Of thee one hour, than all else ever.}
\]
The Funeral

Typical of Donne's preoccupation with physical death (common in Jacobean literature of the time); he imagines himself being buried with a bracelet of his mistress' hair on his arm. Note the bitter 'joke' in the final line of the poem.

This poem is a mixture of light-heartedness and seriousness. His beloved has rejected the poet. In sheer desperation and agony he wishes to sacrifice his life as a martyr on the altar of the god of love. But in the meantime, he has secured a token of love from his beloved. This is a lock of her hair which he has worn round his arm. He thinks that the beloved's hair will preserve his dead body and prevent it from decay and disintegration. It is a kind of charm or rather an embodiment of the outward soul which will give him immortality. The poet ultimately wishes to die as a martyr but fearing that the hair may be worshipped as a relic, he wants it to be buried in the grave along with him. This action will be a sort of revenge on the cruel beloved, because some part of her body will be in the grave while she is still alive.

Comment on the tone of this poem.

The Funeral may be considered disturbing and macabre. It is a monologue and the tone varies as the poet goes through three stages of thought:

1. He implies he is going to die because of unrequited love. The twist of the lady's hair around his wrist will be his outward soul and stop his corpse from decaying or putrefying. So far the lady is being flattered as well as reproached, rather in the Petrarchan style.

2. A disturbing thought suddenly occurs:

   ... except she meant that I
   By this should know my pain
   As prisoners then are manacled...

   Maybe she sent the twist of hair to show who was boss.

3. Next, the melancholy is flavoured by bitterness. If he's going to die because of her, at least he'll take a bit of her with him:

   So, 'tis some bravery
   That since you save none of me, I bury some of you.

   A twist of woman's hair around a dead man's arm is both startling and sad. It emphasizes the reason for his imagined death; he has died for love. This image is extended in a complicated, emotional, and philosophical manner, summed up in these words: For 'tis my outward soul.
A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning -- discussion questions

- What is a valediction?
- The first stanza begins with a simile. What is the connection the speaker makes between "virtuous men passing mildly away" and the way the speaker wants to say goodbye to his love?
- Why would virtuous men "pass mildly away"? How do you suppose evil men pass away? As the hypothetical virtuous men described in the poem are dying, what is confusing or baffling the friends who watch his death?
- The speaker wants the parting couple to "melt" and "make no noise." What does he want their parting to be like?
- What’s a tear-flood or a sigh-tempest? Why does the poet say in the accompanying stanza he doesn’t want these things?
- What is the "laity," according to a dictionary? Who are the "laity" probably in this poem?
- What is the "moving of th' earth" that brings harms and fears?
- What is that "far greater" trepidation of the spheres? (i.e., Although earthquakes are scary, how is the earth constantly moving although people don’t normally sense it?) Why is the latter movement "innocent" in comparison to that earlier movement that causes harms and fears?
- What does the word "sublunary" mean in the fourth stanza? How does this connect with the Renaissance idea of the Great Chain of Being? What is the contrast John Donne is making between "sublunary lover's love" and the "refined" or heavenly love between the speaker and the implied audience?
- Why is it that sublunary lovers have a "dull" love in contrast with the heavenly love? Why can’t sublunary lovers stand absence or being away from each other? Why is it that those with "refined" love don't care if they are separated physically from each other?
- What quality about the couple's love prevents them from understanding what it is? (i.e., how does the fact their love is so pure make that love impossible to measure or analyze or understand?)
- What is the paradox Donne makes in stanza six between the nature of the two souls and the speaker’s departure to a separate existence?
- According to the speaker, the couple will "endure not yet / A breach, but an expansion, / Like gold to aery thinness beat." What does this mean? How is the way a goldsmith hammers gold flat into paper thin foil akin to the way their soul will behave as the two become physically farther and farther apart? What was the Renaissance belief with respect to gold beat to airy thinness?
- In stanza seven, the speaker abandons the metaphysical conceit of goldworking and turns to a different line of thought in which he compares a geometer’s compass to the nature of their souls. Explain the metaphysical conceit of the compass and how each leg or foot corresponds to one lover in the relationship.
- Which leg or foot of the compass is the male speaker? Which leg or foot of the compass is the female audience? Why is this appropriate for their situation? According to Donne, the further out he (or the mobile compass point) moves, the more it will do what?
- What will the speaker (and his corresponding leg of the compass) do as he gradually approaches homeward?
- What is it that "makes [his] circle just" or perfect? That is to say, what force or thing ensures that the speaker will end his journey where he began?

Alchemist symbol for GOLD:

![Alchemist symbol for GOLD](image)

A circle with one point located in the exact centre to demonstrate the complete solidarity and taintless nature of the new element formed. Gold is one of the seven metal of alchemy (gold, silver, mercury, copper, lead, iron, & tin). For the alchemist, gold represented the perfection of all matter on any level, including that of the mind, spirit, and soul. The symbol for gold could also be used to represent the sun in astrology.
Song: *Sweetest Love, I do not go*

In this poem, a loving relationship is seen within the contexts of death, time, fortune, wasting away, and fear. Yet all of this is dismissed in the final four lines. These could be interpreted as an assertion of Love’s power over reality.

**Explain the conceit in the last lines of stanza 1.**

Since I am going to die one day, I thought it best to pretend to die now; that is, being away from you is like being dead, good training for the real thing.

**Be able to explain the sun reference in stanza 2.**

The sun has no desire or feeling, nor half so short a way, so don’t worry about me, but please believe I’ll make quicker journeys because I have more incentives than the sun to return.

**Stanza 3?**

We can’t add to time when things are going well, but when bad luck comes, we are able to make the hours seem longer. We lengthen it and beautify it, so that bad luck marches over us.

**What is happening in stanza 4?**

The lady is crying. Donne tells her that as she and he are one, when she sighs, she sighs his soul away; when she weeps tears, it is his life blood that seeps away. He asks her how she can love him as she claims if she wastes him (herself) away. She is the best of him.

**What is he saying to the lady towards the end?**

That we are so close in spirit that we can never really be parted. Although I’m going away, it will be just as if we had turned aside to sleep – unable to see each other but still close.

**This poem is very light, yet still quite metaphysical. How?**

It contains a series of metaphysical conceits, the *fain’d death* already noted. In stanza 2, the poet claims that since the sun disappeared last night and returned at dawn, he will be even quicker because he has desire, senses, and spurs (reasons), a typically constructed metaphysical argument which sounds convincing. Stanza 4 begins with twin conceits on the theme that, since the lovers are one flesh, her sighs and tears are wasting him away. He argues from this premise that if she really loves him, she should stop crying.
Break of Day

Modelled on the Provençal Aubade (a song or poem appropriate to or greeting the dawn), this poem is one of the few Donne poems that assumes a feminine point of view. As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that this is not truly a love song, but is instead a complaint about the man's priorities. John Donne writes the poem from a female point of view, something that becomes apparent for the first time in the second stanza. The first stanza asks whether the man must get up and go just because it's now daylight, making the point that their decision to lie down together was not based on it being dark. "If we found each other despite it being dark, should we not remain together despite it being daylight?" is a slightly update variant of the final question of the first stanza.

The second stanza features a personification of "light", which is characterized as being all-seeing, but incapable of speech. If light could speak, however, (says the female speaker) the worst it would be able to say is that the speaker would happily stay with her man, based on her own principles of love and honour, both of which are qualities that she attributes to the man as well.

The final stanza makes clear that the people involved in the poem are not nobility, and at leisure, but are working folk: The man must rise in order to attend to his business concerns, and is not at leisure to love. "Love can permit the poor (meaning those who aren't good at it), the foul (those who are unpleasant) and the false (those who are impure of heart), but a busy man doesn't have time for it" is what those middle lines are getting at. Like the commonplace phrase that "the law is a jealous mistress", the notion expressed in the final stanza is that business is so consuming that a man who is dedicated to his work treats his loved ones in the same way that a married man treats his mistress (presumably with less than full and ardent attention).
According to T. S. Eliot’s celebrated dictum, the metaphysical poets of the early 17th century (of whom Donne was the prime example) had a “unified sensibility”, that is, they threw everything into their poems – sex, religion, science, alchemy . . . Explain what Eliot meant, by showing the scope of Donne’s quirkish themes and some of the unique conceits which seem to you particularly notable.

Focussing on the poems which impress you the most, write an essay on John Donne showing how he anatomises and plays with the theme of love.

Compare and contrast Donne’s playful poems with his religious poems.

Although John Donne is an ingenious and witty metaphysical poet, his cleverness does not preclude depth of feeling; on the contrary, his poems show how intricate thought and genuine feeling can be used to complement each other. Demonstrate the validity of this claim. You may also choose to supplement your argument with reference to works by Hebert and Marvell, two other significant metaphysical poets.

One hallmark of the Metaphysical poets is their use of the unexpected: unexpected subject matter, unexpected imagery, unexpected method of presentation. Discuss this statement with reference to the works of John Donne.

One of the fascinating and often surprising things to observe in metaphysical poetry is the application of religious images and ideas to human love, and vice versa, the application of language normally associated with human love to religious experience. Discuss this statement with reference to the works of Donne, Marvell, and/or Herbert.

Discuss John Donne’s use of Time, Place, and Space.

A topic of your own choosing. Please see me for approval.

between 1,000 – 1,500 words
must include poems not studied in class
must be typed and double-spaced
proper citations / documentation
Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the speaker uses varied imagery of the poem to reveal his attitude towards the nature of love.

**Definition of Love – Andrew Marvell**

My love is of a birth as rare
As 'tis for object strange and high;
It was begotten by Despair
Upon Impossibility.

Magnanimous Despair alone
Could show me so divine a thing
Where feeble Hope could ne’er have flown,
But vainly flapp’d its Tinsel Wing.

And yet I quickly might arrive
Where my extended soul is fixt,
But Fate does iron wedges drive,
And always crowds itself betwixt.

For Fate with jealous Eye does see
Two perfect loves, nor lets them close;
Their union would her ruin be,
And her Tyrannic pow’r depose.

And therefore her Decrees of Steel
Us as the distant Poles have plac’d,
(Though Love’s whole World on us doth wheel)
Not by themselves to be embrac’d;

Unless the giddy Heaven fall,
And Earth some new Convulsion tear;
And, us to join, the World should all
Be cramp’d into a Planisphere.

As Lines, so loves oblique may well
Themselves in every angle greet;
But ours so truly parallel,
Though infinite, can never meet.

Therefore the Love which us doth bind,
But Fate so enviously debars,
Is the Conjunction of the Mind,
And Opposition of the Stars.
Working on your own or with a partner, you are to select one John Donne poem (not taught in class; I will provide a couple of good on-line sites to access the works of Donne) and prepare a comprehensive report on the poem. You will be presenting your poem to the class. Your report can be shaped any way you feel best, but it must contain the following:

- a copy of the poem
- a solid paraphrasing of the poem
- a discussion of any relevant historical or background information
- a thorough analysis of the poems’ literary techniques (include the speaker’s attitude toward the subject and how the poem is typical of Donne)
- your personal response(s) to the poem
- something else that is impressive / inspiring

Although our class package focuses on selected love poems by Donne, you are free to select any other poem; it need not be a love poem, but Sonnet 10, *Death Be Not Proud*, is off limits. Students cannot research the same poems, so all poems will be designated on a first come, first sign up process. You will be given some class time to work on this assignment. All secondary resources must be cited properly. The assignment is worth 20 marks. Remember: be thorough and professional in your presentation.

a couple of sites to begin your search:

*The Poetry Foundation*  &lt;www.poetryfoundation.org&gt;

*Luminarium*  &lt;www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnebib.htm&gt;
You’re not Donne yet:
Let’s get metaphysical: find your inner Donne

We began our study of John Donne metaphysical poetry by looking at, and playing with, some unique conceits connected to love and concluded by watching Emma Thompson’s powerful performance in *Wit*. Your task for our final Donne assignment (in lieu of test) is to write your own metaphysical poem, using the style and characteristics of metaphysical poetry.

You have a choice:

1. Select one of the Donne poems presented to you in class, then respond to the ideas and/or speaker of the poem, following the structure of the original poem.

2. Create an original metaphysical masterpiece, using any/all of the characteristics of metaphysical poetry.

(this assignment is worth 20 marks)
Trapped

So senile an appearance our planet cloaked on,
After illness hath your heavenly self drawn,
From this world and to the celestial realm,
Whose qualities blush humbly, for yours shall whelm.

Once magnificent and mighty, Mother Earth
Now only possess twice as small a girth.
For thou—of same mass—an orb of virtues,
Art gone; never again can the two spheres fuse.

Such a catastrophe repeated in my heart;
Long fled my sanity since thy pulse won’t start.
With thy taking, my nature had split in half,
Leaving a demented vessel, champ of the riffraff.

They claim the rich and poor cannot be mixed;
Yet both elements to us so fast affixed:
You, peasant, but of benevolence a fortune own,
I, aristocrat, but of happiness need a loan.

Die! Die! This heinous standard!
Who preached the rich must to the poor not flirt?
To their foul advice I so foolishly listened,
Therefore I, in place of you, should have stiffened.

Now I intoxicate myself every day,
‘till booze will my complexion turn to grey.
Drunkenness shows more kindness than sobriety;
It presents to me thy fair visage—a grand bliss.

O sacred alcohol, prithee, generously
Remove me from this wretched world; kill me.
Let the dear horned spirit from this vessel pull
And condemn my imperfect, misshapen soul.

In jealous rage, the goat-headed deity will shred
This cowardly, sinful soul of mine, to stiff, straight threads.
Quickly to Elysium will these steal, and become
Tangents to thine. Then both souls to hell succumb.

This world hath, dear love, insulted your grace
By trapping you in this class-divided place.
But since thy spirit thought that perfectly fine,
Then it would fain rest in Abaddon, lodged in mine.

Debbie Liang
Gravity

Captivating, mysterious beauty,
you needn’t have done anything
for the gravity of your presence alone
was enough to draw me in a thousand times over when
I existed in this cold universe:
Floating without aim, colliding without intention.

A black hole is what you are, in essence,
but this very darkness of your core so appealed to me,
an ignorant and inexperienced foo, who believed
that feeble love could fill the darkest souls,
so I ventured straight into your grasp.

As much as I lament your pull on me,
the strength of my yearning for you is no less.
But I cannot say the same about the results for
I am too trivial to move and
you are too mighty to be moved.

Do not berate me for my choices
for it is true what they say:
Love is blind, or rather, blinding:
Where I once was an outsider and judged strangers’ loves,
I am now an extension of the darkness
for you have absorbed all my light.

Did I ever expect my love to be reciprocated?
I cannot remember;
I have been spiralling so long down this seemingly endless path.
Only half remains, the rest swallowed by
your hungry, bottomless pit of a heart.

Only when I was beyond the point of no return
did I realize this one-way trip to inescapable death.
But even now as I head towards my own destruction
I cannot help but think:
What a wonderful trip this has been.

Mary Chung
**Separation: To My Dear Partner**

Unknown, your face is to me
And the name I know you by is not a name
But a mask—one I too share
We exchange voiceless words
By the means and absence of light
Softly the divine glow reflects within our eyes

Clasped to her chest, a heart half full
I fill it with my love and she returns a portion
Neither heart completely filled with love
However both rest equal
She is far fairer than the full moon
For her light is not borrowed

Nor is it harsh and overbearing
Like the moon's source
Millennia shaped land to divide us
Oceans hold us to the New World
Winds carry her across the heavens
Yet the Moirai toy with our encounters

Do not say our fates are ones
Bound by such a feeble thing as
A red string, so easily cut by Atropos
What binds us is intangible, thus unbreakable
Despite their meddling, Fate’s power is little
What intervenes our encounters

The Ouroboros of our human nature
Through our minds, we met
As comrades in a realm of ascending colour
Where we, side-by-side, pit ourselves
Against the gods—victorious
Thy nature so sweet; all fall in line

Naturally, without question as moths to flame
Delight at our false images, hastily drawn
Bounds across the sky
And dances among the Moon and Stars
Before reaching my eyes
Therefore I plead, my dear partner

Allow me to continue my charade
If thou came to love me for my soul
Then do not search for the cage
In which my soul resides
Why trade the pure, the truth,
For such an imperfect image.

*Helen Leung*
Wayward Runs Your Love

As we walk side by side,
your shadow encompasses mine.
The red thread that affixes us to one another,
so tangled and knotted,
threatens to disjoin us and
our love at any moment.

Yet, daringly, I watch as your gelid pinky reaches for mine.
Never breaking stride,
I fight back the shiver that ensues.
I cannot pull away.
The biting chill freezes my blood,
causing my coppery heart to shrivel.

Faithful were both eyes that gazed upon me,
but suddenly no more.
Now, dazed, you stop and glance invariably
between two!
Our dying candle sways to the boisterous winds,
of mother nature, less willingly than you.
I shield the saffron flame, staggering this way and that.
Perchance your left ocular
(ogling her, oh so longingly)
possesses myopia.

Alas, revolting
how even you cannot see beyond her transcendental beauty.
It seems, a stewed prune is more dutiful than you.
Reflected behind her eyes that radiate eros
is the face of a nü gui.
Donned in vermillion, she is the colour of vengeance
and even in tears, her eyes brim with the blood of those possessed.
Your stiff mien reveals you think not.

But, I wonder, is vermillion not a red?
Why, this fated love that we share
is as destructive as the force of her wrath;
her desire for vengeance.
In an instant, I snap the ethereal strand between us.
The deity that binds us together be gone!
I unwind my littlest finger from yours, letting go.
I watch transfixed as my heart smothers the flickering flame,
putting out the candle.
I give you back your right eyepiece and renounce your existence.
Fated love be damned —
You are now nought in my life.

Michelle Zheng
Wandered, I have, of what chipped at your soul, 
how, by bits, you died each day 
Had I known, I would’ve paid the Ferryman his toll 
for safe passage down damned waterway 
Imagined, I have, that I’d sing to his Lord 
win his favour as others have tried 
Would I’ve earned his approval with each moving chord 
Bring your pieces back to my side 
Wondered, for long, what took you from me 
If dark beamed through spiderweb crack 
and filled you, and killed you, as one would breathe in sea 
Dying swallowed my tumulus black

If you were half my soul, as they would later sing 
wouldn’t I’ve felt you at Styx’s bank? 
If we were bound so tightly, by Fate’s golden string 
wouldn’t I’ve pulled you back before you sank? 
Were you corrupted, like old fruits from fungal spores 
or were you ever truly alive? 
Were my eyes too rosy, my judgement too poor 
to see who you truly were inside? 
Who or what did I love? This stranger or you, 
who now clambers around in your frame 
would this have been different, if only I knew 
exactly who to blame?

But who am I to lay fault to night skies, 
or unravel star woven thread? 
I’ve no more say in how the sun flies 
or how mountains make their beds 
How can I hope to stop howling winds 
If all I have is a riddled sail? 
How can I stop or atone your sins 
when I was rigged to fail? 
I could not stop, the tearing of walls, that kept in, or out 
this monster who was once half of whole 
and I am left alone, pierced, with wrecking doubt 
over whatever light shone out your soul.

*Haidee Pangilinan*
Rooted Veins

Observe this plant –
its swelled up limbs and sweating leaves,
trapped and rooted in a pot.

Doused and overflowing with water,
this plant is sinking down to its roots.
drowning in the excess,
swamped, suffocated.
How ironic it is that life
pulsing through the veins of this plant becomes poison to its survival.
Even in the purest elements,
in excess, there is destruction.

Alas, I turn to you
with the same wretched position.
Love, who had once nourished me,
has become poison in my veins.

O, how feeble a heart
and how fragile a body.
This gluttonous love engulfing my veins,
drowning me.
Unable to reciprocate and hold your love
the root of my love is wilting,
swamped, suffocated,
by the excess.

*Miley Leong*
Fictitious Love

Lost souls under the bleak heavens,
scavenging through Love’s wasteland.
Barren, futile,
these lost beings travel limitlessly,
searching for traces of faith
for their hollow souls.

How we have fallen, even to a powerless being.
Enslaved and chained by Fate,
yet, Love’s poison spreads.

Intoxicated from illusions of joy,
Love’s petrifying screams
immobilize
us.
Mere hearts it holds,
devours, destroys, and dismantles.

For what reason are we attracted to Love’s immeasurable force
when it is nothing but a fool’s excuse for contentment?
Those who scavenge for the absence of their souls
will only find Love’s fictitious imagery.

Garry Li
Man-Made Strings

Tying the knot, their strings of Fate intricately intertwine – fastening two souls together by their little fingers.

Swerving, swinging, spinning the waltz of marriage tangles the flustered mass of strings yearningly until any pull can draw the two closer.

An abundance of mirrors strewn in an enclosed room a world reflecting only their love If this is the only love existing surely this is true love.

But Fate derides at the mere sight of their man made strings cheap imitations forged rashly marriage without Fate’s consent is an act of defiance. The inauthenticity infuriates Fate to tighten counterfeit strings Their swelling purple fingers areuffed, suffocating in a prison.

Constant proximity distanced the lovers. Acidic words ate at their hearts. Mirrors reflected their vanity. Eyes scattered with storms and thunder. The lovers were entangled, completely. Strings strangled, viciously. Tense air lingered in the room, waiting patiently for a cry, an outburst – silence.

Snip, go the strings.

Queenie Li
Avaunt, Our Love

I remember when my hand was in yours,
and all I could think about was our aeonian love,
knowing that we would triumph over any ephemeral storm.
Your dulcet words would soothe me,
and the felicity that filled me when I heard
your voice or name was none, but true.
Your embrace would put me at ease,
delicate and tangible.
Without you, I felt that
I would be no more than an ethereal being,
with no body or mind to claim as my own.

I pretended I was unaware,
when my hand no longer fit in yours,
the way it did before.
Your gentle words that rested
in my cloudless dreams,
would more often enrage une orage.
Your loving embraces
became rigid and hollow,
and I was left in an empty,
longing sorrow. Vacivity.

Your attention and love for me
had become concentrated elsewhere.
My essence felt dead within me,
mephitic, as it began
eating at my shrivelling heart,
even when I begged for it all to forbear,
and devouring whatever remains it could,
until there was nothing, but the parts
that longed for you- that missed you.

I would fain to do anything for you.
You claimed me as your own.
And even though our mutual desire to
remain together is but velleity,
I am naught of any form of existence
unless you are there beside me,
holding my hand like you did
when you whispered words to me
that, I realise now, were much too sweet.

Janice Yung
Apocalypse

There’s a new virus
and this is the end of the word.
Its infectious state is now in my system
and beyond help and control –
Doctor, you cannot save me.

Mindless.
Mind. Less.
I may be mindless but I want to posses yours
like you possess mine.

My old self is rotting and dying
and becoming unrecognized.
The world dull and broken
as you are full of life; you,
alive among the living dead.

So let me give you my sickness,
the disease of zombies.
Together we can demolish the old world
and build another, your hand in mine.
Do not fret. Let not fear forbid you from my love.

The skeptics may have bullets
but our kind do nor rest
so easily as those of weak impulses
and we will let no one get in the way
of our desires.

Amie Su
My love for you is like Math

What if I told you that you were the solution to my problem?  
That you could replace my X (don’t ask Y)  
because my never ending love for you is comparable to π  
but wait,  
I am sin²x and you are cos²x because together we’d become one  
and our love would be like dividing by zero because we cannot define it.  
Although fractions may be annoying, just let me be your other half  
and I promise you there will be no limits (limits don’t exist).  
You may ask what our common factor is,  
let me tell you in simplest form  
it is our inequalities that make us strong.  
Still,  
my love for you is growing exponentially  
and since our paths may never intersect,  
just know that the love from me to you  
will always be constant.

Hauna Wong
Valediction to Love: (or Pillow talk with the Poet)

Look not with these moist eyes at me
for though I do not claim
to love you, dearest, have this assertion:
by your side will I always remain.

What’s Love, if but four letters?
A simple noise we make too proudly?
I shall not pour this fatal poison
into your unknowing body.

And if I have ever loved before,
or even thought the word,
what lies, what wretched blasphemy,
have these past lovers heard?

For Love is not eternal
nor is it true nor fair,
but my affection and devotion
are pure and sweet as air.

Thus, let my gentle palm and gaze
calm your roaming mind.
Tomorrow, forget this language’s folly
and let our souls take the sky.

Alice Shang
Sonnet #3

How is it possible that she could be
A presence amazingly heavenly
When we two last met and our lips compressed
Her soul into mine, allowing the rest
The body, soul’s home, to drift into air
Proving (again) that our love is so rare:
One chamber, two hearts, complete with both souls
Yet, absence of body, can love be whole?

Though space and absence bond us together
And messages sent may last forever
To mingle then harmonize in heart’s place
(convergence of presence creates new space)
Can temporal souls unite really be
When, she, alas, denies body from me?

Donne

(finis)