

Donne Lecture

Donne's Life (1572-1631)

Education

Donne was raised as a Catholic, although he later converted to the Church of England during the 1590s ie became Protestant. He went to Oxford University aged 11 and may have attended Cambridge afterwards but didn't obtain a degree at either institution (it's worth noting that Catholics were forbidden to take degrees). His Catholic education and subsequent University training gave him a thorough grounding in religious polemic and rhetoric - the ability to argue effectively. After his conversion to the Church of England, Donne was awarded an honorary MA from Oxford and a PhD from Cambridge, which is why he was known as Dr Donne.

In 1592 he began to study law at Lincoln's Inn in London, ideal training for a diplomatic post or of course working as a lawyer. As a young student Donne was part of the intellectual life of London, cultivating the sophisticated urban wit which was so prized at the time and reading widely. It was during this period that he began writing the *Songs and Sonnets* which were circulated in manuscript form (they weren't published until after his death).

Professional life

Donne travelled widely; in 1596 he joined a naval expedition against Cadiz in Spain and he also sailed with Walter Raleigh in pursuit of Spanish treasure ships in the Azores. In 1598 became private secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton. His promising career was cut short when he married Egerton's niece secretly; Egerton sacked him and he was imprisoned briefly. Donne famously commented in a letter written to his wife from prison, 'John Donne, Anne Donne, Undone'. It was social and career suicide.

Donne struggled to make a living as a lawyer and may have been a political pamphlet-writer but happily for him in 1608 he was reconciled to his wife's family, who even paid him her dowry (a woman's father would pay her husband a substantial sum of money when they married to cover her living expenses). Donne was also elected as a member of parliament twice and later worked as a justice of the peace. This broad experience of life and different professions, informed his wide-ranging poetry.

In 1610 he published *Pseudo-Martyr*, which argued that Catholics could pledge loyalty to the Protestant King, James I, without violating their faith. This won him the political favour of the King, who made him royal chaplain in 1615.

Sadly two years later Donne's wife died (in childbirth – sadly not uncommon at the time). This very personal juxtaposition of birth and death inevitably affected Donne deeply – he'd always been acutely aware of death but now became obsessed. As a means of preparing himself for death he took to lying in a coffin for hours at a time.

Donne never really recovered from the grief but his religious convictions deepened. He gained a reputation as a fine preacher and was appointed Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in 1621 and so became part of the established church (the Church of England). Many of his sermons were published and contributed to his reputation as a great wit. The sermons, like the poems, testify to Donne's intellect, his wit and his imaginative and innovative use of language and imagery. They reflect his interest in the realities of life, combining his creative talents with spiritual reflection and passionate concern for man's relationship with God. He delivered his last sermon, *Death's Duel*, while gravely ill, a month before he died; it's thought that he designed it as his own funeral sermon. During his last days, he insisted on posing for a portrait wearing a funeral shroud, which he kept by his bedside to contemplate.

Literary Context

Donne as Metaphysical Poet

The term metaphysics comes from Aristotle – it means a science which investigates being as being ie reality rather than poetic convention, exploring life through the senses. We refer to Donne, Herbert, Marvell etc as Metaphysical poets because they share common characteristics such as wit, inventiveness and elaborate style and a common approach - they investigate the world through rationality rather than mysticism. However, labelling writers is always problematic because it can

give the impression that those we call Metaphysical were part of a School of poetry, self-consciously working to Metaphysical guidelines. As with the Romantics (late eighteenth / early nineteenth century), these poets were individuals, who were grouped together under one label by other writers to reflect their common concerns. Donne was influential on the work of Herbert, Marvell etc but he was not the head of an organized group or school of poets – they were very much individual writers.

Where did the term 'Metaphysical Poets' come from?

Dryden was the first to use the term when he criticised Donne in 1693: 'He affects the Metaphysics...in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts.' It is true that Donne appeals to the intellect not the heart of the reader. Johnson commented in *The Lives of the Poets* (with reference to Cowley), that 'about the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets', highlighting the self-conscious intellectualism of their work: 'the metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show learning was their whole endeavor'.

Dryden disapproved of Donne's writing style, especially his use of conceits (witty comparisons) and his extravagant abstractions. A 'metaphysical conceit' is simply an extended metaphor; making ingenious comparisons between two apparently incongruous things or concepts. Samuel Johnson described the far-fetched nature of their poetic comparisons as 'a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike' eg. Donne's extended comparison of love with astrology or Marvell's comparison of the soul with a drop of dew. They are comparing things which are not at all alike but within the world of the poem they make sense.

The Metaphysical poets were reacting against the poised, smooth and elegant poetry of the sixteenth century and so adopted a vigorous, energetic and sometimes uneven style: they deliberately violated poetic decorum, mixing different styles eg mixing a colloquial [everyday] style with a more traditional refined poetic voice: the simple act of using everyday language and style in a poem, traditionally the preserve of stylised 'poetic' language, is subversive and often very witty. Their poetry shocked the poetic sensibilities of the time, adopting the intellectual refinement of contemporary poetry, and yet mixing it with realistic depictions of sexuality and violence. The Metaphysical poets were well educated intellectuals, familiar with the rhetorical traditions of medieval scholars and yet playfully applying their terminology and style to topics not normally associated with such traditions.

T.S.Eliot highlighted their skills in the essay 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), arguing that they fused reason with passion, showing a unification of thought and feeling which later became separated into a 'dissociation of sensibility'. In this essay he argued that this unity of thought and feeling made for 'a direct sensuous apprehension of thought', that is, thought and feeling working together and 'a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience'. He argued that the later poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries lacked this ability and thus could think but could not feel their thoughts.

Donne and Poetic Tradition

Dante had represented love as akin to religion – love for the idealised angelic woman led to the awakening of love for God. Petrarch was unable to separate love from the senses – he saw this earthly element as negative, dragging us down. He therefore regretted passion as vain and frivolous. By the end of the sixteenth century this idealistic courtly love poetry had become full of literary artifice, laden with clichés. Donne's poetry explores the human struggle for wholeness and harmony between head and heart, seemingly always out of reach but attainable briefly in rare moments of ecstasy or religious insight.

Donne's poetry is original both stylistically and thematically - he is defined in opposition to current and traditional verse rather than following established models such as the Petrarchan sonnet, with its stylised conceits and song-like rhythms. The title of the poetry you're looking at appears to relate to such conventions but they're neither songs nor sonnets (with one exception) and thus they subvert [undermine] the very conventions they appear to use. We do find conventional Elizabethan

imagery such as bleeding hearts and rose-like cheeks but Donne subverts them wittily, rather as Shakespeare mocks conventional images in sonnet no 130 (*Norton* p.1040):

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun...
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks.

Shakespeare and Donne are exposing popular images of female beauty to common sense – taken literally, it is ludicrous to speak of roses in a woman's cheeks or to speak of her as a goddess. Donne's *Elegy* no 8 provides an example of extreme anti-romantic method: 'And like a bunch of ragged carrets stand / The short swolne fingers of thy gouty hand'. His poetry sets itself up in opposition to the melodic Elizabethan tradition, its respect for human nature and its idealised view of love and sexuality.

Poets traditionally glorify their verse but not Donne. In *The Triple Foole* (sadly not in the *Norton*), he refers to it as 'whining' that is weak, even annoying. It appears to be a traditional lament: the lady won't accept his advances so he turns to poetry for comfort. Yet he refers to poetry as 'Rime's vexation', a painful process. Verse is a way of controlling, even conquering pain but it is a difficult process, straining after meaning; he concludes that the little wisdom he had in his verse has made him a fool.

Donne's diction (use of language) and the rhythm of his poetry are more influenced by real speech than poetic tradition. His attitude is realistic, often cynical, his style polemical ie poems are presented as arguments, as pieces of rhetoric. He was of course trained in rhetoric but his use of logic is as subversive and witty as his use of other conventions: his logic can be outrageous.

Donne's ideas on man and his place within the scheme of things were fundamentally medieval - the rational part of man was the most highly valued because reason was believed to lead to truth. Medieval tradition was still powerful. It saw sexuality as incompatible with deep spiritual understanding – hence priests were celibate, to allow them to focus on religion and not be distracted by the things of this world. Love was deemed to be a potentially refining emotion, particularly for men (who could be rescued from an immoral lifestyle by the love of a good woman!!) but also a passion, which should therefore be repented of.

Donne reflects the tension at the heart of Catholic culture, seeking transcendental religious experience [ie on a plane above everyday experience] and a deeper apprehension of divine truth and yet deeply conscious that he was thwarted from such asceticism by bodily desires. [Asceticism – the pursuit of holiness through the denial of bodily desires.]

Donne's approach to love and sex is very down-to-earth, funny, touching, sometimes shocking but always original. His style tends to be highly rhetorical, full of intellectual games, with paradoxes and puns and elaborate conceits. His was an intense poetry, dealing with various states of the human mind. The poems are very varied: satires, cynical poems on inconstancy, idealistic poems about neoplatonic relationships (love between souls, without sensual desire) eg the ideal of the union of lovers' souls.

Donne's secular poetry: often amatory (about love), energetic, passionate and daring; the first poet to use 'sex' in its present sense. It's humorous, racy and often facetious; the poet is very self-assured, often playing the role of a 'man of the world'. Yet it's a forthright and honest way of dealing with human relationships - more 'real' than sixteenth-century courtly love poetry which, though beautiful, was designed more to show the poetic abilities of the writer (and often to flatter the recipient or even the recipient's husband) than to explore the realities of human emotion and relationships.

Donne's religious poetry is as complex and intense as his secular writing but reflects the seriousness and religious passion of the older Donne, using his poetry to explore spiritual tension and to work through spiritual problems. His wife had died and he was intensely aware of his own mortality and sinfulness; his primary concern was to have a right relationship with God.

Donne's religious poetry: devotional verse, prayers, meditations. His religious poetry is often difficult because it is intellectually unresolved. It mirrors the poet's own spiritual concerns, doubts, problems, fears and struggles and tends to be sincere and honest but, perhaps inevitably, less confident than the secular work.

NB The secular and religious poetry are not entirely unrelated – there are continuities in style and subject matter / themes. Donne's main concerns: the passing of time, death, love and sex and religion.

Songs and Sonnets (published 1633 after his death)

The very title of the collection subverts the expectations of the reader: there is only one sonnet and there aren't many songs either – the poems aren't very lyrical. They were published after his death, in no particular order. Each poem is an individual piece, not designed to show character development as in his contemporary Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*.

Donne was very interested in drama and we see its influence in his poetry – it's very theatrical, which contributes to his originality. The *Songs and Sonnets* vary in mood and tone and are addressed to different people. They invite the involvement of the reader, either by shocking us or by asking a direct question which will be developed as the poem progresses, this personal involvement of the reader is innovatory [new] for the period. The argument is often informed by philosophy and science, the logic sometimes oddly persuasive but ludicrous. Donne is famous for his witty wordplay but also his psychological insight, his use of imagery from non-poetic sources such as mathematics and science eg the famous *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, which compares lovers' souls to the movement of the legs of a draughtsman's compass.

Donne creates personae [dramatic speakers / characters] with different attitudes and emotional experiences: the world-weary cynic; the libertine or rake who defines love simply as sex; the lover who views love as a spiritual experience, the joining of souls. What we see are fictive performances which may reflect aspects of Donne himself but they are not autobiographical. The *Norton* explains Donne's different poetic stances: 'Like Petrarch, Donne can present himself as the despairing lover of an unattainable lady (*The Funeral*); like Ovid he can be light-hearted, witty, cynical, and frankly lustful (*The Flea*, *The Indifferent*); like the Neo-Platonists, he espouses a theory of transcendent love'(p.1235).

Love is a perennial topic in literature but Donne represents a variety of attitudes to provide an exploration of the human experience of love rather than a unified personal vision. He creates different poetic voices to articulate these views and so appears to contradict himself. We need to remember that this is sophisticated wordplay, not autobiography.

Donne records the reality of love, with its inconsistencies, conflicting emotions of love and hate and its opposing tones of seriousness and mockery, in vivid colloquial language, giving the impression of a felt passion rather than stereotyped phrasing. Thomas Carew's *Elegie for Donne* summed this up:

The Muses garden with Pedantique weeds
O'rsprede, was purg'd by thee; the lazie seeds
Of servile imitation throwne away;
And fresh invention planted.

In *To his Mistris Going to Bed* (*Norton*, p.1256-7) Donne celebrates erotic pleasure, referring to his mistress as 'my America! my new-found-lande...My mine of precious stones, my empire', an exotic country to be conquered, with treasures to be exploited and plundered. The imagery is very physical, embodying the libertine emphasis on women as sexual objects. He also refers to her as an 'angel' but the context of the poem does not allow us to read this as a spiritualisation of love; the word 'angel' is a common enough term for beautiful women of the time and need not suggest any spiritual quality.

The attitude of the speaker in this poem is something approximating to the tradition of the courtly lover, who expresses admiration and reverence towards the object of his affections (usually unattainable, sometimes even married). Yet we must remember that this is another persona, not Donne himself. Hence the apparent contradiction of *Loves Deitie* [on handout – not in *Norton*], where he criticises the courtly ideal as a corruption of love: 'I cannot thinke that hee, who then lov'd most, / Sunke so low, as to love one which did scorne' (l.3-4); 'It cannot bee Love, till I love her, that loves mee'(l.13-14). Donne attacks the courtly tradition most vehemently

in *The Apparition* (Norton pp.1247): 'When by thy scorn, O murderess, I am dead' (l.1), threatening to haunt her after his death.

The courtly love poet made a virtue of his own suffering (often imagined and exaggerated, sometimes as a way of flattering the husband of the woman to whom the poem was addressed!). Courtly love poetry is by definition stylised and lacking in emotional depth – it was a rhetorical game. Donne differs from courtly tradition in that he celebrates success in love, not courtly yearning for the unattainable. In adopting the tone of the libertine or rake he is reacting against courtly idealism and medieval asceticism, which valued celibacy above sexuality even in marriage.

In *The Flea* (Norton p.1236) the poetic persona is cynical and somewhat dismissive of his female partner, using his wit as a weapon to conquer her moral qualms, in order to gain immediate sexual satisfaction: 'Marke but this flea, and marke in this, / How little that which thou deny'st me is'. Marvell's poem 'To His Coy Mistress' (Norton, pp.1691-2) is written in a similar vein.

The Flea is an exercise in wit rather than a seduction poem – Donne doesn't construct an effective argument but he does flatter the object of the poem by focusing on her and writing so inventively. Central to understanding the poem is the contemporary belief that sex involved the mixing of blood. Fleas of course feed on blood and so provide an effective (if rather gross) image for sex. Donne impudently represents the flea as beautiful, even holy, representing it as a 'marriage temple' (l.13) and playing with the religious connotations. The lines about her killing the flea are deliberately dramatic and over the top. She sees its death as a victory and says that she feels no different after killing it. The speaker suggests that just as killing the flea didn't affect her, having sex with him won't cause her to lose anything either. He takes the image of the flea to its logical conclusion and suggests that sex is like killing a flea. Fleas had sexual connotations to seventeenth-century readers and because they feed on blood indiscriminately, feeding off the virtuous and the non-virtuous, they operate as symbols of sexual immorality.

The poem is dissolute and clever, claiming to be telling the story of an actual event but it's almost certainly a fiction – it has no convincing emotion in it and indeed demands no emotional response in the reader. Again we need to remember that the cynicism he expresses isn't necessarily genuine – it's cultivated, part of the wit he was famous for.

In *The Indifferent* (Norton p.1239) Donne's wit is again apparent as he inverts the conventions of Petrarchan behaviour in praising inconstancy, referring to faithful lovers as 'poor heretics in love'(l.24) and in his seemingly outrageous acceptance of vice as normal. While this owes something to the tradition of the libertine it is perhaps more true to life than poetic platitudes about faithfulness. Again we have a logical argument building to a surprising climax at the end of stanza 1: 'I can love any, so she be not true' (l.9), giving us a vivid portrait of the disenchanted lover.

In *The Ecstasy* (Norton, p.1249) Donne addresses erotic pleasure once more but within the broader context of love. As with many of Donne's titles, the title sums up his argument. Ecstasy occurs at the height of passion and means being outside the self. He's exploring the losing of the self in the other, the idea of spiritual oneness in love. The lovers experience both spiritual and physical communion. The theme is the justification of physical love, representing it as compatible with idealistic notions of spiritual love. Donne sums up his position: 'Love's mysteries in souls do grow, / But yet the body is his book' (l.71-2) ie the body is the physical record of what is learned in the soul.

Rather than simply adopting the Renaissance body / soul dichotomy, he represents the two as part of one whole, as complementary: souls unite but this is embodied physically: 'So soul into the soul may flow, / Though it to body first repair'(l.59-60). To some extent Donne falls into the kind of dualism he is trying to transcend: he may be stressing the interdependence of body and soul but he still uses the dualism of soul as spiritual and body as carnal – he can't change the terms of the argument. Donne was very conscious of the tension between the spiritual and the carnal, which may explain his ambivalence here – he may simply be being honest about the tensions inherent in all humans as we strive for balance between the spiritual and the physical. He presents the reality that as human beings we often live in a state of imbalance between our spiritual natures and our physical. He goes on to explain: 'They are ours, though they are not we; we are / The intelligences, they the sphere'(l.51-2). Yet he does not extrapolate a view of love as spiritual, adopting the

language and argument of the libertine: 'But O alas, so long so far / Our bodies why do we forbear? (l.48-9)'. He concludes:

So must pure lovers' souls descend
T'affections, and to faculties
Which sense may reach and apprehend;
Else a great prince in prison lies. (l.65-8)

Donne plays with extreme positions of argument, seeking to find some middle-ground. He endeavours to reconcile ideals of spiritual love with the physical reality, the seeming contradiction that the union of souls may be achieved by the union of bodies. Love traditionally refines the masculine character; the logical conclusion is that sexuality is a necessary refining force.

Donne's scientific knowledge underpins even his attitudes to sexuality in *The Ecstasy*:

But as all several souls contain
Mixture of things, they know not what,
Love these mixed souls doth mix again,
And makes both one, each this and that. (l.33-6)

This refers to the contemporary scientific belief that everything is composed of four elements: earth, fire, air and water. Just as these elements combine to produce all things, so two souls may combine to produce a new entity. Crucial to this view was the significance of balance: many illnesses were put down to an imbalance of the 'humours', the elements in the human body. Donne applies this to the soul, arguing the need for balance between the two souls for a healthy relationship. This is expressed in the famous image of two souls being compared to the feet of a compass in *A Valediction: forbidding mourning*:

If they be two, they are two so
As stiffe twin encompasses are two,
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th'other doe.

Donne explores this idea in *The Sunne Rising* (Norton p.1239): 'She is all States, and all Princes, I, / Nothing else is.' What he means is that when a couple find love they create a world of their own which is more significant to them than the world outside; this concept of unity in love recurs throughout Donne's work. The tone is witty, impudent and self-assured as he dismisses the intruding world, breaking with convention by referring to the sun as a nuisance, 'Busie old foole', as opposed to the traditional glorious giver of life. The poem argues that his mistress embodies all the riches of the world, that all the riches of the Orient have no value without love: he doesn't represent the world as an opposite force to his love but as gaining meaning from it. Love in this poem gives meaning to all the things which the world offers. Such love doesn't fear death: there is no mourning but resolute acceptance that 'wee / Must leave at last in death, these eyes, and ears'. This ideal love looks confidently through death, 'then wee shall be thoroughly blest'.

Time is a recurrent theme in Donne's work – time gives significance to human relationships but here he claims that time, represented by the sun, is irrelevant: his love is the centre of his universe so he represents the sun as going round the earth – he would have known that scientifically it wasn't true – he's using it (or misusing it) for poetic purposes, playfully perverting scientific fact.

In *The Good-Morrow* (Norton p.1236) Donne writes in a tender tone 'let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one', using the metaphor of the spiritual microcosm [a little world within a world] to signify the eternal unchanging nature of their love. The poem contrasts this with the changing decaying physical macrocosm [the whole universe], implied in the words 'declining West'. Love is portrayed as the expression of the spiritual element in human nature; spiritual ecstasy isn't an opposing force to physical ecstasy: it gives it meaning. The 'abler soul' in *The Extasie* was

created by love animating two individual souls and making them one, 'whom no change can invade'. This soul returns to the bodies of the lovers.

In *The Canonization* (Norton, p.1240) we again see Donne's view of the transcendent power of love, this time over earthly wealth:

Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe his honour, or his grace,
Or the Kings reall, or his stamped face
Contemplate; what you will, approve,
So you will let me love.

Here Donne daringly treats profane love as if it were divine – it's not the canonization of a holy pair who have renounced the world and the flesh but they do renounce the world in a sense – for each other – their hermitage is the other's body. It's a witty parody of sainthood but has a serious point, as we see in the image of the phoenix. This image builds on the earlier image of the lovers as burning tapers but crucially the phoenix burns to live: 'wee dye and rise the same'. In sixteenth and seventeenth-century terms to 'die' figuratively is to experience sexual ecstasy, which is often referred to as 'the little death'. The lovers 'die' but are unchanged ie their love isn't exhausted in mere lust. This is their title to canonization: their 'death', like that of the phoenix, is really a more intense life. The persona is worldly-wise, suggesting that if love outlasts its consummation, it's a minor miracle and the lovers are love's saints.

Donne also uses the theory of alchemy to provide a metaphorical background for his poetry. Alchemy was the process by which it was believed all base materials could be transformed into gold. Alchemists sought the power of transmutation: this image attracted poets writing about love, who used it to represent love as alchemy, the force which can change a human being. *Love's Alchemy* (Norton p.1245) poses two extremes: love as lust and love as the union of two minds. Yet there is no compromise and no resolution at the end of the poem: Donne simply reflects the ambivalence of human experience rather than imposing poetic resolutions. The final couplet refuses to give a comforting resolution, simply asserting the impossibility of satisfaction in either extreme, offering nothing other than 'a winter-seeming summer's night' ie short and cold!

Love is a significant element in human experience and one with a long literary heritage but Donne's discussion of it also engages with contemporary debate about the relationship between the body and the soul, the physical and the spiritual, related to the Renaissance debate between contemplation and action: his vision of love incorporates both. Since love seeks to endure, philosophers struggled with the difficulty of experiencing love in a mortal context, where death must end it. One response was to regard love simply in terms of physical pleasure and lust which because it never seeks to last, is undefeated by time (the philosophy of the libertine). The alternative was to view love as transcending time, as a spiritual experience. The first section of *The Exstasie* depicts the lovers in a trance, their souls hovering above the bed.

Donne explores the ideal metaphysical balance in love between the soul and body in *Air and Angels* (Norton p.1243), charting the progress of love from the ideal to the overwhelmingly physical and then achieving some kind of harmony between the two. The poem opens gently, representing the gentle awakening of love and introducing the angel image which is central to the poem's argument. He opens with the stock Petrarchan excuse that all past affairs were only an anticipation of the present one – in *The Good-Morrow* he claims that past affairs were 'a dreame of thee'. He explores the progress of love from its angelic spiritual beginnings to the seemingly inevitable submission to physical desire, the 'lip, eye and brow'. He isolates what he sees as the central difficulty in love: it cannot express itself without the body, 'Love must not be, but take a body too' (l.10). However, if it is solely carnal or physical it cannot survive. He concludes that both elements are necessary to love: just as angels need to assume a body to become visible to humans, so love needs bodily expression. Angels are unable to express their beauty in human terms without air (which is more physical and therefore less pure than they, hence the line 'not pure as it') so human love, spiritual in origin, is unable to express itself without the body, 'love's spheare'.

There is another interpretation to the angel and air image as differentiating between men and women's love. The angel wears the air and moulds it to his purpose, the air is passive, waiting to be

loved and responding to that love rather than originating it; this passivity implies the woman's inferiority as a servant of love. Renaissance thinkers debated whether man or woman's love is worthier – it's possible that Donne is playfully entering that debate here.

To sum up

Donne treated love as a wholly natural passion in which both body and soul had a part. He departed from contemporary poetic tradition by representing love not as an ideal state where lovers agree about everything and have the same tastes, beliefs and attitudes but where they accept differences in character, celebrating the 'infinite variety' of human nature rather than seeking to confine it to an unrealistic romantic model.

To achieve this, Donne takes a variety of different stances and adopts different voices, which give the impression that he is contradicting himself. The romantic reader might criticise him for appearing to be heartlessly sensual even to the point of gross emphasis on the physicality of love; the idealistic reader may find fault with Donne's extreme cynicism. Yet both these attitudes are poses he strikes to make his point; they're tools in his attack on poetic convention – part of his rebellion. His adopted positions may be extreme but he is deliberately shocking the reader to wake us from our lethargy. Donne wants to wake us up, to make us question poetic and cultural attitudes to love, to help us to view the world critically, to wake us up to the reality of human life and human nature.

His uncompromising realism can be uncomfortable but it is redeemed by his wit – we may be shocked but we have to smile at ourselves and our world – the poet encourages us through laughter to be sympathetic to his argument, to identify with the witty, wise poetic personae. We may be shocked by his coarseness but his logic appeals to the mind if not the heart of the reader.

© Dr Beth Swan, www.english-lecturer.co.uk