Preparing for the Poetry Exam: John Donne
[Source (with some amendments): Richard Huish College, Taunton]

The poetry question is assessed mainly on AO3, so you need to be aware of all the techniques that Donne uses in terms of language, structure and form. The following are some of these techniques, though you may think of more. You need to be able to make cross-references across the poems to illustrate these techniques as part of your answer.

1. General issues on form

Donne's poems were collected under a general heading of "Songs and Sonnets", written between 1593 and 1601, but first published in 1633, two years after Donne's death (Shakespeare was 8 years older than Donne). Many Elizabethan love poems were written in the lyric, and particularly the sonnet forms, in a smoothly flowing language style. Hence they could quite easily be set to music and we have two poems called "songs" in our collection. Poetry is often described as 'lyric' and this relates to the fact that the earliest poetry written by the Greeks was written to be sung to the accompaniment of a lyre (an ancient Greek instrument). Even now, the term 'lyric' relates to words set to music. A lyric is usually fairly short (between 12 and 30 lines) and expresses the thoughts or feelings of a single speaker in a personal and subjective fashion. The Renaissance, when Donne was writing, was the great age of the lyric, not only in England but also in France and Italy. Early Elizabethan poets, such as Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey, made outstanding contributions to the genre and wrote songs, lyrics and sonnets. Donne is viewed as one of the chief lyric poets from this period.

There has always been a close relationship between verse and music and the earliest poetic compositions were probably set to music. Many of the Elizabethan poets also wrote music (John Dowland is one example). Songs were also often included in the plays written by the dramatists of the day: Shakespeare's plays are full of songs and they provided musical relief from the main action. The two songs that we have written by Donne use a very different rhythm to some of the other poems and were clearly written to sing to music.

The sonnet is another form that became important to the Elizabethans and was imported from the work of Petrarch in Italy (see also the discussion of the theme of love later). A sonnet has 14 lines and a set rhyme scheme which varies according to the specific form: the two main types were the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean. Donne did write sonnets, but they were all on religious themes and are grouped under the general heading 'Holy Sonnets'. Although you need to be aware of the existence of this form, there are not any sonnets in the collection that we are studying.

Two of the poems in our collection are called elegies. For Greek and Roman poetry, an elegy referred to the strict metre that the verse followed and could be on any theme: death, war, love etc. This continued to be the case in the sixteenth century when Donne was writing. However, after this time, the term elegy came to be used specifically to refer to a poem of lament for someone who has died. It is important that you are aware of this distinction as Donne's two elegies are not poems of lament. Donne based his elegies on those of the Roman poet, Ovid, who wrote of erotic encounters without glamorising in any way. This sense of a real encounter is very much a central part of elegies such as To His Mistress Going to Bed.
2. The characteristics of metaphysical poetry

The term "metaphysical" refers to philosophical speculations beyond the sensory: notions such as time, God, human nature etc. The term was originally applied to Donne's poems because of his use of academic learning in the poems.

However, this is only one small part of the broader definition of metaphysical poetry which also encompasses various techniques:

a. **intricate arguments**: the power of argument is an important quality of the love poems and Donne usually uses argument to persuade (*The Flea*, *The Ecstasy*). Many of the poems are built up on a logical structure (this is sometimes called his dialectic - a use of argument whereby a statement is given, then challenged to provide a new conclusion). *Love's Growth* is a good example and the poem follows a series of logical progressions signalled by 'But if ...', 'And yet ...', 'If ...', 'For ...' and 'As ...'. Similarly, *The Good-Morrow* moves from past to present to future. The sense of argument is often used to challenge the opening statement: in *Love's Growth*, for example, the poem begins admitting that love is liable to change, but the argument eventually transcends this. The use of argument has another effect on the language: nothing is wasted in the poem or is there for ornamentation. The poems are a focused line of argument and they are often difficult to follow. Donne is challenging our intellect and this is a key aspect of the pleasure of reading metaphysical poetry. Even in a love poem such as *The Good-Morrow*, we are given very little physical detail about what the poet's beloved looks like, but much more philosophical speculation about the nature of their love.

b. **use of paradox**: this is a statement that appears to be self-contradictory but actually reveals a new and important truth. The Christian idea that we can only gain our life by losing it is an excellent example of a paradox. It appealed to Donne as a technique because it allowed him to show his verbal skill and wit. Good examples: *The Ecstasy* "This dialogue of one", *The Good-Morrow* "Let us possess one world, each hath one and is one", *Song: Sweetest Love I do not Go* - "unkindly kind".

c. **use of puns and clever plays on words**: ingenuity and wit was an important aspect of Donne's verse and he often uses this technique to create very rude jokes! *The Flea* includes a visual pun on the typographic (printing) similarities between f and s (on suck'd!). *To His Mistress Going to Bed* is also very inventive with language play, on the word "labour", "standing", "flesh upright" etc - again, mainly rude!

d. **hyperbole (exaggeration)**: many of the poems are extreme and exaggerated. Good examples are: the traumatised and rejected lover in *Twicknam Garden* who is "blasted with sighs" (this is also a parody of the rejected Petrarchan lover - see below under the theme of love), the expression of love in *The Good-Morrow*, the whole scene of the dialogue of souls and the lovers' bodies left as statues in *The Ecstasy*.

e. **analogies drawn from several different branches of learning**: the delight in knowledge is a key aspect of Donne's poetry and he was deeply read in several fields of learning. His learning reflects the world view of the time he was writing. (See below under discussion of the range of images that Donne uses.)
f. tensions between strict, regular metres and the natural rhythms of speech: the poems move between regular patterns of stress (usually based on an iambic rhythm - unstressed/stressed) and a more spontaneous feel. More than any other Elizabethan poet, Donne keeps a sense of ruggedness in the feel of his verse - the first two lines of The Good-Morrow illustrate this where the first line begins using a regular rhythm, but this is immediately challenged in the second line where the stress begins with an irregular stress on the first word, "Did". This has the effect of stressing his opening rhetorical question and the sense of amazement that he expresses at the love he has found. All the poems retain the sense of a speaking voice although they also use regular metrical forms. Sometimes, Donne uses a decasyllabic line (ten syllables or iambic pentameter - as in the two Elegies, The Good-Morrow, Twicknam Garden, Love's Alchemy, The Canonization), sometimes a variety of lines (as in Song: Sweetest Love I do not Go which starts with a seven syllable line). However, any regularity is usually soon broken by an irregularity which mirrors normal speech patterns and contributes to the more dramatic qualities of the verse. Notice the restless rhythms in Song: Go and catch a falling star.

g. arresting openings: Donne was the master of the arresting opening and many poems open with a burst of emotion to gain the reader's (or addressee's) attention. Good examples: The Sun Rising, To His Mistress Going to Bed, The Canonization, The Flea.

h. the metaphysical conceit: like similes and metaphors, a conceit establishes a relationship between two things for the sake of comparison, but for a conceit the comparison has to be strange or outrageous. A conceit is also often elaborate and extended as the points of comparison and contrast are worked out by the poet. This use of conceit was not universally applauded and was described by Samuel Johnson as "thoughts are often new, but seldom natural" and "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked together by violence". Donne's unusual language is not appealing to everyone, and you should not be afraid to make your own mind up in terms of how successful you feel his conceits are. Good examples: The Flea - likening the flea to a church (marriage temple) - and the use of the flea throughout the whole poem; The Canonization where the lovers are linked to canonized saints; The Ecstasy uses a conceit based on the relationship between the soul and the body and the images are drawn from several branches of learning; The Good Morrow with images of voyages of exploration and map making; Love's Alchemy - the idea of science and alchemy; Love's Growth where conceits are drawn from alchemy, astronomy and medicine; To His Mistress Going to Bed - use of geographical/colonial conceit;

i. an obsessive awareness of death and human mortality: the Elizabethans were acutely aware of death (and it is often presented in the visual art of the day in the form of a "memento mori" or a skull painted at the side of paintings to remind viewers of the brevity and vanity of human life). This can hardly be seen as surprising at a time before public sanitation when disease was rife. Even though the poems we are studying all centre on love, there is still an awareness that life is short and fragile and can be cut off at any moment: On His Mistress - Donne imagines his death on his travels, "O my love is slain" and similarly begs his loved one not to imagine any ills in Song: Sweetest Love I do not Go, "Let not thy divining heartForethink me any ill"; the poet's love cannot die in The Good-Morrow because "What ever dies, was not mixed equally"; he believes that he is dying through unrequited love in Twicknam Garden, "because her truth kills me"; in The Canonization, the lover "can die by it, if not live by love".
j. **in some poems, a tone of world-weary cynicism:** Donne as a poet is able to move from poems of life-enhancing optimism and grandeur (such as *The Good-Morrow*) to poems that express a deep degree of cynicism and pessimism, almost as if the verse came from two different pens. Perhaps, in one sense, the depth of despair that Donne sometimes reaches has its alternative face in the optimism and affirmation. The cynical poems in your collection are: *Song: Go and catch a falling star* - a cynical view of women and their lack of fidelity; *Love's Alchemy* - which joins Song in its negative view of women; and the world-weary *Twicknam Garden* (although this is probably more of a play on Petrarchan conventions).

Most of these characteristics come under the general heading of **metaphysical wit** which is said to sum up Donne's style: a lively intelligence and quickness of mind that can make interesting connections between disparate things using great skill with words.

3. **Other characteristics of Donne's poetry**

a. **use of imagery drawn from a wide range of academic sources.**

Donne seldom uses conventional images, preferring to use vigorous, undecorated language whose emotional impact is often brought about by its colloquial directness. The speaker in the poems often seems to blurt out his feelings with choking impatience. Often the language is rough and uneven. The poems are clearly not spontaneous as the stanza form reflects significant care, but Donne has sharply dissociated himself from common Elizabethan practice which is to create a much more studied and mellifluous style of poem.

Donne's choice of imagery reflects the real world in which he lived, not some distant ideal of literary merit, and some understanding of this is important to appreciate his achievement.

i. **The discovery of new worlds, maps and geography**

**Background:** Elizabethan voyages of discovery (eg Christopher Columbus) and exploration; Donne himself travelled extensively in his early days.

*The Good-Morrow* - stanza 2 "Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone...", stanza 3 "Where can we finde two better hemispheares..."

*The Sun Rising* - stanza 2 "Whether both the'India's of spice and Myne..."

*To His Mistress Going to Bed* - "O my America, my new found land..."

ii. **Politics, government and kingship.**

**Background:** the notion of the "Divine Right of Kings" and the Elizabethan idea that that natural order of the universe depended on a hierarchical order headed by the King.

*The Sun Rising* - stanza 3 "She'is all States and all Princes..."

*The Ecstasy* - "Else a great Prince in prison lies".

*The Funerall* - stanza 1 "Viceroy to that, which being then to heaven gone..."
iii. Alchemy, science and astronomy.

**Background:** alchemy - an early medieval science that involved the discovery of the "philosophers' stone" by which base metals could be transmuted into gold (a quest often equated in literature with trickery as in Ben Jonson's play "The Alchemist"). In Donne's time, there was a shift towards scientific endeavour and a human search for knowledge about the world that was in opposition to the medieval notion that the natural world could only be explained by reference to God's divine plan. Rational enquiry took the place of religious speculation. This can clearly be illustrated in the story of Galileo Galilei who propounded the theory of the planets (including the earth) revolving round the sun rather than the earth being the centre of the universe. Galileo was viewed with great suspicion by the Church and was forced to recant his views by the Inquisition in 1633; however, the victory ultimately went to science which won from the Church the authority to define the shape and pattern of the universe and Galileo’s views were accepted.

- The Sun Rising - stanza 3 "All wealth alchimie" and the idea that the earth is the centre of the universe (the old view of the world)
- The Canonization - end of the poem talks about the idea of passing substances through glass vessels - a practice of alchemy.
- Love's Alchemy - uses the idea of change as a metaphor for love.

iv. Religion

**Background:** This was a troubled and difficult time and Donne's decision to renounce his Catholic faith and adopt Anglicanism has often been viewed as an act of expediency to safeguard his position and life. He was related to Sir Thomas More who had been martyred for his Catholic faith and was no doubt very much aware of the severe penalties that could be imposed for practising the Catholic religion. Nonetheless, much of Donne's religious imagery has a distinctly Catholic flavour and biographers have argued that Donne never really recovered, in spiritual terms, from his betrayal of what he must unconsciously have considered the "true religion".

- Twicknam Garden - stanza 1 "transubstantiates" - transubstantiation is the Catholic doctrine of the bread of the Mass being literally converted into the body of Christ during the service - Protestants believed it was only symbolic.
- The Flea - stanza 2 likens the flea to a religious object and uses the language of religion.
- **Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star** - stanza 3 "Pilgrimage".
- The Canonization - the whole poem works on the image of the lovers as saints.
- To His Mistress Going to Bed - For laymen, are all women thus arrayed.

v. Gardening

**Background:** the Elizabethans were famous for their gardens and they believed that the ideal garden mirrored the divine order of the universe. We are familiar with the harmonious
and carefully planned gardens that have been maintained around many existing Elizabethan houses such as Montacute.

**The Ecstasy** - uses images of grafting and propagation.

**Twicknam Garden** - uses the setting of a garden to contrast with the poet who is pouring out his sorrows

**Love's Growth** - uses images of nature and the seasons

vi. War

**Background:** war was a more or less permanent background feature of sixteenth and seventeenth century life - the main threat to English peace was the coming of the Spanish Armada in 1588. There was a sense that high born or ambitious young men ought to take an interest in military pursuits.

**The Ecstasy** - "Two equall Armies".

vii. Greek mythology

**Background:** the learning of Greek and Roman culture would have been an important part of the education of the day. Donne's use of these mythological images reflects, therefore, his background.

**To His Mistress Going to Bed** - reference to Atlanta and Hippomenes

**On His Mistress** - reference to Boreas and Orithea.

**Love's Growth** - reference to the Nine Muses

b. **Use of the "I" persona**

All of the poems are written using the first person and the first person pronouns appear again and again in the poems. This use of "I" gives the impression that it is Donne himself talking. However, it is important to remember that this is not necessarily the case. You should refer to the voice in the poem as the "poet" or the "persona" rather than assuming that this is Donne himself speaking. This means that Donne doesn't have to express a series of consistent viewpoints on, for example, love (see the discussion of the theme of love below). The poems do not necessarily reflect Donne's own feelings, although the use of the "I" does create a sense of a personal confession and intimate, private feelings. Be aware of the use of personal pronouns (I and me) in the poems. Donne is often seen as a very self-centred poet and all the poems are full of references to the persona he has adopted in the poem. However, Donne himself said that he considered his best poems to be those where he had "least truth for the subject". Nonetheless, it is hard not to read poems of parting such as **Song: Sweetest Love I do not Go** as autobiographical when it is known that he did travel abroad and this could well be his leave-taking from Ann More. It is acceptable to make reference to Donne's own life - but you must see this as only one possible reading of the poems.
c. The poem’s audience

Remember also to be aware that, just as the poems are full of personal pronouns, they also often assume a listener to whom the poem is addressed. This listener often also becomes an active part of the poem - as in The Flea. The role of the usually female listener to whom the poems are addressed has been cause of much speculation and this has to be central to the way that we read Donne as a poet and his attitude towards women.

The poems were not published until after his death (in 1633) - and two of the poems in your collection - To His Mistress Going to Bed and On His Mistress - were censored from this first publication as they were viewed as too obscene - the latter poem probably because of the racist comments about Europeans - the French, Italian and Dutch - within it. Thus, the poems initially would have circulated among Donne’s friends and family. Some critics argue that the "racier" poems (such as To His Mistress Going to Bed and The Flea) were written for Donne’s male friends from his early days as a law student in the Inns of Court - and this explains their ribaldry and openness about sex (they were not intended for general publication). The more romantic love poems may have been written for Donne’s wife - a very different audience. This would certainly give us more information about the range and variety of style that Donne adopts. The poems were not popular for many years and they were brought back to prominence in the twentieth century; they need a more open historical context perhaps to be able to appreciate them fully and they were certainly neglected in the main by more restrictive societies such as the Victorians.

d. Dramatic qualities

The Elizabethan/Jacobean age was the great age of drama and it is no surprise that this is reflected in Donne’s work. The arresting openings (see above) are one aspect of this. Many of the poems can be seen as a kind of "dramatic monologue" where one character speaks his thoughts uninterrupted by anyone else. Good examples of this are: The Canonization, Twicknam Garden, The Ecstasy. Other poems actually present a dramatic situation: the actions of the lover to kill the flea in The Flea "Cruel and sudden", the lover undressing in To His Mistress Going to Bed. On His Mistress makes a reference to a type of Shakespearean heroine who disguises herself as a page to follow her loved one - and it is believed that Donne attended the theatre of the day, perhaps even seeing plays in The Globe.

e. The Colloquial energy of the poems

Related to Donne’s use of drama, is the fact that the language is rugged and colloquial. The opening of The Canonization reflects this most fully which opens with "For God’s sake", an overt challenge to pleasant-sounding Elizabethan poetry. Similarly, The Sun Rising opens with a rude insult to the sun, "Busy old fool, unruly sun".

Donne also regularly uses elision where letters are omitted which also contributes to this sense of condensed colloquial energy: The Good-Morrow - ‘twas, The Ecstasy - ‘twixt, Love’s Alchemy - 'tis etc.

f. Structure and form: stanzas and rhyme

One form that is used in two poems is the aubade, a poem set in the morning to greet the new day, which is used as the basis for The Good-Morrow and The Sun Rising.
Two of the poems are called songs and these may well have been set to music, perhaps a lute or similar Elizabethan instrument. The rhythms of these poems reflect this background.

Two of the poems are called elegies. Whereas the modern meaning of this is a poem lamenting a death, in Donne’s day an elegy meant any reflective poem written in a regular metre. Both the elegies you have in your collection are written in iambic pentameter in rhyming couplets. They are not broken down into separate stanzas in the same way that the shorter poems are.

Different line lengths are used throughout the poems as follows:

- Ten syllable (decasyllabic) lines - often iambic pentameter - the two elegies
- Song: Sweetest love = a variety of seven, six and four syllable lines
- Song: Go and catch a falling star = both eight and seven syllable lines with two two syllable lines
- The Flea, Twicknam Garden: a mixture of octosyllabic and decasyllabic lines
- The Good Morrow: mainly decasyllabic but each stanza ends on a hexameter (12 syllable line). A twelve syllable line has been the standard line in French poetry since the sixteenth century (as opposed to the ten syllable line in English poetry) and is called an alexandrine.

Etc etc - be aware of how Donne uses line length in the poems and both the regularity and irregularity in his forms.

Rhyme is used in all Donne's poems, although it can be easy to overlook it because of the energy and drama of the verse. The rhyme adds a structure and regularity to the verse and governs the division of the words into stanzas. Notice the way this division of stanzas often links to the progression of Donne’s argument and ideas. Look through all the poems and work out the rhyme schemes. For example, in The Flea the rhyme scheme follows three couplets with a concluding triplet, and the poem as a whole consists of three stanzas. Remember: for the Elizabethans the twentieth century idea of free verse didn’t exist, so all their poetic writing follows formal structures of metre (regular rhythmic patterns) and rhyme.

g. The Blazon

A literary term used by the followers of Petrarch to describe verses which dwelt upon and detailed various parts of a woman’s body - a sort of catalogue of her physical attributes. This is a form of conceit. Donne clearly used this form in To His Mistress Going to Bed, although he uses it in a slightly different way by dwelling on his mistress’ clothes as she undresses.

4. Background information and issues

a. The theme of love

Donne’s poems both use and reject notions of love fostered by Petrarchan love poetry. Petrarch was an Italian poet (1304-74) who wrote love poems addressed to Laura. This established a number of conventions for Elizabethan love poetry that can be seen in many poems of the day. In Petrarchan poetry, the mistress is chaste and remote and the male lover is constant in his devotion, often dying of unrequited love for a distant and aloof mistress. This attitude to love became known as courtly love. Donne sometimes uses this:
in Twicknam Garden the poet is dying from unrequited love, a direct link to Petrarch. But Donne also sceptically challenges this formula of male/female relations. For example, sometimes he presents women as sexually inconstant, unfaithful and promiscuous (Song: Go and catch a falling starre). Donne’s use of startlingly non-romantic imagery eg The Flea also reflects a challenge to the conventions of Petarchan form. Another effect of the traditions of Petrachism being discarded is that in most of these poems the lady is no longer remote, but in the bedroom, and the poet no longer a passive servant but an active lover. The possibility of so natural and desirable a conclusion to their sufferings seems hardly to have occurred to the Petarchan poets. The women in Donne’s poems are often far removed from the remote, chaste heroine of courtly love and are a very real physical presence, often in bed or in the act of going to bed: To His Mistress Going to Bed, The Sun Rising, The Flea. The more sexually explicit poems reflect another influence on Elizabethan poetry: the Ovidian. The Roman poet Ovid’s collection of poems called Amores influenced Donne, particularly in his Elegies, and convey a world of Roman immorality and sexual freedom translated to Elizabethan London by Donne in his earlier poems. From the combination of these different influences, Donne created a new idiom that was distinctively his.

It is the need for mutual love that is celebrated as the highest state of being in Donne and it is the frustrated longing of unreciprocated love, central to Petarch, that Donne ultimately rejects. This idea of mutual love is an experience of supreme value that opposes the transitory and changeable material world. The private little room of love contrasts with the outside world of princes, explorers, lawyers and merchants who are all preoccupied with material concerns. This can be seen in The Good-Morrow and The Sun Rising where the experience of mutual love gives the poet a new perspective from which the rest of the world looks insignificant. The two lovers create a new whole and one is incomplete without the other (in The Good-Morrow they are two halves of the world – two hemispheres).

As love reaches a pinnacle of spiritual power in the poems, it seems enduring, constant and capable of transcending the physical world. Love can counter the processes of decay that characterise the natural world. This can be seen in The Good-Morrow. The act of sexual union is also often likened to a religious act as in The Flea (though perhaps the link to religion here is more part of Donne’s persuasive power). These religious links continue with The Canonization and The Ecstasy. Other poems that explore the sincerity and power of love are: Song: Sweetest Love I do not Go, and Love’s Growth.

Some of the poems discuss the bitter disillusion that can be created by love. Some, such as Love’s Alchemy, despair that love can ever be a completely fulfilling experience. Others, such as Song: Go and catch a falling star are deeply cynical about the possibility of finding a faithful woman.

Many critics believe that the cynical or physical poems were written by a more youthful Donne before he met his wife, Anne More. The more idealistic poems reflect, these critics believe, Donne’s relationship with his wife. The poems can certainly be read as reflecting a progression in Donne’s feelings, but the poems as a whole express the conflicting attitudes and contrary impulses that characterise the full experience of love.

So what is Donne saying about the nature of love?

It is impossible to determine whether Donne intended to express a coherent philosophy of love in his poems, but it seems unlikely. The poems were written over a long period of time, perhaps as much as twenty years, and Donne’s attitudes no doubt changed a good deal
during this period. However, there are a number of points which can be made about the
view of love which emerges from the poems, even if these points do not, in fact, add up to a
“philosophy”.

One point which has to be made at the outset is that there are many different kinds of
relationship described or implied in these poems. The assumption in The Flea, for example,
is that the only thing which matters is sexual satisfaction; the poem is a battle of wits, and
the prize is the woman’s presumed surrender to the poet’s demands. The glorying in the
physical nature of love is also a characteristic of To His Mistress Going to Bed.

However, in other poems Donne insists that true love can only be attained by a select few
and it is beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. The lovers in these poems become kings and
saints. These ideas are to be found in poems such as The Ecstasy, Love’s Growth and The
Canonization. In these poems, love is spoken of as a sacred state which so exalts the lovers
that they can claim to be the whole world in themselves, immune to the pressures of time
and change. In The Good-Morrow and The Sun Rising the lovers also set out to defy time.

However, in many of the poems the claim for the lovers’ supremacy over the temporal world
is accompanied by an acute sense of their vulnerability in a world dominated by time. The
bravado of The Sun Rising cannot blind us to the fact that the sun will rise regardless of the
lovers’ boasts. There is also the constant fear of betrayal as shown in the cynicism of Love’s
Alchemy and Song: Go and catch a falling star which may stem from the memory of some
breach of faith. There is also anxiety over parting expressed in poems such as On His
Mistress and Song: Sweetest Love I do not Go.

In a few poems (Love’s Growth and The Ecstasy) Donne does address himself directly to a
philosophical question: that of the relation of the body and soul in love. The argument of
both poems is that love is not “pure” but “elemented”: that is to say, the mind and body are,
if not equal, at least equally necessary in human love. Thus, in The Ecstasy, the body is not
seen as “drosse” or waste material to be discarded but as “allay”: an element of little
account on its own but one which increases the strength of the whole compound. Donne’s
conclusion is that the loving self is hindered and “a great Prince in prison lies” unless body
and soul can work together in harmony.

The Ecstasy then contradicts The Flea which ignores the spiritual element in love. The only
way, therefore, to construct a coherent “philosophy of love” from the poems is to
emphasise some poems at the expense of others; since this would be distorting, it is better
to accept that Donne expressed different attitudes in different poems according to the
mood of the moment. At the same time, it may be said that so many of the poems assert
the dignity of love, and its claim on the entire self – body and soul – that it seems reasonable
to think that it is in these poems that the reader comes closest to discovering Donne’s true
feelings about love.

b. Male dominance in the poems

Feminist critics have often found themselves disagreeing with Donne’s perspectives on
women. The poems vary from the overt voyeurism of To His Mistress Going to Bed where
the woman is presented in the language of colonialism as if she is to become the possession
of the male coloniser; to the cynical view of female nature expressed in poems such as
Love’s Alchemy and Song: Go and catch a falling star. Even in the poems that express
mutual love, the woman is silent to Donne’s masculine persona.
However, not every feminist critic takes this view. Some see that the real women in the poems are a healthy challenge to the ridiculous ideals of female behaviour that poets such as Petrarch had previously presented. Donne was not afraid to see women in sexual terms and the highest form of love for him had a strong sexual element to it. He could also be seen as exploring the whole experience of love: every human being has moments of cynicism about the emotion and it is a complex process of vying for power. Donne is not always victorious: it is up to the reader to decide whether the woman in The Flea is going to fall for Donne's persuasions. It is possible to read a strong and resistant woman into this poem who remains an unspoken challenge to Donne's bravado.

**Connections between the poems**

**Form**: two songs and two elegies. Also see links above - use of conceit, rhyme, argument and other metaphysical connections. Be aware, also, of poems that do not simply reflect these characteristics: in "Song: Sweetest love" there is less overt philosophising and the rhythms are much more mellifluous.

**Theme**: views of love - positive/idealistic views of love (On His Mistress, Song: Sweetest love, The Good-Morrow, The Sun Rising, Love's Growth, The Canonization, The Ecstasy), a sexual view of love (To His Mistress Going to Bed, The Flea), cynical views of love (Song: Go and catch, Twicknam Garden - also a parody of Petrarchan conventions, Love's Alchemy).


**Parting**: On His Mistress, Song: Sweetest love,

**Attitudes to women** - To His Mistress Going to Bed, The Flea, On His Mistress, Song: Go and catch.
APPENDICES

1. The Intensity of Love: Critical Perspectives


The Song and Sonets often reject notions of love fostered by Petrarchan love poetry while simultaneously also evoking conventions such as the aloof, distant mistress or the suffering, submissive lover. In Petrarchan poetry, the mistress is chaste and remote and the male lover is constant in his devotion. But Donne sceptically challenges this formula of male/female relations. For example, sometimes he presents women as sexually inconstant, unfaithful and promiscuous (Song: Goe and catch a falling starre) and the male speakers often reject constancy wanting to enjoy sexual relations with as many women as possible (Womans Constancy, Loves Usury). Donne’s use of startlingly non-romantic imagery eg The Flea also reflects a challenge to the conventions of Petrarchan form.

However, it is the need for mutual love that is celebrated as the highest state and it is the frustrated longing of unreciprocated love central to Petrach that Donne ultimately rejects. This is explicitly discussed in the poem Loves Deitie which looks back fondly to a Golden Age of love when feelings were freely exchanged between men and women before the artificial constraints of Petrarchan courtly love established that women should scorn men. Other poems that include the cold, scornful Petrarchan woman and the unrequited lover are The Dampe, Twicknam Garden and The Apparition, a comic parody of Petrarchan love poetry. Other poems where the male lover has died or bewails his rejection in a Petrarchan mode (though not with a Petrarchan tone – Donne makes these poems very much his own) are The Funerall, The Legacie, The Blossome and The Will.

This idea of mutual love is an experience of supreme value that opposes the transitory and changeable material world. The private little room of love contrasts with the outside world of princes, explorers, lawyers and merchants who are all preoccupied with material concerns. This can be seen in The Good-Morrow and The Sunne Rising where the experience of mutual love gives the poet a new perspective from which the rest of the world looks insignificant. The two lovers create a new whole and one is incomplete without the other (in The Good-Morrow they are two halves of the world – two hemispheres).

As love reaches a pinnacle of spiritual power in the poems, it seems enduring, constant and capable of transcending the physical world. Love can counter the processes of decay that characterise the natural world. This can be seen in The Anniversarie and The Good-Morrow. The attempt to stop time can be seen in A Lecture upon the Shadow. The act of sexual union is often likened to a religious act as in The Flea and A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning where their love is seen as a holy mystery that must be kept secret from the “layetie”. Alternatively, in The Relique the lovers enjoy a higher spiritual love because they have refrained from indulging their natural sexual urges.

Some of the poems discuss the bitter disillusion that can be created by love. A Nocturnall upon S Lucies Day is sometimes associated with the death of Donne’s wife and is a poem of
abject despair. Other poems despair that love can ever be a completely fulfilling experience: *The Broken Heart* and *Loves Alchymie*.

Donne’s discussion of the experience of love is often contradictory moving from cynical poems viewing women merely as sexual objects to glorifications of a love that is both physical and spiritual. Many critics believe that the former poems were written by a more youthful Donne before he met his wife, Anne More. They can certainly be read as reflecting a progression in Donne’s feelings, but the poems as a whole express the conflicting attitudes and contrary impulses that characterise the full experience of love. *(Notes based on: “The Metaphysical Poets” by Donald Mackenzie.)*

The *Songs and Sonets* are an exhilarating collection of love poetry. They voice a range of moods and stances, are explored with intensity and are suffused with wit. They combine aspects of radically different traditions that were significant influences on Renaissance poetry – the Ovidian and the Petrarchan. The Roman poet Ovid’s collection of poems called *Amores* influenced Donne, particularly in his Elegies, and convey a world of Roman immorality and sexual freedom translated to Elizabethan London by Donne in his earlier poems. On the other hand, the traditions of Petrarchan poetry are used and transformed by Donne. From the combination of these different influences, Donne created a new idiom that was distinctively his. *(Notes based on: “John Donne” by Phillip Mallett)*

The tradition of English Petrarchism, so called after the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca (1304-74), was a central influence on Elizabethan love poems. Many of his poems were translated into English during the sixteenth century. This tradition is distinguished by the elaborate and extravagant comparisons applied to the lady, who is as cold and remote as she is beautiful, and to the despair of the lover, presented as her devoted and suffering servant. Donne’s restless and sceptical mind had little use for such a convention, and in the *Elegies* and the *Songs and Sonets*, the traditions of Petrarchism are discarded: in most of these poems the lady is no longer remote, but in the bedroom, and the poet no longer a passive servant but an active lover. The possibility of so natural and desirable a conclusion to their sufferings seems hardly to have occurred to the Petrarchan poets.

The immediate consequence of this dismissal of Petrarchism is that Donne’s love poetry shows considerable appetite and energy. His interest is in “what men do” and not in what ought to be done or felt by the idealised lovers of the Petrarchan convention. In Donne’s love poems, the reader is conscious that the realities of human sexual experience are never far away. The recurrent theme of *Songs and Sonets* is the place of human love not in the timeless, ideal world of Petrarchan poetry, but in a world vulnerable to change and death. In this real world, love may be present under many aspects – promiscuity, hopeless adoration, bitter disillusionment, cheerful cynicism, tender intimacy – and Donne’s love poetry encompasses all of these.

**Question:** Do the *Songs and Sonets*, taken as a whole, constitute a “lecture ... in love’s philosophy”?

It is impossible to determine whether Donne intended to express a philosophy of love in the *Songs and Sonets*, but it seems unlikely. The poems were written over a long period of time, perhaps as much as twenty years, and Donne’s attitudes no doubt changed a good deal during this period. However, there are a number of points which can be made about the
view of love which emerges from the *Songs and Sonets*, even if these points do not, in fact, add up to a “philosophy”.

One point which has to be made at the outset is that there are many different kinds of relationship described or implied in these poems. The assumption in *The Flea*, for example, is that the only thing which matters is sexual satisfaction; the poem is a battle of wits, and the prize is the woman’s presumed surrender to the poet’s demands. In contrast, in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* the poet celebrates a love so “refin’d” that mere physical absence cannot diminish its perfection.

The scorn for “dull sublunary lovers” (*A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*) and the insistence that true love can only be attained by a select few are ideas repeated in other poems eg *The Extasie* and *The Canonization*. In both of these poems, love is spoken of as a sacred state which so exalts the lovers that they can claim to be the whole world in themselves, immune to the pressures of time and change. In *The Good-Morrow* and *The Sunne Rising* the lovers set out to defy time and in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* they set out to defy distance.

However, in many of the poems the claim for the lovers’ supremacy over the temporal world is accompanied by an acute sense of their vulnerability in a world dominated by time eg *The Anniversarie*. The bravado of *The Sunne Rising* cannot blind us to the fact that the sun will rise regardless of the lovers’ boasts and *The Anniversarie* cannot obscure the fact that eventually “Two graves must hide thine and my corse”. There is also the constant fear of betrayal as reflected in *A Valediction: of my name in the window* and shown in the cynicism of *Loves Alchymie* which may stem from the memory of some breach of faith.

In a few poems (*Loves Growth, Aire and Angels* and *The Extasie*) Donne does address himself directly to a philosophical question: that of the relation of the body and soul in love. The argument of all three poems is that love is not “pure” but “elemented”: that is to say, the mind and body are, if not equal, at least equally necessary in human love. Thus, in *The Extasie*, the body is not seen as “drosse” or waste material to be discarded but as “allay”: an element of little account on its own but one which increases the strength of the whole compound. Donne’s conclusion is that the loving self is hindered and “a great Prince in prison lies” unless body and soul can work together in harmony.

*The Extasie* then contradicts both *The Flea* (which ignores the spiritual element in love) and *The Undertaking* (which denies the physical element, the Hee and Shee). The only way, therefore, to construct a coherent “philosophy of love” from the *Songs and Sonets* is to emphasise some poems at the expense of others; since this would be distorting, it is better to accept that Donne expressed different attitudes in different poems according to the mood of the moment. At the same time, it may be said that so many of the *Songs and Sonets* assert the dignity of love, and its claim on the entire self – body and soul – that it seems reasonable to think that it is in these poems that the reader comes closest to discovering Donne’s true feelings about love.
2. Death in Donne’s Poetry

The Elizabethans were an age obsessed with death and this anxiety pervades Donne’s verse - even the love poetry uses images of death. Of the 54 Songs and Sonnets, 32 of them have some reference to death. Donne was also obsessed with the idea of suicide and, in 1608, he wrote the first English justification of suicide called "Biathanatos" which was published after his death. He also wrote in his prose work that death can be caused in an infinite number of ways - people have even been known to laugh themselves to death! In an earlier poem, he imagines a situation where a man bursts an abscess in his throat by laughing and, pleased by the self-cure that he has administered, is quickly stopped as the coating of the abscess comes up in his throat and strangles him.

Death is used in different ways by Donne and the following summarise some general links across the whole selection. Consider what these poems say about Donne’s presentation of and attitude to death.

Poems where Donne imagines the possibility of his own death: The Legacie, The Will, The Dampe, His Picture, Thou hast made me (Holy Sonnet i), A Hymne to God the Father.

Poems where Donne grieves over the death of another: A Nocturnal on S Lucies Day, Since she whom I lov’d (Holy Sonnet xvii).

Poems about illness: Hymn to God my God in my Sickness, The Dampe.

Poems where death is used as an image of separation: A Valediction: forbidding mourning, A Valediction: Of Weeping, The Expiration, Song: Sweetest Love.

Poems where death is likened to sleep: Death be Not Proud (Holy Sonnet x), Womans Constancy.

Poems about bodily fragmentation: Valediction of my Name in the Window, The Broken Heart.


Poems that defy the power of death: Death be not Proud (Holy Sonnet x), Elegie on the Lady Markham.

Poems on the Day of Judgment: At the round earth’s (Holy Sonnet vii).

3. Holy Sonnets

By universal agreement, Donne’s Holy Sonnets are some of the finest religious poems ever written. They are written in a combination of Petrarchan (Italian) and Shakespearean sonnet forms and, although the dating is uncertain, they belong to the period from 1615-1619 which includes the death of Donne’s wife in 1617. This event perhaps led the poet to confess all the anxieties of his troubled soul to God.
In these intensely personal sonnets, one hears and feels the doubts and fears overshadowing Donne’s later years. Common areas for Donne to explore in these poems are:

- A reflection on past and present sins and the need for forgiveness
- The confession that the flesh is weak, afflicted by temptation and penitence is inconstant
- The idea that the terror of death and God’s judgment are imminent
- The fierce urging that God should actively help Donne to achieve his salvation
- It is only by God’s cleansing or burning that sins can be purified

Much of Donne’s emphasis is on the pain of religious experience rather than God’s love.

Donne crammed all the urgency of his ideas into a tight poetic form. The sonnet form with decasyllabic lines (ten syllables) is challenging. Donne uses the form by often breaking the lines, and pushing as many words as possible into each line. He often uses elision and ellipsis. He also wrenches the syntax to make the words fit the rhythmic pattern. Sometimes he uses an unexpected caesura or accelerates the pace with enjambment or alliteration.

As we have seen with the love poetry, Donne challenges the traditional form of religious poetry. His boldest stroke was to use the sense of logical argument and dialectic when addressing God and much of his imagery continues the unconventional experiments begun with his earlier verse. Now the questions, arguments and commands used earlier to address a woman are directed at God. Just as religious imagery was used with the love poetry, so imagery of sexual conquest is used here in connection with God (see Holy Sonnet XIV).

4. Commentary on the Songs and Sonnets (mainly c1593-1601)

The Sonnet: Many Elizabethan love poems were written in the lyric, and particularly the sonnet forms, in a smoothly flowing language style. Hence they could quite easily be set to music. The content and manner of these poems had originated from medieval ideals of courtly love and this became fashionable. Elizabethan poets took the Italian Petrarch’s sonnets to Laura in the fourteenth century as their model, using his themes – the ephemeral nature of beauty and life, the pains of separation, the immortality conferred on love by poetry, the chastity/cruelty of the lady, the anguish of unrequited love – and often set these in a world of pastoral romance.

Though the courtly tradition idealised women and their suitors were presented as behaving with impeccable Christian virtue, it did not necessarily censure adultery, perhaps because marriages of the day were not primarily based on love but arranged for financial gain, so the need for love and romance had to be fulfilled through illicit means.

Italian or Petrarchan poems presented the lover as the unworthy, abject worshipper at the foot of the pedestal of a lady-goddess whose perfect beauty he hyperbolically describes. He pens his unrequited love with swooning devotion, even dying of his love as he entreats her mercy.

Donne’s use of these sources: Donne uses these ideas but he placed much more emphasis on the depiction of real love. His love poems variously explore, with passion and honesty, his own complex perceptions of the truth about intimate relationships between men and
women, often challenging and exploring the way romance is presented in the courtly tradition.

**Donne’s language:** Donne’s poems are not smooth in their use of language but rather are characterised by:

- Realism, drama, emotional and intellectual power, and by rugged expression often described as harsh or dissonant.
- An emphasis on meaning rather than harmonious language which often produced staccato rhythms and elliptical syntax.
- Unconventional imagery, often bizarre.

It is likely that Donne wrote from his own experience of love, trying to unravel the ironies, paradoxes and extremes of emotion affecting his body, mind and soul.

*Attitudes and Values in the Sonnets*

The poems in this section are difficult to categorise but certain attitudes and values appear consistently throughout. It is useful to see these connections between groups of poems and note them in your text as this may help you when you choose which poems you want to use for essays.

**A. The young male in search of women and ‘love’** – here, Donne presents a world of the young man revelling in his freedom and enjoying the pursuit of women. To catch his prey, the male will quite audaciously use any argument to seduce the woman or persuade her to shed her virginity or betray an existing lover. He pleads that rejection will kill him until she becomes his mistress.

**Representative poems of this theme:** The Flea, The Dampe, The Triple Foole, Loves Usury, Song (Goe and catche a falling starre), Womans Constancy, The Apparition.

**B. The unrequited lover** – in these poems, the poet figures as the unrequited lover and exhibits the usual Petrarchan trappings, but the tone and approach are very different from the traditional.

**Representative poems of this theme:** Loves Deitie, Twicknam Garden, The Funerall, The Legacie, The Blossome, and The Will.

**C. The World of True Lovers** – these poems assert that the separation of true lovers is death, and that they are life and the whole world to each other. Separation is often presented as death where the departing lover anxiously urges his mistress to remain faithful to him. These poems reflect a distinct shift in attitudes towards the lover perhaps an indication of his more serious feelings about love having met his wife-to-be, Anne More.

D. The Religion of Love — these poems portray the experience of love as akin to a religious experience.

Representative poems of this theme: The Canonization, Break of Day, A Lecture upon the Shadow, The Anniversarie.

E. The Union of Body, Mind and Soul — in these poems, love becomes the highest experience on every level that is available to human beings.


F. Loss and Disillusion — these poems reflect the other side of the experience of love, that loss of love can kill all pleasure in life. They are a farewell to love.

Representative poems of this theme: The Broken Heart, A Nocturnall Upon S Lucies Day, Loves Alchymie.

Task: read and annotate the following poems using the notes provided.

1. The Expiration (p67)

The poem, in common with many of Donne’s work, begins with a conversational air “So, so”. The poet and his lover are parting, their souls in their breath evaporating away as they part in different directions. They did not ask anyone’s permission to love and will not allow anyone else to part them because they are telling each other to part, rather like a metaphorical suicide pact. A simple separation becomes much more because lovers die when they are apart.

In the second stanza, the poet tells his lover to go and asks her, if this has not already killed her, to kill him by telling him to go too. The word “Goe” at the beginning of this stanza is almost shot like a bullet in its violence and is repeated from its first use at the end of the previous stanza which links the two together. The repetition of the word shows that this is the central idea of the poem, the parting of two lovers. As the poet has murdered his lover, then it is just that she should do the same to him. However, he admits that it may be too late to kill him because he is “doubled dead” already – by leaving her and by telling her to leave him. The poem ends with this neat antithesis and a customary display of wit.

2. A Valediction: Of My Name in the Window (p38)

In this poem, the departing lover anxiously urges his mistress to remain faithful to him, then tells her his doubts because their separation is like death for him. The poem works on the idea that the poet has engraved his name in a window using a diamond. He discusses the idea of “firmness” and makes a link between the glass, the diamond and his own firmness now that he has met his loved one. He uses a financial image that her eyes give greater value to the glass by the reflection of her face than the ostensibly higher value of the diamond.

In the second stanza, the glass is seen as “confessing” – a play on the archaic meaning of the word of making something clear and the religious meaning of absolving oneself from sin. In
this way, the glass shows the lover to herself (in its reflection), but Donne again plays on the idea of the two lovers being one in that as she sees her own face, she sees the reflection of his name written across it. This represents how love merges people together. Note how Donne enjoys playing with the idea of reflections – see A Valediction: Of Weeping where the face is captured in a tear.

In the third stanza, the poet announces that as he has engraved his name in the glass, no rain can wash it away and his love will be firm in the same way. He is about to go away on a journey and he clearly feels that his lover is more likely to be faithful to him with this memory of him engraved in the glass.

In the fourth stanza, he wonders whether it is a hard lesson to learn faithfulness from a name scratched in glass and that she should rather view it as a Death’s Head to remind her of death – with the connection that the parting of lovers is like dying. The Elizabethans were fond of the idea of a “memento mori” and in many paintings of the time a skull is painted in to remind the viewer that they will die. The phrase “memento mori” means literally “remember you will die”. In this way, she can view the scratched letters of his name as a skeleton “ruinous Anatomie” that will become representative of him. This will remind her of the mortality of all lovers, but also of his presence and love for her.

Thus, in the next stanza, as his soul is with her in its love, so his body will also still be with her and will live again. The parting has caused a metaphorical death but this symbol will keep him alive. Donne uses images of architecture to denote the form of the body – “rafters” etc.

So, until he returns literally, the little skeleton in the window will represent the poet’s being and the virtuous powers of the heavens that flow into these bodies will be there in these characters. Stanza seven reasserts the power of this form in that it will remind her of him. He dies daily while he is away from her, and so she will daily mourn for him.

In stanza eight, he addresses the lover imagining the woman throwing open the window on some future occasion to entertain another lover who may have more “wit” or “land”. The bones now become alive (inhabited by a soul or a “genius”) and the small naked skeleton is trapped into hearing its own betrayal.

Similarly, in stanza nine he imagines that her corrupted maid brings her letters (the word “melted” shows that the maid has also been corrupted by sleeping with the new lover’s page as well as taking money from him) from this new lover which may encourage her to “thaw” towards this new man. Again, the name in the window will remind her of her other lover who is far away.

In stanza nine, the poet imagines that his lover begins to succumb to the new lover and writes a letter in response. However, again she will see the name in the window and will actually find herself writing to him, not the new man.

Finally, the poem admits that the glass and the lines he has written are not sufficient to keep his mistress faithful. The whole idea of the little skeleton defending the poet’s interests against rivals is, he concedes, nonsense and we are returned to reality. Yet fears will not go away and the fact that he is near his journey – “near death” – has created these suspicions and doubts. He reassures her that he is only rambling and that this is a natural concern of
men who are “dying” ie leaving their lover behind. And yet the poem, in spite of this recantation, ends on a note of insecurity.

3. A Valediction: Of Weeping (p46)

A “valediction” is a farewell and this poem shows how painful love can be at parting. The poet seems to be contemplating a sea voyage. The poem works on three elaborate but linked conceits.

The poet is going on a journey and pauses to pour forth his tears before he leaves. It uses an unusual conceit of coinage – the tears that she sheds bear his image like a coin (she is his sovereign in the same way a coin displays the monarch) and this gives them value (“worth”). The short lines and rhyming couplets stress the conceit. The tears are said to be “Pregnant of thee”, an image of fertility and fullness. The tears are the “fruits of grief” but symbolise (“emblems”) more as his tears bearing her image shatter when they hit the ground just as their love is undone when they are in different countries with the sea between them (“diverse shore”). Thus, their parting is a sort of death.

In the second stanza, the poet uses a conceit of a globe – a workman can take a plain round ball and put on it a map of the world thus making “that was nothing” ie a plain globe “All” ie the whole world. The idea of making All of nothing is a paradox. So, her image on his tears (which are globe-shaped) also make a whole world because she is his world, but when her tears join with his this whole world is destroyed in floods of water. This is not just his world but also his heaven ie all his pleasure in life that is destroyed by their parting.

In the third stanza, the poet continues his image taken from cosmology. He comments that the moon has the power to govern the sea in the tidal movements – but his lady is more powerful because her tears may destroy his world. She becomes more powerful than a cosmic force – “more than Moone”. This image is rooted in a contemporary interest in astronomy. He begs her that while he is in her arms, a place of safety, that she doesn’t kill him by her excessive tears. He implores her also not to give the winds example of ways to kill him by her sighs; they must not sigh away each other’s life. By their grief at their parting, they are killing each other again.

Are these conceits excessive and artificial? Or is this a display of strange and beautiful hyperbole? Parting as a kind of death was a staple of courtly poems, but this image was revitalised by Donne by making the lovers a real man and woman, equal partners communicating a mutual passion rather than an inaccessible silent goddess on a pedestal. As long as their love is reciprocal and they are honest and fearless, then their love cannot be destroyed. We are perhaps here seeing poems that reflect, not the young man looking for any lover, but the more mature Donne in love with Anne More.

4. The Good Morrow (p23)

Here, the salutation of the new day and the new love go hand in hand. An awakening to a new life is created by love as the central metaphor of the poem, but also reflects a literal awakening of the lovers in bed together in the morning. This style of poem written to greet the morning is called an aubade.

In the first stanza, the poet wonders what the lovers did before they loved and likens all their experience before love to being children (“were we not wean’d) sucking on country
pleasures ie immature thrills just for sex not for real love – the language implies the customary Donne indecent puns, but shows his mature reflection on the persona he created in some of the other poems where he gloried in sex for sex’s sake (eg The Flea, Loves Usury). The poem begins colloquially with four slightly varied rhetorical questions. He wonders whether they “snorted in the seaven sleepers den” – a reference to seven young Christians of Ephesus fleeing from the persecution of Decius, a Roman emperor, in AD 250 who slept in a cave for 187 years until it was safe for them to emerge when Christianity was accepted. The poet accepts that all other pleasures were mere fancies and all other loves were only shadows of what he enjoys now – this girl now in his bed. The frequent use of personal pronouns indicates the presence of the girl in this poem and the personal focus of Donne’s “I” addressed to her intimate “thee”. (Note: Donne uses the Elizabethan distinction between the formal and distant “you” and the intimate and close “thee”.)

So, in the second stanza, the poet bids good morning to their awakened souls who are no longer jealous of each other’s movements because they enjoy the security of love. For love has no desire to go to other places but makes this one room where his lover is, an everywhere. Explorers want to travel around the world, and maps have been made both of the earthly and the heavenly world, but the lovers only want to possess each other and this is everything. These images are taken from geography and astronomy.

In the third stanza, the lovers gaze at each other and see the sincerity in their faces. They are so close they can see each other’s reflections in their eyes. The poet uses a geographical image of two halves of the world joined – their love is like the two hemispheres of the world that are joined to make one world, but, unlike the world, they have no cold north or declining sunset in the west ie the end of the relationship. Anything that comes to an end is not mixed perfectly. These lovers are balanced so perfectly that they can never die or decline. This latter is an image from medicine where disease and death is caused by the natural elements being out of balance. They need each other to thrive and continue with their life, and while they both live they will be in perfect harmony.

5. The Anniversarie (p37)

The poem is in rhyming couplets for the most part, with the final quatrain of each verse rhyming together – a very disciplined form. There are no introductory remarks but the poet launches immediately into absolute statements. He begins by proclaiming he is celebrating a year that he has been in love with his mistress; however, while most things (kings, honors, the Sun etc) draw to decay, their love will never die. Love is outside time with no tomorrow or yesterday. The first day is as good as the last for love as it is everlasting. This is a typically hyperbolic statement and the language has Biblical echoes (“All other things...”) reinforced by the regular but subtle rhyme. Those things that are subject to decay reflect the world of politics and the court that Donne was generally so cynical about as he was unable to secure promotion.

In the second stanza, the poet declares that the lovers must be buried separately (thine and my coarse – corpse) which implies that they are not yet married as only married couples would be buried together. However, some critics have speculated that the relationship may be an extra-marital affair – although judging from the risks he took for Anne More this seems unlikely. Everyone must ultimately be separated by death, even Princes and relationships like theirs that are akin to royalty. Their eyes and ears must eventually disappear in death. But as love dwells exclusively in their souls and anything else in their
souls is only an “inmate” (a lodger), then they will love even more intensely in heaven as this is the source of all love.

When they are only souls, they will be truly blessed as all souls are. On earth, they are like kings and are subject to no others. They are free from all fear as the only possible “treason” is in betrayal of each other. Note the way that Donne continues to use this extended conceit of kingship and politics. They must learn to “love nobly and live” to banish all uncertainty until they reach their sixtieth, not just first, anniversary. Bearing in mind life expectancy for the Elizabethans, this is as good as saying forever. The caesura before his final triumphant statement allows us to pause before the idea of their second reign, which will be forever in heaven. This is the poem of an older, wiser happily married man.

6. The Sunne Rising

This is another example of an aubade, an Elizabethan love song to the sun. However, Donne reverses this idea and makes the poem an irreverent address to the sun. It is dramatic, terse and complex.

The poem begins with a direct and dramatic address to the sun as a personified “busie old foole”. The tone is insulting and impudent. The poet asks the sun why it tries to wake the lovers calling through windows and curtains. He asks if lovers must govern themselves by it. He addresses the sun as a saucy wretch and tells him to concentrate on hurrying schoolboys or ill-tempered apprentices, court followers or farmers (“countrey ants”), to their duties leaving lovers alone. Love knows no seasons or times because it has a sense of timeless reality.

In stanza two, the poet asks the sun why it believes that its beams are so strong when the poet can blot them out simply by closing his eyes – except that the poet does not wish to do this as it would mean missing the sight of his lover. The poet asks the sun, if the sun has not already been blinded by the beauty of his lady, to tell him where the riches of spice and gold to be found in both the East and the West Indies are to be found – on the sun’s journey across the world or in the poet’s bed. The sun should ask where the Kings are that it saw and the answer will be that all this power lies in the poet’s bed. Notice the images used here of geographical discovery and politics. The world is only a pale comparison of the riches and power to be found in the poet’s bed.

In the final stanza, the poet extends his political image by announcing that his lover is both all the states in the world and all its leaders. For him “Nothing else is” – in other words, nothing else has any validity. Notice the simple emphasis of the language here. Princes only mimic their power and wealth is only alchemy ie a pretence (alchemy was a medieval pretence at science that attempted to turn base metals into gold). The sun is only half as happy as they are because it is single. As the sun is getting old, the poet suggests that it could have an easier life by warming only the lovers, as the bedroom of the lovers is the whole world. As the sun’s task is to shine to the whole world, then this would be fulfilled in shining only on them. Their bed becomes the new centre of the sun’s orbit “thy spheare”. This is a triumphant conclusion that the room of the lovers is worth everything that is in the whole world.
5. Sample Essay on "The Sun Rising"

(a) What does the poem reveal of the speaker’s attitude to love?

In "The Sun Rising", Donne portrays a very positive attitude towards love. The poem opens with the two lovers together in bed and the poet both utilises and challenges the aubade form, "Busy old fool". In the aubade, the poet sings a song of welcome to the morning and the sun; however, in this poem, the poet treats the sun with disdain because he believes that the love he has is better than anything the sun can offer. This reveals an idealistic and hyperbolic attitude to love and Donne develops this throughout the poem as a whole.

However, at the same time, it is worth noting that the situation that Donne presents and the setting of the lovers in bed together is also fundamentally realistic, "Through windows and through curtains call on us". Although this poem is highly idealised, there is also a sense in which Donne is challenging the conventional Elizabethan love poetry of the time, and in particular the influence of Petrarch, by placing his lovers in a scene of requited love and physical satisfaction. This reveals that, while the poet clearly believes that love is the most important thing in the world, he also sees the necessity for this love to be real and actual, not a distant idealised love as was found in Petrarchan poetry.

The fact that the poet does believe his love to be ideal is constantly emphasised throughout the poem. Love is seen to be greater than the sun, than time and the seasons, "Must to thy motions lovers seasons run?" It encompasses all the world's wealth and power and the very orbit of the cosmos should be changed to accommodate the importance of love, "Shine here to us and thou art everywhere". Any normal everyday activity such as those pursued by "late school boys" or "sour prentices" are seen as banal and unimportant compared to the greatness of love. This poem truly reflects an exploration of the importance and centrality of love for all human existence.

It is worth considering also, though, the poet's attitude towards his loved one. On the one hand, the poet views love as so fundamental, important and more real than the basic realities of time and space, and this is bound to give a sense of a very positive attitude towards love. However, it could also be read that the poem reflects the poet's expression of joy in his possession of his beloved; there is certainly a sense of a masculine and possessive pride in the object or woman whom he has acquired. While clearly on the surface, Donne's poem can be read as an ode to the glories of love, as a modern reader we question the silencing of the woman and the male exultation in his conquest.

(b) Explore the way Donne uses imagery in this poem.

In this poem, Donne uses a range of imagery that is characteristic of his style as a metaphysical poet. Firstly, we can see that the sun has been personified and the poem begins with a dramatic conversation between the poet and the sun. The poet questions the fact that the sun can dare to interrupt the lovers, "Why dost thou thus through windows and through curtains call on us", and uses commands to order the sun to go elsewhere and do something different, "Call country ants". The personification of the sun is surprising, primarily because of the fact that the poet shows it so little respect. An aubade normally glorifies the morning, but here Donne prefers the intimacy of the bedroom to what the sun can offer. The sun is characterised as a "busy old fool", and is thus belittled by the poet's words and by the dramatic and realistic situation that he creates. This image is also linked to
nature, time and the seasons and the poet uses this to emphasise his point that the lovers are beyond these seemingly trivial considerations.

The poet also uses images of discovery and exploration, a central aspect of Elizabethan culture. The poet tells the sun to "Look and tomorrow late tell me whether both the Indias of spice and mine". Donne uses this image to emphasise the richness of his love and the value that she represents for him. The two Indies (west and east) reflect the imported wealth that the Elizabethans would have enjoyed (the East Indies produced spices and the West Indies were mined for gold), and there is also a sense of mystery and exoticism about the two places. However, Donne uses this image to undermine their value and rather points out the fact that he has much more wealth in his mistress. This could, though, also be read as another expression of possession and exploitation; the colonial images that Donne uses in poems such as "To His Mistress Going to Bed" indicate that Donne viewed women as a possession, something valuable to be conquered and enjoyed. His linking of wealth and love may value love more highly, but it also implies a possession.

Donne also uses political images of kingship, which are very unusual in a love poem although used frequently by Donne. The poet claims "she is all states and all Princes I". There are many different ways of reading this image. The key to our understanding rests on the power relationship within this image. There is a mutual and necessary relationship between the state and the Prince (although why is the loved one not likened to a King, a more serious and powerful figure?) The Prince both controls and is controlled by the state. It is debatable how far the poet wishes to control and dominate the woman or how far he views their relationship as an equal one. The silenced woman within the poem perhaps does not create a good impression for this.

The poet also uses imagery from alchemy, which is another favourite source for Donne. He believes that "all wealth" is "alchemy" compared to their love. Alchemy was a false science much discussed by the Elizabethans and set itself two tasks: both to make base metal into gold and to discover the elixir of eternal life. Here, the image relates to the former sense and there is a feeling that the love of the poet for his lover is much more realistic than wild and misguided alchemical experiments.

Finally, the poet uses images from cosmology to discuss the orbit of the sun. The sun's "sphere" can become the poet's bedroom because they are the centre of the whole world. Donne uses science here, assuming a geocentric view of the world (that the sun orbits the earth) rather than a heliocentric view (that the planets orbit the sun). All the natural order is challenged by their love and even the cosmic movement of the planets is affected and changed by what they two lovers are feeling. It is hard to imagine a more effective expression of the power of love.

(c) Comment on how Donne presents different attitudes to love in one or two other poems.

Donne's poems encompass a huge range of attitudes to love and this is part of the pleasure of reading his poetry. He uses many different personae and it is important to be aware that the voice within the poems does not necessarily reflect what Donne himself thought or believed, although many critics equate his own life and biography with the shifting perspectives that we are presented with. It is also important to remember that the original poems would have been circulated only amongst Donne's friends and family and the first volume was not published until after his death. Thus, they were intended for more intimate
audiences, and often different audiences: Donne's male friends in the Inns of Court would have had very different expectations of what makes a good poem than Ann More.

"The Sun Rising" presents a wholly positive attitude towards love, and this is contrasted with a poem such as "Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star" which has a very negative attitude towards love. The poem "Song" is a vigorous and unambiguous poem, reflecting a cynical attitude towards love and women. The disturbed rhythms within the poem perhaps reflect this uncertainty and disruption, and it is hard to decide whether the poem creates a sense of mocking humour or whether it is bitter and harsh.

The poem basically lists a number of impossible activities that are there to show contempt for the idea that a woman can be both "true and fair". The poem is written as a "Song" so it was presumably to be sung, yet the cynical, worldly tone certainly contrasts with Donne's other song in this selection, "Sweetest love I do not go". The regularity of the rhyme with its alternate rhyme, couplets and triplets, reflects the musical background, but the disrupted rhythm and the bitter tone provide a sharp contrast with the idealistic "Sun Rising".

However, one thing that both "The Sun Rising" and "Song" have in common is that Donne was keen to reject Petrarchan conventions and convey a love that was realistic and accessible. "The Sun Rising" rejects Petrarch in the consummation of the union between the two lovers, while "Song" rejects the idealistic attitude towards women. "Twicknam Garden", on the other hand, addresses this convention forthrightly. The poem is set in a garden and portrays a lover languishing for unrequited love "blasted with sighs and surrounded with tears". On one level, this can be read as a bleak and sad poem, reflecting the fact that the poet is weeping because he has chosen the one faithful woman (unlike "Song" where none can be faithful) to love, but unfortunately she is faithful to another. The images and words reflect the poet's dejection - "spider love", "gall", "serpent", "stone fountain weeping out my year". However, on another level this poem can be read as a parody of Petrarchan love conventions. One of the key aspects of Petrarchan love is that the male lover has to feel for his distant and aloof mistress from afar, and he often dies from unrequited love. Donne has here taken this image and written a hyperbolic and theatrical exaggeration of this figure. While there are moments of genuine pathos within the poem, I also believe that Donne was playing with ideas and seeing how far he could go with a convention. Donne's denial of Petrarchan conventions was on the grounds of realism: he would rather have the real love of "The Sun Rising" or even the cynicism of "Song" than the unreal and exaggerated poetic poses of "Twicknam Garden".

Thus, Donne's poetry encapsulates a range of attitudes to love, based on the need for a realistic and honest appraisal of human relationships rather than the distant posturing of Petrarchan conventions.
6. Contextual sources for some of Donne's imagery

Donne seldom uses conventional images, preferring to use vigorous, undecorated language whose emotional impact is often brought about by its colloquial directness. The speaker in the poems often seems to blurt out his feelings with choking impatience. Often the language is rough and uneven. The poems are clearly not spontaneous as the stanza form reflects some care over this, but Donne has sharply dissociated himself from common Elizabethan practice which is to create a much more studied and mellifluous style of poem.

Donne's choice of imagery reflects the real world in which he lived, not some distant ideal of literary merit, and some understanding of this is important to appreciate his achievement.

1. The discovery of new worlds, maps and geography

**Background:** Elizabethan voyages of discovery (eg Christopher Columbus) and exploration; Donne himself travelled extensively in his early days.

- **The Good-Morrow** - stanza 2 "Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone...", stanza 3 "Where can we finde two better hemisphaeres..."

- **The Sunne Rising** - stanza 2 "Whether both the'India's of spice and Myne..."

- **A Valediction: of Weeping** - stanza 2 "On a round ball..."

- **A Valediction: forbidding Mourning** - the compasses image at the end assumes that the male lover is travelling around the world.

- **The Triple Foole** - stanza 1 "Then as th'earths inward narrow crooked lanes..."

- **Satyre III** - p105 (near the bottom) - "frozen North discoveries".

- **Hymne to God my God** - p177 stanza 2 "Cosmographers, and I their Mapp..."

2. Politics, government and kingship.

**Background:** the notion of the "Divine Right of Kings" and the Elizabethan idea that that natural order of the universe depended on a hierarchical order headed by the King. This thought was increasingly being threatened by thinkers like Machiavelli, in Italy, who, in his famous work "The Prince", put forward a theory of political power based on cunning and expediency rather than natural order. (cf: King Lear.)

- **The Sunne Rising** - stanza 3 "She'is all States and all Princes..."

- **The Anniversarie** - stanza 1 "All Kings and all their favourites", stanza 2 "Alas, as well as other Princes..", stanza 3 "Here upon earth we'are Kings, and none but wee..."

- **The Extasie** - p57 near the end of the page "Else a great Prince in prison lies".

- **The Funerall** - stanza 1 "Viceroy to that, which being then to heaven gone..."
3. **Alchemy, science and astronomy.**

**Background:** alchemy - an early medieval science that involved the discovery of the "philosophers' stone" by which base metals could be transmuted into gold (a quest often equated in literature with trickery as in Ben Jonson's play "The Alchemist"). In Donne's time, there was a shift towards scientific endeavour and a human search for knowledge about the world that was in opposition to the medieval notion that the natural world could only be explained by reference to God's divine plan. Rational enquiry took the place of religious speculation. This can clearly be illustrated in the story of Galileo Galilei who propounded the theory of the planets (including the earth) revolving round the sun rather than the earth being the centre of the universe. Galileo was viewed with great suspicion by the Church and was forced to recant his views by the Inquisition in 1633; however, the victory ultimately went to science which won from the Church the authority to define the shape and pattern of the universe and Galileo's views were accepted.

**The Sunne Rising** - stanza 3 "All wealth alchimie"

**A nocturnall upon S Lucies Day** - stanza 2 "In whom love wrought new Alchimie".

**The Canonization** - end of the poem talks about the idea of passing substances through glass vessels - a practice of alchemy.

**Loves Alchymie** - uses the idea of change as a metaphor for love.

**Holy sonnet I** - "And Thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart" - an image of magnetism.

4. **Religion**

**Background:** This was a troubled and difficult time and Donne's decision to renounce his Catholic faith and adopt Anglicanism has often been viewed as an act of expediency to safeguard his position and life. He was related to Sir Thomas More who had been martyred for his Catholic faith and was no doubt very much aware of the severe penalties that could be imposed for practising the Catholic religion. Nonetheless, much of Donne's religious imagery has a distinctly Catholic flavour and biographers have argued that Donne never really recovered, in spiritual terms, from his betrayal of what he must unconsciously have considered the "true religion".

**Twicknam Garden** - stanza 1 "transubstantiates" - transubstantiation is the Catholic doctrine of the bread of the Mass being literally converted into the body of Christ during the service - Protestants believed it was only symbolic.

**The Funerall** - stanza 3 "It into other hands these Reliques came" - relics were part of saints' bodies kept by the faithful - Donne himself was believed to possess half of one of Thomas More's teeth!

**The Relique** - uses the same idea with a "bracelet of bright hair".

**The Flea** - stanza 2 likens the flea to a religious object and uses the language of religion.
Satyre III deals with the whole question of religion in some detail. The argument falls into three parts: a) a condemnation of those who fail to seek for religious truth b) encouragement to seek "true religion" despite the doubts and conflicts of an age of religious controversy and c) a warning that it is better to risk persecution for disobeying the secular authorities than to risk damnation by betraying the truth reached by the efforts of the individual conscience. While the poem ostensibly seems to promote the cause of Protestantism, the final conclusion is hugely ironic if you remember Donne's recantation of his native faith.

Song: Goe and Catch a Falling Starre - stanza 3 "Pilgrimage".

The Canonization - the whole poem works on the image of the lovers as saints.

Donne also wrote an series of Holy Sonnets all on the theme of religion.

5. Gardening

Background: the Elizabethans were famous for their gardens and they believed that the ideal garden mirrored the divine order of the universe. We are familiar with the harmonious and carefully planned gardens that have been maintained around many existing Elizabethan houses such as Montacute.

The Extasie - bottom of p55 has images of grafting and propagation.

6. War

Background: war was a more or less permanent background feature of sixteenth and seventeenth century life - the main threat to English peace was the coming of the Spanish Armada in 1588. There was a sense that high born or ambitious young men ought to take an interest in military pursuits.

The Extasie - top of p56 "Two equall Armies".

Satyre III - six lines down from top of p106 "worlds garrison".

Holy sonnet XIV - "an usurpt towne". (Also notice the images of marriage, divorce and sex in this sonnet.)

7. Money and Capitalism

Background: many theorists see the Elizabethan age as the first real age of capitalism after the rigid hierarchical structures of medieval time. Money became the basis on which society was run rather than simply rank and status, and it became possible for those not born into the nobility to rise quickly to positions of power. Cardinal Wolsey is one such example, the son of a butcher who rose to be the most powerful man in the country under Henry VIII, Exloration meant that trade was expanded and the formation of companies such as the East India Company in 1600 reflect this entrepreneurial spirit that now pervaded the nation.

Loves Usury - uses the very image of money-lending and bargaining as the basis of its exploration of love.
A Valediction: of Weeping - stanza 1 uses the image of minting new coins as a way of exploring the tears the lovers shed at their imminent parting.