

## SELECTED POEMS

### “Donne explores love in all its forms. Discuss.”

John Donne's Selected Poems is a commentary centered around the various forms of love which, as one of the “great shaping forces of his life,” has profound transformative influences on his work. The anthology presents a multi-faceted view of love, exploring both its hopeful and cynical sides. Donne's own stance on love is mercurial and shifts to reflect the circumstances of his life. Initially, his works are preoccupied with the physical nature of love or rather, lust, focusing on the pursuit of carnal desires. However, the poems go on to depict a more mature version of love, endorsing its eternal and transformative aspects. Working opposite the more spiritual side of love, the anthology also exhibits examples of fickle, superficial love. Donne approaches the topic of love with a unique daring, through his extended use of unlikely conceits, he presents the audience with an unbridled image of love in all its forms.

A prominent form of love in Donne's poetry is that of sexual desire. Donne speaks with “remarkable frankness about sex,” adopting a casual stance on sexual intimacy. Challenging the societal norms surrounding the pursuit of the physical, Donne's poem “Elegy: To His Mistress Going To Bed,” makes light of the seriousness of traditional elegies by dedicating it to the act of seduction. By subverting this form of poetry, Donne aims to remove the stigma around sex, normalising it in the process. To Donne, “there is no penance due to innocence,” this betrays his view that sex is innocuous and shouldn't raise objections on moral grounds. The act of engaging in sexual intimacy is negligible, represented in his unusual conceit of “The Flea,” where the flea is symbolic of the proposed physical union between the two lovers. Just as the flea is tiny and its death fails to incite consequence, Donne builds up to the argument that the same goes for their coupling. Donne rebels against the conventional view of sexual intimacy through the depiction of sex as something pleasurable that should be pursued. This is apparent through the religious imagery interwoven into both these poems of seduction, the lovers' “soft bed” is referred to as a “marriage temple,” and “love's hallow' d temple.” As two of the largest influences in Donne's life, the divine and sexual intimacy are inextricably linked. By elevating the act of sex to religious levels, Donne adopts a contrarian view on chastity compared to others of his time. Sex cannot bring shame especially since, to Donne, engaging in sex makes the lovers “more than married are,” and to disagree would go against the sanctity of marriage. Religious imagery is also used to express Donne's appreciation for the physical, “as souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be.” Here clothing is a distraction and just as souls are freed from their bodies during the rapture, clothes must be freed from the body so lovers can experience “whole joys,” demonstrating Donne's view that nakedness is natural, especially “in a society where most people were almost never naked.” In “Elegy,” the speaker refers to his lover as “my America,” showing that the human body is something worthy of exploration. By writing openly on the sexual side of love, Donne sheds the negative connotations around sex and explores love that is centered on the physical.

Donne's poems also depict examples of pure love, which is transformative and everlasting. The love seen in Donne's aubades is transcendental and unbound by earthly concerns. In “The Sun Rising,” the speaker's love is powerful enough to embolden him to challenge the very sun. The speaker speaks brazenly with condescension towards the sun referring to it as a “saucy pedantic wretch” and “busy old fool.” The love presented has a transformative aspect that creates a microcosm of the universe wherever the lovers are. This notion is explored in both, “The Sun Rising” and “The Good Morrow,” the strength of the speaker's love is enough to “make one little room an everywhere.” The lovers shun the outside world claiming that “the Indias of spice of mine” “all here in one bed lay,” the sun only needs to “shine here to us” because in the eyes of Donne's speaker all the treasures of the world are

contained in their bedroom. Here, Donne depicts love that is the epitome of all love in the world, love strong enough that the whole world revolves around the love of Donne's speaker. The same notion is echoed in "The Canonisation," where the speaker's love is immortalised and the lovers ascend to sainthood. After leaving the material world, the lover's take away the purest source of love in the universe so that "countries, towns...beg from above a pattern of your love," all other love has become a poor reflection of their love. Each stanza in this poem begins and ends with love, creating a circular narrative that reflects how the material world revolves around the lover's image. Donne describes love that is impervious to the "rags of time" and "without sharp North, without declining West," proof that love can be eternal. "Without declining west," references how the set will never set on the speaker's love so that their relationship is an eternal morning. The predictable rhyme and meter of Donne's love poetry adds to the idea that this true form of love is stable and ongoing. In the final stanza of "The Sun Rising" Donne shifts the pronouns to "us" and "we" representative of the idea that "holy matrimony can transform two into one," the lovers represent one whole that is the center of the entire cosmos. Donne delineates the metaphysical aspects of true love through elaborate conceits exploring the spiritual form of love.

Despite Donne's endorsement of true love, his poetry also explores love which is inconstant and superficial, the shallow side of love is examined in tandem with pure love. Although poems like "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" focus on transformative love, Donne does so whilst scorning love that is "sublunary." An extended metaphor is used to compare the two opposing forms of love; the common sort of love is likened to the "moving of th'earth," this is love that is focused on the senses and "cannot admit absence." In contrast, the speaker's love is compared to the "trepidation of the spheres" that will stand the test of parting because their love is spiritual and "inter-assured of the mind". Donne scorns fickle love, viewing it as inferior to love that is a union of the mind instead of the physical. "The Good Morrow," likewise focuses on the dichotomy of love, contrasting the before and after of experiencing true love. The speaker wonders "what thou and I did, till we loved," in the past he only experienced love that is incited by physical desires and compares it to "country pleasures." After he has experienced the all-consuming side of love, all previous relationships were "but a dream of thee." To Donne, true love augments life, he argues that spiritual love is essential in being able to perceive the world fully, without true love the speaker existed in a state of semi-consciousness. Donne breaks the convention of traditional love poetry, shattering the illusion that love in all its forms is free of faults. By criticising the fickle side of love, Donne enhances the purer side, elevating it to a more unattainable level. *Selected Poems* sheds light on the weaker form of love that is preoccupied with the physical and is subject to the passage of time.

Donne's poetry challenges Petrarchan norms and tradition by focusing on forms of love other than the all-consuming, absolute version. Through an anthological depiction of love, Donne explores its varied nature. Love doesn't merely exist in a hyperbolic, everlasting form but can also be transitory and shallow. Love may also manifest as a pursuit of lust which Donne maintains is free from shame. Donne's life and poetry are centered around love and the anthology follows Donne's discovery of the various forms of love. The audience is able to experience an intimate understanding of Donne's views on the many facets of love in a way that is uniquely a result of Donne's "bold individuality."