
Objective:

- Students will be able to understand and identify the conventions of poetry including rhythm, figurative language, imagery, and symbolism.

John Donne (1572 – 1631)

John Donne was an English poet, satirist, lawyer, and priest. His style and subject matter include him in the group known as the metaphysical poets. The metaphysical poets were concerned with elevating the human spirit above the body, and they tried to create relationships between things that a person might not normally connect such as separated lovers and the arms of a compass. Donne's poetry is known for its vibrant language and creative metaphors. Donne's writing style is characterized by abrupt openings and the usage of *paradox* and *irony*. A *paradox* is, in simple terms, a statement or event that seems to contradict itself, though it may still be true or at least makes sense. *Irony* is when the illogical or unlikely outcome occurs despite strong evidence to suggest otherwise. These features, in combination with his dramatic rhythms, syntax, and eloquence, are a reaction against the smoothness of conventional Elizabethan poetry. His early works demonstrate a deep knowledge of British society, and Donne criticizes that society harshly. An important theme in much of Donne's poetry is the idea of true religion, but he also wrote many secular and love poems. Donne is particularly famous for his mastery of metaphysical conceits. A *conceit*, in poetry, is a very complicated metaphor.



Structure

Donne's song, *Soul's Joy, Now I Am Gone*, tells his wife that even though the two of them are separated physically, the love between them keeps them connected. The song is structured into five, five-line stanzas. Thus, Donne created a consistent poetic structure. That this was intentional is proven by Donne splitting what could have been the second line into a second and third line, thus producing five-line stanzas instead of four-line stanzas.

Rhythm

Rhythm in poetry refers to how many beats, or syllables, there are in each line. The **rhythm** in Donne's song remains consistent. The beats per line in each stanza are 6, 4, 4, 8, 6:

Soul's joy, now I am gone,	6
And you alone,	4
- Which cannot be,	4
Since I must leave myself with thee	8
<u>And carry thee with me</u>	6
Yet when unto our eyes	6
Absence denies	4
Each other's sight,	4
And makes to us a constant night,	8
<u>When others change to light;</u>	6

Figurative Language

Figurative language is a major convention in poetry. It does not use words in their literal sense. *Metaphor* and *analogy* are two types of figurative language. A *metaphor* is when one thing is represented by another, despite not having any literal resemblance between them. An *analogy* is the comparison between two different things that share similarities. The song begins with the words, "Soul's joy." This is how Donne refers to his wife, as his soul's joy.

John Donne specializes in metaphors and creates complicated, elaborate connections between seemingly disparate objects. An example of a metaphor is in the second stanza, fourth line:

"And makes to us a constant **night**,"

Here the word **night** is used figuratively to mean that he and his wife are unable to see each other, as if they are in the black darkness of the night when they die.

Another example of figurative language is in the last stanza's third line:

"Why should our **clay**
Over our spirits so much sway?"

Here, the word "clay" means their actual bodies, their physical forms. Donne is asking why the body should have so much power over the human spirit.

Imagery

Imagery is when the writer causes the reader to consider their senses and taste, see, hear, feel, and smell what is happening in the text. The last stanza uses imagery.

“Fools have no means to meet,
But by their feet;”

This passage creates the image, or picture, of two people walking towards each other to meet. In the **context** of the poem, Donne is saying that other people (“Fools”) who are not as in love and who do not enjoy the special, spiritual connection that he and his wife enjoy can only meet physically by being in each other’s actual presence.

Symbolism

Symbolism is when something represents both itself and something much greater than itself. For example, the American flag is just several pieces of cloth sewn together, but it symbolizes the United States and all of our national values. In Donne’s song there is symbolism, as well.

“But let belief
Of mutual love
This wonder to the vulgar prove,
Our bodies, not **we** move.”

The word “we” not only represents Donne and his wife physically, but also has an additional meaning. It symbolizes their spirits and their true characters. Donne is saying that the mutual love between him and his wife is immovable and will continue even in death. “Our bodies, not we move.” This means that the two of them can be apart from each other, but their spirits remain together.

Growth & Assessment

1. **Rhythm** in poetry refers to –
 - a. Something that symbolizes something else
 - b. How many beats are in each line
 - c. How many lines are in each stanza
 - d. Its rhyme scheme
2. The word **night** is an example of which convention in the following passage?

Each other's sight, And makes to us a constant **night**, When others change to light;

 - a. A simile
 - b. Figurative language
 - c. Foreshadow
 - d. Imagery
3. What is Donne referring to when he writes "soul's joy"?
 - a. His wife
 - b. The night
 - c. "Our clay"
 - d. Their feet
4. What is something that represents itself and something much greater?
5. What does the following stanza mean?,

"But let belief
Of mutual love
This wonder to the vulgar prove,
Our bodies, not we move."