**Reading Donne: The Layers and Varieties of Metaphysical Love**

**Introduction**

The speakers of Donne’s poems adopt various different perspectives on human love and faith. Never is the presentation of love simple, however: the particular situations, the metaphors and similes chosen for sustained analogy and analysis, the shifting nature of the arguments all contribute to and complicate the qualities and meaning of the love described. So, the only way to acquire an accurate sense of the many shades of love in Donne’s poetry, is to read a selection of his poems (the more, the better), consider the metaphorical and logical construction of each very carefully, and ultimately compare and contrast the ideas and attitudes found in each with those encountered in others. This activity aims to get you started on this process.

**Instructions**

Start by reading the following poems by Donne in your *Norton Anthology* or elsewhere:

* “The Sun Rising” (p. 672)
* “Love’s Alchemy” (p. 677)
* “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” (pp. 679-680)
* “The Relic” (pp. 683-684)
* “Elegy 19. To His Mistress Going to Bed” (pp. 685-686)
* Holy Sonnet 14 (p. 692)

As always, you should make good use of the notes and glosses provided by the *Norton Anthology*, and jot down your reactions to the poems as you read. The following questions are designed to help you focus your thoughts, so you should try to record your own responses to them before reading on to the answers I’ve suggested.

**Focus Questions**

1. The primary image in “The Sun Rising” is the sun itself. How is the sun described and how does that description help characterize the love that’s celebrated?
2. The lovers in “The Sun Rising” are equated with the whole world, and the world, along with other geographical images, is used in “Elegy 19” as well. There is, however, a vast difference between the ways in which this conceit is used in the two poems. How would you describe the difference?
3. Ravishment is the hope of the speakers in both “Elegy 19” and Holy Sonnet 14, and the poems share other ideas too, but the person addressed, the object of ravishment, the speaker’s ultimate goal, the form of each poem, as well as the style and language differ markedly. Can you list the particulars of these differences?
4. The word “seal” is used in both “Elegy 19” and “The Relic,” but is glossed very differently by the *Norton Anthology* in each case. Do you think both meanings are relevant to both poems? How does the concept of the seal contribute to the description of love in each poem?
5. In both “Elegy 19” and “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” a belief in a privileged insight or understanding known only to an elite is introduced. Can you identify the relevant passage(s) in each poem and explain what is being suggested?
6. A striking geometrical conceit is developed by the speaker in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” and an alchemical one in “Love’s Alchemy.” How does each serve to characterize human love and the speaker’s attitude toward it?

Once you have completed the readings and tackled the focus questions, read this commentary on the “[Layers and Varieties of Love in Donne’s Metaphysical Poetry](https://moodle.tru.ca/pluginfile.php/459104/mod_bootstrapelements/intro/ENGL%202111_Unit%204_Donnes_Love_Poetry.pdf),” which provides some possible answers to these questions.