



### WRITING IDEAS

1. "The Sun Rising" is an aubade: a poem greeting the dawn, often involving lovers reluctant to separate. Using Donne's poem as inspiration, write a modern aubade. For more contemporary models, read one of the following:

"Aubade" by Amber Flora Thomas

"An Aubade" by Joel Brouwer

"Aubade" by Philip Larkin

2. In "The Sun Rising," Donne speaks to the sun using "apostrophe," a rhetorical device in which he addresses an inanimate object (the sun) as if it were a person able to respond. Using apostrophe, write your own poem addressing an imaginary or absent object as if it were present and able to reply.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Donne's speaker feel about the coming of dawn? Which words or phrases best suggest his attitude?
2. How does Donne compare the sun to a person? In his personification, what sort of person does Donne suggest the sun is? Is his comparison reasonable or absurd? Why or why not?
3. Donne begins the poem by telling the sun to go bother "late school boys" and "country ants" because it can have no effect on love. Where else does Donne use wit, irony, or wordplay in the poem? What effect does it have on your understanding of the poem's message?

What relationship exists between the public and private spheres in the poem, and how does Donne distinguish between them? Which realm does Donne seem to privilege?

### TEACHING TIPS

1. Before teaching, review [Stephen Burt's poem guide](#). Also, have small groups of students research the following terms and share them with classmates before presenting the poem: John Donne, Copernicus, Galileo, Heliocentrism, Geocentrism, Aubade, Conceit, and Apostrophe; they can find the latter three terms defined in the Learning Area's glossary, as well as a detailed biography of Donne linked next to the poem. Students may hyperlink their research terms to the poem to share on a class web site.
2. After paraphrasing the first stanza of the poem with your class, encourage students to read the text out loud multiple times as they work in small groups to paraphrase the other two stanzas, looking up words as necessary. Have volunteers from each group perform their paraphrase of the speaker's address to the sun. Then in a large group debrief, create a class description of the moves Donne makes in each of the three stanzas of the poem. Start by asking what kind of speech act does the speaker perform in each stanza: warning, challenging, showing off, etc. What audiences are being addressed in each of the stanzas? How do these movements contribute to the overall meaning of the text?
3. Have students explore "Assumption of the Virgin," the painting by Renaissance artist Lodovico Cigoli who was a close friend of Galileo's. The first example of Galileo's telescopic views of the moon to appear in visual art, the painting depicts the moon at the feet of the Virgin Mary. Have students discuss how scientific developments of the Renaissance may have shaped Cigoli's painting and Donne's imaginative portrayal of the speaker's encounter with the sun in this aubade. Have them consider Donne's speaker's persona, perspective, and tone in light of the intellectual milieu of this period. Extend the discussion to include a comparison of a painting from the same period, "[Landscape with the Fall of Icarus](#)" by Pieter Breughel, which depicts a very different relationship between human beings and heavenly bodies. W. H. Auden's poem "Musee de Beaux Arts" comments on this painting.
4. After exploring the poem in the context of its intellectual origins, its genre (the aubade) and its formal elements (the apostrophe and the conceit); have students prepare a radio documentary or webcast in which a formal reading of the poem and an interpretive discussion are included. Models of interpretive discussions of poems such as [William Blake's "The Garden of Love"](#) and [Plath's "Fever 103"](#) are available.

## The Sun Rising

BY JOHN DONNE 1572–1631

Busy old fool, unruly sun,  
 Why dost thou thus,  
 Through windows, and through curtains call on us?  
 Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?  
 Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide  
 Late school boys and sour prentices,  
 Go tell court huntsmen that the king will ride,  
 Call country ants to harvest offices,  
 Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,  
 Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beams, so reverend and strong  
 Why shouldst thou think?  
 I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,  
 But that I would not lose her sight so long;  
 If her eyes have not blinded thine,  
 Look, and tomorrow late, tell me,  
 Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine  
 Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with me.  
 Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,  
 And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.

She's all states, and all princes, I,  
 Nothing else is.  
 Princes do but play us; compared to this,  
 All honor's mimic, all wealth alchemy.  
 Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,  
 In that the world's contracted thus.  
 Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be  
 To warm the world, that's done in warming us.  
 Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;  
 This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.

Also available as an audio poem.



## John Donne: "The Sun Rising"

The poet tries to start a revolution from his bed.

BY STEPHEN BURT

**John Donne** (1572-1631) wrote a prose work called *Paradoxes and Problems*, and his life presents plenty of both: he was born a Catholic, gained notoriety for sacrilegious verse, and later in life became an Anglican priest. Though some of his poems defended libertinism and casual sex, he destroyed his first career by falling in love, and stayed with the woman he married until her death. His poems picked up a reputation for head-scratchingly bizarre intellectualism—one reason they're now called metaphysical—but some of them are the most deeply felt poems of romantic love in the language. One such poem is "[The Sun Rising](#)."

A former law student whose London relatives were persecuted for remaining Catholic after England had turned Protestant, Donne ruined what could have been a fine career at court when in 1601 he secretly married his employer's niece, Anne More. The next year, Donne's employer found out and fired him. Donne later found

his calling as an Anglican cleric, giving dramatic sermons at London's most famous church. Until after his death, most of Donne's poems circulated only in manuscript: his friends copied them by hand, then showed them to their friends, who copied them into their commonplace books. (If you think of a book of poems as like a compact disc, then a commonplace book is like a mix tape, or an iPod; Donne's poems were like popular, unreleased MP3s.)

Donne liked to make long, odd comparisons, called conceits: he compared two lovers to the parts of a compass, for example, and likened a teardrop to a navigator's globe. Later poets such as Abraham Cowley (1618-1667) built whole careers by imitating those conceits. By the time Cowley died, though, conceits had gone out of fashion. When the influential critic Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) coined the term *metaphysical poets*, he meant it as an insult: "Metaphysical poets" such as Cowley and Donne, he wrote, used their conceits to present "heterogenous ideas ... yoked by violence together"; "they were not successful in representing or moving the affections." (In other words, they had too much head, not enough heart.) The term *metaphysical* stuck, though the judgment did not: when modernist critics and poets such as T.S. Eliot wanted to rehabilitate Donne, they defended something called metaphysical poetry, and praised the metaphysical conceit.

Readers like to believe that Donne's libertine poems—which insult women in general, or recommend sex with many partners—date from his law-student days, while the passionate, sincere-sounding love poems reflect his romance and marriage with Anne. As with Shakespeare's sonnets, nobody really knows. It's no wonder, though, that so many readers (myself included) imagine "The Sun Rising" as written to Anne. In it, Donne and his beloved wake up together, and Donne fears that someone will walk in on them: the unwelcome intruder is (not her father, nor his boss, nor a London stranger, but) the sun, which (here's the conceit) Donne treats as a person:

Busy old fool, unruly sun,  
Why dost thou thus,  
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?  
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?  
Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide  
Late school boys and sour prentices,  
Go tell court huntsmen that the king will ride,  
Call country ants to harvest offices,  
Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,  
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

"Prentices" are apprentices, who (like today's sullen teens) oversleep; "motions" are regular changes, such as sunset or sunrise, spring or fall. Donne and Anne (we might as well call her Anne) believe it's more important to be in love than to be on time: they won't let the hour, or the month, or even their relative ages, tell them what to do.

Nor do they want to get up out of their shared bed. From medieval French to modern English, there's a tradition of poems called aubades, about lovers who awaken at dawn: often they are adulterous or illicit lovers, who don't want to separate but don't want to get caught. Donne wrote such a poem himself, called "Break of Day." In "The Sun Rising," though, Donne and Anne feel right at home: there's no chance either of them will go anywhere, because their love has placed them where they belong, and everything else must reorient itself around them.

It follows that Donne is the master of the house; the sun, as a guest, should respect and obey him. Donne therefore reverses the conceit: having likened the sun to a person, he now gives a person—himself—the powers of the sun:

Thy beams, so reverend and strong  
 Why shouldst thou think?  
 I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,  
 But that I would not lose her sight so long;  
 If her eyes have not blinded thine,  
 Look, and tomorrow late, tell me,  
 Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine  
 Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with me.  
 Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,  
 And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.

Donne could occlude or outshine the sun (because he, too, is a celestial body), but he won't (because then his beloved would not see him, and he would not see her). Since everything important to Donne (i.e., Anne) stays indoors, not outside, Donne feels as if everything *commonly believed* important—spices from the Indian Ocean, precious metals from West Indies mines—remains securely indoors too.

In fact (here we see the extravagance of the conceit), everything and everyone of any importance is already in Donne's bed:

She's all states, and all princes, I,  
 Nothing else is.  
 Princes do but play us; compared to this,  
 All honor's mimic, all wealth alchemy.  
 Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,  
 In that the world's contracted thus.  
 Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be  
 To warm the world, that's done in warming us.  
 Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;  
 This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.

The sun, having been shown the door, now gets asked to remain. The pronouns "I" and "she" disappear, leaving only "us" and "we"; thus combined, the lovers become the whole Earth, and since the sun's job is to warm the Earth, it ought to stay where the lovers are, and orbit them. Not only will Donne and Anne escape detection and censure, since the sun will never shine anywhere else, but the lovers won't even have to get out of bed.

Fancy metaphysical conceits differ from plain-Jane metaphors not just because conceits run all the way through a poem, but also because they often bring in the latest in Renaissance science and technology. Remember that the sun is like a person, but Donne is like a celestial body: he and Anne, together, replace the Earth. "Sphere" comes from the old, Ptolemaic cosmology (the one Galileo and Copernicus disproved), in which the sun supposedly went round the Earth (as did all other planets, each in its own "sphere"). In Donne's time, astronomers (and astrologers) still argued about what went around what. His interest in scientific controversy, in ongoing disputes about natural and supernatural truths, gave him metaphors for his poems. The same interest helps give this poem its emotional force: *nobody knows if the sun goes around the Earth, or vice versa*, that last line implies, *but I'm quite certain that my life revolves around yours*.

Donne's conceit describes the sun as a human being who walks in on the lovers, and then—with help from what was, to Donne, modern science—makes himself and his beloved into their own cosmic entity, their own world.

You might see how readers who (like Johnson) thought poets should stay away from complex images found such flights of figuration distasteful. In "The Sun Rising," though—and in other Donne poems akin to it ("The Canonization," for example, and "The Relic")—the figure of speech is extreme for a very good reason: Donne's devotion is extreme, too, and only "heterogenous ideas yoked by violence together," only the language of the metaphysical conceit, can express the depths of his love.