

Learning to Appreciate Poetry

Presented by Paul Rogers

John Donne



The Sun Rising

A few words in advance

John Donne and Metaphysical Poets.

The Poem

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 honour'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 centre is, these walls, thy sphere.

Rhyme Scheme

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
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The three regular stanzas of “The Sun Rising” are each of 10 lines long and follow this pattern: 4255445555 — lines 1, 5, and 6 are in iambic tetrameter, line 2 is in dimeter, and lines 3, 4, and 7-10 are in pentameter. The rhyme scheme for the stanzas is ABBACDCDEE.

Imagery

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
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Metaphors abound in this poem, the most important of which is the comparison of the bedroom to the world. The point is that their love is everything and anything. They are better than the sun. It is not the centre of the universe: their love *is* the universe. It is all-powerful, so they are as rich and powerful as kings and queens. Their love is the only thing that matters to them; it is all the wealth in the world.

Basic Meaning

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The Sun Rising is a love poem set in a bedroom, where a man and his lover are in bed after a physical encounter overnight. The poet sees the sun as an intruder, hastening the onset of day (and presumably, an end to passion). The sun is addressed directly as a "person," before being unfavourably compared with the man's lover.

Concluding Remarks

All the Metaphysical Poets are challenging. They demand a lot of concentration from the reader which, as Johnson observed, is not always worth the effort. However, the giants of the group: Donne, Marvel, Herbert, etc., are among the greatest poets the English language has ever produced, and they will repay your effort many times over.

One mistake made by people who are new to Donne is to try and read several poems in one sitting. His wordplay and density of language are such that you'll quickly get mental overload if you attempt too much in one go. It's far better to aim for something like a poem a day to study and devote 30 minutes to an hour with it. Use the basic tools you now have at your disposal – rhyme scheme, imagery, etc. – and see what works for you and what causes problems. Try and resist the temptation to go to Google (and particularly to Wikipedia) for a quick fix. By all means do an Internet search after your own analysis; it'll be good to see how much your thoughts and impressions accord with the views of critics.

This has been our most challenging poem thus far, and you'll have noticed I didn't give you any help with colour coding this time. Find the images and rhymes for yourselves, if you can.

Preparing for the Next Unit

