

John Donne: Selected Poems Questions

Answer the questions in complete sentences on a Google Doc, and turn in to the homework collector on my website.

“The Canonization”

1. The rhyme scheme of the poem is abbaaabba. How does this embody the movement of thought in each stanza? (Is there a reason for that rhyme scheme?)
2. What is the dominant meter of the poem? What effect does this create?
3. What word ends the first and last lines of each stanza? What is the significance of this observation?
4. Stanza 3 contains the symbols of: moths, candles, eagles, doves, and phoenixes. How do these symbols add to your understanding of his relationship with his beloved?
5. Some critics have suggested that it is difficult for the reader to accept the argument of this poem because the speaker tells us in the last stanza that we will be begging him for a model of his love, suggesting that none of us will ever have anything but an inferior experience compared to him. What is your opinion of this perspective?

“The Triple Fool”

1. What did Donne mean, in writing “grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce”?
2. In the first lines, Donne introduces a desire that his writing would be like a river which removes the salt from the ocean as it moves through the “earth’s inward narrow crooked lanes.” What does this conceit about “purging” the salt reveal about Donne’s emotions at this point?
3. Explain how Donne is “three fools” – what is the reason for each? (hint: the last lines indicate that he is “a little wise” – how might this make one a fool?)
4. What happens when men set Donne’s verses to song? Is this a good thing?
5. How does this relate to Donne’s other poems in its contradictory statements? Provide one example or comparison.

“The Bait”

1. The first line of this poem is also the first line of Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” which is a pastoral love poem that highlights the unrealistic promises of a shepherd to his love (look it up if you want). Why might Donne have included this line, and what does it reveal about the poem, which is titled “The Bait”?
2. What does the last line of each stanza share in common?
3. The final stanza shifts the course of the poem. What information does it reveal in terms of the speaker’s feelings towards the lover?
4. The poem contains many paradoxes, including the final stanza’s assertion that “thou thyself art thine own bait.” This means that the woman who is catching fish is also being caught herself. What does this reveal about love?
5. Who else was a “fisher of men”? How does reading the poem in this context change its meaning?