

## John Donne 'Love's Growth'

### Contexts and perspectives

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This is another poem which can be read in the context of Donne's rejection of Petrarchan love conventions, a rejection that is explicit here. He is far less interested in the idea of the eternally unrequited lover, of the man as humble suffering servant of an idealised, distant woman. He is far more interested in the real engagement of lovers, however complicated and though subject to time and the inevitability of death.

### Summary

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I can't believe my love is as pure as I used to think it was because it endures the ups and downs of life, and the seasons, just like grass does. I guess I lied all winter when I swore my love was infinite, if the Spring makes it grow more. But if this medicine, love, which cures all sorrow with more, is not only no absolute essence of life, but also a mixture of things which hurt soul and sense, and it has to borrow its energy from the sun, then love is not as pure and abstract as those with no mistress other than the Muse would have us believe. But like everything else that is made up of different elements, love sometimes thinks, sometimes does.

And although it doesn't get bigger, love grows more important by the Spring, just as in the heavens stars are not enlarged by the sun, but shown more clearly. Gentle love deeds, like blossoms on a branch, now bud from love's awakened root. If love develops in the same way that many circles are produced from one when the water's stirred, then those circles are like so many spheres that make one heaven because they all revolve around you. And although each Spring adds new heat to love – just as princes get new taxes in times of action and don't repay them in times of peace – no winter shall reduce the spring's increase.

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### Explanations

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Make sure you are clear about the meanings of these words in the poem, using close analysis of the word in the context of its line, the glossary in your edition of the poems, dictionaries, and perhaps an encyclopaedia.

Line	Word/phrase	Explanation
4	vicissitude	
7-8	cures all sorrow / With more	
8	quintessence	
12	Muse	
13	elemented	
17	firmament	
23	spheres	
27	remit	
28	abate	

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### Explanations – teacher's 'here's one I made earlier' version

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Line	Word/phrase	Explanation
4	vicissitude	Changeability; the ups and downs of life.
7–8	cures all sorrow / With more	This image draws on the ideas of what we would now call homeopathic medicine, specifically that the basis of a cure can be the application of a substance that produces symptoms similar to those of the disease being treated. The idea is to stimulate the body's natural defence mechanisms.
8	quintessence	The absolute essence of a substance. Also considered, in ancient and medieval philosophy, to be the fifth element, after water, air, earth and fire, and what the heavenly bodies were made of.
12	Muse	In Greek mythology, one of nine sister goddesses, each the protector of a specific art or science. More generally used to refer to the source of divine inspiration for all artists, and especially poets.
13	elemented	Made of different elements combined together.
17	firmament	The expanse of the sky; the heavens.
23	spheres	Here, the spheres essentially mean the planets, but the idea being referred to in lines 21–24 is the system of astronomy that Copernicus proposed in the early 1500s and which gained currency in the 17 <sup>th</sup> century. In this, the planets, the moon and the stars were considered to be arranged concentrically and to revolve around the sun. This was an exciting new idea when Donne was writing.
27	remit	To send money or payment as for goods or services, especially by post.
28	abate	To lower in amount, intensity or effect.

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### Themes and issues, attitudes and values

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1. In the York Notes study guide, Donne's love poetry is described as addressing many aspects of love in the real world, including "promiscuity, hopeless adoration, bitter disillusionment, cheerful cynicism, tender intimacy". How would you describe the treatment of love in this poem?
2. The speaker uses a number of complex intellectual allusions to elucidate his ideas about love, drawing on homeopathic treatment, the constituent matter of the heavenly bodies, chemical compounds, Greek mythology, Copernican astronomy, and systems of taxation. What does this suggest about his personality and attitude to love?
3. We see both positive and negative attitudes to women in the poems. What attitude is suggested by the image of the concentric circles of a ripple and the Copernican system of astronomy?

### Language

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#### Stanza 1

1. The poem opens with a quiet reflective statement in the first two lines that is conversational in tone. What is it about the diction that achieves this effect?
2. "Because" in line 3, "if" in lines 6 and 21; "But" in lines 7, 13 and 16; "not only ... but" in lines 8–9; "And" in lines 10, 15 and 25; "yet" in line 15; "For" in 24; "though" in line 25. What impression do these words create of the speaker?
3. What impact is created by the enjambment of lines 3–4?
4. There is perhaps an element of hyperbole in the words "swore" and "infinite". What does this suggest about the speaker's attitude to his own previous behaviour as a romantic lover?
5. In line 4, the endurance of the speaker's love is compared to grass. What does this image suggest about the nature of his relationship?
6. In lines 5 and 6, there is a contrast between "winter" and "spring". What does the progression of the seasons here suggest about the nature of his love?
7. What does the metaphorical comparison of love and homeopathic medicine add to your understanding of the speaker's attitude to love?
8. Lines 9–10 slow in pace, and are suggestive of a mind puzzling out a complex issue. This intellectual intensity is heightened by the sounds of the words. What technique is used to create this effect?

#### Stanza 2

1. In lines 20–21 a simile is used to compare "Gentle love deeds" with a blossoming tree. What does this natural image add to your understanding of the speaker's relationship?
2. Some critics regard lines 20–21 as evidence to support the view that "the realities of human sexual experience are never far away". How might these lines support this view? To what extent do you agree?
3. What impact is created by placing the word "thee" at the end of the end-stopped line 24?
4. In lines 26–27, a contrast is made between "times of action" and "peace". What impression does this create of the speaker's treatment of love and relationships?

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### Structure

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1. It has been argued that part of the emotional power and integrity of Donne's poems is created by the use of a structure which follows the logic of natural thought processes. To what extent do you agree with this statement in relation to this poem? Give reasons and evidence for your answer. You might like to consider the structure created by the words "and", "yet", "but", "because" etc already identified, and the way the stanza structure reflects the shift in mood.

### Form

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1. Annotate a copy of the poem to show its rhythm. In what metre is most of the poem written? What effect does this create?
2. Identify each example of a line or lines where the metre changes. What shift in ideas or mood is marked by this in each example?
3. The rhyme scheme of the poem is ababccdeedffgg. How does this changing pattern of interlaced rhyme and rhyming couplets embody the meaning of each stanza and the progress of thought?