

Lesson plan on 'The Indifferent' – John Donne

Distribute the first sheet for students to work on by themselves. It is the first 2 stanzas of Donne's poem. Don't tell them that it's incomplete, and don't tell them the title.

Share their ideas in a short plenary.

Then give them the complete poem, with title, in pairs (second sheet). They should attempt the tasks together.

Pull together ideas in a plenary, to include some presentations of the dramatic situation between speaker and listener/s.

Study the poem below and complete the following tasks:

1. Give the poem a title
2. What kind of attitude to love does Donne present here? Can you see any kind of development in the poem? What other poems by Donne can you link it to?

I CAN love both fair and brown ;
Her whom abundance melts, and her whom want betrays ;
Her who loves loneliness best, and her who masks and plays ;
Her whom the country form'd, and whom the town ;
Her who believes, and her who tries ;
Her who still weeps with spongy eyes,
And her who is dry cork, and never cries.
I can love her, and her, and you, and you ;
I can love any, so she be not true.

Will no other vice content you ?
Will it not serve your turn to do as did your mothers ?
Or have you all old vices spent, and now would find out others ?
Or doth a fear that men are true torment you ?
O we are not, be not you so ;
Let me—and do you—twenty know ;
Rob me, but bind me not, and let me go.
Must I, who came to travel thorough you,
Grow your fix'd subject, because you are true ?

THE INDIFFERENT.

by John Donne

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Venus heard me sigh this song ;
And by love's sweetest part, variety, she swore,
She heard not this till now ; and that it should be so no more.
She went, examined, and return'd ere long,
And said, "Alas ! some two or three
Poor heretics in love there be,
Which think to stablish dangerous constancy.
But I have told them, 'Since you will be true,
You shall be true to them who're false to you.' "

Questions for writing and discussion:

1. In what ways does the third stanza alter your reading of what has gone before?
2. What impressions do you form of the character of the speaker of (i) the song (stanzas 1 and 2) and (ii) the poem as a whole (inc stanza 3)? How far is it possible to 'know' the character of the speaker when we reach the end of the poem?
3. Study the interplay and contrasts between each stanza in the poem. Things you might like to consider should include:
 - Imagery
 - Rhythm/stress patterns
 - Rhyme
 - Sound patterns/repetition
 - The relationship between the speaker and listener, or listeners
4. Finally, think about the speaker again, and the 'dramatic situation' suggested by the poem (ie, 'The Flea' and 'To his Mistress' are clearly addressed to the woman he's in a relationship with). What do you think is the situation here?

Consider the following possibilities:

- Male speaker to girlfriend – she is faithful to him, he feels tied down
- Male speaker to a girl he wants to seduce, but who's resisting because she's faithful to another man
- Male speaker to another male who has been hurt in love
- A soliloquy with a male speaker, reflecting on his own experience in love

Justify your decision. You can present it however you like – a dialogue that dramatises the situation would be one way of doing it.