

“Tell me the truth about love”: Poetry of Human Love and Divine Love

Chief among the perennial themes of poetry are love, time, and poetry itself. Shakespeare combines the three themes in his sonnet sequence. In Sonnet 116 his speaker famously asserts that “Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds,” and that “Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle’s compass come,” only to end with the grammatically slippery couplet, “If this be error, and upon me proved, / I never writ, nor no man ever loved.” More recently, W. H. Auden addressed a longish lyric to the puzzle of love, ending, “Will it come like a change in the weather? / Will its greeting be courteous or rough? / Will it alter my life altogether? / O tell me the truth about love.” Poets have written to woo, to immortalize, to praise (or castigate) their beloveds, to mourn the beloved dead, to testify to their love of God and to God’s love for us. We will spend two sessions sampling pre-circulated poems, approaching human and divine love from various angles. We will read poems by, among others, Shakespeare, Mary Sidney, John Donne, Ben Jonson, George Herbert, Anne Bradstreet, John Milton, Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Hardy, Robert Hayden, Audre Lorde, and Mark Jarman.

Poems on Human Love

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Sonnet 65

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
 But sad mortality o’er-sways their power,
 How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
 Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
 O, how shall summer’s honey breath hold out
 Against the wrackful siege of batt’ring days,
 When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
 Nor gates of steel so strong, but time decays?
 O fearful meditation! where, alack,
 Shall time’s best jewel from time’s chest lie hid?
 Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
 Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
 O, none, unless this miracle have might,
 That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Sonnet 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments. Love is not love
 Which alters when it alteration finds,
 Or bends with the remover to remove.
 O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wand’ring bark,
 Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.
 Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
 Within his bending sickle’s compass come;
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
 If this be error and upon me prov’d,
 I never writ, nor no man ever lov’d.

John Donne (1572-1631)

The Sun Rising

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 kind 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,
 Whetherboth th'Indias of spice and
 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.

Ben Jonson (1572-1637)

On my First Son

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
 My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.
 Seven years tho' wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
 Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
 O, could I lose all father now! For why
 Will man lament the state he should envy?
 To have so soon 'scap'd world's and flesh's rage,
 And if no other misery, yet age?
 Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say, "Here doth lie
 Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."
 For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such,
 As what he loves

To My Dear and Loving Husband

Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672)

To My Dear and Loving Husband

If ever two were one, then surely we.
 If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.
 If ever wife was happy in a man,
 Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
 I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
 Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
 My love is such that rivers cannot quench,

 Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.
 Thy love is such I can no way repay;
 The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
 Then while we live, in love let's so persevere,
 That when we live no more, we may live ever.

John Milton (1608-1674)

Excerpts from *Paradise Lost*

With thee conversing I forget all time,
 All seasons and their change, all please alike.
 Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
 With charm of earliest birds; pleasant the sun
 When first on this delightful land he spreads
 His orient beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flow'r,
 Glist'ring with dew; fragrant the fertile earth
 After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
 Of grateful evening mild, then silent night
 With this her solemn bird and this fair moon,
 And these the gems of heav'n, her starry train:
 But neither breath of morn when she ascends
 With charm of earliest birds, nor rising sun
 On this delightful land, nor herb, fruit, flow'r,
 Glist'ring with dew, nor fragrance after showers,
 Nor grateful evening mild, nor silent night
 With this her solemn Bird, nor walk by moon,
 Or glittering starlight without thee is sweet.

(Eve to Adam, 4.639-56)

now lead on;

In me is no delay; with thee to go,
 Is to stay here; without thee here to stay,
 Is to go hence unwilling; thou to me
 Art all things under Heav'n, all places thou.

(Eve to Adam, 12:615-19)

Sonnet 23

Methought I saw my late espousèd saint
 Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave,
 Whom Jove's great son to her glad husband gave,
 Rescued from death by force though pale and faint.
 Mine as whom washed from spot of child-bed taint
 Purification in the Old Law did save,
 And such, as yet once more I trust to have
 Full sight of her in Heaven without restraint,
 Came vested all in white, pure as her mind:
 Her face was veiled, yet to my fancied sight,
 Love, sweetness, goodness in her person shined
 So clear, as in no face with more delight.
 But O as to embrace me she inclined,
 I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Surprised by Joy

Surprised by joy—impatient as the Wind
 I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom
 But Thee, deep buried in the silent Tomb,
 That spot which no vicissitude can find?
 Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind—
 But how could I forget thee? Through what power,
 Even for the least division of an hour,
 Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
 To my most grievous loss?—That thought's return
 Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,
 Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
 Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
 That neither present time, nor years unborn
 Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

John Keats (1795-1821)
Bright Star

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

W. H. Auden (1907-1973)
O Tell Me the Truth about Love

Some say love's a little boy,
And some say it's a bird,
Some say it makes the world go around,
Some say that's absurd,
And when I asked the man next-door,
Who looked as if he knew,
His wife got very cross indeed,
And said it wouldn't do.

Does it look like a pair of pyjamas,
Or the ham in a temperance hotel?
Does its odour remind one of llamas,
Or has it a comforting smell?

Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is,
Or soft as eiderdown fluff?
Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?
O tell me the truth about love.

Our history books refer to it
In cryptic little notes,
It's quite a common topic on
The Transatlantic boats;
I've found the subject mentioned in
Accounts of suicides,
And even seen it scribbled on
The backs of railway guides.

Does it howl like a hungry Alsatian,
Or boom like a military band?
Could one give a first-rate imitation
On a saw or a Steinway Grand?
Is its singing at parties a riot?
Does it only like Classical stuff?
Will it stop when one wants to be quiet?
O tell me the truth about love.

I looked inside the summer-house;
It wasn't over there;
I tried the Thames at Maidenhead,
And Brighton's bracing air.
I don't know what the blackbird sang,
Or what the tulip said;
But it wasn't in the chicken-run,
Or underneath the bed.

Can it pull extraordinary faces?
Is it usually sick on a swing?
Does it spend all its time at the races,

or fiddling with pieces of string?
Has it views of its own about money?
Does it think Patriotism enough?
Are its stories ***** but funny?
O tell me the truth about love.

When it comes, will it come without warning
Just as I'm picking my nose?
Will it knock on my door in the morning,
Or tread in the bus on my toes?
Will it come like a change in the weather?
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love.

Robert Hayden (1913-1980)
Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Audre Lorde (1934-1992)
Recreation

Coming together
it is easier to work
after our bodies
meet
paper and pen
neither care nor profit
whether we write or not
but as your body moves
under my hands
charged and waiting
we cut the leash
you create me against your thighs
hilly with images
moving through our word countries
my body
writes into your flesh
the poem
you make of me.

Touching you I catch midnight
as moon fires set in my throat
I love you flesh into blossom
I made you
and take you made
into me.

Jill Alexander Essbaum (1971-)
Poem

A clementine

Of inclement climate
Grows tart.

A crocus
Too stoic to open,
Won't.

Like an oyster
That cloisters a spoil of pearls,
Untouched—

The heart that's had
Enough
Stays shut.

Poems on Divine Love →

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)

Amoretti LXVIII

Most glorious Lord of life, that on this day,
Didst make thy triumph over death and sin:
And having harrow'd hell, didst bring away
Captivity thence captive, us to win:
This joyous day, dear Lord, with joy begin,
And grant that we for whom thou diddest die,
Being with thy dear blood clean wash'd from sin,
May live for ever in felicity.
And that thy love we weighing worthily,
May likewise love thee for the same again:
And for thy sake, that all like dear didst buy,
With love may one another entertain.
So let us love, dear love, like as we ought,
Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.

Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621)

Psalm 100

O all you lands, the treasures of your joy,
In merry shout upon the Lord bestow:
Your service cheerfully on him employ,
With triumph song into his presence go.
Know first that he is God; and after know
This God did us, not we our selves create:
We are his flock, for us his feedings grow:
We are his folk, and he upholds our state.
With thankfulness O enter then his gate:
Make through each porch of his your praises ring.
All good, all grace, of his high name relate,
He of all grace and goodness is the spring.
Time in no terms his mercy comprehends,
From age to age his truth it self extends.

John Donne (1572-1631)

Holy Sonnet 13

What if this present were the world's last night?
 Mark in my heart, O soul, where thou dost dwell,
 The picture of Christ crucified, and tell
 Whether His countenance can thee affright.
 Tears in His eyes quench the amazing light;
 Blood fills his frowns, which from His pierced head fell;
 And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,
 Which pray'd forgiveness for His foes' fierce spite?
 No, no; but as in my idolatry
 I said to all my profane mistresses,
 Beauty of pity, foulness only is
 A sign of rigour; so I say to thee,
 To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd;
 This beauteous form assures a piteous mind.

Holy Sonnet 16

Father, part of his double interest
 Unto thy kingdom, thy Son gives to me,
 His jointure in the knotty Trinity
 He keeps, and gives to me his death's conquest.
 This Lamb, whose death with life the world hath blest,
 Was from the world's beginning slain, and he
 Hath made two Wills which with the Legacy
 Of his and thy kingdom do thy Sons invest.
 Yet such are thy laws that men argue yet
 Whether a man those statutes can fulfil;
 None doth; but all-healing grace and spirit
 Revive again what law and letter kill.
 Thy law's abridgement, and thy last command
 Is all but love; Oh let this last Will stand!

George Herbert (1593-1633)

The Pearl. (Matthew xiii)

I know the ways of learning; both the head
 And pipes that feed the press, and make it run;
 What reason hath from nature borrowed,
 Or of itself, like a good huswife, spun
 In laws and policy; what the stars conspire,
 What willing nature speaks, what forc'd by fire;
 Both th'old discoveries and the new-found seas,
 The stock and surplus, cause and history;
 All these stand open, or I have the keys:
 Yet I love thee.

I know the ways of honour; what maintains
 The quick returns of courtesy and wit;
 In vies of favours whether party gains
 When glory swells the heart and moldeth it
 To all expressions both of hand and eye,
 Which on the world a true-love-knot may tie,
 And bear the bundle wheresoe'er it goes;
 How many drams of spirit there must be
 To sell my life unto my friends or foes:
 Yet I love thee.

I know the ways of pleasure; the sweet strains
 The lullings and the relishes of it;
 The propositions of hot blood and brains;
 What mirth and music mean; what love and wit
 Have done these twenty hundred years and more;
 I know the projects of unbridled store;
 My stuff is flesh, not brass; my senses live,
 And grumble oft that they have more in me
 Than he that curbs them, being but one to five:
 Yet I love thee.

I know all these and have them in my hand;
 Therefore not seeled but with open eyes
 I fly to thee, and fully understand
 Both the main sale and the commodities;
 And at what rate and price I have thy love,
 With all the circumstances that may move.
 Yet through the labyrinths, not my grovelling wit,
 But thy silk twist let down from heav'n to me
 Did both conduct and teach me how by it
 To climb to thee.

Love (III)

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
 But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'
 Love said, 'You shall be he.'
 'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on Thee.'
 Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.'
 'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'
 'My dear, then I will serve.'
 'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
 So I did sit and eat.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

O Deus, Ego Amo Te
 O God, I love thee, I love thee —
 Not out of hope of heaven for me
 Nor fearing not to love and be
 In the everlasting burning.
 Thou, thou, my Jesus, after me
 Didst reach thine arms out dying,
 For my sake sufferedst nails and lance,
 Mocked and marred countenance,
 Sorrows passing number,
 Sweat and care and cumber,
 Yea and death, and this for me,
 And thou couldst see me sinning:
 Then I, why should not I love thee,
 Jesu so much in love with me?
 Not for heaven's sake; not to be
 Out of hell by loving thee;
 Not for any gains I see;
 But just the way that thou didst me
 I do love and I will love thee:
 What must I love thee, Lord, for then? —
 For being my king and God. Amen.

As Kingfishers Catch Fire

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;
 Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
 Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Carrion Comfort

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
 Not untwist — slack they may be — these last strands of man
 In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;
 Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.
 But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
 Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
 With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,
 O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee
 and flee?

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
 Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
 Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh,
 chéer.

Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me,
 fóot tród
 Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That
 night, that year
 Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my
 God.

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965)

“Burnt Norton” V

Words move, music moves
 Only in time; but that which is only living
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
 Can words or music reach
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.
 Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
 Not that only, but the co-existence,
 Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
 And the end and the beginning were always there
 Before the beginning and after the end.
 And all is always now. Words strain,
 Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
 Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
 Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
 Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
 Always assail them. The Word in the desert
 Is most attacked by voices of temptation,
 The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
 The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

The detail of the pattern is movement,
 As in the figure of the ten stairs.
 Desire itself is movement
 Not in itself desirable;
 Love is itself unmoving,
 Only the cause and end of movement,
 Timeless, and undesiring
 Except in the aspect of time
 Caught in the form of limitation
 Between un-being and being.
 Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
 Even while the dust moves
 There rises the hidden laughter
 Of children in the foliage
 Quick now, here, now, always-
 Ridiculous the waste sad time
 Stretching before and after.

Mark Jarman (1952-)

Unholy Sonnet 4

Amazing to believe that nothingness
 Surrounds us with delight and lets us be,
 And that the meekness of nonentity,
 Despite the friction of the world of sense,
 Despite the leveling of violence,
 Is all that matters. All the energy
 We force into the matchhead and the city
 Explodes inside a loving emptiness.

Not Dante's rings, not the Zen zero's mouth,
 Out of which comes and into which light goes,
 This God recedes from every metaphor,
 Turns the hardest data into untruth,
 And fills all blanks with blankness. This love shows
 Itself in absence, which the stars adore.

Unholy Sonnet 11

Half asleep in prayer I said the right thing
 And felt a sudden pleasure come into
 The room or my own body. In the dark,
 Charged with a change of atmosphere, at first
 I couldn't tell my body from the room.
 And I was wide awake, full of this feeling,
 Alert as though I'd heard a doorknob twist,
 A drawer pulled, and instead of terror knew
 The intrusion of an overwhelming joy.
 I had said thanks and this was the response.
 But how I said it or what I said it for
 I still cannot recall and I have tried
 All sorts of ways all hours of the night.
 Once was enough to be dissatisfied.