

Notes on The Good-Morrow by John Donne:

For most of us, mornings are hard. Some deal by drinking mugs of coffee; others un-drowse over CNN and cinnamon toast crunch. But the aubade, a love poem that takes place the morning after a fun-filled night, is a whole other genre. And by "fun-filled night" we don't mean Office-binges on Netflix. These poems are basically cuddly pillow talk, usually about the nature of love, how sex fits into it, and whether this happiness will last forever.

For the sweethearts in "The Good Morrow," the title says it all. This poem is about waking up: into a new morning after a sexy night, into true love, and into a spiritual unity with the partner who completes you. And get this: "The Good Morrow," which usually headlines collections of John Donne's "Songs and Sonnets," is probably his earliest poem. So does that mean these three stanzas of iambic morning joy could also signify a "good morrow" for Donne himself? Well, if his enduring status as one of England's greatest poets is any clue, heck yes.

Packed with Donne's signature moves, "The Good Morrow" philosophizes about the relationship between sexual and spiritual love, brings in some wild allusions to theology and geography, and decorates everything with metaphysical conceits. Time to wake up and get reading!

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Remember the day you upgraded your banged-up flip-top Motorola cell to a gleaming new smartphone and your Entire. Life. Changed? After playing your 567th game of Angry Birds, swiping a few Wat Ups to your friends, and checking the weather forecast, you probably thought to yourself, "OMG, how did I ever live without this?"

Well, John Donne never rocked an iPhone, but this poem is bursting with the same sense of wonder and newness. These lovers can hardly remember what life was like before they fell in love (and bed) together. Okay, they may have messed around with other people, but those shenanigans were lame compared to this rapture.

Plus, just as the fascination of slingshot-ing over-sized chickens at ancient architecture tends to block out the rest of reality—including homework and talking to your mom—this true love is so powerful and sincere that it wipes out the whole world. Other people are excited about exploring new lands (just-published maps were like the smartphones of the seventeenth century: everybody wanted them). But these guys are happy to lie in bed and explore their new love. Why conquer a continent when you've got a whole new world in your bedroom?

A dude wakes up next to his lover and starts dishing about love. What the freak did we do before we were, like, in a relationship? They were either too young or too obsessed with sex, way different than what they are now: truly, maturely in love. Any previous fooling around was clearly only a prelude to this, a weaker version of the real deal.

The real deal means that this is not just about bodies; the souls are in on it too. This soulful love is so all-consuming that these lovebirds no longer need the rest of the world. They don't log on to TripAdvisor; they don't buy cheapo tickets on Kayak. Their bedroom contains the whole world.

Put another way, they are each a hemisphere and when combined in true love, they build the entire world. It's kind of like Legos. And since hemispheres are twins, or mirror-images of each

other, that means that their love is so balanced and alike that it will never die. Looks like they won't be getting out of bed anytime soon!

Lines 1-3

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?

No snooze buttons here. This dude (and we're assuming that our speaker is a dude at this point) wakes up talking. Although his lover doesn't enter the poem in a speaking role, we can also assume that she's the "thou" he's talking to.

The first thing on his mind is a rhetorical question: what on earth did we do before we were together? ("By my troth" is an old-school version of "what on earth.")

Like all rhetorical questions, this one isn't really meant to be answered (uh, I don't know about you, but I went to school and played in Little League). Instead the speaker uses it as a way to get his poetic monologue rolling, to get his lady friend thinking about love and why their relationship is so fantastic.

When he starts tossing out possible answers to his own question, they aren't too serious. Perhaps they were children right up until they met each other, still nursing from their mothers?

That's a perfect example of hyperbole: deliberately exaggerating for effect. His larger point is that before this perfect, mature love, he and the GF were like children: hardly even alive, naïve, and self-centered.

It looks like the dude's trying for some laughs, but he's also getting pretty naughty. Get a load of the innuendo riding right under the surface of lines 2-3. "Weaned" and "sucked" supposedly refer to breastfeeding, but after a sex-filled night, this guy's thinking of foreplay too.

"Country pleasures" takes it to a new level. On the surface, "sucked on country pleasures, childishly" is another breastfeeding reference, with "country" implying that childhood fun is rustic (of the country) and unsophisticated. But the first syllable of "country" is also a dirty pun on a certain part of the female anatomy. Combined with "sucking," you can see that this double-entendre is getting down and dirty.

The assonance of "sucked" and "country" emphasizes the naughtiness with a guttural "uh" sound. And don't skip the trio of alliterative W's in line 2: "were," "we," and "weaned." For more on how this stanza amps up the sound, head down to "Sound Check."

Lines 4-5

Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.

The speaker keeps up the hyperbole and preschool references in line 4 with an allusion to the Seven Sleepers, a legendary group of Christian children who were walled up alive by the Roman emperor Decius (AD 249-251). But instead of suffocating or starving to death, these

children went all Rip van Winkle and slept miraculously for a really long time. When a random builder un-bricked the entrance 187 years later, he found them alive and well.

So why bring these Sleeping Beauties up? Well, with this allusion the speaker suggests that anything before this relationship was (1) childish, (2) boring (because everyone was asleep), and (3) something to be hidden or afraid of.

The quadruple S alliteration underlines his points with its sonic emphasis: "snorted," "Seven," "Sleepers."

Line 5 marks the end of the quatrain (4 lines that rhyme ABAB) and the beginning of the triplet (3 lines rhyming CCC). In both cases, the letters refer to the end rhyme of each particular line. So, lines 1 and 3 rhyme; lines 2 and 4 rhyme; and lines 5-7 all rhyme. If you scan down the poem, you'll notice that every stanza is structured this way. So far, so technical. But get this: in each stanza, the quatrain sets forth some idea or circumstance while the triplet offers a chance for the speaker to kick back and reflect. Check out "Form and Meter" for more deets.

Line 5 kicks off the reflections by settling the speaker's first question once and for all. Those crazy answers offered in lines 2-4? They were all true.

Compared to this, all previous pleasures—whether of childhood or sex—were "fancies." In other words, they weren't real.

Lines 6-7

If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

The final two lines of the stanza sum it up. Thinking back on his life, the speaker says that any beautiful woman he saw, desired, and bedded, was merely a dream of his current lover. Sure, that sex happened, but compared to the love he's experiencing now, those affairs had no substance, no importance and, ultimately, no reality.

Such a sweet boy! Check how the alliteration of "desired" and "dream" reinforces the connection between previous loves and nothingness. Aww!

Now that these guys have found each other, they're starting to really live for the first time. They're waking up to a good morrow—and a new life.

Lines 8-9

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;

The "and now" at the beginning of this stanza signals that the introduction is over and we're getting down to the real meat of the poem: the waking souls. Spot that title? We've got a "good-morrow" tucked in line 8, serving as a hyphenated greeting, an old-timey version of "good morning." Wake up, everyone!

The first stanza was all about bodies: breastfeeding, sex, sleep. Stanza two wakes up the souls and starts to show us what exactly this true love is and why it's powerful enough to make all the speaker's ex-girlfriends pale in comparison.

Line 9 takes us back to the Seven Sleepers. The souls waking up in this love-bed are different than those children because the souls feel no fear. Think about it: if you were walled up by a foaming-at-the-mouth Roman tyrant, you'd probably be feeling pretty creeped out—even if you were with six of your best buds.

The point the speaker's making is that true love, the kind that involves the souls, is totally without fear. They watch each other and feel only the pure joy of being together.

Lines 10-11

For love, all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.

The reason these souls are so perfectly satisfied is that erotic love overpowers the love of anything else. Apple pie, soccer, grumpy cat? That stuff means nothing when you're in the grip of true adoration.

But at the same time that the outside world begins to mean nothing to you, love is turning your bedroom (or wherever you get it on with your beloved) into a microcosm, or smaller version of the world. True love is so perfect and all-consuming that it can contain the whole universe. This hyperbolic claim kicks off some serious geographic and cartographic imagery in the poem, so stay tuned for more on space, exploration, and the global reach of true love.

Lines 12-14

Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

The triplet of stanza two responds to the quatrain with three recommendations, using anaphora: the repetition of the same word(s) at the beginning of succeeding lines. Here it's "let," which really underlines the speaker's suggestions.

Since love has made their bedroom the equivalent of the whole world, these lovers are no longer interested in traveling anywhere else. Leave the discovery of new lands to those loser explorers, like Vasco da Gama and Cortez. They were probably single anyway.

Other people (read: those not in love) have looked at maps and been inspired by the mind-blowing complexity of the world: a globe with so many new and exotic places just discovered that it looks like multiple worlds exist within the larger world.

Unknown empires and South American cities? Sign us up!

But these lovers aren't interested in tearing up a new jungle. Through their love, they already possess the whole world, right there in that rumbled bed.

The speaker drives home their disinterest with a cute paradox that goes back to the "worlds on worlds" of line 13: he has his own world (his lady friend) to explore all by himself, but he's also a world himself, ready to be explored. That makes this bedroom (which is also the whole world) a pretty world-saturated sanctuary.

Lines 15-16

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;

Face-to-face with his lover, the speaker sees his own face reflected in her eyes and assumes that she can see his too.

The coolness of this optical vision is reinforced by an awesome lineup of long I assonance: "my," "thine," "eye," "thine," "mine."

But this isn't just cool. Gazing into her eyes, he claims that emotional honesty resides in the face. Their true love is written in their eyes and the expression of their mouths.

Lines 17-18

Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp north, without declining west?

Line 17 poses a rhetorical question about these hearts, using a conceit (an extended metaphor) to compare them to two separated hemispheres.

Sure, the world has its own hemispheres, but those are an inferior product. These heart-hemispheres are perfectly designed and perfectly matched. With no cold wintry north, these hearts are full of warm southern love; and with no west, where the sun sets every day, bringing darkness to the world, they hold nothing but constancy and light.

Notice how line 18's "declining west" or sunset slyly brings the poem back to its title, emphasizing that this is about waking up to true love and starting a new day.

Are you cooing into your iambic pentameter yet? Well, the cheese factor goes way up once you get a load of the origin of this conceit, which lies in the so-called cordiform maps (cordiform meaning "heart-shaped") of the seventeenth century. Devised by a dude named Werner, these map-projections show the world as a heart made up of two half-heart hemispheres. If the speaker and his girlfriend are both single hemispheres, when they combine they form a heart (true love) and an entire world.

Sounds good, but there's actually more to this conceit than Werner's cordiform maps. To get to the roots, we have to zoom back to Greek times (even before Decius bricked up those Christian kids) and read what Aristophanes thought about the origin of human gender according to Plato. For the skinny, read here.

In a nutshell, Aristo argued that originally humans were both male and female and were shaped like globes. This combination of genders made them super-buff and they mounted an attack on the gods. Pissed off, the gods punished them by slicing each human in half, one female and the other male.

And basically that's the origin of heterosexual love: whenever you want another person, you're actually desiring your other half.

Man longs for woman and woman longs for man because without the other they are incomplete. So if love = wholeness, it makes sense that these lovers compare themselves to halves or hemispheres. In their union of love, they recognize that they're making themselves whole.

Lines 19-21

Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.

The triplet tees off with an observation that seems totally random and out of context: oh yes, we might have been talking about love and worlds and completion, but listen, did you know that if something dies that means it was out of balance?

According to medieval theories of medicine, diseases (and death) were caused by an imbalance in bodily humors. For more on how these are not bodily lolz, check this out.

This line only starts to make sense in lines 20-21, when the speaker concludes that if their feelings for each other are the same or really similar, then their love is so healthy that it will never weaken or die.

By comparing their love to a human body, the speaker argues that their passion is not just strong and lusty; it's also well-balanced and in proportion. That makes their love the equivalent of Ryan Lochte: super-strong, super-sleek, and too-healthy-to-die.

True love, multiple worlds for exploring, and immortality? Yeah, that sounds like a pretty good morrow.