

A practical criticism of
john donne's "song"
and "go and catch a
falling star..."



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This poem chiefly concerns the lack of constancy in women. The tone taken is one of gentle cynicism, and mocking. Donne asks the reader to do the impossible, which he compares with finding a constant woman, thus insinuating that such a woman does not exist. The title, " Song", leads us to expect certain things: a lyrical element to the words, and a musical rhythm, which are fulfilled by this neatly crafted poem. It is also very ambiguous, not hinting at the subject matter of the poem. The stanzas are slightly longer than might be expected, nine lines each, but this allows for the more complex and abstract ideas, which are archetypal of metaphysical poetry. The first stanza is the most forceful, employing the imperative to achieve a sense of command, and implying that he is talking to one specific person. The second stanza begins conditionally, " if", and continues to be directed towards the apparent listener by the repeated use of the second person singular, " thou". Both are heavy in exotic imagery, which the final stanza is completely devoid of, and the final stanza also takes on a far more conversational, monosyllabic tone. The first sentence is a command: " Go and catch a falling star", and an impossible one, for how can one catch a star? The word " falling" suggests a gradual deterioration, rather than fallen which would be irretrievable, there is a sense that there is a chance, but it is narrow. It is interesting that Donne is using the conventionally romantic image of a star in defiance of such a traditional idea as monogamy. It could also be linked to the fourth line which references the devil, as Lucifer was a fallen angel, and the stars are often symbolic of Angels and heaven, this devil imagery perhaps is an early suggestion of the duplicity of women. Donne builds on this idea of the impossible in the second line, " Get with child a mandrake root", there is much superstition surrounding the <https://assignbuster.com/a-practical-criticism-of-john-donnes-song-and-go-and-catch-a-falling-star/>

mandrake plant, it is said to scream when pulled from the ground, and it “resembles the human form, sometimes the female form and sometimes the male, according to whether the roots are twofold or threefold”. This could again be linked to the devil who has “cleft” feet, which also resemble the fork-rooted plant through the idea of division and multiplicity. This in turn is suggestive of the inconstancy of women, suggesting their doubled relationships. Further fantastical imagery is that of the “mermaids singing”. Mermaids could be seen as important in this poem as they appear to be women above the waist but are not beneath, and this could therefore suggest that women can be deceptive creatures. There is also the idea of them luring men to a watery death, it has been said that this links to the experience of Odysseus in “The Odyssey”, although he encountered the sirens who dwelt on an island, not in the sea. Donne uses the word “stinging” to describe envy, finally coming to the point of the poem overtly. The word sting suggests something, which is inflicted by some external force, it shifts any blame away from the subject of the envy. It is a piquant image, suggesting intensity of feeling. There is also a slightly bitter undertone caused by the constant use of hard consonants such as “go”, “get”, “teach” and “tell”. Then the poem seems to slow down very quickly in the final refrain, seeming to echo the sound of the wind, the speaker wonders how honesty can be gained, and we can presume that this refers to honesty in the sense of being chaste. It is necessary to point out that although “wind” does not seem as if it should rhyme with “find” and “mind”, it was pronounced as such at the time, as is often seen in Shakespeare. In fact it was rather a familiar rhyme to use, quite boring in fact, which combined with the monosyllabic beat of these last few lines, <https://assignbuster.com/a-practical-criticism-of-john-donnes-song-and-go-and-catch-a-falling-star/>

seems to mirror his boredom with women. The second stanza is full of convoluted images and hyperbole; it is as if Donne is mocking the idea of a love poem in itself. " Ride ten thousand days and nights, / Till age snow white hairs on thee," seems to echo the professions of love made by the other poets of his time, and yet he is using these images against the idea of love and monogamy. It is interesting that Donne takes the commonly used hyphenated adjective of " snow-white" and uses it as a subjunctive verb, he is making the image fairytale like, suggesting perhaps how unlikely it would be for a woman to be faithful. Donne also uses the paradoxical idea of things " invisible to see" which further emphasises this idea. Again the suggestion of time implicit in the line is surely a reference to other love poets and their impossible promises to women, to love them forever and a day etc etc. In this part of the poem it seems as if he is challenging the reader to find evidence contrary to his opinion, asserting that it simply does not exist: " Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me...[that nowhere]...Lives a woman true, and fair". What is odd is that here Donne seems to be saying that it is only beautiful women who will be unfaithful, does this mean that the ugly women will be? The repeated " thou" is accusing, it seems as though the listener is in fact such a woman, beautiful and inconstant. The tone at the end of this stanza is far more personal, and the syntax more difficult; this is perhaps an indication of personal feeling, of his mistrust. The final stanza begins in a sardonic manner, " if thou findst one, let me know", he appears to be expressing the opinion that a woman of character and beauty is implausible. It is comparatively colloquial, there being no images to speak of and the words are less poetic, and less apparently organised than in the previous two stanzas. It seems dismissive of women, it all seems to be a waste of time, he

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is saying that even if you do find the woman I'm looking for, it will take only the time of you writing a letter for her to be unfaithful to "two, or three" other men. The monosyllabic style of these lines accentuates the sense of boredom and irritation, as does the *ai* rhyme used for the final triplet. However this rhyme does add to the phonological quality of the poem, as the simplicity is perhaps more songlike than the rest of the poem. The regular rhyme and meter of the poem also help to create this feeling. There is a very tight verse structure, which consists of a sestet of ABAB rhyme preceding the rhyming triplet in each stanza. The triplet shows an insistence of opinion, it emphasises the points being made but also creates a lilting rhythm to the end of each verse, like the refrain to a song. The two very short lines immediately precede a far longer one, thus creating contrast, which mirrors the contrasting images in the poem. For example, there is the heavenly image of a "falling star" adjacent to the earth bound image of the "mandrake root", then there follows the lovely image of the "mermaids singing" with the ugly apparition of the devil. It would seem that light and dark are being paralleled, and it is strange imagery to use when describing love and constancy. This is continued into the second stanza where in the third line there is the contrast between day and night, which continues to express images of lightness and darkness as in the first stanza. Significant also is the idea of a "pilgrimage", this seems to tie in with the other religious elements in the poem and suggests sacrifice and religious Puritanism, but this serious image is immediately followed by a light hearted quip, "Yet do not, I would not go, / Though at next door we might meet..." . This seems to mock the seriousness of love in other poems, he seems cynical about women, but not in a way which could be construed as misogynistic. It seems

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that the poem is rebuking one lady in particular as it appears to be directed specifically, and yet it is rhetoric; no answer seems to be expected. It could be said therefore that this poem is predominantly light and mocking in tone, but with an undercurrent of cynicism. This is reflected in the contrasting pairs of images such as light and dark, and of the ugly and the beautiful; and it seems that in the main, those images also relate in some way to religion. It is typical of Donne to use such mixed images and to relate love to religion, and this is evident in the poem.