

# A lecture upon the shadow – john donne



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Donne's love poem, "A Lecture upon the Shadow" intellectualises the idea of love and through his careful selection of words and images creating symbolism, addresses humankind and calls them to heed, "stand still" (line 1) and listen to "a lecture", presented as a special interpretation of love, "love's philosophy" (line 2).

Donne contrasts love with the sun and the shadows that the sun casts are symbolic of the trials and tribulations faced when one is in love. Donne refers to the period in our life span when love waxes and wanes as, "these three hours that we have spent/ in walking here" (lines 3-4). The poet asserts that regardless of the "two shadows [that] went along with us" (lines 4-5), (symbolic of insecurity, the fears, trials and tribulations in our lives), we create for ourselves, "which we ourselves produc'd" (line 5), we are also able to "tread" these shadows, obliterating these produced anxieties, when the "Sun is just above our head" (line 6), symbolic of the all encompassing "light" experienced at the peak of pure love, or complying to the imagery presented by the poet, the noon of love. Through risk, in our efforts to experience what we regard as true love, very real problems in "brave clearness are reduc'd" (line 8).

The shadows are described as flowing from us in line 10, a suggestive warning that these shadows still exist, but are merely ignored or cleared from our consciousness for this heightened period. This warning is made explicit when the poet warns that a false sense of security exists, for "love hath not attained the highest degree" (line 12). At noon the light of the sun creates the best time in the development of love with the least shadows, however, the poet warns again, "we shall new shadows make the other

way" (line 15). A decline in maintaining the "noon hour" of love will give rise to new problems of another kind. The symbolism created by the intellectualised imagery is important, especially with regard to the position of the sun.

If the sun is in the lovers' faces, they are blinded by "love" and cannot see the shadows that are behind them, but if the sun "westwardly decline" (line 19), the shadows become apparent and the absolute blinding by love fades. The poet asserts that the "morning shadows wear away", but that "these grow longer all the day", thus implying that although the problems and indiscretions fade, that the conscience remains a lingering force. Life can be equated with the poet's use of the word "love" in line 24, when he desperately utters that "...love's day is short, if love decay" and continues, by making a didactic statement in the final lines of the poem, "Love is a growing, or full constant light; And his first minute, after noon, is night" (lines 25-26), summarising "the lecture in love's philosophy", propounded as "A Lecture upon the Shadow".