

Investigate!

Metaphysical poetry: John Donne, *A Nocturnall upon St. Lucies Day*

❖ **Going deeper:**

Read carefully through *A Nocturnall upon St. Lucies day*

- Collect together words and phrases in the poem that suggest
 - Nothingness
 - isolation
- Can you find the links between each of the stanzas?
- To whom is the poem addressed?
 - How would the poem differ if it were addressed to the dead person?

❖ **Themes:**

- List the words and phrases to do with nothingness in the poem and set alongside them those which suggest substantiality
 - What paradoxes does Donne expose in connecting the two sets of words?

❖ **Imagery and symbolism:**

- Look at the alchemical images in lines 12-18; 21-22
 - What do you think is their meaning?
- What is 'an ordinary nothing' (l.35)?
 - How could such a nothing have 'shadow, a light, and body'?

- Look up 'hydroptique' (l.6)
 - What sort of an image is it?
- What is an 'Epitaph' (l.9)?
 - In what sense does it apply to the poet?
- Do you notice any other significant images?

❖ **Language and tone:**

- There is a rational argument going on here
 - Pick out words and phrases that suggest this
- What words would you say are emotionally loaded?
 - How do they impact on the more scientific language employed elsewhere?

❖ **Structure and versification:**

- What is the effect of ending a poem on the word 'is'?
- Look at some examples of lists of words, such as 'absence, darkness, death'
 - What is their rhythmic effect?
- Examine the balance of monosyllables and polysyllables
 - Do you notice anything interesting?
- Compare *A Nocturnall upon St. Lucies day* with *Twicknam Garden*
 - Which seems the more powerful expression of melancholy and grief?