

## Peeling Back the Layers—“The Broken Heart” by John Donne

### Activity One: Deconstructing the Prompt

In this lesson you will analyze the poem “The Broken Heart” by seventeenth-century poet John Donne. Think about what this title means to you. In the space below, write two or three sentences defining the concept of “a broken heart.”

Writers frequently compare abstract ideas to physical objects in order to make the abstraction clearer or more understandable to the reader. If you were to compare the concept of a “broken heart” to an image or object, what would you choose? Why?

In 1995, the AP Literature exam included the following prompt, which asked students to consider the concept of Love in “The Broken Heart”:

Read the following poem carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze how the speaker uses the varied imagery in the poem to reveal his attitude toward the nature of love.

What concrete device is the prompt asking you to analyze?

What abstract topic are you asked to discuss in your response?

**Activity Two: Close Reading**

Read carefully the poem “The Broken Heart.” Next to each stanza, write a brief summary of the speaker’s ideas about love, and annotate for any images that the poet uses to characterize the nature of Love.

**The Broken Heart by John Donne**

- He is stark mad, whoever says,  
 That he hath been in love an hour,  
 Yet not that love so soon decays,  
 But that it can ten in less space devour;  
 5 Who will believe me, if I swear  
 That I have had the plague a year?  
 Who would not laugh at me, if I should say  
 I saw a flash of powder burn a day?
- Ah, what a trifle is a heart,  
 10 If once into love's hands it come!  
 All other griefs allow a part  
 To other griefs, and ask themselves but some;  
 They come to us, but us love draws ;  
 He swallows us and never chaws;  
 15 By him, as by chain'd shot, whole ranks do die;  
 He is the tyrant pike, our hearts the fry.
- If 'twere not so, what did become  
 Of my heart when I first saw thee?  
 I brought a heart into the room,  
 20 But from the room I carried none with me.  
 If it had gone to thee, I know  
 Mine would have taught thine heart to show  
 More pity unto me; but Love, alas!  
 At one first blow did shiver it as glass.
- 25 Yet nothing can to nothing fall,  
 Nor any place be empty quite ;  
 Therefore I think my breast hath all  
 Those pieces still, though they be not unite ;  
 And now, as broken glasses show  
 30 A hundred lesser faces, so  
 My rags of heart can like, wish, and adore,  
 But after one such love, can love no more.

1. Summarize the “story” or “problem” presented in the poem.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. The concept of Love is personified in this poem. List the action verbs in the poem that describe Love’s behavior.

What pattern of meaning do you see in the verbs you listed?

3. The poet also uses various details to describe Love. List details that describe Love:

What pattern of meaning do you see in the details used to describe Love?

4. Based on the pattern you see in the poem’s verbs and details, what is the speaker’s view of Love?

### Activity Three: Analyzing Figures of Speech

Part A: Below are two objects the poet compares to Love. Look up each term and write a brief definition or explanation of each:

- “chain’d shot” (line 15)
  
- “pike” (line 16):

The poet also compares his broken heart to several objects. Look up each term and write a brief definition or explanation of each:

- “fry” (line 16)
  
- “glass” (line 24)

Part B: Explain how each figure of speech reveals the author’s tone or how it extends our understanding of “a broken heart.” An example has been provided for you.

Quotation	Commentary—How does the figure of speech reflect tone?
“what a <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">trifle</span> is a heart” (line 9)	<i>A trifle is a thing or event of very little meaning or value. When the speaker describes the human heart as a “trifle” when it falls into Love’s hands, he suggests that Love does not respect the heart and the person it symbolizes. Love finds it easy to destroy the heart because it is neither important nor valuable.</i>

<b>Quotation</b>	<b>Commentary—How does the figure of speech reflect tone?</b>
<i>“He swallows and never chaws” (line 14)</i>	
<i>“By him, as by chain’d shot, whole ranks do die” (line 15)</i>	
<i>“He is the tyrant pike, our hearts the fry” (line 16)</i>	
<i>“At one first blow did shiver it as glass.” (line 24)</i>	

Part C: A metaphor that developed over the course of a few lines or a passage is called an **extended metaphor** or a **conceit**. Identify the conceit in the poem by completing the fill-in-the-blank template below:

Love is a(n) \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (write a noun that describes the figure of Love and its behavior)

Write a phrase or line from the poem that supports your understanding of the extended metaphor.

**Activity Four: Analyzing Images**

1. Below are three images from the poem. Discuss how they reflect or reveal the speaker’s attitude.

Quotation	Commentary--How does the image reflect tone?
<i>“broken glasses” (lines 29)</i>	
<i>“A hundred lesser faces” (line 30)</i>	
<i>“rags of heart” (line 31)</i>	

