VCE ENGLISH:

JOHN DONNE’S POETRY

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PREFACE

‘What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason,
how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable,
in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god.’

_Hamlet_ , Act II, Scene II

The words are Shakespeare’s, a contemporary of John Donne’s. Shakespeare was born in 1564 and died in 1616. Donne was born in 1572 and died in 1631. According to the English writers Robert McCrum, Robert MacNeil and William Chan (The Story of English, Penguin, 2002) Shakespeare contributed roughly 2000 new words and phrases to the English language. We still use many of these in our everyday speech—often without realising that it’s Shakespeare we have to thank.

John Donne is less well known than Shakespeare. In part this is because he was a poet. Most of his poems were written during the first half of his life and were distributed to a very small group of people: close friends and sponsors (people who supported him). Indeed, very few of Donne’s poems were published during his lifetime. The first collection of his works was published two years after his death.

Part of Donne’s legacy can be found in popular music. Since the Metallica song ‘For whom the bell tolls’ was first uploaded to YouTube, it has received almost 30 million hits. The song was a tribute to a 1940 novel by American writer Ernest Hemingway that bore the same name and which was based on Hemingway’s experiences in the Spanish Civil War. The phrase that Hemingway borrowed for the title of his book came from a much earlier source. The expression dates back to one of John Donne’s prose pieces entitled _Meditation XVII_. (This piece is not included in the _Penguin Classics John Donne: Selected Poems_. Students might like to research the piece on the internet.) During the 1950s, another song, this time by Perry Como, made it to No. 1 on the Hit Parade. The title of the song ‘Catch a falling star’ came from a poem that Donne had written almost 400 years before.

‘Go and catch a falling star
Get with child a mandrake root
Tell me where all past years are
Or who cleft the Devil’s foot’

Donne isn’t the easiest of poets to understand. Take the first four lines of one of Donne’s most famous poems, _The Flea_:

‘Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deny’st me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;’
We recognise this as English, but it is unlike the English that is spoken nowadays. It sounds more like the old-fashioned version of the Bible. And so it should: the King James version of the Bible was written during Donne’s lifetime. Donne uses the word ‘mark’ in two senses in the opening line. In the first part of the line—‘Mark but this flea’—the speaker draws his lover’s attention to a flea; he then asks her to think about a particular idea. Translated into modern English, it might read something like this:

- Pay attention to this flea and, as you do, you will notice
- That what you are refusing me isn’t very much at all
- The flea sucked blood from me, and now it sucks blood from you
- And our blood—yours and mine—now mingles (or is mixed) inside this flea.

The second line—‘How little that which thou deny’st me is’—is a complex construction. At the time that Donne wrote, there were no dictionaries. When people wrote, they spelt the words the way they pronounced them. The idea that words could only be spelt in one way hadn’t really entered people’s heads. Shakespeare spelt his own name in a dozen or more different ways. A simple word like ‘girl’ might be spelt ‘girl’, ‘gherl’, ‘gerl’, ‘gurl’, ‘gherle or some other variant. These differences reflected differences in pronunciation. According to McCrum, in the 1600s there were at least five major ‘dialects’ of English—each spoken in a different area of England.

Reading and understanding Donne’s poetry is hard work, which makes the task of writing about his work even more of a challenge. This book is written with the intention of helping you develop study techniques and writing strategies that will enable you to do well in the English examination.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is written for students of VCE English and EAL. The first half is intended to help you better understand the demands and expectations of the Reading and creating texts section of the VCE English and EAL examination papers. The central focus is this: how can you best prepare for this section of the English paper? The answer is pretty straightforward:

i. Make sure you understand what the examiners are looking for. What are the skills you are expected to display? What are the criteria by which your essay will be judged?
ii. Make sure you understand how to make sense of the essay topic. How do you deconstruct the prompt and the task so that you can achieve the best possible result?
iii. Make sure you understand how to plan and write your essay.

The second half of this book consists of three model essays. You are encouraged to ‘become the marker’. You are provided with the key criteria, and your task is to mark each essay in terms of these criteria. The annotations on the essays draw your attention to particular aspects of the model essays. Through this activity you will come to a better understanding of what your teachers and exam markers are looking for when they assess your essays.
STUDYING POETRY

POETRY IS ... WHAT?

‘Poetry is for wets and weeds.’ That was the considered judgement of Nigel Molesworth, the schoolboy narrator of a series of 1950s children’s books that bore titles like *Down with Skool* and *How to be Topp*. The slang is dated, of course, but the sentiments are clear enough.

Two and a half millennia ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote that ‘poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history’. John Betjeman was himself a poet, so his bias is understandable. In 1974 he observed that ‘Too many people in the modern world view poetry as a luxury, not a necessity like petrol. But to me it’s the oil of life’. Robert Frost, another poet, had this view: ‘Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat’.

English poet Brian Patten too saw a confrontational role for poetry: ‘When in public, poetry should take off its clothes and wave to the nearest person in sight. It should be seen in the company of thieves and lovers rather than that of journalists and publishers’. Patten would have liked Robert Louis Stevenson’s description of the wild American poet Walt Whitman: ‘Whitman, like a large shaggy dog, just unchained, scouring the beaches of the world and baying at the moon’.

Not everyone holds poetry—or poets—in high esteem. Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington, had little time for poets: ‘I hate the whole race... There is no believing a word they say’.

Short stories, if they are any good, grab your attention and keep you on the edge of your seat till the end. Novels, when they are good, place us inside a bubble, a world created out of words, in which we can choose to stay for hours at a time and in which we accept propositions that are utterly bizarre. We accept, for example, that running full pelt at a wall on a railway station is the only way of getting onto Platform 9¾ in order to board the next train to Hogwarts. This is referred to as ‘suspending disbelief’.

Regardless of what you think of poetry, you must accept one thing: the study of poetry involves a very different kind of attention and a lot of work. But with the right strategies at your disposal the task will become less onerous and you may even enjoy it!
WHAT DOES ‘CLIME’ MEAN?

The line reads: ‘Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime’.

The meaning of ‘season’ is clear enough. ‘Clime’ can refer to ‘climatic conditions’, or—more broadly—to regions as parts of the earth. The line can be paraphrased: Love remains the same, regardless of the place, the season, the conditions.

POETIC FEATURES

Because this is poetry, as we read we will also be noting other aspects of the poem.

RHYME SCHEME, METRE AND LITERARY TECHNIQUES

Annotate the poem again to highlight or mark out other key features like the rhyme scheme, metre and use of techniques such as alliteration.

‘Busy old fool, unruly Sun, / Why dost thou thus, / Through windows and through curtains call on us? / Must to thy motions lovers’ seasons run? / Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide / Late schoolboys and sour prentices, / Go tell court huntsmen that the King will ride, / Call country ants to harvest offices; / Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime, / Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.’

When we pay close attention to the rhythmic structure of this stanza, a number of things stand out. Much of the poem follows the rhythm of iambic pentameters—one of the most common poetic rhythms in English poetry. The opening lines could be thought of as a single line: ‘Busy old fool, unruly Sun, Why dost thou thus,’ in which ‘Busy’ can be treated as a single syllable:

‘Busy old fool, unruly Sun, Why dost thou thus’;

This six-beat line begins with a trochee; that is, it begins with a stressed syllable but then becomes an iambic pattern, with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The next two lines are in the familiar iambic pentameter rhythm:

‘Through windows and through curtains call on us? / Must to thy motions lovers’ seasons run?’

Five beats—iambic pentameter

Five beats—iambic pentameter
In terms of its rhythm, this poem is quite complex as Donne utilises several rhythmic patterns. It's interesting to note that the disruptions to regular rhythm occur when the persona is rebuking the sun—it is unlikely this is an accident! Donne is drawing our attention to and emphasising the rebuke. Be sure to question any inconsistencies like this that you note and question their meaning and what effect they have.

**CONTEXT**

Developing some knowledge of Donne's life and the events that shaped him will certainly add to our ability to interpret and understand his poetry. It will also help if we develop some understanding of the social and cultural context in which Donne lived. See page X of this book for information about the life and times of John Donne.

**PREPARING TO RESPOND TO POETRY IN THE EXAM**

Here are five top tips for preparing to respond to a question about John Donne's poetry in the exam.

1. **Read and reread some of the key poems many times over.** Your understanding of each poem will most likely come slowly, rather like the way a pearl begins as a tiny speck of grit inside the oyster shell. Mucous from the oyster gradually covers the grit and hardens over time. This process, called accretion, slowly continues until the pearl is formed. Think of that shiny pearl as your understanding of the poems!

2. **When you read the poem, read it out loud.** Alternatively, listen to readings of the poems. There are a large number of readings of Donne's poems on YouTube for example. Some are read by actors like Richard Burton and Kenneth Branagh, who are able to interpret the poems with great passion and authority. This will help you to interpret the words on the page.

3. **With each reading, add annotations to remind yourself of fresh insights or to raise questions for which you can seek answers.**
POEM SUMMARIES

‘THE GOOD MORROW’

‘The Good Morrow’ (p. 1) philosophises about spiritual awakening and the discovery of true love. It is morning, and two lovers wake after spending the night together. The man wonders what they did before they were lovers, suggesting that before the previous night they were like children—childish and immature—and tells his lover that any relationships he had before were but a dream of this true love. It is as if their souls have awakened, and the room they now occupy is ‘an everywhere’. The metre is predominantly iambic pentameter, which conveys a sense that the speaker is engaging in conversation.

‘SONG (GO AND CATCH A FALLING STAR)’

One of Donne’s simpler poems, ‘Song’ (p. 1) resembles a ballad or song. The metre is iambic tetrameter, with four stresses per line, providing a sing-song rhythm. In the tradition of popular folk songs, the persona instructs the ‘other’ (the person to whom the persona is speaking) to undertake a series of impossible tasks: catch a falling star, make a mandrake root pregnant, find where the passing years have gone, discover who cleft the Devil’s foot. No matter how long the quest is pursued, no matter what amazing things might be seen, there is one thing that could never be found: ‘a woman true, and fair’. The tone of the poem is playful and exaggerated, suggesting that the writer is being tongue in cheek.

‘WOMAN’S CONSTANCY’

This poem (p. 3) examines the same issue as ‘Song’: the alleged inconstancy of women. It suggests that in the heat of passion, women make oaths that they later renege upon. Yet the speaker admits his own inconstancy and the light-hearted nature of the affair, suggesting that he too will move on and renege on any promises made. The poem is witty and accessible, with the poet treating love as a fickle, fleeting thing. The irregularity of the metre in this poem, combined with the constant questioning, contributes a sense of the speaker’s confusion about his lover’s feelings and motives.
POSSIBLE TOPICS

While you are revising for your exam, consider the points listed below. How would you handle them if they were presented to you as an exam question? What evidence from the text would you use to support your argument?

If you have considered in advance a wide range of perspectives and ideas relating to the text, you are more likely to be able to think on your feet on the day. Read through the points below and make notes on:

- what your position is in relation to the statement or quote. Do you agree? Disagree? Can you see both sides?
- evidence from the poems that supports your position.

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<th>POSSIBLE QUESTION TOPICS</th>
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<td>How Donne’s life history affects his poetry</td>
<td>The whole of <em>John Donne: Selected Poems</em> can be examined for evidence of how life events have influenced his works.</td>
<td>To what extent does Donne’s poetry reflect the events and issues he faced in his life? ‘Donne’s poetry is dominated by two major preoccupations: spirituality and religion on the one hand and eroticism and love on the other.’ Discuss.</td>
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<td>Love poems</td>
<td>‘The Good Morrow’ ‘The Sun Rising’ ‘The Canonization’ ‘The Anniversary’ ‘A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning’</td>
<td>‘It is impossible to determine whether Donne intended to express a coherent philosophy of love in his poems, but it seems unlikely … Donne expressed different attitudes in different poems according to the mood of the moment.’ Discuss. ‘Each of Donne’s love poems focuses on one of two aspects of love—either the physical or the spiritual.’ Discuss.</td>
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<td>Poems of seduction</td>
<td>The Flea ‘Elegy: To His Mistress Going to Bed’</td>
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<td>Attitude to women</td>
<td>‘Song (Go and catch a falling star)’ ‘Woman’s Constancy’ ‘The Apparition’</td>
<td>The poet Ben Jonson, a contemporary of Donne’s, complained that Donne ‘perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy’. Discuss.</td>
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<td>Death</td>
<td>‘The Relic’ ‘Holy Sonnet X (Death be not proud)’ ‘The Legacy’ ‘A Fever’ ‘The Funeral’</td>
<td>‘For Donne, death is not an end—it is a beginning.’ To what extent do you agree with this view?</td>
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GET REVISING

REVISING FOR YOUR EXAMS

The VCE English course introduces you to a wealth of stimulating, exciting literature, and will open your eyes to new ways of viewing the world around you. Hopefully, you will enjoy reading the books and discussing the characters and the ideas they explore. Come the end of the year, though, there are the exams to contend with. Preparing for any exam can be stressful, whether you like the subject or find it difficult. Most students undertake five VCE subjects in Year 12, and preparing for five exams is a big task. There are many demands on your time.

You therefore need to be sure that you’re using your time wisely and being as effective as you can in your revision. Good organisation is the key. Being organised enables you to prepare well for the exams.

There are several things you can do to make sure you feel confident when it’s time for the exam, and to help you to achieve your full potential. One of the first things you should do is to familiarise yourself with the structure of the VCE English examination papers. Knowing what to expect in the exam is the first step towards knowing how to prepare.

THE NATURE OF ENGLISH

Before we look more closely at what the exams require, it’s important to consider the difference between English and other subjects. Some people find English a difficult subject to study because it does not centre on a set of facts or content to be learned, and the exam does not rely on how well you recall information. While the tasks set for VCE English will draw on your knowledge of texts, you cannot predict what the topics will be, and you will need to be able to think on your feet. The exam will expect you to demonstrate your capacity to write clearly, fluently, insightfully, coherently and in an organised manner in response to a topic that you have not seen before.

NO RIGHT ANSWER?

There is no single right answer for the kinds of questions asked in Section A of a VCE English examination. VCE English is about thinking, and about the interpretation of texts. It is about reading and responding to texts, thinking about ideas and developing an interpretation—or exploring possible
Each section is worth one-third of the marks. Plan to spend an equal amount of time answering each section. It might help you to think of the exam time as being composed of timeslots as follows:

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<tr>
<th>Timeslot</th>
<th>Minutes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Reading</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Get to the exam room early. Open your exam paper as soon as you are able. Spend the 15-minute reading time carefully absorbing your tasks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Planning</td>
<td>10–15</td>
<td>Once you have been given permission to start writing, jot down plans for answers—especially for Sections A and B. In those first few minutes you will have lots of ideas flying around in your mind. It's important to jot them down, so you don't lose them. Students often come out of the exam room complaining: 'Oh, I had this great idea, but I forgot to include it.' Jot down a word or two as a reminder to yourself.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Writing Section A</td>
<td>50–55</td>
<td>Write in as detailed a manner as you can within the time limit. WHEN YOU FINISH: stretch, loosen your muscles, drink some water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Writing Section B</td>
<td>50–55</td>
<td>Write in as detailed a manner as you can within the time limit. WHEN YOU FINISH: stretch, loosen your muscles, drink some water.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Writing Section C</td>
<td>50–55</td>
<td>Write in as detailed a manner as you can within the time limit. WHEN YOU FINISH: stretch, loosen your muscles, drink some water.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Revising</td>
<td>5–15</td>
<td>Go over your answers—especially the opening paragraphs of each answer. Correct any errors of spelling, punctuation or expression.</td>
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**PLANNING A RESPONSE**

Here is an idea for using the reading and planning time strategically. Give it a try with a practice question and refine the model to suit you, if necessary.

**A Analytical response to text**

 Quickly find the questions on John Donne's poems, and decide which of the two options you will answer.

- Identify the KEY WORDS.
- DECONSTRUCT the TASK (see section below).
- Start thinking about how you will answer this question or respond to this task.

**B Comparative analysis of texts**

Look at the PROMPT for this section of the paper, and read over any support material—quotes, photographs or other visuals.

- Identify the KEY WORDS.
- DECONSTRUCT the TASK.
- Start thinking about how you will answer this question or respond to this task.
C Analysing argument

This section of the English exam paper is the part that requires the most reading. Usually there will be both written and visual texts. Read through the material. As soon as you are told that you can start writing, quickly annotate the material in this section; identify the main contention, tone, key arguments, persuasive strategies, rhetorical devices and appeals of various kinds.

DECONSTRUCTING THE TASK

You will be asked to demonstrate a wide variety of skills by responding to the prescribed texts in different ways. Below is a discussion of some of the verbs commonly used in Section A Analytical response to text, with explanations of what each is asking you to do. This list is designed to help you quickly comprehend how the question wants you to respond, so that you can get straight down to composing a response that demonstrates what you know. By interpreting these topics correctly, you can be confident that you’re answering the question appropriately and giving the examiner what they are looking for.

TOPIC VERBS

Discuss

This means that you need to identify an issue or issues and then provide supporting evidence in favour of your view of the issue.

Of the verbs used in framing essay questions in VCE English examinations, ‘discuss’ is the most common. Of the 40 Text response questions in the 2015 English examination, 29 questions required students to ‘discuss’ an idea or statement. Below is an example of a ‘discuss’ task. Notice that it calls for a wide-ranging consideration (i.e. discussion) of the themes and issues raised in the quote. It is an invitation to explore your knowledge, understanding and interpretation of the novel, focusing on the ideas included in the prompt.

‘Donne’s poems were not intended for the general public. Rather they were addressed to an exclusive private audience.’ While this is the case, his poetry continues to have broad appeal, 400 years later. Discuss.

The inclusion of this quote invites you to reflect first on the essentially personal nature of much of Donne’s poetry, and the fact that he was writing for a very specific audience. But the task also directs your attention to the wider appeal of the poetry, and its continuing appeal centuries later.

A discussion of this topic might explore several aspects:
This brought him into contact with literature and science at a time of great change; these were the early years of the Enlightenment, when the shackles of a narrow and dogmatic Catholicism were beginning to loosen. There had been a shift from a view of the Universe as being centred around the earth, and the privileged position accorded humankind as the peak, focus and purpose of God’s creation was giving way to the view that our solar system revolved around the sun. In time, humans would come to be seen not as God’s special creation, but simply as one evolutionary form that emerged from the many.

Another theme that is evident in Donne’s poetry—and we can assume that it occupied some, even much, of his thoughts and thus inner life—is the place of death in the overall scheme of things.

And finally, there is the question of what role the writing of poetry played in Donne’s commerce with both himself, his friends and associates, and his dealings with ‘the world’. In what ways did his writing of poetry enable him to sort out and make sense of the turbulent sexual, interpersonal, social, ethical, spiritual issues that were clearly so prominent in his life. It is tempting to see his life in two broad, overlapping phases. During the first phase—his first roughly 40 years—his carnal, sexual self was preoccupied with matters of seduction, eroticism, love, intimacy and the like. During the final 20 years, the spiritual matters take precedence, and his poetry is focused largely on such matters. This is perhaps over simplistic. It is not to say that there were not spiritual concerns present during the first phase.

Step 2: Start thinking about what ideas and in particular which poems you might refer to in your answer.

The ideas discussed above provide a good starting point for this stage of the planning. At this point, you should refer to the tables and annotated notes that you have compiled during the course of the year to help you choose the particular poems that may be relevant for each aspect of the question.

Step 3: Consider what your ‘answer’ will be.

Which aspects of the discussion above will you include? Will you stick to the three areas identified in the topic, or will you broaden the terms of the topic, and include aspects like Donne’s school, his attitude to death and other factors?

HOW YOU WILL BE ASSESSED

You are required to demonstrate the following skills in order to follow the rubric for Section A of the exam:

- **detailed knowledge and understanding** of the selected text, demonstrated appropriately in response to the topic. You can show this in a number of ways:
  - by referring to particular lines, stanzas or poems in their entirety
  - by using appropriate quotes from the text to support your commentary. This not only demonstrates your knowledge of the text but your ability to link that knowledge to the task

- **development in the writing of a coherent and effective discussion in response to the task.** Look up the word ‘coherent’ in a thesaurus and you will find words such as ‘organised’, ‘intelligible’, ‘clear’,
This statement asserts that it is predominantly how complex the poetry is that makes it interesting. In your answer, decide whether this is the case, or whether readers might find other things in the poetry that fascinate.

In her introduction to John Donne: Selected Poems, Ilona Bell wrote of Donne’s poetry: ‘it is above all their complexity and difficulty that make them so compelling and endlessly fascinating’. To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Your answer will also need to demonstrate how the poetry is compelling and fascinating, and how this links to their complexity.

When you are asked ‘To what extent’, you are being asked how far you agree with the statement. Consider your answer as a sliding scale with ‘totally agree’ at one end and ‘totally disagree’ at the other. Wherever your answer sits, you will need to justify your position with evidence from the poems.
GETTING STARTED

Make sure you’ve read the ‘Planning a response’ section on p. 22. Now that you’re ready to start, you may find it helpful to ask yourself these questions:

- Do you agree with Ilona Bell’s first claim: that Donne’s poems are complex and difficult?
- Do you agree with her second claim: that the poems are compelling and ‘endlessly fascinating’?
- Which poems might I focus on to examine these two elements of Donne’s poems:
  i. difficult and complex
  ii. compelling and fascinating
- Is there an alternative point of view that you might argue? For example, that the difficulty and complexity is offputting?

Let’s see how the model essay tackles the question. As you read, make notes or highlight/underline elements of the essay that demonstrate strong writing technique or salient points. The questions alongside the essay should get you thinking about how the essay addresses the topic and follows the rubric.

MARK IT!

In her introduction to John Donne: Selected Poems, Ilona Bell wrote of Donne’s poetry: ‘it is above all their complexity and difficulty that make them so compelling and endlessly fascinating’. To what extent do you agree with this statement?

It is hard to disagree with Bell’s contention that Donne’s poetry is both complex and difficult. In around 1618, the poet Ben Jonson (a contemporary of Donne’s) expressed the view that Donne’s poetry ‘for not being understood would perish’. Other contemporaries found his conceits (or extended metaphors) unintelligible, and one—Henry Hallam—concluded that there would be barely ‘three passages that we should care to read again’. If highly literate contemporaries of Donne’s found much of his verse obtuse, it can be little wonder that readers almost 400 years later find them extremely challenging. But again, Bell is right that time taken teasing out Donne’s meaning is well rewarded. In the simpler poems, like ‘The Good Morrow’ and

1. Why do you think the student has included the quotations from Jonson and Hallam? In what way does this support the development of the response to the text and question?

2. A well-written introduction directly addresses the question. Highlight or underline the words or phrases in this introduction which the student has used to show the examiner that they have read the question and intend to answer it.