SUBJECT: English Language & Poetry
TOPIC: Song – *John Donne*
LESSON MAP: 2.6.C.1
Duration: 28:23 min
Song – Go and Catch the Falling star...

John Donne and the Metaphysical School of Poetry:

John Donne (1572-1631) was an English poet, satirist, lawyer and priest. His works include sonnets, love poetry, religious poems, satires and sermons. John Donne is believed to be the founder of the Metaphysical School of Poets. The term gives the misleading impression that metaphysical poetry discusses the nature of the Universe. However, the word refers to the style rather than the subject matter of the poems - it is a reflection of their attitude towards experience. The term Metaphysical as a descriptive term for Donne’s poetry was first applied to his work by John Dryden. The highly respected scholar of the eighteenth century Dr. Samuel Johnson, extended the term from Donne to a whole school of poets who were influenced by him to employ similar poetic procedures and imagery. The Metaphysicals looked for connections between their emotions and mental concepts. All the imagery rose from a perceived likeness between different things. Their distinguishing feature is that they were more logical than sensuous or emotional.

Donne set the metaphysical tone by writing poems that were sharply opposed both, to the rich mellifluous style of the Elizabethan poets and to their idealized view of human nature and sexual love.

Instead Donne wrote in the jagged rhythms that closely resemble actual speech. He often organized his poem as a heated argument, with a reluctant mistress, an intruding friend, or God, or death or even himself. In the earlier poems, (to which category ‘Go and catch a falling star’ belongs), Donne was cynical in his treatment of human motives. In this poem he breaks away from the tradition of Elizabethan poets like Petrarch who gave women a
highly exalted place as noble, faithful and virtuous. Above all, he was ‘witty’, made extensive use of paradox, pun and images and metaphors that had a high shock value.

**The metaphysical conceit:**
The metaphysical conceit is a different kind of image of which John Donne is considered to be the master. It is an extended metaphor, using imagery that one would not normally associate with that situation, to compare two things. Elizabethan poetry made use of closely related comparisons that eventually became common and clichéd, like the rose and love. But metaphysical conceits go to great lengths to compare two quite unrelated objects, but two things that have at least one point in common.

One of the most famous of Donne's conceits is found in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" where he compares two lovers who are separated to the two legs of a compass. One would not easily be able to see the point of comparison, but Donne labours it, pointing out that while one lover travels, the other stays rooted to a spot. Yet all the time, the two are connected at a certain level! Like the compass, thus, though separated by circumstances, the lovers remain united. It is an amazing image thought up by Donne to describe how 2 people remain wholly one while yet apart. The woman lends fixity and stability to the relationship, so the man returns to the point in the relationship where he first began.

The images are thus, intellectual, rather than emotional in origin, requiring thought in order to understand their logic. This is a trait of the Metaphysical Poets- they looked for a connection between their emotion and their mental concepts.

These conceits are strange, interesting and sometimes even outrageous. Some critics have found them so funny that they have referred to them as metaphysical humour!

(For a list of metaphysical conceits in this poem, go to the end of the lesson.)

**The poem: Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star**
John Donne’s “Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star” is found in the volume of poems entitled “Songs and Sonnets.” It is a metaphysical conceit that states that it is impossible to find a woman in this world who is both beautiful and virtuous or faithful.

It is a perfect example of Donne's earlier playfulness with metaphysical conceits and female sexuality. As a younger poet, before Donne became an Anglican Theological Doctorate famous for his sermons, John Donne had a reputation for being obsessed with the ladies of London. John Donne's "Song: Go, and Catch a Falling Star", is an example of some of the humorous works Donne would come up with for the drunken jokers of English pubs or taverns to recite when out of luck with the ladies. ‘Song: Go and Catch a Falling Star’ was probably written when he was a young man of reputation, and while he was still stinging after a betrayal. It thus projects a highly stereotyped view of woman as femme fatale. Women reading this poem should not take offence but see it as a natural reaction to being betrayed: a period of time in which one would disdain the opposite sex. John Donne’s revenge takes the form of a poem, sharp, witty and humourous - all at the same time!

(the poem)

**Explanation:**

The poem begins with the imperative: Go and catch a falling star… and illustrates a shock tactic, the dramatic form of direct address, the rough idiom of normal spoken speech – all characteristic of the metaphysical style. It is Donne’s habit to strike his key-note, his biggest punch, in the first line of a poem.

The speaker or poet addresses an unspecified interlocutor, assigning him seven impossible tasks to perform. There’s no way can a person "catch a falling star" or "Get with child a mandrake root."

Many people believe, even in this day and age, that if one makes a wish upon a falling star, that wish will come true. Of course, this is just a myth, a legend, and falling stars are nothing but cosmic dust lighting up with friction as they enter the earth’s atmosphere. Choosing to believe the superstition, however, the poet wishes
not just to see the falling star, but to catch it, to get a hold of it, so that his consuming desire to find the ideal woman could be fulfilled.

The mandrake is a European herb with a forked root that resembled human legs. It was the subject of numerous superstitions. In Donne's song, the operative interpretation is that of legs. But achieving "oneness" with a vegetable root and having a child with it, is about as likely as catching a falling star.

Similarly impossible are the demands that the interlocutor tell where past years have gone, explain who split the Devil's feet, or teach the poet how to hear the mermaids singing.

It remains a puzzle to all, however wise and intelligent, what happens to Time or where it goes. In fact, one of the most frequently expressed comments of surprise is: "Where has this day gone to?" Or worse, this month or the year! On the 31st December of every year, people, journalists, just about everybody... exclaims at how the year has sped by.

Similarly, ancient medieval Christian theologists believed that devils had feet that were split, somewhat like the divided hooves of certain animals, like the pig, the goat and others. This group of thinkers held split hooves to be the mark of the devil. But how this belief came to be held, is still a mystery. The poet tells the interlocutor to find out where this conception began.

In the same way, Donne likens the possibility of finding a woman both lovely and true to hearing the mermaids sing. In classical mythology mermaids were fabulously beautiful creatures, half fish, half woman. They supposedly sat on rocks in the ocean, and lured men with their lilting songs, only to destroy them after they were enticed. The fact remains that although there are many stories of mermaid sightings, there has never been any proof that mermaids really exist. They have retained their reputation as mythical creatures.

In a sarcastic note, the poet claims that finding the perfect woman is as impossible as to be free from ever experiencing the sting of envy. Envy has been described as that emotion we feel when we think that we lack something, a quality or a commodity, that someone else has, and we desire to have it. Though a negative emotion, envy is very common, and no one can really escape being a victim of it.
from time to time. The suggestion here is that the poet has tried to shed this awful feeling from his heart, but has not succeeded. As impossible as that has been for him, equally unlikely will it be to find the perfect woman.

The same is true of finding the source or situation of life that rewards honesty. The poet seems to suggest that only dishonest people do well in life. For honest folk, there is no reward. It is strange that that’s how we feel, living in twenty-first century India, when we look around the world! We feel like Life just isn’t fair! It seems like everywhere, the mafia, the corrupt, the scamsters, the thieves, polished or crude, the dishonest people are prospering! The honest tax payers just continue to struggle- it looks like they never get the reward for their hard work and honesty! It seems like life is the same, whether in sixteenth, or seventeenth century, or twenty-first century, England, or India! The speaker's attitude is cynical, however, and not to be taken seriously.

The references to mandrake and mermaids are significant in that both are associated with myths. And so also, the poet seems to imply, the kind of woman he is looking for must be mythical. She might exist in some fairy-tale or legend, but is not to be found in real life.

In the second stanza, the poet tells the man going out on the quest for this perfect woman, that if he were born with the gift of seeing visions, the ability to see what normal men cannot, and he went on an imaginary journey of a thousand days and nights, then he would report having seen some amazing sights. Donne imagines the person sent out on such a quest as spending a lifetime, even until all his hair had turned grey, looking for the woman that was both beautiful and faithful. He would tell of strange and unreal experiences, for sure. He would see things that are invisible to the naked eye. However, he would not be able to report spotting the perfect woman. Therefore, as a man who could see the visible and the invisible, his testimony would have to be accepted as truth, it would just have to be trusted - that such a woman as the poet sought, did not exist.

The third stanza begins with a rising hope: ‘If thou findest one, let me know’. For a brief moment, it seems like hope is restored, but only to be dashed to pieces once more. The poet says that if the man who went on a quest for the perfect woman were indeed successful in finding her, he (the poet) would love to make a ‘pilgrimage’ to see her. The poet calls such a trip a ‘pilgrimage’, because if indeed
the woman were pure and virtuous, then appearing before her would take on the solemnity of a holy journey. However, he would not take the risk, even if she lived right next door! Very cynically, the poet says that in the time it would take for the seeker to write him a letter giving him the details of her location, in that short period, the woman would be untrue, not just with one man, but two or even three!

This takes us back to the reference to mermaids in Stanza 1, that even if mermaids did exist, the myths claimed that by their beauty, they were known to have lured men, and then destroyed them. Thus hope remains a distant fantasy, that if foolishly pursued, can lead to a man’s destruction.

**Another point of view:**

When it comes to John Donne’s poem, “Go and catch a falling star”, there are two schools of critics who hold quite contrary views on the content of this poem. We will look at the opinion of these critics too and let the viewer decide, as poetry is written and published as an invitation to the reader to add his/her interpretation to the understanding of it.

The poem really can be read as a very broad statement about women in general, their mysterious ways and ever-changing emotions. Basically, Donne is ranking the mysteries of a woman's heart and soul right up there with all the other unsolvable mysteries of the universe.

Some critics have seen the poem as Donne’s expression of his desire to find a lifetime companion who is both beautiful and truthful. His life would not be complete without this ideal woman. He wishes to find her and spend the rest of his life with her. However, finding such a woman is no easy task. It is as difficult as catching a falling star. Or he compares it to instances where people have been misled, like mistaking the mandrake to have human qualities or like who were ensnared by mermaids.

The second stanza extends the ambit of the poet’s search: he says that no matter how much time it takes, or to what length he must journey through mind or space, he will do so, because he counts the search as worth-while in seeking out the perfect or ideal woman to be his soul-mate. It does seem like Donne found this
woman in Anne More whom he stayed married to, happily and faithfully, for as long as she lived.
In the last stanza the poet goes back to his belief that the ideal woman is impossible to find- she remains an illusion, a mirage, disappearing no sooner than she is discovered.
Modern-day readers are attracted to Donne’s poetry because of his realistic-pessimistic perception of life and relationships. This down-to-earth attitude, his intellectual approach to understanding the emotional being, and his humour, are what make Donne extraordinarily appealing in our times.