**Song [Go and Catch a Falling Star]**  
**John Donne [1572-1631]**

**Relevant Background**

* John Donne wrote poetry in the years around 1600.
* Donne is classed as a humorous poet. He liked to entertain his readers with an amusing style of argument.
* He often focused on love. In ‘Song [Go and Catch a Falling Star]’ he offers clever arguments and examples about how impossible it is to find a faithful and honest woman.
* Around 1600 many male poets wrote comical poems pretending that women were not loyal to their husbands or lovers.
* Donne in his early days was a young man about town and a ‘great visitor of ladies’ in high society according to the social gossip of his day. Perhaps he himself was a bit of a playboy. Yet in this poem he complains that women behaved in just the same way that he was gossiped about.
* Donne’s personal record is not trustworthy on matters of love. In 1601 Donne secretly married his boss’s 16 year-old niece, Anne More; a reckless romance that led to jail and then poverty

**Summary**

This is a poem by John Donne in which he argues that it is impossible to find a woman who is both attractive and faithful to the one man.

In the first stanza Donne states a number of impossible tasks. He compares finding an honest woman to these tasks. He cleverly states that to find a woman who is honest in love is as difficult as it is to catch ‘a falling star’. The impossible tasks also include conceiving a child with a mandrake plant, gaining full knowledge of the past, solving the mystery of the Devil’s cloven hoof and learning the knack of hearing mermaids singing. In a sarcastic comment Donne says that finding an honest woman is as difficult as living without the pain of envy. Envy is the greed and lust of other people who would secretly long for his woman. He adds sarcastically to the list of impossible tasks the task of finding the wind that brings prosperity to those who are of honest mind. He means that only dishonest people do well, that to have an honest mind is to fail.

In the second stanza the subject matter is an imaginary journey of ten thousand days. Donne imagines a seeker spending a lifetime, until he has grey hairs, looking for an honest woman. Donne believes that despite all the strange sights the traveller will see, he won’t come across an honest woman.

In the third stanza the thought changes to the more positive idea of finding an honest woman. If the traveller finds one, he is to report her immediately. Donne says such a journey, ‘pilgrimage’, would be ‘sweet’. But then Donne changes his mind and says he wouldn’t travel next door to meet her as by the time he arrives even that far she will have slept with two or three other men. He says a woman would only remain honest at most for as long as it takes to write the letter saying you have found her.

**Themes**

The poet claims it is impossible to find an honest wife or female partner:  
‘No where lives a woman true, and fair.’

The poet argues that those who lust after a man’s beautiful partner will envy him and torment him with their rivalry for her:  
‘Teach me to … to keep off envy's stinging.’  
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The poet argues that to see an honest woman would be a weird dream:  
‘strange sights…things invisible to see… strange wonders’

**Tones**

Sometimes the tone is magical:  
‘Go and catch a falling star’.

Sometimes the tone is harsh and cruel:  
‘Get with child a mandrake root’

Sometimes the tone is bitter:  
‘And swear, no where lives a woman true, and fair’

Sometimes the tone is self-pitying:  
‘envy's stinging’.

Sometimes the tone is petulant [bitchy]:  
‘I would not go, though at next door we might meet.’

Sometimes the tone is mocking:  
‘If thou be'st born to strange sights,  
Things invisible to see’

Sometimes the tone is commanding or bossy:  
‘Go …Get…Tell…Teach’

Sometimes the tone is hopeful and caring:  
‘If thou find'st one, let me know,  
Such a pilgrimage were sweet.’

Sometimes the tone is bitter or resentful:  
‘I would not go, though at next door we might meet’

Finally the tone is sour:  
‘Yet she will be false, ere I come, to two, or three.’

**Imagery**

Donne uses many comparisons.  
He compares an honest female woman to something impossible and magical like ‘a falling star’. He compares finding such a woman to hearing ‘mermaids singing’ or to solving impossible mysteries like knowing the past or explaining the cause of the devil’s hoof.

Note how Donne uses contrast, especially between ‘a woman true, and fair’ and a woman who ‘Will be false, ere I come, to two, or three.’

Donne’s images are very vivid and dramatic:  
‘Ride ten thousand days and nights,  
Till age snow white hairs on thee’.

Donne uses exaggeration:  
‘Go and catch a falling star’;  
‘Though she were true, when you met her,  
…Yet she will be false, ere I come, to two, or three.’

**Sound effects**

**Alliteration** [the repetition of first letters]:  
The repeated **‘b’** and **'s’** sounds in ‘If thou be'st born to strange sights’.

**Assonance** [repetition of vowels]:  
T he ‘a' sounds in ‘Go and catch a falling star’.

**Rhyming:**  
There is a regular pattern.  
[The first and third lines rhyme, the second and fourth lines rhyme, the fifth and sixth lines rhyme as a couplet and the last three lines rhyme at the end of each stanza]:  
The end sounds in the first stanza are as follows:  
‘ar’, ‘oot’, ‘are’, ‘oot’, ‘ing’, ‘ing’, ‘ind’, ‘ind’, ‘ind’.  
There is clearly a regular pattern.