"Hence is't that I am carried towards the West/This day, when my soul's for, bends towards the East."
'The poetry of John Donne proves that all relationships are complex and uncertain.' To what extent do you agree?

"In prayers and flattering speeches I court God; Tomorrow I quake with true fear of His rod."
Through the romanticisation of God, John Donne elicits the male speaker's entangled relationship between the falsity of his unholy deeds and the spiritual expectations of Catholicism. Written during an era of significant exploration and great scientific discovery, Donne's poetry reflects the difficulty and the uncertainty of some relationships, which are predominantly the spiritual connections with God that are evident in his religious poems. Yet, Donne also conveys that individuals are able to withhold reliable and equally sophisticated relationships when embracing a harmonious love.

Donne further distinguishes the transience and vulnerability of love in his carnal poems, exemplifying that some relationships can also be simple and be devoid of devotion.

Silhouetted against the backdrop of the Elizabethan reign, Donne's more metaphysical poems demonstrate the speaker's uncertainty and struggle between the individual corruption and the acquisition of God's love. In his 'Holy Sonnet 19', the speaker's direct address to God with a forceful apostrophe, 'O vex me', amplifies a pragmatic self assessment towards his "constant habit" of inconsistency in life. Such a blunt articulation generates a sense of self-loathing and doubt, and a need to seek forgiveness in order to eliminate a corrupted sin. Through a series of antithesis asserting the ephemerality of his "profane love" and his "praying" to God, the speaker exposes the difficulty for individuals to be consistent in their devotion to God and resort to attitudes that "come and go away" easily. Hence, Donne amplifies the notion that only God's punishment with "His rod" would undo this state of ambivalence and gain God's respect. Donne's 'Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward' furthers the struggle of withholding particular religious standards in order to gain a connection with God. Symbolising a "man's soul" as a sphere, Donne alludes to the idea that devotion guides and directs the soul, and contrasting, those "subject to foreign motions" and those who are "whirled" by "business or pleasure" would be drawn away from possessing a spiritual bond. Yet, the speaker's hesitance to "[see] God's face" presents a sense of self- unworthiness, suggesting both literally, as he travels "towards the West", and metaphorically, that it is indeed a journey of "much weight" and of immense difficulty to attain the love of God and forgiveness. Subsequently, Donne's religious poetry displays how the spiritual love of God can be complicated and unfulfilling.

While retaining the notion that the human experience of love is complex, Donne also reveals that relationships can be secure and transcendent in his more harmonious poems. Through symbols of "the eagle" and "the dove" that incarnate into "the phoenix" in his lyric poem 'The Canonisation', Donne highlights that when two lovers unite, their love transcends beyond the physical and becomes immortal. The religious diction of "life and death" further accentuates the permanence of love; that even under criticism and punishment, the unity of love would enable the lovers' "legend" to become "fit for verse" and surpass the barrier of time. The intricacies of a love relationship are seen to an even greater extent in 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning', where the "two souls" of lovers "which are one" are metaphorically aligned with "gold to airy thinness beat", conveying that no matter how vastly they are spread, they will not be separated. The speaker elevates their love and his own credibility to the audience through an enjambed outlining that their love will "endure not yet/a breach", and coupled with the regular metre of each stanza, exemplifies the consistency of harmonious love. Intertwining an elegant conceit of a compass representing the love that connects the speaker and his mistress, Donne garners the notion that no matter how far one "doth roam", the intellectual bond between lovers would always be certain and enable both parties to overcome any physical separation. The speaker's comforting reassurance that the woman's "firmness makes [his] circle just" implies that only the faithfulness of the mistress would bring him home and validate the strength of their love, solidifying how a mutual relationship can be simultaneously refined and unequivocal. Hence, Donne's poetry highlights that the mortal acquaintance of harmony can foster a complex and impermeable bond between lovers.
Contrary to his work on religious or harmonious love, Donne's carnal poems that are primarily dedicated to his peers portray simpler and more transient relationships. By reflecting on the childish "country pleasures" when growing up, the speaker is crafted with the behaviour typical of a Libertine in the outset of 'The Good Morrow', thus illustrating the instability of love when burdened by immaturity. Similarly, the impermanence of love is also shown in Donne's frustration poem, 'Woman's Constancy', in which the speaker's physical desires for unknown women are only restricted to "one whole day". Such vulnerability in love not only signifies the ramification of a fragmented relationship, but also the notion that love is at times, crude and not always returned. Donne elucidates that love is a mere battle of authority in 'Elegy: To His Mistress Going to Bed', in which he delves beyond the boundaries of Petrarchan poetry to demonstrate the rejection of a physical experience, and with an intention of entertaining his peers. By establishing a strong, commanding tone through the bold command "come, madam, come", the speaker's attempt to claim dominance over his mistress amplifies a simple goal of coaxing her into bed. The speaker's utterance that "until I labour, I in labour lie" suggests an inability to do anything else until he accomplishes in his sexual pursuit, which again denotes the lack of intellectual complexity of carnal love. With an analogy to Elizabethan navigation and discovery, the speaker represents his mistress as "[his] new-found-land" in an attempt to intensify his masculine dominion over her. However, such arduous efforts prove to be futile as the speaker is revealed to be "naked first", exemplifying that his mistress possessed the authoritative position from the outset. Therefore, such a result solidifies the idea that less complex relationships are shaped by Donne's physical poems, with a primary attempt to display wit and humour.

In essence, while Donne's poems delve into the intricacies and uncertainties within spiritual love, they also provide the insight of how harmonious love can foster a stable relationship, and how temporal and fragmented relationships are shaped by carnal desires. However, regardless of either having spiritual, harmonious or physical connections, Donne ultimately prompts modern readers with the message that a relationship is only sustained through the unity of the body, mind and spirit, manifested by the line, "what ever dies, was not mixed equally".