Love in its many forms is explored in Donne’s poems. Discuss.

John Donne, the 17th century founding poet of the “metaphysical lyric”, primarily explores the notion of love and human nature in his poems from the text ‘John Donne - Selected Poems’. Critic, Ilona Bell states, Donne’s “bold individuality” meditates on all forms of love, including physical and spiritual love. However, Donne assures that the most valuable and triumphant relationship is one in which love in its many forms are in harmony. Donne’s metaphysical love poetry illustrates his knowledge of love as sexual attraction and physical gratification. Simultaneously however, Donne further explores love as a spiritual merging of two souls in an era in which souls were a unity of body and mind. Illustrated through his humorous, religious and unparalleled conceits, Donne reflects in his poetry the unity between all forms of love.

Focusing on primarily carnal pleasures in his earlier poems, Donne utilises conceits of Ovidian love to explore human’s sexual desires. As discussed by Ilona Bell, Donne’s “rugged unpredictability of passionate, colloquial speech” was not in conjunction with social mores of his time, in which sexual darings were not discussed. As depicted in Donne’s poem ‘To His Mistress Going to Bed’, the speaker aggressively exercises his persuasion in order for his mistress to “license [his] roving hands” to “cast all…this white linen”. Revealing human nature’s impatience to get in bed, the narrator ultimately wishes for his mistress to further their ovoidal relationship. Whilst depictions of “full nakedness” may render Donne’s contemporaries shocked (and his friends rejoining), nevertheless his bold imagery and impatient rhythm mirrors his hopes of sex and his desire to reach a climax. Not only is his desperation so high, that he is to ‘teach thee’, but also he is left “standing…naked first”, reminding the reader of his humanness and weakness. Donne further reveals his vulnerabilities in pursuing such carnal relationships, that is carried through into his other explicit poems. Further perpetuating the humorous tone of ‘To His Mistress Going to Bed’, Donne creates a jaunty and playful feel in “The Flea”, trademark of his ovidian love poems of him getting a woman into bed with him. The conceit of the flea is used in the eponymous poem to represent the “shame[less]” and insignificant act of sex. Their “two bloods mingled be” in this flea, is an embodiment of “how little that which [the woman] deny st” him. This unexpected metaphysical metaphor, humorously engages his audience to explore physical love - as insignificant that it is not “a sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead”. Donne’s poems reveal his early preoccupation with his physical relationships and the women he shares them with. However, Donne not only flatters “her by cataloguing her physical beauty”, but is also trying to convince her “take an extraordinary risk” (Ilona Bell), in order to discover and explore their love.

Donne “came of an age during a time when religious belief was passionately debated” (Ilona Bell), and as a result, his religious poems written later in his life, reflect his longing for an intimate love with God. Through a display of spiritual conflict between pain and pleasure, Donne is largely characterised by the want for physical action in order to strengthen his spiritual love with God. Alluding to Donne’s internal struggle with his faith, ‘Holy Sonnet XIV’ speaks of Donne’s conflict to live a life of faith whilst being “betrothed unto Your enemy”. Donne’s imagery seeks to refute the 17th century connotation of God, by asking God to “batter my heart” and “ravish me”, conjuring images of a blacksmith and violent metaphors to illustrate God as a creator who would “break, blow, burn and make [Donne] new”. The alliteration in conjunction with the caesura reveals Donne’s desire to be made new without sin, in order to start again and be made in the image of God. This evident desperation for God to “imprison” him, stems from his same frustrations in his earlier love poems, but this time in his spiritual relationship with God. Continuing his inconsistency towards his faith, ‘Goodfriday, 1613’. Riding Westward” depicts Donne rendered guilty whilst on a trip to Europe on Good Friday. Donne reflects upon memories of Christ’s death on the cross, however his body is “carried towards the West”. Following the emergence of the new Church of England, Donne, like some of his contemporaries, felt himself in conflict with his faith and devotion, or lack thereof, his human nature challenging the faith of his ancestors. Donne felt that devotion to God should be the “first mover” that guides “sphere” of the human soul, however Donne, and by extension human kind, allowed “pleasure or business” to guide them in the opposite direction (west). Donne’s construction of language through violent assertions that demand God to “give him corrections”, emphasises Donne’s guilt in turning his back on his relationship with God. Therefore, it is in Donne’s religious poetry that he begs for an intimate, often “a violently wrenching leap of
faith” Ilona Bell) with God, claiming that a spiritual relationship can be made tangible if one is worthy.

Critics such as Ilona Bell have recognised that Donne “dramatises the movement of thoughts”, combining, both sexual and spiritual love. Although, knowing love as sexual attraction and physical gratification in his early youth, Donne was not oblivious to love as the marriage of true minds, as exemplified in the poem ‘The Good Morrow’. ‘The Good Morrow’ promotes a love that is “mixed equally”, in which each “possess one world” and “is one”. Thus, unlike the temporary and immediate love of that in ‘Woman’s Constancy’, Donne acknowledges that a love that brings the physical and spiritual into harmony, is everlasting and “none can die”. Furthermore, this harmonious love in which “none do slacken” is presented in one of his most famous metaphysical conceits: that of the mathematical compass. ‘A Valediction Forbidding Mourning’, assures Donne’s wife that her “fixed foot” make his “circle just”. Like the instrument, their love’s function depends on the two parts working in tandem. Donne firmly asserts that a mature love relationship requires strength and confidence, not only the “dull sublunary lovers’ love”. She is instrumental in their love as she must exert a determinedly steadfast force so he can complete his circle. Donne’s repeated image of spheres throughout his poetry symbolise perfection and infinity. The notion of the infinite, cements the idea of Donne’s elevated affection and spiritual connection for his wife, that transcends the physical, and persists even after death. Hence, in consideration with the concerns of Donne’s day and their “static love for an inaccessible, heavenly mistress”, Donne’s work is inescapable evidence that attaining a balanced love, time nor death poses no barrier or damage to love and relationships.

In an era of dramatised Petrarchan love poetry, John Donne frequently invokes the philosophy of earlier poets such as Ovid and Petrarch, and yet Donne “constantly turns conventional poetic forms to unpredictable ends” (Ilona Bell). Donne explores the extremes of purely physical love, and an intense love for his faith, it is evidently portrayed in the end that the most valuable love is one of balance- metaphysical love. Donne was analytically concerned with the forces of both human, carnal pleasures and religious faith, and it is this duality of his intellect that allows Donne and his readers to grapple with human sensations and emotions. As such, in his search of the sublime harmony between the physical and spiritual, Donne articulates the conflicts of human nature and love, in an age of intellectual and cultural transition.