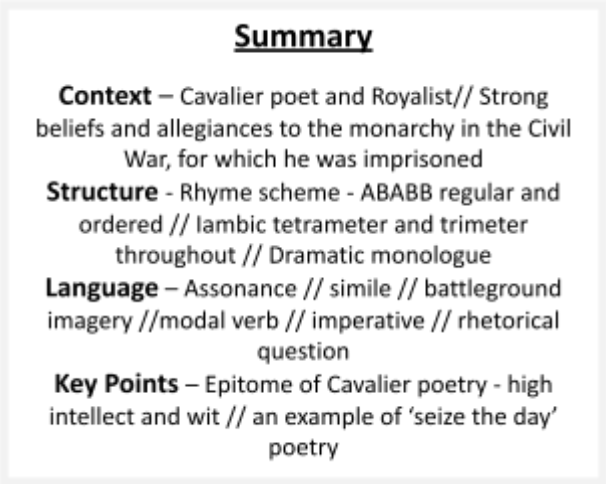
AQA English Literature A-level

Poetry: Love Through the Ages Anthology (Pre-1900)

Richard Lovelace: 'The Scrutiny'

Brief Summary



Like Marvell's poem 'To His Coy Mistress', 'The Scrutiny' presents a **'carpe-diem'** style attitude towards love. The poem, which takes the form of a **dramatic monologue**, consists of a speaker explaining why he is **'forswear[ing]'** his promise to the lady whom he spent the night with that he would be hers.

While the speaker prioritises **sexual pleasures** over commitment, this is the opposite of a seduction poem, which aims to draw a woman in: here, the speaker is **rejecting** the lady he has spent the night with and pledged his **commitment** to, explaining that, like a **mineralist,** he must **"sound/ For [other] treasure"**. Lovelace was a **'Cavalier poet' -** a group of poets who wrote mainly for King Charles I. Cavalier poetry, which is marked by an abundant of wit, an obsession with love and beauty, support of the monarch over Parliament and a 'seize the day' attitude, which was often directed towards woman.'The Scrutiny' can be placed squarely within the **Cavalier tradition**.

Synopsis

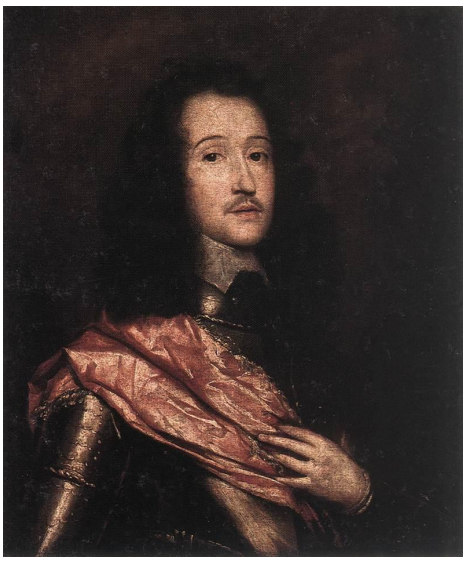
- 'The Scrutiny' consists of four five-line stanzas **(cinquains)**. It is clear that Lovelace, as a **Cavalier poet**, aims to entertain with this poem; it is written almost in a **song format**. In the **patriarchal** context of the time, the poem was written to to entertain other men - it was to be read at court for **King Charles I**.
- The poem begins with the speaker responding to an accusation of unfaithfulness that the woman has apparently made. He asks why she would say this and states that he has already loved her a long time. He then goes on to argue that he should not deprive other **"beauties"** of his **fleeting attention,** nor should he **"rob her"** of another lover.
- He states that others will find **"joy"** in her hair and that he himself must search like a mineralist for other **"fair"** beauties. If, after his expedition, he has found her the most "**pleasant"**, he will return to her **"sated"**. The poem's argument - that he will be more faithful when/if he returns, because he will be **"sated",** recalls the **twisted argument** of the speaker in **'Absent from Thee',** who maintains that through infidelity he can **"prove"** his love (since infidelity will provoke in him **"torments"**, which will be evidence of it).
- The speaker's argument is **see-through** and not meant to be taken too seriously: it's playful and lighthearted. This is reflected by the metre, which alternates between **iambic trimeter and iambic tetrameter.** The short lines also reveal the speaker's impatience with the topic.

- The rhyme scheme follows **ABABB** - the poem does appear to be structured and Lovelace maintains **perfect rhymes** throughout the poem. The **perfect rhymes** and **song-like form** lend a **singsong air** to the speaker's argument; it seems he is almost **mocking** her for her assumption that he would stay with her beyond the night.

Context

Literary Context - Cavalier Poetry

The **Cavalier poets** were a school of English poets active between the 1620s and the 1640s that came from the classes that **supported the King** during the Civil War. Lovelace was somewhat a **leader** of this loose group of poets. Cavalier poetry differed from other poetic styles such as metaphysical poetry in its use of **strict rhyme schemes**, **regular meters** and **clear forms**. Cavalier poetry was also different from traditional poetry in its **subject matter**. Instead of tackling issues like religion, philosophy, and the arts, cavalier poetry focused on the **pleasures of the moment** such as drinking and sensuality, expressing a '**carpe diem**' philosophy. Many of the Cavalier poets were courtiers and sensual and romantic love were a main focus. It also celebrated **beauty, nature, fellowship, honour** and **social life**, attempting to revel in society and life life to the fullest. The latter often meant having sex with women and gaining material wealth and resulted in Cavalier poetry taking on a **boisterous** and **triumphant tone**.



https://tinyurl.com/richard-lovelace

Despite being dedicated **royalists**, Cavalier poets **rarely wrote about political or monarchical affairs**, aside from some references to **battle and honour**. The Cavaliers were **highly educated** and **respected poets**. Their use of **tight logical structures** and allegorical and classical references respectively displayed their **intellect** and their **erudition**.

Further characteristics of Cavalier poetry include **metaphor**, **fantasy,** and **platonic love**. The latter consisted in the man showing his **divine love** to a woman, who would be **worshipped** as a creature of perfection. As such, it was common to hear praise of womanly virtues as though they were divine. Praise is largely absent from 'The Scrutiny', whose speaker is **derogatory**.

Historical Context

It is highly likely that 'The Scrutiny' was written in the early 1640s, just before or during the beginning of the bloody **Civil War** between the **Puritans and Royalists**. Put simply, the Puritans advocated for the country to adopt a more **radical Protestant faith**. Charles I opposed them, insisting on the more **conservative doctrines** of the **Church of England.** The Puritans eventually won the War and executed Charles in 1649, but their victory was **short lived**; after

their leader Cromwell's death in 1658, the **monarchy was restored**. Lovelace, however, did not live to see this; he died in 1657.

'The Scrutiny' was written in a time of **political turmoil**. Nevertheless, the poem does not reflect this. Its **humorous song-like form** indicates its purpose was to entertain - Lovelace may have performed it to a strained **Royalist audience**.

Poem Analysis

The repetition of 'I' in the opening stanza indicates that the speaker will prioritise his needs and desires over hers. Cold, possibly ironic form of address: a way of distancing himself from his former "fond" or amorous words/ actions. Emphasis on the noun 'Lady' created by the comma/ caesura punctuation and the trochaic nature of the word. Lovelace may want to draw attention to his cold formality of which contrasts with their intimacy of the prior night. The alliteration and assonance of 'tedious twelve' is in itself tedious. The speaker puts her down by intimating their time together was boring or unsatisfying. To dote is to bestow or express excessive love or fondness, suggests he has mimicked affection during the night. "Must" suggests duty. Perhaps his desire is so strong it is a compulsion. Simile comparing himself to a geologist. Objectifies women by suggesting they are treasures.	Why should you swear I am forsworn, Since thine I vowed to be? Lady, it is already morn, And 'twas last night I swore to thee That fond impossibility. Have I not loved thee much and long, A tedious twelve hours' space? I must all other beauties wrong, And rob thee of a new embrace, Could I still dote upon thy face. Not but all joy in thy brown hair By others may be found;— But I must search the blank and fair, Like skilful mineralists that sound For treasure in unploughed-up ground.	Change in tense between two lines, shows how fickle his feelings are. He is trying to say that last night was a long time ago. Since it is obviously not, we get the feeling he is not trying too hard to counter the lady's accusations - his argument is deliberately weak His fondness has vanished with the dawn but her fondness lingers on. Ironically suggests that he would 'wrong' other women by *not* sleeping with him - in reality he will wrong them by sleeping with them. Tries to portray his abandonment as charity - he does not want to 'rob' her of a new lover. 'Others' suggests that she will also be with other men in the future Suggests that her beauty does not measure up and that he prefers lighter beauties, with white "blank" skin and fair hair. Makes the possibility that he will return to her remote. He seems to prefer women who have not been discovered by other men (hence they are buried in land that has

Unlikelihood of him returning is magnified by the caesura which draws attention to the word 'if'. This emphasises the conditionality (rather than probability) of this event. A roundabout course; a bit like a 'grand tour' such as the one young men took around Europe as a rite of Passage. Suggests he wants to conquer and deflower as many women as he can in various places. Argument that the woman will gain from the speaker's philandering - she will share the spoils with him. What these spoils are (for her) are vague; perhaps she will gain other women's envy.	Then if, when I have loved my round, Thou prov'st the pleasant she, With spoils of meaner beauties crowned I laden will return to thee, Ev'n sated with variety.	not been ploughed up). Reflects cultural valuation of virginity. Also a link to pastoral poetry in which women are imagined as landscapes to be enjoyed. Battleground language of victory and war reveals that the speaker believes himself to be a conqueror of deflowering women. Also suggests that women lose something when they have sex - the man carries off the 'spoils'. Image of greed, gluttony and selfishness.

The Title

Scrutiny literally refers to being **critically examined** or being subject to a kind of **interrogation**. Within the context of the poem, Lovelace alludes to the idea that the speaker is under critical observation by the woman he is trying to turn down after making **'vows'** that he didn't actually mean. We can read the title as **mocking**, almost **ironic**; the speaker is **dismissive** and does not care for her scrutiny or disappointment. Lovelace would have been aiming to create a poem that would have been **relatable** to other courtiers.

Perspective

The poem is written in the form of a **dramatic monologue**; the speaker is responding to accusations the woman has made. The selfishness of his desires is mirrored by the abundance of **personal pronouns**: **"I am forsworn", "I vowed", "I swore to thee"** (lines 1-4). The speaker's attitude towards the woman is **patronising** and his tone is playful. It is clear through his **hyperbolic statement** that he has loved her **"much and long"** (line 6) that he does not care for her accusations and cannot be bothered to counter them properly. His clear admission that he will **court other women** makes it obvious he could not care less about her feelings. The **incongruity** between his respectful use of **"Lady"** and his disrespectful treatment of her suggests that he is using **"Lady"** in a **cold and distant**. It is possible that he is also using it

mockingly or **ironically**; in the context of the time, her virtue would have been seen as **compromised** by her sexual engagement with the speaker; she would have been 'no lady'.

The speaker displays **male entitlement** in his readiness to make promises that he knows he will break; he treats his interlocutor **unfeelingly** and **disparagingly**. His lack of commitment, selfishness and sickening behaviour makes the speaker cavalier indeed - an adjective that means **haughty, disdainful, supercilious** or **offhand.**

The speaker uses **apostrophe** by addressing an absent - or silent - woman. He effectively silences her by monologuing and employing **rhetorical questions**, not allowing her the opportunity to respond. Apostrophe is also employed by Marvell in **'To His Coy Mistress'**, in which the speaker address an absent mistress - also referred to as **"lady"** - in an attempt to convince her to sleep with him.

The Opening

The speaker immediately establishes a distant relationship with the lady he has just spent the night with through the cold through **superficially respectful** address **'Lady'** (line 3). This **impersonal** address also **generalises** the situation, making it more relatable for the audience. He asks her a rhetorical question - **"Why would you swear I am forsworn,/ Since thine I vowed to be?"**, contesting her accusation of unfaithfulness with an assertion that while his vow was a "**fond impossibility"** (line 5) he has already fulfilled it by loving her **"much and long"** (line 6). The **whiny assonance** of **"Lady"** and **"already**" (line 3) suggests his **impatience** with her complaint, and establishes the dismissive tone with which he will treat her.

Structure

Form

The poem consists of four **rhyming cinquains**. It is written as a **20-line dramatic monologue** in an extremely **regular form**. However, it makes sure to not strictly follow any set or **inherited form** such as the sonnet or sestina, perhaps reflecting the Cavaliers' **rebellious** attitudes; they **opposed the dominant Puritanical spirit of the time.** Lovelace intended his poem to be **performed as a song** and to be entertaining and humorous.

Rhyme Scheme

The rhyme scheme follows **ABABB** with no deviations. This immediately creates a sense of **regularity and control** which mirrors the control the speaker has over the lady he addresses, due to the imbalance of affection. The rhyming couplet at the end of every stanza sounds **trite and hackneyed**, reflecting the speaker's insincerity.

The rhymes are mostly **strong and full** and the rhyme scheme consistent. However, as the poem progresses the rhyme sounds start to be **reused** - the 'B' rhyme of the third stanza - **"found" "sound" "ground" -** becomes the 'A' rhyme in the final stanza - **"round" "crowned"**. The **continuation** of the rhyme sounds or **linking** of the stanzas suggests that the speaker has reached the **pinnacle of his argument** and become more passionate and excited; he has warmed to his subject and found an argument worthy of his erudition and his wit. The linking of stanzas stands out in a poem in which almost all the lines are **end-stopped**. The last stanza's **repetition** of the first stanza's 'B' rhymes **knit the poem together** and create a sense that the speaker's argument is **airtight**, despite its inability to convince.

Meter

'The Scrutiny' is composed of **iambic tetrameter** and **iambic trimeter**, maintaining a **bouncy, playful, songlike** tone. These short feet give the poem a faster pace and keep it comical. The fast pace mirrors the poem's **'carpe diem'** philosophy. This poem deliberately avoids the more prestigious **iambic pentameter** (used in **heroic verse**) thus reminding the audience that this is not a **serious** or **highfaluting** poem, despite Lovelace's high status as a courtier. The poem's use of playful iambic tetrameter and trimeter **aligns it with Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'**, which employs iambic tetrameter - a meter that falls just short of heroic verse and thus seems to be mocking it.

The poem **alternates** between tetrameter and trimeter. This means that some lines fall short of the reader's expectations: expecting eight syllables, they are met with six, as in the first two lines: **"Why should you swear I am forsworn,/ Since thine I vowed to be?"**. The relative **untrustworthiness** of the meter (for it is only relative; the second lines of every stanza can be read as trimeter) matches the speaker's untrustworthiness.

End-Stopped Lines

Almost all of the poem's lines are end-stopped, the exceptions being **"I swore to thee/ That fond impossibility"** (line 1-2) **"Like skilful mineralists that sound/ For treasure in unploughed-up ground"** (lines 14-15) and **"With spoils of meaner beauties crowned/ I laden will return to thee"** (lines 18-19). The end-stopped lines lend the speaker a **confident** and **self-assured** air. You can contrast his sentences with the sentences of someone who is desperately trying to justify themselves or convince someone or something - that person would likely **ramble**, which would be reflected by **enjambment**.

End-stopped poems contain pauses which can **slow them down**. Nevertheless, the poem remains lively and quick; the end stopped lines are **compensated for** by the brief meter.

Language

Simile and Metaphor

The speaker uses a **simile** in the poem's penultimate stanza **"Like skilful mineralists that sound/ For treasure in unploughed-up ground"** (lines 14-15). In this way, he compares himself to a geologist looking for valuable minerals. The **prestige** of a geologist's profession conflicts with the **sordidness** of the speaker's plans. The speaker suggests that he will look specifically for virgins - he will investigate **"unploughed-up ground".** This reflects the poem's **patriarchal, misogynistic** context in which **female virginity was prized**, while unmarried women who had lost their virginity were discarded, shamed and regarded as spoiled goods. His **preference for virgins** perhaps explains the **change in his attitude** towards her: now that she has been **"deflowered"** he loses respect for her. This simile compares finding women to a **geological expedition** and may remind the reader of 'Whoso List to Hunt', which employs an extended metaphor likening to the pursuit of a woman to a hunt. Both speakers see engaging with women as a competitive pursuit. They are to be hunted, searched for or pursued. This is reinforced by the **metaphor** the speaker uses in the **final stanza**, in which he compares sleeping with women to conquering them. The speaker sees himself as their victor - **"crowned"**, bearing the **"spoils"** of **war** (line 18) - and them as **defeated or vanquished**. This is a riff on the **traditional patriarchal idea** that when a woman has sex for the first time it is a **loss** (hence the phrase 'losing your virginity').

Assonance, Consonance and Alliteration

Lovelace uses **alliteration, consonance** and, to a lesser extent, **assonance** to emphasise key points and **create comedy**. The alliteration of **"tedious twelve"** (line 7) is itself tedious as well as derogatory. The assonance of **"Lady, it is already morn"** (line 3) lends the phrase a **whiny tone**, revealing the speaker's impatience with the woman and his desire to get away. The speaker also uses consonance to **heighten his argument** in the last stanza:

Then, if when I have lov'd my round,
Thou prov'st the pleasant she;
With spoyles of meaner Beauties crown'd

The 'l' 'n' and **plosive** 'p' sounds add a **forceful insistence** to these lines, creating the idea of passion; now that the speaker has hit on a good argument, he is enjoying himself and content to stay to explain it.

Rhetorical Questions

The speaker uses two **rhetorical questions**, in the first and second stanzas. With the first rhetorical question, the speaker **questions the legitimacy** of the woman's accusations ('How can you say I have forsworn my vow?'). With the second rhetorical question, the speaker **defends** his behaviour: twelve hours is a **"long"** period of time. This **hyperbolic, ridiculous**

statement alerts the reader to the fact that the speaker is not making a serious argument and thus that the tone is likely to be **comic**.

The first rhetorical question may have a **coded political meaning**. Pledges of **allegiance to the King** were taken very seriously. Lovelace manages to respectfully **mock the severity of vows** through a sexual encounter which only a male courtier audience could relate and find humour in.

Themes

Lust and Sexual Desire

Lust is a **primary theme** in the poem.The speaker seems **obsessed** with satisfying his lust; it seems to be almost a **compulsion**, indicated by the modal verb **"must"** (line 13). The satisfaction of sexual desire comes with **patriarchal power dynamics**: the man becomes the victor of the woman he has slept with, signalled by the **battleground metaphor** in the final stanza.

Virginity and Purity

The speaker refers he prefers virgins: minerals in **"unploughed-up ground"** (line 15). Perhaps the speaker reveals this to the lady as another way of **putting her down**; he signals to her that she is spoiled goods. Lovelace's audience would have been well-respected **male courtiers** who would have likely **shared his ideals** around sex and virginity. The **battleground metaphor** in the final stanza references the **sexual double standard** of the time: the woman loses (virginity, purity) when she has sex, while the man gains (hence his **"spoils"**).

Infidelity and Faithfulness

'The Scrutiny' **condones infidelity**, repeating an argument that many courtiers may have themselves used. It **mocks women** for believing a one-night stand would lead to something more. This poem follows the **'carpe diem'** style of poetry, emphasising the importance of accruing a wealth of **sexual experience**. Although the speaker's argument for his promiscuity is unconvincing, both his situation and argument would have been relatable and familiar to male courtiers.

Critical Viewpoints

"**This poem articulates the pose of the careless Cavalier for whom love is nothing more than a game**" (source unknown)

Advocates of this view would argue that the speaker acts **immorally**, making promises and disowning them the following day. Advocates might even argue that this cavalier does not know

what love is; the poem contains nothing of tenderness, only coldness after the woman's function has expired.

"It is a rather nasty poem: cruel, clever and somehow lacking in real emotion" (source unknown)

The speaker is indeed cruel, revealing his preference for fair virgins and insulting the woman by suggesting their time together was **"tedious".** He is impatient, patronising and dismissive of her affection**.** The poem is also very clever in its entertaining nature and its relatability as well as its **regular form and rhyme scheme**; it does seem a refined poem.

Comparisons

'The Scrutiny' - 'A Song (Absent From Thee)'

Similarities	• Both poems have speakers that attempt to convince women that infidelity will serve them. • Both poems use **apostrophe** - a silent female is addressed in both poems. • Both speakers seem **unable to contain their desires** - 'The Scrutiny''s speaker makes desire seem like a **compulsion** (**"must"**) while the speaker of 'Absent From Thee' professes to be suffering yet unable to stop philandering.
Differences	• 'Absent From Thee''s speaker is more self-deprecating than the speaker in 'The Scrutiny'; he calls himself a **"straying fool"** whereas 'The Scrutiny's speaker puts down the woman he addresses, not himself, and sees himself as glorified by his future conquests (**"crowned"**). • The speaker of 'Absent From Thee' is speaking to a woman he is very familiar with (her bosom is **"safe"**, he equates her with home or **"rest"**) whereas the speaker in 'The Scrutiny' is addressing someone he has just had a one-night stand with. • Contrasting tones/ atmospheres: Wilmot's poem is **heavy and remorseful** while Lovelace's poem uses **light and comedic** language and imagery • Satirist poet versus Cavalier poet • 'Absent From Thee' speaks of romantic love whereas commitment for the speaker of 'The Scrutiny' is a distant possibility **"if, when"** and love is not even mentioned.

'The Scrutiny' - 'Remember'

Similarities	• Both speakers address a silent other. • Structured rhyming couplets maintain control

Differences	• Rossetti's speaker selfless - allowing her lover to forget her - whereas Lovelace's speaker is selfish, wanting to philander. • Rossetti does not focus on sexual love in her poem; it is a **tender reflection** on their relationship