How is a dramatic tone created in poems ‘Holy Sonnet X’ and ‘The Sun Rising’ by John Donne?

Donne is well known for his his overly dramatic poetry through his use of hyperbolic language, complex arguments and imagery, as well as strange comparisons and whimsical conceits- all traits of a metaphysical poet, a term created by the critic Samuel Johnson in the 19th century. Donne’s also studied law in which many examples of language of law can be seen in his poetry, which could have been the influence for such dramatic poetry - through the drama in arguing in court. Donne’s poetry, much like his life, transitions from secular, romantic and sexual poetry to religious, violent and dramatic holy sonnets in full devotion to God, following the death of his wife Anne Moore and other dramatic events that took place in his life such as the death of his brother and his conversion to protestantism from Catholicism. However, despite the contrasting tones, Donne’s techniques remain the same, his metaphysical traits and hyperbolic language continues to create a dramatic sense in both styles of writing. In this essay I will be exploring both the secular ‘The Sun rising’ in which portrays the dramatic condemnation of the sun by a persona for waking up himself and his lover, and the religious ‘Holy Sonnet X’ where the speaker very intensively faces up to death and its meaning on the ways in which their form, structure and language help to create their dramatic tones respectively.

In Holy sonnet X ‘death be not proud’ Donne presents a dramatic tone through his hyperbolic struggle with death. During Donne’s life, he was continuously surrounded with death from the death of his father at an early age to death of his brother within prison. Later in his life, Donne was also struck with horrific illnesses in which he thought he would die from. From this, Donne became obsessed with the idea of death and used many of his poems to illustrate his ideas and presentation of death, leading to a very dramatic series of poems.

In the very first line, Donne directly addresses death as a person, with the imperative ‘death of **be** not proud’, beginning the poem with directly demanding death to humble himself. This can be seen as dramatic as the use of imperative and direct address to the ‘mighty and dreadful’ death illustrates to the reader the anger and force that Donne is implementing from the beginning of the poem. Further, Donne continues this idea of triumph over death through the second half of the stanza stating ‘thou think’st thou dost overthrow/ Die not poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.’ Donne is suggesting here that death is in fact powerless; the people in which he believed he has ‘overthrow[n]’ in dying, ‘die not’. To further the melodramatic statement, Donne even goes on to say that, despite in his sickly health at the time of writing, death ‘nor yet canst’ even kill Donne himself. This line also connotes the religious aspect of Donne’s holy sonnets through implying that after death there is life through heaven, in which all Christians believed was the place in which people resurrected after death. Through this, Donne creates a dramatic tone as he is completely over turning the idea of death and instead portraying to the reader that deaths actions are futile. Moreover, the monosyllabic line ‘Die not poor Death..’ creates a dramatic tone through the heavy stressing of each syllable, as well as the emphatic ‘D’ sound, making the structure of the line seem melodramatic in itself.

In the second stanza of the sonnet, Donne uses excessive listing to create a sense of drama within the poem. Donne first names death as a ‘slave to fate, chance, kings and desperate men’ portraying that death holds no power anyone and in fact does not get to even choose who dies in a dramatic turning of the conventional ideas of death and the power it holds. Further to this, Donee wrote his sonnets in a Petrarchan style, a dramatic structure in which a twist is implemented after eight lines. By naming death a ‘slave’ Donne completely juxtaposes the idea of the ‘mighty death’ and may shock the reader with such a disdainful word as ‘slave’ connoting complete loss of power and control. By following this twist with a long list Donne emphasises the idea of slavery with each word: ‘fate, chance…’ and thus continuously adds to the dramatic effect. Additionally, Donne carries this technique into the third stanza by disempowering death even more by saying ‘doth with poison, war, and sickness dwell’. Words such as ‘poison’ and ‘sickness’ creates horrific and evil imagery in the minds of the reader and reenforces the idea that death ‘dwells’ with the lowest of low- the hyperbolic language emphasising the dramatic tone of the poem.

Finally at the end of the sonnet, Donne cleverly creates a paradox in which ‘death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.’ Again, Donne uses the technique of a monosyllabic sentence to finish the poem in a dramatic statement in which death itself will die, using complex ideas and a paradox to dramatise the fall of the idea of death. It could also be said that Donne’s use of a semi colon before is use of a paradox emphasises the last four words through its pause, thus creating a climatic rise for the reader. Further to this, Donne rids of his abba rhyming scheme for the last to lines of the poem which also could be a way of singling out and emphasising the last two sets of 10 syllables (as it is a sonnet) to maximise the theatric and twist of an ending to the reader.

In the secular poem ‘The sun rising’ Donne also uses the idea of putting himself above powerful forces, however in this case, he degrades the power of the sun. Using hyperbolic language and comparisons, Donne dramatises the personas complete infatuation over his lover in him placing his love above the rising of the sun. In the first stanza, the persona reprimands the sun by calling it an ‘old fool’ and ‘unruly’. Here, Donne personifies the sun by giving it human characteristics leading the reader to feel a sense confrontation by the persona adding to the dramatic style. Further more, Donne uses invectives such as ‘fool’ and ‘unruly’, which thus makes an explosive beginning which accentuates the dramatic tone.

Donne also uses copious amounts of imperatives in ‘the sunrising’ as he is well known to do in many of his other poems, which also creates a dramatic tone through the commanding voice of the persona. In the second half of stanza one, the persona tells the sun to ‘go chide late school boys’ and ‘go tell court-court-huntsmen that the King will ride’ and finally ‘call country ants to harvest offices’ in which the repetitive use of imperatives illustrates to the reader the complete frustration in which the persona feels by the sun awakening him and his lover. Moreover, the enjambment used between ‘go chide’ and ‘late schoolboys’ causes the reader to pause and thus emphasises the power in which the persona must be using in this imperative, making it all the more dramatic as the reader imagines the sound of it being bellowed at the sun. Donne insinuates that the persona feels above the people he lists, even going as far as to call the harvesters ‘ants’- demanding the sun wakes them up before him, as ‘love,.. no season knows..nor hours, days, months’, again using a long list to depict how his ‘love’ is separated from the worlds boundaries of time and the sun, dramatising his emotions and elevating himself even above the ‘reverend and strong’ sun.

In the second stanza, the tone of the argument changes to one of a controlled yet scornful attitude, creating a drama through his more calm and intellectual condemnation of the sun.

Donne cleverly inverts the first two lines of the stanza, so that at first the reader thinks he is acknowledging the sun's beams as ‘so revered and strong’, only to have the bathos of the second line, with the scornful question ‘Why shouldst thou think?’, ‘i could eclipse them..with a wink’ completely eliminating all respect the reader thought the persona had for the sun, a technique purposely used by Donne to cause a shocked and emphasised reaction in the reader. Furthermore, the idea of such an effortless act of a ‘wink’ illustrates to the reader the strength in which the persona believes he holds over the sun, adding to the hyperbolic tone of the poem. However, the persona again contrasts this harsh insult in the next lines by stating that ‘But that I would not lose her sight so long’ , explaining that he couldn’t bare to not look at his lover for a ‘wink’ of time, again using the word to dramatise his complete adoration for her. The persona also uses metaphor and imagery of ‘both the India of Spice and mine..or lie here with me’ to further display the hyperbolic love he feels towards his lover. Donne is cleverly using geographical references here to the spices of India as, during his era, the importation of spices to the UK was extremely expensive and regarded as treasures that only the richest could acquire. This therefore would have a big effect on an Elizabethan reader, that the persona believes his lover to be of the finest treasure; no matter how many treasures the sun shines in the world, the most precious ‘thou shalt hear, all here in one bed lay’. Adding to this, the effect of the caesura in the middle of the line reflects the balanced argument in which the persona makes which could possibly be the influence in which the court had on Donne's poetry in a dramatic yet controlled sense.

In the final stanza, Donne again uses geographical references to create a dramatic tone. The persona states that ‘she’s all states, and all prices I’ alluding to the idea that the persona thinks the *world* of his lover in a melodramatic statement. Donne frequently used ideas of maps and geographical allusions in his secular poetry to dramatise the importance of a character in his poetry, as can be seen in such as ‘the good morrow’ and ‘a valediction of forbidden mourning’. Also, the effect of chiasmus creates an almost theatrical tone to the line as if it would be used in a soliloquy- which, to an Elizabethan reader who’s era was filled with theatre and drama, would thus implement this drama within the poem. Finally towards the end of the poem, the persona comes back to the sun in a twist in argument to them command the sun to ‘shine here to us’ as ‘to warm the world, thats done in warming us’. The persona is now using the idea that he and his lover are of such high being that by ‘warming us’ the sun is actually reaching the whole world. This extreme and outrageous statement is then linked back to the personas dramatic love as in the final line he states ‘this bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere’ illustrating to the reader that his lover and his bedroom is his world, and by shining on her thus the ‘sphere’ of the world is shined upon. By revealing this at the very end of the poem, Donne creates a dramatic reaction within the reader as they realise that in fact the persona is not annoyed at being woken by the sun, yet instead just wants to spend forever in bed with the love of his life, and the entire poem was his dramatic and extreme way of saying this.

In conclusion, Donne creates an unfathomable amount of drama within his poetry through his constant use of hyperbolic metaphors, imagery and shocking arguments within a dramatic structure also. However, although the techniques in which Donne uses occur in both his secular and his religious poems, the effect on the reader is very contrasting. Whilst his religious poetry in the example of ‘Holy Sonnet X’ makes the reader question the idea of death with his paradoxes and violent language, in a dark and twisted way his secular and romantic poetry such as ‘The Sun Rising’ ultimately creates a heart-warming theatrical performance in the minds of the reader in his hyperbolic expressing of love. This change in tone yet continuous use of technique could also show how, although Donne’s character changed dramatically throughout the years from a young man in love to a devoted preacher, his poetry and skill never fails to conjure emotion from within the reader and will always continue to create dramatic reactions, not only the understanding of context from the Elizabethan reader, even from readers of the 21st century and onwards through his powerful dramatic use of literary techniques.