

# John Donne (1572–1631)

Donne (a Welsh name pronounced Dun) wrote learned, passionate, argumentative poetry most of which he never published, since he never was ambitious to be known publicly as a poet. His first aim in life was to be “courtier”—that is, a member of the Queen’s government. But he had one bad handicap: He was born into a prominent Roman Catholic family, his great uncle being no less a person than Sir (or Saint) Thomas More, the author of *Utopia* and the Lord Chancellor whom Henry VIII had beheaded for not supporting him in his quarrels with the Pope.

A When we first hear of Donne from his earliest biographer, Izaak Walton, he was only twelve years old but already studying at Oxford. Catholic boys went to the University very young, so that they would not have to take the oath of allegiance to the Queen, whom the Pope had excommunicated. After a few terms at Oxford, and perhaps also at Cambridge, Donne returned to his native city of London and at the age of seventeen became a law student at Lincoln’s Inn, one of the “Inns of Court” where lawyers were trained. He had no financial worries, since his father, a prosperous iron merchant, had died and left him some money. We can think of him now as “Jack” Donne, a handsome, well dressed youth who devoted his mornings to heavy reading in philosophy and foreign literature and his afternoons to circulating in society. A friend later in life remembered him as being “a great visitor of ladies, a great frequenter of plays, a great writer of conceited verses.”

B Eventually, in 1598, after various adventures such as taking part in two naval expeditions against Spain, Donne became confidential secretary to the Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas Egerton. This was an important post, the starting point for what could become a brilliant career in government, for by now Donne had abandoned his Catholicism. But he blasted all his hopes and ambitions when, in 1602, he secretly married Anne More, a seventeen-year-old niece of the Lord Chancellor’s wife. Marriage with a minor, without her father’s consent, was a serious crime against both Church and state. As soon as



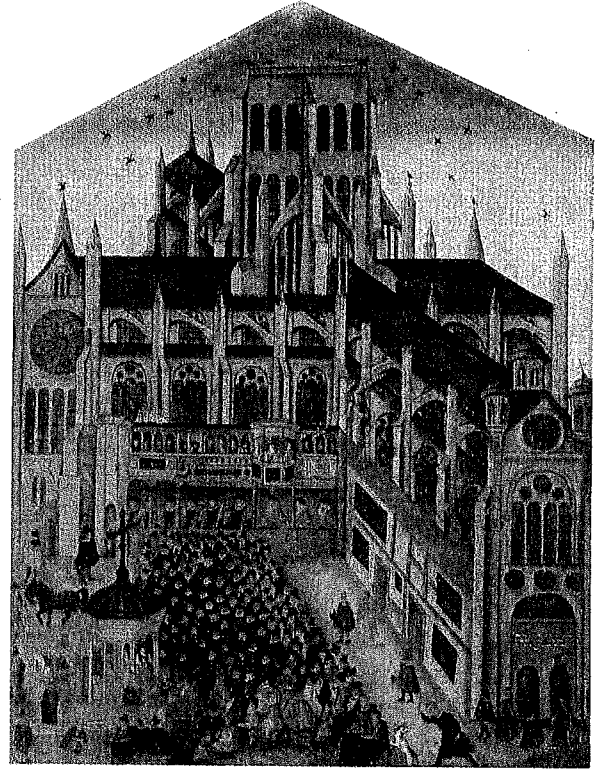
Title page to John Donne’s *Sermons* (1640).  
Engraving.

Anne’s father discovered what had happened, he had Jack Donne arrested, jailed, and dismissed from his position. In jail, Donne wrote his shortest poem:

John Donne,  
Anne Donne,  
Undone.

In his head-on confrontation with society, Donne blundered badly. Of course he was not kept in prison long, but he never did recover his position, and for years he and Anne had to live off the bounty of friends and relatives, Donne’s own money being all gone. They certainly needed what help they could get, since they eventually had twelve children, five of whom died in infancy.

In the early 1600's Donne continued to read voraciously, to write poetry for private circulation, and prose for public, though he did publish two long poems in memory of a dead little girl, the daughter of one of his patrons. In prose, he wrote against the Church of Rome so effectively that he became known as an important defender of the Church of England. The new King, James I, was impressed, and he began to put pressure on Donne to become a clergyman. And so, in 1615, Donne was ordained a priest. His brilliant, theatrical sermons immediately won his advancement in the church, and he rose to be Dean of St. Paul's in London, the principal cathedral of England. Thus Jack Donne became Dr. John Donne; with an honorary degree from Cambridge University and important ecclesiastical positions. He preached outdoors in the open space before the cathedral, and he preached before the King, always with great effect, for he brought to his sermons the same surprising inventiveness that he showed in his poems. He died full of years and honors, and his monument, showing how he looked in the winding sheet put about his dead body, may still be seen in St. Paul's.



*Preaching at Old St. Paul's Cathedral (ca. 1616). Oil.*

Society of Antiquaries of London.

## The Elements of Literature

# METAPHYSICAL POETRY

In the 1590's, when Donne started writing, most poets tried to make their works as sweet, smooth, and musical-sounding as possible. The opening lines of some of Shakespeare's songs show how one poet achieved the "sugared sweetness" that many poets aspired to:

"Come unto these yellow sands"  
 "It was a lover and his lass"  
 "When daffodils begin to peer"  
 "Full merrily the humble bee doth sing"

Sidney, Spenser, Campion, Raleigh, and dozens of others assumed that the language and rhythms of poetry should be as pleasing to the ear as music. But Donne would have none of this. In one of his poems he says, "I sing not siren-like, to tempt, for I am harsh." For his poems

he invented a new style, a style that some later critics would call metaphysical.

For the most part, Donne based his most characteristic poems not on music but on the rhythms of colloquial—that is, spoken—English. "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love," he begins one of his poems. "I wonder," he begins another, "what thou and I did till we loved." The speaker in his poems frequently sounds blunt and angry, or he broods to himself, or he seems to be thinking out loud. At times the speaker sounds like a lecturer, explaining difficult matters to the woman who is presumably listening to him. But whatever he sounds like, Donne's speaker is always using his brains and bringing into the poem ideas from books he has read, especially books of philosophy and theology. He also brings in images from everyday activities, trades, occupations, and learned disciplines—law, medicine, science, geography. Metaphysical poems, then, are not only impassioned; they are also intellectual, and reading them is frequently like figuring out the solution to a riddle.

12  
For those who believe in immortality, death is merely an episode in the progress of the soul, the moment of its delivery from the confines of the body and into eternal life. This belief, which

Donne held firmly, permits him to belittle and denigrate death in this sonnet. The sonnet finds a modern echo in a well-known poem by Dylan Thomas, "And Death Shall Have No Dominion."

## Death Be Not Proud

Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so,  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me;  
5 From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures<sup>o</sup> be,  
Much pleasure,<sup>o</sup> then from thee, much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.<sup>o</sup>  
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate  
men,  
10 And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
And poppy,<sup>o</sup> or charms<sup>o</sup> can make us sleep as well,  
And better than thy stroke; why swell<sup>o</sup>st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.

5. **pictures:** A sleeping person can resemble a dead person.

6. **much pleasure:** That is, rest and sleep give much pleasure.

8. **Rest . . . delivery:** Death gives the body rest and delivers the soul from the bondage of the body.

11. **poppy:** opium. **charms:** magic, hypnotism.

12. **swellest:** swell with pride.

## Responding to the Poem

### Analyzing the Poem

#### Identifying Details

1. According to the poem, why should death not be proud? Whom must death serve as a slave?

#### Interpreting Meanings

2. Show how, as the sonnet develops, the speaker shifts the grounds of his attack on death.
3. Explain how rest and sleep are the "pictures" of death (line 5).
4. The sonnet seems to involve a **paradox**, or contradiction: Those who die do not die, but *Death* itself will die. Explain how the paradox can be resolved.
5. What book uses this poem's opening lines as its title? How is the title appropriate to that book?

### Writing About the Poem

#### A Critical Response

**Comparing Two Sonnets.** In a brief essay, compare the attitude toward death in "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners" and "Death Be Not Proud." What religious convictions seem to underlie both sonnets?

In "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners" the speaker first calls for the tremendous events that will happen, according to biblical prophecies, at the end of time: the return of Christ to the Earth and the Last Judgment of both the living and the dead. Then, having called rather flamboyantly for the end of the world, the speaker changes his mind.

The "last busy day," as he once called it, fascinated Donne, as it has many other writers and painters. Like practically everybody in his time, he was confident that the great event would soon occur, perhaps even before his own death. The prospect of God's judgment lends urgency to many of his sermons and poems.

## At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners

At the round earth's imagined corners,<sup>o</sup> blow  
 Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise  
 From death, you numberless infinities  
 Of souls, and to your scattered bodies<sup>o</sup> go,  
 5 **A** All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,  
 All whom war, dearth,<sup>o</sup> age, agues,<sup>o</sup> tyrannies,  
 Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you whose eyes  
 Shall behold God, and never taste<sup>o</sup> death's woe.  
 But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,  
 10 For, if above all these, my sins abound,  
 'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace,  
 When we are there;<sup>o</sup> here on this lowly ground,  
**B** Teach me how to repent; for that's as good  
 As if thou hadst sealed my pardon with thy blood.

1. **imagined corners:** A globe has no corners, though the Bible (Revelation 7.1) mentions the four corners of the earth.

4. **scattered bodies:** scattered because the bodies to be resurrected on the last day will be mainly dust and bones.

6. **dearth:** famine. **agues:** sicknesses.

8. **never taste:** Those who are alive on the last day will not die (I Corinthians 15.51-52).

12. **there:** at the Last Judgment.

## Responding to the Poem

### Analyzing the Poem

#### Identifying Details

1. Whom does the speaker address in the **octave** of the sonnet? Whom does he address in the **sestet**?
2. Where does the speaker change his mind in the sonnet? How does Donne use the sonnet form to signal this change of mind?
3. To what event does the speaker refer in the last line? Whom is he addressing here?

### Interpreting Meanings

4. Essentially, the poem is a plea for more time. Time for what?
5. Explain how the sound of the poem changes as it moves from its beginning to its end.