

Under this head, we can engage with the religious concerns of the age, particularly those that the individual in the early modern period forged for confronting truth of the surrounding dilemmas. At the turn of the century, multiple streams of the Christian faith contended with one another to gain ascendancy. Within Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, thinkers and interpreters studied the scriptures from angles of knowing, practicing and preaching. In this light, there was also the issue of tempering the ways of feeling that presented psychological states concretely. The crux was the individual caught in the tussle. “The condition of helplessness,” says critic Ramie Targoff, “that Donne describes stems from his fear of abandonment by God.” Targoff explains the point by adding that “Donne’s fear of being abandoned by God pervades his devotional writings. We see it in the *Essayes in Divinitie*, a prose meditation on the opening verses of *Genesis* and *Exodus* written around 1614, in which he dwells on whether God would allow his creatures to be returned to nothingness. We see it most spectacularly in the sermons, in which Donne conjures up what it would feel like to fall out of God’s hands” (Mahapatra, Aruni. Ramie Targoff in “Holy Sonnets” in *Love Canonized: The Poetry of Spenser and Donne*. Delhi: Worldview, 2014. 388-9). Donne was a poet as well a thinker and visionary. He also had joined the Church in the latter part of his career. In life, too, death had been a major concern for him; it haunted him ever as a mode of suffering. Doctor Donne reflected on the subject in deep religious terms. The sonnet form particularly suited him for dealing with death and God as questions of deep interest. Brajraj Singh has brought in the significant issue of “anguish” while commenting on Donne’s holy sonnets. This, for Singh, “is at the sense of his (Donne’s) own unworthiness and therefore a fear that accompanies the working out of his salvation face to face with his Maker, with no intercessors or intermediaries present” (Singh, Brajraj. Ed. *Five Seventeenth-Century Poets: Donne; Herbert; Crashaw; Marvell; Vaughan*. New Delhi: Oxford, rpt. 1999. 98). *Holy Sonnets*, for Donne, were expressions of unease as well as impatience in a period of turmoil. They touched aspects of spirit and spirituality. Psychological exploration at a time when God, faith and morality were under stress as issues, was a true and authentic strategy for Donne to adopt. It did not divide poetic attention in the poet’s case. He remained simultaneously a poet of love and religious sentiment. We notice in Donne an intellectual interest in matters that touched his soul. The same remained true about matters of the body, the senses—the two combining to present a representation bordering on sensuality. The combination assumed oddities and a sense of weirdness that worked at levels of the idea and language, the two were stretched to the limit. This was the source of metaphysical conceit that we associate with the kind of verse John Donne wrote. Thus, holiness and love in relatively abstract terms as well as a live engagement with self and God became the hallmark of Donne. At this point in the discussion, let us have a look at the text of “Death Be Not Proud.”

4.4.1 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.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Let us comprehend the meaning and message of this sonnet step by step. Note, for instance, that this sonnet has opened with the poet directly addressing death. Donne talks in the first person and initiates a conversation with the figure. This sonnet fits in with other sonnets of the period that were poems in the conversational mode. Here, the writer’s choice of subject might appear conventional—death as much as

love was a stock theme of the sonnets in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For us in this unit, it is the treatment of the subject that makes the poem different, Donne being the shaping influence of the dialogue held between the poet persona and Death. Interestingly, the poet does not speak of the power of death or its inevitability. Indeed, he admonishes death for being too proud and suggests that for him death doesn't hold sway over the world nor can it overpower him individually. Note his tone in "Death be not proud though some have called thee /Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so". The use of negatives "not proud" and "not so" creates an added emphasis. We may ask: Why does the poet show this stance of arrogance, and what can defeat death? He tells Death squarely that "For those whom thou think'st, thou doest overthrow/ die not". Again, the use of the negative "not" makes it a statement of clarity. For the poet, Death is deceived in believing that it overthrows human life by claiming it. It is conveyed that the case can be overturned and its opposite can be established with greater certainty. A person doesn't die even when Death apparently takes him/her away. Further, the poet calls Death "poore"—it is not human beings who are the subject of pity but death itself deserves that denigration. Note the assurance in the poet-subject's words "nor yet canst thou kill me". Donne goes on to elaborate on the theme adding to it those characteristics of death that are nothing to be proud of. Death, he claims, makes a picture of sleep and rest, while life keeps on moving. As the best of men are taken by death, they are delivered of their bones and souls; they shed only the bodily form. Adding more features, Donne suggests that death lives in the company of disease, squalor and war. Simultaneously, the poet says that Death is a "slave to fate, chance, kings and desperate men". What is the connecting thread among these? Do fate, chance and the rest share a common trait? If not, what is the poet's purpose in bringing them together? Both fate and chance can cause deaths, kings can order executions, and desperate men unthinkingly may kill people. In any case, we are left to surmise that death is not free and is bound by these factors. We might wonder about the kind of life that death leads. Note the heightened form of personification. The irony is not missed that here Donne talks about the life that death leads. Note that the poem concludes with the foreboding, a kind of prophecy: "death thou shall die". It appears to be more than a paradox. The poem defines it as about the life and death of Death, thus making it a philosophical take on the subject. What could be the purpose of personifying death in this manner? Giving a human form to death renders it more palpable. We might then accept Donne's claim in the sonnet—"one short sleepe past, we wake eternally". The suggestion is that in view of eternity, Death would have no role to play.

Donne thus strips death of its power as an independent agency. He suggests that to reach eternity we don't need death since "poppie and charms can make us sleepe as well/ and better than thy stroake". Death stands rebuked for swelling in conceit. In the sonnet, it is given the small figure of a non-entity.

We might also look at this poem as a holy sonnet, since it is recognized as a part of the *Holy Sonnet* series. What has the poet attempted in this sonnet from the point of view of subject and approach? At one level, the tradition of poetry dealing with death, life or fate that sonneteers of his time engaged with has been steadily questioned by Donne. In evoking death as a subject wanting in significance and power, indeed one that is ever at the mercy of others and is always in company of things detestable, Donne projects an unenviable picture of death. The critic Elizabeth Hodgson has observed that, "Donne's apostrophe to 'Death' reinforces the sense that death is a present absence and absent presence in the poem: the speaker talks to death as if death were listening, but only to deny death's power to do anything—including listen". She further adds that the sonnet in question is as much about the poet's anxiety as the idea of death. In her view, "The problem is, of course, that in addressing and confronting, and defeating death, Donne reveals more about his own anxiety than he does about death's ultimate fate. The speaker declares his faith but if faith were sufficient to the task the speaker would not care if death were proud, and the poem would end before it began." (Elizabeth Hodgson. *Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne*. Newark : UP of Delaware, 1999. 152).

At another level, the poem speaks of the courage of the poet who with contemplation and willful use of the mind has manipulated with the natural fear of death. We could term it intellectual courage. Still, at the third level the sonnet is the poet's visualization of eternal life than treating death conventionally. Think of Donne's lines from "For Whom the Bell Tolls"—"no man is an island/ entire of itself/ each is a piece of the continent / a part of the main". If each man were a piece of the continent and a part of the picture, then

humanity and life would grow in congruence with them. Eternity, too, cannot be the right of an individual alone. For Donne, it is a common pool of life that grows and is enriched with time. Donne's view of the dynamic human endeavour brings out the experience of joy and spiritual fulfillment that constitutes eternal life. Through the projection of eternity, Donne seeks to attain freedom, and release from restrictions imposed on it by social custom. He takes pleasure in such a projection where bodies would not decay nor ailments affect people, where there would be no scope for death. It is an idealized picture but one that stands on principles of intellect and imagination simultaneously. Could the source of this fascination with eternity be the poet's weariness with society as well as his own illnesses at regular intervals in life, and the many deaths that occurred in the family? The question is worth going into. Donald Ramsay Roberts in an essay titled "The Death Wish of John Donne" evaluates Donne's fascination for death verging on an obsession, he suggests that "A wish for death was a permanent and constant element" in Donne's "psychic life". Mark that Donne suffered an almost fatal disease in 1623 following which he wrote a series of poems meditating upon health and sickness. These were published in 1624 under the title *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. Contrarily critics such as Mark Allinson (Allinson, Mark. "Re-visioning the Death Wish: Donne and Suicide". *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*. vol.24, no.1, 1991, pp. 31-46) believe that "death is both abhorred and desired" in Donne and that he "dramatizes certainly, but he dramatizes his own experience". The impulse towards "self preservation" is equally present in Donne's poetry. Still, Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker (Bauer, Matthias and Angelika Zirker. "Sites of Death as Sites of Interaction in Donne and Shakespeare " *Shakespeare and Donne: Generic Hybrids and the Cultural Imaginary*. Judith Anderson and Jennifer C. Vaught Fordham University, 2013) reinforce the idea that "If there is a motif that runs like a thread through all of John Donne's writing, it is the awareness of death and its impact on life. Donne's portrait in shroud, the frontispiece of his most famous sermon 'Deaths Duell', which became the model of his epitaph in St. Paul's Cathedral, is the visible sign of this constant awareness" (17). It goes to the poet's credit that the concepts of death and eternity in a series of his sonnets received from him a concrete religious rendering.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have interpreted Donne's poetry with special reference to two of his poems—"The Sun Rising" and "Death Be Not Proud." Donne's poetry bore clear markings of intellect and mature thought. An unsentimental viewer of society and the individual human being, Donne brought into play questioning, analytical comment, dialogue and the humanist statement of revolt. The range of his interests is wide—it covers in its sweep elements such as the sun, the power centres of the world wielding influence over men, as well as figures of death, fate and time. Significantly, all these stand opposite to the human individual who is equipped with mental and moral skills to take on the adversary. For Donne, wit is a weapon with the human being. In the poet's hands, human wit becomes a whole concept of rebellion against the conventional norm and decadent value system. The poems discussed in this unit serve the purpose of substantiating these points in Donne's poetry.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a critical note on Donne's poetic sensibility.
2. How is love interpreted in the poem "The Sun Rising"?
3. Discuss briefly the implications of the "metaphysical" in the context of Donne's poetry.
4. Critically comment on Donne's argument against death in the sonnet "Death, Be Not Proud."

4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Allinson, Mark. "Re-visioning the Death Wish: Donne and Suicide". *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*. vol.24, no.1, 1991, pp. 31-46.

2. Bauer, Matthias and Angelika Zirker. "Sites of Death as Sites of Interaction in Donne and Shakespeare " *Shakespeare and Donne: Generic Hybrids and the Cultural Imaginary*. Judith Anderson and Jennifer C. Vaught Fordham University, 2013.
3. Elizabeth Hodgson. *Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne*. Newark: UP of Delaware, 1999.
4. Mahapatra, Aruni. Ramie Targoff in "Holy Sonnets" in *Love Canonized: The Poetry of Spenser and Donne*. Delhi: Worldview, 2014.
5. Robert, Donald Ramsay. "The Death Wish of John Donne". *PMLA*. Vol. 62, No. 4 (Dec., 1947), pp. 958-976)
6. Singh, Brajraj. Ed. *Five Seventeenth-Century Poets: Donne; Herbert; Crashaw; Marvell; Vaughan*. New Delhi: Oxford, rpt. 1999.
7. Smith, A.J. *John Donne: The Critical Heritage*.1983. London: Routledge, 2000.
8. Steel, Abram. "rememberestright": Remembering the dead in John Donne's *Songs and Sonets*" in *Renaissance and Reformation*. Vol. 33, No. 2 (SPRING / PRINTEMPS 2010), pp. 93-124.
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