

John Donne



Life

- John Donne (1572 - 1631), the founder of the metaphysical school of poetry and the greatest representative of the metaphysical poets, was born of a family with a strong Roman Catholic tradition. He was educated at the Trinity College, Cambridge.



Life



As a young man hungry for adventures, he went with Essex on the expedition to Cadiz in 1596 and later became secretary to Lord Keeper Egerton. In 1601 he eloped with the niece of Lord Keeper and was imprisoned by the girl's father. For several years after his release, he lived in poverty. But during this time he wrote some of his most beautiful poems, many of which were believed to have been written to his wife. These were known as his youthful love lyrics.

So Much Death and Poverty...

- Married in 1601, had 12 children (incl. 2 stillborns)
- Three more children died before age 10
- His wife died in 1617; he never remarried
 - Rare for this time
- In a state of despair, Donne noted that the death of a child would mean one less mouth to feed, but he could not afford the burial expenses

Life

In 1615 he gave up Catholic faith and entered the Anglican Church and soon became Dean of Saint Paul's Church.

As the most famous preacher during the time, he wrote many religious sermons and poems. And these were known as his sacred verses.



John Donne's House

The Background of John Donne's Age

Politics

- John Donne's life 1572-1631 spanned across two dynasties- House of Tudor and House of Stuart. The Tudors extended their power beyond England, achieving the full union of England in 1542. The Tudor line failed in 1603 with the death of Elizabeth I. Then James I inherited the throne and began the house of Stuart, which publicized the ideas of "divine right of kings" and launched absolute feudal reign, which greatly hindered the development of capitalism

Religion

- The Protestant Reformation (1517–1648) was the European Christian reform movement that established Protestantism as a constituent branch of contemporary Christianity. The separation of the Church of England from Rome under Henry VII, beginning in 1529 and completed in 1536, brought England alongside this broad Reformation movement; however, religious changes in the English national church proceeded more conservatively than elsewhere in Europe.

Culture and Thoughts



- The Renaissance began in the 13th century and reached its peak at the 16th century in Europe. People 's thoughts ventured away from the restriction of feudal belief of god and religion, and became more realistic and human. This was a great emancipation, which led to the works by people such as Francis Bacon and Shakespeare.

Just So You Know...

- **“Donne wrote some of the most passionate love poems and most moving religious verse in the English language” (Damrosch and Dettmar 1669).**
- **He is hailed as the “Monarch of Wit” (Dickson xi).**
- **He wrote FIVE different types of poems:**
 - Satires
 - Elegies
 - Verse Letters
 - Songs & Sonnets
 - Holy Sonnets or “Divine Poems”



Satires

- **Dealt with common Elizabethan topics**, such as corruption in the legal system.
- **They also dealt with the problem of true religion**, a matter of great importance to Donne. He argued that it was better to examine carefully one's religious convictions than blindly to follow any established tradition, for none would be saved at the Final Judgment.

Three stages of Donne's Poetry

Not necessarily chronological, but an easy way to categorize Donne's works.


1. The young “Jack Donne:” reflected by a **misogynistic, lusty, and cynical persona in his early poetry** (“The Flea,” “The Bait,” and “Song—Go and Catch a Falling Star”);
2. The courting / married lover: reflected by a **Neoplatonic ideal of transcendent love-** but a love also founded in the physical (“A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” and “The Ecstasy”)
3. Dr. Donne, the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral: **religious poetry** (Holy Sonnets) and prose (“Meditation 17”) that **sometimes praises, sometimes struggles with God's transcendent perfection.**

Stage 1: Early Poetry (Elegies)

- Donne's earliest poems: **Knowledge of English society coupled with sharp criticism of its problems**
- **His Erotic Poetry-** Donne's early career was also notable for his erotic poetry(sexy stuff, wooo), especially his elegies
- He **employed unconventional metaphors** to portray sex



Stage 2 Poetry- (Neo) Platonic Love

- Physical love (animal lust) is base, common, low-born;
 - Spiritual love is worthy, unique, divine
 - Love, through procreation, is the closest humans come to immortality
 - Comprehension of love brings comprehension of beauty as infinite
 - Stages of Platonic love:
 - Initiated by Sense
 - Founded in Reason
 - Attains Spiritual Quality
- A Neoplatonic Syllogism:
- God is everlasting, perfect divine love;
 - True, spiritual love is everlasting and perfect;
 - Therefore, two lovers united by spiritual love are close to divinity.
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- The image shows a right hand with several words and symbols written on it in black ink. The words include "Liebe", "AMOR", "BESO", "KISS", "Ecstasy", "Bacio", "Amore", "Love", "L'Amour", "Baixek", "Kiss", "Dilectio", "Eros", "Philia", "Agape", "Storge", "Pity", "Sympathy", "Charity", "Friendship", "Romance", "Marriage", "Parental Love", "Sisterly Love", "Brotherly Love", "Neighbourly Love", "Country Love", "Humanity Love", "Divine Love". There are also small heart symbols scattered around the words.



Stage 3- Religious Poetry

- ❖ **a more somber and pious tone in his later poems:** Because of His numerous illnesses, financial strain, and the deaths of his friends
- ❖ **Donne focused his literary career on religious literature.** He quickly became noted for his sermons and religious poems.

Religious Poetry Cont (Stage 3)

- His early **belief in the value of skepticism** now gave way **to** a firm faith in **the traditional teachings of the Bible.**
- The lines of these sermons come to influence future works of English literature.
 - E.g. Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which took its title from a passage in Meditation XVII
 - Thomas Merton's *No Man is an Island*, which took its title from the same source.

Meditation XVII



- **No man is an island**, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know **for whom the bell tolls**; it tolls for thee.

Later Poetry Continued- A Challenge to Death

Towards the end of his life Donne wrote works that challenged death, and the fear that it inspired in many men, on the grounds of **his belief that those who die are sent to Heaven to live eternally.**



A detailed still life painting by Pieter Claesz, 1632. The composition is a dense arrangement of objects on a dark, reflective surface. In the center, a human skull is prominently displayed, surrounded by a lute, a telescope, a magnifying glass, and an open book. Other objects include a small globe, a pair of glasses, a pocket watch, and various pieces of jewelry. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures and forms of the objects against a dark background. The painting is signed and dated 'Pieter Claesz 1632' in the lower left corner.

The main features of metaphysical poetry can be summarized as the following:

- Wit or conceit is commonly used, but the wit or conceit is so odd that the reader usually loses sight of the thing to be illustrated. (This will be covered in another slide)
- The theme is peculiar. The theme is not decorated by conventional comparisons. Instead, it is illumined or emphasized by fantastic metaphors and extravagant hyperboles.
- Sensuality is blended with philosophy, passion with intellect, and contraries are ever moving one into the other.
- Complex rhythms are used.

Characteristics of Metaphysical Poetry

With a rebellious spirit, the metaphysical poets tried to break away from the conventional fashion of the Elizabethan love poetry. The diction is simple and echoes the words and cadences of common speech. The imagery is drawn from the actual life. The form is frequently that of an argument with the poet's beloved, with God, or with himself.

You MUST understand these things regarding Donne's style when we're done today, so pay close attention and ask me to clarify if you have questions regarding:

- **Metaphysical Conceit**
 - **Complex**
 - **Paradox**
- **Posed as an argument**

Metaphysical Conceit

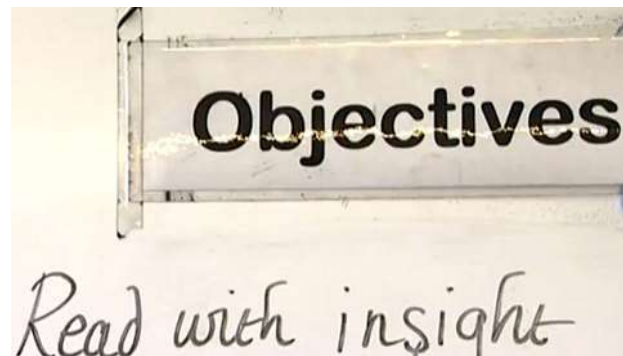


In Donne's day, conceit simply meant: idea.

- Metaphysical Conceit: combination of heterogeneous ideas yoked together by violence that is sustained throughout the poem.
- an extended metaphor that combines two vastly different ideas into a single idea, often using imagery.
- One of the most famous of Donne's conceits is found in "**A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning**" where he compares two lovers who are separated to the two legs of a **compass**.

These Poems are...Complex!

- Meant to make you think.
- “It makes demands upon the reader and challenges them to make it out. It does not attempt to attract the lazy and its lovers have always a certain sense of being a privileged class, able to enjoy what is beyond the reach of vulgar wits” (*The Metaphysical Poets* 17).



Paradox

- What is paradox?
 - An apparently untrue or self-contradictory statement or circumstance that proves true upon reflection or when examined in another light.

THERE ARE KNOWN KNOWN
THERE ARE THINGS THAT WE KNOW THAT WE KNOW, THERE ARE
KNOWN UNKNOWN
THAT IS TO SAY, THERE ARE
THINGS THAT WE NOW KNOW WE DON'T KNOW
BUT THERE ARE ALSO
UNKNOWN UNKNOWN
THERE ARE THINGS
WE DO NOT KNOW
WE DON'T KNOW
AND EACH YEAR WE DISCOVER
A FEW MORE OF THOSE
UNKNOWN
UNKNOWN

Argumentative Form

- Donne's poetry involves a certain kind of argument, sometimes in rigid syllogistic form. He seems to be speaking to an **imagined hearer, raising the topic** and trying to **persuade**, convince or upbraid him. With the brief, simple language, the argument is continuous throughout the poem.
- The poems forms force the reader to trace the argument throughout the entire poem.
- They always have a surface level meaning, and then an implication (explore some sort of conflict)



John Donne is famed for 3 things

1. A great visitor of ladies
2. A great frequenter of plays
3. A great writer of conceited verses

At his time, John Donne was famed as a **preacher**. Today, he is famed as a lyric poet. John Donne's conceit can be seen from his "Go catching the falling star" in which he listed many **impossible things**---the most impossible thing is a **woman's faith and heart**.



