

Metaphysical and Cavalier Poets

Selected Poetry and Nonfiction

by John Donne



READING 3 Evaluate the changes in sound, form, and figurative language in poetry across literary time periods. **6** Analyze the effect of contradiction and paradox in literary essays. **7** Analyze how the author's patterns of imagery and conceits reveal theme, set tone, and create meaning in metaphors, passages, and literary works.

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML12-516A

Meet the Author

John Donne 1572–1631

Donne's life and his poetry contained startling contrasts. Donne was born and raised a Roman Catholic, but he became a popular Anglican priest whose powerful sermons drew overflowing crowds to St. Paul's Cathedral in London. In his youth, he was a ladies' man who later became a devoted husband and the father of 12 children. He was both worldly and spiritual, dramatic and introspective, a doubter and a believer, a sensualist and an intellectual.

The Price of Being Catholic Donne was born into a Roman Catholic family at a time when Protestants were the majority and had no tolerance for religious ideas outside their own. He studied at Oxford University and Cambridge University, but he never received a degree, because he was a Roman Catholic and would not take an oath of allegiance to the Protestant queen. In 1593, Donne's brother died in prison, where he was sent for sheltering a Jesuit priest. Donne began to question his faith; he later abandoned Catholicism and became an Anglican priest in 1615 at the urging of King James I.

Impoverished by Love Besides religion, marriage also strongly influenced Donne's fortunes in life. In 1597, at the age of

25, Donne became the personal secretary of Sir Thomas Egerton, an official of the royal court. Four years later, Donne secretly married Egerton's 17-year-old niece, Anne More, without seeking her father's permission. When the marriage was discovered, Donne lost his job and was briefly imprisoned. For more than ten years, he battled poverty as his family grew. Donne described the situation as "John Donne, Anne Donne, Undone."

Art Reflects Life Death was a prominent theme in Donne's writing. During the Renaissance, medical knowledge was limited. It was not unusual for people to die well before the age of 50. Donne's own wife died at age 33, shortly after giving birth to their 12th child. Two of his children were stillborn, and others died at the ages of 3, 7, and 19.

"Holy Sonnet 10" (page 521) reflects Donne's concerns about death and salvation. Donne wrote "Meditation 17" (page 522) in 1623 while recovering from a serious illness. He was inspired in part by hearing the ringing of church bells to announce a person's death. "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (page 518) was written to console his wife, who was distressed over her husband's impending departure for France in 1611.

Author Online

Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML12-516B



DID YOU KNOW?

John Donne ...

- once sailed with Sir Walter Raleigh on a treasure-hunting expedition.
- had his portrait drawn while dressed in his burial shroud.
- wrote lines that inspired the titles of the novels *Death Be Not Proud* by John Gunther and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway.



LITERARY ANALYSIS: METAPHYSICAL CONCEIT

A device that often appears in metaphysical poetry is the **metaphysical conceit**, a type of metaphor or simile in which the comparison is unusually striking, original, and elaborate. While all metaphors and similes show likeness in two unlike things, a conceit compares two unlike things that may at first seem to have no connection whatsoever. In “Meditation 17,” for example, Donne compares humanity to a book in which each person makes up a chapter. As you read these selections, look for other examples of metaphysical conceits, and notice how Donne’s elaboration and subtlety allows you to make sense of the unusual comparisons.

READING SKILL: INTERPRET IDEAS

For centuries, Donne has been acclaimed for his ability to convey complex ideas in poetry and prose. Sometimes these ideas are expressed in the form of a **paradox**—a statement that seems to **contradict**, or oppose, itself but is actually true. To uncover Donne’s ideas in this type of statement, you will need to **interpret**, or explain the meaning of, the paradox. Some paradoxes may be complex and not easily understood, so it is important to

- locate the apparent **contradictory**, or contrasting, elements in the paradox
- examine the surrounding words and phrases

As you read the selections, use a chart to record the paradoxes and your interpretations.

<i>Selection</i>	<i>Paradox</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>“A Valediction”</i>	<i>“Our two souls therefore, which are one, / Though I must go, endure not yet / A breach, but an expansion”</i>	<i>Two people so closely connected cannot be separated when apart, only expanded.</i>



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

What is the role of DEATH in LIFE?

Death is not something we only face at the end of our lives; it influences us when we lose loved ones or even when we contemplate our own mortality. John Donne, who experienced the early deaths of his wife and some of his children, struggled to understand the meaning of death. His thoughts about mortality inspired some of his greatest works.

QUICKWRITE How has the knowledge of death affected your life? Has it made you more cautious or more fearful for your personal safety? Does it influence your relationships with others? Does it affect your appreciation of life’s pleasures? On a piece of paper, list three ways in which the knowledge of death influences you. Share your ideas with others.



A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

John Donne

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No;

5 So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,
10 Men reckon what it did and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
15 Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assuréd of the mind,
20 Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Analyze Visuals ►

What do the gestures and facial expressions of the figures in this painting suggest about their relationship?

5 melt: part; dissolve our togetherness.

7 profanation (prŏf'ə-nā'shən): an act of contempt for what is sacred.

8 laity (lā'y-tē): persons who do not understand the "religion" of love.

9 moving of th' earth: an earthquake.

11 trepidation of the spheres: apparently irregular movements of heavenly bodies.

12 innocent: harmless.

13 sublunary (sŭb'lŏō-nĕr'ē) **lovers' love:** the love of earthly lovers, which, like all things beneath the moon, is subject to change and death.

14 soul . . . sense: essence is sensuality.

16 elemented: composed.

19 inter-assuréd of the mind: confident of each other's love.



Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

25 If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the center sit,
30 Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
35 Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun. **A**

22 endure not yet: do not, nevertheless, suffer.

24 like . . . beat: Unlike less valuable metals, gold does not break when beaten thin.

26 twin compasses: the two legs of a compass used for drawing circles.

32 as that comes home: when the moving foot returns to the center as the compass is closed.

34 obliquely (ō-blēk'lē): not in a straight line.

35 firmness: constancy; **just:** perfect.



TEKS 7

A METAPHYSICAL CONCEIT

We know that a **metaphysical conceit** is a type of extended metaphor in which a poet makes an unusually striking, original, and elaborate comparison. A conceit often provides a key to the poem's theme. Reread lines 25–36. What is unusual about comparing two lovers to a compass? How does this comparison help express the speaker's love?

Literary Analysis

1. **Clarify** Why is the speaker trying to console his wife?
2. **Analyze** Reread lines 13–20. How would you describe the relationship between the speaker and his wife? Cite details in the poem to support your answer.

Holy Sonnet 10

John Donne

Death, be not proud, though some have calléd 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 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,
10 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. **B**

5–6 From rest . . . flow: Since we derive pleasure from rest and sleep, which are only likenesses of death, we should derive much more from death itself.

8 soul's delivery: the freeing of the soul from the body.

11 poppy: opium, a narcotic drug made from the juice of the poppy plant.

12 swell'st: swell with pride.

B INTERPRET IDEAS


What wishful **paradox** does Donne include at the end of his poem? Why is this reference to death paradoxical?

Literary Analysis

1. **Clarify** Why does the speaker state that death is not mighty or dreadful?
2. **Interpret** How do you interpret the statement "Death, thou shalt die"?

Meditation 17

John Donne

Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me and see my state may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that. The church is catholic,¹ universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member.² And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: all mankind is of one author and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and
10 every chapter must be so translated. God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. As therefore the bell **C** that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all; but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness. . . . Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? but who takes off his eye from a comet when that breaks out? Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world? No man is an island,
20 entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.³ If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory⁴ 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.  **D**

Language Coach

Multiple Meanings Lines 8 and 12 contain several words that have multiple meanings: *volume*, *bind*, and *leaves*. What does each word mean in this passage? How can you guess their meaning?

C METAPHYSICAL CONCEIT

Reread lines 8–13. What comparison is made in this conceit?

D INTERPRET IDEAS

What **paradox** do you find in lines 22–24? How would you interpret it?

1. **is catholic:** embraces all humankind.

2. **body which is my head . . . member:** Donne likens the church to the head, which controls every part of the body, and to the body itself, because it is made up of interconnected parts (the individuals who compose it).

3. **main:** mainland.

4. **promontory** (prŏm'ən-tŏr'ē): a ridge of land jutting out into a body of water.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What important church rituals does Donne describe in “Meditation 17”?
2. **Clarify** In “Meditation 17,” what event does the tolling bell announce?
3. **Clarify** Why does Donne feel that the tolling bell calls more to him than to most people?

Literary Analysis

4. **Analyze Simile** Reread lines 21–24 of “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.” How will the speaker’s marriage be similar to gold that has been beaten thin?
5. **Interpret Ideas** Review the chart you created as you read. Choose one **paradox** you identified, and explain how it connects to the **theme** of the work it appears in.
6. **Interpret Metaphysical Conceits** Explain the meaning of the conceits in the following passages:
 - “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” lines 1–6
 - “Meditation 17,” lines 8–13
 - “Meditation 17,” lines 19–22
7. **Draw Conclusions** Examine the ideas about mortality that Donne expresses in “Holy Sonnet 10” and “Meditation 17.” Use a chart like the one shown to record your response, and then draw conclusions about Donne’s view of mortality in general.
8. **Compare Texts** Compare Donne’s depiction of love in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” with Shakespeare’s depiction of love in “Sonnet 116” on page 329. Do the two speakers appear to agree or disagree? Cite evidence to support your answer.

<i>Selection</i>	<i>Ideas about Mortality</i>
<i>“Holy Sonnet 10”</i>	
<i>“Meditation 17”</i>	



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Literary Criticism

9. **Critical Interpretations** Donne has been characterized as a writer who “married passion to reason.” Reread “Holy Sonnet 10” and explain how this description does or does not apply to this poem. Consider Donne’s ideas and the techniques he uses to present them. Support your answer with evidence from the text.

What is the role of **DEATH** *in* **LIFE**?

Humans by definition are mortal, susceptible to death. What characters in literature or films are portrayed as immortal? How would being immortal change the way you lived your life?