

Information from: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-donne>

## **John Donne 1572-1631**

<http://digitaldonne.tamu.edu>

The English writer and Anglican cleric John Donne is considered now to be the preeminent metaphysical poet of his time. He was born in 1572 to Roman Catholic parents, when practicing that religion was illegal in England. His work is distinguished by its emotional and sonic intensity and its capacity to plumb the paradoxes of faith, human and divine love, and the possibility of salvation. Donne often employs conceits, or extended metaphors, to yoke together “heterogenous ideas,” in the words of Samuel Johnson, thus generating the powerful ambiguity for which his work is famous. After a resurgence in his popularity in the early 20th century, Donne’s standing as a great English poet, and one of the greatest writers of English prose, is now assured.

The history of Donne’s reputation is the most remarkable of any major writer in English; no other body of great poetry has fallen so far from favor for so long. In Donne’s own day his poetry was highly prized among the small circle of his admirers, who read it as it was circulated in manuscript, and in his later years he gained wide fame as a preacher. For some 30 years after his death successive editions of his verse stamped his powerful influence upon English poets. During the Restoration his writing went out of fashion and remained so for several centuries. Throughout the 18th century, and for much of the 19th century, he was little read and scarcely appreciated. It was not until the end of the 1800s that Donne’s poetry was eagerly taken up by a growing band of avant-garde readers and writers. His prose remained largely unnoticed until 1919.

In the first two decades of the 20th century Donne’s poetry was decisively rehabilitated. Its extraordinary appeal to modern readers throws light on the Modernist movement, as well as on our intuitive response to our own times. Donne may no longer be the cult figure he became in the 1920s and 1930s, when T.S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats, among others, discovered in his poetry the peculiar fusion of intellect and passion and the alert contemporariness which they aspired to in their own art. He is not a poet for all tastes and times; yet for many readers Donne remains what Ben Jonson judged him: “the first poet in the world in some things.” His poems continue to engage the attention and challenge the experience of readers who come to him afresh. His high place in the pantheon of the English poets now seems secure.

### **Additional comments from Clark:**

Early life as courtier; Early Career in Government; Late Career as Clergyman eventually holding highest clerical position in the Church of England

He wrote what is now termed METAPHYSICAL Poetry. “Most poets then aimed for sweet, smooth, musical-sounding verse... ‘I sing not siren-like, to tempt, for I am harsh.’ ...The new style he forged came to be called...metaphysical poetry – a term that reflected its intensity of intellect, its self-conscious invention, and its bold emotion. For the most part, [he] based the rhythm and sounds of his poems on colloquial English...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 almost seems to be lecturing the woman he is addressing. Whatever his tone, [his] speaker is always using his brains and bringing into the poems ideas from books of philosophy and theology. He also brings in images from everyday activities and trades [see the connections to Modern Literature?!] and from learned disciplines like law, medicine, and science.” (HRW 246).

\*\*\*As noted above, Donne became a major influence on Modern Verse particularly is his inventiveness with traditional verse techniques. Further his experiments with PROSE (seemingly well ahead of his time) became a model for an approach to the form over 200 years after his writing!

### **Donne's Major Work:**

Holy Sonnet: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44107/holy-sonnets-death-be-not-proud>

Most Famous: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44131/a-valediction-forbidding-mourning>

Most Famous Prose: <http://www.online-literature.com/donne/409/>