

John Donne

(1572-1631)

Biography

John Donne was born in London in 1572, of Roman Catholic parents. His mother was a direct descendant of Sir Thomas More's sister, while his father was a prosperous London merchant. Donne studied at Oxford and Cambridge, though he took no degree from either university because as a Roman Catholic he could not swear the required oath of allegiance to the Protestant queen, Elizabeth. He then travelled to Italy and Spain and, when back to London in 1597, he became secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, an influential statesman. Then Donne met and fell in love with Anne More, niece of Egerton's second wife. The two married secretly, probably in December 1601, and because of the marriage, moreover, all possibilities of a career in public service were dashed, and Donne found himself at age 30 with neither prospects for employment nor adequate funds with which to support his household. During the next 10 years Donne lived in poverty and humiliating dependence, while he repeatedly tried (and failed) to secure employment, and in the meantime his family was growing. In spite of his misery during these years, Donne wrote and studied assiduously, producing prose works and composing love lyrics, religious poetry, and complimentary and funerary verse for his patrons. Donne converted to Anglicanism and, after taking orders, he became Dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral, where he preached memorable sermons until his death, in 1631.

Songs and Sonnets (1590-1601)

A collection of poems which gave the poet fame, it shows how indebted Donne was to the Elizabethan conventions but also how new and experimental his poetry was, thus allowing him to overcome the literary tradition. Originality and variety characterise his choices, together with a taste for realism. The poems cover a wide range of topics and refer to several fields of human experience, as a result of new knowledge as well as recent discoveries and explorations. Donne weaves a rich pattern of intellectual images by making use of alchemy, mythology, sea voyages, cosmology, religion, etc.

Holy Sonnets (1617-1618)

A collection of sonnets dealing with love for God, sin, remorse and repentance, all feelings which prevailed in his soul after the conversion and the death of his beloved wife. The language used to deal with religion is also rather unusual and often witty.

Experimentation

Language and form become fields for new explorations in the **Metaphysicals**, a group of English lyric poets of the 17th century. The term was first used by Samuel Johnson (1744) to refer to poets like John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan

and Andrew Marvell. The main features of their poetry are the **metaphysical conceit** (a figure of speech that employs unusual and paradoxical images), **wit** and **irony**, **learned imagery**, **wordplay**, and **subtle argument**. Romantic and sensual love and humankind's relationship with God are the favourite fields of investigation.

- **Conceit.** A figure of speech, which is nothing but a complex and intricate metaphor using unusual or paradoxical symbols to hint at inner truths, express satire, display cunning, define or persuade. Unlike the Elizabethan and the Petrarchan conceit, this figure of speech does not merely decorate the poems, it is rather an instrumental part of the whole.
- **Wit.** An acute perception of the world expressed in a creative way. Together with cynicism, irony and wordplay it is the Metaphysicals' favourite way to interpret reality.
- **Rhythm.** Most of Donne's poems show a search for a harsh rhythm which contrasts greatly with the Elizabethan smoothness.
- **Register.** Together with the new rhythms, the tone of many poems by Donne is new to the poetical field. He often opens his compositions addressing the subject directly, thus giving his lines a prosaic tone. Some of his poems in fact may be defined as **dramatic monologues**, like *Sonnet 10*.