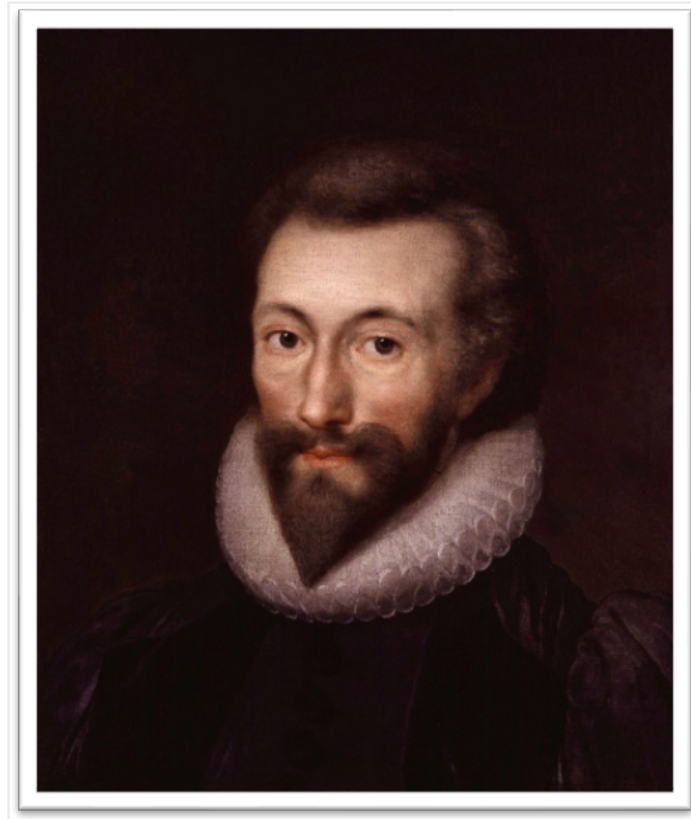


GANZ NOTES IN PART - John Donne on 21 April 2026



Britannica – “John Donne (born sometime between Jan. 24 and June 19, 1572, London, Eng.—died March 31, 1631, London) was a leading English poet of the Metaphysical school and dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London (1621–31). Donne is often considered the greatest love poet in the English language. He is also noted for his religious verse and treatises and for his sermons, which rank among the best of the 17th century.”

OVERVIEW

John Booty - John Donne is well characterized as an

Anglican Divine, one who combines extensive learning with a profound spirituality. Donne combines literary, scholarly, and spiritual gifts in ways which suggest that his poems, sermons, meditations and prayers are interdependent and best understood in relation to one another. Furthermore, although a deeply spiritual man, Donne was also of the earth, earthy. His spirituality was incarnational, his love poems and his *Holy Sonnets* illuminate one another, his sermons are in touch with the experience of ordinary, fallible human beings, and his meditations written during a serious illness are redolent with the feelings of a man experiencing pain, bedeviled by sundry fears, and yet confident in his God. The spirituality which emerges in reading poems, sermons, and meditations is one with which ordinary folk can identify, and indeed Donne knew this, and recognize that, as is true of Herbert's *The Temple*, his spiritual writings are intended to comfort and instruct those who read them.^[1]

[1] Donne, John. [*John Donne: Selections from Divine Poems, Sermons, Devotions, and Prayers*](#). Edited by John Booty and Bernard McGinn, Paulist Press, 1990, p. 1.

DONNE'S POETRY

***Britannica*, "John Donne" by Patricia Garland Pinka**

The first two editions of Donne's Poems were published posthumously, in 1633 and 1635, after

having circulated widely in manuscript copies. The Poems were sufficiently popular to be published eight times within 90 years of Donne's death, but his work was not to the general taste of the 18th century, when he was regarded as a great but eccentric "wit."

Because almost none of Donne's poetry was published during his lifetime, it is difficult to date it accurately. Most of his poems were preserved in manuscript copies made by and passed among a relatively small but admiring coterie of poetry lovers. Most current scholars agree, however, that the elegies (which in Donne's case are poems of love, not of mourning), epigrams, verse letters, and satires were written in the 1590s, the Songs and Sonnets from the 1590s until 1617, **and the "Holy Sonnets" and other religious lyrics from the time of Donne's marriage until his ordination in 1615.** He composed the hymns late in his life, in the 1620s. Donne's Anniversaries were published in 1611–12 and were the only important poetic works by him published in his lifetime.

...

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**conceit**" –
III.8.b. - 1556–1874 - † A person's capacity or faculty for imagining things; imagination; fanciful thinking. *Obsolete.*

From these explosive beginnings, the poems develop as closely reasoned arguments or propositions that rely heavily on **the use of the**

conceit—i.e., an extended metaphor that draws an ingenious parallel between apparently dissimilar situations or objects. ***Donne, however, transformed the conceit into a vehicle for transmitting multiple, sometimes even contradictory, feelings and ideas.*** And, changing again the practice of earlier poets, he drew his imagery from such diverse fields as alchemy, astronomy, medicine, politics, global exploration, and philosophical disputation.

...

In the poems of mutual love, however, Donne's lovers rejoice in the compatibility of their sexual and spiritual love and seek immortality for an emotion that they elevate to an almost religious plane.

BACKGROUND

Peter McCullough – on Donne, John (1571/2–1631)

Metaphysical poet, preacher, and dean of St Paul's. A Londoner, he was a member of a Catholic family, his mother's kin including the Jesuit Jasper Heywood, and Sir Thomas More. He entered Hart Hall, Oxford, in 1584. He entered Thavies Inn in 1591 and transferred to Lincoln's Inn in 1592. In 1596 he accompanied Essex and Raleigh to Cadiz and in 1597 to the Azores. During this time, he wrote his most famous satires and love poetry for private circulation among friends at the Inns of Court. He must have been reconciled to the C of E by 1598, when appointed secretary to the lord keeper, Sir Thomas Egerton, a post from which he was dismissed four years later owing to his secret marriage to Ann More. During the

next years he and his growing family lived in retired poverty. Around this period, he wrote *Biathanatos*, a casuistic defence of suicide, and in 1610 published *Pseudo-Martyr*, a defence of the Oath of Allegiance. In the next year he wrote a satire on the Society of Jesus, *Ignatius his Conclave*. He complied with the wish of King James and was ordained in 1615, whereupon he was appointed a royal chaplain and at the king's insistence granted an honorary doctorate from Cambridge. The following year he returned to Lincoln's Inn as reader in divinity. In 1621 he became dean of St Paul's where he reinvigorated preaching in the cathedral. After a serious illness in 1623 he published *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), dedicated to Prince Charles. He died in 1631 and was buried in St Paul's. His marble effigy, for which he posed during his last illness standing in his shroud, survived the Great Fire. In the American BCP (1979), and CW, feast day, 31 March.

Donne's secular poetry was mainly written in his twenties. **His religious poetry belongs mostly to his troubled middle years. Almost all of his works were printed posthumously.** His fame as a poet suffered eclipse after the Restoration but had a striking revival in the 20th cent. His dramatic style, capacity for introspection, and subtle blend of argument and passion attracted poets in revolt against the Romantic tradition, most notably T. S. Eliot. Eliot was far less complimentary about his sermons, which he found emotionally vulgar and manipulative. Like all sermons of the period, they were conceived as hour-long orations, although calibrated to the needs of very different congregations and occasions. Always on display in his

was an array of ancient and modern learning. Much of his patristic material was gleaned from secondary sources, but he knew the works of Augustine intimately. His court and cathedral sermons in particular are adorned with striking imagery, but the modern familiarity with excerpted purple passages obscures the more complex strategies of persuasion of the sermons as wholes. **Although in the pulpit he lamented the rents in Christendom, he was a consistently vehement critic of the Catholic Church, reserving a particular scorn for papal power and the Jesuits.** His great strength was as a moral and pastoral theologian, preaching as a sinner who has found mercy to other sinners. Although the contrast between Jack Donne, the youthful rake, and Dr John Donne, the divine, has been overdrawn, **there is no doubt that he was haunted by an intense consciousness of the gravity of sin and by the thought of physical death.** His great theme as a love-poet was the bliss of union; his great theme as a preacher was God's mercy. Both are given singular force coming from one who wrote so often of a love that was 'rage' and not 'peace', and who knew in experience the meaning of working out one's salvation with fear and trembling.^[1]

METAPHYSICAL POETS

Metaphysical Poets - The name given to a diverse group of **17th-century English poets** whose work is notable for its ingenious use of intellectual and theological concepts in surprising conceits, strange paradoxes, and far-fetched imagery. **The leading metaphysical poet was John Donne**, whose colloquial, argumentative abruptness of

rhythm and tone distinguishes his style from the conventions of Elizabethan love-lyrics. Other poets to whom the label is applied include Andrew Marvell, Abraham Cowley, John Cleveland, and the predominantly religious poets **George Herbert**, Henry Vaughan, and Richard Crashaw. In the 20th century, T. S. Eliot and others revived their reputation, stressing **their quality of wit, in the sense of intellectual strenuousness and flexibility** rather than smart humour. [Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford Quick Reference) (p. 367). Kindle Edition.]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**conceit**" – **III.10.b. - a1522** – A fanciful, ingenious, or witty expression, metaphor, turn of thought, etc.; a stylistic affectation. Later more generally: any elaborate, playful, or ingenious artistic device or concept.

Metaphysical Poets, name given to a group of English lyric poets of the 17th cent. **The term was first used by Samuel Johnson (1744)**. The hallmark of their poetry is the metaphysical conceit (a figure of speech that employs unusual and paradoxical images), a reliance on intellectual wit, learned imagery, and subtle argument. **Although this method was by no means new, these men infused new life into English poetry by the freshness and originality of their approach.** The most important metaphysical poets are John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Traherne, Abraham Cowley, Richard Crashaw, and Andrew Marvell. Their work has considerably influenced the poetry of the 20th cent. See studies by H. C. White (1936, repr. 1962), J. F. Bennett (3d ed. 1964), H. Gardner,

ed. (1967), G. Williamson (1967), P. Beer (1972), P. Grant (1974), and M. DiCesare, ed. (1988).^[2]

C of E *Church of England

St Saint

St Saint

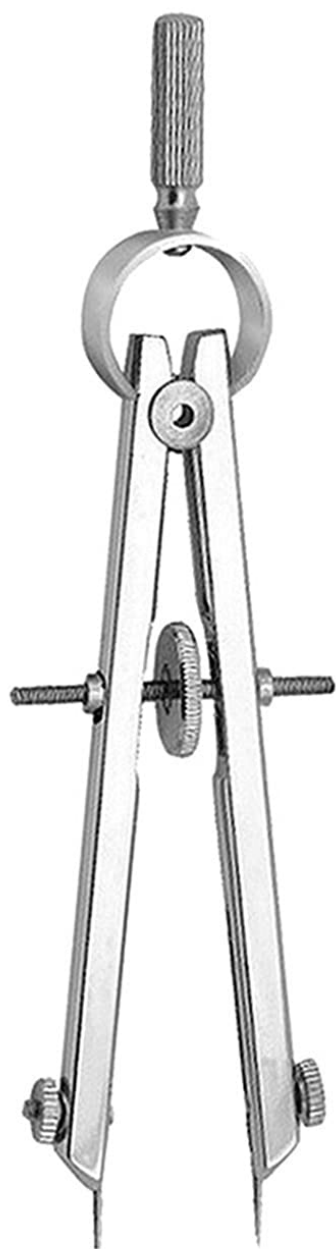
BCP Book of *Common Prayer

CW *Common Worship

cent. century.

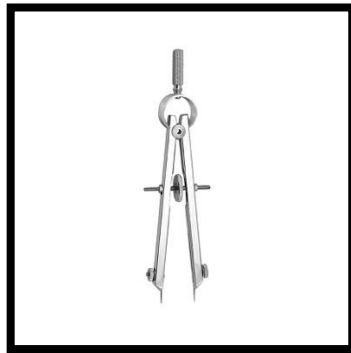
[1] McCullough, Peter. "[Donne, John.](#)" *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by Andrew Louth, Fourth Edition, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. 572–73.

[2] Paul Lagassé, Columbia University, [The Columbia Encyclopedia](#) (New York; Detroit: Columbia University Press; Sold and distributed by Gale Group, 2000).



GANZ NOTES - TNS 18,4
JOHN DONNE
(1572-1631; 59-YEARS OLD)
21 APRIL 2026

Wikipedia: "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is a metaphysical poem by John Donne. Written in 1611 or 1612 for his wife Anne before he left on a trip to Continental Europe, "A Valediction" is a 36-line love poem that was first published in the 1633 collection *Songs and Sonnets*, **two years after Donne's death**. Based on the theme of two lovers about to part for an extended time, the poem is notable for its use of conceits and ingenious analogies to describe the couple's relationship ... Donne's use of **a drafting compass as an analogy for the couple** – two points, inextricably linked – has been both praised as an example of his "virtuoso display of similitude", and also criticised as an illustration of the excesses of metaphysical poetry; despite detractors, it remains "the best known sustained conceit" in English poetry. As well as citing this most famous example, literary critics point to Donne's use of subtlety and precise wording in "A Valediction", particularly around *the alchemical theme* that pervades the text.



A draft-compass

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**alchemy**" - I.1. - c1390 - The branch of study and practical craft in the medieval and early renaissance period concerned with the nature and transformation of physical substances, esp. the transmutation of baser metals into

gold; the physical and chemical transformation of metals and other substances performed by practitioners of this craft. The chief goals of practical alchemy (the forerunner of modern chemistry and metallurgy) were the *elixir* (or philosopher's stone) which would transmute base metals into gold and/or prolong life indefinitely: the alkahest or universal solvent, and the panacea or universal remedy. However, many alchemical texts are more concerned with symbolic or mystical aspects of the study, and alchemy was frequently associated with astrology and other occult practices.

John Donne - "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"

As virtuous men pass mildly¹ away,
And whisper to their souls to go,²
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No:

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.³

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did, and meant;

¹ "**mildly**" - The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**mild**" - **1.a. - Old English** - With reference to a person having power, e.g. a ruler: gracious, clement, merciful, kind, indulgent; not harsh or severe. Now somewhat *archaic*. **1.d. - Old English** - Gentle and conciliatory in character, disposition, or behaviour; not easily provoked; not giving offence to others; not rough or fierce in manners. Of manners, behaviour, etc.: gentle, conciliatory.

² "**and whisper to their souls to go**" - Such a beautiful expression of a person who understands that death is not his or her enemy, who recognizes that his or her "soul" now must go to where it now belongs. Donne deliberately and without resistance or clinging sends it "home".

³ "**So let us melt**" - I think that this whole stanza is about John Donne and his wife making love before he departs - "to melt" - whose obvious and joyful physicality - "our joys" - must remain their secret, lest "public morality", hearing him describe their lovemaking openly would intrude upon something precious to them and try to make it seem gross (even though he speaks of lovemaking with his wife!). He "scolds" his wife - "**no tear-floods**" - because her emotions about his departure, for a time, can wreck the reality of what now they are sharing - sweet love and trust and closeness. *Goodbyes are filled with closeness* ... if one does not miss this fact by paying attention to the loss that is in a goodbye.

But trepidation⁴ of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.⁵

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented⁶ it.⁷

But we by a love so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,

⁴ **"trepidation"** – The *Oxford English Dictionary* - **3.a.** - **a1631** – *Astronomy*. A *libration* of the eighth (or ninth) sphere, added to the system of Ptolemy by the Arab astronomer Thabet ben Korrah, c950, in order to account for certain phenomena, esp. precession, really due to motion of the earth's axis. And **"libration"** - The action of librating; motion like that of the beam of a balance oscillating upon its pivot; swaying to and fro. It was not understood, yet, that the Earth "wobbles" on its axis.

⁵ **"Moving of th' earth ... trepidation of the spheres"** – Wonderful, and clever, subtlety, referring to but disguising their sexual sharing, continues in this stanza, in which he draws a simile to what they have experienced in their lovemaking as an "earthquake". When actual earthquakes happen – a very public event – "men reckon ... what it meant". But as we know, even today even the best scientists do not fully understand earthquakes, though the plate-tectonics description helps us understand. In the same way, when "public morality" intrudes on the lovemaking of a couple and presumes to understand it (and legislate about it!), it proves itself ignorant and meddling even perverse. Even the "trepidation of the spheres" (see note above about this astronomical "correction" for the "wobble" of the Earth on its axis – "trepidation"), which Ptolemaic scientists tried to understand and to express mathematically, is morally **"innocent"**; this "wobble" is about Nature and its mysteries that existed long before human beings were able to moralize their experience.

⁶ **"elemented"** – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at **"to element"** something: **1.** - **c1400-1657** - † *transitive*. To compound of elements. *Obsolete*. Lovers cannot bear absence from each other, because their "lovers' love" requires/needs the physicality of their beloved. One cannot "make love" in this "sublunary" way without the bodily presence of both; i.e., one cannot make love in a merely mental or abstract way.

⁷ **"Dull sublunary lovers' love"** – Instead of the traditional language of "earthly" (and therefore versus "heavenly" love), Donne uses "sublunary" (i.e., under the Moon, which in the stacking of the medieval view of the heavens, with the Earth at the center point, means Earth, the lowest point in the "stack" of seven heavenly bodies). **"Dull"** is meant to be descriptive not dismissive. The body's knowledge (what lovers share in their "sublunary" lives on Earth) is limited in its understanding of things other than itself, because it is not filled with light (intellect) that can comprehend the universe. But the body's knowledge is also a mode of understanding reality that "pure intellect" cannot sufficiently understand. Intellect can rule the body but it cannot become what the body uniquely is – in a riff on Pascal, "the body has its reasons which reason does not know."

Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.⁸

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.⁹

Sister Wendy Beckett, Hermit, in *Speaking to the Heart: 100 Favorite Poems* (2006) –
“All culminates in the one extended metaphor when he takes the conceit¹⁰ of the drafting-compass and turns it into a sublime image of human love.”

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two¹¹;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.¹²

Sister Wendy Beckett, Hermit, in *Speaking to the Heart: 100 Favorite Poems* (2006) –
concerning this poem: “I am aware of no more beautiful lines about what it means to love and to be loved than those in the second to last stanza.”

And though it in the center sit,

⁸ “**But we by a love so much refined**” – I am not sure whether in this stanza Donne is criticizing an overly-intellectual conception – “That our selves know not what it is” – of love and lovemaking – “Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss” – or beginning to make a transition, reminding his wife that their love, while body-based, also has a “so much refined” aspect that transcends merely physical presence to each other.

⁹ “**but an expansion**” – In this stanza he reminds his wife that their two souls are one, and that any apparent separation (by distance) does not tear a “breach” in their bond but actually expands it. We think of “distance makes the heart grow fonder”. And then the lovely simile of a block of gold being hammered into “airy thinness”, which makes the gold both more useful and more lovely.

¹⁰ “**conceit**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “conceit” – **III.10.b. - a1522** – A fanciful, ingenious, or witty expression, metaphor, turn of thought, etc.; a stylistic affectation. Later more generally: any elaborate, playful, or ingenious artistic device or concept.

¹¹ “**compasses**” – Draft-compasses or drawing-compasses are used in architectural drawings, and so they are about making plans/drawings for **building things**. But they also are used when drawing maps and charts, or as an instrument for plotting one’s way, and so they are about **finding one’s way**. Either of these uses of the draft-compass bring richness to Donne’s simile.

¹² “**twin**” – Donne is not talking about *two* drafting compasses, but one with two legs – the “pencil” leg and the “needle” leg that join at the “head” and move at the hinge or pivot or joint. Donne in the next stanza speaks of his “leg” of the compass as “th’ other foot”.

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, obliquely¹³ run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,¹⁴
And makes me end where I begun.¹⁵

¹³ “**obliquely**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**oblique**” – I.1. - ?a1425 – Having a slanting direction or position; not vertical or horizontal; diverging from a straight line or course.

¹⁴ “**just**” – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective “**just**” – I.1.a. - c1384 – That conforms to a required or agreed standard; right in amount, proportion, aesthetic quality, etc.; appropriate, correct.

¹⁵ “**Thy firmness**” – Such a lovely, perceptive imagery. When Donne describes his “going away” as to “run” and doing so “obliquely” (as in veering off from the straight and narrow), he describes how he, without his wife’s “firmness” could get lost out there in his travels and business. Her “needle leg” of the compass is what he counts on not to lose its hold, to keep him in her embrace and care no matter how far he “runs”. But also, her “bowing” – “it leans and hearkens” - in his direction implies both her submission to his mission and the courteous way that she holds onto him, not trapping him or imprisoning him.

GANZ NOTES - TNS 18,4
JOHN DONNE
(1572-1631; 59-YEARS OLD)
21 APRIL 2026

MEDITATION XVII - *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* by John Donne.

See poem and analysis at All Poetry: <https://allpoetry.com/No-man-is-an-island>

Britannica:

In 1623 Donne fell seriously ill with either typhus or relapsing fever, and during his sickness he reflected on the parallels between his physical and spiritual illnesses – reflections that culminated during his recovery in the prose *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, published in 1624.

In 1611 Donne completed his *Essays in Divinity*, the first of his theological works. Upon recovering from a life-threatening illness, Donne in 1623 wrote *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, the most enduring of his prose works. Each of its 23 devotions consists of a meditation, an expostulation, and a prayer, all occasioned by some event in Donne's illness, such as the arrival of the king's personal physician or the application of pigeons to draw vapours from Donne's head. The *Devotions* correlate Donne's physical decline with spiritual sickness, **until both reach a climax when Donne hears the tolling of a passing bell (16, 17, 18) and questions whether the bell is ringing for him.** Like Donne's poetry, the *Devotions* are notable for their dramatic immediacy and their numerous Metaphysical conceits, such as the well-known "No man is an Iland," by which Donne illustrates the unity of all Christians in the mystical body of Christ.

John Donne, "No Man is an Island"

No man is an island,
Entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,

A part of the main.¹

If a clod² 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,³
Because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls;⁴
It tolls for thee.

Analysis: The poem argues human interconnectedness through geographical metaphors, suggesting individual existence relies on collective humanity. **It presents**

¹ “**main**” – This is short for “mainland”. The contrasting of “clod” (humble, of little worth) and “mainland” (large estates) teaches that both wealthy and poor belong to each other, which then is reinforced later in the contrast between a “promontory” and a “manor”. But “**main**” also means: The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun “**main**” – **II.5.a. – 1579** – Short for [main sea n.](#); the open sea, or the high sea. Now chiefly *poetic*.

² “**clod ... promontory**” – “Clod” expresses something of barest consequence, humble (remember the word “humility” and “humble” have their root in the Latin *humus*, which means dirt. And what is a single “dirt clod” in contrast to a “promontory”? In a gently mocking way, using these earth-metaphors, he mocks the human penchant for making self-congratulatory separations: “I am a promontory in contrast to his or her clod.” Recall how we can insult someone by calling him or her: “What a clod!” And Donne reinforces this social critique of class when he speaks of a “manor” house (something grand) in contrast to some far humbler than that which you and I dwell in.

³ “**diminishes me**” – In the time of Pope Francis I, and, for example, his outstanding encyclical letter on the created world as our home, his line in Donne captures something similar. Donne is talking not just about a “spiritual” link that we each have to every other human being, but, I think, he is describing also an organic link – our “stuff” is a shared stuff. We think of certain Native American spiritualities which highlight both a spiritual and organic link among all created things.

⁴ “**for whom the bell tolls**” – In the long ages when there existed no electronic communication, human beings had to be able to communicate meaning, significant meanings, at a distance and to a large group. Church bells tolled, communicating many things: alarm (“Danger is near!”); a time to stop for prayer; to call people in from the countryside to congregate for some important reason; and, as in this poem, to signal someone’s death or to announce that a funeral was happening in the church. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “*memento mori*” – A warning or reminder of the inevitability of death, *esp.* a skull or other symbolic object. Later sometimes in weakened use: any grim, ominous, or sobering symbol.”

death as a universal experience that erodes communal bonds. The piece underscores shared vulnerability.

Metaphorical Language: The "island/continent" duality frames isolation versus unity, while "clod" and "promontory" equate minor and major losses. "Bell tolls" transforms a daily church ritual into a *memento mori*, merging spiritual and literal communal practices.

Form and Structure: Fragmented lines mirror the fragmentation of humanity it warns against. **Repetition of "as well as" emphasizes equivalency between small and large losses**, amplifying the central thesis through syntactic parallelism.

Historical and Linguistic Context: Written during Protestant-Catholic tensions, the poem's focus on universal human bonding contrasts with religious divides of Donne's England. References to "Europe" reflect early modern geopolitical awareness amid continental wars.

Comparison to Other Works: Unlike Donne's erotic paradoxes in earlier poems ("The Flea"), this devotional work from "Meditation XVII" prioritizes collective spirituality over individual wit. Its directness contrasts with his complex metaphysical conceits.

Less-Discussed Angle: The poem's economic language ("manor," "main") **subtly critiques aristocratic individualism**, framing land ownership as insignificant against mortality – an unusual stance from a Dean of St. Paul's embedded in hierarchical society.

Archaic Language: "Thee/thine" creates liturgical solemnity, evoking prayer books of Donne's time. "Clod" (earth clump) grounds abstraction in tactile imagery, typical of his concrete metaphysical style.

Era Norms: Rejects Renaissance humanist individualism by prioritizing collective identity. Resonates with plague-era literature **emphasizing communal fragility** yet departs from contemporary elegies by avoiding personal grief.

Obscurity Nuance: Often excerpted from "Meditation XVII," its standalone popularity overshadows the prose meditation's exploration of illness and divine refinement – context that sharpens its urgency.

Final Imperative: The closing command shifts from meditation to warning, mirroring Donne's sermons where rhetorical questions become calls to action. This contrasts with his lyric poems' unresolved tensions.⁵

⁵ See poem and analysis at *All Poetry*: <https://allpoetry.com/No-man-is-an-island>.

GANZ NOTES - TNS 18,4
JOHN DONNE
(1572-1631; 59-YEARS OLD)
21 APRIL 2026

DEADLY SINS -

The deadly, or capital, sins are now usually listed as seven: pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. Traditionally they have been classified as sins, not because they necessarily involve conscious and voluntary choices, but because they are basic tendencies toward evil, dangerous sources of sin, and habits of vice. The list suggests a complex of emotions, attitudes, desires, and ways of acting which pervert good, useful impulses and which stand in the way of love for God, self, and others. Though called “deadly,” these sins have not been viewed as inevitably “mortal,” especially when considered apart from the character and motivations of their subjects. At its best, the spiritual tradition’s reflection on the deadly sins has been situated positively within the context of the possibility of conversion from sin to virtue.¹

PRIDE -

The sin of *pride* is widely viewed as the “root of all the other sins” (Eccl 9:15). It is marked by a self-aggrandizement that clouds not only God’s sovereignty and others’ worth but also an appreciation of one’s true self. Distinct from healthy self-esteem and from a justifiable pride in one’s own God-given talents and achievements, **the sin of pride often involves disregard or contempt for ideas and judgments other than one’s own.** A chief aspect of pride is *vainglory*, which comprises the inordinate effort to show one’s own excellence and the insatiable

¹ Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 248.

need for approval. **A strong force for self-deception**, this aspect was often set off as a separate deadly sin in early lists.²

HOLY SONNET #6

[1] Death be not proud,³ though some⁴ have called thee

[2] Mighty and dreadful,⁵ for, thou art not soe,⁶

[3] For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,⁷

² Michael Downey, [*The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 249.

³ **"Death be not proud"** – Such a famous line. A direct addressing of Death and with defiance. He scolds Death for fundamentally misunderstanding what it is, as Pride causes: "It is marked by a self-aggrandizement that clouds not only God's sovereignty and others' worth **but also an appreciation of one's true self.**"

⁴ **"though some"** – Actually all, not "some". One must live a long time and be long in friendship with God to begin to understand that God has conquered Death.

⁵ **"mighty and dreadful"** – In fact, Death is "mighty and dreadful", even as Donne mocks its frightening presentation. Donne addresses Death, and scolds it, but only in the light of faith in Christ who conquered Death, stripping Death of its most effective power: the power to terrify us. In this we see Donne articulate the "two worlds" operating in our one world/life: (1) the world that faith reveals, and (2) the world that "the world" reveals and suggests is true. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at **"dreadful"** – **2.a. - a1325** – Inspiring dread or reverence; awe-inspiring; terrible, formidable; awful; to be dreaded.

⁶ **"thou are not soe"** – One can imagine Donne emphasizing that **"not"** with special force. In the light of faith in God, Donne has gained the confident insight that things just are not as they seem, not what "the world" is convinced is the case. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adverb **"so"** – **I.1. - Old English** – In the way or manner described, indicated, or suggested; in that style or fashion; that way. Contextually the sense may be 'in the same way', 'by that means', etc.

⁷ **"whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow, Die not"** – I am puzzled by the commas, in particular the one after "think'st". I think that it should read "whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow"; that is, "You think that you, Death, have overthrown a person, when, in fact, he or she does not die."

- [4] Die not, poore death,⁸ nor yet canst thou kill mee.⁹
- [5] From rest and sleepe,¹⁰ which but thy pictures bee,¹¹
- [6] Much pleasure,¹² then from thee,¹³ much more must flow,
- [7] And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
- [8] Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.*¹⁴
- [9] Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,¹⁵

⁸ “**poore death**” – The mocking tone continues, but it is now softer. Not even Death can escape the delusions of this world. It really thought it was “mighty” but it just isn’t ... except among those who have no knowledge of God. Among these latter and very large congregation, Death is what they worship either with fear or by threatening death on any who cross them.

⁹ “**nor yet canst thou kill mee**” – I am confused by the double negatives “nor” and “canst”. But I think Donne states that Death has not taken him *yet*. But notice the verb “kill”, which carries an aggressive, murderous meaning. Death kills, wants to kill, and will. But this line suggests that Death cannot act when it wants to act – “**nor yet**” but must wait on a higher power, on God, who decides when a person’s “span” is completed.

¹⁰ “**From rest and sleepe**” – From Death as a killer, what Death likes to image that it is, Donne here overturns what Death considers its obvious truth: that it, Death, erases human existence (this is the terror that we feel about death). But the truth is that Death has no power to do this to what God has made His own. Instead, death is non-existence but “rest and sleepe”.

¹¹ “**which but thy pictures bee**” – I don’t understand this. But what I think Donne means is that our *images* – “pictures” - of what Death is and its terrifying effects do not tell the truth.

¹² “**much pleasure**” – I think he is referring to “rest and sleepe”, which are lovely realities to contemplate, getting to those things after long and challenging lives in a complicated world.

¹³ “**and from thee**” – How startled Death is when it realizes that what it actually does, what it thinks is murder, is to be the means, the only means, by which we can finally find “rest and sleepe” and “much pleasure”.

* *deliverie.*: liberation.

¹⁴ “**Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie**” – This lovely description that contrasts the ugliness and difficulties of the world with the hope of finally coming to rest and peace.

¹⁵ “**Thou art slave**” – Death, in all of its exalted, “puffed up” self-admiration is forced to depend on “some” who believe its exalted claims. And to the degree that it must depend on human beings to give it power, it is a slave, ruled by the “masters” who accept that Death is a killer, a murderer.

[10] And dost with poyson, warre, and sicknesse dwell,¹⁶

[11] And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,¹⁷

[12] And better then thy stroake;¹⁸ why swell'st* thou then?

[13] One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,

[14] And death shall be no more; death,¹⁹ thou shalt die.*²⁰

1 Corinthians 15: ²² Just as all die in Adam, so in Christ all will be brought to life; ²³ but all of them in their proper order: Christ the first-fruits, and next, at his coming, those who belong to him. ²⁴ After that will come the end, when he will hand over the kingdom to God the Father, having abolished every principality, every ruling force and power. ²⁵ For he is to be king *until he has made* his enemies his footstool, ²⁶ and the last of the enemies to be done away with is death, *for he has put all things under his feet.*²¹

¹⁶ “**And dost with poyson**” – When Donne puts it this way, we see how Death is forced to live among what is ugly and deceitful and miserable and filled with despair. One can almost hear in Donne a compassion for the misery of proud Death. It has a miserable existence.

¹⁷ “**And poppie, or charmes**” – Donne returns to a mocking tone. He says that drugs or magic – perhaps referring here to these as medication for sickness – are also capable of giving “sleepe”.

¹⁸ “**And better then thy stroake**” – I think “then” means “than”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**stroke**” – **1.a. – 1297** – A blow with the hand or a weapon (*occasionally* with the paw of an animal, the claws or beak of a bird, etc.) inflicted on or aimed at a living being. Sometimes (now rarely) applied to the thrust of a pointed weapon.

* *swell'st*: puffed up with pride. The point being that “poppie” or “charmes” deliver a more graceful result than Death.

¹⁹ “**death, thou shalt die**” – A magnificent closing and with full emphasis on “thou”.

* *death, thou shalt die.*: See 1 Corinthians 15:26.

²⁰ John Donne, *John Donne: Selections from Divine Poems, Sermons, Devotions, and Prayers*, ed. John Booty and Bernard McGinn, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), 80.

²¹ *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), 1 Co 15:22–26.