

# *John Donne*

*(21 January 1572 – 31 March 1631)*

*With thanks to Shanghai University of Political Science and Law*  
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# Basic Biography

**Born:** 21 January 1572; London

**Died:** 31 March 1631 (59 years)

**Occupation:**

Poet, Priest, Lawyer

**Genres:**

Satire, Love poetry, Elegy, Sermons

**Subjects:**

Love, Sexuality, Religion, Death

**Literary movement:**

Metaphysical Poetry



## Early life:

❖ John Donne was born **on Bread Street in London, England**, into a **Catholic family** at a time when Catholicism was illegal in England.

❖ Despite the obvious dangers, Donne's family arranged for his education by the Jesuits which gave him a solid theological foundation.

❖ But his brother Henry Donne died of the plague, leading John Donne to begin questioning his Catholic faith.

❖ **Study:**

Donne was a **student at Hart Hall**, now Hertford College, Oxford, **from the age of 11.**

**After three years** at Oxford he **was admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge**, where he studied for another three years .

In 1591 he was accepted as a student at the **Thavies Inn legal school, one of the Inns of Chancery in London.** (19 years old)

**In 1592** he was admitted to **Lincoln's Inn, one of the Inns of Court.**



Thavies Inn



Lincoln's Inn  
Chancery Lane entrance



Library (left) and  
Bencher's rooms  
(right)

## ❖ Adult life:

- In 1601, Donne married Anne More, the niece of his employer, Sir Thomas Egerton. Egerton was outraged and had Donne imprisoned until the marriage was verified.
- John & Anne had 12 children— Anne died a few days after giving birth to the 12<sup>th</sup> in 1617.
- He was certainly in communication with the King, James I of England, who urged him to accept the Anglican priesthood.
- He finally gave into the King's wishes and **in 1615 was ordained into the Church of England.**

# Early Poetry

- When “Jack Donne” was a young man, he helped establish what came to be known as “Metaphysical Poetry”— which “represented a strong break in the English lyric tradition, marking the beginning of what was later called the metaphysical school, poetry characterized by intellectual argument, wit, and use of metaphysical conceits, unusual comparisons often employing mundane objects to convey spiritual or emotional ideas” (Maynor).
- Wrote funny, smart, sexy poems that were probably recited for amusement at parties and poker games. (“The Flea,” “Song”)





# Later poetry

❖ “Dr. Donne” focused his literary career on religious literature. He quickly became noted for his sermons and religious poems.

- 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.

## ❖ Death

- It is thought that his **final illness was stomach cancer**.
- He died on 31 March 1631, having left a body of work fiercely engaged with the emotional and intellectual conflicts of his age.
- though **only in manuscript** - his poems would not be printed and published until two years after his death

- John Donne is **buried in St Paul's Cathedral in London**, where a memorial statue of him was erected, with a Latin epigraph he probably composed himself.





- **Part of the house where John Donne lived in Pyrford.**



- A portrait of Donne as a young man in 1595
- (In the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London)

## *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.