



[Death, be not proud \(Holy Sonnet 10\)](#), by John Donne

In A Nutshell

No one's sure when John Donne's Holy Sonnets were written. Many people think that Donne composed them after the death of his wife in 1617, but that's just a guess. At any rate, they weren't published until 1633, two years after Donne's death. As the title suggests, they are about religion. But, not exclusively. Some of them are also about sex, violence, and, in this case, mortality. Donne was a preacher, and he wrote many electrifying sermons in his lifetime. However, he is best known for his poems, among which the Holy Sonnets stand out. They are deep, intense, personal, complicated, and playful.

Donne is commonly grouped among the Metaphysical Poets, a loose collection of writers from the early 17th century. Along with Donne, the most famous Metaphysicals are Andrew Marvell and George Herbert. We wish we could say that they have a clubhouse and a secret password, but, sadly, no. They weren't a formal group at all, and the term didn't exist until the famous literary critic Samuel Johnson coined it in the 18th century.

"Metaphysics" is the study of the ultimate reality beyond our everyday world, including questions about God, creation, and the afterlife. These poets are known for using symbols and images from the "physical" world to spin complicated arguments about such "metaphysical" concerns. They are known especially for the use of *wit*, which involves a lot of wordplay. When someone makes fun of you and you find the perfect comeback, that's wit. After you read this poem, you'll be convinced: if Donne was alive today, he'd be a master of the

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Does the speaker sound like a cocky trash-talker, or is he just trying to talk himself out of being afraid? Could it be both? What is the effect of addressing the poem to something that can 't talk back?
- 2 If you have to pick out the one most effective argument in the poem , which one would it be?
- 3 Does the comparison between death and sleep make sense outside of a theological context? Is the speaker justified in thinking that death will bring pleasure?

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