

# John Donne's Holy Sonnets



by John Donne

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## eNotes: Table of Contents

1. [John Donne's Holy Sonnets: Overview](#)
2. [John Donne's Holy Sonnets: John Donne Biography](#)
3. [John Donne's Holy Sonnets: Setting and Character](#)
4. [John Donne's Holy Sonnets: Themes](#)
5. [John Donne's Holy Sonnets: Four Sonnets Analyzied](#)
  - ◆ [Sonnet 10: Death, Be Not Proud](#)
  - ◆ [Sonnet 11: Spit in My Face](#)
  - ◆ [Sonnet 14: Batter My Heart](#)
  - ◆ [Sonnet 17: Since She Whom I Loved](#)
6. [John Donne's Holy Sonnets: Critical Overview](#)
7. [John Donne's Holy Sonnets: Bibliography](#)

## John Donne's Holy Sonnets: Overview

John Donne's religious poetry is collectively known as the *Divine Poems*; among these, the largest group is the nineteen Holy Sonnets. Donne began writing his love poetry in the 1590s, while still single, and did not turn to religious poetry until 1609, eight years after he had married Anne More, which resulted in his banishment from the royal court. During this time he had begun to renounce his Roman Catholic faith but had not yet converted to the Church of England, which he did in 1615. He became a minister two years later. The dramatic character of the Holy Sonnets suggests that Donne probably read them aloud to his friends, enhancing their argumentative tone, years before he began circulating them in manuscript form. Although not necessarily biographical in nature, the sonnets do reflect Donne's meditation on his religious convictions and address the themes of divine judgment, divine love, and humble penance. However, just as the persona of Donne's love poems speaks with passion, wit, and tenderness in seducing or praising his beloved, so the speaker in these sonnets turns to God in a very personal way, with a love passionate, forceful, and assertive yet fearful, too. Although the sonnets are predominantly Petrarchan, consisting of two quatrains and a sestet, this form is often modified by an inclusion of a Shakespearean couplet or other variation in structure or rhyme. Donne probably wrote all but two of the Holy Sonnets between 1609 and 1611. Dating Sonnets 18 and 19 is more difficult because they were not discovered until the nineteenth century. Along with the love poems,

the first seventeen Holy Sonnets were published in the collection *Love Songs and Sonnets* in 1633, a few years after Donne's death.

## John Donne's Holy Sonnets: John Donne Biography

Born into a prosperous Roman Catholic family in 1572, John Donne was educated by Jesuits before he entered Oxford and then later studied at Cambridge, and scholars find that the meditative form of the sonnets reflect his Jesuit schooling. He did not graduate from either school, however, because his faith led him to refuse to take the Oath of Supremacy, which acknowledged the king as the head of the Church. After participating in several military expeditions, Donne accepted a post as secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, an important member of the court. In 1601 he became a member of Parliament, but his political aspirations were dashed when he secretly married Egerton's seventeen-year-old niece. After spending a few weeks in Fleet Prison as a result of his elopement, Donne was dismissed from his post and began a quiet and not particularly successful career in law. However, during this time he continued to write his love poetry, which he had begun in the 1590s. He also started writing anti-Catholic polemics, signaling his renunciation of Catholicism. Although he converted to Anglicanism, scholars debate to what extent he understood God in terms of the tenants of Calvinism, including predestination, sin, and grace. By 1607 King James was encouraging Donne to take Holy Orders in the Church of England, but Donne refused. However, by 1609 he began writing his nineteen Holy Sonnets, a documentation of his religious meditations as well as a symbolic turning point in his career. In 1615 Donne finally entered the ministry, and in 1621 he was made Dean of St. Paul's, four years after the death of his beloved wife. During a time when preaching was considered both spiritual devotion and dramatic entertainment, Donne's witty and erudite style captured the attention of influential people, and he preached to great congregations. As he became more devout and his life neared its end, he became obsessed with the idea of death, preaching what he called his own funeral sermon a few weeks before he died in 1631.

## John Donne's Holy Sonnets: Setting and Character

A sense of place does not seem significant to the Holy Sonnets, but each does invoke a particular moment of time that is important to the speaker. These moments are related to the state of the speaker's soul and cause him to speak, addressing a particular audience, who is usually God but is sometimes his soul, Christ, Death, or angels. As a result, the Holy Sonnets have a distinctly dramatic tone between speaker and audience, although the problems of the speaker are seldom resolved in the course of the poem. He frequently expresses his ardor for God through metaphors of sexual passion, demanding a relief attained only through physical pain that will purify him of his sins. In Sonnet 1, for example, the speaker opens by asking "Thou," who is God, to "repair [him] now" for he "run[s] to death" and feels "terror" because of his sins. Only when he looks upon God, continues the speaker, can he "rise again," a metaphor of sexual desire as well as redemption. Sonnet 5 uses images and figures of speech to create a natural world with an "endless night," "new lands," and "new seas," all functioning as ways to show contrition, and the speaker concludes his address with an imperative that commands more than asks God to "burn" him in order to "heal" him, thus evoking an image of fire that paradoxically connotes purification as well as lust. The speaker in Donne's Holy Sonnets is a man who sometimes orders, sometimes pleads with, and other times questions God or Death. He considers himself a sinner in constant battle with a foe that is the Devil, needing God's grace to win this fight and become, in effect, freed of the world and the flesh, cleansed for an eternal life after death.

## John Donne's Holy Sonnets: Themes

Donne treats themes of sin, grace, and redemption in his Holy Sonnets, for his God, though loving, righteously will punish the transgressions the speaker very adamantly admits. The Devil lurks, ready to tempt him, and so he calls on God to make him strong enough to resist the Devil or to purify him after he succumbs

to temptations: in either case, the speaker suggests, punishment is necessary. Thus, one thematic treatment of divine love involves fear and despair rather than hope and trust. The speaker desperately wishes to go to Heaven and to escape Hell but generally presents himself as such a miserable sinner that his chances of getting there are remote, for God would be just, if harsh, in banning him from eternal happiness. Significantly, however, the speaker's tone suggests that he experiences an emotional intensity in the relationship he has with God, sometimes eagerly asking for the punishment he deserves so that afterward he will be united with the God he loves. In this way, "teach me how to repent" (Sonnet 7, line 13) becomes a main theme of some sonnets, as does "Satan hates me, yet is loathe to lose me" (Sonnet 2, line 14).

However, sometimes the speaker seems to blame God, complaining about ill treatment rather than humbly petitioning for grace. In such moments, the tone (which becomes argumentative, petulant, or accusing) modifies the themes of sin, grace, and redemption. When in Sonnet 2 the speaker cries out, "Why doth the Devil then usurp in me? / Why doth he steal, nay ravish that's Thy right?", he does so as though it were God's fault that the speaker plunges himself into sin. He seems to deliver God a moral ultimatum: "Except Thou rise and for Thine own work fight, / Oh I shall soon despair." The speaker arrogantly puts all the responsibility on God, having in the first part of the poem set out in lawyerlike terms the contractual relationship of creature and Creator, sinner and Redeemer. Somewhat differently, Sonnet 16 uses metaphors of law such as "jointure," "legacy," "two wills," "invest," "statutes," "law and letter," and "law's abridgment" to make his case for salvation before God.

The poems' sexual imagery carries themes of the power of the speaker's devotional love as well as the paradoxical nature of God's love for his creatures and His power over them. Sonnet 18, opening with "Show me, dear Christ, Thy spouse so bright and clear," concludes with the paradox that Christ, the bridegroom of the Church, is pleased when His bride is sexually possessed by as many men as possible: "Who is most true and pleasing to Thee then / When she is embraced and open to most men." Once again the speaker humbles himself, suggesting he is satisfied to be one of many of Christ's lovers, a sort of cuckold, if such is the best that God will give him. In one particularly powerful moment of Sonnet 14, the speaker presents himself as a masochistic bride that entreats God to make him "chaste" by "ravishing" him, using the rather shocking conceit of God as a rapist. Perhaps Donne's real point in conceits such as this is that divine truth inevitably presents itself in terms that seem absurd or self-contradictory to earthly wisdom.

## John Donne's Holy Sonnets: Four Sonnets Analyzied

### Sonnet 10: Death, Be Not Proud

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so,  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow,  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;  
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

A mixture of the Petrarchan and Elizabethan forms, Sonnet 10 is structured with an abba, abba, cddc, ee rhyme scheme. Each of the first two quatrains consists of a single sentence that apostrophizes Death, and the

concluding sestet shapes itself as a four-line question followed by a succinct though paradoxical answer in the concluding couplet to the central issue of the poem: Death should not be proud, because it, like human beings, “shalt die.” The poem is argumentative in tone, with the speaker attempting to humble Death partly in an effort to quell his own fears that he will physically die but partly to assert his spiritual faith that a greater eternal life makes a physical death ultimately insignificant. Ironically, in his argument that Death should not be proud, the speaker himself becomes rather arrogant, for in putting Death “in its place” he, the speaker, feels stronger and less fearful.

The first quatrain introduces the central metaphor of personifying Death as “mighty and dreadful” only to dismiss these qualities with a quick “for thou art not so” and the condescending adjective “poor,” as if Death simply does not understand how really unimportant it is in the grand scheme of God’s plans. The rhyme of “thee” and “me” establishes the conflict the speaker creates between himself and Death, and the word “overthrow” repeats the situational metaphor that Death and he are in a battle, the stakes of which, as the poem goes on to establish, are his life and immortal soul. The second quatrain indicates, however, that this battle is not bloody, for Death is only a false notion to begin with. Because “rest and sleep,” which are “pictures” of death, provide “pleasure,” Death itself must necessarily offer even more respite, which is why men often seek it: to find rest for their bones and freedom for their souls. Reducing Death to even lower status, the speaker continues to insult Death in the succeeding lines. It is a “slave,” which contrasts starkly with its own notion of being “mighty and dreadful,” and is akin to “poison, war, and sickness” as well as “poppy or charms” in its ability to destroy or seduce. Having established these qualities as evidence, the speaker presents his key question: if such is the case, how can Death think itself important? The word “swell’st” connotes the falseness of such pride, suggesting that it puffs itself up to hide its own misgivings about itself. Death is so insignificant, in fact, that “One short sleep past, we wake eternally / And death shall be no more.” The lower case “d” reduces the importance of death even more, putting it in the third person and as an object, denying it the importance of a subject and living idea. Thus, with concluding “Death, thou shalt die,” the speaker at once utters a paradox, which is that death permits eternal life as well as leverages his own importance, for in condemning Death to a sentence of death, he obtains control over it and therefore over his fears of it as well. Indeed, it is the voice of a preacher more than a supplicant of God that utters these final words in the poem.

## Sonnet 11: Spit in My Face

Spit in my face, you Jews, and pierce my side,  
Buffet, and scoff, scourge, and crucify me,  
For I have sinn’d, and sinne’, and only He,  
Who could do no iniquity, hath died.  
But by my death can not be satisfied  
My sins, which pass the Jews’ impiety.  
They kill’d once an inglorious man, but I  
Crucify Him daily, being now glorified.  
O let me then His strange love still admire;  
Kings pardon, but He bore our punishment;  
And Jacob came cloth’d in vile harsh attire,  
But to supplant, and with gainful intent;  
God cloth’d Himself in vile man’s flesh, that so  
He might be weak enough to suffer woe.

The speaker opens the first quatrain of this poem with a meditation on the suffering of Christ by addressing “you Jews,” whom he imagines as responsible for the crucifixion, following the misunderstanding current in the seventeenth century. He is so conscious of his own sins that he tells the Jews to do to him what they did to Christ: “Spit in my face...pierce my side, / Buffet, and scoff, scourge, and crucify me.” The six vivid verbs gain in intensity, following the stages of Christ’s suffering, and we can feel the speaker’s meditative identification with the scene on Calvary. Sibilants predominate, dragging out the effect of the experience, and

the speaker's pain is great for he realizes that he is guilty of wrongdoing and, therefore, deserves such treatment, while Christ "Who could do no iniquity, hath died." The colon that concludes the quatrain announces the shift in tone in what follows, indicated by "but," for the speaker now broods as he explores the theological significance of the scene of the crucifixion. His own death, much less his suffering, cannot atone for his sins, which surpass "the Jews' impiety," for although they killed "once an inglorious man," the speaker crucifies Christ "daily, being now glorified." His point is that the Jews did not know they were murdering the Son of God, but the speaker does have that knowledge yet continues to sin nevertheless. This recognition prompts another shift in tone as he reflects that he cannot understand this "strange love" of Christ, who endured this treatment, which in turn prompts a sense of wonder that anyone could bear such punishment as that which Christ bore for him out of love. The reference to Jacob in lines 11 and 12 initiate an analogy that indicates the speaker's intellectual immersion in the mystery of "God made flesh" and the power of God's love. Although Jacob gained his father's blessing by disguising himself in the clothing of his brother, "God cloth'd Himself in vile man's flesh, that so/ He might be weak enough to suffer woe." Thus, this sonnet does not argue, seek penance, or show fear. Rather, the speaker, a mere man who daily conspires in Christ's suffering, prayerfully and humbly reflects on God's love. Using the word "vile" twice (lines 11 and 13) in describing the human condition, the speaker also uses it to address his own feelings for himself in his continued sinful life.

## Sonnet 14: Batter My Heart

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurp'd town to'another due,  
Labor to'admit you, but oh, to no end;  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly'I love you, and would be lov'd fain,  
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;  
Divorce me,'untie or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you'enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

In this sonnet, the speaker addresses God in a violent tone carefully contained within a blend of the Petrarchan and Elizabethan forms of the sonnet, as if he is using structure to control the experience he is expressing,

which is a desperate plea for spiritual renewal. The first quatrain presents a series of emotional commands, and the second explains more calmly why he needs God's help. The beginning of the sestet, "Yet dearly I love you," signals another change in tone, only to revert again to emotional commands as the poem winds up in the final couplet with powerful sexual imagery containing one of Donne's most famous metaphysical conceits—that of the speaker imagining himself as a woman wanting God to "ravish" him.

The verbs of the opening quatrain are in triplicate, reflecting the "three-person'd" God the speaker addresses. "Batter my heart," he begins, using a conceit of a tinker mending pots, escalating from "knock, breathe, shine" to "break, blow, burn." The alliteration of these verbs as well as their onomatopoeic qualities contribute to the power of their effect. The paradox of this opening conceit is that just as a damaged pot can be repaired by pounding it to get out the nicks, so the speaker's soul can be renewed if God similarly does violence to it. The aggressive if not cruel connotations of "break, blow, burn" give way to the dominant conceit in the second quatrain, where the speaker imagines himself a town that has been "usurped" by an enemy and cannot break free. He then pushes that idea further by indicating he is "betroth'd" to the enemy that has conquered him. Thus, by the end of line 10, the speaker has moved from the rather homely metaphor of a pot tinker, to one of a besieged town, to the sexual connotations of being promised (as the spoils of war) to another. Throughout this development in situation, the speaker presents himself as rather pathetic, wanting punishment. Even more, he presents himself as feminine, a sort of captive princess who is devoid of "reason," "weak," and "untrue" while being "betroth'd" to the enemy, who is Satan. "Yet" and "but" in the first two lines of the sestet suggest his vacillation, another indication of his weakness that can be perceived as feminine. However, in demanding that God "divorce" him in line 11, the speaker complicates the tone, returning to the imperative of the opening, "batter my heart." Here, too, the speaker piles on the verbs: "divorce," "untie," "break," "take," "imprison," "enthrall," and "ravish." As he does so, they accumulate in paradox, with "enthrall," which means to charm or enslave, contrasting with "free" and "ravish." Together they result in another contradiction, "chaste." The speaker's preoccupation with his desire is signified with his repetition of "me" five times in the last four lines, reinforced by the rhyme of "free."

## Sonnet 17: Since She Whom I Loved

Since she whom I loved hath paid her last debt  
To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,  
And her soul early into heaven ravished,  
Wholly on heavenly things my mind is set.  
Here the admiring her my mind did whet  
To seek Thee, God; so streams do show the head;  
But though I have found Thee, and Thou my thirst hast fed,  
A holy thirsty dropsy melts me yet.  
But why should I beg more love, when as Thou  
Dost woo my soul, for hers off'ring all Thine:  
And dost not only fear lest I allow

My love to saints and angels, things divine,  
But in Thy tender jealousy dost doubt  
Lest the world, flesh, yea, devil put Thee out.

Addressing the subject of his love for his wife and his grief over her death, the topic of this sonnet is unique in the collection and dates when it was written, which is after 1617 (when Anne died at the age of 33, having just borne their twelfth child).

The poem opens with the speaker apparently resigned to the loss of “she whom [he] loved.” Now that she has died, he is able to set his mind “Wholly on heavenly things.” However, we can see that his acceptance of her death is not complete, for he refers to her as “my good” and describes her death in terms of being “ravished,” carrying the sexual connotations of God stealing his wife from him. The word “early” in line 3 also carries a sense of disagreement, as if God took her before it was time for her to go. In the second quatrain, the speaker mildly complains about his wife’s death because, after all, she enabled him to love God more: she “whet” his desire for God. Just as “streams” eventually lead one to their “head” or point of origin, so she led him to God. However, without her, loving God is not sufficient, and in fact his love for God has caused him to love his wife even more. The end words of each of the eight lines of the first two quatrains rhyme; furthermore, each concludes with a plosive “d” or “t.” The totality of these sounds signals an abruptness the speaker experiences and resents in the event of his wife’s death.

There are other indications that the speaker disputes God’s decision in taking away his wife and is uncomfortable with why He did this. The speaker’s use of “but” three times is particularly significant. First he says, “But though I have found Thee,” his love for God “hast fed” his “thirst” for love, causing him to need yet more love, such as that which he shared with his wife. With the second “but” he questions why he should “beg more love” from God when the love his wife gave him was God’s to begin with—“hers off” ring all Thine.” Understanding God as a lover who “woo[s] [his] soul,” the speaker wonders whether God took his wife because He wanted all of the speaker’s love for himself. With the third “but,” the speaker more aggressively accuses God of taking away his wife because He was jealous of his love for her: “But in Thy tender jealousy does doubt / Let the world, flesh, yea, devil put Thee out.” The word “tender” mitigates “jealousy” yet refers to God; however, “doubt,” which in this case denotes fear, seems to refer also to the speaker. Perhaps the real conclusion here is that the bereaved speaker also saw his wife, representing the “world” and “flesh,” as having been a temptation to deadly sin and therefore must accept her loss so that he can love God more.

## John Donne’s Holy Sonnets: Critical Overview

Donne’s Holy Sonnets were probably read very little during his lifetime, in part because of the sometimes scandalous manner in which he referred to God. In reading the sonnets, one frequently hears echoes of Donne’s most passionate love poetry. Some critics have said that, had the Holy Sonnets been circulated, they would have constituted a black mark on his reputation as an earnest and godly preacher. However, it is this very quality that keeps Donne’s devotional poetry alive in the public imagination today. The Holy Sonnets offer a unique voice, thrilling readers as they transgress the decorous bounds of devotion.

Bracketing the shocking treatment of God and sin in the Holy Sonnets, later generations of critics such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope faulted Donne’s poetry for the lack of regularity in its rhythm and the sometimes contorted language of its conceits. Dryden first used the term “metaphysical” to criticize Donne’s “excessive use of philosophy,” and Samuel Johnson used it to describe poets who wrote to “show their learning.” Johnson also criticized Donne for what became known as the “metaphysical conceit” in which

(said Johnson) “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.” As a result, by the eighteenth century, John Donne as a poet was forgotten. It was not until the twentieth century that John Donne was resurrected as one of the greatest of English poets. This was in large part due to T. S. Eliot’s essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921), which praised that which Dryden and Johnson condemned. Eliot argued that Donne’s poetry possesses a capacity to synthesize emotional and intellectual experience so that the reader can “feel...thought as immediately as the odor of a rose.” Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, critics have studied Donne to understand the tension, paradox, and ambiguity in his poetry. In addition, scholars are often concerned with the religious ideologies contained in the Holy Sonnets, their meditative structure, and the extent to which they speak of the biography of the man John Donne.

## John Donne’s Holy Sonnets: Bibliography

Abrams, M. D., et al., ed. 1986. “John Donne.” *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th edition, Vol. I. New York: W. W. Norton. This anthology provides helpful footnotes that explain some of the language in the poems.

Clements, Arthur L., ed. 1992. *John Donne’s Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*, 2nd edition. New York: W. W. Norton. This essential scholarship offers authoritative texts as well as gloss and notes on the poems. Also included are a series of essays tracing important scholarship on Donne. One section provides an overview of seven different treatments of “Batter My Heart.”

Gardner, Helen. 1952. *John Donne: The Divine Poems*. Oxford: Clarendon. Gardner explores the “meditative exercise,” which she says Donne learned from the Jesuits, that provides the foundation for the first sixteen sonnets. “The influence of the formal mediation lies behind the Holy Sonnets not as a literary source but as a way of thinking,” she explains.

Gardner, Helen, ed. 1961. *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Although current only up to the mid-twentieth century, the collection traces and clarifies the changing literary attitudes toward Donne.

O’Connell, Patrick F. 1981. “The Successive Arguments of Donne’s Holy Sonnets.” *Philological Quarterly*, Vol. 60, pp. 323-342. O’Connell tries to group the sonnets according to their argument, seeking a logical development in their order.

Warnke, Frank J. 1987. *John Donne*. English Author Series. Independence, KY: Twayne. Warnke provides an overview of Donne’s biography, reputation, and influence as well as some characteristics of his different types of poetry.