

Death, be not proud



POEM TEXT

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



THEMES



THE POWERLESSNESS OF DEATH

In this sonnet, often referred to by its first line or as “Holy Sonnet 10,” the speaker directly addresses death, seeking to divest it of its powers and emphasize that man, though fated to die, is more powerful than death itself. The poem paints a picture of death as prideful—vain, even—and works to deflate death’s importance by arguing firstly that death is nothing more than a rest, and secondly that following this rest comes the afterlife, which contradicts death’s aim of bringing about a final end. With death’s powerlessness proven by the end of the poem, it is death itself, not man, who is going to die.

The speaker clearly argues against death being treated as something strong and important. In essence, he reasons that nobody who dies is actually dead. Though death is personified as a boastful figure that proudly trades on its reputation as “mighty and dreadful,” the speaker, through logical argument, aims to show death as petty and weak. In order to build this picture of “poor death” as a pitiable figure, the speaker directly confronts death, insisting that “nor yet canst thou kill me” and quickly establishing the poem as a message of defiance.

Death is then compared to sleep, one of the most commonplace and beneficial of all human activities. People generally feel good after sleep and rest, the poem reasons, so why shouldn’t they feel good after death? Death is simply a rest for men’s “bones”—their physical selves—while their souls move on to the afterlife.

Having established death as nothing more than a restful passage between life on earth and the eternal life, the speaker presents death’s more fearful properties—represented by images like the grim reaper—as comically inaccurate. One can read the speaker’s declaration that “death, thou shalt die” as his assertion that that this *idea* of death as something frightening and omnipotent will meet its end. The speaker of the poem thus aims to flip death on its head—its pride is misplaced because it is nothing for people to be afraid of. The speaker achieves this by literally talking down to death, making a mockery of its inflated idea of itself.

The poem also paints death as “slave” to earthly things, further emphasizing death’s powerlessness. Death is associated with “fate, chance, kings ... desperate men ... poison, war, and sickness.” It is completely of the earth, the speaker implies, and depends upon earthly things for its existence. Death is not a master of anything, then, but a slave.

Even as a form of rest, death isn’t all that impressive. Indeed,



SUMMARY

The speaker directly addresses and personifies Death, telling it not to be arrogant just because some people find death scary and intimidating. In fact, death is neither of these things because people don’t really die when death—whom the speaker pities—comes to them; nor will the speaker truly die when death arrives for him.

Comparing death to rest and sleep—which are like images of death—the speaker anticipates death to be even more pleasurable than these activities. Furthermore, it’s often the best people who go with death—which represents nothing more than the resting of the body and the arrival of the soul in the afterlife.

Death is fully controlled by fate and luck, and often administered by rulers or people acting desperately. The speaker points out that death is also associated with poison, war, and illness. Drugs and magic spells are more effective than death when it comes to rest. With all this in mind, what possible reason could death have for being so puffed up with pride?

Death is nothing but a mere sleep in between people’s earthly lives and the eternal afterlife, in which death can visit them no more. It is instead death—or a certain idea of death as something to be scared of—that is going to die.

the speaker mentions “poppy” (opiate drugs) and “charms” (magic and spells) as better means of obtaining rest. Thus whichever way death is looked at, it’s inferior to something else. It is, essentially, irrelevant, summed up by the speaker’s question, “why swell’st thou then?” The speaker asks death what it *actually* has to be prideful about.

Overall, the poem's presents death as having just one function: to transition people between life and the afterlife. With its fearsome power dispelled, death itself can die.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Line 8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 11-14



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

*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.*

As with many of Donne's poems, "Death, be not proud" starts boldly. While a sonnet might often be used to address a lover, here death itself is personified and instantly introduced as the recipient of the poem. The reader is, essentially, eavesdropping on the speaker's address to death. The word itself is capitalized—"Death"—which makes the personification obvious by turning the word into a proper noun. The poem also begins with [apostrophe](#), which makes it clear that "Death" is the intended listener.

By personifying death, the speaker imbues it with the undesirable human characteristic of misplaced pride. Death has a self-inflated sense of importance and trades on its reputation as fearsome and final. The speaker acknowledges that some people view death in this way, but makes it clear that they shouldn't—and that the rest of the poem will prove why.

Lines 2-4 expand on the opening proposition that Death is wrong to feel proud, and that it is neither mighty nor dreadful. Death thinks that it can "overthrow" life, which, as the fourth line clarifies, means "kill people." Here, Death is characterized as an aggressor. But the speaker states very clearly that this aggression is misplaced because, essentially, nobody ever actually dies.

This is, of course, a [paradoxical](#) statement—the poem doesn't really intend to deny the existence of death. Instead, it takes the Christian belief in the eternal afterlife as proof that death is really nothing at all. Though the afterlife has not yet been

mentioned, it informs the atmosphere of the quatrain's proposition. Again, this sets up the standpoint of the poem's argument and it is from here that the speaker must prove why this argument holds true.

In line 3, the [alliterative](#) use of /th/ sounds creates a delicate quality that juxtaposes with the idea of death as a powerful, almighty figure. The [enjambment](#) from lines 3 to 4 suspends the sentence—the reader, and Death as the poem's addressee, need to get to line 4 to understand what happens to those that supposedly die. The "overthrow" is literally thrown into a short suspense, and then completely undercut by "Die not." The very reason, then, for death's existence is based on an untruth. Accordingly, the speaker again addresses Death directly using apostrophe, but this time adding the adjective "poor." Not only does the speaker not fear Death—he actively pities it.

For the most part, the poem conforms to the Petrarchan sonnet rhyme scheme (with an important difference to come). Here, the rhyme scheme sets up "thee" from line 1 in opposition with "me" in line 4. This puts Death on one side of the argument—the wrong one—and the speaker on the other.

By the end of line 4, the poem is still in the proposition stage of the argument. The bold statement has been made—that death cannot kill—and it is up to the rest of the poem to somehow demonstrate this to be true.

LINES 5-6

*From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure;*

In the poem's second [quatrain](#), the speaker's argument enters its second stage. While the first quatrain established the poem's main points of contention—that death shouldn't be proud because it isn't mighty or dreadful—the next few lines deal specifically with the evidence that supports these claims.

The speaker compares rest and sleep to death, suggesting that the former are images of the latter. This is part of the overall project to diminish death's power. Rest and sleep are, first and foremost, entirely harmless activities. In fact, they are the absence of activity and, in sleep's case, the "switching-off" of conscious living. Furthermore, both rest and sleep have great benefits—and are essential to life. They are at once daily, harmless activities and important ways for people to maintain and restore good health. They are the necessary moments of inactivity that make activity possible. Accordingly, the speaker equates them with pleasure—rest and sleep make people feel good. If death is just a heightened version of rest and sleep, then, there is nothing to fear from it.

The [caesura](#) in line 6 after "pleasure" allows the reader a literal rest to consider the importance of rest and sleep. Likewise, the long vowel sounds in "pleasure" go as far as to create a sense of luxuriance, deliberately at odds with the seemingly urgent topic of the poem. In this sense, then, the speaker is temporarily

holding Death at bay and exerting his own control.

LINES 6-8

*then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.*

Having linked death with rest and sleep in the previous sentence, the speaker proceeds to the next stage in the logic of the poem's argument. If rest and sleep bring people pleasure, then death must be even more pleasurable, being a kind of heightened and intensified version of them. Briefly, then, the speaker is actively praising death for bringing "the big sleep" to people. Line 6 uses [alliterative](#) /m/ sounds to reinforce the idea that death is basically sleep-plus, creating a sonic sense of bounty and abundance.

Lines 7 and 8 then suggest that it is the best people on earth who often die earliest, perhaps hinting that they have been chosen by God for their reward of heavenly eternal life.

Line 8 modifies the idea of death as rest by clarifying that the speaker only intends the comparison to apply to the physical body. The "bones" of the "best men" are their physical selves—their "corporality"—and it is only these that are laid to rest in death. "Bones" is therefore a [synecdoche](#) for the human body. In a more literal sense, though, bones are indeed all that remains after a body goes through the processes of decay that come with death; for the speaker, bones are the inanimate leftovers of life on earth—but life on earth is not what's important to this poem. It is the "soul's delivery"—the arrival in the afterlife—that underpins the poem's entire argument. Death is really a form of transition from temporary life to eternal life. The poem plays on this, with the word "delivery" hinting at a kind of birth, rather than death.

LINES 9-10

*Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,*

Lines 9 and 10 begin the third [quatrain](#) and serve to further demonstrate death's weakness, and to divest it of its fearsome and intimidating quality. Essentially, they function as a kind of character assassination—first showing that death is not a master but a slave, and then that Death is associated with some of the worst elements of the world.

Though death is often thought of as something powerful, line 9 argues that it is actually weak, dominated by other elements or people. Firstly, death is "slave" to fate and chance, the [assonance](#) of the /a/ vowels bolstering this connection. In essence, death is weaker than fate and chance and depends on them to do its work.

Death is so weak, in fact, that it is also beholden to kings and "desperate men." Both of these are, of course, human beings, who are precisely the target of death's work. Kings, acting in

positions of power, create conflict and have authority over their subjects. They therefore administer death themselves, implying that Death—the personified version—is just as much a subject as anybody else. (On this note, it's worth remembering that Donne was writing at a time when monarchies were extremely powerful and had a huge role in shaping world history; now, many of them are largely symbolic and ceremonial.) The "desperate men" can be read as referring to people who commit murder, or to those who take their own lives out of desperation—both readings are possible.

Line 9 continues this line of argument, accusing death of being a bedfellow of "poison, war and sickness." The speaker presents these as ugly and undesirable things to be associated with. Essentially, death has nothing better to do than hang out with the worst elements of human life.

LINES 11-12

*And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?*

Lines 11 and 12 return to the speaker's comparison of death with sleep. Once again, the argument seeks to deny death any authority.

Both lines use [anaphora](#) to continue the line of argument, beginning in the same way as in lines 10 and 7 with "And." This creates the sense of an accumulation of reasons as to why death is so powerless, almost suggesting that the speaker could name more if it weren't for the confines of the sonnet form.

Though the speaker has admitted the benefit of death if it is framed merely as a kind of sleep, even on those terms it is inferior. Poppy, which is a reference to the kind of opiate drugs that were popular at the time, is presented as a more effective method for sleep than death. Charms refers to magic spells and incantations, both of which the speaker considers superior to death in terms of bringing about sleep.

The speaker frames this superiority in the first 5 words of line 12: "And better than thy stroke?" The "stroke" functions in two slightly paradoxical ways. First of all, it acknowledges the idea of death as a powerful figure. Death is often personified as being able to administer death to the living without any difficulty (in the figure of the Grim Reaper, for example). But a stroke is also a gentle motion, and even an act of affection. As in line 4, then, death is presented as meek and mild.

The [caesura](#) in line 12 indicates that the poem is reaching the end of its argument, and sets up the speaker's final challenge to death. In light of all the evidence that has been presented, how can death still "swell" up with pride? This ties in with the first line, too, which instructed death to not be proud.

LINES 13-14

*One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

Lines 13 and 14 bring the poem to its conclusion, making explicit the reason why the speaker has been so bold in addressing death: the eternal afterlife. Death is nothing but a "short sleep," a transition from earthly living—with all its miseries and pains—to eternity. The monosyllabic words that begin line 13 emphasize this idea of shortness.

The whole poem depends upon faith and is informed by Christian theology. When people "wake eternally," they will be out of death's reach. Death, as a concept, will be as good as dead to them. Here it seems likely that the poem is informed by the Bible, namely 1 Corinthians 15:26—"the final enemy to be destroyed is death."

It is interesting to note that these lines present a more uplifting and affirmative tone than many of the others in the Holy Sonnets series, which generally consist of a speaker trying to reconcile belief in God with their place in the world (in the hope of attaining eternal life in heaven). With that in mind, there is an important distinction to be made about the poem. In its last line, the speaker does not literally mean that death has been defeated—death remains a constant presence in the world. But death, viewed in the bright light of faith, is nothing to be feared—and it need not have any of the characteristics that are usually attached to it. In essence, then, the poem is an argument not just *against* death, but also *for* faith.

- **Line 13:** "sleep," "wake"



BONES

The speaker refers to death as a kind of "rest" for the bones. Bones are a stand-in for the physical body itself, and its earthly mortality. The whole poem depends upon religious faith, which presents a division—or a duality—between the body and the soul. The body, represented by bones, doesn't last long; but the soul lives on forever. "Bones" thus represents what people leave behind when they head for the afterlife: a pile of relics that is no longer really them. The association between death and human bones is a long-standing and logical one, given the process of decay that eventually leaves only the bones as the last trace of the physical body.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "bones"



SLAVERY

In "Death, be not proud," the speaker works hard to divest death of its intimidating and fearsome character. This is done largely by personifying death and preempting any line of argument that might prove death's power. As part of this, then, the speaker reverses the idea that death rules over humankind by implicating death itself—in personified form—as a kind of slave. Furthermore, death is "slave" to "fate, chance, kings, and desperate men," which are either out of death's control—fate and chance—or specifically within humankind's control—kings and desperate men. Whichever way death turns, then, it is a slave to something or someone else. The evocation of slavery thus further symbolizes death's ultimate powerlessness.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "slave"



POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

This poem is not just an argument *against* death, but an argument *with* death. To make this argument work, the speaker employs [apostrophe](#) throughout the entire poem to directly address death as if it were a person. Essentially, the speaker is trying to deflate the sense of death's power by tackling it head-on.

The first word of line 1 uses apostrophe to make it absolutely



SYMBOLS



SLEEP

As part of the argument against the power of death, the speaker repeatedly refers to sleep and rest. In essence, sleep is a symbol of death itself: when someone is asleep they are unconscious and thereby separated from their interactions with the world and other people (just as they will be, permanently, in death). Sleep is also a kind of restorative retreat—good for the mind and body—that everybody needs.

The speaker uses this symbol for two main reasons. If death is a kind of sleep, it is nothing to be feared; sleep is a *good* thing. In fact, if death is a kind of "super-sleep" it is even something to be looked forward to.

Secondly, the kind of sleep that death represents is not a permanent one (in the belief system of this poem). It is nothing but an unconscious transition from earthly living to the afterlife. Sleep therefore becomes a general symbol for the ultimate harmlessness of death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "rest and sleep"
- **Line 8:** "Rest"
- **Line 11:** "sleep"

clear to whom this poem is addressed. Apostrophe is also closely linked to another device, [personification](#)—the two combine to make death seem like a prideful, misguided individual who has got the completely wrong idea about their role in the lives of humankind. Line 4’s usage characterizes death as a pitiable figure.

Apostrophe both opens and ends the poem. The beginning lets the reader know that an argument directed at death is to follow. The poem’s ending—“Death, thou shalt die”—tells the reader that the argument is finished and irrefutable. The poem further foregrounds the use of apostrophe through capitalization. Lines 1, 4 and 14 turn “death” into “Death.”

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-7
- Lines 9-12
- Line 14

ALLITERATION

The poem employs [alliteration](#) quite subtly throughout and to varying effect. In the first [quatrain](#), the numerous “th” sounds, most of which are part of words that personify death, conjure a sense of feebleness that the speaker uses to undermine death’s power.

In line 6, the speaker suggests that death is nothing more than a more plentiful, more pleasurable sleep. Alliteration backs this up with repeated “m” sounds, creating a sense of abundance.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “th,” “th”
- **Line 3:** “th,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 4:** “D,” “D,” “c,” “k”
- **Line 6:** “th,” “th,” “m,” “m,” “m”
- **Line 12:** “th,” “th,” “th,” “th”
- **Line 13:** “w,” “w”
- **Line 14:** “D,” “d”

ANAPHORA

Five out of the poem’s 14 lines begin in the same way: with an “and.” This use of [anaphora](#) builds the momentum of the speaker’s argument, adding reason upon reason why death shouldn’t be feared. Essentially, this technique is about creating a cumulative effect that makes its logic seem undeniable and ultimately results in the question directed at death: “why swell’st thou then?” The build-up of “ands” works to make it seem absurd that death would even consider “swelling” with pride at its place in the world.

It’s no coincidence that the last line modifies the beginning of the first by using anaphora. Death is strongly announced as the subject at the start of the poem, but by the end is dominated by

“and,” which has come to represent the numerous reasons why death is powerless in view of the afterlife to come.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** “And”
- **Line 10:** “And”
- **Line 11:** “And”
- **Line 12:** “And”
- **Line 14:** “And”

ASSONANCE

Examples of [assonance](#) can be found throughout the poem, and are generally used to reinforce the argument that death is powerless. The vowel sound of “thee” in line 1 combines with the weak stress of the second syllable of “Mighty” in line 2. This mimics the poem’s overall project of showing that death is weak, not strong. Line 9 employs /a/ sounds in “slave,” “fate” and, subtly, in “chance” to literally bind death to factors outside of its control—it is enslaved to fate and chance, and thus not powerful or mighty.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “ee”
- **Line 2:** “y”
- **Line 9:** “a,” “a,” “a”

CAESURA

As with many other of the poetic devices at play in this poem, [caesura](#) is used to contribute to the sense of an argument being made. Of the poem’s 14 lines, only lines 3, 7, and 11 *don’t* employ caesura.

The caesurae in the poem should be considered in the context of its form, which is a [sonnet](#). A sonnet is a generally stable form consisting of an octave and [sestet](#), and though there are different types of sonnets, their basic concept is quite strict formally. The high number of caesurae in this poem works both with and against the form, contributing to the overall force of the argument by suggesting that this very argument cannot be contained by a neat line-by-line shape. That is, the argument will pause or accelerate as and when it needs to.

For example, the caesura that comes after “Much pleasure” in line 6 allows a brief moment for the reader to digest the logic of the proposition that has come before—that “rest and sleep” are images of death, and that they are pleasurable. Because the poem is presented as a logical argument, the caesura’s pause sets up an anticipation for the next proposition—that death, being like a heightened version of sleep, must provide even *more* pleasure than sleep itself.

The caesura in the poem’s final line marks the end of the poem’s argument and the arrival of its logical conclusion. With death’s

powerlessness proven, the speaker calls death's name and tells it that, in light of the argument that has come before, the inevitable endpoint is that death itself, not people, will die.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** " " "
- **Line 2:** " "
- **Line 4:** " " "
- **Line 5:** " "
- **Line 6:** " "
- **Line 8:** " "
- **Line 9:** " " " "
- **Line 10:** " " "
- **Line 12:** " "
- **Line 13:** " "
- **Line 14:** " " "

ENJAMBMENT

"Death, be not proud" uses [enjambment](#) between lines 1-2, 3-4, 11-12, and 13-14. Generally speaking, it functions in a similar way to the moments of [caesura](#) in the poem. Though the [sonnet](#) is a contained form, the poem uses enjambment wherever the argument requires a longer sentence, contributing to both an overall tension and a sense that the speaker is in control. This display of control is in keeping with the aim of the poem: a denial of death's importance.

The enjambment from line 1 to 2 allows for the reversal of stress in the first [foot](#) of line 2 to take effect, creating internal rhyme/[assonance](#) between "thee" and the second syllable of "mighty" that seems to undermine the idea of death as powerful figure.

Likewise, the enjambment from line 3-4 allows the speaker to set up one of death's supposed characteristics and then quickly undercut it. Death is meant to "overthrow" people, but this is denied by "die not."

The latter two instances of enjambment contribute to the accumulation of the evidence against death's power and also build the poem to its climax.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "thee"
- **Line 3:** "overthrow"
- **Line 11:** "well"
- **Line 13:** "eternally"

PARADOX

Arguably, the entire poem is a kind of [paradox](#) in which death is treated as a figure that can be defeated by logical argument. The main paradox, though, is that death can ever be defeated. Death is life's only certainty. However, the aim of the poem is to

weigh death against the promise of the afterlife, and it is in this context that death can be said to die. The poem doesn't actually intend that death "shall be no more," but that a certain *idea* of death is not worth worrying about. That is, death does not equal an ending. Paradoxically, death is merely the *birth* of the afterlife. This is posed most succinctly in the poem's ending: "Death, thou shalt die."

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die"

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker [personifies](#) death from the start of the poem all the way through to the end. [Sonnets](#) were often written as an address to a lover, but Donne subverts this by addressing death as if it were a person. This enables the poem to argue with Death as if it were arguing with an actual individual subject, and to apply the same rules of logic that the rest of humanity follows.

The poem's personification is foregrounded throughout by two key elements. Firstly, death is capitalized as if it were the name of a person. The first "death" of line 14 is an exception because the speaker is talking about death in the abstract, rather than, at this point, talking directly to Death.

Secondly, the poem contains numerous uses of "thee," "thou," and "thy," employing the (old-fashioned) second person pronouns to consistently remind the reader that this is a poem targeted directly at Death, as though Death is a being capable of understanding. Line 3, for instance, posits that Death can "think."

Personification allows the speaker to accuse death of being mistakenly prideful—a human characteristic—in line 1, and even a figure of sympathy in line 4: "poor Death." That is, Death has such a misguided view of itself that it deserves to be pitied.

In line 9, Death is personified as slavish, rather than being the master over humankind.

Line 12 returns to the idea of death as mistakenly prideful—now that the poem has provided much of the evidence in the case against death, the speaker asks it a direct question: "why swell'st thou then?" The implication is that death is like a person swollen with pride, and that this pride is unjustified.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Death, be not proud"
- **Line 3:** "thou think'st"
- **Line 4:** "Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, / And dost with poison, war, and sickness

dwell,"

- **Line 12:** "why swell'st thou then?"
- **Line 14:** "Death, thou shalt die."

METAPHOR

There is one principal example of [metaphor](#) in the poem (though arguably the [personification](#) throughout functions as a kind of metaphor too). This comes in line 9, when Death is characterized as a "slave to fate..."

This metaphor is intended to drive home the idea that death is powerless, not mighty. Slaves have their agency taken away from them—and the speaker of this poem is trying to do that to Death through logical argument.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,"

ALLUSION

The last line of the poem is thought to [allude](#) to the Bible, specifically 1 Corinthians 15:26, which says: "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death."

Like the biblical quote, the poem has presented Death as a kind of foe in need of defeating, with the particular weapon here being logical argument. The surrounding text of the biblical quote is about the growth of "Christ's reign," which will vanquish all enemies until eventually taking on the only one left: Death.

Like the poem, the biblical quote is about faith. Those who have faith, goes the argument, are in the process of defeating death, and will be rewarded with eternal afterlife. This is in keeping with the general content of Donne's Holy Sonnets, in which the speaker grapples with questions of faith and how to be true to his religion.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die."

SYNECDOCHE

In line 8, the speaker refers to death as a rest of the "bones." Here, "bones" can be taken both literally and figuratively. In a literal sense, the bones are what is left of a person after they have and their body has decayed. But figuratively speaking, "bones" is used here as a stand-in for physical existence itself. That is, the "bones" are representative of the body more generally, and as such this can be interpreted as an example of [synecdoche](#).

This is an important contribution because the poem's argument hinges on the existence of an afterlife and therefore requires a separation between the physical and spiritual selves, between the body and the soul. It is the existence of the soul, divorced from its "bones," that makes Death irrelevant—because Death has no dominion over the soul, only the body.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "bones"

SIBILANCE

The poem uses a few moments of minor [sibilance](#), and these multiple "s" and soft "sh" sounds contribute primarily to the idea of rest, sleep, and sleepiness. The sound evokes the breathing of somebody sleeping—and sleep forms part of the poem's argument against death, which is no more than a kind of sleep.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "s," "s," "tu," "s"
- **Line 6:** "ch," "s"
- **Line 8:** "s," "s," "s," "s"



VOCABULARY

Thee (Line 1, Line 6, Line 7) - An archaic form of "you."

Thou (Line 2, Line 3, Line 4, Line 9, Line 12, Line 14) - An archaic form of "you."

Art (Line 2, Line 9) - An archaic form of "are."

Think'st (Line 3) - An abbreviated form of "thinkest," which is a 17th century rendering of "think."

Dost (Line 3, Line 10) - The archaic second person singular present form of "do." The usage here in line 2, for instance, simply emphasizes that Death thinks he really *does* "overthrow" (i.e. kill) people, an assumption the speaker counters in the following line.

Canst (Line 4) - The archaic second person singular present form of "can."

Thy (Line 5, Line 12) - The archaic form of "your."

Pictures (Line 5) - Pictures here simply means images, with possible connotations of paintings/artworks. Essentially, a dead person looks like someone resting or asleep.

Bones (Line 8) - Bones refers to the bones left behind after someone dies, and to the body more generally.

Poppy (Line 11) - Poppy is a reference to drugs, particularly those of the opioid family, which are derived from the poppy plant. Opium was a popular drug in the 17th century and

induces a sleepy, dream-like state.

Charms (Line 11) - Charms is a reference to magic and spells.

Stroke (Line 12) - Stroke means touch, referring to the moment when Death comes to someone.

Swell'st (Line 12) - Swell'st is an abbreviation of "swellest," which is an archaic version of "swell up."



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Death, not be proud" is a [sonnet](#), and is specifically close to the Petrarchan variety. Sonnets are a tight form that lend themselves well to arguments consisting of a proposition and a response. This sonnet is grouped into two main sections, the octet (8 lines comprised of 2 quatrains) and the sestet, where the poem "turns" to offer its perspective on what has come before.

The turn in this poem is subtle, as it is primarily an intensification of the argument against death as a powerful force. This is a deliberate strategy that allows the argument to build increasing momentum towards the poem's concluding question of line 12 and the following 2 lines' response.

The ending of the poem also represents a departure from the Petrarchan sonnet in that Donne writes a concluding couplet, which is more in keeping with the Shakespearean sonnet form. This final couplet allows for a further shift in the poem, this time to state, as clearly as possible, the reason why death is powerless: the eternal afterlife. The poem can thus be thought of both as an octet and a sestet, *and* as three quatrains and a couplet.

METER

The meter in "death, be not proud" is [iambic pentameter](#) throughout, with a few instances of variation. Modern readers might struggle to hear the iambic pentameter clearly because of changes in the way certain words are pronounced. For example, "called" in Donne's era would have been said with 2 syllables: "call-ed." Line 5 gives an example of perfect iambic pentameter:

From **rest** and **sleep**, which **but** thy **pictures** **be**,

The poem uses its steady meter to reinforce the argument that death is powerless. For example, the [enjambment](#) at the end of line 3 and the use of punctuation at the start of line 4 means that line 4 can be read:

Die not

Here, "die" would usually be a stressed word, but the poem's

manipulation of its meter forces the reader to emphasize the second word instead. This, of course, foregrounds the poem's view that death is nothing more than the beginning of the afterlife.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of the first 8 lines (the octet) follows the pattern:

ABBAABBA

This is the typical scheme found in Petrarchan [sonnets](#).

But the [sestet](#) diverges from the Petrarchan set-up and rhymes:

CDDCEE

In terms of rhyme, then, the poem can be divided into three [quatrains](#) (two of which form the octet) and an ending [couplet](#). The development towards the couplet at the end lends force to the conclusion, which is making the bold claim that Death itself will die (because of the afterlife).



SPEAKER

The speaker in "death, be not proud" is anonymous, though critics often take the Holy Sonnets to be an expression of John Donne's own struggles with his Christian faith (particularly as Donne had converted from Catholicism to Anglicanism a few years prior). However, nothing in the poem definitively proves Donne to be the speaker.

In fact, as the poem is essentially a logical battle with death, it's reasonable to think of the speaker as representing humanity itself. Specifically, the poem's speaker chastises death from a standpoint of certainty—they believe in the eternal afterlife, and for them this sole fact undoes everything that is usually terrifying or intimidating about the thought of death.

The speaker talks widely about the world, and particularly humankind's role in it as opposed to death's. This supports the idea that speaker positions themselves as a kind of defender of humanity, taking on death through a series of unfolding logical propositions. But, of course, it's up to the reader to decide if the speaker's standpoint is convincing.

If the poem is worked through backwards, all of the speaker's confidence and assertiveness is wholly reliant on their belief that following death comes the eternal afterlife. The speaker takes the afterlife as a given, making the poem as much about faith as it is about death. In turn, then, it is fair to say that the speaker is making an argument to their reader: have faith, and do not fear death.



SETTING

The setting of "Death, be not proud" is non-specific. In general,

the poem is set on earth (as opposed to heaven, which it gestures towards). It is a poem that makes its argument in broad strokes, taking a look at death's role on earth and arguing against the fear of dying.

That said, there are one or two moments that seem to tie the poem to the 17th century and to Europe (or possibly England) more specifically. The first 8 lines give little away in terms of setting, but lines 9-11 provide some interesting clues. Line 9 accuses death of being slave to "kings," referencing the role of monarchs in the doling out of death among subjects. War was not uncommon at the time of the poem's writing in 1610, which was not long after the end of the Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604). This conflict, as with many others, was ultimately presided over by monarchs. Likewise, the religious turmoil in Europe was also closely linked with its monarchies.

In line 11, "poppy" links the poem to 17th century Europe as well. The word is a euphemism for opium, a relatively popular drug in England at the time.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Donne is generally grouped together with Andrew Marvell, George Herbert, and others as part of the "Metaphysical" Poets, though in truth he is a singular talent in the English canon. This poem comes from the "Holy Sonnet" series, a group of Donne's poems that mostly deals with issues of faith, mortality, and religious anxiety. Of those poems, this is perhaps the most sure-footed; others present more of a challenge to God, and worry about man's relationship to his maker. But this was not always Donne's subject—as a younger man, Donne wrote marvelously constructed and extremely witty poems that tended to be more interested in love and sex than God and penance. The early poems—in fact, all of Donne's poems—were not published widely during his lifetime, but circulated in small number amongst an exclusive group of people in the know.

The "metaphysical" poets was a description coined by the critic Samuel Johnson, who saw in Donne and his contemporaries a reliance on [conceit](#)—which is, in essence, an ingenious and sustained [metaphor](#)—and an emphasis on the spoken quality of their work. In fact, Donne was often criticized by his contemporaries for not being stricter with his meter and form. Ben Jonson quipped that Donne deserved "hanging ... for not keeping accents."

Now, Donne is considered one of the foremost poets in the English language. Those qualities that made him seem inferior to some of his fellow poets and critics—his linguistic dexterity and his taste for the daringly imaginative—are those that make him endure so strongly. He remains widely influential, and often quoted (the 1999 play *Wit*, for example, makes frequent

reference to this particular poem). Bizarrely, J. Robert Oppenheimer named the first atomic test site "Trinity" in reference to Donne's Sonnet 14—which famously begins, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem was written in 17th-century England, a time of considerable religious turmoil and the expansion of British reach across the globe. Donne was a Catholic, born during a time of great anti-Catholic sentiment. In 1593, Donne's brother, Henry, was imprisoned for his Catholicism and died soon after. Critics disagree as to the exact reasoning behind Donne's decision, but he subsequently changed his religious allegiance by converting to Anglicanism. Later, he became a cleric, delivering passionate sermons in Saint Paul's—including one in which the phrase "no man is an island" originates.

The tension between the two different forms of Christianity played on Donne's conscience, and the Holy Sonnets portray an individual desperate for confirmation that they have chosen the right faith, and that in turn they will be granted access to the afterlife.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Clip from Wit](#) — A clip from the film version of *Wit*, a play by Margaret Edson. The two lead characters discuss the punctuation of Donne's sonnet. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GS-m0UAB3uQ>)
- [A Reading by John Gielgud](#) — A reading by the influential actor and theater director, John Gielgud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-A8mojwHjzU>)
- [Britten's "Death, be not proud"](#) — English composer Benjamin Britten set a number of Donne's "Holy Sonnets" to music. Here is a performance of "Death, be not proud." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZPnuf2i7RU>)
- [The Holy Sonnets](#) — A link to the entire "Holy Sonnets" series (based on the Westmoreland manuscript). (<http://triggs.djvu.org/djvu-editions.com/DONNE/SONNETS/Download.pdf>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN DONNE POEMS

- [A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning](#)
- [The Flea](#)
- [The Good-Morrow](#)
- [The Sun Rising](#)
- [To His Mistress Going to Bed](#)



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