

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
Selected Poems, John Donne

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AUTHOR NOTES

Born in 1572 to a London merchant and his wife, John Donne established the metaphysical poetry which flourished throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Donne's father died when he was very young and his mother was remarried twice in his lifetime; several of his brothers and sisters also died throughout his childhood. Educated at Hart's Hall, Oxford and Lincoln's Inn, Donne learnt to speak several languages and went on to publish poetry in both Latin and English. Donne was born Catholic in a time where England was deeply divided over religion, leading James I to advise Donne to renounce his Catholicism as he would only achieve advancement within the Church of England; he was ordained into this church in 1615.

As an adult, Donne lived a fascinating life; he sailed with the royal fleet, was a Member of Parliament and a diplomat before becoming a successful priest in the Anglican Church and the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in 1621 till his death in 1630. He was considered a successful and popular priest, preaching several times to royalty.

In 1601, Donne secretly married Ann More, resulting in his imprisonment by her father until several months later when the Court of Audiences upheld his marriage, releasing him, he was then sent to live with his wife's cousin. This incident led to him losing his fortunes. He then travelled and lived throughout England, France and Italy with his family in an attempt to regain his financial status.

Writing Career

John Donne's work can be broken into two clear categories; those written prior to him entering the ministry and those written afterwards. The only real difference between the two being a shift in the subject matter towards the holy and righteous; all of his poetry is concerned with matters of the heart. For the decade leading to his death Donne focused his attention on writing sermons. His sermons, known for their power and directness, are still well known today. Both the phrases, "No man is an island" and "Therefore ask not whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee" were the opening and closing to one of his most famous sermons.

It is however, his poetry that Donne is remembered for. In the early 20th century his poetry was revived back into popularity. His poetry was also the champion of metaphysical poetry, including poets such as George Herbert and Andrew Marvell. However, Donne was also very individualistic about his poetry, exploring the conflict between spiritual piety and physical carnality and his approach to this theme remains unparalleled.

Donne, however, wrote his poetry for private audience, sometimes even for individuals, sent as letters. He did however publish some of his poetry in his lifetime, though later regretted this decision.

Reception

The reception of Donne's poetry has shifted and changed throughout the years. Originally his work was circulated amongst friends, with few poems being published. Two years after his death the first volume of his poetry was published and opened up to public comment. In 1718, it was predicted that the complexity of his poems would lead to the death of his work. Over the next century his works did not receive much praise or comprehension. By the nineteenth century his works were beginning to be received with more understanding, yet also more critique. The Victorians pointed out that his work was pointless and the conceits too complex to be intelligible. However, by the twentieth century Donne began to be credited with his exceptional work and the rugged strength of his poetry.