

Block

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SHAKESPEARE & DONNE

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

Shakespeare: Life and Works

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Donne: "The Sun Rising" and "Death Be Not Proud"

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Block 2: Shakespeare and Donne

This block takes you to the two literary giants of English literature—William Shakespeare and John Donne. Here, the distinct aspect of discussion is that we read the two writers as poets alone. It applies well to Donne who was primarily a poet. However, Shakespeare excelled as a dramatist; only in a few phases he wrote non-dramatic poetry. Particularly, the sonnets are expressions of the private zone where the writer let the reader know his personal feelings and emotions. John Donne wrote sonnets and a few longer poems as well. Paradoxically, Donne's poems are not exactly personal or private statements, they are not about the England of the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century either. Indeed, Donne's poems are too philosophical or mystical to be classed under a traditional mode. They strike us as disturbing and somewhat teasing in that the poet exhibits playfulness in language and representation. The core of this block consists of questions, attitudes and approaches that puzzle the reader. To that extent, they typify the opening years of the seventeenth century—we become aware in them about the complex reality that was unfolding in the three or four decades at the level of ideological conflicts. Shakespeare's sonnets dazzle the reader with their internality and depth that connects with the human mind and enable the reader to make sense of time, life, death, prejudice and the prevailing value system.

UNIT 1 SHAKESPEARE: LIFE AND WORKS

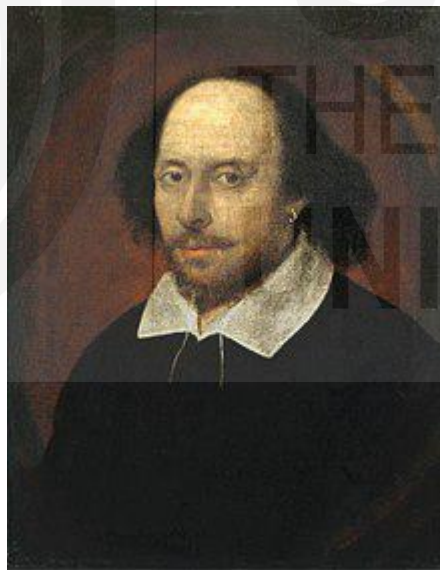
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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is meant to acquaint you with the life and times of Shakespeare. It would offer a view of the world Shakespeare inhabited, in particular England of the sixteenth century. It would also bring into discussion the various trends that shaped the intellectual environment of the period. Further this unit would provide a biographical account of Shakespeare to enable you see the influences that shaped his literary persona. Finally, a view would be taken of Shakespeare's works and his peculiar sensibility that made him unique and popular in his age and in the following centuries.

1.1 INTRODUCTION



William Shakespeare
(Source: en.wikipedia.org)

Shakespeare died in 1616 and his first biography came out in 1709 (by Nicholas Rowe), fifty three years after his death and that, too, of only a few pages in length. Thus, there is difficulty in speaking of accurate life-details of Shakespeare and his plays. There are no letters available of Shakespeare (except one official letter) that may tell us of his life. In fact, belief is stretched to the extent that the texts that we allude to as Shakespeare's may not have been written by him. Rowe's biography was based on the information he received from the actor Betterton who in 1690s travelled to Warwickshire to collect details about Shakespeare's life that might have survived in the oral narratives. In this sense, the information could

hardly be verified. Shakespeare never published his plays, except for two short poems that he gave to the press himself, and the publication of the two long narrative poems—*Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece* that came out during the plague years when the theatres were closed. His actor-friends brought out after his death the folio edition of his plays in 1623 which they claimed was true to the original manuscripts. Interestingly, much is not known about Shakespeare's life. For instance, we do not know when exactly he left Stratford for London and when he returned. Little information is available about the women whom Shakespeare was in contact with or he addressed his sonnets to. Whatever understanding we have of Shakespeare is through the strength of his works. It is evident that as he matured as a writer, his plays became gloomier than before and presented a less merry picture of life. Towards the end of his career, Shakespeare seemed to write only tragedies and philosophical plays. Of course, certain facts about him have been established through assiduous scholarship verifying legal records, documents and contracts as also through utterances of his contemporaries. Allusions to Shakespeare in writings of the time and testimonies of his worth as a narrative poet and a popular dramatist have been put together by Shakespeare scholars over the years. This enables us to build a context around the figure of Shakespeare, the poet-dramatist and the man.

1.2 ENGLAND IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

It is important to note that “English society in the sixteenth century was moving from a feudal to modern or capitalist stage more quickly than any other country” and “the old order was disintegrating faster than a new one could take its place” (Kiernan 106). Feudalism, the order of the nobility that fostered serfdom and privileged people of pure blood was soon losing both money and power. On the other hand, the new group of merchants and traders exporting and importing materials as also those with small businesses flourished during the period. They gave the king money for fighting wars and maintaining stability. In return, they acquired titles and power.

During the sixteenth century, London was becoming the centre of power. Its population doubled during the period as more and more people came in search of livelihood from poor provincial towns and the countryside. Workmen, artists, refugees and merchants sought opportunity to win bread and butter in London. They brought along them their specific skills. London turned into a vibrant city—a hub of culture and clashing ideas as well as perspectives. There was a large-scale shifting of population, too, from one corner of the country to another. The later sixteenth century saw more social mobility than ever before, especially with respect to owning and working on land—the new rich or those with influence were gaining ownership of land and the old gentry was sinking in debt and losing it. There was displacement but also reconfiguration of towns and cities in England which made it a dynamic country in a broader sense.

The downfall of the old church in the sixteenth century made English society more volatile. The demand for the Reformation of the church that had already created waves in other European countries, gained a strong and steady hold of England in the sixteenth century. Victor Kiernan claims that “between Henry VIII's rupture with Rome and marriage with Anne Boleyn in 1533 and the accession of her daughter Elizabeth in 1558, monarchy and country went through a quarter-century of renewed turmoil” (Kiernan, V.G. *State & Society in Europe, 1550—1650*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980. 107).

Particularly during the reign of Elizabeth from 1558 to 1603, England passed through many stages of socio-ideological evolution and gained political stability at the close of the century. It was during her reign that monarchy and the dynastic rule got a strong foothold. Elizabeth's reign, however, was beset with conspiracies and plots on her life. The Pope excommunicated Elizabeth and absolved the English subjects from following her, also suggesting that anyone who removed her from power would provide great service to Catholicism. The queen's cousin Mary Stuart was involved in most of the Catholic conspiracies against Elizabeth. The English Parliament on the other hand recognized her as the queen of the country by the law of God. In 1587, Mary Stuart was executed on the order of queen Elizabeth for treason. It was to achieve a state of equilibrium that Elizabeth maintained ties with both Spain and France. And when diplomacy failed, England had to go on a war with Spain in 1588. Elizabeth borrowed money

from the organized group of merchants and with it England emerged victorious against the Spanish Armada which was a naval fleet of 130 ships employed for attacking England. As against the strong Spanish fleet, English had only sixty sails which were lighter in build. However, England turned the tide in its favour and won against Spain--the greatest power of the day. This victory against Spain put beyond doubt England's growing might in Europe; it also left a mark on the rival European countries that had continued to view England as a weak nation headed by an illegitimate queen. At home, the victory brought new energy and optimism in the country which further reinforced the rule of the Queen. This forms the background for many achievements of England in the closing decades of the sixteenth century.

After Elizabeth's death, the advent of the new king in 1603 from Scotland created disturbances in England. The rule of James I was corrupt and encouraged sycophancy. But this was also the time when Shakespeare's theatre company gained the official status of King's Men. Shakespeare inhabited such a society. In it changes occurred frequently. The 1590s was a period when Shakespeare simultaneously wrote the English Histories and the farces as also romantic comedies. During the Jacobean era (King James I's reign) he moved to writing dark comedies and tragedies. His works capture the mood of the times that included both social disorder and courtly intrigue.

1.3 SHAKESPEARE: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

1.3.1 Life in Stratford

Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564 in Stratford, a small town with many green meadows and a river named Avon. On the edge of Stratford was the Forest of Arden, close to his mother's maiden place. Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden was born in the village of Wilmcote on the fringes of the forest of Arden and belonged to a well-to-do yeoman family. She married John Shakespeare in 1557, who was a tanner and glove-maker. John Shakespeare intended to better his conditions and extended his business. He gradually rose to an influential position becoming the town Chamberlain (who kept the town's accounts) in 1561 and later the High Bailiff (legal officer) in 1568.

Shakespeare was the third child born to his parents; the two sisters before him had died in infancy. Soon after his birth, plague broke out in London. It was a miracle indeed for both John and Mary that Shakespeare survived the plague. Neither of Shakespeare's parents received any school education, thus they made sure that Shakespeare attend school. They sent him to the Grammar School of Stratford where he learnt Latin grammar and read Ovid and Virgil among other classics. The early years spent in Stratford impacted young Shakespeare who developed a deep connect with nature. The picturesque landscape enhanced his poetic sensibility. Also, Shakespeare was one with the life of the ordinary people. The folk-songs of the peasantry and their ways of celebration have been captured in his works. He was a product of the countryside and ever felt drawn towards it. Most of his plays oscillate between the world of the city and court on one side and the forests and country on the other. Where the country is absent, he moves into the alleys that the common people occupied. Significantly, Shakespeare was witness to deprivation and the misery of people in the country. The place was crowded with beggars and tramps moving within it and presenting a depressing spectacle. Farmers were racked by their landlords and there was rampant social injustice. In the initial years, Shakespeare's own financial condition worsened as his father incurred penalties for being in deep debt. This may have triggered in the young man the urge to become a self-made gentleman or in fact what was termed bourgeois *gentilhommes*. The horrific life of the poor that he had seen first in Stratford and later in the dim and dingy lanes of London could also be the reason why Shakespeare had the motivation to buy land and a house. This ensured security. In this, he may have been enabled by the profits from theatre.

When Shakespeare was born, Elizabeth had been on the throne for six years. He grew up in a tense political environment but saw royalty from close quarters at the age of eight when the queen came visiting Sir Thomas Lucy of Charlecote, in the neighboring town. The town of Stratford was frequently visited by country artists. The travelling company of players would arrive at the place with their theatrical troupes and perform in Stratford and the neighbouring towns. These were mostly secular theatricals. As a young

boy, Shakespeare became familiar with the tradition of English theatre and its changing strains in the plays presented by these troupes. However, by 1578 John Shakespeare's fortunes waned and he ran in debt. This resulted in Shakespeare pulling out of the school. John Shakespeare's economic condition was severely affected by this development. It is believed he was imprisoned for debt as well. Young William worked as a clerk for sometime at an attorney's office to make some money. In 1582, when Shakespeare was eighteen, he married Ann Hathaway, the daughter of a wealthy yeoman. She was senior to Shakespeare by eight years. Their first daughter Susanna was born soon after in 1583 and later in 1585 twins were born, a girl and a boy, Judith and Hamnet. The son died at the age of eleven. Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* derives its name from his son. It is believed that Shakespeare had to leave Stratford for London soon after the birth of the twins. He was twenty-one years old when he left Stratford and would return to settle down there only at the fag-end of his life. Both wife and children stayed back in Stratford while he went to seek his fortune. In London, Shakespeare started his career as an actor and soon earned recognition. His progress was marked by success as a business person, theatre manager and eventually proprietor of the theatre group. Yet, the memory of the days spent in Stratford haunted him. George Brandes has suggested that,

There can be no doubt that Shakespeare never for a moment lost sight of Stratford, and that he had no sooner made a footing for himself in London than he set to work with the definite aim of acquiring land and property in the town from which he had gone forth penniless and humiliated, his father should hold up his head again and the family honour be re-established. (Brandes, George. *William Shakespeare: A Critical Study*. London: William Heinemann, 1905. 12)

Thus, a new chapter in Shakespeare's life unfolds—life in London, while the past continues to live with him in his works.

1.3.2 Life in London

In London, Shakespeare came in touch with James Burbage who owned the first playhouse erected in London in 1576 called the Theatre. It was James Burbage's son Richard Burbage who would later become Shakespeare's most famous fellow actor. Shakespeare began to work at the Theatre as in-charge of horses for those who rode to watch the plays. He continued to do menial work such as becoming a 'servitor' to the actors, then a prompter's attendant whose job was to facilitate the actors, approached the stage. These petty jobs at the theatre company made Shakespeare aware of the fine details of play-acting and managing a show. Because of his skills, he soon rose above his station.

This period in London was marked by the development of the Protestant spirit. England under the stewardship of the queen had become a great Protestant power. The validation of Queenly power was provided by the writers preceding Shakespeare, such as Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser; the latter celebrated the Queen's authority and reinforced her right to power through their poems. Shakespeare, too, dedicated his works to patrons who were in service of the queen. However, this did not prevent him from unraveling the murky nature of power and courtly politics. His characters sought escape from the court and the city and ventured to reflect critically on that which went in the name of honour, heroism and valour. Shakespeare's comedies written in the period 1592 onwards testify to this attitude.

Not much is available about Shakespeare's life between 1586 and 1592. Those years have been termed as the 'lost years' in Shakespeare's life. Somewhere around 1587, Shakespeare emerged in London. After the christening of his twins in 1585, we hear of him in 1592 in the allusion made by the writer Robert Greene whose sneer at Shakespeare has now become famous. Greene had criticized Shakespeare in his pamphlet, "Groatsworth of Wit Worth a Million of Repentance", referring to him as "Shake-scene," and calling him "an upstart crow beautified with our feathers". Greene was a senior playwright at the time and he was addressing his fellow writers such as Marlowe, Lodge and Nash. Greene referred to the supposed literary dishonesty implied in his "beautified with our feather." It carried a hint of the hostility the senior poets bore against Shakespeare who would constantly pick up plots of their plays and rebuild them in his own style. Thus, the acclaim Shakespeare received for his productions made these writers angry as they

felt they had been wronged. In this context, we may ponder over the usual practice during Shakespeare's time. Dramas routinely reproduced and recast the old plays for changing the appeal of the existing scripts. By and by, theatre became a commercial activity in the sixteenth century. Frank Kermode has observed:

By the late 1590s the London theatre was well established and the trades of playmaking and acting well developed. The distance between the earlier drama—the miracle and morality plays, the performances of travelling actors and acrobats—and the work of the professional London stage was by now great. Yet in a sense there was real continuity between the old and the new... The elements of simple display—the sword-fighting, the droll, and often slightly obscene playlet called the 'jig' at the end of the main performance—were valued survivals. (Kermode, Frank. *The Age of Shakespeare*. Great Britain: Phoenix, 2004. 52)

Thus, the old theatrical elements found place in the new commercial drama, even as the distinction between the secular plays of Shakespeare and the miracle as well as morality plays of the medieval period became more pronounced. This is also true of the poetry written during this period as well as that which was equally secular in nature.

Shakespeare attached himself to the company of players that belonged to the Earl of Leicester and around this time he was highly respected for his poems and plays. The company's main interest was to stage plays in large open air theatres (like the Theatre had been and the Globe would become in 1598). Later, Shakespeare's company ventured to make profit through private indoor theatre as well. Shakespeare's theatre company of which he was a shareholder, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, was formed in 1594 where players shared profits—it was a joint stock company.

By 1602, Shakespeare had made enough money and, as mentioned above, bought land and property in his hometown Stratford and maintained his family. Some records are available of his performances. In 1598, Shakespeare acted in Ben Jonson's play *Every Man in His Humour* and again in 1603 in Jonson's *Sejanus*. It is believed he played the part of Adam in *As You Like It* and of Ghost in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is dated as being an early Globe play, staged in 1599. In 1598, *The Lord Chamberlain's Men* brought down their regular playhouse, the Theatre, and built the Globe. Shakespeare was entitled to ten per cent of the profits. Thus, he was part-owner of the Globe. He became a shareholder and in-house playwright for *The King's Men*. *The lord Chamberlain's Men* received official status as the *King's Men* in 1603 when they received the royal patent and protection from King James I. Shakespeare turned to playwriting and acting and made it a profitable venture. As such, his involvement in the company was complete as actor, playwright and business director. At this juncture, he purchased the Great House of New Place. It was the second largest dwelling in Stratford at the time. It would become Shakespeare's permanent residence after retirement from London until his death. He bought some more land and a cottage in 1602. But by then he had lost his father who died in 1601. After 1609, Shakespeare occasionally returned to London and was confined to his hometown. On April 23, 1616 Shakespeare died.

Not much is known of his last illness, but it is believed that he developed a fever after his daughter Judith's marriage celebrations ended on that day. Shakespeare's wife lived to see his monument installed in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, but died in 1623 before the First Folio edition of his works came out. The story goes that she earnestly desired to be buried in the same tomb where her husband's bones lay, but was instead buried on a side to avoid the opening of the grave. Shakespeare's tomb bore the epitaph: "Good friend for Jesus sake forbear, to dig the dust enclosed here. Blessed be the man that spares these stones, and cursed be he that moves my bones". Shakespeare's four grandchildren left no male heir. Thus, his property passed to strangers. His last surviving grandchild Elizabeth Bernard died in 1670.

After Shakespeare's death, the bard turned into a canonical figure and indeed a legend in himself. Ben Johnson who rivaled with Shakespeare on many an occasion spoke warmly of him. His eulogy was prefixed to the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays. He claimed, "for I loved the man and do honour his memory, on this side idolatory, as much as any. He was (indeed) honest, and of an open and full

nature; had an excellent phantasy, brave notions, and gentle expression; wherein he flowed with that facility, that sometimes it was necessary he should be stopped” (20, qtd. in Brandes George). Jonson’s words bear witness to the fact that Shakespeare had earned a name for himself both in the intellectual circles of England and in the popular imagination. His reach in his own time was far and wide.

1.4 A VIEW OF SHAKESPEARE’S WORKS

Shakespeare came to London as much to be a poet as to become an actor and playwright. He was a poet seeking a patron. His early poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. *Venus and Adonis* begins with a Latin phrase appealing for patronage where Shakespeare asserts that he would pursue “pure poetry” as against the common literature of the times. Both these poems were written during the years of the plague when the theatres were shut by government order. When he couldn’t stage plays, Shakespeare turned to poetry and spent his time writing and editing his poems. This may be the reason why his plays are poetic in nature. *Venus and Adonis* is an Ovidian erotic poem that ran into nine editions during the poet’s lifetime. It became Shakespeare’s signature work. The poem relates the tale of an innocent boy who is seduced by an older woman/goddess. The work became a favorite among the young readers of Elizabethan England.

Before these poems, Shakespeare had written plays such as *Henry VI* trilogy as also *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Comedy of Errors*. The plays *Henry VI Part 1*, *Part 2* and *Part 3* were written between 1589 and 91. *The Comedy of Errors*, *Richard III* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* were written during the next two years 1592-93. *Titus Andronicus* and *The Taming of the Shrew* came out in the following year 1593-94. Once Shakespeare acquired a share in *The Lord Chamberlain’s Men* and later *The Globe*, he devoted himself more or less entirely to writing plays. Nonetheless, he kept writing sonnets during the 1590s and kept the poet in him alive. It is believed that he continued to write sonnets till 1609.

In his early years in London, Shakespeare was deeply impressed by Christopher Marlowe who was his senior. Marlowe was responsible for bringing on public stage the use of unrhymed iambic pentameter which Shakespeare would also make use of. Marlowe gave substance to English tragedy and is rightly considered its creator. He had as model the plays of Seneca (Roman dramatist of the ancient period). Marlowe’s diction and style were refined, too. He was a scholar from Cambridge and rose to fame quicker than Shakespeare. The evidence of Marlowe’s influence on Shakespeare can be found most distinctly in the latter’s play *Titus Andronicus*, the earliest tragedy he wrote. The play has many horror-filled details, and projects savage deeds where the father Titus kills one of his sons abruptly. There is blood and gore as well as many slaughter scenes in the play that have been borrowed from Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*. They also carry shades of Ovid and Seneca. Shakespeare was well read in the classics as he was indeed in the literature of his age. Marlowe’s writing style was highly rhetorical and so was Shakespeare’s in his early plays.

The years 1595-96 saw the production of Shakespeare’s history plays such as *King John* and *Richard II* on the one hand, and romances such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* on the other. Following this, in 1597 Shakespeare staged *The Merchant of Venice*; *Henry IV Part I*; and *Merry Wives of Windsor*. The variety and the range of his subjects bring to us the fact that Shakespeare enjoyed versatility as an important trait. He could easily juggle between writing history plays and comedies as also romances. Shakespeare read voraciously. He had extensive knowledge of English history as also the history of the Greeks and the Romans. For his English historical plays, he used Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577) and for his plays based on Roman Empire he took help from Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* written in second century AD. Shakespeare wrote a number of Romances and comedies in the closing years of the century. *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It* belong to this phase of his writing. Along with these, Shakespeare wrote history plays *Henry IV Part II* and *Henry V* in the same year. *Julius Caesar*, too, was staged at the same time. In it, Shakespeare revived interest in the classics. In 1601, Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, arguably his most complex work. This was accompanied by *The Phoenix and the Turtle*.

With *Twelfth Night* produced in 1601-2, the period of Shakespeare's comedy would come to a close. He wrote many dark plays thereafter, such as *Othello* (1604) and *Macbeth* (1605). The plays *Troilus and Cressida*; *All's Well that Ends Well*; and *Measure for Measure* were written between 1601 and 1604. Shakespeare's *King Lear* was staged somewhere around 1605-06. During this period, he wrote a play on the unstable Roman Empire projected in *Antony and Cleopatra*. His interest in the subject continued in the following year with the publication of *Coriolanus*; *Timon of Athens*; and *Pericles* in 1607-08. In 1609 Shakespeare more or less completed writing sonnets and produced *Cymbeline*. In 1610 he wrote some of his last plays - *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* before finally returning to his hometown Stratford. In 1612-13, Shakespeare wrote *Henry VIII* and *The Noble Kinsmen* (co-written with his friend John Fletcher) but he had more or less retired from active work by this time.

1.5 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SHAKESPEARE OVER THE CENTURIES

What has Shakespeare meant to the generations of readers and writers? What constitutes his appeal? These questions often leave us wondering how a man who wrote in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century has received such acclaim and recognition. Add to this the question, why should we read Shakespeare today?

First, Shakespeare's appeal lies in his universality. He appealed to all strata of society at different levels. His plays were not addressed to any one group in society, notwithstanding the fact that he was obliged to seek patronage from noblemen and lords who supported his theatre. Yet, there is always something for everyone in a Shakespearean play.

It must have become clear to you by now that Shakespeare didn't write to be read, but to be viewed on stage instead. However, over the centuries it has turned out that readings of Shakespeare have added to the rich texture of his productions. The plays have enabled readers to find hidden meanings in texts that perhaps slipped from productions. The exercise of evaluating specific aspects of Shakespeare's plays has multiplied over the centuries. It was Samuel Johnson who in his "Preface to Shakespeare" took up the task of defending Shakespeare's works and reiterating its value for the 18th century. Interest in Shakespeare was revived by the Romantic poets especially Coleridge's *Lectures on Shakespeare* (1811-1819) that set standards for criticism. The twentieth century saw a splurge of Shakespeare criticism. From New Criticism to Archetypal theory, Shakespeare has been assessed from all quarters. A renewed interest in the feminist and postcolonial interpretations of Shakespeare's plays came to the fore in the 1960s. The Cultural Materialist and New historicist approaches saw in Shakespeare those subversive tendencies that challenged the dominant structures of the time. New Historicist critic Stephen Greenblatt has suggested in his 1988 essay "Invisible Bullets" that Shakespeare constantly offered critiques of the authorities of the day even as he was continuously "contained" by the ruling ideology. Thus, there was a dynamic relation between a Shakespearean text and the culture of the time where or when the plays were produced.

Shakespeare stood for humanism and the secular values, and his appeal grew with time. He could be incorporated in subaltern narratives that spoke to power. Shakespeare became the representative voice of Renaissance humanism that was based on ideals of universal brotherhood and upholding dignity of human being. The emphasis on rational and human aspects of life further created a bond between the reader and Shakespeare. We witness, too, that there is a marked critique of tradition in Shakespeare. Even as he seemed to adhere to old concepts of duty and honour, Shakespeare often projected them as inadequate and in fact found them detrimental to human well-being. His characters questioned the accepted idea of duty and code of conduct that goes against merry-making and individual desire. In his sonnets as well, Shakespeare projected different shades of love that often contradicted the general perception of the time. He was not a votary of chivalry or morality. Instead, he emphasized practical evaluations and decisions based on material truths, not abstract myths.

A.C. Bradley's monumental work *Shakespearean Tragedy* published in 1904 brought out a character-centric study of Shakespeare's tragedies. The inner logic of his plays according to this approach was determined by character proclivities. Psychological approaches to Shakespeare's plays also came to the

fore in the first half of the twentieth century as scholars interpreted the plays either as spiritual journeys of the playwright or reflections of modernist tendencies. Contrarily, the semiotic approach to Shakespeare isolated the plays from the playwright and dwelt on the available text. Critics such as Northrop Frye have argued that Shakespeare was a “born courtier” and reinforced the Tudor myth which was important to maintain the hegemony of the royalty.

Further, Shakespeare has been viewed by critics as a historian of his age. According to Campbell in *Shakespeare's Histories* (Campbell, Lily B. *Shakespeare's Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy*. 1947. Oxon: Routledge, 2005), the playwright used history to his advantage to uncover contemporary politics. Thus, his plays were viewed as specimens of Elizabethan political thought. Shakespeare showed that these subjects (history and politics) were not independent of life. They were integrally linked to the social life of the country and had a direct bearing on the lives of people who thought, felt and reacted to circumstances in specific ways. In this sense, Shakespeare stretched the limits of history and politics to include in them personal experiences of characters. In this sense, scholarship on Shakespeare has provided varied interpretations of the man, poet and playwright.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has highlighted specific points in Shakespeare's life that made him the person he was. It has also given you a contextual understanding of the age in which Shakespeare lived. It has aimed to focus upon the historical time, its bearing on Shakespeare's life and his plays. The purpose of this discussion has been to show how these were interlinked and not autonomous happenings. Further, a view of Shakespeare's works has been provided where Shakespeare explored different genres within his dramatic-poetic exercise. Finally, Shakespeare's reception over the centuries as also interpretations of his works has been broadly discussed in this unit.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. In what way does Shakespeare negotiate the country that was his past and the city that was his place of livelihood?
2. England during the sixteenth century went through some major changes. List some watershed moments in England's history in the sixteenth century.
3. In what way did Shakespeare respond to the life he witnessed in London? How did he represent it in his works?
4. Discuss how Shakespeare was the voice of Renaissance humanism in sixteenth century England.

1.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 2 SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS 18, 55, 65

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Shakespeare as a Poet
- 2.3 The Shakespearean Sonnet
- 2.4 Themes and Concerns of the Sonnets
- 2.5 Sonnet 18
 - 2.5.1 Explanation
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- 2.7 Sonnet 65
 - 2.7.1 Explanation
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Questions
- 2.10 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit would familiarize you with the tradition of sonnet writing in England and Shakespeare's experimentation with the sonnet form. We would look at the sonnets of Shakespeare specifically, and view his poetic sensibility. The idea is to understand the general strains of Shakespeare's sonnets focusing on the themes and issues raised in them. The three sonnets in your course would be at the centre of this unit and we would interpret them for gaining an understanding of the many dimensions they open.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Sonnets were a popular mode of literary expression in Renaissance Europe. In England particularly, the form came into vogue through the sonnets of Thomas Wyatt and Earl of Surrey in the early 16th century. The tradition was followed by Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. In the 1590s the private sonnet form and the public drama came of age. The former had an elitist edge while the latter thrived on mass acceptance. Shakespeare belonged to the group of middle-class writers who always wrote keeping in mind the ground realities. It is for this reason that he sought to write realistic works that consciously engaged with common feelings of the people. Even his sonnets create some space for realism. Certainly, Shakespeare was well aware of both the Italian sonnet form and the English one. As he borrowed elements from them, Shakespeare constantly experimented with them and evolved his own style in terms of structure and theme. He wasn't exactly keen on adding flow and lyricism to his sonnet, and wished to add depth to an emotion or an aspect of nature. He went into the nature of the life's issues explored the hidden layers of the phenomenon. If it was summer that caught his attention (as in sonnet 18), he would devote an entire sonnet to its features and aspects.

Shakespeare's collection of 154 sonnets was published in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe. The first edition of his collection bore a dedication to a certain W. H. that became the subject of much speculation. The dedication was provided not by Shakespeare but by the publisher, Thorpe. Till the eighteenth century it was believed that the sonnets were addressed to a woman who was Shakespeare's mistress. However, by the close of the century, in 1780 to be precise, a group of scholars claimed that more than a hundred sonnets had been addressed to a man. The word 'love' in Shakespeare's time was quite inclusive. It was used to address a mistress, friend or a patron. For instance, Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* began with the author's dedication where he projected "love" for his patron that denoted regard for him. It is believed that sonnets 1 to 17 were addressed to a young man of high station. With respect to the dedication of the sonnets many conjectures have been made. According to one theory, "Mr. W.H." stood for William Herbert who became the earl of Pembroke in 1601 and was Shakespeare's patron as well. It is to him that

the first folio edition of Shakespeare's works was dedicated. However, another theory is that this mysterious man was Earl of Southampton (whose initials were H.W.) to whom Shakespeare had earlier dedicated his two long poems. A third view (and the one accepted by many critics) suggests that the sonnets were dedicated to William Harvey who was Southampton's step father. These schools of thought have continued to establish one or other fact but nothing has been established with certainty. Another aspect of the sonnets relates to the reference of the mysterious woman often alluded as the "Dark Lady" in Shakespeare's life. Not much clarity is available on this subject but subsequent scholarship on the subject has rendered some help. For instance, A.L. Rowse in 1984 indentified the "Dark Lady" as Emilia Lanier, who was a poet and the orphaned daughter of an Italian court musician. It is sufficient for us to keep in mind that broadly, Shakespeare's sonnets were addressed to a 'fair' young man who held a high social position and a dark lady with whom he enjoyed a love-hate relationship.

Despite conjecture around the possible dates, sequence of the sonnets and the addressee, Shakespeare's sonnets have occupied an important position in Shakespeare criticism. The sonnets come across as personal and mature. They are striking, too, as thought-centric compositions. Critics such as Adena Rosman believe that "Shakespeare's sonnets were a Romantic obsession because their generically 'personal' rhetoric made them seem the key to Shakespeare's heart" (Rosmarin, Adena. "Interpreting Shakespeare's Sonnets". *Modern Language Association*. Vol. 100. No. 5 (October 1985) pp. 810-812 .811).

2.2 SHAKESPEARE AS A POET

It is believed that poetry brings out the genuine self of a person since it captures feelings and emotions rooted in a person's experience. Can we say that in poems and sonnets we get a glimpse of the real Shakespeare—the living man? Shakespeare's plays often proved difficult for identifying influences in real life. This was because Shakespeare did not leave in his works any hint of an actual situation. In the sonnets, too, we see sincerity as well as artificiality working in tandem. The sonnets appear in turns genuine expression of the poet's feeling as well as stylistic poetry devoted to a patron. There is, thus, a kind of duality in Shakespeare's sonnets where the writer expresses, then hides and covers the emotion skillfully. In any case, the bard appears to be a torn sensibility—dilemma and conflict in him playing a part. He rationalizes the point in one sonnet, (as in sonnet 35), pedestalizes the subject of his sonnets elsewhere, and takes pride in his identity as a poet. This is then followed by an exhibition of his passion which later blends with regret (sonnet 152). In another moment, he becomes self-critical, or indulges in self-deception (sonnet 93). Elsewhere, the speaker in the sonnets wears the mask of madness (as in 147) and yet shows clarity of thought. Such attributes as these make Shakespeare a poet of great variety and depth—he leaves much for interpretation and offers contradictory point of views to cover the vast variety of matters he is dealing with.

2.3 THE SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET

Let's look at the stanzaic structure of Shakespeare's sonnet. The Shakespearean stanza form consists of fourteen iambic pentameter lines, with the rhyme scheme--*abab cdcd efef gg*. The division of lines in a Shakespearean stanza, therefore, consists of three quatrains (twelve lines that rhyme alternately) and a couplet. What you get in a Shakespearean sonnet stanza is an arrangement of unaccented and accented syllables that have end-rhymes. According to the critic Paul Fussell, the English sonnet has a peculiar tendency termed the "balloon-and-pin-prick" pattern. The suggestion is that in the English sonnet there is a development of the problem (a conscious building up much like slowly inflating a balloon) which is carefully elaborated in the twelve lines of the three quatrains. This is followed by the resolution in the last, a couplet which is a witty conclusion or a quick turn-around from the dramatic description of the preceding lines. The last two lines burst the balloon as it were.

While Sidney's sonnet style was fixed and full of rhymes, Shakespeare's was experimental. The latter was discovering the potential of the sonnet form capable of attaining depth as well as expansion.

Shakespeare did not use the epistolary form popular at the time where the sonnet would be written as a letter of supplication to the beloved. The Italian sonneteer Petrarch had established a particular pattern and the poets of the time strictly adhered to it. The Petrarchan model of sonnet writing was introduced in England by Wyatt but by the time Spenser came to writing, the form had become flexible. In Shakespeare's time, more changes occurred in the form. The number of lines remained fourteen, but changes and variations were introduced within them. Thus, the English sonnet gained a specific identity in the hands of Shakespeare. Russell Fraser has observed:

The metrical pattern of the 'English' sonnet (abab cdcd efef gg) is directive. Committing the poet to three coordinate quatrains, it ends with a couplet that ties this series together. If well turned, the couplet approximates the epigram ... Shakespeare blurring the pattern he inherits frequently 'elides' his quatrains, as in the Italian sonnet in which the major turn occurs after line 8. (Fraser, Russel. "Shakespeare at Sonnets". *The Sewanee Review*. Vol.97. No. 3 (Summer, 1989) pp408-427. 409).

Thus, in Shakespeare's sonnets the shift from the quatrains to the couplet creates a disruption of meaning and alters it. There is a sharp turn in his sonnets. Owing to the brevity of the form, emotions captured in expressions are available as condensed. The sonnet becomes precise but is loaded with suggestion. In a play, the idea may be elaborated upon through dialogues and characterization, but in the sonnet, completion of the intent in fourteen lines is a must. This makes the sonnet complex and coded.

2.4 THEMES AND CONCERNS OF THE SONNETS

Shakespeare's early sonnets, particularly sonnets 1-14, are of a uniform nature; they have a shared theme of marriage and familial harmony. They are meant to persuade a young man, for instance, to marry and have children so the beauty of the parents is passed on to the progeny. Some flattery and romance are involved in it. Shakespeare depicts admiration for the subject of these sonnets. The more sustained themes of the sonnets are the themes of love and time which could be observed with poignancy. It is the power that both love and time wield over human life that makes the poet interested in exploring the subject.

In the early sonnets, we find different shades of love—youthful love, passionate love, mature love among others. References to love are also representative of many things—one of them could be 'true' love, romance, close friendship, regard and admiration, or transitory fascination. One might see the variations in Sonnets 29, 116 and 30, all revolving around the idea of love. Shakespeare steered clear of the conventional theme of wooing and imploring a lady. At the same time, the idea of love stood examined as also reaffirmed. There is a passionate engagement with the theme of love in Shakespeare—it makes the poet mad, leaving him open to guilt and revulsion, while the passion takes him towards the joys of being in the company of the beloved. If there is desire, it is accompanied by suffering. In the sonnets, moments are captured and feeling is rationalized.

Shakespeare's preoccupation with time and its changing nature that he significantly brought out in his plays is also evident in his sonnet sequences. See the opening quatrain of sonnet 64:

When I have seen by time's fell hand defaced
The rich proud cost of outworn buried age,
When sometime lofty-towers I see down razed,
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage

The stark changes caused by time leave the poet humbled as also aware of historical movement where individuals appear as mere actors. The critic Victor Kiernan has observed that "everyone with a pen has written about Time, but Shakespeare said far too much about it for there to be any doubt of its poignant meanings for him; and it rarely failed to inspire him. It is a salient theme of fourteen sonnets, three of them in the opening set" (Kiernan, Victor. *Shakespeare: Poet and Citizen*. London: Verso, 1993.(154)).

Kiernan further notes that “eternity” is “one of its key-words”, an aspect of time that “throw(s) a huge shadow on the sonnets”.

Another theme of the sonnets is fame. It could be seen in sonnets ranged between sonnet nos. 18 and 83. In the early sonnets, Shakespeare felt unsure about the sonnet form, as it were, and was enamoured of fame achieved by great artists and poets. However, in his heyday he was aware of his popularity. It also was the case that his interest in the idea of fame diminished with time. With respect to the famous court figures and courtly culture in Shakespeare’s sonnets, Kiernan has further made an interesting observation:

What may be called the official or ‘court’ culture was as elaborate and showy as a courtier’s costume. In his sonnets as in his long poems, Shakespeare was submitting to its artificialities, its conceits and verbal capers and quibbling (e.g. no. 24, 46), devoid of any real meaning...Shakespeare may well have had fits of self-doubt. In No. 55 he is triumphant; in No. 72 he is ashamed of ‘that which I bring forth’, ‘things nothing worth’. (Kiernan, Victor. *Shakespeare: Poet and Citizen*. London: Verso, 1993. 156)

Similarly, the theme of remorse resurfaces in several of Shakespeare’s sonnets. In the sonnet 152, he alludes to himself as the man breaking vows of matrimony and thus regrets his decision and suffers the pangs of guilt.

There are many references to the seasons in Shakespeare’s sonnets for describing the weather, the beloved or even a state of mind. He refers to the “stormy gusts of winter’s day” (sonnet 13) and “never-resting time leads summer on/ To hideous winter and confounds him there” (sonnet 5) as suggestive of the many phases of life. Seasons accompanied by the natural landscape add freshness and tenderness to the experience projected in the sonnets. Shakespeare often brings in images from nature to prove a point. Natural objects, too, have a life of their own. So far as the poet is concerned, they have power over human effort. This is dwelt upon in the sonnets and the two worlds (human courts as well as cities and natural landscape) stand juxtaposed therein. As we turn attention to the specific sonnets in the course, we notice themes and attitudes of many other kinds as well.

2.5 SONNET 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm’d;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature’s changing course, untrimm’d:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:
 So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

2.5.1 Explanation

Sonnet 18 is one of the most famous among Shakespeare’s sonnets. It begins with a rhetorical question the answer to which is not required nor is it important for the poet. Still, it helps in emphasizing the beloved’s eternal youth. The fact that it is a question suggests that there is indeed to be a dialogue to settle it. Further, a dialogue requires two people for holding it— the “I” and “thee” in the sonnet substantiate it. The question is whether the lover’s contemplation in the sonnet is about the beloved being addressed. The

satisfactory answer would be that it is both. The poet is talking to himself as much as he is addressing the friend or beloved.

A “summer’s day” in England would be a long sunny day much wished for. The summer months are seen as time for rejoicing. References to the cyclical seasons are conventional symbols in poetry. Seasons may be used to represent stages of human life. Winter stands for old age; spring signifies budding youth; whereas summer is the prime of life or young adulthood and autumn is the middle age. The seasons also could symbolize moods and state of feelings. Winter suggests cold, degeneration and death. Spring on the other hand, is suggestive of effervescent fresh beauty. Summer signifies warmth, charm, vitality and stability, even as autumn brings out moods of contemplation and mature thought. Keeping this as background, let us approach Shakespeare’s sonnet 18. We find that the friend/beloved is being equated with a summer’s day which is meant to be full of energy and life. This period is also suggestive of romance and passion. The poet finds the comparison inadequate. That is why the addressed figure has much more than what a summer’s day can offer. The beloved is more “lovely” and “temperate”—thus more desirable than summer and is found to be more poised, pleasant and constant.

To highlight the stark contrast between the summer season and the beloved, Shakespeare goes on to list the faults with summer that clearly aren’t seen in the beloved. According to the poet, summer is reckless and violent as the “rough winds shake the darling buds of May”. The line also points at the predatory nature of summer represented through the “rough winds” that forcibly “shake” (sexually assault) the soft buds. Secondly, summer’s “lease” is too short i.e. it is short-lived and is soon taken over by other seasons. The third shortcoming of summer is found to be its extremity (the opposite of temperate), that it gets too hot or is dimmed by clouds and rains. This is certainly true of English summer which sees enough intermittent rains between warm days. The idea presented here is that summer is inconstant and fickle. Note that summer is personified here with its “gold complexion” that dims with nature’s course.

Later, Shakespeare broadens the scope of his subject to include everything “fair” that fades and “declines” with time. Circumstance or nature can cause the decline of beauty. However, Shakespeare is quick to note that it is not the case with his beloved as he claims “but thy eternal summer shall not fade”. While the seasonal summer is transitory and changeable, the beloved’s summer (beauty) is eternal for the poet. Even death, the poet argues, cannot “brag” that it has sway over the beloved since the poet has immortalized in his “eternal lines” the object of love. What does the poet mean by “thou grow’st” in them? How can the beloved grow in the lines with time? Shakespeare refers to the afterlife of a literary work—with time as the popularity of his verse grows, so would the subject’s fame. As is evident, Shakespeare is conscious of his popularity and in fact takes pride in. This strain in sonnet 18 is not consistent with his other sonnets where he projects self-doubt and questions his own worth as a poet. For instance, in sonnet 76, Shakespeare begins with “why is my verse so barren of new pride/ so far from variation and quick change?” and “why write I still all one, ever the same?”.

Finally, the couplet at the end of sonnet 18 reinforces the ever-lasting influence of poetry as Shakespeare suggests—“So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, /So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”. Here “this” refers to the sonnet he has written. He suggests that so long as men live, they would need poetry to sustain them. Shakespeare’s verse would last equally well. Interestingly, the couplet has added a twist to the logic of the poem. While the poet was all along in the sonnet recounting the qualities of the beloved, he strikes a high note to praise his work as also the object of love. The claim is that his poetry will infuse life into the figure being described.

The sonnet is lyrical and soft in its use of words. It is evocative as well. The use of words such as “breathe” and “see” in the couplet bring alive the characters of the lover and the beloved and establishes the nature of their love. Certainly, it is a one-sided expression for we have no way of knowing what the beloved thinks and feels. It is the poet and his experience that is at the centre of this sonnet.

The theme of this sonnet is love’s eternal presence and how it can become immortalized in poetry. Love is constant and impermeable. So is poetry, too. If we considered this as description of a conventional love

poem, then it would be difficult for the sonnet to provide minute details of the actual beauty of the person. We know nothing of the complexion, features, height, physical form and hair of the beloved, something that poets take great pains to describe in love poetry. In fact, when Shakespeare gives us a glimpse of that detailing in other sonnets, we see in his description an inversion of the conventional beauty of a woman. For instance, his sonnet 130 opens with “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun/ coral is far more red than her lips’ red” and “if hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head”. “Yet”, says the poet, “by heaven, I think my love is as rare as any”. Thus, Shakespeare seldom adheres to the conventional idea of love poetry that was popular and established in his day. He challenged the notion of love based on traditional beauty.

2.6 SONNET 55

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rime;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone, besmear’d with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils rot out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
‘Gainst death, and all oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the judgement that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lover’s eyes.

2.6.1 Explanation

In this sonnet, Shakespeare begins on a note of confidence with respect to his verse. He terms it "powerful rime" that outlives both marble and gold-plated monuments of Princes that were perfected with skills of the artisan. Here, marble could refer to the tombs of kings that had gilded effigies of the monarch such as found on a sacrophagus (stone coffins with carvings, inscriptions or sculpture). This fine detailing on figures of princes in the sonnet appear weak and pale before the power of poetry. Shakespeare claims that in poetry he would preserve the object of his affection. He corroborates this by saying: "You shall shine bright in these contents." This is the first comparison he makes between fine artistic works and his poetry. In the second case, he equates his verse with the natural objects and finds the latter corrupted over time. The stones have been "besmeared with sluttish time". Why has time been called sluttish? What is the meaning of the term ‘slut’ and how was it used at the time? In Elizabethan England, it was a common usage and suggested both a promiscuous woman and an untidy-unkept woman. The first definition of slut in Oxford English Dictionary is, “a woman of dirty, slovenly, or untidy habits or appearance; a foul slattern.” Here, the sexual connotation of the word was not established. However, it had come in vogue during Shakespeare's time. For instance, Shakespeare in his play *Cymbeline* makes the character Iachamo says the following:

Sluttry to such neat excellence opposed
Should make desire vomit emptiness,
Not so allured to feed. (Act 1. Scene 6, lines 43-6)

The above lines are spoken by Iachamo in the context of Imogen whom he wants to seduce in order to win a bet with her husband and to prove a point to him that all women are unfaithful. Thus, the word “sluttry” also suggested unfaithfulness, especially in women in Shakespeare's time. In Shakespeare, the reference to "sluttish time" raises the pertinent question—what was Shakespeare's intention in using the word? Is it to suggest that time belongs to none forever and is never loyal to any person? Or has the

reference something to do with the corruption caused by time? Let's look at the reference in the sonnet further. "But you shall shine more bright in these contents /Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time". That the beloved shall shine while the stone gets covered with grime caused by time seems to be the suggestion here. Supposedly, eternal youth reflects on the beloved and his verse, while stones and monuments that may appear glamorous today would soon deteriorate in the poet's scheme of things. Further in sonnet 55, Shakespeare refers to the destruction caused by wars and broils where all material objects including the finest works of art are vandalized. The statues and works of masonry are turned to dust. The supposed beauty of his sonnets would on the other hand outlive them. Finally, the poet rests his case by making the object of love the judge of his verse. It is the beloved for whom the sonnet is written who would decide the worth of his poetry and whether he has done justice to it. To him "The judgment" would "arise" from the beloved. Is this sonnet in praise of the beloved or just an example of powerful poetry? What is the focus of the sonnet? To us, the poet is reinforcing as much the undying life of poetry as he is lauding the beauty of the beloved. It stays in the lover's eye and cannot be stained and gets commemorated in the poem.

2.7 SONNET 65

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'ersway their power
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
O fearful meditation! Where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

2.7.1 Explanation

This sonnet extends the theme of "Time" as elaborated in sonnet 64. In sonnet 65, Shakespeare speaks of the power of "sad mortality" over everything. For him, nothing holds sway over it. Brass, stone as also the entire earth and the vast sea succumb to its power. The poet brings up the rhetorical question—how can beauty that is as fragile as a flower contest with this "rage" that he calls mortality? Similarly, he claims that the soft "honeyed breath" of the summer season (symbolizing joy and love) can scarcely hold out against the wrath and juggernaut force of time that he compares with "the siege of battering days". The comparison Shakespeare builds here is between the strong and the delicate. The latter cannot withstand the power of the former. What does Shakespeare mean by "sad mortality"? Death may appear both fearful and sad. It is the loss of lives that leaves those living in a state of sadness. The awareness of inevitability of death creates feeling of sadness in the poet. Not only does death evoke a sense of helplessness, the same can be seen in degeneration, too. The poet remarks: "Time decays" and the sternest and strongest of natural objects such as "rocks impregnable" and "gates of steel" fail to withstand time's natural course. Against the power of time, they would erode and deteriorate.

In the Sonnet, soon the feeling of "sad mortality" is replaced by "O fearful meditation". The thought of doom and decline leaves the poet fearful. When Shakespeare asks: "Where, alack, Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?" he knows that even the best jewel that time has provided cannot hide away from "time's chest". It is observed that change in human life and body is inevitable and irreversible. Shakespeare asks—who can stop or "forbid" the "beauty" from "spoil" and which "strong hand" can change the course of time and return to previous state? "None", is the obvious answer. In the following

lines in the sonnet, the view is reversed. The poet asserts that as time reigns supreme over all life and objects, poetry can cast a magic spell. Poetry has “might” and it can immortalize and bring back time of the past alive through the “ink”. The claim is made that in poetry, love can shine bright. The historical moment would flee, beauty too would fade away, but poetry would keep the essence of the beloved alive.

Finally, the poet wishes that even as his powers have gone weak and he is approaching middle age, his words (“black ink”) may still have power to move people with his love. The poet wishes to share his experience of love with the reader. The point is whether it is for validation or to prove to himself his own worth. These multiple interpretations arise from the logic of his sonnets and Shakespeare keeps all meanings alive in his verse. To stress the point, Shakespeare wrote many sonnets on the idea of time and its mutability. Sonnet 65 was at the centre of that cluster of sonnets.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

This unit has outlined the basic form of Shakespearean sonnet and its features. It has brought into discussion Shakespeare’s inventive mind and creative genius as a poet. In this unit, a general view of the collection of the sonnets has been provided as also the themes and issues raised therein. Further, a detailed explanation of sonnets 18, 55 and 65 is offered, too.

2.9 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the nature of time in Shakespeare’s sonnets keeping in view the theme of immortality.
2. What for Shakespeare is the larger role of poetry and the poet? Explain.
3. Write a note on the Shakespearean stanza.
4. How is love projected by Shakespeare in his sonnets?

2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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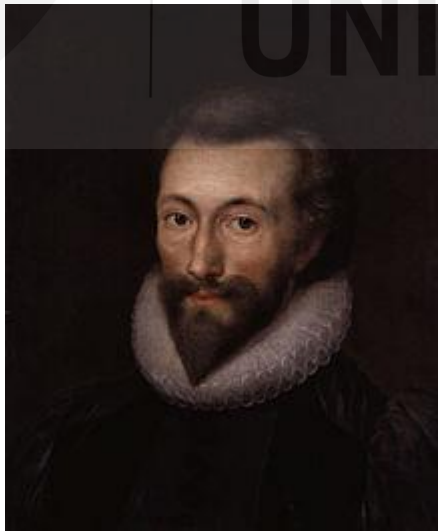
UNIT 3 JOHN DONNE: LIFE AND WORKS

- 3.0 Objective
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Seventeenth Century: A Historical Background
 - 3.2.1 Social Unrest
 - 3.2.2 Conditions Leading to the Civil War
 - 3.2.3 The Shaping of Consciousness and Creativity: Closing Years of the Sixteenth Century
 - 3.2.4 The Role of Religion
- 3.3 Metaphysical Poetry
 - 3.3.1 Cavalier Poets
- 3.4 Metaphysical Poets
- 3.5 John Donne: A Biographical Account
- 3.6 Donne's Literary Sensibility and Spiritual Engagements
- 3.7 Donne in his own times and ours
- 3.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.9 Questions
- 3.10 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVE

This unit will give a view of the metaphysical poet John Donne's life and writings. For us, comment on the poet's life would involve a brief description of the world in which he lived whose pressures he bore and the specific features of which inspired him to write. Particularly, we shall consider changes that occurred during his time in society, religion and literature. The unit will later focus upon a few important events of his life and the phases of the writing that indicated turns and twists in the domain of feelings and thoughts at the time. Surely, all this might make us conscious about issues that are still active in our world and tell us about the ways in which we may tackle them today.

3.1 INTRODUCTION



John Donne
(Source: en.wikipedia.org)

John Donne's time in England roughly stretches from the middle of the sixteenth century to the first quarter of the seventeenth century. It was marked by momentous upheavals in society, ideology and politics. In it, one could see a concrete departure from what could be called medieval ways of responding to the socio-cultural conditions. The new state of developments in life demanded a new set of norms and principles to adhere to. Literature and the arts also stood redefined to the extent that no significant link could be perceived between what existed in the past and what showed up later. In literature, the poets, thinkers and visionaries were left to invent their own ways of expression and articulation, there being no suitable model for them to adopt and work upon. Pressures of invention and experimentation would sometimes make writers look for guidance elsewhere, to Italy or France, for instance. More conveniently, these pressures would draw the visionaries to England's atmosphere of skepticism and apprehension. They would be tempted to consider and analyse practitioners in politics, administration or religious preaching to derive help and guidance from. Such a scenario made it necessary that writers make their own choices, surmise their own goals, and examine creative strategies their fellow writers adopted. Indeed, the complexity of the job emerged for the imaginative social segment as a great challenge. For them, it became a mission of adventure and fascination. A look at the contemporary political-cultural scene might help in drawing a map of creativity that ensued the efforts of alert minds in the second half of the sixteenth century and the first few decades of the seventeenth century.

3.2 SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

One of the most important events of the sixteenth century that left a lasting impact on life in England was Reformation. As the name suggested, The English king launched a campaign through this to reform and rework the nation's relation with Roman Catholicism and Pope of Rome. The royal decision had many complicated issues hidden behind it—personal, succession-based, economic and political. The ostensible purpose was to reform the religious structure and make it conducive to England's national interest. Here, keep in mind that the word "religious structure" is secular, it presents the idea as open to human intervention. As a structure, religion is understood in terms of a tangible agency that can be handled through policy measures. In the sixteenth century, however, religion had a direct connection with God, the creator of everything and whose word would be interpreted at the level of uplifting of souls and all things divine and holy. The reach of religion was so vast that it covered the whole of Europe consisting of kings, princes, preachers, writers, administrators, the nobility, and people on the city streets and village lanes. Individually, too, people would go deep into the questions of sinfulness, virtue, the human good, patience, and such other aspects touching the human body and soul. Reformation aligned with whole array of interests and engagements. Thus, we might think that Reformation was not less than an earthquake and its impact reverberated through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

To reiterate, Reformation, shook the foundations of English society and compelled it to rework so that a different path was carved to forge ahead. With advantage of hindsight, we might say that Reformation produced challenges that would lay the basis of humanist culture and literature, something that other nations of Europe would take double the time to catch up with an evolved England. At one level, Reformation proved to be a boon for England. It helped the country to strike deep roots in the soil, to recognize its potential and give it a grip over contentious aspects of growth. At another, it became a cause of destabilization and misery. One result was a redistribution of land, another was of the big vacuum in the mind and spirit of the people who struggled to form an altogether new equation with religion, morality and selfhood. The mind-related aspect became a factor in giving words to the mental states that the severance of the Roman Church from England had wrought. One could see many layers active in this occurrence. Ronald Carter and John McRae have observed:

The Reformation gave cultural, philosophical, and ideological impetus to English Renaissance writing. The writers in the century following Reformation had to explore and redefine all the concerns of humanity. In a world where old assumptions were no longer valid, where scientific discoveries questioned age-old hypotheses, and where man rather than God was the central interest, it was the writers who reflected and attempted to respond to the disintegration of former certainties. For it is when the universe is out of control that it is at its most frightening—and its

most stimulating. There would never again be such an atmosphere of creative tension in the country. What was created was a language, a literature, and a national and international identity. (Carter, Ronald and John McRae. *The Routledge History of Literature in English*. London: Routledge, 2001, rpt. 2009. 54)

More, literature and language apart, Renaissance gave to the monarch and the people at large self-assurance and the will to assert. With increase in economic resources and prosperity of the merchants as well as traders, England became a country of inspired citizenry. Add to this a skilled population of artisans, workers and craftsmen who looked forward to adopting progressive ideas, adventurous seamen and explorers who would roam the world with curiosity and interest. The sixteenth century also saw two dynamic monarchs, Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth; they provided to the country the much-needed stability and vision of progress. Particularly, Queen Elizabeth created conditions in which a secular establishment would finally emerge and correspond well with the rising bourgeoisie. The fifteen-eighties proved to be a successful period of economic and political advances; this climaxed in the defeat of the famed Spanish Armada, a cluster of warring ships that was considered invincible at the time. Again, fifteen-eighties was the period when theatre, poetry and the arts took a gigantic leap in terms of scope and variety. We shall take up the point regarding destabilization and misery under the next head “social unrest,” that will constitute, too, an important segment of the historical background.

3.2.1 Social Unrest

Tensions in society take many forms. In one case, there may be doubts and apprehensions. In another, uncertainties begin threatening prospects of peace. In yet another case, tensions come out of the closet and challenge the existing system of governance. All these apply when we think about English society in England in the sixteenth century that began with the Tudor monarchs occupying levers of power. Initially, the tussle between the nobility and an emergent kingship captured attention. The former wanted to hold on to comforts and the riches accruing from the labour of the rural population. Nobility believed in a system that would last for ever, keeping intact their control over the resources of the land. Some might call it land as a resource. In either case, England in early part of the century drew its strength from age-old norms of privilege that were ensured from religious tradition, with God firmly placed in the centre of it all. But the gap widened gradually between the nobility and kingship as time progressed. The force working behind it was the rural labour pushing through men who lived by individual enterprise but bound by limitations of political power they enjoyed even as mild support. People's best bet was a strong king making and implementing laws from one power centre that would operate from one place alone. This would happen from the king's court taking cognizance of the needs and requirements of the country's whole territory; this constituted regions and areas as property that the nobility through familial right would control. Significantly enough, the king as a unifying factor also came from a combination of the nobility and feudal lords, as one among them who won support in the country and began imposing his writ on the country's population.

The process we are talking of assumed an altogether new dimension after the death of Henry VIII in mid-century. With this, the era of divisions began. The tussle over ascension of throne became alarming as the country stood on the brink of division vertically. The lines were marked by religious orientation. It was a divide along religious markings, between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. However, the political wrangling only indicated the deeper layer of class distinctions. Social unrest in England was rooted in issues of poverty and deprivation of the kind where ideas of change had percolated to the masses because of the religious antagonism going on for decades. It could even be said that rise of the bourgeoisie had caused currents of a new kind in the country. This helped grow consciousness about inequality. Hungry mobs were seen roaming streets of London to protest conditions of hunger and starvation. Fifteen eighties and nineties were the decades of mob violence. The scene stands well captured in Shakespeare's plays of the fifteen-nineties and sixteen-hundreds.

Thus, a decisive development contributing to social unrest had links with the land. People with influence would bring open land under their control and put it to private use. This was done by what was called the practice of “enclosures” through putting a fence or erecting a boundary wall. A.L. Morton has explained:

The quantitative transfer of land from open field to enclosure and from arable to pasture, proceeding continuously up to this time, assumes the qualitative character of a widespread dispossession of the peasantry. The change coincided with the growth of population to perhaps five million, which may be regarded as the maximum which the land would support under the hitherto existing mode of production. Under these circumstances enclosures of an extent which earlier might have passed almost unnoticed were bound to involve sweeping social changes. Further, these changes coincided with the beginning of a rise in prices, the result of the influx of precious metals into Europe, that had the effect of doubling profits and almost halving wages by the century. The prosperity of the later Tudor period was in fact a vast transfer of wealth from the laboring masses to a small class of merchants and capitalist farmers. The rise in prices became in its turn an inducement to speed up enclosure, since the land became immensely more valuable. (Morton, A.L. *A People's History of England*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, first published 1938, rpt. 1971. 166-7)

It is made clear in this quote that the prosperity of England went hand in hand with the impoverishment of the country's peasantry. The spectacle of want and deprivation made the scene difficult to accept and cope with. The writers of the period, such as Shakespeare and John Donne, who were witness to this atmosphere in the fifteen eighties and nineties felt torn from within. It was not easy for them to find factors that would create harmony among people through religious or moral practices. The circumstance was compounded by the arrival of the new merchant wedded solely to profit. Understandably, the merchant and the capitalist farmer would go together a long way and influence the emerging trends. Yet more, they would play a part in the making of policies and have an increasing alliance with the monarch.

3.2.2 Conditions Leading to the Civil War

The English Civil War in which armies led by King Charles I and those led by Oliver Cromwell fought a long drawn out bloody battle. It lasted a few years and ended the rule of the monarch. In the late sixteenth-century, Republicanism was established. But this event was only the culmination of a long process of change set somewhere in the late sixteenth century. Things at a palpable level started happening in the first decade of the seventeenth century. With Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, a new character of political-ideological pattern emerged. In politics, the question of faith shifted from Puritanism and the Anglican Church to Roman Catholicism and left its mark on the people's mind. The social tension disturbed the range and scope of progress that was based on the rising merchant class of the day. At the ideological level, where writing and writers come under direct influence, a sort of mental churning could be discerned. The tragic plays of Shakespeare and the stress on violence and crime in the Jacobean drama reflected it unmistakably. Combine it with the conflict between the king and English parliament, and we have a scene in front of our eyes carrying seeds of protest and rebellion. The parliament put pressure on the King and he in turn took strong measures to suppress, if not crush the parliament. The divide between the two spread all over the country—one indeed might call a divide between town and country. The countryside was swept by puritans who placed their beliefs on conduct, simplicity and hard work. On the opposite side, the urban sections supported the king since he had the sanction of orthodox religion. The clash told heavily on the economic and social conditions and affecting the mental and moral health of the people. Metaphysical poetry with its emphasis on wit and the recognition of fissures and ruptures in society indicated violent tussles. From hindsight, we say that all was leading at the time to a decisive resolution of issues in the Civil War.

3.2.3 The Shaping of Consciousness and Creativity: Closing Years of the Sixteenth Century

This had to do with shuffling of groups and subgroups in the society of the time. New ways of winning bread and butter, a city-centric market driven increasingly by skills of buying and selling, an education

imparting ability to individual members for a progressive career and the values related with such a scenario gave a fillip to literary writing not existing hitherto. Watchwords were the individual, the specific profession, the playwright and the poet, selfhood and being. The phenomenon required a point of comprehension from where the social trends and questions could be viewed. In plays, the characters spoke to one another more precisely, in poems, the dialogue or interaction between two attitudes received prominence. The essays, analyses and comments bore the stamps of the thinking person than of the age in which broad trends clashed for dominance. Even as literary works were not meant for publication, they would soon assume dimensions of individual perception and require attention for recognition of the wit and verbal skills of the creator. Marjorie Cox has observed:

London was an essential part of the milieu of literature; some writers were born there, Milton the son of a scrivener, Donne of a prosperous ironmonger, Herrick of a goldsmith; more were drawn there by its attraction as an economic, social and intellectual centre. But London was only part of the background of cultivated society: most of the men of letters of this period, and many of their contemporaries of the 'political nation,' shared with the Earl of Clare in 'all the ornaments of the University, Inns of Court, Court, Camp, travel and language could enrich him with.'(Ford, Boris. *The Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Donne to Marvell*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, first published 1956, rpt. 1963. 20)

3.2.4 The Role of Religion

In a discussion about John Donne, religion would be centrally situated. Donne wrote about religion, about Christianity with a deeply felt anguish. It came from engagements of the sixteenth century at many levels. Three streams could be clearly identified in English thought of the day. Roman Catholicism that ran as per established convention and believed in hierarchy was the first. Protestantism was rooted in the moral aspect where the word of the Bible was supreme. The message of the holy book meant all. This stream took a serious note of the distortions that had set foot in the various offices of the church. Men of the church, those who preached and practiced Christianity, had turned into the men of the world with ways and manners identical to those of the others. They compromised and were easy prey to worldly temptations. This was unacceptable to the Protestants. They upheld principles. The third stream was of the pragmatists among critics of the Pope of Rome. A large majority of the believers in Protestantism saw in the severance of the link with Rome an opportunity to grab land, use money to climb up the social ladder and be successful wielders of authority. The middle path pursued by them suited England. A newly emerged society of merchants and traders believed in merging national interests with the religious faith. Indeed, the last one called Anglican Church or Church of England bore markings of the English ways of life wedded to the doctrine of success. Consider that the problems lay with followers of the Church of England. They were mixing faith with worldly success and distorted God's message. The role of religion in Tudor England and the years that followed was to struggle for purity and righteousness. On this, debates were held consistently in and outside the church a century. The views of the three streams clashed in literature, too. Poets raised the level of intensity and suffering in their poems and presented human experience as the substance of literary expression. No poetic or dramatic work remained untouched by one or other aspect of Christianity. The emphasis on individuality that we have dealt with elsewhere in this unit added breadth to the faith-related norms. A concrete reflection of this in the contemporary writing only proved that the time of Donne, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson assigned great significance to the Christian ideal of virtue, innocence and simplicity. Hypocrisy, dishonesty, falsity and the many temptations remained persistent themes of all literary works without exception. Religion was maintained as a yardstick with which the worth of people's conduct and behavior could be measured profoundly.

3.3 METAPHYSICAL POETRY

The trend called metaphysical poetry did not cater to a larger audience, but one that was evolved culturally. Poems would circulate privately through a limited number of copies. The subjects selected for use appeared customary on the surface. At deeper levels of representation though, they indicated uncertainty and even malaise. The theme of love, for instance, would project lovers that avoided the public eye. Even within parameters of the private domain, the lovers would not commit to the sincere

declaration since that would involve using a cliché. The love emotion might need an effort of a new kind, intellectual and deliberately problematic. The poets resorted to stretching the point, to obfuscating the issue so the reader employed one's own skills of reading and comprehending.

In this regard, the word "metaphysical" may be of help. It was famously commented upon by Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century who said, for instance, that "About the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the *metaphysical poets*. . . . Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural. . . . The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together." (qtd., in Carter 167)

3.3.1 Cavalier Poets

Thomas Carew, Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, and John Suckling, among many others, constitute the group of Cavalier poets. They were active in the first half of the seventeenth century and their writing can be considered a part of the metaphysical stream. The poets were a part of the court of King Charles I. What they wrote was not as complex or engaging as the poetry of John Donne or Andrew Marvell. It lacked urgency and the sense of struggle that characterized poetic compositions of Shakespeare and Donne. In a substantial manner, this set them apart from the intense and paradoxical writing placed under the metaphysical trend. The reason was that cavalier poets distinguished themselves as the voice of conservatism. They followed the cultural path of King Charles who was locked in a life and death struggle with Oliver Cromwell and his campaign for the republicans. Cavalier poets were simpler in their expression as well as the ideological concerns that they upheld. They linked with the royalist cause. In literature, their guiding spirit was Ben Jonson who maintained classical distance while capturing the ethos of the time. Such an inclination kept the writing of the Cavalier poets away from the immediate concerns. The mode chosen by these poets was lyricism. They adopted the established tradition of sweet rendering, observing norms that would be mainly rooted in tradition. This kept them on the right side of the king's court. Understandably, they shunned ideas, critical and analytical, since that would end up as an act of hostility towards the ruling group. The effort resulted in a poetry not moving enough to disturb the equanimity of the upper sections. It remained stylized and formal. Geoffrey Walton has observed:

Cavalier poetry presents a surprising mixture of elegance and sophistication with naivete and schoolboy obscenity, but it is rarely vulgar or sneering. One senses these qualities in reading. Further knowledge of the way that produced it helps to explain the paradoxical qualities.

The idiom (in the poems of writers such as Carew and Suckling) is the conversation of the Court circles in all its variety, cultivated and colloquial, with that tendency to the racy and the slipshod which has been characteristic of English aristocratic speech ever since the speech of the educated became formalized, and which has produced so remarkable succession of literary achievements from this time to Byron's. (Ford, Boris. *The Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Donne to Marvell*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, first published 1956, rpt. 1963. 160-1)

The emphasis in this quote is on directness as well as elegance. Also, "naivete" is used for suggesting that the poets kept out of the existing crisis at levels of the religious faith and politics. Seriousness of tone and risk-taking were inadvisable for a writer who supported the King. See that in the latter part of the comment, speech rhythms are carefully picked up from common talk happening in the elite circles. Indeed, this practice required a command over the genre of poetry confined to a limited group. Restriction on issues to be addressed created climate of skilled language-use. Experiment was discouraged, but word-play for amusing the reader and leaving him in wonder were resorted to. The practice eventually led to what is called "literary achievements." In a different sense, the same was intended also in the mainstream metaphysical poetry. However, the specific value of the latter lay in paradox and extended wit. In Cavalier poetry, smooth and direct expression was preferred.

3.4 METAPHYSICAL POETS

John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Andrew Marvell and a few others fall under the category of Metaphysical poets. All of them wrote in the seventeenth century. While reading them, we are constantly reminded of the time in which they lived. Their writing was not spontaneous and they seldom talked about the muse in the idealistic sense. Words such as “imagination,” or “inspiration” occurred in their writing only ironically, if at all. The reason perhaps is that they were seldom poetic going on journey to fairy lands where dreams combined naturally with reality. We associate poetry with streams, the spring season, vast expanse of fields, the open sky and birds chirping in dense forests. England in the seventeenth century consisted of all these. Yet, the metaphysical poets engaged with ideas, wit, word play and the unusual aspect of human behaviour. They took their attention beyond what was available to the five senses. Human mind is what they engaged with. This mind could be twisted to say things that challenged customary writing. Symbols, metaphors and images were for them carriers of new inventions that dazzled attention and shocked understanding. Literally, since they took literary representation away from the mundane and ordinary, into domains of the unknown that would then be worked out with intellectual effort, it would tell that they shunned the rational, available to reason, and real, available to human perception. The phenomenon of physical existence is what they rejected. The word for them would then be coined that they were “metaphysical,” strange, unfamiliar, even weird. Keeping in mind “wit” as the central component of metaphysical poetry, Samuel Johnson famously remarked that wit was “a kind of discordia concors; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. . . . The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked together.” (Abrams 42)

3.5 JOHN DONNE: A BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT

John Donne was born in 1572 in Bread Street, London to parents who had faith in Roman Catholicism. His father John was an ironmonger, an established merchant with good means to support a large family. Donne’s mother Elizabeth came from family of thinkers and writers. Her father John Heywood was an epigrammatist and an interlude writer. She was also the great-niece of Sir Thomas More. This made John Donne a man of curiosity in matters of mind and soul, ever searching for answers to complex questions of spirituality and existence at a higher level. His mother’s two brothers became Jesuits, a Roman Catholic sect devoted to the religious cause; the sect opposed Reformation.

In a span of nine years, between 1572 and 1581, Donne had lost his father and three sisters. Soon after becoming a widow in 1576, his mother married Dr. John Syminges, a widower with three children. This turn of events would have left impact on young Donne, rendering him insecure and lonely. Meanwhile though, a semblance of stability was restored to the young child.

At the age of twelve in 1584, John Donne did Matriculation from Hart Hall, Oxford. It is conjectured that he studied at Cambridge around 1588, and was for sure admitted to Lincoln’s Inn, the reputed seat of legal luminaries, in 1592. From this year to 1600, Donne was busy straightening his course at the Lincoln’s Inn and rising from one ladder to another successfully. The period also saw him going on a few expeditions to other countries, and particularly islands. The important one was ‘Island’s’ expedition that proved eventful. This involved his going to Azores, in Portugal. From it he was back to England in 1597. The last years of this period were marked by his joining service at Sir Thomas Egerton’s place. In 1601, he secretly married Ann More, daughter of Sir Thomas’s brother-in-law. He revealed this to Egerton in 1602 and was imprisoned as well as dismissed from service. Later in the year, The Court of Audiences upheld his marriage. This was followed by his moving to Surrey and living as a guest of his wife’s cousin, Sir Francis Wolley. In a span of fourteen years from 1603 to 1617, he became a father of ten children, five daughters and five sons. In 1612 his wife had given birth to a still-born child. The last child, a daughter, was born in 1615. In 1617, his wife gave birth to another still-born child on 10 August, and died five days later. In this span, three of his children also died. This was in addition to his losing two sisters and his father when young. We can understand Donne’s concern for death, the pain it caused and sense of vacuum it created. He felt a deep link between death and his sensibility which constantly struggled to accept the reality of losing so many people close to his heart.

3.6 DONNE'S LITERARY SENSIBILITY AND SPIRITUAL ENGAGEMENTS

In 1601, Donne entered Parliament as MP for Brackley. This appears to have been a temporary phase. In 1606, he shifted back from Surrey to England and assisted Thomas Morton for four years in polemical writings against the Church of Rome. Morton urged Donne to take holy orders in 1607 but Donne refused. He earned Honorary MA from Oxford in 1610. Around this time, his poetic and intellectual writing began. Some of these were *The Expiration*, *Pseudo-Martyr*, *Ignatius His Conclave*, *An Anatomy of the World*, *The First and Second Anniversaries*, *Break of Day*, and *Elegy Upon Prince Henry* (1609-13). All these were published in his life time. In 1615, he was ordained as deacon and priest at St Paul's Cathedral and preached at many churches, at Court and Lincoln's Inn. The preaching continued till his death in March, 1631. John Donne is famous for his sonnets, love poems, religious poems, Latin translations, elegies, satires and sermons.

We find a close affinity between the kind of life of lived and his writings. He played an active role in the religious and academic circles and wrote as well as preached and debated. At regular intervals till sixteentwenties, he also took assignments and toured many countries. These gave him a cosmopolitan look, at once distanced and objective on one side and urgent as well as intimate on the other. This is reflected in his poems that use the method of dialogue, analysis, elaboration and witty comment. They also bring out a troubled soul that explored and examined. His confrontation with self, the elements, events of the world and time segments in history bring to life conflicts that enlighten and dazzle the reader. Strangely and authentically, Donne's sense of self goes parallel to the inner workings of the mind in Shakespeare's tragic protagonists. In both cases is visible the struggle to know and question, and a thirst to grasp with wit the complexity of contemporary emotions.

At a broader level, John Donne kept alive the tradition of raising fundamental questions of socio-cultural existence. He was an exact contemporary of the great Elizabethans such as Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare—there being just a gap of six years between the two. What distinguished him from the Elizabethans, however, was the social group to which he belonged. Whereas Marlowe, Shakespeare and other dramatists of the time participated in the common problems and issues of the day, the life on the street and the tribulations at the lower levels, Donne moved in the courtly circles. The former section was stuck to the life in London and Donne was travelling quite frequently from one corner of England to another and in different countries in Europe. Another and yet more important distinction was that the dramatists interacted with the mundane secular matters while Donne remained immersed in psychological and spiritual processes of human engagement. At the same time, the joining part was of the larger period in which the two groups participated at separate levels.

3.7 DONNE IN HIS OWN TIMES AND OURS

Donne's time was of social and political upheavals; it was marked by a reworking of the world along lines of modernity, progress, novelty and experimentation. Deep within this world was situated a sense of uncertainty, apprehension and lack of stability. The idea of kingship that had remained recognized and accepted since the early centuries of the millennium found itself face to face with the notion of power resting in the common masses. This caused a schism in the psyche of the age. Crisis and disintegration flowed within the mental states of writers, thinkers and those others whose job it was to explain life's logic in accordance with the holy scriptures. What was knocking at the doors of the period was a mysterious call for change; it emanated from aspirations of a long-suppressed humanity.

Such a vision of change and progress led to what we call the age of reason, logic and scientific thought. The twentieth century along with the present one stands on an even surface of equality and democratic awareness. Yet, we face the apprehension, too, of a danger of instability lurking behind the present political structures in a period that saw two world wars causing devastation on an unprecedented scale. Even though we have definitions of mutuality, divergence and peaceful coexistence in our world, much remains to be fulfilled for happy coherence to occur in our midst. John Donne visualized a world of

humans as a cohesive entity tied together in a thread of organic linkage. Mark the title “For Whom the Bell Tolls” that Hemingway gave to his novel written in early years of the twentieth century; it came from a poem by Donne. Death that haunted Donne in a major portion of his life had become a yet more crucial factor in the twentieth century. The twentieth century also saw a grand revival of Metaphysical Poetry in general and John Donne in particular.

3.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed John Donne as a metaphysical poet. The facts and details about his life and works given here constantly refer to his genius and vision. We saw that Donne was a troubled genius who lived by his dazzling wit and humanist assertion and stood at the opening of an era of questioning and critical appraisal. One of his major concerns was death that he engaged with necessary urgency. An intellectual of worth and relevance, Donne stood up to the cultural challenges of his time and saw to it that his critical acumen enriched his response with sufficient courage. His life and writing became an inspiration to the future generations and he emerged as an appealing figure in the twentieth century.

3.9 QUESTIONS

1. What does ‘Metaphorical Poetry’ signify as a term? Explain.
2. Do you agree that John Donne as a poet inclined towards wit and paradox than spontaneity? Discuss.
3. Write a critical note on Cavalier poets.
4. “Metaphysical poetry was a specific response to the English conditions in the beginning of the seventeenth century”. Comment.

3.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Rpt. Singapore: Thomson, 2005.
2. Carter, Ronald and John McRae. *The Routledge History of Literature in English*. London: Routledge, 2001, rpt. 2009.
3. Ford, Boris. *The Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Donne to Marvell*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, first published 1956, rpt. 1963.
4. Morton, A.L. *A People’s History of England*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, first published 1938, rpt. 1971.

UNIT 4 **DONNE: “THE SUN RISING” AND “DEATH BE NOT PROUD”**

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Donne’s Poetic Sensibility
- 4.3 The Sunne Rising: Discussion
- 4.4 Holy Sonnets: A View
 - 4.4.1 Death be Not Proud: Discussion
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Suggested Readings

4.0 **OBJECTIVES**

It is difficult to integrate John Donne with the stream of poetry in English. From the point of view of the period in which he wrote, he happens to be between Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser and Shakespeare on one side and Milton on the other. This is speaking merely in relation with his immediate predecessors and contemporaries—the latter were the Jacobean dramatists such as John Webster, Beaumont and Fletcher who presented states of mind that had no ideals to pursue. Indeed, the Jacobean period was of decline, not just economically but also in terms of the views and ideas that floated around. Ben Jonson, Marlowe, and Sidney were placed a little before Donne. Those who came later such as the Cavalier Poets kept an eye on narrow interests of seeking patronage also formed a category to be considered in the context. The Cavalier poets were royalists, in sync with the authority headed by the king. They constituted the circles of influence in the first three decades of the seventeenth century. More importantly, England in this period went through the processes of transition and instability. Apart from religion and ideology involving succession following the death of Queen Elizabeth, the crucial pressures emanated from the politics of the day carrying the burden of economic clashes and conflicts. Donne’s early poetry and Shakespeare’s mature plays, tragedies and romances had a parallel existence. We may also note that Shakespeare’s increasing use of paradox in the later plays has a great amount of commonness with what is termed the metaphysical conceit.

4.1 **INTRODUCTION**

Perspective was not the strong point of metaphysical writing. The overall attitude of acceptance or rejection that sifted grain from chaff and took a position was entirely missing from the writings of John Donne, Herbert and many others of the group. In them, there was not much to convey. It might indeed be asked whether poems of these writers led major critics to take note of them. Yet, there was something in the metaphorical verse that drew attention. This may be termed the sense to engage with current thought, whether linked with ideology, religion or popular themes of love and rational appreciation. All these were there in the air. Certain it was that Metaphysical poets did their job of poetically expressing their intent. They had no simple answers to provide to the current issues. What they achieved was in the form of formulating an honest opinion on the questions of the day. For instance, equanimity and balance were missing from the socio-ideological scene at the time. Admitting it as such was an act of courage, and pursuing it intellectually was a challenge worth taking up. What may have suited the environment particularly was a rational appraisal. Thus, intellect was employed to experiment, stretch, dare to seriously unsettle existing norms and show to the reader that all was not well with the period. Since the tangible relations and affinities did not hold much hope, paths untrodden were explored. That they were called not materialist and deeply secular in their involvement might make sense. Yet, the word that captured the essence of this writing was “metaphysical.” This meant beyond the sensible, normal and sane. The examples that follow in this unit amply elaborate the poetic and cultural difficulties of the period.

4.2 **DONNE’S POETIC SENSIBILITY**

By poetic sensibility we mean the human faculty of grasping and interpreting the surrounding reality. Particularly, human beings evolve a manner of living to engage with pressures and problems of society. Those who write use specific words and phrases as well as a pattern of addressing the reader. All these come under sensibility. What do we say of Donne's sensibility? For this, we may refer to the formative period of Donne's life, the circumstances of which he was a part. In the previous unit, we saw in detail the ups and downs of his family as well as the phase of growing up. We also noted the crucial episodes of death that left an impact on his psyche. For Donne, a life of activity, deep reflection and loneliness occasioned sharp and searching dialogue with self. His poetry is testimony to the fact that he was strained and troubled in the deeper layers of his heart. In fact, the language he used for poetic communication presented themes that are discernible in his similes, metaphors and ironical observations. His poetic utterances were not assertive. Instead, they reflected a drama of pain and anguish. Questions of love, fascination, excitement and faith that he dealt with leave us wondering about his way of meeting requirements of the mind and the heart.

Donne's poetic sensibility was shaped by what is known as the Anglican approach to the life's affairs in England. It had a mixture of rationality, individualism and sense of initiative. The seriously interrogative element in his poetry, the sense of doubt as well as search serves the dual purpose of capturing the surface and raising the mundane to a higher level. What Samuel Johnson called "violently yoking together" of opposites came from Donne's apparently flat perception that was rather mischievously combined with intellect. Was Donne serious in his poetic mission of giving sense to the weird? We certainly think so, since levity and deep concern for the unfolding truth was rooted in contemporary thought. This was the Anglican essence of Donne's way of grasping the truth of his time.

4.3 "THE SUN RISING": DISCUSSION

The Sun Rising

Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains, call us!
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?
Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide
Late schoolboys, and sour prentices,
Go tell court-huntsmen that the King will ride,
Call country ants to harvest offices,
Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beams, so reverend and strong
Why shouldst thou think?
I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,
But that I would not lose her sight so long
If her eyes have not blinded thine,
Look, and tomorrow late, tell me
Whether both the Indias of spice and mine
Be where thou leftst them, or be here with me.
Ask me for those Kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
And thou shalt hear: 'All here in one bed lay.'

She is all States, and all Princes I.
Nothing else is:
Princes do but play us; compar'd to this,
All honour's mimic, all wealth alchemy.

Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,
In the world's contracted thus;
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere.

“The Sun Rising” is one of the simpler poems of John Donne. It uses the mode of a monologue, the manner of a person speaking to another from beginning to end. Here, the one who speaks is the poet and the one addressed is the sun. Is it not unusual? We think it is, since it is rare that a person would speak to the sun as if the latter were a human being. That apart, the speaker would not have so much to say to the sun, since it is not involved as much in the human affairs as is the case in the poem. We might keep in mind that the writer is taking liberties with the social convention, the rules and laws of nature and the rational basis of language. However, let us say in defense of the poet that he employs the unusual in life deliberately and makes an interesting point about love and lovers that defies contemporary logic.

Another aspect catching our attention is the presence of two people in the poem, the lover and the beloved. Whereas the speaker and the lover are one, the object of their love is a woman, a beautiful person with eyes so shining they have power enough to render the sun “blinded.” It is a hyperbole, an exaggerated use of words to praise the beloved’s eyes. So, we have two statements over-emphasizing the lover’s stance of expressing a feeling—the lover addressing the sun and the beloved who is more powerful than the sun. This sets the poem apart, makes it extraordinary. Let us then say that the poem is metaphysical, odd and strange, not fitting in with the normal course of trends in literature.

There is yet another way in which the poem can be called metaphysical, beyond the reach of earthly logic. The poem is a blend of the serious and non-serious, of that which might make sense and that which does not make sense. We note that there is too much of levity, excessive light-heartedness in the poem. What after all does the poem represent in precise terms? Let us take up this question in some detail.

The poem is in three separate parts, each capturing a distinct phase. The first defines the behaviour of the sun which is called “Busy old fool.” The expression may be interpreted broadly as interfering in affairs of the humans. This is an act of insensitivity on the part of the sun, says the poet-lover. Yet more, it places the sun against the interests of the individuals tied in love. For the lover, as for Donne perhaps, it disturbs the two lovers spending time in the coziness of the curtained room protected from the public gaze. Generally, humans have the right not to be dictated to in their personal matters by any external force or agency. Specifically, the lovers would prefer undisturbed environs for spending time together. Is it because in the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the poem was composed, nothing seemed better than love? If that were the case, Donne has made a telling comment on the affairs of the world, something that would have ruffled a few feathers. This means that with the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, English society had become topsy-turvy, difficult to be brought back on to the rails. Let us assess the scene. So far as post-Elizabethan era is concerned, it does not know where to look for relief. Economy is in a state of shambles—the process began in the last decade of the sixteenth century. Religious faith, an important aspect of life in England of the time, offers complications of an unprecedented variety. It is not set in the Catholic Church. Nor is it entirely Protestant in orientation. Additionally, the culture of the period does not offer answers to the instability and confusion of the surrounding ethos. Also, consider that Donne sets great store by the bonding in love between individuals. In the second part of the poem, a line of distinction is drawn between seasons of nature and those of the “lovers’ seasons.” Thus, summer, autumn or winter might be governed by the sun, the lovers’ seasons are driven by passion. The two systems clash and the blame should therefore fall on the son, the “fool” who is busy with managing the senseless affairs of nature, thinks the impatient lover. Out of anger, the lover calls the sun a “Saucy pedantic wretch.” The sharp utterance signifies uncultured brutishness and impudent behaviour. The lover also makes a mention of life’s routine under which people take to the daily chores, oblivious of where the worth and meaning of human existence lie. All these are significant questions, and to most of the people love would come rather low in the hierarchy of observable principles. The case of metaphysical wit is,

however, different. The twist is unmistakable. In this part, the rhetoric of metaphysical wit is yet more pronounced. The two lovers are contrasted with the many kings controlling separate parts of the earth. The subject is, indeed, accompanied by mention of the Indies where spices or precious metals abound. For the poet, all those bounties are nowhere near the measure of love. The lover would only shut his eyes, or “wink” as he calls it, to make the kingdoms as well as the beams of the sun disappear. And insofar as he is concerned, the whole earth and the cosmos stands successfully squeezed into the bed that the lovers occupy. Mark that the “wink” is presented graphically with full weight of the many implications. One of those is that the wink reminds the lover of the beloved’s eyes that would outshine the sun, making it blind if she cared to look that side.

The third part of the poem offers an apt conclusion to the ‘argument’ that the poet-lover presented. It came from the second part where the whole world was declared as concentrated, so to say, within boundaries of the lovers’ bed. In this part, two points are specifically made: one, that “She is all States, and all Princes I” and the second is that “All honour’s mimic, all wealth alchemy”. “States” here suggests a group of all countries organized as social units. Another meaning is that states are territories. Figuratively speaking, the beloved as a group of states stands for a living unit governed by the principle of love with the poet as partner in the venture. Likewise, “Princes” are grouped as an integrated entity in the figure of the poet-lover. The hyperbole of the two lovers constituting the entire world is meant to be taken literally. The putting together of the lovers with the world they occupy, and suggesting that they are the crux is an example of conceit. The reader is expected to imagine that the man and the woman are indeed the sum-total of organized societies. The idea is far-fetched but meant to convey the power or dynamism of love. The poet does not stop here. He goes further to say that the comparison between the lover and the Princes is indeed weighted on the side of the former—“Princes do but play us.” The princes are nothing more than actors playing the role of the lovers (us) who are protagonists in the drama of life. Indeed, if one compared the lovers with the world of princes, one would only realize that in face of the former’s love, “All honour’s mimic, all wealth alchemy.” It is a serious criticism of the pursuits of the mighty that appear to the poet as hollow and without worth. The sweep of the poem is overwhelming.

After providing criticism of the existing world scenario, the poet-lover turns towards the positive aspect of love, his main concern here. Love is a feeling of warmth, and envelops lovers into cozy company, makes them enjoy moments of close physical intimacy. On its side, the sun, too warms the world, but while doing so it expends energy too much where it is not due. Maybe, the sun has lack of focus because of which it does not know whom to give warmth to and how much. This question can be better addressed, says the poet, by concentrating on the two lovers who, as has been said earlier in the poem, indeed constitute the entire earth. To quote: “Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;/This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere.” We spot levity here again, a talk that draws much from a supposedly minor segment of society. For us, however, levity and semi-serious tone of the poet fits in with the spirit of the poem. The writer has all along commented upon the act and experience of love in manner of an entertaining and witty enterprise. An imaginative attempt, the poetic expression helps the reader enter the fold of indulgence, humour, word-play and has a dig at the power patterns existing in the surrounding world. It is a poem of rejection of the established norms based on clichés, honour, shallow adherence to preferences that are unreal since bound to the mundane. For the poet, all these facets stand countered by love, at once an emotion and a physical act that gives materiality to the human pursuit. To clarify further, Donne’s idea of love critiques Platonism that swore by the abstract beauty ideal. In the Jacobean ethos, with particular reference to the rising tensions in politics and society, the Platonic influence in literature, a staple in the sixteenth century in general and in the Elizabethan period in particular, had considerably weakened. Instead, it had assumed the shape of intellectual and realistic expression. The human reason and logic made it penetrate social walls and look beyond them to the core of ideology working there. Reality, yet more effectively, on the other hand forced it to stick to the body, the concrete surface, and actual ways in which life confronted attitudes of traditional acceptance.

4.4 HOLY SONNETS — A VIEW

Under this head, we can engage with the religious concerns of the age, particularly those that the individual in the early modern period forged for confronting truth of the surrounding dilemmas. At the turn of the century, multiple streams of the Christian faith contended with one another to gain ascendancy. Within Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, thinkers and interpreters studied the scriptures from angles of knowing, practicing and preaching. In this light, there was also the issue of tempering the ways of feeling that presented psychological states concretely. The crux was the individual caught in the tussle. “The condition of helplessness,” says critic Ramie Targoff, “that Donne describes stems from his fear of abandonment by God.” Targoff explains the point by adding that “Donne’s fear of being abandoned by God pervades his devotional writings. We see it in the *Essayes in Divinitie*, a prose meditation on the opening verses of *Genesis* and *Exodus* written around 1614, in which he dwells on whether God would allow his creatures to be returned to nothingness. We see it most spectacularly in the sermons, in which Donne conjures up what it would feel like to fall out of God’s hands” (Mahapatra, Aruni. Ramie Targoff in “Holy Sonnets” in *Love Canonized: The Poetry of Spenser and Donne*. Delhi: Worldview, 2014. 388-9). Donne was a poet as well a thinker and visionary. He also had joined the Church in the latter part of his career. In life, too, death had been a major concern for him; it haunted him ever as a mode of suffering. Doctor Donne reflected on the subject in deep religious terms. The sonnet form particularly suited him for dealing with death and God as questions of deep interest. Brajraj Singh has brought in the significant issue of “anguish” while commenting on Donne’s holy sonnets. This, for Singh, “is at the sense of his (Donne’s) own unworthiness and therefore a fear that accompanies the working out of his salvation face to face with his Maker, with no intercessors or intermediaries present” (Singh, Brajraj. Ed. *Five Seventeenth-Century Poets: Donne; Herbert; Crashaw; Marvell; Vaughan*. New Delhi: Oxford, rpt. 1999. 98). *Holy Sonnets*, for Donne, were expressions of unease as well as impatience in a period of turmoil. They touched aspects of spirit and spirituality. Psychological exploration at a time when God, faith and morality were under stress as issues, was a true and authentic strategy for Donne to adopt. It did not divide poetic attention in the poet’s case. He remained simultaneously a poet of love and religious sentiment. We notice in Donne an intellectual interest in matters that touched his soul. The same remained true about matters of the body, the senses—the two combining to present a representation bordering on sensuality. The combination assumed oddities and a sense of weirdness that worked at levels of the idea and language, the two were stretched to the limit. This was the source of metaphysical conceit that we associate with the kind of verse John Donne wrote. Thus, holiness and love in relatively abstract terms as well as a live engagement with self and God became the hallmark of Donne. At this point in the discussion, let us have a look at the text of “Death Be Not Proud.”

4.4.1 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.

Let us comprehend the meaning and message of this sonnet step by step. Note, for instance, that this sonnet has opened with the poet directly addressing death. Donne talks in the first person and initiates a conversation with the figure. This sonnet fits in with other sonnets of the period that were poems in the conversational mode. Here, the writer’s choice of subject might appear conventional—death as much as

love was a stock theme of the sonnets in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For us in this unit, it is the treatment of the subject that makes the poem different, Donne being the shaping influence of the dialogue held between the poet persona and Death. Interestingly, the poet does not speak of the power of death or its inevitability. Indeed, he admonishes death for being too proud and suggests that for him death doesn't hold sway over the world nor can it overpower him individually. Note his tone in "Death be not proud though some have called thee /Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so". The use of negatives "not proud" and "not so" creates an added emphasis. We may ask: Why does the poet show this stance of arrogance, and what can defeat death? He tells Death squarely that "For those whom thou think'st, thou doest overthrow/ die not". Again, the use of the negative "not" makes it a statement of clarity. For the poet, Death is deceived in believing that it overthrows human life by claiming it. It is conveyed that the case can be overturned and its opposite can be established with greater certainty. A person doesn't die even when Death apparently takes him/her away. Further, the poet calls Death "poore"—it is not human beings who are the subject of pity but death itself deserves that denigration. Note the assurance in the poet-subject's words "nor yet canst thou kill me". Donne goes on to elaborate on the theme adding to it those characteristics of death that are nothing to be proud of. Death, he claims, makes a picture of sleep and rest, while life keeps on moving. As the best of men are taken by death, they are delivered of their bones and souls; they shed only the bodily form. Adding more features, Donne suggests that death lives in the company of disease, squalor and war. Simultaneously, the poet says that Death is a "slave to fate, chance, kings and desperate men". What is the connecting thread among these? Do fate, chance and the rest share a common trait? If not, what is the poet's purpose in bringing them together? Both fate and chance can cause deaths, kings can order executions, and desperate men unthinkingly may kill people. In any case, we are left to surmise that death is not free and is bound by these factors. We might wonder about the kind of life that death leads. Note the heightened form of personification. The irony is not missed that here Donne talks about the life that death leads. Note that the poem concludes with the foreboding, a kind of prophecy: "death thou shall die". It appears to be more than a paradox. The poem defines it as about the life and death of Death, thus making it a philosophical take on the subject. What could be the purpose of personifying death in this manner? Giving a human form to death renders it more palpable. We might then accept Donne's claim in the sonnet—"one short sleepe past, we wake eternally". The suggestion is that in view of eternity, Death would have no role to play.

Donne thus strips death of its power as an independent agency. He suggests that to reach eternity we don't need death since "poppie and charms can make us sleepe as well/ and better than thy stroake". Death stands rebuked for swelling in conceit. In the sonnet, it is given the small figure of a non-entity.

We might also look at this poem as a holy sonnet, since it is recognized as a part of the *Holy Sonnet* series. What has the poet attempted in this sonnet from the point of view of subject and approach? At one level, the tradition of poetry dealing with death, life or fate that sonneteers of his time engaged with has been steadily questioned by Donne. In evoking death as a subject wanting in significance and power, indeed one that is ever at the mercy of others and is always in company of things detestable, Donne projects an unenviable picture of death. The critic Elizabeth Hodgson has observed that, "Donne's apostrophe to 'Death' reinforces the sense that death is a present absence and absent presence in the poem: the speaker talks to death as if death were listening, but only to deny death's power to do anything—including listen". She further adds that the sonnet in question is as much about the poet's anxiety as the idea of death. In her view, "The problem is, of course, that in addressing and confronting, and defeating death, Donne reveals more about his own anxiety than he does about death's ultimate fate. The speaker declares his faith but if faith were sufficient to the task the speaker would not care if death were proud, and the poem would end before it began." (Elizabeth Hodgson. *Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne*. Newark : UP of Delaware, 1999. 152).

At another level, the poem speaks of the courage of the poet who with contemplation and willful use of the mind has manipulated with the natural fear of death. We could term it intellectual courage. Still, at the third level the sonnet is the poet's visualization of eternal life than treating death conventionally. Think of Donne's lines from "For Whom the Bell Tolls"—"no man is an island/ entire of itself/ each is a piece of the continent / a part of the main". If each man were a piece of the continent and a part of the picture, then

humanity and life would grow in congruence with them. Eternity, too, cannot be the right of an individual alone. For Donne, it is a common pool of life that grows and is enriched with time. Donne's view of the dynamic human endeavour brings out the experience of joy and spiritual fulfillment that constitutes eternal life. Through the projection of eternity, Donne seeks to attain freedom, and release from restrictions imposed on it by social custom. He takes pleasure in such a projection where bodies would not decay nor ailments affect people, where there would be no scope for death. It is an idealized picture but one that stands on principles of intellect and imagination simultaneously. Could the source of this fascination with eternity be the poet's weariness with society as well as his own illnesses at regular intervals in life, and the many deaths that occurred in the family? The question is worth going into. Donald Ramsay Roberts in an essay titled "The Death Wish of John Donne" evaluates Donne's fascination for death verging on an obsession, he suggests that "A wish for death was a permanent and constant element" in Donne's "psychic life". Mark that Donne suffered an almost fatal disease in 1623 following which he wrote a series of poems meditating upon health and sickness. These were published in 1624 under the title *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. Contrarily critics such as Mark Allinson (Allinson, Mark. "Re-visioning the Death Wish: Donne and Suicide". *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*. vol.24, no.1, 1991, pp. 31-46) believe that "death is both abhorred and desired" in Donne and that he "dramatizes certainly, but he dramatizes his own experience". The impulse towards "self preservation" is equally present in Donne's poetry. Still, Matthias Bauer and Angelika Zirker (Bauer, Matthias and Angelika Zirker. "Sites of Death as Sites of Interaction in Donne and Shakespeare " *Shakespeare and Donne: Generic Hybrids and the Cultural Imaginary*. Judith Anderson and Jennifer C. Vaught Fordham University, 2013) reinforce the idea that "If there is a motif that runs like a thread through all of John Donne's writing, it is the awareness of death and its impact on life. Donne's portrait in shroud, the frontispiece of his most famous sermon 'Deaths Duell', which became the model of his epitaph in St. Paul's Cathedral, is the visible sign of this constant awareness" (17). It goes to the poet's credit that the concepts of death and eternity in a series of his sonnets received from him a concrete religious rendering.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have interpreted Donne's poetry with special reference to two of his poems—"The Sun Rising" and "Death Be Not Proud." Donne's poetry bore clear markings of intellect and mature thought. An unsentimental viewer of society and the individual human being, Donne brought into play questioning, analytical comment, dialogue and the humanist statement of revolt. The range of his interests is wide—it covers in its sweep elements such as the sun, the power centres of the world wielding influence over men, as well as figures of death, fate and time. Significantly, all these stand opposite to the human individual who is equipped with mental and moral skills to take on the adversary. For Donne, wit is a weapon with the human being. In the poet's hands, human wit becomes a whole concept of rebellion against the conventional norm and decadent value system. The poems discussed in this unit serve the purpose of substantiating these points in Donne's poetry.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a critical note on Donne's poetic sensibility.
2. How is love interpreted in the poem "The Sun Rising"?
3. Discuss briefly the implications of the "metaphysical" in the context of Donne's poetry.
4. Critically comment on Donne's argument against death in the sonnet "Death, Be Not Proud."

4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Allinson, Mark. "Re-visioning the Death Wish: Donne and Suicide". *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*. vol.24, no.1, 1991, pp. 31-46.

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