

---

## 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.