Death, Be Not Proud
Published as Holy Sonnet X
A Poem by John Donne

Title, Publication	Type of Work	Rhyme Scheme and Meter	Theme
Figures of Speech	Text of the Poem	Annotations	Donne's Works: Free Texts

Title and Publication Information

The poem first appeared as "Holy Sonnet X" in a collection of 19 sonnets by John Donne (1572-1631). However, its title came to be known as "Death, Be Not Proud" (after the first four words of the poem) or simply as "Death." It was written between 1601 and 1610–the exact year is uncertain–and published after Donne died.

Type of Work

"Death, Be Not Proud" is a sonnet (14-line poem) similar in format to that established in Italy by Petrarch (1304-1374), a Roman Catholic priest who popularized the sonnet form before it was adopted and modified in England. Petrarch's sonnets each consist of an eight-line stanza (octave) and a six-line stanza (sestet). The first stanza presents a theme, and the second stanza develops it.

Rhyme Scheme and Meter

The rhyme scheme of "Death, Be Not Proud" is as follows: ABBA, ABBA, CDDC, EE. The meter varies, although most lines are in iambic pentameter.

Theme

"Death Be Not Proud" is among the most famous and most beloved poems in English literature. Its popularity lies in its message of hope couched in eloquent, quotable language. Donne's theme tells the reader that death has no right to be proud, since human beings do not die but live eternally after "one short sleep." Although some people depict death as mighty and powerful, it is really a lowly slave that depends on luck, accidents, decrees, murder, disease, and war to put men to sleep. But a simple poppy (whose seeds provide a juice to make a narcotic) and various charms (incantations, amulets, spells, etc.) can also induce sleep–and do it better than death can. After a human being's soul leaves the body and enters eternity, it lives on; only death dies.

Figures of Speech

To convey his message, Donne relies primarily on personification, a type of metaphor, that extends through the entire poem. (Such an extended metaphor is often called a conceit.) Thus, death becomes a person whom Donne addresses, using the second-person singular (implied or stated as *thou*, *thee*, and *thy*). Donne also uses alliteration, as the following lines illustrate:

> Line 4: **D**ie not, poor **D**eath, nor yet **c**anst though **k**ill me
> Line 6: **M**uch pleasure; then fro**m** thee **m**uch **m**ore **m**ust flow
> Line 13: **O**ne short sleep past, **we w**ake eternally (Note: *One* begins with a *w* sound; thus, it alliterates with *we* and *wake.*)

Donne ends the poem with paradox and irony: Death, thou shalt die.

Death, Be Not Proud
By John Donne
Written Between 1601 and 1610

Text of the Poem	Annotations
Death, be not proud, though some have called thee	**Death** . . .**proud**: Personification/metaphor in which death is compared
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;	to a person
For those whom thou think'st thou dost **overthrow**,	**overthrow**: kill
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.	
From rest and sleep, which but **thy pictures be**,	**thy pictures be**: rest and sleep mimic death
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,	
And **soonest** our best men with thee do go,	**soonest**: willingly; as soon as
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.	Line 8: their bones go to their earthly rest but their souls do not die
Thou art **slave** to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,	**slave**: death is only a servant of events that end life: bad luck,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;	accidents, royal decrees, murder, war, and illness
And **poppy or charms** can make us sleep as well	**poppy or charms**: charms and drugs made from poppy seeds can
And better than thy stroke; **why swell'st thou** then?	also induce sleep–and do it better than death can
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,	**why swell'st thou**: why do you swell with pride?
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.	