English poet and cleric. Donne's metaphysical poetry is among the greatest work in English literature. His early poetry, mostly written in the 1590s, consists mainly of love poems, elegies and satires while later work, such as *An Anatomy of the World* (1611) and *Of the Progress of the Soul* (1612), became more philosophical. Donne's rejection of Catholicism and conversion to Anglicanism is evident in the prose-work *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610). He was ordained in 1615 and became Dean (1621) of St Paul's Cathedral, London.

Donne was brought up in the Roman Catholic faith and went to Oxford at an early age to avoid taking the compulsory oath of supremacy at the age of 16. Before becoming a law student at Lincoln's Inn in 1592, he travelled in Europe. During his four years at the law courts he was notorious for his wit and reckless living, and it was probably around this time that he renounced Catholicism. In 1596 he sailed as a volunteer in an expedition against Spain with the Earl of Essex and Walter Raleigh, and on his return became private secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton (c. 1540–1617), Keeper of the Seal. This appointment was ended by his secret marriage in 1601 to Ann More (died 1617), niece of Egerton's wife. They endured many years of poverty, made worse by the births, in rapid succession, of twelve children (of whom seven survived childhood). The more passionate and tender of his love poems were probably written to her.

With the accession of James I, Donne's fortune changed. In 1610 he made a bid for royal patronage with the prose work *Pseudo-Martyr* (a contribution to the disputes about the oath of supremacy and allegiance), and in 1611–13 with *Ignatius his Conclave* (an attack on the Jesuits), an *Elegy on Prince Henry*, and an *Epithalamium* for the marriage of Princess Elizabeth. In 1611 he travelled in Europe with Robert Drury, whose daughter he had already eulogized in the *First Anniversary*. In 1615 he was ordained in the Church of England, urged on by the King. In 1616 he became divinity reader of Lincoln's Inn with the responsibility of preaching there. From 1621 to his death he was dean of St Paul's, where he often preached before Charles I. He died of consumption and was buried in St Paul's.

His earliest poetry consisted of conceit verses (using elaborate metaphors to link seemingly dissimilar subjects), passed round in manuscript among his friends at the Inns of Court (finally published in the 1633 *Poems*). Most of these were apparently written in the 1590s. They record a series of actual or fictitious love affairs, in which the lover woos, not by praising his mistress's beauty, but by arguing, cajoling, and plunging off into philosophical speculation and flights of fancy. They show a strange blend of the conversational (most of these poems open with a phrase that might come straight from colloquial speech) with the involved, and of the outspokenly erotic, with theoretical questions apparently having little to do with the experience of love. His religious poems show the same passion...
and ingenuity as his love poetry.

Common to all the poems is the imaginative power of their imagery, which ransacks the intellectual world for symbols, curious and sometimes far-fetched, but always compellingly apt. The sermons, in an elegant prose style less rugged and harsh than that of the poems, show the same preoccupation with humanity's place in the universe and its approaching end.

One principle which unifies the divergent elements of his work is the desire to isolate and analyse a particular psychological state and relate it to the outside world. The *Anniversaries* on the death of Elizabeth Drury (1611 and 1612) link the direct expression of grief, ‘She, she is dead’, with an exploration of the emptiness of the world; in the *Divine Poems* the introspective dissection of the experience of love is replaced by that of the fear of death, and other religious emotions. His verse was long out of favour, but he is now recognized as one of the greatest English poets.

**quotations**
Donne, John

**documents**
Donne, John: ‘Song’
Donne, John: ‘The Flea’
Donne, John: ‘At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners’
Donne, John: ‘Death, Be Not Proud’
Donne, John: ‘The Apparition’
Donne, John: ‘Meditation 17’
Eliot, T S: On John Donne

**weblinks**
Donne, John

**audios**
Donne, John The Flea

**APA**

**Chicago**

**Harvard**

**MLA**
