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|  | John Donne was born in Bread Street, London in 1572 to a prosperous Roman Catholic family - a precarious thing at a time when anti-Catholic sentiment was rife in England. His father, John Donne, was a well-to-do ironmonger and citizen of London. Donne's father died suddenly in 1576, and left the three children to be raised by their mother, Elizabeth, who was the daughter of epigrammatist and playwright [John Heywood](http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/heywood.htm) and a relative of [Sir Thomas More](http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/tmore.htm). [[Family tree](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnepedigree.htm).]  Donne's first teachers were Jesuits. At the age of 11, Donne and his younger brother Henry were entered at Hart Hall, [University of Oxford](http://www.ox.ac.uk/), where Donne studied for three years. He spent the next three years at the [University of Cambridge](http://www.cam.ac.uk/), but took no degree at either university because he would not take the [Oath of Supremacy](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/supremacy.htm) required at graduation. He was admitted to study law as a member of Thavies Inn (1591) and [Lincoln's Inn](http://www.online-law.co.uk/bar/lincolns/index.html) (1592), and it seemed natural that Donne should embark upon a legal or diplomatic career.  In 1593, Donne's brother Henry died of a fever in prison after being arrested for giving sanctuary to a proscribed Catholic priest. This made Donne begin to question his faith. His first book of poems, [*Satires*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnebib.htm#satires), written during this period of residence in London, is considered one of Donne's most important literary efforts. Although not immediately published, the volume had a fairly wide readership through private circulation of the manuscript. Same was the case with his love poems, [*Songs and Sonnets*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnebib.htm#sonnets), assumed to be written at about the same time as the Satires.  Having inherited a considerable fortune, young "Jack Donne" spent his money on womanizing, on books, at the theatre, and on travels. He had also befriended Christopher Brooke, a poet and his roommate at Lincoln's Inn, and [Ben Jonson](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/jonson/) who was part of Brooke's circle. In 1596, Donne joined the naval expedition that [Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/essex.htm), led against Cádiz, Spain.  In 1597, Donne joined an expedition to the Azores, where he wrote "The Calm". Upon his return to England in 1598, Donne was appointed private secretary to [Sir Thomas Egerton](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/egerton.htm), Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, afterward Lord Ellesmere.  Donne was beginning a promising career. In 1601, Donne became MP for Brackley, and sat in [Queen Elizabeth's](http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/eliza.htm) last Parliament. But in the same year, he secretly married Lady Egerton's niece, seventeen-year-old [Anne More](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/annemore.htm), daughter of Sir George More, Lieutenant of the Tower, and effectively committed career suicide. Donne wrote to the livid father, saying:  "Sir, I acknowledge my fault to be so great as I dare scarce offer any other prayer to you in mine own behalf than this, to believe that I neither had dishonest end nor means. But for her whom I tender much more than my fortunes or life (else I would, I might neither joy in this life nor enjoy the next) I humbly beg of you that she may not, to her danger, feel the terror of your sudden anger."1  Sir George had Donne thrown in [Fleet Prison](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/fleetprison.htm) for some weeks, along with his cohorts Samuel and Christopher Brooke who had aided the couple's clandestine affair. Donne was dismissed from his post, and for the next decade had to struggle near poverty to support his growing family. Donne later summed up the experience: "John Donne, Anne Donne, Undone." Anne's cousin offered the couple refuge in Pyrford, Surrey, and the couple was helped by friends like Lady Magdalen Herbert, [George Herbert](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/herbert/)'s mother, and [Lucy, Countess of Bedford](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/lucyharington.htm), women who also played a prominent role in Donne's literary life. Though Donne still had friends left, these were bitter years for a man who knew himself to be the intellectual superior of most, knew he could have risen to the highest posts, and yet found no preferment.  It was not until 1609 that a reconciliation was effected between Donne and his father-in-law, and Sir George More was finally induced to pay his daughter's dowry.  In the intervening years, Donne practised law, but they were lean years for the Donnes. Donne was employed by the religious pamphleteer [Thomas Morton](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/mortonthomas.htm), later Bishop of Durham. It is possible that Donne co-wrote or ghost-wrote some of Morton's pamphlets (1604-1607). To this period, before reconciliation with his inlaws, belong Donne's [*Divine Poems*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnebib.htm#divine) (1607) and *Biathanatos* (pub. 1644), a radical piece for its time, in which Donne argues that suicide is not a sin in itself.  As Donne approached forty, he published two anti-Catholic polemics *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610) and [*Ignatius his Conclave*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/ignatius.htm) (1611). They were final public testimony of Donne's renunciation of the Catholic faith. *Pseudo-Martyr*, which held that English Catholics could pledge an oath of allegiance to [James I](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/james/), King of England, without compromising their religious loyalty to the Pope, won Donne the favor of the King. In return for patronage from Sir Robert Drury of Hawstead, he wrote [*A Funerall Elegie*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/funeralelegy.htm) (1610), on the death of Sir Robert's 15-year-old daughter Elizabeth. At this time, the Donnes took residence on Drury Lane.  The two *Anniversaries*— [*An Anatomy of the World*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnebib.htm#anniversary) (1611) and [*Of the Progress of the Soul*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnebib.htm#anniversary) (1612) continued the patronage. Sir Robert encouraged the publication of the poems: *The First Anniversary* was published with the original elegy in 1611, and both were reissued with *The Second Anniversary* in 1612.  Donne had refused to take Anglican orders in 1607, but [King James](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/james/) persisted, finally announcing that Donne would receive no post or preferment from the King, unless in the church. In 1615, Donne reluctantly entered the ministry and was appointed a Royal Chaplain later that year. In 1616, he was appointed Reader in Divinity at Lincoln's Inn (Cambridge had conferred the degree of Doctor of Divinity on him two years earlier). Donne's style, full of elaborate metaphors and religious symbolism, his flair for drama, his wide learning and his quick wit soon established him as one of the greatest preachers of the era.  Just as Donne's fortunes seemed to be improving, Anne Donne died, on 15 August, 1617, aged thirty-three, after giving birth to their twelfth child, a stillborn. Seven of their children survived their mother's death. Struck by grief, Donne wrote the [seventeenth](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/holysonnet17.htm) Holy Sonnet, "Since she whom I lov'd hath paid her last debt." According to Donne's friend and biographer, Izaak Walton, Donne was thereafter 'crucified to the world'. Donne continued to write poetry, notably his [*Holy Sonnets*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnebib.htm#holy) (1618), but the time for love songs was over. In 1618, Donne went as chaplain with Viscount Doncaster in his embassy to the German princes. His [*Hymn to Christ at the Author's Last Going into Germany*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/hymn.htm), written before the journey, is laden with apprehension of death. Donne returned to London in 1620, and was appointed Dean of Saint Paul's in 1621, a post he held until his death. Donne excelled at his post, and was at last financially secure. In 1623, Donne's eldest daughter, Constance, married the actor [Edward Alleyn](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/alleyn.htm), then 58.  Donne's private meditations, [*Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/donnebib.htm#devotions), written while he was convalescing from a serious illness, were published in 1624.  The most famous of these is undoubtedly [Meditation 17](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/meditation17.php), which includes the immortal lines "No man is an island" and "never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for *thee*."  In 1624, Donne was made vicar of St Dunstan's-in-the-West. On March 27, 1625, [James I](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/james/) died, and Donne preached his first sermon for [Charles I](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/kingcharles.htm). But for his ailing health, (he had mouth sores and had experienced significant weight loss) Donne almost certainly would have become a bishop in 1630. Obsessed with the idea of death, Donne [posed in a shroud](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/shroud.htm) - the painting was completed a few weeks before his death, and later used to create an effigy. He also preached what was called his own funeral sermon, [*Death's Duel*](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/donne/deaths_duel.html), just a few weeks before he died in London on March 31, 1631. The last thing Donne wrote just before his death was [*Hymne to God, my God, In my Sicknesse*](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/sickness.htm).  Donne's [monument](http://www.accd.edu/Sac/english/bailey/donne.jpg), in his shroud, survived the [Great Fire of London](http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/greatfire.htm) and can still be seen today at St. Paul's. |