

Death, be not proud (Holy Sonnet 10)

Matthew Williams • English Literature • March 18, 2026

Death, be not proud (Holy Sonnet 10)

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;

Analysis: The personification "Death, be not proud" directly addresses death as a being with arrogance, immediately diminishing its authority. The claim that it is "not so" dismantles its feared reputation.

For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

Analysis: The speaker asserts that death cannot truly kill, introducing the idea of spiritual survival. Calling it "poor Death" reverses power dynamics, presenting death as weak.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,

Analysis: The metaphor "rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be" reduces death to an imitation of something harmless and familiar, minimizing its severity.

Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,

Analysis: If sleep brings comfort, death must bring even more, reinforcing the idea that death is not to be feared but welcomed.

And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Analysis: "Delivery" suggests transition rather than ending, implying rebirth into eternal life. Death becomes a passage, not a conclusion.

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,

Analysis: The metaphor "slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men" strips death of autonomy, presenting it as controlled by external forces.

And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

Analysis: Death is associated with destructive forces, suggesting it cannot act independently and relies on worldly conditions.

And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well

And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

Analysis: The comparison to drugs ("poppy") trivializes death further, suggesting it is no more powerful than artificial sleep. The rhetorical question mocks its pride.

One short sleep past, we wake eternally

Analysis: The metaphor "one short sleep" reinforces the temporary nature of death, framing it as a brief pause before eternal existence.

And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

Analysis: The paradox "Death, thou shalt die" delivers the final blow, asserting that death itself will cease to exist, completely overturning its perceived power.

About the poem

Author: John Donne (1572–1631)

Context: Metaphysical poetry; influenced by Christian beliefs about death, resurrection, and eternal life

Core idea: Death is not powerful or final. It is a temporary state that leads to eternal life, and therefore should not be feared.

• Main themes

- Defiance of death
- Powerlessness of death
- Immortality of the soul
- Religion and afterlife
- Appearance vs reality
- **Mood:** Confident and reassuring, with underlying spiritual certainty
- **Tone:** Defiant, mocking, and assertive

Remember

- Death is attacked directly through personification
- Sleep metaphor is central to reducing fear of death
- "Slave to fate" proves death has no control
- Final line is the thesis: death itself is defeated
- Religious belief drives the entire argument