

University of Al-Zahraa for Women  
College of Education  
Department of English  
16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> c. English Poetry for *Sophomores*



# The Poetry of the 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> Century

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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*A Brief hand-out written and edited by:*  
**Asst. Lect. Karrar H.**  
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*“Poetry is, at bottom, a criticism of life”*  
**- Matthew Arnold**

# 1<sup>st</sup> Semester: Poetry of the 16<sup>th</sup> century

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## What is Poetry?

Poetry is a type of literature that conveys a thought, describes a scene or tells a story in a concentrated, lyrical arrangement of words. Poems can be structured, with rhyming lines and meter, the rhythm and emphasis of a line based on syllabic beats. Poems can also be freeform, which follows no formal structure.

## What are the Characteristics of Poetry?

1. It is concerned with all kinds of experiences, beautiful or ugly, strange or common, noble or ignoble, actual or imaginary.
2. Poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature.
3. It involves not only our intelligence but our senses, emotions and imagination.
4. Its language is musical and figurative.
5. It relies heavily on images and symbols.

## What are the major forms of poetry?

1. Blank verse is a form of poetry written with a precise meter—almost always iambic pentameter—that does not rhyme.
2. Rhymed poetry is a rhymed poem.
3. Free verse poetry is poetry that lacks a consistent rhyme scheme, metrical pattern, or musical form.
4. An epic poem is a lengthy, narrative work of poetry. These long poems typically detail extraordinary adventures of characters from a distant past.
5. Narrative poetry is a poem that tells a story.
6. Dramatic poetry is written to be spoken or acted in public, in front of an audience.
7. Lyric poetry refers to a short poem, often with songlike qualities, that expresses the speaker's personal emotions and feelings.

8. A pastoral poem is one that concerns the natural world, rural life, and landscapes.

9. A sonnet is a 14 line poem, typically (but not exclusively) concerning the topic of love. The exact rhyme scheme depends on the style of a sonnet.

10. An elegy is a poem that reflects upon death or loss. Traditionally, it contains themes of mourning, loss, and reflection

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### What is meant by figurative language and what are its types?

It refers to words or phrases that are meaningful, but not literally true, for example: “that news hit me like a ton of bricks”. This means that the news I have received was deeply affecting. Historically speaking, figurative language has often been divided into two classes:

1. Figures of Thought: words or phrases are used in a way that effects a clear change in what we take to be their standard meaning (the literal meaning).

2. Figures of Speech: words or phrases are used in non-literal sense for rhetorical or vivid effect.

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## Sixteenth Century English Literature

Europe in the fourteenth century witnessed the rise of the Renaissance (European Renaissance). Renaissance is a French word means “rebirth” or “revival.”

### What is Renaissance?

Roughly speaking, the period ranging from the 14<sup>th</sup> century through the 17<sup>th</sup> century is known as the Renaissance. It marked the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern world. It witnessed extraordinary intellectual, cultural, scientific and artistic developments. Generally speaking, the term is used to describe the revival of the culture and civilization of ancient Greece and Rome. It started in Italy in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and reached England late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Great renaissance writers were Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio; while artists were Leonardo Da Vinci, Michel Angelo, Donatello and Raphael.

*The Renaissance period is subdivided by historians into:*

1. 1558-1603 Elizabethan Age
2. 1603-1625 Jacobean Age
3. 1625-1649 Caroline Age
4. 1649-1660 Commonwealth Period (Puritan Interregnum)

### What are the major influences that led to the Renaissance?

1. The fall of Constantinople drove Greek scholars to take refuge in Italy, taking with them valuable classical texts and manuscripts of Greek and Latin writers.
2. The invention of the modern printing press in 1445 helped spreading the ideas of Renaissance.
3. The great scientific and geographical discoveries gave new material to the literary imagination
4. The new philosophy known as Humanism. It stresses the dignity of man and focuses on his mind, body, thoughts, feelings and his relationship to other men. Moreover, it disagrees with the Christian worldview in the Middle Ages, which believed in the supernatural and God-centered world.

## Elizabethan Literature

Elizabethan Literature refers to the bodies of work produced during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I from 1558 to 1603. The central figures of the Elizabethan canon include *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, *Henry Howard (Earl of Surrey)*, *Edmund Spenser*, *Sir Philip Sidney*, *Sir Walter Raleigh*, *Christopher Marlowe*, *William Shakespeare* and *Ben Jonson*.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century witnessed enormous changes in both language and literature. Although early Elizabethan literature was written in Latin, English soon became the preferred language of expression. The dominant form of English literature during the Renaissance were poetry and drama, which were permeated by Italian influence.

The most typical of the Renaissance poetry were the lyric and sonnet. The lyric poem, like a song, expresses personal and emotional feelings and thoughts of the poet. It has a musical quality which reflected the melodious spirit of the age.

*The sonnet* is a poem of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter which follows a strict rhyme pattern. It originated in Italy in the 13th century and was used by two Italian masters: Dante and Petrarch. The English poets were influenced by their style, like Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard. Wyatt translated Petrarch's works into English and wrote poetry using Petrarchan sonnets. Howard modified the Italian sonnet and introduced the English sonnet. Both poets were called "courtly poets."

### How many types of Sonnets do we have?

- The Petrarchan (Italian) Sonnet
- The Shakespearean (English) Sonnet
- The Spenserian Sonnet
- The Miltonic Sonnet

### What were the dominant literary themes in the Elizabethan age?

Beauty, idealized love, rejected love, courtly love, time, jealousy, revenge, power, politics, country life, treachery, hypocrisy and carpe diem.

### What is 'Carp diem'?

A Latin expression that means "seize the day". It was used by Horace, a Roman poet. It emphasizes that life is short and time is passing by. So, one must enjoy the pleasures of life and live for the moment, without concern for the future.

### What is 'Courtly love tradition'?

A doctrine of love, governing the relations of aristocratic lovers, which was widely represented in the lyric poems. Love, accordingly, was a dynamic force in which the couples engaged in a courtly relationship conventionally exchanged gifts.

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## “Spring” by Henry Howard

Who is Henry Howard?

Henry Howard was an English nobleman, politician and poet, born in 1516-1547. With Sir Thomas Wyatt, he introduced new styles and meters of the Italian poets. He also introduced the free verse. He translated Books 2 and 4 of Virgil’s Aeneid. His themes include: love, death, friendship, youth, unrequited love.

### “Spring”

*Importance of the Title:* the poem starts with an epigraph “Description of Spring, wherein each thing renews, save only the lover”. It is connected to the feelings expressed by Howard: Spring is always connected with new beginnings, except Howard’s lover who decided to end the relationship and not to renew its terms.

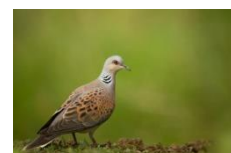
*Tone:* The poem starts with a note of hope because the poet speaks about the nature of spring, being active and refreshed. At the end of the poem, the tone changes; though spring symbolizes new beginnings, but it fails the change the poet’s sadness about his love story.

*The Core Message of the Poem:* Happiness cannot bloom in a heart weighed down by sorrow. While the poem describes nature’s renewal with blooming flowers and active animals, the speaker’s internal turmoil does not change.

### Discussion & Analysis

The soote season, that bud and bloom forth brings,  
With green hath clad the hill and eke the vale:  
The nightingale with feathers new she sings:  
The turtle to her mate hath told her tale:

Spring brings new life with buds blooming. The green grass covers the hill and valley with its beauty. The bird who has new feathers sings lovingly and the turtle tells a tale of love to her mate, ushering new opportunity. All these images contribute to create the sense of beauty and newness.



Summer is come, for every spray now springs,  
The hart hath hung his old head on the pale:  
The buck in brake his winter coat he flings:  
The fishes flete with new repaired scale:

Spring declares that summer is coming soon. The male deer is hanging his antlers on the fence as if he wants new ones. The buck is undressing his winter coat (fur); he needs a new coat to welcome the season. The fishes are floating on the surface of water with their new scale, while in winter they dive in to get warm.

The adder all her slough away she slings:  
The swift swallow pursueth the flies smale:  
The busy bee her honey now she mings:  
Winter is worn that was the flowers' bale.

Now, the snake is throwing her skin away, standing for new life. The swallow moves rapidly and chases the insects. The bees are busy making honey, actively producing during spring. Winter is over and it is the time for the flowers to grow. All these images indicate the vividness of life and its beauty.

And thus I see among these pleasant things  
Each care decays, and yet my sorrow springs

At last, the poet says despite all pleasant images: how spring is a season of life and rebirth, yet it did not change his state and mood, he is still pessimistic and sad; his beloved refused my love. The poem ends with a note of sadness.

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## “Leave me O Love” by Sir Philip Sidney

Who is Philip Sidney?

Born in Kent, England in 1554. Sidney was born into a wealthy and highly favored courtier family. His father, Sir Henry was lord president of Wales. He attended Oxford University’s Christ Church College from 1568 to 1571, but he left to travel Europe before completing his studies. Sidney penned several major works of the Elizabethan era, including *Astrophel and Stella*, the first Elizabethan sonnet cycle, and *Arcadia*, a heroic prose romance. He was also known for his literary criticism, known as *The Defense of Poesy*. Sidney’s themes include love, chivalry, virtue, and political service. Died October 17, 1586, Netherlands.

### “Leave me O Love”

*Importance of the Title:* It directly states the poem’s central conflict, where the speaker must reject temporal desires; like earthly love (“which reachest but to dust”) to seek a higher purpose and a lasting, spiritual connection with God. The main theme refers to the departure from the physical love towards the eternal love, which is more meaningful and inspiring.

*The Core Message of the Poem:* In the present poem Sidney speaks slightly of earthly love and concentrates on thought of heaven. The permanence of divine love is contrasted with the vain and short-lived earthly love.

### Discussion & Analysis

Leave me, O Love, which reachest but to dust;  
And thou, my mind, aspire to higher things;  
Grow rich in that which never taketh rust;  
Whatever fades but fading pleasure brings.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker’s mind is elevating. Love, fading pleasures, and material wealth are not worthy of the speaker’s attentions. He does not seek the material wealth of gold or other valuable metals, but, rather, seeks the eternal values of the soul. He would rather find a noble and divine pursuit that he will not carry with him to the grave.

Draw in thy beams and humble all thy might  
To that sweet yoke where lasting freedoms be;  
Which breaks the clouds and opens forth the light,  
That doth both shine and give us sight to see.

In these lines, the speaker continues to picture what heavenly love could bring. It would enlighten us and makes us more modest. The human body gets free from the restrains of earthly love and the other attachments. This love gives us the godly light of wisdom to see and appreciate our existence.

O take fast hold; let that light be thy guide  
In this small course which birth draws out to death,  
And think how evil becometh him to slide,  
Who seeketh heav'n, and comes of heav'nly breath.

The speaker confirms that the light of heaven should guide us through in this short life. Human beings should be strong enough to gain this spiritual love. If we take the trajectory of the heavenly love, our evils will be obviously “slide”/ go down. Those that seek connection to the eternal soul must seek the way of heaven through its words.

Then farewell, world; thy uttermost I see:  
Eternal Love, maintain thy life in me.

In the concluding lines, the speaker is telling us that he has become aware of his own mortality. He is also saying that he has discovered the uttermost finding in the world. Realizing its value, he goes on and asks if he can take this love of God that he has found into his next small course of life and continue on.

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## “Like as a Ship” by Edmund Spenser

Who is Edmund Spenser?

An English poet who was born in 1552 and died in 1599. He was known as one of the pioneers who was considered as craftsmen of modern English verse. He went to Ireland in 1580 to serve the Lord Deputy. His works include: *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579): a collection of poems, *The Faerie Queene* (1580): an allegorical epic poem written to glorify Queen Elizabeth I and in celebration of the Tudor dynasty, *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* (1595): a sonnet sequence dedicated to his second wife, Elizabeth Boyle.

What characterizes his poetry is that it is melodious, beautifully structured, idealized, serious and allegorical. He influenced classical poets like John Milton and Alexander Pope and Romantic poets as well like William Blake, William Wordsworth, P. B. Shelley, Alfred Tennyson.

Among Spenser’s many contributions to English literature, he is the originator and namesake of the Spenserian stanza and the Spenserian sonnet. He molded the classical epics in his own style, influenced by Virgil. Moreover, he set out to create poetry that was distinctively English—in religion and politics, in history and custom, in setting and language. His themes include: love, virtue, heroism, inner and outer beauty. He often writes pastoral poetry, pamphlets, epics and hymns.

### “Like as a Ship”

*The Main Theme:* This poem describes a break in the speaker’s relationship with his wife and how he is left astray waiting for her forgiveness. Spenser uses the analogy of a ship losing its way during a storm to convey the separation between him and his wife.

#### *Summary*

The sonnet begins with the speaker expressing his yearning for his beloved, who is physically distant from him. The opening lines employ a simile to compare the speaker’s love to a ship guided by a star.

In the following lines, the speaker describes the intensity of his longing and the pain he experiences due to the separation from his beloved. The speaker’s soul is tired by the absence of his love.

The sonnet then shifts to express the speaker's hope that his words will reach and touch the beloved's heart. However, the beloved is being cruel or indifferent towards the speaker. The speaker asks for the beloved's attention or by asking her to experience pain herself.

### Discussion & Analysis

Lyke as a ship that through the Ocean wyde,  
by conduct of some star doth make her way.  
whenas a storme hath dimd her trusty guyde.  
out of her course doth wander far astray:

The speaker describes the ship sailing in the wide ocean. This ship is guided by star. All of a sudden, a storm appears and the clouds make the sky dark, misleading the speaker. The ship is getting astray, losing its "trusty guyde". Spenser would be the ship that has gone off course, because his beloved's light is no longer shining on him.

So I whose star, that wont with her bright ray,  
me to direct, with cloudes is ouercast,  
doe wander now in darknesse and dismay,  
through hidden perils round about me plast.

The storm has left him without his beloved to guide him. He misses her bright ray, which can be interpreted as he misses her beautiful soul, wit, personality, or any other such personality trait. He is consumed with sadness that he has lost his way, and is left defenseless.

Yet hope I well, that when this storme is past  
My Helice the lodestar of my lyfe  
will shine again, and looke on me at last,  
with louely light to cleare my cloudy grief,

In these lines, he hopes that when this storm passes his beloved's light will shine upon him again, and guide him back to the port (or her), so that they can be together once again.

### What does "Helice" stand for?

This name Helice is a classical reference to: The Great Bear /Ursa Major constellation. In Greek mythology, Helice (or Helikē) is one of the nymphs who nursed Zeus. As a reward, she was transformed into the constellation

Ursa Major, also called the guiding Bear. Like a guiding star, she normally guides him safely, just as sailors follow Ursa Major. But now she has withdrawn her light, leaving him metaphorically lost at sea in his emotional turmoil.

Till then I wander careful comfortless,  
in secret sorrow and sad pensiveness.

The speaker is telling his beloved that until she forgives him, he will wander aimlessly all alone, thinking sorrowful thoughts.

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## 2<sup>nd</sup> Semester: Poetry of the 17<sup>th</sup> century

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How many schools of poetry appeared during the 17<sup>th</sup> century?

1. Metaphysical Poetry (Jacobean age 1603-1625): its representatives are John Donne (1572-1631) and George Herbert (1592-1633).
2. Cavalier Poetry (Caroline age 1625-1649): its representatives are: Ben Johnson (1572-1637) and Robert Herrick (1591-1674).
3. The Age of Milton (Puritan Interregnum 1649-1660): its representative is John Milton (1608-1674).
4. Restoration Literature (the Restoration Period 1660-1688): its representative is John Dryden (1631-1700).
5. The Augustan Age (Augustan Period 1688-1702): its representative is Alexander Pope (1688-1744).

Compare between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> c poetry?

16 <sup>th</sup> c. poetry	17 <sup>th</sup> c. poetry
The dominant forms of poetry were lyrical poetry and sonnets.	lyrical poetry was still running and later on, it was gradually changed into being argumentative and intellectual.
The main subject matters were about: idealized love, politics, beauty, time, the country life, and carpe diem.	Metaphysical poets departed from the idealized view of human nature, and set the pace to tackle religious and philosophical perspectives.

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What is meant by 'Metaphysics'?

In the Middle Ages, the word 'metaphysics' used to refer to science. Later on, it was associated with philosophy and the nature of reality. Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the relationship between the physical world and human consciousness. It simply means beyond the physical nature.

## Metaphysical Poets

Metaphysical Poets are a group of poets who often give concrete form to abstract ideas through their unusual imagery and comparisons. They were called as such by John Dryden in his *Discourse Concerning Satire* (1693); saying that John Donne “affects the metaphysics”.

### Define Metaphysical Poetry?

Herbert John Clifford Grierson in his book *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (1912), says that it is “inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence” (xiii). It can be described as “feeling thought” or “passionate thinking” (xvi). *To sum up*: it is a form of verse that encourages readers to engage critically and emotionally with universal questions, using vivid imagery and layered metaphors.

### How many extremes appeared in Metaphysical Poetry?

Two, they are:

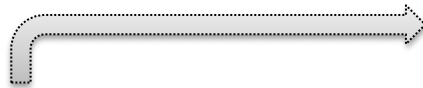
1. Secular Poets like Cowley, Marvell, and Cleveland.
2. Religious Poets like Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw.

### What do Metaphysical Poets often talk about (themes)?

Metaphysical poets often talk about: mystical love, death, religion (soul's relationship with God), psychological insight, passions, time, existentialism, and the human condition.

### What are the Characteristics of Metaphysical Poetry?

1. It is characterized with violent combinations of dissimilar images, obscure allusions and comparisons, and hyperboles.
2. It is characterized by “unification of sensibility” in the first of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. but turned into “a dissociation of sensibility” in the second half of the century
3. They employ paradox, antithesis, oxymoron, conceit and puns.
4. They use colloquial (informal, ordinary) language.
5. Metaphysical poets' art (poetry) is serious.
6. It possesses the epigrammatic intensity.
7. It is logical both in content and structure.



## **“Death be not, Proud” by John Donne**

This poem can be best described as a Metaphysical poem

Who is John Donne?

An English poet and Anglican cleric, Donne was born in England in 1572 to Roman Catholic parents. It was not until the end of the 1800s that Donne’s poetry was eagerly taken up by modern readers and writers. His work is distinguished by its capacity to explore the paradoxes of faith, human and divine love. Modern poets such as T. S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats have discovered that *Donne fused intellect and passion in his poetry. Donne often employs conceits (extended metaphors), to link together “heterogeneous ideas”* as Samuel Johnson said. He embraced science, theology and religion. He was a learned lawyer, twice member of parliament.

Donne *believed that every living thing was a mirror of everything else.* This was a view unusual for the period and was influenced by his readings of Greek and Jewish mysticism. Donne’s personal relationship with religion was tumultuous and passionate, and at the center of much of his poetry.

### **“Death, be not Proud..”**

#### *Summary*

The speaker directly addresses and personifies Death, telling it not to be arrogant just because some people find death scary and intimidating. The speaker emphasizes that death is being deceived in his own conceit. Comparing death to rest and sleep—which are like images of death—the speaker anticipates death to be even more pleasurable than these activities.

Death is fully controlled by fate and luck, and often administered by rulers or people acting desperately. The speaker points out that death is also associated with poison, war, and illness. Drugs and magic spells are more effective than death when it comes to rest. Death is nothing but a mere sleep in between people’s earthly lives and the eternal afterlife, in which death can visit them no more.

## Discussion & Analysis

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
He Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

The speaker addresses death that it is not that powerful and terrible as everybody calls it. The people that death has killed, they do not die. They go to the afterlife. He belittles death. It is true that the speaker may lose his physical body but his spirit will transcend.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Death is just like resting and sleeping, it gives us pleasure. And if death is so important, it would not be so than rest and sleep. If death is just a heightened version of rest and sleep, then, there is nothing to fear from it.

The “bones” of the “best men” are their physical selves—their “corporality”—and it is only these that are laid to rest in death. The poem plays on this, with the word “delivery” hinting at a kind of birth, rather than death.

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well

Death, the speaker emphasizes, is a servant of fate and chance; and of kings and of murderers who slaughter people. Death has spent his time dwelling with poison, war and with sick people. Poppy (flowers where we get opium from) and charms (spells for sleep) make people asleep too.

And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.  
Poppy and charms work better than death does.

The speaker asks death that why is he proud? It only one “short sleep” (atonement for our sins), then we will wake up in heaven. He ends the poem with a strong phrase, saying that death cannot do anything to people.

## *Cavalier Poetry*

Ben Jonson and his disciples (Robert Herrick 1591-1649, Thomas Carew 1595-1640, Edmund Waller 1606-1687, John Suckling 1609-1642, John Denham 1615-1669, and Richard Lovelace 1617-1657) lived during the Caroline age. The term “Caroline” is derived from Latin “Carolus” which means Charles, of which the period named after King Charles I. He reigned from 1625 to 1649. In this period in England, there was religious, political and social discord between the king and his supporters (Royalists) and the supporters of the parliament (Roundheads). Despite this conflict, arts and sciences were in progress. King Charles I supported poets who created the art he craved. Those poets were grouped under the term “Cavaliers”.

### What are the Characteristics of Cavaliers' Poetry?

1. Cavaliers did not commit or even concern themselves with the hopes and aspirations of the common people.
2. Their interest lies in their enjoyment of the casual and the amateur poem.
3. They composed lyrics that tend to be gay in tone and light-hearted, graceful, elegant, melodious and polished in manner.
4. They were concerned with literary criticism, creative writing, problems related to art, political and religious debate and discussion of moral problems.
5. The absence of poetic diction.
6. Their poetry is strong syntactically (masculine).
7. The control of poetic rhythm and movement (A. H. 62-69).
8. They ignored topics like religion and philosophy.
9. Their poems celebrate beauty, love, nature, sensuality, drinking, good fellowship, honor and social life.
10. They appreciated women in their poetry; they were divine.

*Style:* Cavaliers followed Johnson's style of writing that could be described as: restrained in feeling, deliberately limited, intellectually thin, meticulously clear, incisive in expression, and its language is urban (64).

*Themes:* Cavaliers sing of youth, love, happiness, war chivalry, loyalty and allegiance (68).

*Intention:* Cavaliers' basic intent to write poetry was to please the king and enjoy the pleasures of life.

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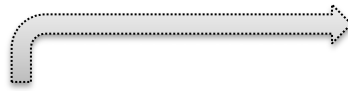
### **"To Daffodils" by Robert Herrick**

Who is Robert Herrick?

Herrick was an English poet and Anglican cleric, born in 1591. He matriculated at Saint John's College, Cambridge. He served as a vicar of Dean Prior for 31 years. He was a true Royalist. He is the perfect artist in slight verse. His father, Nicholas, committed suicide in the Cheapside Street, London, in 1592. This had created a father complex to Herrick. He was highly influenced by Ben Johnson.

### **What are the Characteristics of his Poetry?**

- He employs exaggeration for poetic effect.
- His attitude toward country life, like his attitudes on love, women, government, social class, even religion and poetry were creatively ambivalent.
- He hints at the existence of his poems of the good life, works that, in the Cavalier tradition, celebrate friendship and sociability, the pleasures of fine food and drink, of conviviality in general.
- In his volume (*Hesperides*) is signaled by the memorable phrase "Times trans-shifting"—the notion that everything that lives is subject to temporality.
- Posterity, in fact, is much on Herrick's mind. Time and time again he reiterates his faith in "the eternizing power of poetry."



## Discussion & Analysis

This poem can be best described as a Cavalier poem

*Title:* the title refers to the daffodils, part of nature.

*The speaker:* the identity of the speaker is anonymous. But if we read closely, we notice that they are a group of people praying during “the even-song” (an evening church service), indicating that they’re a Christian. They don’t even refer to themselves as a singular “I,” instead counting themselves as part of a collective “we.” This highlights that the speaker is expressing a general, human anxiety around death and wasted potential. This poem was published in 1648 during the English Civil War, and it’s likely the poet himself, surrounded by death and uncertainty, was grappling with the very anxieties that the speaker expresses here.

*Setting:* The poem is set in the morning during spring, when blossoming “Daffodils” have already begun to wither. Usually poets often use “spring” to symbolize rebirth or new life yet this poem suggests that things begin to die. In this way, one needs to accept the inevitability of “decay.”

*Themes:* shortness of life, death, youth, beauty, carpe diem.

Fair Daffodils, we weep to see  
You haste away so soon;  
As yet the early-rising sun  
Has not attain’d his noon.

The speaker expresses his sadness that the flowers wilt so quickly. The speaker says “we,” this conveys that they’re talking about a general human experience (not only flowers die, even human beings). It hints at a collective grief more than individual.

In lines 3-4, the speaker is upset about the daffodils dying before the sun has even reached its zenith in the sky. This reflects the fact that daffodils are some of the earliest flowers to blossom in spring and also some of the first to depart. These flowers miss out the brightest part of the day.

The personification of the “sun” in line 3 suggests that the speaker’s sorrow about the daffodils’ early departure reflects their own anxiety about not reaching their “noon”. They worry they will die before they achieve whatever it is they hope to achieve in life.

Stay, stay,  
Until the hasting day  
Has run  
But to the even-song  
And, having pray'd together, we  
Will go with you along.

The speaker continues to beseech the daffodils to stick around until the “even-song”. By asking the flowers to wait, they refer to what is known as vespers, which is a nightly church service that takes place at sundown. The repetition hints that the speaker is thinking about their own limited time on earth.

One might interpret lines 9-10 as personifying the daffodils, suggesting that they are drooping their heads in prayer. To sum up, the speaker’s desire for the daffodils to “stay” until the end of the day suggests that they themselves want to live until old age. Only then will they be content to go along with the daffodils.

We have short time to stay, as you,  
We have as short a spring;  
As quick a growth to meet decay,  
As you, or anything.

The speaker compares the shortness of life and the inevitability of death of these daffodils to the human life’s brevity and “decay”. They are equal as “anything” else. Spring is usually associated with youth, vitality, hope, new beginnings, etc., and the speaker is thus implying that the best years of people’s lives all too quickly pass them by. Both daffodils and people grow towards their own decay; all life leads in the direction of death.

We die  
As your hours do, and dry  
Away,  
Like to the summer’s rain;  
Or as the pearls of morning’s dew,  
Ne’er to be found again.

The speaker says that human beings die just as the daffodils’ hours end. The word “hours” does die, but this comparison emphasizes the idea that life is made up of moments that quickly pass people by. People’s lives evaporate

just like the summer's rain. This simile suggests that human life lasts about as long as "rain" on wasted earth.

Condensation collects into drops of "dew" overnight, but no sooner have these "pearls" coalesced than the morning sun rises and makes them evaporate. Once these pearls have disappeared, they will never be found again. Moreover, the speaker uses the daffodil's acceptance of death as a model to transcend the idea of accepting human death as inevitable.