**Death Be Not Proud**  
*By John Donne*

**Overview:** In this metaphysical poem, Donne explains the overconfidence in Death’s pride. He uses wit, wordplay, and intellectual and philosophical arguments to depict Death as a less powerful figure. Donne makes Death seem like a good thing by relating it to a path to eternal life in heaven.

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| Death, be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so; | *Death, don’t be proud of yourself. Though some think you’re powerful and dreadful, you really aren’t.*  
In the very first line, Donne apostrophizes Death, meaning he directly addresses Death as if it were a person. Although he says some people fear Death, Donne smacks Death in the face by telling it that it’s not as powerful as it thinks it is, and Death shouldn’t be so proud of itself. |
| For those whom thou thinks’t thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet cans’t thou kill me. | *Those who think you can kill don’t die. Ah, poor Death, you can’t even kill me.*  
In these lines, Donne sympathizes for Death because it can’t kill anyone on its own free will. Donne knocks Death down again by saying it doesn’t have the power kill like it’s supposed to. |
| From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure, then from thee much more must flow, | *I picture sweet dreams when I think of you. But, death must be even more peaceful.*  
Here, Donne uses wordplay by using the actual meaning of death, rather than personifying it. He states that death is just like sleeping, but even better. Donne makes death seem beautiful rather than scary. |
| And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul’s delivery. | *The best of men go with you to their final resting place so they can be born again.*  
Donne explains how when people die, their soul will be delivered. Wordplay is used on the word delivery because it could either mean their soul is being born into the afterlife, or Death is the one who is delivering their soul to the afterlife, which would make Death seem magnificent by the idea that Death brings you to a happy and peaceful new beginning. |
| Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell, | *You are a slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, and can only standby as poison, war, and sickness kills.*  
Donne tells Death off by saying that it doesn’t choose when people die. They choose for themselves. For example, kings choose who will be beheaded, and desperate men can choose when to commit suicide. Also, note that fate and chance don’t have anything to do with religion. |
| And poppy and charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell’st thou then? | *Poppies and charms make us sleep too, and better than you, so why do you swell with pride?*  
In these lines, Donne suggests that the opium from poppies and spells can make people sleep like Death can, only better. So he asks Death why he’s proud if other things can do a better job than it can. Again, Donne makes Death seem less effective. |
| One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; | *After a quick sleep, we will wake up and have eternal life, and death will have passed.*  
Here, Donne adds a Christian element by saying people will wake up in heaven and life will go on. Again he uses wordplay on death and says that it is just a phase. It will just be like falling asleep and then waking up once more. He implies that death isn’t forever, which makes Death seem less dreadful. |
| Death, thou shalt die. | *Death, you will die.*  
In the last line, Donne explains that in the end, Death is the one that will truly die because death does not live on. Death will be gone after “one short sleep.” Death can not hold anyone in its grasp; therefore, Death is not powerful and should not be feared. |
Literary Devices

Personification:
“Death, be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful.”
Donne uses personification to emphasize that Death isn’t as powerful and dreadful as it seems. He treats Death as a person by saying it isn’t as good as it thinks it is and that others can do better than it.

Tone
The tone is straightforward and encouraging. It’s straightforward because Donne directly tells Death that it’s not as powerful as it thinks it is, and it shouldn’t be so proud. It’s encouraging because Donne states that Death isn’t scary, but peaceful and happy since death is the pathway to heaven.

Theme
Death isn’t as powerful or frightening as it seems.
According to Donne, death is just like sleeping. It’s calm and peaceful, and when we wake, life will continue in heaven. Death can’t even kill people on its own free will. Accidents, murder, suicide, royal decrees, poison, war, and sickness are what cause death, and they can be chosen. Death does not choose when to kill, we do.
