

*17<sup>th</sup> century in English Literature –  
Metaphysical poetry*



*Lecture #5*

# Historical Background - Britain 1625-1702



three religious groups:

❑ **The Church of England (Anglican Protestants)**

the official state Church as established by Henry VIII during the Reformation; a hierarchical structure governed by archbishops and bishops; a living symbol of England's independence from Rome.

❑ **The Roman Catholic Church (Catholics)**

a sizeable minority did not accept the Reformation and remained Catholic.





# Historical Background - Britain 1625-1702

## Puritans, Presbyterians and Dissenters

non-conformists, started to form during the reign of Elizabeth I;

- ❑ believed that the Reformation had not been radical enough;
- ❑ elected their ministers and criticized as undemocratic the hierarchical structure of the other Churches;
- ❑ had very strict moral principles;
- ❑ the way to salvation lay in a life of hard work and avoidance of all forms of frivolous entertainment.



# Politics in the 17<sup>th</sup> century England

- the Tudor monarchs – autocratic
- **Charles I** (1625-1649)
- **1629** - dissolved the Parliament, ruled for 11 years without one;
- **1640** – had to reopen the Parliament to ask for taxes; the Parliament refused;
- **1642** - the Parliament demanded the control of the army. Charles's refusal meant **Civil War**;





# Politics in the 17<sup>th</sup> century England

- Puritan army (under the command of **Oliver Cromwell**) vs. the king's royalist forces;
- Puritan victory; Charles was executed on June 30<sup>th</sup> 1649;
- Cromwell and his followers founded a republic (**the Commonwealth**) – collapsed in 1660 after the death of Cromwell;
- monarchy restored (Charles II) - **the Restoration**.



# Puritan and Restoration Poetry



For a period after the Renaissance, poetry divided into 2 trends: **the Cavalier** poets and **the Metaphysical** poets.

- **The Cavalier Poets** defended the monarchy against the Puritans during the reign of Charles I

**Robert Herrick, Thomas Carew, Robert Lovelace, Sir John Suckling**

- ideal gentleman - a lover, a soldier, a wit, a musician, a poet
- light-hearted approach to life
- poetry for births, marriages, great parties
- poems embodied the spirit of the upper classes before the Puritan Commonwealth

# Cavalier Poetry



Out upon it! I have loved  
Three whole days together,  
And am like to love three more  
If it prove good weather.

Sir John Suckling

Sir John Suckling: "Why So Pale and Wan, Fond Lover?"



# Cavalier Poetry



## To Electra

I dare not ask a kiss;  
I dare not beg a smile;  
Lest having that or this,  
I might grow proud the while.

No, no, the utmost share  
Of my desire shall be  
Only to kiss the air  
That lately kissed thee.

Robert Herrick



# Metaphysical Poetry



- George Herbert  
Richard Crashaw  
Henry Vaughan
- followed in the tradition of **John Donne** (1572-1631);
- misleading term “**metaphysical**” used by literary critic Samuel Johnson, the 18<sup>th</sup> century;
- the poetry did not deal with philosophical speculation but with the themes of **religion** and **love**;
- Johnson used the word “metaphysical” to criticise what he considered to be the poets’ desire to be original at any cost;
- 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries - the Metaphysical poets were unpopular;
- beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - T.S. Eliot helped generate new appreciation for Donne and his followers

# The features of Metaphysical poetry

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- the use of **conceits**: comparisons between objects which at first glance seem to have nothing in common;
- the **argumentative quality** of the love poems, in which the poet tries to persuade his lover to share his point of view;
- the **dramatic quality** of the language, which often seems to be one side of a dialogue between the poet and his lover, or God, or himself;
- the **wide range of subjects** from which the poet draws his **imagery** (sciences, travel, medicine, alchemy, philosophy) – vs. Elizabethan poetry (which used the stock imagery of the period – birds, flowers, sun, moon, stars);
- the use of **wit** (in the 17<sup>th</sup> century – the ability to relate dissimilar ideas, implied intellectual genius – use of paradoxes, conceits, puns)

# John Donne (1572-1631)

- born in London to a prominent Roman Catholic family;
- converted to Anglicanism during the 1590s;
- at the age of 11 entered the University of Oxford, then Cambridge – took no degree;
- 1592 - began the study of law at Lincoln's Inn, London; legal or diplomatic career;
- 1598 - appointed private secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, Keeper of the Great Seal;





# John Donne (1572-1631)

- 1601 - secretly married Egerton's niece, Anne More;
- dismissed from his position, brief imprisonment;
- made a meagre living as a lawyer;
- *Divine Poems* (1607);
- 1615 - became a priest of the Anglican Church, appointed royal chaplain;
- 1621 - named dean of St. Paul's Cathedral;
- attained eminence as a preacher, delivered the most brilliant and eloquent sermons of his time.

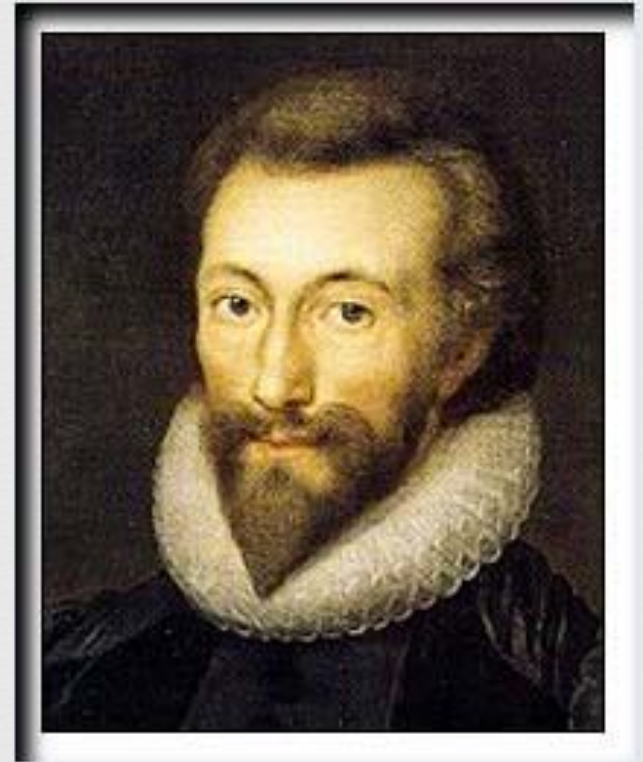


# John Donne (1572-1631)

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a wide range of secular and religious subjects:

- ❑ cynical verse about inconstancy,
- ❑ poems about true love,
- ❑ Neoplatonic lyrics on the mystical union of lovers' souls and bodies,
- ❑ brilliant satires and hymns depicting his own spiritual struggles

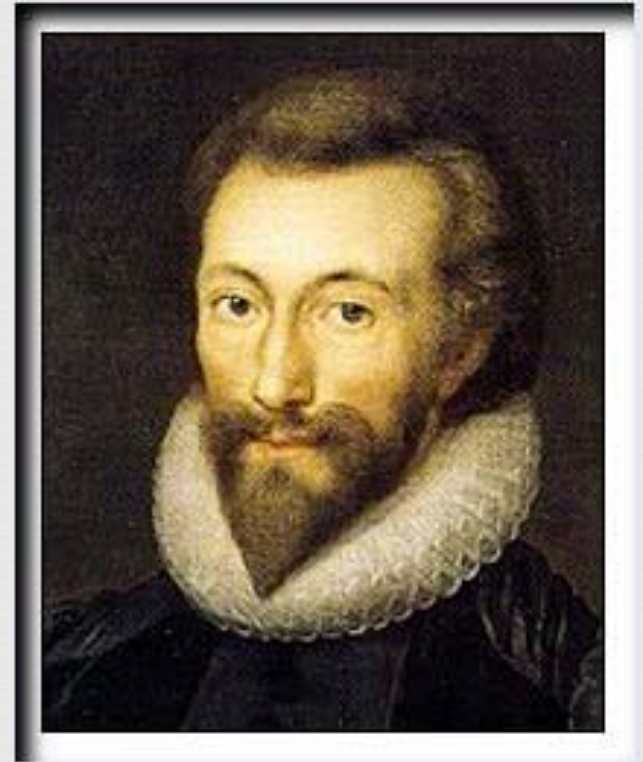


# John Donne (1572-1631)

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Characteristics of Donne's poetry  
(typified the work of the metaphysical  
poets):

- ❑ dazzling wordplay, often explicitly sexual;
- ❑ paradox;
- ❑ subtle argumentation;
- ❑ surprising contrasts;
- ❑ intricate psychological analysis;
- ❑ striking imagery selected from nontraditional areas (law, physiology, scholastic philosophy, mathematics)



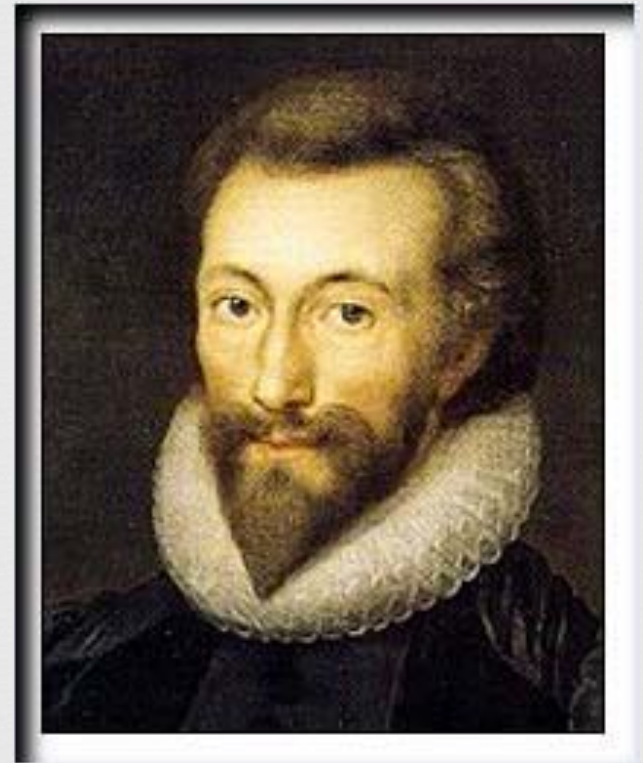


# John Donne (1572-1631)

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**Prose:** *The Sermons* (160)

- imaginative explications of biblical passages;
- intense explorations of the themes of divine love and of the decay and resurrection of the body;
- *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624)



# Some works by John Donne

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## Poetry

- Satires (1593)
- Songs and Sonnets (1601)
- Divine Poems (1607)
- **An Anatomy of the World (1611)**
- The Second Anniversary. Of The Progress of the Soul (1611)
- An Anatomy of the World (1612)
- **Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions (1624)**
- Wisdom crying out to Sinners (1639)

## Essays

- Three Sermons Upon Special Occasions (1623)
- The First Sermon Preached To King Charles (1625)
- Essays in Divinity (1651)

# A VALEDICTION FORBIDDING MOURNING

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As virtuous men pass mildly away,  
And whisper to their souls to go,  
Whilst some of their sad friends do say,  
"The breath goes now," and some say, "No,"

So let us melt, and make no noise,  
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;  
'Twere profanation of our joys  
To tell the laity our love.

Moving of the earth brings harms and fears,  
Men reckon what it did and meant;  
But trepidation of the spheres,  
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love  
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit  
Absence, because it doth remove  
Those things which elemented it.

But we, by a love so much refined  
That our selves know not what it is,  
Inter-assured of the mind,  
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

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Our two souls therefore, which are one,  
Though I must go, endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion.  
Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so  
As stiff twin compasses are two:  
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show  
To move, but doth, if the other do;

And though it in the center sit,  
Yet when the other far doth roam,  
It leans, and hearkens after it,  
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,  
Like the other foot, obliquely run;  
Thy firmness makes my circle just,  
And makes me end where I begun.



# ПРОЩАНИЕ, ВОЗБРАНЯЮЩЕЕ ПЕЧАЛЬ

Как шепчет праведник: пора! -  
Своей душе, прощаясь тихо,  
Пока царит вокруг одра  
Печальная неразбериха,

Вот так безропотно сейчас  
Простимся в тишине - пора нам!  
Кошунством было б напоказ  
Святыню выставлять профанам.

Страшат толпу толчки земли,  
О них толкуют суеверы,  
Но скрыто от людей вдали  
Дрожание небесной сферы.

Любовь подлунную томит  
Разлука бременем несносным:  
Ведь цель влеченья состоит  
В том, что потребно чувствам косным.

Перевод Г. М. Кружкова

А нашу страсть влеченьем звать  
Нельзя, ведь чувства слишком грубы;  
Неразделимость сознавать -  
Вот цель, а не глаза и губы.

Связь наших душ над бездной той,  
Что разлучить любимых тщится,  
Подобно нити золотой,  
Не рвется, сколь ни истончится.

Как ножки циркуля, вдвойне  
Мы нераздельны и едины:  
Где б ни скитался я, ко мне  
Ты тянешься из середины.

Кружась с моим круженьем в лад,  
Склоняешься, как бы внимая,  
Пока не повернет назад  
К твоей прямой моя кривая.

Куда стезю ни повернуть,  
Лишь ты - надежная опора  
Того, кто, замыкая путь,  
К истоку возвратится скоро.

# Poetic devices



- ❑ **ballad-like** four-line stanzas help create the gently, slowly moving "feel" of the poem;
- ❑ **rhyme scheme** - consistent and predictable;
- ❑ emotion confined to the "laity"-the ordinary lovers who cannot stand parting.
- ❑ **Conceits** used:
  - ❑ Donne and wife > celestial bodies > the points of a compass;
  - ❑ the wedding ring > the path of a planet > the alchemical symbol for gold > the path traced out by a compass;
  - ❑ the emotions of the common people > earthquakes and tempests

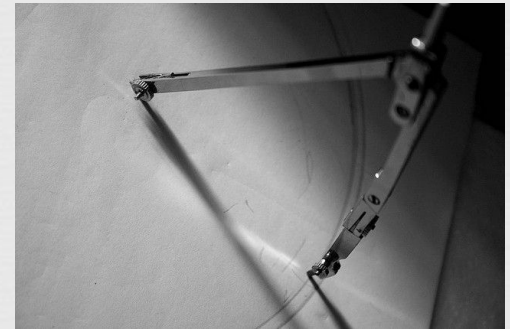
# Imagery / References to Donne's learning

## The circle

- Marriage ring
- Path of the planets (Trepidation of the spheres)
- Alchemical symbol for gold was a circle with a point in the centre
- Path described by a compass.

**Very broad range of knowledge displayed:**

- planetary trepidation
- earthquakes, the love of "sublunary lovers"
- properties of gold – **malleable**, the most precious of all the metals, the **least reactive** of all metals, the most noble metal, the most difficult to destroy
- compass imagery and use





# Religious themes in Donne's works

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## Devotions upon Emergent Occasions (1624)

- series of reflections written as Donne recovered from a serious illness (typhus or relapsing fever);
- describes this as a "preternatural birth, in returning to life, from this sickness";
- consists of twenty-three parts ('devotions') describing each stage of the sickness;
- each part is further divided into a **Meditation**, an **Expostulation**, and a **Prayer**.



MEDITATION XVII.  
NUNC LENTO SONITU DICUNT, MORIERIS.

Now this bell tolling softly for another,  
says to me, Thou must die.

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... all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again, for that library where every book shall lie open to one another; as therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come; so this bell calls us all: but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness.

**No man is an island**, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, **and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.**

# TO HIS MISTRESS GOING TO BED

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COME, madam, come, all rest my powers defy ;  
Until I labour, I in labour lie.  
The foe ofttimes, having the foe in sight,  
Is tired with standing, though he never fight.  
Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glittering,  
But a far fairer world encompassing.  
Unpin that spangled breast-plate, which you wear,  
That th' eyes of busy fools may be stopp'd there.  
Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime  
Tells me from you that now it is bed-time.  
Off with that happy busk, which I envy,  
That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.  
Your gown going off such beauteous state reveals,  
As when from flowery meads th' hill's shadow steals.  
Off with your wiry coronet, and show  
The hairy diadems which on you do grow.  
Off with your hose and shoes ; then softly tread  
In this love's hallow'd temple, this soft bed.  
In such white robes heaven's angels used to be  
Revealed to men ; thou, angel, bring'st with thee  
A heaven-like Mahomet's paradise ; and though  
Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know  
By this these angels from an evil sprite ;  
Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.

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Licence my roving hands, and let them go  
Before, behind, between, above, below.  
O, my America, my Newfoundland,  
My kingdom, safest when with one man mann'd,  
My mine of precious stones, my empery ;  
How am I blest in thus discovering thee !  
To enter in these bonds, is to be free ;  
Then, where my hand is set, my soul shall be.  
Full nakedness ! All joys are due to thee ;  
As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be  
To taste whole joys. Gems which you women use  
Are like Atlanta's ball cast in men's views ;  
That, when a fool's eye lighteth on a gem,  
His earthly soul might court that, not them.  
Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made  
For laymen, are all women thus array'd.  
Themselves are only mystic books, which we  
—Whom their imputed grace will dignify—  
Must see reveal'd. Then, since that I may know,  
As liberally as to thy midwife show  
Thyself ; cast all, yea, this white linen hence ;  
There is no penance due to innocence :  
To teach thee, I am naked first ; why then,  
What needst thou have more covering than a man?



# В ПОСТЕЛЬ

Ко мне, сударыня! Я замер, я притих,  
Как в ожиданье схваток родовых.  
Так вид врага порой столь нестерпим,  
Что можно пасть, и не сразившись с ним.  
Прочь пояс - он блестит, как край небес,  
Но обнимает мир иных чудес.  
И эту брошь с груди сними скорей -  
Глупцам пристало любоваться ей.  
Рви пальцами шнуровку - слышишь звон? -  
Час наступил - для нас назначен он.  
Прочь этот лиф - завидовать готов  
Его спокойствию вблизи таких даров.  
Слетает платье, стан полуоткрыв,  
Как будто тень сошла с цветущих нив.  
Сними венец - какой теперь в нем прок? -  
И покажи волос своих венок.  
Прочь тифельки, ступай же в тишине  
В священный храм любви - в постель ко мне.  
Так в белом одеянье с высоты  
Нисходят ангелы. Мой ангел - это ты,  
Даруешь мне блаженств восточный рай.  
А ты, душа, злых духов отличай  
От ангелов - различье таково:  
Там волосы встают, здесь - естество.  
Не связывай мне руки и утешь -  
Пусти их спереди и сзади, вниз и меж.



О ты, Америка, земля моя, предел,  
Которым я доныне не владел!  
Сверкает дивный клад, глаза слепя, -  
О, как я счастлив открывать тебя!  
В цепях любви себя освобожу,  
И где рука - там душу положу.  
О, нагота, - обитель всех надежд!  
Как дух без тела - тело без одежд  
Вкушает радость. Ну а к жемчугам,  
Как Аталанта - к золотым плодам,  
Пусть, восторгаясь, тянется простак, -  
Бедняга, он иных не знает благ.  
Наряды обожает женский род,  
Ну, а дурак - богатый переплет.  
Но девы - книг таинственная весть  
Для тех, кто удостоен их прочесть.  
Встань предо мною, покидая высь, -  
Как перед старой нянькою явись.  
Скинь все, совсем, сорочку тоже вон, -  
В том нет греха - невинность твой закон.  
Готовый дать урок, лежу нагой, -  
Так чем тебя накрыть как не собой?

# DEATH, BE NOT PROUD

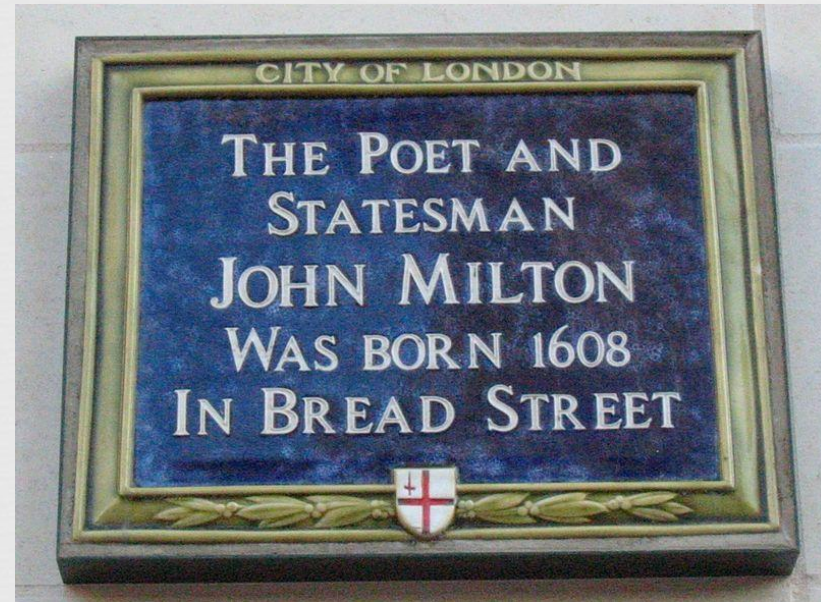


Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
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  
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.



# John Milton (1608-1674)

- born in London on December 9, 1608, into a middle-class family;
- prepared to enter the clergy;
- after university (Christ's College, Cambridge), abandoned plans to join the priesthood;
- course of independent study to prepare for a career as a poet (classical and modern works of religion, science, philosophy, history, politics, and literature);
- proficient in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Spanish, Italian, familiar with Old English and Dutch
- May 1638 - began a 13-month tour of France and Italy, met many important intellectuals and influential people, including the astronomer Galileo





# John Milton (1608-1674)

- during the English Civil War championed the cause of the Puritans and Oliver Cromwell;
- wrote a series of pamphlets advocating radical political topics (the morality of divorce, the freedom of the press, populism, and sanctioned regicide)
- served as secretary for foreign languages in Cromwell's government, composing official statements defending the Commonwealth;
- steadily lost his eyesight, and was completely blind by 1651;
- after the Restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, arrested as a defender of the Commonwealth, fined, and soon released



# John Milton (1608-1674)

- lived the rest of his life in seclusion in the country;
- completed the blank-verse epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667);
- sequel *Paradise Regained* (1671);
- tragedy *Samson Agonistes* (1671);
- oversaw the printing of a second edition of *Paradise Lost* in 1674;
- included an explanation of "why the poem rhymes not," clarifying his use of blank verse;
- died on November 8, 1674, in Buckinghamshire, England.



# John Milton (1608-1674)

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## A Selected Bibliography

- Poetry
- Lycidas (1638)
- Poems (1645)
- Paradise Lost (1667)
- Paradise Regained (1671)
- Samson Agonistes (1671)





# Paradise Lost

- chronicles Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden;
- masterpiece and one of the greatest epic poems in world literature;
- debate regarding its theological themes, political commentary, and its depiction of the fallen angel Satan who is often viewed as the protagonist of the work.



# Paradise Lost



- In choosing between Latin and English for the language of the poem, Milton compromised by inventing a new dialect for poetry, one that is removed from the language of natural speech.
- How could this rebel Puritan not have a degree of sympathy for the arch-rebel Satan?
- How could a scholar such as Milton believe that the tree of knowledge should be forbidden to mankind?

# Paradise Lost – Book 1



Farewell, happy fields,  
Where joy for ever dwells! Hail, horrors! hail,  
Infernal world! and thou, profoundest Hell,  
Receive thy new possessor--one who brings  
A mind not to be changed by place or time.  
The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.  
What matter where, if I be still the same,  
And what I should be, all but less than he  
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least  
We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built  
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:  
Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice,  
To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:  
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.