*John Donne,* DEATH BE NOT PROUD, page 806

During the Renaissance, when life was short, a man of the cloth like Donne would

have surprised no one by being on familiar terms with death. Still, “Death be not

proud,” one of Donne’s “Holy Sonnets,” is an almost startling put-down of “poor

death.” Staunchly Christian in its sure expectation of the Resurrection, Donne’s

poem personifies death as an adversary swollen with false pride and unworthy of

being called “mighty and dreadful.”

In “Death be not proud” the poet accuses death of being little more than a slave

bossed around by “fate, chance, kings and desperate men”—a craven thing that keeps

bad company, such as “poison, war, and sickness,” and is itself powerless without their

assistance. Finally Donne taunts death with a paradox: “death, thou shalt die.”

It might be instructive for students to compare two personifications of death:

Donne’s and Emily Dickinson’s in “Because I could not stop for Death,” where death

appears in the guise of a courtly gentleman who stops by to take the poet for a pleasant

ride.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Death be

not proud.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

**1. How would you restate the meaning of the poem’s first two lines?** Ask your

students to restate the first four *words* of the poem: you’ll probably get “Death is not

proud.” If there were a comma after “Death,” it might help them to realize that “be”

is not some older form of “is,” but is instead an imperative: “Death, don’t be proud.”

The other possible sticking point in the passage is the antecedent of “so,” which

refers back to “mighty and dreadful.” Thus: “Death, don’t be proud, even though

some people think that you’re mighty and dreadful, because you really aren’t.”

**2. Explain the comparison developed in lines 5–8.** Rest and sleep are “pictures”

of death in the sense that they are pale copies or weak representations of it. Since

they give “[m]uch pleasure”—comfort and renewal—then the real thing, death, must

give much greater pleasure. Line 7 might bring to mind the expression “The good die

young”: they go unafraid to the physical comfort (“Rest of their bones”) and spiritual

renewal (“soul’s delivery”) that death provides.

**3. What is being said in lines 9–10?** In line 9, death is told that its activities are

not under its own control; instead, it must depend on accidents, tyrants, and murderers

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to carry out its work. Line 10 suggests that death has no power of its own, but must rely

on these other agencies to achieve its effects. Therefore, since it has neither will nor

means of its own, the speaker asks, at the end of line 12, why it is so puffed up with pride.

**4. Explain the concept expressed in the poem’s concluding couplet.** To the

devout Christian speaker of the poem, death is not an ending, but a doorway to the

soul’s eternal life. Here is the ultimate irony: when each individual dies, then death

no longer exists for that person; when everyone has died, then death will completely

cease to exist. In the end, those whom death has killed live on eternally, while death

itself is the only one that really dies.