
Section Objective:

- Generate research questions from informational text
- Analyze plot structure, flashbacks, and foreshadowing
- Use prefixes to understand word meanings; distinguish denotative and connotative meanings of words; and identify and use words from myths

Introduction to John Donne



John Donne

John Donne lived from 1572-1631. He was a contemporary of William Shakespeare, only eight years younger than the more famous English author. During their lifetimes, King James I commissioned a new English translation of the Bible: published in 1611, it became known as the King James Bible. The publications of both the Bible and Shakespeare make this time period one of the most important in English Literature.

John Donne was an English clergyman, so most of his works would consist of sermons. Today's assignment differs from the others in the course, since it is neither a story, a poem, nor a play. Rather, we're reading a "meditation," a type of **philosophical** examination of a particular topic. A typical essay or book in philosophy would take a very logical approach to a topic, outlining an idea and listing support. In contrast to being organized by logic or reason, a **meditation** follows a train of thought, one idea leading to another, often meandering around a topic without a clear sense of organization. This particular reading contains some phrases that have become memorable in English literature, often repeated by others and even used as book titles: "for whom the bell tolls," and "no man is an island."

Did You Know...?

By the time John Donne wrote "Meditation XVII" in 1623, his wife had died after giving birth to their twelfth child, one of his older daughters died, and he himself nearly died—possibly from typhus.

Our prior discussion of Malory noted the common use of referencing time according to the feasts of the church, and the time of day based on morning or evening services. John Donne's meditation continues in that vein, focusing on the church bells, used by the townspeople as a way to tell time in an age when few people owned clocks. The usual ringing of bells occurred for morning, noon, or evening prayers. Outside of those set times, a bell would toll slowly, announcing the death (or deathbed watch) for some individual. The tolling of such a bell becomes the starting point for Donne's meditation.

Reading Skills



Because you are reading a philosophical reflection, you will need to read the text more than once to understand its meaning. As you read, note the contrasting types of bells referenced, the tolling vs. the time of day. Although the meditation is a **monologue**, consider it as a **dialogue**, part of it concerning some person who is sick, and the other part dealing with John Donne himself. Whether you print the text or read it on a computer, highlight the two distinct parts with different colors to **visualize the text**.

To understand why death and illness would be an important topic, consider some **research questions** that would help in understanding the context. For example, researching health issues during this period could lead to information concerning the average life expectancy and the dates of major illnesses like the plague that ravished Europe.

Literary Skills

Since the **structure** follows an association of ideas and images, you'll need to look at the sequence of these ideas to follow his train of thought. Donne starts with the tolling of the bell, moves to church, and then thinks of church as a single unit, but with many members. To **analyze the structure** of the work, follow the types of ideas and images that flow from this start. In particular, list the **series of analogies** Donne uses as a way to build his **argument**. To organize your analysis, create a table with three columns. In column 1, list the various analogies as they appear in sequence. In column 2, list the "whole" items involved with the analogy; and in column 3, list the "parts" that go with the whole. Read closely, for one overall image may contain more than one part-whole analogy.

In narrative or dramatic works, we often look at words or images used early in a work as a **foreshadowing** of events to come. For this philosophical reflection, identify the foreshadowing that Donne sees for his own life.

Vocabulary

Words have dominant meanings, or **denotations**, so we can share our communication about a common event. But words also have **connotations**, particular emotions or feelings that we add to the word. For example, we could see a similar denotation for the words *house* and *home*, but the words convey very different **connotations**. List the connotations you would associate with the word *home*. Then examine how the word appears in this particular meditation of John Donne. Identify how the connotations with the word make it work as an **analogy** in Donne's meditation.

Examine the **denotations and connotations** associated with two other words that appear in this reading, *misery* and *treasure*. Identify which connotes primarily positive ideas and which connotes mostly negative. Then examine the similarities that Donne sees within these ideas as he develops his train of associations in the meditation.

As indicated in the text, the word *catholic* means *universal*. Based on this **denotation**, the word fits within the overall theme of the meditation. But the word also has other connotations, especially when it appears capitalized, Catholic. Identify the various **connotations** that you associate with this word. Then indicate whether any of the associations contribute to the overall theme in Donne's meditation or distract from that theme.

The word **prefix** *trans* means to carry or go across something. In this reading, the prefix appears in the words "translators" and "translation." Identify the precise meaning or **denotation** of these terms. But these words also have **connotations** or associations that convey some emotion or feeling. Identify the various feelings that come to mind with these terms. Finally, since the overall context of the reading uses images as **analogies**, identify the **analogy** associated with these specific terms as well.

Another common **prefix**, *con*, usually conveys a sense of *with* or *together*. Examine the following words from the reading that share this prefix:

contention	connected	concerns	congregation
continent	consideration	contemplation	

Clarify for yourself the root idea of each word and how the prefix changes or focuses the meaning. Given the basic meaning of the prefix, explain why these types of words would appear in this particular meditation of John Donne.

Specific vocabulary words from John Donne: meander, monologue, affliction, catholic, contemplation, translate

