**Death, be not proud**

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 Donne (1572-1631)

Death Be Not Proud” presents an argument against the power of death. Addressing Death as a person, the speaker warns Death against pride in his power. Such power is merely an illusion, and the end Death thinks it brings to men and women is in fact a rest from world-weariness for its alleged “victims.” The poet criticizes Death as a slave to other forces: fate, chance, kings, and desperate men. Death is not in control, for a variety of other powers exercise their volition in taking lives. Even in the rest it brings, Death is inferior to drugs. Finally, the speaker predicts the end of Death itself, stating “Death, thou shalt die.”

**Analysis**

Donne’s poem follows the Elizabethan/Shakespearean sonnet form in that it is made up of three quatrains and a concluding couplet. However, Donne has chosen the rhyme scheme of abba for the first two quatrains, grouping them into an octat. He switches rhyme scheme in the third quatrain to cddc, and then the couplet rhymes ee as usual.

The first quatrain focuses on the subject and audience of this poem: death. By addressing Death, Donne makes it/him into a character through personification. The poet warns death to avoid pride (line 1) and reconsider its/his position as a “Mighty and dreadful” force (line 2). He concludes the introductory argument of the first quatrain by declaring to death that those it claims to kill “Die not” (line 4), and neither can the poet himself be stricken in this way.

The second quatrain, which is closely linked to the first through the abba rhyme scheme, turns the criticism of Death. From Death comes “Much pleasure” (line 5) since those good souls whom Death releases from earthly suffering experience “Rest of their bones” (line 6). Donne then returns to criticizing Death for thinking too highly of itself: Death is no sovereign, but a “slave to Fate, chance, kings, and desperate men” (line 9); this last demonstrates that there is no hierarchy in which Death is near the top. Although a desperate man can choose Death as an escape from earthly suffering, even the rest which Death offers can be achieved better by “poppy, or charms” (line 11), so even there Death has no superiority.

The final couplet caps the argument against Death. Not only is Death the servant of other powers and essentially impotent to truly kill anyone, but also Death is itself destined to die when, as in the religious understanding, the dead are resurrected to their eternal reward. Donne taps into his Christian background to point out that Death has no power and one day will cease to exist.