

B. A. English (Honours) Part-I
Paper-I (History of English Literature)
John Donne: Life and Works- I

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John Donne (1572?-1631)* was born in London. He was the son of a rich iron merchant. His parents were Catholics and so he was educated in their faith before going to Oxford and Cambridge. But his education could not be continued at Oxford and Cambridge due to his religion because at that time Catholics were subject to severe persecution. So he passed through a bitter experiences and it set his religious standards of life, which we find in his poetry.

He joined the expedition of Essex for Cadiz (a full scale naval and military operation launched against Spain having its centre in Cadiz) in 1596 and for the Azores in 1597. In the former expedition Donne was among the three hundred gentlemen volunteers described as ‘green headed youths, covered with feathers, gold and silver lace’. In volunteering he was proving his patriotism and loyalty to the Queen Elizabeth and beginning to relinquish his Catholicism. The second expedition was a part of Sir Walter Raleigh’s fleet. During these expeditions he found time for writing poetry and two of his best poems *The Storm* and *The Calm* are the results of that leisure time. He travelled Europe for three years. Throughout his life Donne had a restless desire for work and worldly success. After having returned home he was appointed secretary to Lord Egerton, for which he had to abandon his Catholicism. There he fell in love with Lord’s niece, Anne More, eloped with her and married her. For this he was sent to prison. What is surprising is that his poetical work, *The Progress of the Soul*, is a study of transmigration, not of youthful romance. At last, Sir George More, father of Anne More, forgave the couple and settled a handsome allowance, and thus, the years of wanderings and poverty ended. As a result he became more ascetic and intellectual in tastes and refused the flattering offer of entering the Church of England. After the death of his wife he again fell to extreme poverty. Then he chose to be a preacher, and on account of his intellectual force and genius, in a very short time, got the fame of one of the greatest of English Preachers. After that he was appointed the Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London where he “carried some to heaven in holy raptures and led other to amend their lives”. He died in March, 1631. [Sources: W. J. Long’s *English Literature* & <http://www.englishwordplay.com/donne4.html>]

*In some sources the year of John Donne’s birth has been mentioned as in 1573