In difficult times, people turn to religion, music, and pleasure to stay sane. The Seventeenth Century was no different than today. Much of the literary thunder echoing from this era sounded from the writing of men who dedicated themselves to moral purity. John Donne committed the latter part of his life to spiritual excellence. His sermons may be the greatest prose of the era and are still quoted today. George Herbert genuflected, or bent a knee, to holiness in his volume *The Temple*. Ben Jonson, the progenitor or father of Cavalier poetry, believed that great poetry radiated from great souls. "Ben’s Tribe” or the “Sons of Ben” were poets who followed his example. Jonson was mentored by Shakespeare himself. In this era, battles raged, torture reigned, innocent people were executed without ever knowing the nature of the accusation—but what remains of value is the quiet evidence of thoughtful minds.
Charles I - Tyrant or Divinely-Appointed King?

It is hard to believe that the author of Paradise Lost, John Milton, argued that Charles I should be beheaded. How could such a gentle spirit arrive at such a ghastly conclusion? Consider the factors that caused the English civil war in the first place. 1) Charles disliked the Puritans and treated them harshly. Slitting people’s noses, chopping off ears—in public—were part of the government’s policy in repressing the Puritans. 2) The king constantly needed money and at times resorted to extortion. 3) He dissolved Parliament until he needed money. 4) He insisted on the divine right of kings. 5) He tried to force the Scottish Calvinists to reform.

Who Loves Charles?

Charles supporters were called cavaliers, for many aristocrats were skilled horsemen. Cavalier reminds us of the word cavalry. They were typically rich and tended to live in the countryside. The word cavalier means debonair, arrogant or unduly casual toward important issues. It also refers to King Charles’ party and particular poets of the era. Poets of this time were most often on the side of the king—the court had the money to support the arts and writing. You would think that drama would flourish in this environment; however, there were not many great pieces of drama written in the Seventeenth century.
The Rule of Opposites

In a discussion with a friend, you might say “day” and the other person responds “night.” If one person states “I’m really not that good at basketball,” the next person might say “sure you are.” Our natural human tendency to contradict one another was alive and well in the time of Charles I. On one side of the seesaw there was the King and his supporters and on the other side, the Calvinists and Puritans. Calvinists were called Roundheads because they cut their hair short. They tended to live in the towns and sided with the Puritans against the king. The king, with a Catholic French wife, favored the Catholicism, whereas the Calvinists favored Protestant thinking.

An Argument for Democracy

Difference of opinion is celebrated in the United States as a virtue. The Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches—each with a unique point of view—hold the power to influence issues of the day. The more nationalities and languages represented, the stronger and sharper our perceptions—and the more productive and powerful we become.

In England, King Charles I and then Oliver Cromwell fought to the death for their differing beliefs. Yet they both were similar in a critical way—both were tyrants and suppressed differing opinions. Partially for this tyrannical bias, Charles I was beheaded. As a reward for Cromwell’s excesses, his body was dug up out of the grave and his head was stuck on a pole above Westminster Hall. Had either embraced political moderation, the respect accorded their bodies may have been more cordial.
Oliver Cromwell

After Charles I was beheaded, the new government was called the English Commonwealth led by Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell had eliminated the opposition in Parliament when they disagreed with Charles’ beheading. People grew discontent with Cromwell’s government because the execution of Charles I was not universally popular, the Puritans enforced strict policies, and England was at war with Spain and France and had forces in Scotland. Eventually, Parliament decided to restore the monarchy because it was tired of the taxation, violence, and disorder.

When Oliver Cromwell was leader of the Puritans, his government banned fancy clothes, gambling, horse racing, dancing, newspapers, theatre, and various forms of entertainment. The Puritan’s fundamental religious beliefs justified these actions. It looks like Cromwell took the ‘fun’ out of fundamental.

To the Web: Thoughts on Cromwell

- http://www.forerunner.com/champion/X0004_3_.Oliver_Cromwell.html
- http://www.olivercromwell.com

See the Movie!

Richard Harris as Oliver Cromwell, Alec Guinness as King Charles
Ben Jonson

Ben Jonson was the most influential writer of the era. He argued that poets inspire “young men to all good disciplines, inflame grown men to all great virtues...keep old men in their best and supreme state.” Noble sentiments from a man who had made his living as a bricklayer (“a trowel in his hand and a book in his pocket.”) and a soldier. To Jonson, poetry was the greatest of all professions. He believed that a person could not be “the good poet without being a good man.” Jonson tried to live up to this moral duty by: 1) giving good advice in his poems; 2) honoring worthy men and women in his poems; 3) satirizing corruption in his plays. Like flesh that never ages, Jonson’s works are as alluring today as ever.

http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/jonson

John Milton

A Puritan Writer

Commitment to one’s ideals characterized the Seventeenth century. Two writers from this period who were Puritans and therefore produced more religious works as a result were John Milton and John Bunyan. Like Beethoven composing great symphonies while he was stone deaf, John Milton wrote his greatest work Paradise Lost when he was completely blind. Modeling the triumph of the human spirit, he is regarded as the greatest poet of the Seventeenth century.

Milton’s ability to make and maintain friends came in handy. Colleague Andrew Marvell used his influence in the court of Charles II to intervene on Milton’s behalf and prevent Milton’s execution. There is no price that you can place on developing true friendships.

Milton WebTrips: http://www.richmond.edu/~creamermilton  http://incompetech.com/authors/milton
John Bunyan
A Puritan Writer

John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress* while he was in jail. Only the Bible outsold this book! These were the only two books on the shelves of many early settlers in the United States. Below is an excerpt from *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

“I seek an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away, and it is laid up in heaven, and safe there, to be bestowed, at the time appointed, on them that diligently seek it. Read it so, if you will, in my book.”

For a deeper drink from the Pilgrim’s well of Seventeenth century virtue, visit:


The Cavalier Poets

Ben Jonson inspired a literary following which included Sir John Suckling, Richard Lovelace and Robert Herrick. These men were the dreamers, the grand creators of Cavalier poetry. Some of the most airy and delicate thoughts in our language live here. Vicariously and imaginatively ride the swell of its phrasing--float into secret, fragrant lagoons of youthful passion, and die as death takes its noble, calming place within the storm of life.
Sir John Suckling

A Cavalier Poet

Sir John Suckling, a gambler and card-shark, was a man of pleasure. Hated by the Puritans, he eventually fell into a political intrigue, fled to France, and died at an early age. Yet the light of his dreams and joys still flickers through the dark corridor of time. He is loved for his love poems.

Her feet beneath her petticoat
Like little mice stole in and out,
As if they feared the light;
But oh, she dances such a way!
No sun upon an Easter-day
Is half so fine a sight.
From Ballad upon a Wedding

Her face is like the milky way i’ the sky,--
A meeting of gentle lights without a name.

Brennoralt, Act iii

Open the door to Sir John’s sparkling world: http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/suckling
Richard Lovelace

A Cavalier Poet

Like Cervantes composing Don Quixote or Eldridge Cleaver writing Soul on Ice, Richard Lovelace wrote many of his finest poems from prison. We see how sadness sweetens the heart and gives wings to the spirit:

Stone walls do not a prison make,
   Nor iron bars a cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
   That for an hermitage;
If I have freedom in my love,
   And in my soul am free,
Angels alone that soar above
   Enjoy such liberty.

To Althea from Prison, iv.

Lovelace  http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/lovelace
Cleaver  http://www.gale.com/freresrc/blkhstry/soulfire.htm
Robert Herrick

A Cavalier Poet

Robert Herrick was closest to Ben Jonson in style and temperament. If we are not careful, the hours and days of life will slip through our hands unnoticed. Let’s listen to what our friend Robert Herrick has to say about time:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying,
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.

*To the Virgins to make much of Time.*

Fair daffodills, we weep to see
You haste away so soon:
As yet the early rising sun
Has not attained his noon.

*To Daffodills.*

Robert Herrick  http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/herrick
Metaphysical Poetry

Like the Baskin Robbins selection, poetry comes in many different flavors. Metaphysical poetry is a great choice on a hot night--providing you have the time (currency) to enjoy it. Remember Luke Skywalker courageously flying to deliver the *coup de grace* (deathblow) to the Death Star in the first Star Wars episode? Similarly, with metaphysical poetry, we dive deeply into our mind--riding the thoughts of the poet and following complex poetic mazes. Bizarre comparisons jostle our minds from its naturally sleepy state. Qualities of metaphysical poetry include high intellectualism, well-structured arguments, and frequent employment of conceits.

Conceit – In Poetic Language

Let’s look at one of the key elements. A conceit, one of the main weapons of metaphysical poetry, is *a comparison in which the subject is likened to something that would never normally be associated with it.* Think of any two subjects, the more diverse, or different, the better. Now, make a comparison. For example, compare your lady (or gentleman) friend’s eyes to a sandy beach-- each unique grain twinkling bright thoughts of love and glowing with radiant heat. As John Donne opened the door to metaphysical poetry, we can have fun with this slick literary device, even writing our own poems.
John Donne

Somehow, I can’t believe that there are any heights that can’t be scaled by a man who knows the secrets of making dreams come true. This special secret, it seems to me, can be summarized in four C’s. They are curiosity, confidence, courage, and constancy.

-Walt Disney

Death, sadness, failure, poverty—all seem to be factored into many people’s lives—but this doesn’t stop them from rising to the top. During the first part of John Donne’s life he was raised by a widowed Catholic mother—and was wild, clever, and charming. He wooed and married Anne More, hoping for advancement. He was poor, ill, depressed, and barely made a living. After moving into his home with his first wife, John Donne wrote on a window “John Donne, Anne Donne, Undone” responding to the reaction of his father-in-law who had him fired from his job and thrown in jail. At age 33, his first wife died during childbirth.

But, like many great people, he had the courage and faith to hold on until his fortune began to change. His ladder to success looked like the one Walt Disney described in the quote above. John Donne persevered and did not give up. During the second part of his life he became dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral and was the most popular preacher in England. He had many poems and sermons published. His sermons are regarded by some as the greatest prose of the era. Reading John Donne is like arriving at Mount Everest’s summit— you wonder where you have been all your life!
John Donne’s

Song

Yesterday the sun went hence,
And yet is here today…

The outrageous optimism of darkness yielding light, failure giving birth to success, and death becoming life, buoys the spirit of Seventeenth century poetry. In the first stanza, the speaker’s reason for leaving his beloved is that his departure is a preparation for his ultimate departure in death. The speaker suggests that his beloved think of their parting that as long as two people remember each other, they are not really parted but rather separated, as in sleep. The speaker of the poem urges his love not to grieve over their separation as: 1) his departure will be a rehearsal for death; 2) like the sun he will inevitably return; 3) his beloved’s grieving weakens him; and 4) she should think of them as merely turned aside in sleep. The poem is a metaphysical conceit because it makes unlikely comparisons.
John Donne’s
Meditation 17

…and for affliction is a treasure,
and scarce any man hath enough of it.
No man hath affliction enough that is not matured, and ripened by it,
and made fit for God by that affliction.

From Meditation XVII

Ernest Hemingway, in his famous novel, For Whom the Bell Tolls, connects with the feelings of John Donne in a more contemporary setting. For Meditation 17, the writer unveils his deep affinity with heaven, other members of the church including children, and the integrity of his own soul. The tone of this poem is reassuring. The statement “Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind…” expresses the major theme of the meditation. One of the secondary themes of Meditation 17 is that hardship and trouble help to mature people—death is part of life’s spiritual purpose.

The idea that people are more similar than different, more united than isolated, is expressed through Donne’s phrase “Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it arises?” When Donne writes, “…and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again,” “leaves” refers to the pages of a book. Donne states that God will put them in order again. According to the argument Donne puts forth in Meditation 17, one can be affected by another’s death because human beings are inherently involved with one another. The fact that individuals should always be aware of their connections to others best summarizes Donne’s ideal regarding individuals within society.
All mankinde is of one Author, and is one volume; when one Man dies, one Chapter is not torne out of the booke, but translated into a better language; and every Chapter must be so translated; God emploies several translators; some peeces are translated by age, some by sicknesse, some by warre, some by justice; but Gods hand is in every translation; and his hand shall binde up all our scattered leaves againe, for that Librarie where every booke shall lie open to one another…

**Meditation 17**

http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne

**George Herbert**

In his first two sonnets which he sent to his mother, he gently reminded us that that writing about the love of God was a worthier than writing about the love of women. **George Herbert** became an Anglican dean and wrote almost all religious verses. His writing was different from Donne’s in that he wasn’t as doubt-ridden and anxious. Herbert’s most famous manuscript was entitled *The Temple*. It represented the experience of attending church.

A sense of hidden laughter and permanence flows through the poem *Virtue*—like going on picnic with laughing children and peaceful thoughts. In this poem “sweet day,” “sweet rose,” and “sweet spring” **all must die**. In the last stanza, the “sweet and virtuous soul” *lives eternally*. The ease with which Herbert paints the marriage of life with death helps us to breathe in harmony with the day, the rose, and springtime.
George Herbert’s

Virtue

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright!
The bridal of the earth and sky—
The dew shall weep thy fall to-night;
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue angry and brave
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye,
Thy root is ever in its grace,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie,
My music shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like season’d timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.
As we “unlax” (a combination of *unwind* and *relax*) now before easing onto the next lesson, sit back and enjoy George Herbert’s fountain of ideas.

**From *Jacula Prudentum*:**

“His bark is worse than his bite,”

“Help thyself, and God will help thee,”

“The offender never pardons.”

“Dare to be true, nothing can need a lie;
A fault which needs it most, grows two thereby.”

“A dwarf on a giant’s shoulders sees farther of the two.”

**From the *Country Parson, Chapter xxxix***

“Do well and right, and let the world sink”