



# The Poetry of George Herbert: "Living well is the best revenge."

*George Herbert*

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George Herbert was born on April 3rd 1593 in Montgomery, Wales to a wealthy and intellectual family. His father, an active local sheriff and member of Parliament, died when George was only three and he was left as one of ten children to a widowed mother. The family itself was much taken by the Arts. His mother was a patron to John Donne and his older brother was also to become a well known poet. The family finances afforded him an excellent education beginning first at Westminster School and then as a student in 1609 to Trinity College, Cambridge where he excelled in both languages and music. George graduated with a Bachelor's and then a Masters degree at age 20. He then obtained a Minor fellowship then a Major fellowship, which involved increasing responsibilities as a tutor and lecturer. In 1620 he was made university orator, a position of great prestige within the university and often a stepping-stone to a career at court. However his original career intention was to become a priest but with the attention of James I/VI he became a member of parliament for two years representing Montgomery. With the King's death in 1625 and the loss of his own influential patrons George's short career as a Parliamentarian was now over. He was still in his post of Cambridge University orator which he would hold until 1628 but by 1630, once more swayed towards holy orders, he was to spend the rest of his life as the rector of the parish of Fugglestone St Peter with Bemerton St Andrew near Salisbury. He was devoted to his parishioners and this shows most vividly in his religious poems. In 1633 Herbert finished a collection of poems entitled *The Temple*, which imitates the architectural style of churches through both the meaning of the words and their visual layout. The themes of God and love are treated by Herbert as much as psychological forces as metaphysical phenomena. Herbert is much remembered and admired for his use of 'Pattern Poems'. A good example is "The Altar." The words of the poem itself form a shape suggesting an altar, and this becomes his conceit for how one should offer himself as a sacrifice to the Lord. Herbert also wrote poems in Greek and in Latin. He was a great influence on his fellow metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan and many of his poems were put to music by such luminaries as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten and William Walton. His *Jacula Prudentium* is a collection of pithy proverbs was finally published in 1651, and included many still popular sayings, for example "His bark is worse than his bite." Unfortunately George Herbert was only to live for forty years. On March 1st 1633 he died from tuberculosis only three years after taking holy orders. On his deathbed, he reportedly gave the manuscript of *The Temple* to Nicholas Ferrar, asking him to publish the poems if they might "turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul", or otherwise, to burn them.

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