

# John Dryden

(1631-1700)

John Dryden was born into a Puritan family. After attending Westminster School he took his Bachelor of Arts in Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1654.

He moved to London and, thanks to his cousin's mother, held a post in Cromwell's government. His first work, *Heroique Stanzas*, commemorated Cromwell's death and in 1660, one year later, *Astraea Redux* celebrated the return of Charles II to the throne. This sudden change in politics was much criticized by his contemporaries, but Dryden followed what the majority of English people did: they welcomed the Restoration. Tired of the Puritan regime, that left little space for individual freedom, people received Charles II with joy and were eager to experience the French wit and elegance which the king brought from his exile.

Dryden wrote many **poems** (like *Absalom and Achitophel*) **based on satirical portraits**, some of them in epic style, that ably depict the political atmosphere of the time. Though he was a famous poet, he mainly dedicated the years from 1664 to 1681 to the writing of plays (a much more secure source of income then). With the Restoration the theatres reopened and Dryden became the most productive of dramatists of his time. His **heroic plays** were epic in mode -Dryden's model was the Italian Torquato Tasso- and he was also influenced by French classical drama.

In 1677 he wrote one of his most successful play, *All for Love*, a tragedy in blank verse based on Shakespeare's *Antonio and Cleopatra*. Dryden changed Shakespeare's metaphorical language into a more conventional one to suit the Restoration audience.

With the accession to the throne of the Catholic King James II, Dryden converted to Catholicism. He became a fervent follower of the Roman Church and wrote his longest poem, *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), an allegory in which the hind represents the Roman Church and the panther represents the English Church. His honesty as a Catholic is even more evident when the Protestant William and Mary came to the throne: he had to pay double taxes, he lost his title as poet laureate, which he had acquired in 1668, and all the favours from the Crown.

In his pieces of criticism Dryden proclaimed the **neoclassical ideas on poetry**. Poetry is an imitation of nature and is didactic; imagination is a 'wild' faculty and is to be controlled by judgement.

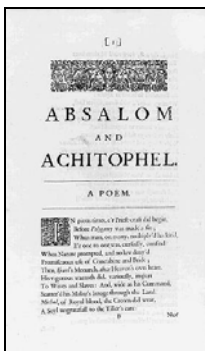
Dryden spent the last years of his life translating Virgil's Aeneid, Ovid's Metamorphoses and other works. His last work, *Fables* (1700), is a collection of translations from Boccaccio, Chaucer and Ovid. He died in 1700 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Dryden is the man who best represents his age, and his various writing are the mirror of the last forty years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He shifts from philosophical to political and to religious works and he does not miss any occasion to comment on public events. He is considered the man who links the Renaissance and the Classical age.

His early poems show some characteristics of Elizabethan poetry: flights of imagination, the search for sonorous melody, and the reliving of the past. But gradually his taste changes. He not only abandons the Elizabethan style but also rejects the metaphysical conceit in favour of more clarity and precision, and this choice reflects a general need of the time. Literature tried to offer simplicity and unity to balance the social confusion of the Restoration, a complex period, full of conflicts.

Neoclassicism looks back to the Roman classics as well as to the French contemporaries as examples of purity of form and correctness. Dryden believed control was fundamental to art, as well as clarity, proportion, harmony and precise rhythm. For him the couplet was ideal because its fixed metre (iambic pentameter) and final rhyme obliged the poet to write within a rigid framework. Dryden changed this basic form into the heroic couplet, two rhyming lines of ten syllables each, and sometimes alternated it with a triplet not to make the verso too monotonous. The result was a vivacious metre which was very successful among his contemporaries and successors.

Here below is an example of Dryden's metre with a couplet followed by a triplet; it is taken from a poem Dryden wrote on the premature death of his friend, John Oldham (To the Memory of Mr Oldham).



A noble error, and but seldom made,  
When poets are by too much force betrayed.  
Thy generous fruits, though gatered ere their prime,  
Still showed a quickness, and maturing time  
But mellows what we write to the dull sweets of rhyme.

Dryden was not only a great poet; he was a very important playwright, and wrote to please his audience which was mainly formed by the court and the world around it. His heroes and heroines are often tormented by choices concerning love or honour and the dialogues, in rhymed heroic couplets, are characterized by a rhetorical style. Later Dryden wrote libretti for the opera, the new dramatic form.

Dryden's greatest gift was satire, and it was with this genre that he won his fame. He had already acquired mastery of verse and was able to mould the language according to his needs. He was a great artist of the satirical portrait: first he describes the features of a character and then raises him to a type making general considerations.

An example of his art is the description of the duke of Buckingham, who according to Dryden was always changing his opinion and profession but was never good at anything.

Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong,  
Was everything by starts, and nothing long;  
But in the course of one revolving moon  
Was chemist, fiddler, statesman and buffoon.

These four lines are a good example of Dryden's style: balanced lines, use of words of great impact, precision in the choice of them and a last forceful line. He is far from the allegorical and metaphorical world of the Renaissance; his new realism, his lexical and syntactical clarity, his search for truth are all expressed in his satire, a genre which was born in England with Dryden and reached its climax in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Dryden was also innovative in his criticism, and his ideas and tastes determined the features of neoclassical literature; his prose is endowed with a new flavour: it is clear, easy and simple, and follows the cadence of speech.

Samuel Johnson praised his prose: "Every word seems to drop by chance, though it falls into its proper place. Nothing is cold or languid; the whole is airy, animated, and vigorous... though all is easy, nothing is feeble; though all seems careless, there is nothing harsh".

Dryden was the man who gave his public that security they were longing for after the collapse of the Commonwealth and the restoration of a controversial monarchy. He 'corrected' the verse of his predecessors endowing it with clarity, simplicity and musicality; his poetic language remained a model to refer to until the Romantic age.

## INTRODUCTORY TASK

1. Dryden exercised his talent in different fields. Consider what you have read so far and try to sum up the characteristics of the genres listed below.

<b>Poetry</b>	<b>features:</b>
	<b>metre:</b> heroic couplet: two rhyming lines of ten syllables, each
<b>Drama</b>	<b>audience:</b>
	<b>features:</b>
	<b>style:</b>
<b>Satire</b>	<b>style:</b>
	<b>features:</b>
<b>Criticism</b>	<b>features:</b>



Georg Friedrich  
Haendel

**Harmony:** this word  
Relates to the idea of  
harmonia mundi, a  
Philosophical concept  
coming from  
Pythagoras and Plato  
and referring to the fact  
that the universe was  
conceived as a system  
of celestial spheres and  
stars harmoniously  
connected with one  
other by way of divine  
impulse. Thus, the  
creation of the world is  
often compared to the  
composition of a  
musical piece: as atoms  
in disarray are  
reordered by God, so  
are notes arranged by a  
musician.



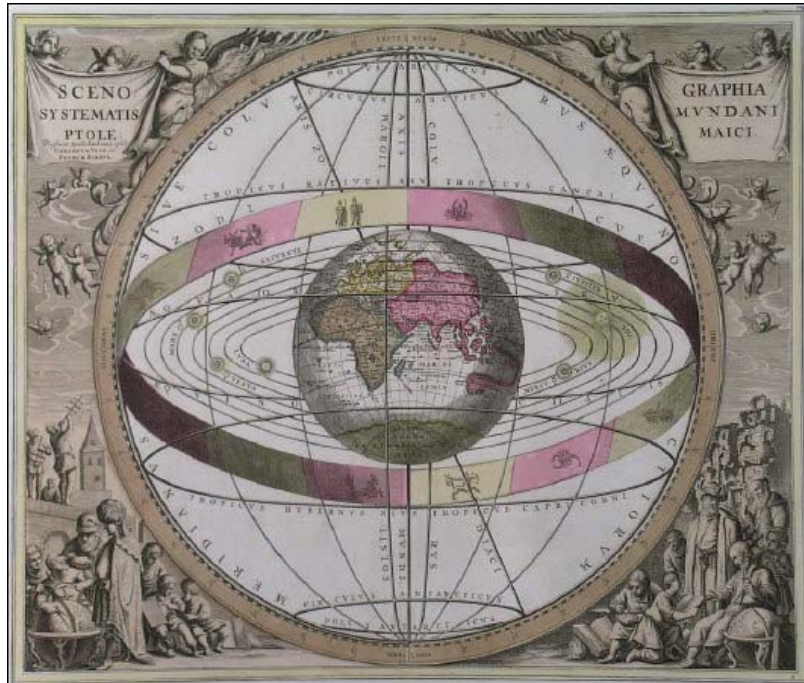
**universal frame**  
**began:** life started.  
**jarring atoms:** atoms  
shaking and bumpint  
into each other,  
according to the  
Epicurean theory.  
**stations leap:** the  
four elements that  
compose the  
universe, earth,  
water, air and fire,  
are sent to their  
places according to  
their characteristics.  
**diapason:** the  
combination of the  
musical tones that  
reaches the highest  
pitch and loudest  
sound.



## A Song for St. Cecilia's Day

This poem was written in 1687 on occasion of St. Cecilia's Day on 22 November. St. Cecilia is the patron saint of music and the Musical Society asked **Dryden** to write a song to celebrate the day. This song was set to music by **Georg Friedrich Haendel** (Halle 1685-London 1759).

St. Cecilia is an early Christian martyr. She is often represented as playing on the organ which she is supposed to have invented. Dryden wrote his song on the model of the pyndaric ode. Pyndar (518-438 B.C.). The Theban poet became famous for the pieces he wrote on the occasion of athletic competitions and games to celebrate the athletes' achievements. His odes, endowed with moral and religious tones, were based on the model of choric songs, strophe, antistrophe and additional stanza intended for choral song and dance.



**Harmonia Mundi:** the universe as a system of celestial spheres harmoniously connected.

1

From Harmony, from heavenly harmony

This universal frame began.

When Nature underneath a heap

Of jarring atoms lay,

And could not heave her head,

5

The tuneful voice was heard from high:

"Arise, ye more than dead".

Then cold, and hot and moist, and dry

In order to their stations leap,

And Music's power obey.

10

From Harmony, from heavenly harmony

This universal frame began:

From harmony to harmony

Through all the compass of the notes it ran,

The diapason closing full in Man.

15

**quell:** calm.  
**Jubal:** according to the Bible the father of all the Musicians.  
**corded shell:** an instrument made with strings pulled over a shell.  
**brethren:** brothers.



**clangour:** a loud sound.  
**Hark:** listen.  
**foes:** enemies.



**dirge:** a sad song usually sung at funerals.  
**warbling:** a pleasant high pitched sound.



**Notes... above:** the notes pervade heaven and make the choirs beautiful.



**Orpheus:** the poet who, according to mythology, with his music could soothe fierce animals.

**lays:** songs.  
**blest:** blessed.  
**crumbling pageant:** stave falling into pieces.  
**untune:** produce the wrong notes.



2  
What passion cannot Music raise and quell!  
When Jubal struck the corded shell,  
His listening brethren stood around,  
And, wondering, on their faces fell  
To worship that celestial sound. 20  
Less than a god they thought there could not dwell  
Within the hollow of that shell  
That spoke so sweetly and so well.  
What passion cannot Music raise and quell!

3  
The Trumpet's loud clangour 25  
Excites us to arms,  
With shrill notes of anger  
And mortal alarms.  
The double double double beat  
Of the thundering Drum 30  
Cries: "Hark! the foes come;  
Charge, charge, 'tis too late to retreat".

4  
The soft complaining Flute  
In dying notes discovers  
The woes of hopeless lovers, 35  
Whose dirge is whispered by the warbling Lute.

5  
Sharp violins proclaim their jealous pangs, and desperation,  
Fury, frantic indignation,  
Depth of pains, and height of passion, 40  
For the fair, disdainful dame.

6  
But O! what art can teach,  
What human voice can reach,  
The sacred Organ's praise?  
Notes inspiring holy love, 45  
Notes that wing their heavenly ways  
To mend the choirs above?

7  
Orpheus could lead the savage race,  
And trees unrooted left their place,  
Sequacious of the lyre; 50  
But bright Cecilia raised the wonder higher:  
When to her Organ vocal breath was given,  
An angel heard, and straight appeared,  
Mistaking earth for heaven.

*Grand Chorus*  
As from the power of sacred lays 55  
The spheres began to move,  
And sung the great Creator's praise  
To all the blest above;  
So when the last and dreadful hour  
This crumbling pageant shall devour,  
The trumpet shall be heard on high,  
The dead shall live, the living die,  
And Music shall untune the sky.



## TASKS

### Stanza I

1. What is the effect of harmony on the "jarring atoms"?
2. What object is mentioned at the end? Why was it chosen to announce the creation of man?
3. The first stanza is on (tick as appropriate):
  - \_\_\_\_\_ the creation of the universe in a chaotic way.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ the power of music on man.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ the creation of harmony from chaotic elements.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ the impossibility of order in nature.

### Stanza II

4. Which line introduces a new instrument? Which lines show the reaction of people to music? Which lines speak about the characteristics of sound?
5. Line 16 is repeated in line 24. What is the effect of the repetitions?

### Stanza III

6. Which instruments are quoted?
7. In Stanza 2 the effect of music was sweet. What images are evoked here?
8. The repetition of 'double' and 'charge' creates a special effect on the rhythm. Describe that effect.

### Stanza VI

9. Translate lines 29-30 into Spanish\Catalan trying to create a similar effect.





**10.**What kind of music do you associate with this stanza?

### Stanza V

**11.** Here the instrument is the violin. It expresses conflicting feelings. Can you list them?

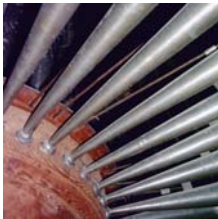
- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

**12.** There are some examples of alliterations. Which ones? What is their effect?



### Stanza VI

**13.**The organ has a special power. State what it is. What kind of music is it associated with?



### Stanza VII

**14.**Complete the following:

Orpheus has the special power of .....  
but Cecilia overcomes him because .....



### Grand Chorus

**15.**What does "the last and dreadful hour" refer to?

"the crumbling pageant" refers to ☐the theatre

☐the world

**16.** The trumpet is the last instrument mentioned. What is it associated with in the context?





17. Imagine that this score is played. What is the function of Stanza I?

- ☐ It is an introduction to the song.
- ☐ It contradicts what is stated afterwards.
- ☐ It produces the tuning of the song.
- ☐ It predicts the main points.

18. What is the function of the Grand Chorus?

- ☐ refrain
- ☐ variation
- ☐ finale
- ☐ repetition

19. Complete the comment on A Song. Use the words in the box which are in scrambled order.

creation	instruments	finale	orchestra	music	song	score
tuning up	heavenly	themes	choir	tones	harmony	chaos

In this \_\_\_\_\_ Dryden wants to describe the \_\_\_\_\_ of the world thanks to  
 \_\_\_\_\_ music transforming what is \_\_\_\_\_ into \_\_\_\_\_. He mentions  
 different \_\_\_\_\_ to show that this \_\_\_\_\_ is made up of an ensemble of  
 \_\_\_\_\_ that together make a perfect score. It is played by an \_\_\_\_\_ that  
 starts with a \_\_\_\_\_, develops its \_\_\_\_\_, following the \_\_\_\_\_, and  
 ends with a \_\_\_\_\_ that has the function of the \_\_\_\_\_.