

Metaphysical poetry

Metaphysical poetry in English literature

The metaphysical poets were a group of 17th-century poets who concerned themselves with the experience of man and the nature of being on the world. What is our place within the world and how to best define that place? Taking up the philosophy of metaphysics, first set forth by Aristotle, the metaphysical poets wrote of experience, including love, romance, beauty, imagination and man's relationship with God. Less concerned with expressing feeling than with analyzing it, metaphysical poetry is marked by bold and ingenious conceits, metaphor, drawing something forced parallels between apparently dissimilar ideas or things, complex and subtle thought, frequent use of paradox and a dramatic directness of language.

Although in no sense a school or movement proper, they share common characteristics of wit, inventiveness, and a love of elaborate stylistic maneuvers. Metaphysical concerns are the common subject of their poetry, which investigates the world by rational discussion of its phenomena rather than by intuition or mysticism.

WHAT IS METAPHYSICAL POETRY?

Metaphysical poetry is concerned with the whole experience of man, but the intelligence, learning and seriousness of the poets means that the poetry is about the profound areas of experience especially - about love, romantic and sensual; about man's relationship with God - the eternal perspective, and, to a less extent, about pleasure, learning and art. Metaphysical means dealing with the relationship between spirit to matter or the ultimate nature of reality.

Metaphysical poems are lyric poems. They are brief but intense meditations, characterized by striking use of wit, irony and wordplay. Beneath the formal structure (of rhyme, meter and stanza) is the underlying (and often hardly less formal) structure of the poem's argument. Note that there may be two (or more) kinds of argument in a poem. In "To His Coy Mistress" the explicit argument (Marvell's request that the coy lady yield to his passion) is a stalking horse for the more serious argument about the transitoriness of pleasure. The outward levity conceals (barely) a deep seriousness of intent. You would be able to show how this theme of *carpe diem* ("seize the day") is made clear in the third section of the poem.

ORIGIN OF THE NAME:

'Metaphysical poets' the name given to a diverse group of 17th-century English poets whose work is notable for its ingenious use of intellectual and theological

concepts in surprising conceits, strange paradoxes and far-fetched imagery. The word metaphysics is formed from the Greek *meta ta phusika*, a title which, about the year A.D. 70, was related by Andronicus of Rhodes to that collection of Aristotelian treatises which since then goes by the name of the "Metaphysics"

AGE:

The term "metaphysical" when applied to poetry has a long and interesting history. The term "Metaphysical Poet" was first coined by the critic Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) in his book 'Life of Cowley' and he used it as a disparaging term. Earlier, John Dryden had also been critical of the group of poets he grouped together as too proud of their wit. Johnson and Dryden valued the clarity, restraint and shapeliness of the poets of Augustan Rome (which is why some 18th century poets are called "Augustan," and therefore were antagonistic towards poets of the mid-17th century).

The Metaphysical poets were out of critical favor for the 18th and 19th centuries (obviously, the Romantic poets found little in this heavily intellectualized poetry). At the end of the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century, interest in this group picked up, and especially important was T.S. Eliot's famous essay "The Metaphysical Poets" Interest peaked this century with the New Critics school around mid-century, and now is tempering off a bit, though Donne, the original "Big Name" is being superceded now by interest in George Herbert, who's religious seeking and questioning seems to be hitting a critical nerve.

CHARACTERS OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY:

The metaphysical poems have been written following some chief characteristics. Such as:

- o Use of ordinary speech mixed with puns, paradoxes and conceits (a paradoxical metaphor causing a shock to the reader by the strangeness of the objects compared; some examples: lovers and a compass, the soul and timber, the body and mind)
- o The exaltation of wit, which in the 17th century meant a nimbleness of thought; a sense of fancy (imagination of a fantastic or whimsical nature); and originality in figures of speech
- o Abstruse terminology often drawn from science or law
- o Often poems are presented in the form of an argument
- o In love poetry, the metaphysical poets often draw on ideas from Renaissance Neo-Platonism to show the relationship between the soul and body and the union of lovers' souls
- o They also try to show a psychological realism when describing the tensions of love.
- o These poems are full of Obscurity-which means confusion and haziness for

common readers.

EXAMPLE OF SOME METAPHYSICAL POEMS:

John Donne- The Good-Morrow, The Sunne Rising, The Anniversarie, The Canonization, A Valediction Forbidding Mourning and A Nocturnall upon S.

Lucies Day

George Herbert- Jordan (I), The Pearl, The Collar, Discipline and Love (III)

Andrew Marvell- The Coronet, Bermudas, To His Coy Mistress, The Definition of Love and The Garden

Henry Vaughan- He retreat, The World, Man and "They Are All Gone into the World of Light"

SOURCES OF METAPHYSICAL POEM:

The poems are from the activities of every spheres of life especially from craft, all the school of science, alchemy, Aristotle's theory, philosophy, history, mythology, law, religion and different beliefs.

POETS OF THE METAPHYSICAL WORLD:

This is a very broad term, but it joins together a number of 17th century poets, most notable among them John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell, Henry Vaughn and Abraham Cowley.

John Donne:

The last decade of sixteen century and early seventeen century a very strange style of verse is written by John Donne. He creates a new trend for writing poetry in the history of English literature. That's why he possessed one of the keenest and most powerful intellects of the time. His poetry is noted for its ingenious fusion of wit and seriousness and represents a shift from classical models towards a more personal style. In that time he took the major position for writing metaphysical poetry.

John Donne born on 1572, Donne came from a Roman Catholic family, Despite his great education and poetic talents he lived in poverty for several years. He started writing religious poems after his wife's death, before that he wrote many love poems. He died on March 31, 1631.

Specialty of John Donne's poetry:

Donne is considered the master of the metaphysical poetry. In his poem we get some unique versatility. Such as, He yoke together two entirely opposite ideas and told very serious matter with the help of playfulness.

Intellectuality, cleverness, unique diction sparkingly express through his poem. He draws the material of his figure of speech from highly unpoetical sources. The material is abstract but Donne gives it full poetic concrete Pictures. Specially his imagistic writing, use of conceit, abrupt opening with a dramatic style and colloquial diction made his poems highlighted.

George Herbert:

George Herbert was born in Montgomery, Wales, on April 3, 1593, the fifth son of Richard and Magdalen Newport Herbert.

His poetry shows that to a large extent he followed the lead offered by Donne, but he also made contributions which were quite distinct. Herbert's poems are characterized by a precision of language, a metrical versatility, and an ingenious use of imagery or conceits that was favored by the metaphysical school of poets.

Herbert's distinguishing characteristic is his simplicity of diction and metaphor. He retains the colloquial manner, and, to an extent, the logical persuasive presentation of ideas, but he draws his metaphors from everyday domestic experience, employing a range of simple commonplace imagery in contrast to the sophisticated imagery of Donne. A technique Herbert introduced was the ending of a poem with two quiet lines which resolve the argument in the poem without answering the specific points raised by it. . Herbert occasionally explores his doubts in intellectual terms, but answers them with emotion. Herbert's poetry is certainly about struggles of a religious kind. In these respects Herbert can be considered to have broken new ground, into which Henry Vaughan followed later.

Henry Vaughan:

Henry Vaughan was born in 1621 to Thomas Vaughan and Denise Morgan. He is considered one of the major Metaphysical Poets, whose works ponder one's personal relationship to God. He shares Herbert's preoccupation with the relationship between humanity and God. He saw mankind as restless and constantly seeking a sense of harmony and fulfilment through contact with God. Vaughan, in contrast, has the arrogance of a visionary. He feels humility before God and Jesus, but seems to despise humanity. In contrast, Vaughan's images are more universal, or cosmic, even to the point of judging man in relation to infinity. The term 'visionary' is appropriate to Vaughan, not only because of the grand scale of his images, but also because his metaphors frequently draw on the sense of vision.

Andrew Marvell:

Andrew Marvell was born at Winestead-in-Holderness, Yorkshire, on March 31,

1621. The life and work of Andrew Marvell are both marked by extraordinary variety and range. Gifted with a most subtle and introspective imagination. His technique of drawing upon philosophy to illustrate his argument gives the poem an intellectual appeal, not just a visual one. There is also complete devotion displayed in this first stage of the argument, namely:

"I would Love you ten years before the flood. And you should, if you please, refuse till the conversion of the Jews."

In Marvell we find the pretence of passion (in *To His Coy Mistress*) used as a peg on which to hang serious reflections on the brevity of happiness. The Definition of Love is an ironic game - more a love of definition let loose; the poem is cool, lucid and dispassionate, if gently self-mocking

Marvell considers whether the poetic skill which has formerly (and culpably) served to praise his "shepherdess" can "redress that Wrong", by weaving a "Chaplet" for Christ.

Richard Crashaw:

Richard Crashaw was born on 1613. He was the only son of William Crashaw, a puritan preacher in London who had officiated at the burning of Mary, Queen of Scots. He wrote many metaphysical poems following Donne. Though his verse is somewhat uneven in quality, at its best it is characterized by brilliant use of extravagant baroque imagery.

Crashaw owed all the basis of his style, as has been already hinted, to Donne. His originality was one of treatment and technique; he forged a more rapid and brilliant short line than any of his predecessors had done, and for brief intervals and along sudden paths of his own he carried English prosody to a higher refinement, a more glittering felicity, than it had ever achieved. Thus, in spite of his conceits and his romantic coloring, he points the way for Pope, who did not disdain to borrow from him freely.

Conclusion:

Metaphysical poets created a new trend in history of English literature. These poems have been created in such a way that one must have enough knowledge to get the actual meaning.

Metaphysical Poets made use of everyday speech, intellectual analysis, and unique imagery. The creator of metaphysical poetry John Donne along with his followers is successful not only in that Period but also in the modern age. Metaphysical

poetry takes an important place in the history of English literature for its unique versatility and it is popular among thousand of peoples till now.

Characteristics of Metaphysical Poetry

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Introduction

“[Metaphysical Poets](#)” is a term coined by poet & critic Samuel Johnson, who describes a loose group of [English lyric](#) poets of the 17th century, whose work was characterised by ample use of conceits, guess & speculation about topics such as love, religion etc.

These poets were not formally affiliated; most of them did not know each other or read each other’s work. Metaphysical poetry is extremely intelligent & witty. It is deeply religious but is also ironical.

It is a little bit different from other types of poetry. Poems classified in this category do share the same characteristics. They are all of highly intellectualised, use strange imagery & contain complicated thoughts.

Meaning & Origin

The word “meta” means “after”. Thus metaphysics deals with the questions that can’t be explained by science. It questions the nature of reality in a philosophical way. Metaphysics can cover a broad range of topics from religious to consciousness. Metaphysics is about exploration & philosophy, not about science & mathematics.

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Characteristics

1. **Themes:** Metaphysical poetry is spiritual & has often religious themes. Moreover, it focuses on love, as the union of soul.
2. **[Literary Devices:](#)** Metaphysical poetry uses metaphors, puns, paradoxes & meter to create drama & tension. In addition, Metaphysical poetry uses scientific, medical & legal words & phrases to create arguments about the philosophical aspect of life.
3. **Poets:** Metaphysical poets were men of high intellect. They were all graduated from Oxford University, Cambridge University or they studied at one of the Inns of Court in the city of London. With the help of their vast knowledge, they presented new ideas & stories to their readers.

4. **Uncertainty:** Metaphysical poetry is considered highly ambiguous & obscure due to high intellect & knowledge of metaphysical poets. The poetry is greatly challenging to understand at the first reading. It needs full concentration & full attention to getting to the roots of the matter.
5. **Short Poems:** Metaphysical poetry is considered to be brief & concise. Every line conveys a lot of meanings in a few words. Every word is adjusted in every line like a brick in a wall & conveys the message of the author. Hence there is no wastage of words.
6. **Sayings in the Poetry:** Metaphysical poetry is a vast collection of maxims & sayings. Thus epigrammatic quality is part & parcel of the metaphysical poetry. John Donne is a pioneer in this regard.
7. **Metaphysical Conceits:** A significant feature of metaphysical poetry is the use of metaphysical conceits. It is the unique quality of metaphysical poetry. A conceit is a comparison of two dissimilar things, which may have very little in common. E.g. Abraham Cowley in his poem “The Mistress” compares his love for ladies to his habit of travelling in various countries of the world.
8. **Originality:** Originality is the hallmark of metaphysical poets. All the metaphysical poets were unique & original in their ideas & thoughts. They didn’t follow the path of their contemporary poets. They stood against their contemporaries & followed their own way of writing poetry.
9. **Wit:** Metaphysical wit is also a noteworthy feature of metaphysical poetry. Metaphysical wit is the expression of one’s idea & thoughts, using aptly & technically, the words & various figures of speech in such a manner as to provide pleasure to the readers. John Donne is called the “Monarch of Wit” in the history of metaphysical poetry.
10. **Platonic Love:** Platonic love is another feature of metaphysical poetry. Platonic love means, spiritual love, which is free from elements of physical love.

Conclusion

Metaphysical poetry is not intended to be read in a passive way. Its use of paradox, imagery, conceit & wit is meant to awaken the reader. Metaphysical poetry asks the philosophical questions about religion, faith, spirituality & being.

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