

Metaphysical Poetry

Introduction:

Metaphysical poetry is a term used for the highly intellectual poetry that existed in the early part of the seventeenth century i.e. in the Jacobean- Caroline age. It roughly spans from 1620 to 1660. Most of the metaphysical poetry remained unpublished during its period. Though the Elizabethan style of poetry continued its sway up to 1625, this new trend did catch the minds of some poets. Metaphysical poetry and Cavalier poetry are the two major types of poetry that marked this period. The term “metaphysical” was first used by John Dryden in a derogatory sense to describe John Donne’s poetry – “Donne affects the Metaphysics not only in his satires but in his amorous verse where nature only should reign, and perplexes the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy when he should engage their hearts and entertain them with the softness of love”.

Dr. Samuel Johnson too did not approve of the metaphysical style and said, “Whatever is improper or vicious is produced by a voluntary deviation from nature in pursuit of something new and strange”. In *Life of Cowley*, he writes about the basis of the metaphysical imagery as a kind of yoking together of the most heterogeneous ideas by violence, a combination of dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike.

The revival of interest in metaphysical poetry in the twentieth century is mainly a result of the publication of the *Poetical Works of Donne* and the *Anthology of metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the seventeenth Century* by H. J. C. Grierson and the review of this anthology by T. S. Eliot in the *Times Literary Supplement*. John Donne is regarded as the father of metaphysical school of poetry. All the characteristics of metaphysical poetry are present in Donne’s poetry. This type of poetry basically challenges the intellect at the same time that it stimulates, sustains, enlivens and delights the sensibility by its art. Poets of the school have written love, nature and religious poetry in this style. With their insistence on intellectual element they have endeared themselves to the readers of the modern times. Among the salient features of the group are lyrical quality, religious or amatory themes, metrical felicity in spite of complicated lyrical stanzas, startling openings, use of metaphysical conceits, logical argument, cynicism, humour, unexpected turns of language and figures of speech, highly compressed expression, display of knowledge etc.

In a sense the term metaphysical does not exactly apply to the poets of this school because metaphysical implies dry reasoning, a speculation about the nature of the universe, the problems of life and death etc. The poetry of these poets does not expound any philosophical system of the universe. There is nothing about general human experiences. On the contrary, they largely deal personal emotions and experiences. The poetry of Donne and other Metaphysical poets is metaphysical only in style as it involves use of conceits which are metaphors drawn from the most far-fetched, remote and unfamiliar sources.

Salient Characteristics of Metaphysical Poetry:

i. Intellectual Element through the use of conceits

Metaphysical poetry is highly intellectual and it appeals the head instead of the heart. This intellectual element is used in the treatment of love for the beloved or nature or even God. It is a result of the use of conceits wherein apparently dissimilar things are claimed to be

similar and the poet convinces his point through the poem. The conceits are a peculiar type of metaphors which violently yoke or bring together two dissimilar things or ideas and claim them to be similar. These conceits constantly bring together the concrete and the concrete, the remote and the near, the spiritual and the material, the finite and the infinite, the sublime and the commonplace. The comparison and similarity that the poet claims is a result of seeing beneath the surface of life, illuminating the deeper places and flashes of imagination and reflection. This makes the metaphysical poetry quite obscure and difficult to understand.

ii. Logical argument:

The poets engage into a logical argument to drive their point to the readers. The entire poem is in the form of logical argument and this is evident through the use of logical linkers like 'but', 'for', 'because', 'thus' etc.

iii. Startling openings:

Metaphysical poems usually have very startling, eye-catching openings. e.g. "Busy, old fool, unruly Sun", "Go, catch the falling star", "Death, be not proud" etc. This springs from the use of conceits. Unusual compound words are often used to achieve this effect. Colloquial language, unusual rhythms also contribute to make the openings startling/surprising.

iv. Display of knowledge/ learning:

The Metaphysical poets display their learning or knowledge through the conceits from various fields like, Mathematics, Law, Religion, Astronomy, Geography, Geology etc. We have instances when love of the lovers is compared to a pair of compasses, or the poles of the Earth etc.

v. Revolt against the Elizabethan poetry:

Metaphysical poetry is a sort of revolt against the Elizabethan poetry. These poets under the leadership of Donne appear to discard the conventional verse forms, regular rhythms and the worn out similes and adopt innovations in form and content of poetry. The tone is colloquial and the metre is rough and crabbed as against the soft melody of Elizabethans.

Major Metaphysical Poets:

i. John Donne:

Donne is referred to as the father of metaphysical poetry. His poems were published only in 1633 after his death. But many of his poems were in private circulation in his lifetime. His poetry displays all the characteristic features of romantic poetry. He wrote love poetry, nature poetry as well as religious poetry in the metaphysical style. There appear to be two distinctly different approaches in his poetry – the earlier Donne seems to be given to a reckless life full of affairs and this reflects in the sensuousness in his poetry. This personality is often termed as the "Jack Donne" personality. But in the later phase of his life after taking holy orders there comes a drastic change in his personality with a lot of seriousness, devotion and philosophical tendency. This is termed as the "Doctor Donne" personality. It is surprising to see such a total change in attitude in a poet. His important works include *Elegies* (a collection of love poems and not poems on death), the *Anniversaries*, the *Satires*, *Songs and sonnets* and the *Divine Poems*.

ii. George Herbert:

He is one of the most conspicuous disciples of John Donne. He was a public orator as well as a priest. Nearly all his poems are devotional in nature. His collection *The Temple* includes about 150 short poems that deal with the Church and its ceremonials. They

represent, according to Herbert, “many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master, in whose service I have now found perfect freedom.” The poems are peculiarly honest, intimate, sincere and modest. There is a colloquial, tone, quietness and quaint humour. His sincere devotion and simplicity make the poems striking.

iii. Richard Crashaw:

Crashaw began as an Anglican but later drifted to Roman Catholicism and settled in Paris. He followed the use of metaphysical conceits in his religious poetry. His poetry lacks the fire and fervor common to metaphysical poets but religious excitement and exaltation. He has also written secular poems but they are in the Cavalier style. His fame rests on the collection of religious poems entitled *Step to the Temple*.

iv. Henry Vaughan:

Vaughan studied law and was apprenticed to a doctor and practiced medicine. He was not a priest at heart but a mystic and wrote religious poetry His works include *Poems, Olor Iscanus, Silex Scintillans* and *Thalia Rediviva*. He follows Herbert and considers him to be his master. He often imitates Herbert in writing poems about the Church festivals and adopting his homeliness. But he is at his best when he maintains his individuality. His poems deal a lot with childhood, and of communion with nature and with eternity and in this he comes very close to Wordsworth.

v. Abraham Cowley:

Cowley was an important literary figure of his age. He wrote love poetry in the metaphysical style. His collection called *The Mistress* is cold, lacks passion and is often imitative. It is full of witticism and display of learning. His poetry also lacked melody. The metaphysical strain had weakened him and due to his wit, dry precision he shows signs of the classicists who were to follow soon.

vi. Andrew Marvell:

Andrew Marvell was the only Puritan among the metaphysical poets. But he was not sour or gloomy like them. He was a humanist, a poet and a wit. He did write a few religious poems but he was not averse to a life of enjoyment. He is a true child of Renaissance with his joyous humanism and his love for wine, women and song. An important feature of his poetry is love for nature foreshadows the sensuousness of Keats. He also foreshadows the optimistic and meditative mood of Wordsworth. He has primarily written nature and love poetry in the typical metaphysical style popularized by Donne. He is the one who propounds the ‘*carpe diem, carpe florem*’ theme loudly. His “Garden”, “To His Coy Mistress”, “The Definition of Love” are some noteworthy poems of Marvell that speak for his popularity as well as his poetic skill. His poetry is marked for its vigour and satire as also for his sincerity and straightforwardness.

Conclusion:

Metaphysical poetry that actually existed in the early seventeenth century is best remembered as intellectual poetry, striking new grounds by its daring metaphysical conceits, wit, compressed expression, syllogistic argument and flashes of ingenuity and imagination.