

Metaphysical Poets (Part 1)

[BA (Hons.), Part-1, Paper-1]

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Although in no sense a school or movement proper, the Metaphysical poets were certain 17th century poets who shared common characteristics of wit, ingeniousness and elaborate stylistic manoeuvres. With John Donne as the pioneer and George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Traherne, Abraham Cowley and Andrew Marvell as the followers, these poets did not make Metaphysics, a branch of philosophy, their concern; rather they chose a discussion of the world and its phenomenon bases on the rationality and characteristics of metaphysics. Yet, the name ‘metaphysical’ was not a self-imposed one; it was John Dryden who first used it in his criticism of Donne: ‘He affects the metaphysics,... and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy,...’ Dr. Johnson further consolidated the name when he said (with reference to Cowley) in *Lives of the Poets* that ‘about the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets.’

The Metaphysical Poets shared certain characteristics which were time and again derided by classical critics like Dryden and Dr. Johnson. Their poetry is a beautiful admixture of intellect and passion, thought and feeling, which projects, in the words of T.S. Eliot in *The Metaphysical Poets* their ‘unified sensibility’. This sensibility consists in a delight in novel thoughts and expressions. Their poetry brings in a vivacious dramatic and colloquial

frankness as seen in a debate. With a wanton use of hyperbole, the chief feature of their poetry is the use of far-fetched metaphors, called '*Metaphysical Conceits*', in which seemingly contradictory things are yoked together creating a startling effect. Dr. Johnson decried it as a *discordia concors*. This yoking or telescoping of images makes for a comprehensive use of diverse fields of knowledge thus leading to a great obscurity regarding their poems. This drew the criticism from Dr. Johnson that 'The Metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show learning was their whole endeavour...'

Obviously a singularly original figure in Elizabethan poetry, John Donne pioneered the Metaphysical poets. Chiefly a writer of satires and religious and amorous verses, Donne's metaphysical genius is best expressed in his love poems in *Songs and Sonnets*. Addressed to Anne More whom he ardently loved and married, the poems in this volume fuse all that he possessed as a Metaphysical poet. Thus in *Song* he startles his reader with a novel and fantastic idea: the reader should 'Ride ten thousand days and nights' to look for a faithful and beautiful lady. The novel ideas and conceits that he used need a mental gymnastics on the part of the reader. This in *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning* he compares the twin souls of the lovers to 'shift twin compasses' or speaks of his mistress's tears as coins or maps. In *The Sunne Rising*, too, he brings into the bedroom of two lovers 'both th' Indias of spice and mine' and links two disparate areas of experience. *A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day* shows the poet reduced to the state of absolute nothingness by the death of the lady in the poem. Donne is also anti-Petrarchan and untraditional in dealing with a woman, for who else would have dared to say, 'Nowhere/Lives a woman true, and fair' (*Song*). But he can also idolise the beloved in his own way: 'She's all states, and all princes I. /Nothing else is' (*The Sunne Rising*). This liveliness of conception is best visible in the dramatic openings of his poems: 'For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,' (*The Canonization*); or 'Busy Old fool,

unruly Sun' (*The Sunne Rising*); or 'Go and catch a falling star' (*Song*). Donne's nineteen religious *Holy Sonnets* are also combinations of passion and argument like those in *Songs and Sonnets*. The same vigour is visible in the poems beginning 'Batter my heart, three-person'd God,' and 'Death be not proud'. But the most obviously metaphysical of these religious poems is *Hymn to God, My God, in Sickness*.

....to be continued....