

Metaphysical Poets (Part 2)

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

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Often called the ‘Saint of the Metaphysical School,’ George Herbert’s *The Temple*, consisting of 160 poems, describes, in his own words, ‘the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and [his] soul.’ Two poems in particular *The Pulley* and *The Collar* ‘affects’ the metaphysics to the full. The choice of the subjects as well as the title is ingenious: the pulley is God’s device to pull the world-weary man up to Him for rest, and the collar is the yoke of God from which there is no freedom. Drama is also present there: ‘I struck the board, and cried, "No more; I will abroad! (*The Collar*). Technical innovations with the stanza form is evident in a ‘pattern poem’ like *Easter Wings* where the two stanzas are in the shape of wings, the sense expanding and contracting as the line lengthens and shortens. Herbert also uses the lyric form and the best such poem is *Virtue* which testifies his simple, unambiguous and smooth beauty.

Henry Vaughan was a self-proclaimed disciple of Herbert. He is best known for spiritual poems published under the title *Silex Scintillans*. The title is significant: it means a heart of flint burning under the stroke of a thunderbolt and throwing off sparks. Metaphysical conceits like ‘stars shut up shop,’ when he is describing dawn, owe their origin to Herbert’s influence. But standing by his own, he writes his best poetry, and he is best when dealing with childhood and eternity. *The Retreat* captures the innocence of infancy, a state when the

human soul is clear to God man the adult state: 'Happy those early days...' The World, which assails people who do not care for Eternity, has an arresting opening: 'I saw Eternity the other night/Like a great ring of pure and endless light,...

By far the greatest of the Metaphysicals often Donne was Andrew Marvell, a versatile poet who wrote lyrics, odes, satires as well as political pamphlets. His early poems show him a lover of nature, as *On a Drop of Dew* begins with the most accurate description of a dew drop on a rose and turns the picture into a symbol of the soul's relation to earth and Heaven. The slight affair of *The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn* evokes those emotions which surround all our practical passions. *The Garden* charms with a finely ordered imagery and a cunning progression of thought and distils cumulatively the essence of lonely garden as symbol of the unfallen life in Eden. But his most well-known poem is *To His Coy Mistress*, a model of a metaphysical poem with its use of the *carpe diem* motif with a wonderful manipulation of hyperbole, conceit, irony and dramatic passion.

Lack of a general comprehensibility and out-of-the-time theme and treatment held the Metaphysical poets long under popular distaste till the acknowledge of their genius by Robert Browning in the 19th century and the favourable critical judgement passed by T.S. Eliot who revived them as men of literature.