

Metaphysical Poetry

The term "metaphysical" is used to designate the work of 17th-century writers who were part of a school of poets using similar methods and who revolted against the romantic conventionalism of Elizabethan love poetry, in particular the Petrarchan conceit. It includes a certain anti-feminist tradition; see e.g. Donne's "Go and Catch a Falling Star" or "The Apparition."

John Donne was the acknowledged leader of the poets today identified as "metaphysical" (though they themselves would not have used the term, nor have considered themselves to constitute a "school" of poetry). No exact list of "metaphysical poets" can be drawn up. **Crashaw** and **Cowley** have been called the most "typically" metaphysical. Some were Protestant religious mystics, like **Herbert**, **Vaughan** and **Traherne**; some Catholic, like **Crashaw**; one was an American clergyman, **Edward Taylor**. While less easily assimilatable, **Marvell** shares certain affinities with the "metaphysical" poets. The "metaphysicals" are popular with modern readers because of their realism, their intellectualism, and their break with their immediate literary past.

Some characteristics of metaphysical poetry include:

- a tendency to **psychological analysis** of emotion of love and religion
- a penchant for **imagery** that is novel, "unpoetical" and sometimes shocking, drawn from the commonplace (actual life) or the remote (erudite sources), including the extended metaphor of the "metaphysical conceit"
- **simple diction** (compared to Elizabethan poetry) which echoes the cadences of everyday speech
- **form**: frequently an argument (with the poet's lover; with God; with oneself)
- **meter**: often rugged, not "sweet" or smooth like Elizabethan verse. This ruggedness goes naturally with the Metaphysical poets' attitude and purpose: a belief in the perplexity of life, a spirit of revolt, and the putting of an argument in speech rather than song.
- The best metaphysical poetry is honest, **unconventional**, and reveals the poet's sense of the complexities and contradictions of life. It is **intellectual, analytical, psychological, and bold**; frequently it is absorbed in thoughts of death, physical love, and religious devotion.

A "**metaphysical conceit**" is a far-fetched and ingenious extended comparison (or "conceit") used by metaphysical poets to explore all areas of knowledge. It finds telling and unusual analogies for the poet's ideas in the startlingly esoteric or the shockingly commonplace -- not the usual stuff of poetic metaphor.

It is often grotesque and extravagant, e.g. Crashaw's comparison of Mary Magdalene's tear-filled eyes as "Two walking baths; two weeping motions / Portable and compendious oceans." Donne's comparison of his union with his lover to the draftsman's compass in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is more successful because it gives us a perception of a real but previously unsuspected similarity that is therefore enlightening.

Typical metaphysical conceits come from a wide variety of areas of knowledge: coins (mintage); alchemy; medieval philosophy and angelology (see e.g. Donne's "Air and Angels," NA 1243 [not assigned for this class]); meteorology (sighs are blasts, tears are floods); mythology (the Phoenix's riddle, the river Styx); government ("she is the state, he is the Prince" from Donne's "The Sun Rising"); travelling (Donne's "Go and Catch a Falling Star"); astronomy; metallurgy ("gold to airy thinness beat"); geometry (the twin compasses); law; geography.

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John Donne and Metaphysical Poetry

Before reading the poems, carefully read the headnote on each poet as well as the assigned background reading on the Early Seventeenth Century (esp. NA 1217-9, 1226-7, and 1229 on Marvell, as well as the headnote to Edwards on e-reserve). See if you can make connections between the political, cultural or religious attitudes of the poets and the poems they produced. How would you characterize their poetry? Think about such subjects as: form; subjects and themes (religious, erotic, pastoral, etc.); tone; relationship to prior literary tradition (e.g. classical sources, influence of other contemporary poets, etc.) Review An Approach to Reading and Writing About Poems as needed for guidance.

Consider the two sides of **John Donne** (Jack the rebel vs. the serious, pious Dean of St. Paul). How does each side come out in the poetry? Does one dominate? Which poems glorify erotic love or otherwise resemble the playful and witty seduction poems of Marlowe, Raleigh and Campion? To what extent does Donne's poetry express Christian humanist values? Note how the *Holy Sonnets* differ from the 16th-century sonnets read earlier in the term. Read Donne's famous Meditation 17 (NA 1277-8). Are you surprised that its author is the same man who produced "The Flea" or "The Bait"? What common characteristics can you find in both sorts of writing? Notice Donne's use of the so-called "metaphysical conceit" in such poems as "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (the image of the twin compasses in stanzas 7-9). Read carefully headnote to Donne's *Satire 3* (1257; know significance of Roman poets **Juvenal, Horace** and

Persius). Note how this poem reflects a new religious pluralism (see lines 43-69). Pay particular attention to the key passage beginning "doubt wisely," lines 77-92. What is Donne saying in this passage? In all of these works, note Donne's use of colloquial speech patterns; odd twists in imagery and ideas; unusual variation on older poetic forms (meter, rhyme scheme and stanzaic patterns).

What points of contact do you note between Donne and **Herbert**, **Crashaw**, **Marvell** (selections 1), or the "American metaphysical" poet **Edward Taylor**? To what extent do they fit into the poetic traditions discussed earlier this quarter (e.g. the sonnets, pastoral poetry, playful poems about erotic seduction, etc.)? Which of Donne's poems do they most closely resemble? Do they correspond more closely to the "rakish" side of John Donne (Jack the Rebel) or to his more serious, spiritual side (the Dean of Saint Paul's)? What characteristics of these works can be seen as "metaphysical"? How and to what extent do they surpass that classification?