

What is Metaphysical Poetry?

What is metaphysical poetry? And who were the metaphysical poets? In this post about metaphysical poetry we're going to take a closer look at the **origins of the term** and some examples of this **curious and enigmatic school of early modern poetry**. Common features of metaphysical poetry, which we will explore in this short introduction, include **elaborate similes and metaphors, extended poetic conceits and paradoxes, colloquial speech, and an interest in exploring the interplay between the physical and spiritual world** (and between the big and the small).

Poets associated with metaphysical poetry include **John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughan**: J. Donne is often said to be first metaphysical poet, and **Donne's genius for original, intellectually complex poetry certainly helped to set the trend for the poetry that followed him**. (Donne began writing at the end of the sixteenth century, but the high moment of metaphysical poetry would be in the century that followed.) **Key characteristics of metaphysical poetry include complicated mental and emotional experience; unusual and sometimes deliberately contrived metaphors and similes; and the idea that the physical and spiritual universes are connected.**

This last one is where the term 'metaphysical' came from: **from metaphysics, the branch of philosophy dealing with, among other things, the relationship between mind and matter, or between the physical world and human consciousness**. (Curiously, the word 'metaphysical' comes **from the Greek meaning 'after physics', but more specifically referred to 'after Aristotle's work on physics'**, probably because a student of philosophy was only meant to delve into the complex and more abstract world of metaphysics after they had mastered Aristotle on physics.)

For this reason – because **they're interested in the interplay between the world of the mind (or the spirit or soul) and the physical world 'out there'** – metaphysical poets often **give concrete form to abstract ideas through their unusual images and comparisons**. So, for instance, in his poem 'The Definition of Love', Andrew Marvell (1621-78) writes about the fact that he and his beloved are doomed never to be together, despite being made for each other:

As lines, so loves oblique may well
Themselves in every angle greet;
But ours so truly parallel,
Though infinite, can never meet.

Therefore the love which us doth bind,
But Fate so enviously debars,
Is the conjunction of the mind,
And opposition of the stars.

Is this an example of **'star-cross'd lovers', as in Romeo and Juliet**? **Marvell** doesn't state the reasons why he and his love cannot consummate their love, but he **uses the clever image of two parallel lines to embody the idea that, although perfect for each other, he and his love cannot be one**. Parallel lines, you see, are a perfect match for each other (they run parallel, so are on the same course), but they can never meet, precisely because they are parallel. Clever, eh? Some critics have interpreted Marvell's poem as being about same-sex desire (the two would-be lovers are parallel lines because they're the same gender, but because homosexual love was outlawed in the seventeenth century, they must never 'meet').

But whether we interpret the image in that way or not, the clever thing is that **Marvell has given concrete form to an abstract dilemma**. His poem also neatly captures **metaphysical poetry's fondness for paradox**: he and his love are made for each other, but will never be together precisely because they are too 'parallel', too well-matched.

This kind of **elaborate, extended metaphor or analogy is also known as a CONCEIT**. A conceit is an **unusual or surprising analogy, metaphor, or simile – a kind of extended metaphor, if you will – which metaphysical poets often use in their poetry**. So, in his great seductive poem 'The Flea', John Donne (pictured right) uses the conceit of the flea biting first him and then his mistress as a justification for their going to bed together: they've already been intimately joined through the flea's sharing of their blood:

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

In other words, Donne says, the flea sucking the both of them doesn't cause them any sense of shame, and isn't considered a 'sin'; so why should going to bed with each other be considered sinful? **Donne is using the conceit of the flea to put across an extended argument, which spans the whole poem, that is designed to get the woman into bed with him.**

Another feature of much metaphysical poetry – and something that sets it apart from much other verse of the period – is its colloquial speech. Not all metaphysical poets used more informal or conversational diction in their work, but in something like John Donne's 'The Canonization' shows how **colloquial language** was put to good use by some metaphysical poets:

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,
My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune flout,
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe his honor, or his grace,
Or the king's real, or his stampèd face
Contemplate; what you will, approve,
So you will let me love.

Although it may not strike us as particularly conversational now, Donne's speech here – as evinced by phrases like **'For God's sake'** and **'what you will'** – is daringly down-to-earth for a poem written four hundred years ago. Such direct, no-nonsense diction is in some ways at odds with metaphysical poetry's use of elaborate and complex conceits, but this arguably makes both all the more surprising and powerful.

The term '**metaphysical poets**' was popularised (though not invented) by Samuel Johnson (1709-84) in his critical biography of the seventeenth-century poet Abraham Cowley, in Johnson's Lives of the Poets (1779-81). Before Johnson, John Dryden had written (in 1692) of the 'metaphysics' of Donne's poetry, and before Dryden, William Drummond of Hawthornden had used the term in relation to a group of poets in a letter of around 1630. Samuel Johnson employed the term disparagingly: he disliked the 'conceits' used by metaphysical poets.

In summary, then, metaphysical poetry often **uses elaborate imagery, complex conceits, and colloquial speech to explore 'big' topics, or frequently to argue a position about them – whether it's love, death, sex, the afterlife, or even what lies beyond our own world** (Donne was particularly fond of using planetary imagery and the idea of space travel in his work). It's often challenging but, as Johnson acknowledged, worth sticking with. It's little wonder that **the modernist poet T. S. Eliot championed the metaphysical poets in an essay of 1921 (and a subsequent series of Cambridge lectures)**. Both the modernists and the metaphysical poets thought that **literature should be intellectually robust and that it should grapple with big ideas**.

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