

## Metaphysical Poetry <sup>5b)</sup>

The term 'Metaphysical Poetry' is used to designate the work of a group of poets belonging to the first half of the 17th century. More precisely it is a movement in poetry in the Caroline Age. The term was first used by Dr. Johnson, who borrowed it from Dryden's phrase about Donne, "he affects the Metaphysics". Dr. Johnson's account of the school is worth quoting.

"About the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a role of writers that may be termed the Metaphysical poets.... The Metaphysical poets were men of learning, are to show their learning was their whole endeavor.... The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions".

The term 'Metaphysical' was, as used originally, a term at contempt signifying habitual deviation from naturalness of thought and style to novelty and quaintness. Some of the major features of Metaphysical poetry may be summed up as follows :-

- (i) **Delight in Novelty** :- The Metaphysical poets took delight in novel thought and expression. They, in Johnson's words, "desired to say what they hoped had never been said before". They had their own thoughts", said Sir Walter Scott "as the Elizabethans had played with words". A closer examination, however, reveals that the playfulness of Metaphysical poetry is not frivolous. The witty expression and novel ideas are fundamental to poetic purpose.
- (ii) **Far-fetched Images** :- Dr. Johnson censured the Metaphysical poets for their use of far-fetched images. They used images to impress by its strangeness. Modern critics, however, believe that such images do have a role to play. The true function of Metaphysical conceit, is to join the parts of a fractured world.
- (iii) **Affectation and Hyperbole** :- Metaphysical poetry is suffused with affectations and hyperboles. When Donne's mistress sighs, she exhales not breath but his soul, and when she weeps, she sheds not tears but his blood. However, it can be said that in good poetry, hyperbole is never superficial; it can be purposively used.
- (iv) **Obscurity** :- Metaphysical poetry has been censured for its obscurity. It is said to be so unlike poetry, written before or after that it is difficult to understand. Joan Bennett however, points out in her study of five Metaphysical poets, "it is impossible to generalise how for the reader or the poet is to blame.
- (v) **Dramatic Realism** :- Metaphysical poetry has often, been praised for the use of direct speech, colloquial vigour and dramatic realism. It imparts a Dramatic Directness and clarity to the poems. Donne, for instance; specialises in their field.

John Donne is the leader of the Metaphysical school of poetry. His poetry is divided into three types – amorous, religious and satirical. His amorous poems are marked by an intellectual tone, cynicism disillusionment and brutal frankness. They are also noted for their startling, shocking and dramatic openings.

'Go and catch a falling star'

'Busie old fool unruly Sun'

'For God's sake, hold your tongue and let, Donne uses breath-taking analogies, like 'ears and globe', 'lovers and legs of compass'. Donne's religious poems reveal his intense exploration for the right kind of relationship with God. They present a mixture of hope and anguish. Donne's satires, however, lack humour and are not considered as his representative poem. Ben Jonson remarked that 'for not keeping of accent, Donne deserved hanging!' but Lieaman calls him *The Monarch of Wit*.

George Herbert chiefly wrote religious subjects. His poems show a beautiful blending of deep thought and fine feeling. Often described as the saint of the 'Metaphysical School', Herbert is noted for clarity of vision and expression, classical discipline and simplicity. *The Temple* is a collection of nearly 160 poems. Herbert also tried his hands at Hieroglyphic form. He is said to have inspired Vaughan and Hopkins.

Henry Vaughan is a mystic among the Metaphysical. His *Silex Scintillans* is a collection of seared verses. 'The Retreat' anticipates Wordsworth. 'The World' has these famous opening lines :

"I saw Eternity the other night,

Like a great ring of pure and endless light.

Andrew Marvell's poems unite the grace of the cavaliers with the restraint of the Puritans. In his nature poems, he anticipates Keats in sensuousness and Wordsworth in Meditative Mood. His love poems are called "tissues of conceits". They are highly passionate, graceful and ironical.

Metaphysical poetry suffered from a conspiracy of silence for nearly three hundred years until, in 1912, H.J.C. Grierson brought out "Metaphysical Lyrics and poems of the 17th century" with an elaborate introduction. In 1921, T.S. Eliot wrote essays on "Metaphysical poets" and "Andrew Marvell" and firmly established the Metaphysical poets on a very sound footing. Metaphysical poetry has greatly influenced the poetry of the 20th century and recent English and American critics have devoted much attention to the Metaphysical poets.

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