UNIT 3: METAPHYSICAL POETRY: IMPORTANT PRACTITIONERS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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3.4 John Donne as a Metaphysical Poet

3.5 Other Important Practitioners of Metaphysical Poetry

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit you will be able to:

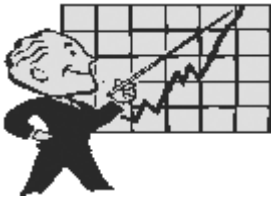
- gain a brief overview of metaphysical poetry
- analyse this particular stream of poetry called 'the metaphysical poetry'
- discuss John Donne as a metaphysical poet
- learn about some of the other metaphysical practitioners

3.2 INTRODUCTION

Metaphysical poetry refers to a poetic tradition in 17th century England, where a group of poets started writing unconventional poems with a unique blend of the head and the heart, that is, emotion and intellect. The term 'metaphysical' when split into two parts becomes 'meta' meaning beyond and 'physical' means the concrete universe or the physical world. Hence, the term taken together refers to something beyond the physical universe or a reality that lies outside the conventional sense of the term.

This poetry tradition paralleled the Elizabethan love poetry tradition which was more popular then. However, conventional love poetry reflected

mostly unreciprocated love and the lady beloved as an unattainable, distant object. But metaphysical poetry dealt with theme of fulfillment in love. While mainstream love poetry of 17th century England gave more preference to emotion, metaphysical poetry brought about a blend of the emotional and intellectual faculties of the human mind. No wonder, T.S. Eliot calls it a 'unified sensibility' and the greatest of the practitioners to observe this closely in his poems is John Donne.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Define the term 'metaphysical.

Q2. What was the difference between mainstream love poetry and metaphysical poetry?

3.3 METAPHYSICAL POETRY

First let us know what is metaphysical poetry? As students of literature, one question is likely to arise in our mind as to what makes this poetry different and distinct from the courtly love poetry. The answer is in the poems itself. Metaphysical poetry has dramatic beginnings which are noticeably absent in love poetry. Notice the abruptness in the opening line of John Donne's poem 'Canonization',

> “For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love!
>
> Or the opening line of Andrew Marvell's poem, 'To His Coy Mistress',
>
> Had we but world enough and time;”

Secondly, the presence of metaphysical conceit gives it its own distinct flavour, which is normally absent in courtly love poetry tradition. And thirdly, the whining and pining that is a much sought after theme in conventional love poetry that result out of unreciprocated or unrequited love is not seen in metaphysical poetry. It, instead, celebrates the fulfillment and satisfaction of love and contentment to have found the object of desire close at hand.

Let us discuss in details the metaphysical conceit. In one of the poems of John Donne, 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning', the two lovers are compared to the two legs of a compass and their soul as the fixed point in

the compass.

"If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do."

It is interesting and at the same time intriguing to see that love, an emotion, has been compared to a geometrical equipment to define the intensity of love. Such intellectual and often unlikely comparisons require an active participation of the reader as well. Such comparisons are called conceits.

3.4 JOHN DONNE AS A METAPHYSICAL POET

At a tender age, John Donne was exposed to quality education by his Catholic parents. Born to an iron monger, financial shortage never hindered John Donne's education and he was taught by tutors afforded by his family. Donne studied in the University but could not receive his degree. After the death of his father, who was also named John Donne, his mother Elizabeth Heywood remarried a rich widower, Dr. John Syminges.

The kind of education that Donne was exposed to shaped his career as a satirist, lawyer and cleric in the Church of England, besides being a popular poet. He had started composing poetry at a very early age. It is said that his poetry often reflected his scorn for the social flaws and poetasters of his time. The diseases that he often referred to in his verses were nothing but metaphors for subtle invective against those social vices. It is also said that his early poems somehow give way to a sense of unrequited love and his intolerance towards hypocrites and bad poets. It is only during his middle age that Donne's poetry achieves a mature and mellowed tone because it tones down the sharp edges and raw contempt, and acquires a sense of tolerance for human frailty.

The poetry of this stage also registers a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction with Anne More becoming his wife. However, with the maturity in his literary career, one also witnesses a downside in his economic front.

John Donne spent much time travelling around and writing poetry. Before meeting Anne More, he was enjoying a satisfactory job as an apprentice to Thomas Egerton. He was enjoying his position as the chief secretary to the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal and was an established man of letters at Egerton's residence in London. sadly, however, his elopement with Egerton's niece, Anne More, proved to be disastrous to Donne and his whole life and accomplishment came crumbling down. His lost the favour of Thomas More and even had to serve a short term in prison. It is only after his reconcilement with his father in law and the little amount of money he received as his wife's matrimonial share, he set up his career once again in 1609.

John Donne's poetry became famous for its unique flavour-with unusual mixture of emotions with physical things like merchandise, disease, navigation, mystery and myths, geography, cartography, seasons, geometry and creatures. His poems initially circulated in manuscript form in his coterie and they were received with much enthusiasm. However, they were also critiqued for the sole reason that they required a lot of cerebral capacity to be comprehended and thus, they way not appreciated much by everyone uniformly.

In his later life, Donne began to engage himself with theology. His collaboration with personalities like Lucy, Countess of Bedford, Sir Robert Drury and Sir Robert Carr, Viscount of Rochester, Thomas Morton, Bishop of Durban resulted in intense theological discussions and the output were volumes of devotional poetry. *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611), *Pseudo-Martyr* (1612), *The Progress of the Soul* (1612), *Biathanatos*(1614) and *Essays in Divinity* (1614) are some of these volumes.

Donne had a mystifying fascination with death and it is said that he even designed his own coffin and had his portrait painted thus. His later poems reflect this tendency in Donne. He suffered for a long time and it is thought that he died of cancer. He started composing his oft quoted work, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions in 1623, and another 'Death's Sermon' which was to be preached as a sermon before the king appeared on 23rd February, 1631. On 31st March, 1631, Donne breathed his last.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. How did John Donne's poetry acquire a more matured tone?

Q4. What were the elements that made John Donne's poetry famous?

Q5. Name some of the volumes of devotional poetry by John Donne.

3.5 OTHER IMPORTANT PRACTITIONERS OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY

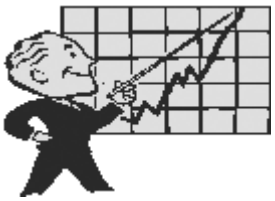
John Donne's love poetry acquired a maturity and a distinct flavour that appealed to some of his contemporaries like George Herbert (1593-1633), Richard Crashaw (1613?-1649), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), and Henry Vaughan (1622-1695). George Herbert was a Welsh poet, orator and an Anglican priest and he gained the favour of King James I. He wrote equally efficiently in English, Latin and Greek and his life of priesthood offered with ample materials to compose his poetic works. George Herbert is famously remembered for his innovative style of poetry writing where his poems were written in the shape of the object they dealt with. Such poems are called “Pattern poems”. The famous poems of this kind are “The Church Porch”, “The Altar”, “The Sacrifice” and the most famous one “Easter Wings”. His notable collections are: *The Temple*, *The Country Parson* and *Jacula Prudentum*.

Richard Crashaw was a poet and a teacher, and he wrote metaphysical poetry with a religious element that underlined his belief that the beauty of nature and spiritual existence were mutually dependent presences. He wrote and published three poetry collections during his lifetime, while a small collection appeared posthumously. His first poetry collection, based on his experience of schooling as a teacher, mostly consisted epigrams and was named Epigrammatum SacrorumLibreor *A Book of Sacred Epigrams* (1634). His second work was *Steps to the Temple*, *Sacred*

Poems. With the *Delight of the Muses* (1646) which had a second edition bearing the same name and was published in 1648. Carmen DeoNostroor *Hymns to Our Lord* was published posthumously in 1652.

Andrew Marvell was a metaphysical poet, politician and satirist who wrote poems like “To His Coy Mistress”, “Upon Appleton House”, “The Garden” and “An Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland”, which is a political allegory. One of his most notable and oft quoted poems is the love poem “To His Coy Mistress” where he tactfully uses the metaphysical conceit to make his beloved shed her coyness. Other themes that occasionally visit his poetry are mostly political and satirical.

Henry Vaughan was a Welsh physician, author and a poet. He was greatly inspired by the religious works of George Herbert. He is popular for his religious poetical work *Silex Scintillans*(1650) with its second edition published in 1655. He also wrote a secular poetic work OlorIscanus(1651) or *The Swan of Usk*, that reflects a critical period in Vaughan's personal life. His other notable works are *Mount of Olives* or *Solitary Devotions* (1652) and *Flores Solitudinis*(1654).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6. Name of the contemporary poets who were inspired by the practice of metaphysical poetry.

Q7. Write brief notes on the following:

a. John Donne as a metaphysical poet

b. Contributions of the contemporary metaphysical poets



3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have been able to learn how metaphysical poets are different from the practitioners of the conventional courtly love poetry although both belonged to the 17th century. We have also seen the language and the

images used by metaphysical poets which are unique. The cerebral element that goes into their compositions caters not only to our emotions but also to our intellect.



3.7 FURTHER READING

1) Alvarez, A. (1961) *The School of Donne*. London: Chatto and Windus.

2) Bennett, Joan. (1964) *Five Metaphysical Poets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3) Kenst, W.R. (ed.) (1930) *Seventeenth Century English Poetry: Modern Essays in Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

4)Leishman, J.B. (1934) *The Metaphysical Poets*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

5) William, George. (1930) *The Donne Tradition*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.



3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q1: The term 'metaphysical' when split into two parts becomes 'meta' meaning beyond and 'physical' means the concrete universe or the physical world. Hence, the term taken together refers to something beyond the physical universe or a reality that lies outside the conventional sense of the term.

Answer to Q2: While mainstream love poetry of 17th century England gave more preference to emotion, metaphysical poetry brought about a blend of the emotional and intellectual faculties of the human mind.

Answer to Q3: It is only during his middle age that Donne's poetry achieves a mature and mellowed tone because it tones down the sharp edges and raw contempt, and acquires a sense of tolerance for human frailty.

Answer to Q4: John Donne's poetry became famous for its unique flavour-with unusual mixture of emotions with physical things like merchandise, disease, navigation, mystery and myths, geography, cartography, seasons,

geometry and creatures.

Answer to Q5: The volumes of devotional poetry. *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611), *Pseudo-Martyr* (1612), *The Progress of the Soul* (1612), *Biathanatos* (1614) and *Essays in Divinity* (1614) are some of these volumes.

Answer to Q6: John Donne's love poetry acquired a maturity and a distinct flavour that appealed to some of his contemporaries like George Herbert (1593-1633), Richard Crashaw (1613?-1649), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), and Henry Vaughan (1622-1695).

Answer to Q7: a. Refer to Section 3.4 John Donne as a Metaphysical Poet
b. Refer to Section 3.5 Other Important Practitioners of Metaphysical Poetry



3.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Comment critically on the excessive use of imagery in John Donne's poem 'Canonization'.

Q2. What are the basic characteristics of metaphysical poetry? How is it different from the conventional poetry tradition of 17th century England?

Q3. Comment on the metaphysical conceit.

Q4. Discuss John Donne as a metaphysical poet.

Q5. Who were the contemporaries of John Donne? Discuss their work.

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