

Who are the Metaphysical Poets? Evaluate their contribution to English literature.

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Or, what is Metaphysical Poetry? What are the salient features of Metaphysical Poetry?

The metaphysical poets are a group of 17th-century English writers. Elaborate metaphors, conceits (unusual comparisons), and deep philosophical and abstract themes are seen in their works. The most famous metaphysical poets are John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughan. The term "**Metaphysical Poets**" was coined by Samuel Johnson (1709 - 1784). He mentioned their tendency to mingle thoughts and feelings in their poetry.

John Donne/Conceits and Paradoxes (1572-1631): Conceits and paradoxes are two salient features of Metaphysical Poetry. Conceits are comparisons between two different things in a surprising way. Donne is known for metaphysical conceits and paradoxes. In "*A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*," Donne compares the two lovers to the two legs of a compass. He writes:

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.

Here, the poet says the lovers cannot stay separate: if one goes somewhere, the other leans towards the beloved. Donne's work explores various themes like love, death, God, and faith. His divine poems are found in his work "Holy Sonnets." His well-known metaphysical poems are:

"*The Good-Morrow*," "*The Sun Rising*," "*The Canonization*," "*A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*,"

and

"*The Flea*."

George Herbert/Religion and Spirituality (1593-1633): Metaphysical poetry deals with religious themes. Herbert's poetry mainly focuses on religion and spirituality. His devotional poems are found in his collection "*The Temple*". This collection includes poems like "*The Collar*" and "*Easter Wings*." These poems present Herbert's religious attitude. He often uses symbols and metaphors. He expresses his faith and inner struggles, such as in the poem "*The Collar*"—where the speaker is burdened with religious duties, and eventually finds comfort in God's prayer. Unlike Donne, Herbert's language is more straightforward.

Andrew Marvell/Love and Philosophy (1621-1678): Andrew Marvell's poetry skillfully combines Metaphysical style with philosophical and political themes. His iconic poems are: "*To His Coy Mistress*," "*The Definition of Love*," and "*The Character of Holland*". "*To His Coy Mistress*" is a passionate love poem. Here, the speaker urges his coy mistress to consume their love before time runs out. The poem takes a turn to focus on philosophical themes like the fleeting nature of time and death. The speaker is always concerned with the fleeting nature of time, as he says:

*But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near.*

Wit and irony are also the features of metaphysical poetry. Marvell's poem "*The Character of Holland*" uses wit and irony to satirize the greed of the Dutch people.

Henry Vaughan/Nature and Divinity (1621-1695): Henry Vaughan was deeply influenced by George Herbert. Vaughan's poetry is highly mystical. His poems are focused on themes of nature, God, and the afterlife. Vaughan's poems often connect nature with divinity. Some of his celebrated poems are "*The World*," "*Peace*," "*Regeneration*," "*Man*," and "*Corruption*." In his poem "*The World*," he uses nature as a symbol of divine presence and spiritual renewal.

Richard Crashaw/Intense Emotion and Spiritual (1613-1649): Richard Crashaw was known for his religious and spiritual poetry. His poetry is filled with intense emotions and rich imagery. Crashaw's passionate devotion to God is evident in his poems. "*The Flaming Heart*" and "*Hymn to Saint Teresa*" are his famous religious poems. In "*The Flaming Heart*," he describes Saint Teresa's (*St. Teresa of Avila*) spiritual experiences with vivid imagery. He says about her,

O thou undaunted daughter of desires!

Abraham Cowley/Complex Metaphors (1618-1667):

Cowley was known for his versatility. He writes in various forms, including odes, elegies, and epic poetry. His work contains many metaphysical elements, such as complex metaphors and philosophical themes. He writes poems like

"The Davideis" (An unfinished epic on the life of David), "Platonic Love", "On the Death of Mr. William Hervey," and "The Wish"

. Cowley modified the Pindaric ode to English poetry, influencing later poets. His elegies and odes, like

"On the Death of Mr. William Hervey"

, highlight his skill in expressing deep personal and universal themes. Again, In the poem *"The Wish*,

" he expresses a hope for a simple, peaceful life. He says,

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown.

John Cleveland/Sharp Wit and Strong Emotions (1613-1658):

John Cleveland is an influential metaphysical poet. He used sharp wit, strong emotions, and political ideas in his poems. Some of his famous poems are:

"The Rebel Scot", "Mark Antony," and "Square-Cap"

. His poem "The Rebel Scot" attacked the rebellious Scottish people with clever insults. His poetry had a strong rhythm and deep meaning. He uses irony, argument, and satire to make his ideas clear.

In termination, the metaphysical poets enrich English poetry with their inventive use of language. Each poet contributed uniquely. Their legacy continues to inspire and challenge readers and writers. This is why T. S. Eliot has praised them in his essay "The Metaphysical Poetry".