

The Metaphysical Poets Summary

Writer: T. S. Eliot | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Background

T. S. Eliot wrote his essay as a review. He reviewed the book by Sir Herbert John Grierson (1866-1960). The book was called ***“Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the 17th Century.”*** A review means talking about the good and bad points.

Before Eliot's essay, people disliked these poets. Critics, especially Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), said their poems were strange and not good. The metaphysical poets were neglected for a long time. Eliot wanted to change this opinion. He showed that these poets are very intelligent. Their poetry uses deep ideas and strong feelings. Eliot explained that their poems are not useless or meaningless.

He said metaphysical poems belong to the main flow of English poetry. This type of poetry did not harm English literature. Instead, it made poetry richer and stronger. Eliot gave new respect to the metaphysical poets through his essay.

Unification of Sensibility

Unification of sensibility means combining thoughts/thinking and emotions/feeling.

Here, thinking and feeling work together. The poet's mind/thinking and heart/feeling are connected. In the poem, thoughts and emotions are joined in every line. For example, if a person loves someone, he/she does not just think or just feel, rather he/she does both at once. Eliot means to say that this is a fantastic power for poets.

Dissociation of Sensibility

Dissociation of sensibility means the separation of thoughts/thinking and emotions/feeling.

Here, thinking and feeling do not work at the same time. The poet either feels first and thinks later, or the opposite. The poem loses unity and directness. For example, when we solve a math problem, we use only our thoughts/thinking, not our emotions/feelings. Eliot says this change made poetry less powerful and less natural.

Metaphysical Poetry and Its Features

Metaphysical poetry is a type of poetry in which abstract ideas (love, God, belief, etc) are discussed. At first, Dr. Samuel Johnson named Metaphysical Poetry. He meant it for poets like Donne, Cowley, Andrew Marvell, Cleveland, George Herbert, and Henry Vaughan. Johnson said they joined different ideas by force. He thought their thoughts were strange and mixed. But T. S. Eliot praised them. He said they joined thought and feeling together. Eliot believed they showed real life and real emotion in deep, new ways.

Metaphysical poetry is full of deep thoughts. The poets use hard ideas and clever images. They often use comparisons or conceits. Conceit means a far-fetched comparison between two different things. Metaphysical poets were very educated. They read science, history, law, and religion. They used this knowledge in their poems. Their learning helped them make unusual and deep comparisons. The language is simple but the meaning is deep. It needs careful reading because of its deep thoughts. That is why their poems are powerful and strange.

Donne's Superiority Over Cowley

John Donne's metaphors are brief and sharp. His images are surprising and very clear. Donne mixes feeling and intellect in each line. Cowley's metaphors are long and decorative. His style can seem more showy and less direct. Donne unites thought and feeling in his poems. Cowley's poetry uses longer and more decorative comparisons. His style is less natural and a bit artificial. Cowley does not always join them so closely. This unity makes Donne more successful as a metaphysical poet than Cowley.

The Intellectual Poets and the Reflective Poets

Eliot says early poets were intelligent. They joined thought and emotion together. They felt ideas like real things. Their poems showed deep and active minds. Donne, Herbert, and Marvell used knowledge deeply. They could digest all kinds of experience. They turned learning into living emotion. Reading and thinking changed their feelings fast. Their minds were quick, strong, and full. This made their poetry full of power.

Later poets were not like this. They were thoughtful but not deeply feeling. They could not unite thought and emotion. Their poetry became slow and reflective. Tennyson and Browning thought, then felt slowly. They could not join sense and idea. So, Eliot calls them reflective, not intelligent.

For example, someone who laughs with friends and shares their thoughts right away is similar to an intellectual poet. Someone who later thinks alone about why they laughed, and then writes about it, is more like a reflective poet. Eliot prefers the first type for poetry.

Similarities Between Elizabethan Dramatists and Metaphysical Poets

Eliot finds strong links between both. Elizabethan dramatists were full of energy. They joined ideas with real feelings. Their language was rich and surprising. They used sharp images and quick turns. Donne and Herbert did the same.

Both groups felt thoughts like experiences. They changed reading into living emotion. Their poems or plays were bold. They explored religion, love, and learning. They used wit and deep comparisons.

Both used sudden changes and contrasts. They shocked readers with strange beauty. They balanced mind, heart, and imagination. Eliot praised this full poetic power. He said both had strong sensibility. They could digest all kinds of life. So, dramatists and metaphysical poets are linked. They shared style, force, and mental unity.

Comparison: Metaphysical and Modern Poets

Metaphysical poets wrote in the seventeenth century. Modern poets wrote in the twentieth century. Both groups show deep feelings and thoughts. They want to explore the mind in poetry. Metaphysical poets use wit and clever images. Their style is more natural and instinctive. Modern poets focus on the mind in a planned way. They are careful and think before writing. T. S. Eliot says both mix emotion with intellect. Modern poets study inner life more consciously. Both groups aim for honesty and complexity. Their poetry is deep and full of meaning.

The Metaphysical School Is Compared

Eliot compares them with Elizabethan dramatists. Writers like Middleton, Webster, and Chapman. They used sharp, rich, and strange language. Their lines joined thought and feeling fast. Metaphysical poets did the same thing. He also compares them with Dante. Like Dante, they mixed heart and mind. They used simple words, but with deep meaning. They expressed ideas as real emotions.

Eliot also mentions modern French poets. Writers like Baudelaire and Laforgue are similar. They turn thought into a strong sensation. They use images in surprising ways. So, Eliot links the Metaphysical poets with Elizabethan dramatists, Dante, and modern French poets. All these poets showed full sensibility. They balanced intellect, emotion, and expression beautifully.

Johnson's Wrong Judgment on Metaphysical Poets

Samuel Johnson did not like metaphysical poets. He thought their poems were too complex and full of strange comparisons. Johnson remarks that in Metaphysical poems **"the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together."** T. S. Eliot says Johnson's opinion is not deep. Johnson only noticed the style, not the real talent. Eliot believes the poets have true unity of feeling and thought (Unification of Sensibility). Johnson missed this important quality in their poetry.

Our Understanding

Eliot concludes that metaphysical poets are honest and original. Their poetry is difficult but deep and valuable. They join emotion and intellect in a unique way. Eliot believes their poetry offers a strong model for modern writers.

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