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The Metaphysical School of Poetry

A new kind of poetry, known as the metaphysical poetry began with John Donne (1573-1631). The term "metaphysical", as applied to poetry was first used by Dr. Samuel Johnson who borrowed it from Dryden's phrase for Donne. "He affects the metaphysics" It denoted in the words of Saintsbury "the habit common to the School of poets, of always seeking to express something after, something behind, the simple, obvious first sense and suggestion of a subject." Summing up the characteristics of the metaphysical poetry Dr. Johnson remarks: "About the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed metaphysical poets. The metaphysical poets were men of learning and to show their

Learning was their whole endeavour.... Their thoughts are often new but seldom natural. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions, their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises, but the reader this improvement dearly bought, and though he sometimes admires; is seldom pleased.... Their attempts were always analytic, they broke every image into fragments and could no more represent, by their slender conceits and laboured particularities, the prospects of nature or the scenes of life, than he who dissects a sunbeam with a prism, can exhibit the wide effulgence of a summer noon." The following characteristics are common in all metaphysical poets:

- (i) Delight in novel thoughts

and expressions - The metaphysical poets desired to say what they hoped and had never been said before. They cared to be singular in their thoughts and worked out their own manner of expressing them. "They played with thoughts" says Sir Walter Scott, as the Elizabethans had played with emotions."

- (ii) Scholarship and Erudition - The metaphysical poetry reveals the scholarship and erudition of the poets. A whole book of knowledge might be compiled from the scholarly allusions in the poetry of Donne and Cowley only. What is unfortunate about metaphysical poets is that they "sometimes drew their conceits from recesses of learnings not very much frequented by common readers of poetry." They also twist their vast learning in such a manner that it becomes

difficult for an average reader to follow what the poet wants to say.

(iii) For, Fetched, Images - A characteristic feature of metaphysical poetry is indulgence in "dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike." The poets thought that by displaying their scholarship and using dissimilar and far fetched images and hyperbolical expressions, they would attain height of poetic excellence.

(iv) Religious, and Amorous - metaphysical poetry may be classified into two broad divisions of amorous and religious verse. The former was written mainly by Carew, Suckling and Andrew Marvell and the latter by Herbert, Crashaw and Vaughan. Donne wrote both amorous and religious verse. The metaphysical elements, it seems,

first made its appearance in love poems. H. J. C. Grierson observed: "The metaphysicals of the seventeenth century combined two things ... the fantastical dialectics of medieval love poetry and the simple, and sensuous strain which caught from the classics - soul and body lightly yoked and glad to soar together in the winged chariot of Pegasus."

- (v) Obscurity - In the task trying to find the verbal equivalent for the states of mind and feeling the ~~metaphysical~~ metaphysical poets made themselves difficult to understand. They are obscure because they yoked dissimilar ideas and images without making an effort to unite them. The reader is confounded by the frequent use of elliptical language, out of way terms and strange learning.

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After the Restoration the metaphysical poetry was on the wane. It was after the 'First World War' that metaphysical element in poetry appeared again. T.S. Eliot, E.R. Leavis and Helen Gardner have a powerful mystical note in their poetry. Grierson remarks, "... great poetry is always metaphysical, born of man's passionate thinking about life, love and death."

The end.

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