Metaphysical Poetry

The phrase ‘Metaphysical poetry’ is derived from the scornful remarks of some Restoration or 18th-century critics. Strictly speaking, ‘metaphysical’ means concerned with the fundamental problems of the nature of the universe, and man’s function or place in life, but this literal sense is misleading. The Metaphysical poets, who wrote during the first three-quarters of the 17th century, were led, both chronologically and from the point of view of influence and importance, by John Donne. Though they cannot be considered as a real movement displaying common features and adhering to the same principles, they reflected the intellectual and spiritual crisis of their age, the difficult transition from the Renaissance to the modern age. The poet was expected to be a man of ‘wit’, displaying not only his sensitivity, but also his knowledge and cleverness; and the frequency of references in Metaphysical poetry to religious debate, astrology, alchemy, sea-discovery and philosophy illustrates the intellectual excitement of the age. In those days wit was the ability to make up unusual metaphors and images and arrange them in an unexpected way so as to surprise the reader.

The clearest distinguishing feature of Metaphysical poetry is the repeated combination of these ‘metaphysical elements’ with that particular type of metaphor or simile called a ‘conceit’. ‘Paradox’ and ‘epigrammatic conciseness’ are another strength of Metaphysical poetry just as the element of drama. Donne in particular uses the words and the rhythms which common people were using in their speech around him; most of his poems are dramatic monologues. The dramatic quality in these poets is most immediately apparent in the opening lines: most poems begin in medias res introducing the reader right in the middle of the poet’s argument.

The ‘diction’ of the Metaphysical poets was rich and varied. Latinisms and words of Anglo-Saxon origin were both used: the Anglo-Saxon, mostly monosyllabic words, for simplicity and vigour; Latinisms in order to try to pin down the virtually ungraspable, or to achieve precision. The Metaphysical poets wrote in several different verse-forms; there was not a favourite convention, nor were they innovators, except in Herbert’s suit of stanza-form to meaning. The Metaphysical poets were largely forgotten during the 18th century when a taste for clarity prevailed. Their reputation was revived by the essays of the modern poet T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), who understood the seriousness of their art, their spirit of revolt, their intellectualism, and their affinities with modern interests.

1 READ the first paragraph and say:
   1 what the term ‘metaphysical’ means;
   2 when the Metaphysical poets wrote;
   3 who the most influential was;
   4 hat they reflected.

2 ANSWER the following questions about the features of metaphysical poetry.
   1 What kind of man was the Metaphysical poet?
   2 In what sense was his imagery unusual?
   3 How did he arrange his images?
   4 How does a Metaphysical poem usually begin?
   5 Who revived the reputation of the Metaphysical poets? Why?

John Donne (1572–1631), his life and works

Life and works
John Donne was born in 1572, the son of a London ironmonger of some wealth. Both his parents were Roman Catholics at a time when anti-Catholic sentiment was common in England, and Donne received a Roman Catholic education before going to Oxford when he was eleven. In 1592 he entered the Inns of Court, in London, to study law.

It was in these years that Donne wrote his early love lyrics, Songs and Sonnets, and satires which circulated privately among his friends and were much admired. In 1596 preparations were being made for an expedition against Spain. Donne volunteered and for the next two years experienced action, adventure and excitement and witnessed historic events. In 1598 he was appointed private secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, one of the highest officials in Elizabeth’s government, and his prospects of a successful
career were bright. What ruined them forever, was his clandestine marriage in 1601 to the seventeen-year-old Ann More, niece of his employer. Ann’s father, a rich influential country gentleman, had Donne dismissed from his job but in 1611 Sir Robert Drury befriended him and took Donne on a diplomatic mission with him to France and other countries. Donne’s separation from his wife at this time provided him the occasion for writing the poem A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning. Anne bore him twelve children, five of whom died very young or at birth.

During these years Donne’s main literary accomplishments were Divine Poems (1607) and two anti-Catholic pamphlets which were his public renunciation to the Catholic faith. Many people, including King James, recognised his potential as a religious thinker and preacher and urged him to take holy orders in the Anglican Church, which he did in 1615. After his wife’s death in 1617, he continued to write poetry, notably his Holy Sonnets (1618), but the time for love poetry was over. From being appointed Chaplain to the King soon after his ordination he became, in only six years, Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral. He was one of the greatest preachers of all times and his sermons were major London occasions, attracting the crowds as only football or pop concerts can today. But he virtually ceased to be a poet. He died in 1631 and was buried in St Paul’s Cathedral.

Unconventional poetry
Donne is commonly considered a great literary innovator of his age and the most remarkable representative of the Metaphysical school. He created a way of writing which turned around these features:

• an intense dramatic quality: many of his poems are dramatic monologues with the surprising directness of the speaking voice, so that the immediate effect is that of vivid speech;
• the use of wit and unusual, intellectual metaphors called ‘conceits’. Recurring images in Donne draw upon current beliefs in metaphysics, cosmology, natural science, medicine, alchemy and geography; a rhetorical stance with a variety of tone and register. The speaking voice takes on many inflections and intonations; from an assertive to a meditative tone, from coarse cynicism to enigmatic irony.

Sensual and spiritual imagery
Donne’s imagery is impressive for its range and variety and its rejection of the conventionally ornamental. He is intensely aware both of the physical body and of its mystical potential: its capacity for the raptures of love and sanctity. The struggle between physical and spiritual accounts for much of the tension in his work. So it is not surprising that religious metaphors should be frequently used in his love poems, just as metaphors of physical love appear in the Divine Poems.

The most powerful and pervasive image in Donne is that of ‘Death’, often connected with darkness and sickness. Another major image is that of the ‘World’. The lovers are the world; their love embraces the whole world. Or they are another world in themselves, or two worlds joined. Other recurring images in Donne draw upon current beliefs in metaphysics, cosmology, natural science, medicine, alchemy and geography. These unusual and intellectual metaphors are called ‘conceits’.

The Metaphysical conceit
The Metaphysical conceit was certainly the best means to communicate a unified experience. Donne’s use of the conceit is a way of bringing into poetry all his interests, activities and speculations. No part of his experience is regarded as unpoetical; all is equally available to him in the act of composition.

A final feature which distinguishes Donne’s verse is its so-called ‘roughness’. In his rejection of the conventional courtliness of diction, he always uses the formal devices of poetry – metre, rhyme, alliteration and other effects of sound – to serve an expressive purpose, with the voice, as the critic Wilbur Sanders has said, ‘of a man who is never content with feeling which has been separated from understanding’.

Donne and the Petrarchan tradition
The Petrarchan tradition had already set the rule for love poetry when Donne wrote Songs and Sonnets, where he changed the concepts concerning love and women. The most scandalous of his ideas is probably how he regarded women’s appearance. The courtly poets followed a sort of catalogue of the mistress’s physical beauties, including phrases such as ‘coral lips’, ‘pearly teeth’, ‘alabaster neck’. Donne almost forgot to describe his lover. The Petrarchan mistress dominated the poet’s heart and thoughts, he was in love with her and did not question her faithfulness. Donne instead emphasised the woman’s inconstancy and described several female characters, from the innocent girl to the woman who is aware of sexual pleasure.

1 **ANSWER** the following questions about the work of John Donne.

1 Why was Donne regarded as an innovator of poetry?
2 Why is Donne’s imagery impressive?
3 What creates great tension in his works?
4 What are the most pervasive images in his poetry?
5 How did Donne use the conceit?
6 How did he change the tradition of love poetry?
Batter my Heart

John Donne

Holy Sonnets (1609–1611)

One of the most powerful of the Holy Sonnets, written between 1609 and 1611, this poem deals with the poet’s love of God through strikingly original images.

Batter¹ my heart, three-personed God; for, you
As yet but² knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend³;
That⁴ I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow⁵ me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

I, like an usurped town, to another due⁶,
Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy⁷ in me, me should defend,
But is captived⁸, and proves weak or untrue,

Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain⁹,
But am betrothed unto your enemy¹⁰,
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot¹¹ again,

Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthrall me¹², never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me¹³.

COMPREHENSION

1 ANSWER the following questions.
   1 Who is the poet addressing?
   2 What does the poet want the addressee to do?
   3 What does the poet think of himself?
   4 What are his feelings towards the addressee?
   5 Who is the poet engaged to?
   6 What is the poet afraid of?

ANALYSIS

2 NOTE DOWN the rhyme scheme of the sonnet and say what kind of sonnet it is.

3 UNDERLINE the verbs in the first quatrain.
   1 What semantic area do they all belong to?
   2 How is the relationship between the poet and God connoted?

4 IDENTIFY the terms of the simile contained in the second quatrain.
   1 Who is the usurper?
   2 To whom is the town ‘due’?

5 WHAT images does the poet use in the sestet to renew his tormented appeal to God?

6 WRITE down the features of Metaphysical poetry that can be found in this poem.