

Metaphysical poetry

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The term metaphysical may be applied to any poetry dealing with spiritual or philosophical matters ,it is usually limited to the work of a group of 17th century English poets of whom John Donne was the most distinguished. The term 'metaphysical poet' has been coined out by Dr. Johnson in his lives of Cowley to describe the poetry of Donne and his group whose work is characterized by witty remarks ,exaggerated expressions, far-fetched magination and conceits. They were intellectually conscious while dealing with love poems which requires emotional exuberance .This is a common feature of the poetry of Donne when he compares the lovers and beloved with two needles of a compass. In the same manner Richard Crashaw, another significant poet of this group ,compares the eyes of his beloved as two walking bath from tears are coming out very frequently.

While passing his comments on Donne, Dryden said 'he too much affects the metaphysics not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses ' He has not used the term in the real sense. He means to suggest that Donne was too much given to intellectual analysis. Dr. Johnson extended the term metaphysical for the group of poets led

by Donne. He further said that the metaphysical were men of learning, and, to show their learning was their whole endeavour ... the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together in their poetry.

The poets of this group included the religious and the secular poets. Marvell, Vaughan and Herbert are placed in the former group where as Donne, Cowley and Craushaw are placed the later group. The metaphysical poets were thrown into oblivion by critics like Dr. Johnson and John Dryden and had to wait till 20th century to get their talent recognised by eminent critic T. S. Eliot. Eliot in his essay on John Dryden had held Dryden and Milton responsible for corrupting English language. He insisted that from 17th century onward a dissociation has set in English poetry for which these two poets are solely responsible who guided their successors to follow on the beaten track except for the metaphysical poets in whose poetry he noticed association of sensibility which according to Eliot is essential feature of a perfect poetry. Eliot insisted that there must be a coordination between mind and heart, intellect and emotion and metre and music. This balance must be maintained in a perfect poetry which he noticed in the poetry of the 17th century metaphysical poets and praised their poetry in high-flown words. He on the contrary criticized the romantic poets for taking least concern for association of sensibilities in their poetic works particularly the works of Shelley in which he found “bad jingling” and intellectual incoherence.

Donne's work is characterised by elaborate conceits, paradoxes and abstruse terminology often drawn from the world of science which is evident in his poems “For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love”, “The Sun Rising”, “Death be not Proud” and “Go and catch the falling star”. The poets of this group sometimes take the form of arguments for the metaphysical characteristically link intense emotion with intellectual ingenuity. In the 18th and 19th century the metaphysical poets remained unnoticed due to the change in taste and temperament which made their poetry unfashionable, but in the 20th century intellectual clarity and psychological exploration gained currency led to the revival of interest in their poetry.

Actually Donne was the by-product of Renaissance and the Reformation movement and thus scientific or intellectual discourses and emotional exuberance get intermingled in his poetry which is characterized by conceits and far-fetched imagination and gave his poetry a distinct look .These are the characteristic features of the poets of this group including Marvell, Vaughan ,Herbert and Crashaw.
