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METAPHYSICAL POETRY

Definition, Features, Examples

John Dryden, in his 'Discourse Concerning Satire' (1693) commented about John Donne:

"He (Donne) affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but also in his amorous verses (love poems)".

The Elizabethan age or the age of Shakespeare was aptly called "a nest of singing birds" because of the popularity of the lyrics written by Shakespeare, Spenser, Sidney and others. The romantic lyrics dominated this period. But soon there was a decline in the popularity of this romantic poetry. John Donne and other poets reacted against this romantic poetry in the beginning of the 17th century and brought about a new kind of poetry which was later on known as METAPHYSICAL POETRY.

What Is Metaphysical Poetry?

The term 'Metaphysical' is derived from Greek language. In Greek 'meta' means 'beyond' and 'physical' means 'everything which we can see with our eyes, this real world.' Hence, the poetry which deals with the subject matter which is beyond this real world is called metaphysical poetry. This type of poetry presents the spiritual themes of the union of souls, spirits and so on. First of all Dryden used the term 'Metaphysical' for Donne's poetry. He said, "Donne affects the metaphysics". Later on Dr. Johnson called Donne and his followers "the metaphysical poets". Since then the word

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‘metaphysical’ has been used for Donne and his followers.

There was a group of poets in the beginning of the 17th century who started writing such highly philosophical and spiritual poetry. This group is called the groups of metaphysical poetry. John Donne was the leader of this group.

Major Metaphysical Poets:

John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Abraham Cowley and others.

Features of Metaphysical Poetry:

1. Display of Learning:

The metaphysical poets were the men of high learning and as a result their poetry often turned into pomp and show of their knowledge. They tried to make a show of their knowledge and wisdom of the ancient scriptures. That is why their poetry became much obscure or difficult to understand. They used many references to the ancient works and their poetry was full of allusions from the Bible, from the Greek and Latin literature which makes it a difficult poetry.

2. Intellectualism:

Metaphysical poetry was a reaction against the romantic poetry of the Elizabethan poetry (which appealed to the heart). Metaphysical poetry appealed more to the intellect of the reader. This poetry is full of high philosophical and spiritual ideas and the reader has to do much mental exercise in order to derive the meaning. Mark this poem ‘The Flea’ written by John Donne:

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**“Mark but this flea, and mark in this, How little
that which thou deniest me is; It sucked me first,
and now sucks thee, And in this flea our two
bloods mingled be”**

3. Far-Fetched Images and Conceits:

The metaphysical poets used far-fetched images. They compared the incomparable objects. They tried to bring images from areas of agriculture, mechanical engineering, architecture, biology, geometry and so on which have nothing common with the theme of their poems. Such a practice drew attention of the readers and it made them establish poets. Herbert borrowed images from architecture and mechanical engineering. The best examples are ‘The Church Porch’ and ‘The Pulley’. Andrew Marvell made use of geometrical and mathematical images. The best example is ‘To His Coy Mistress’. Donne made use almost all type of images in his poetry. In his poem ‘The Sun Rising’, Donne personifies the sun to be an intruder in his bedroom that he shares with his beloved. Donne does not want to start the day and instead stay there with his beloved. Mark his words :

**“Busy old fool, unruly sun, Why dost
thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?”**

4. Mysticism and Religious Elements:

Most of the metaphysical poets were mystics. The poets like Donne, Herbert and Crashaw expressed communion with God. The believed that spiritual alone is the real and the world

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which we live in real life is merely a shadow of that real spiritual world. They used highly symbolic language to express their mystical ideas.

5. Poetic Style:

The style of metaphysical poets was obscure yet melodious. It was full of verbosity yet clear. Symbols and conceits were the integral parts of the poetic style of these poets. However, it must be remembered that they all developed their individual styles in their poetry. They never cared to follow their Elizabethan predecessors. A critic rightly remarks:

“We cannot distinguish the poetry of Donne from that of Herbert, and Herbert’s from that of Crashaw’s and so on altogether more easily than we can distinguish the work of one Elizabethan poet from that of another.”

Conclusion:

Summing up the characteristics of this metaphysical poetry, it can be said that it was a reaction against the Elizabethan romantic poetry. It appeals to the intellect of the reader. It is written in highly learned and witty language. It is obscure or difficult to understand as it is full of mysticism, philosophical and spiritual thoughts.