

Cavalier and Metaphysical Poets

First Half of the Seventeenth Century

ca. 1600-1650

James I - Charles I

Cavalier Poets vs Metaphysical poets

- Cavaliers = courtiers
- Supported the Monarchy during the Civil War
- Celebrate aristocratic values (elegance, courteous behaviour). Poetry characterized by formal perfection, refined style, pastoral and bucolic settings, influenced by Latin writers (Virgil, Horace, Juvenal). They drew inspiration from **B. Jonson**
- Best poet: **Robert Herrick**
- Metaphysical poets:
 - **John Donne** (1572-1631)
 - George **Herbert** (1593-1633), Richard Crashaw (1612-49), Henry Vaughan /vo:n/ (1621- 1695)
 - *The Golden Treasury* (1861) did not include them
 - Rediscovered in the 20th century: **T.S. Eliot**'s essay *The Metaphysical Poets*

What does “Metaphysical” mean?

- **Literal meaning** of “metaphysical”: concerned with the fundamental problems of the nature of the universe and man’s place in it.
- In modern philosophical terminology, metaphysics refers to the studies of what cannot be reached through objective studies of material reality.
- This meaning is completely **misleading** for Metaphysical Poetry in English literature

Origin of the word Metaphysics

- Aristotle wrote some treatises about the natural world, now known as *Physics*, and others that he called *First Philosophy*: the study of “being as such” (i.e., the nature of being, or what it is for a thing to be or to exist) and the study of “the first causes of things” (i.e., their original or primary causes).*
- The treatises of *First Philosophy* were collected centuries later in a volume after those about the natural world, under the title *Ta meta ta physika* (roughly, “the ones after the books about nature”). It probably conveyed the editor’s idea that students should read them only after reading and mastering the other part, *Physics*.
- Metaphysics: a branch of philosophy which studies the first causes of things and the nature of being.

*See: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/metaphysics>

Metaphysical Poetry in English Literature

- «Metaphysical» is a scornful term coined by the poet Dryden to mean “abstruse, obscure” and later used by the famous 18th century critic Samuel Johnson (Dr. Johnson).
- Johnson described Metaphysical Poetry correctly, but expressed a negative judgement.

Dr Johnson and Metaphysical Poetry

- Dr Johnson said : “The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked (tenute al giogo) by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions.”
- For Dr Johnson their poetry consists of “Combinations of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike”. → artificial and obscure

Characteristics that make metaphysical poetry innovative

- **Wit**= quickness of intellect, liveliness of fancy → ingenuity.
- **Conceit** = (concetto o metafora ardità): unusual metaphors, analogies between two apparently distant images, ideas or objects.
- **Use of images from natural science**, geography, alchemy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics.
- **Colloquial tone** used by the poet with his **beloved**.
- **Sensual images** expressed with **religious** language and religious images expressed with sensual language.

John Donne (1572-1631)

- Born into a Catholic family, studied at Oxford and Cambridge (was not awarded a degree for being Catholic). Between 1589-1591 he travels to Spain and Italy → adventure, excitement, action.
- Writes *Elegies*, five *Satires*, love poems in the 1590s.
- Appointed private secretary to an important official in Elizabeth's government (Sir Thomas Egerton)
- Clandestine marriage with Anne More, niece of his employer in 1601 → dismissed
- Probably writes *Songs and Sonnets* after his marriage, but they are published only posthumously.

Donne's Life and Works

- Writes *Holy sonnets* 1609-11
- 1611 Sir Robert Drury took Donne with him on as diplomatic mission in France → «A Valediction»
- Two Anti-Catholic pamphlets: renunciation of the Catholic faith.
- Well-known as great preacher and thinker → he took Holy Orders in the Anglican Church → vicar of St Paul's Cathedral from 1621 to his death.
- *Songs and Sonnets* published after his death in 1633. It collects all his love poems but none of them uses the sonnet form. Form is dictated by the “message”.

Donne's notion of Love

- Unlike traditional love poetry the beloved is not the centre of the poem but the **relationship**.
- Language can have a highly erotic charge or invite to a spiritual union which goes beyond the physical and sentimental.
- Woman = not a distant object but a real partner: she is being asked to accept the amorous experience proposed by the poet.

Love and Religion: two major themes

- **Dramatic monologue** and dramatic tension: directness of the speaking voice. Use of Latinisms and simple words of Anglo-Saxon origins. Mix of high and low style. **Formal and colloquial**.
- Speaking voice can be assertive, ironic or meditative, but there is always the exploration of a situation, feeling, state of mind **in a mix of emotional and rational terms. A thesis is demonstrated**. A line of reasoning is followed.
- Each poem explores one of the many possible faces of love
- **Poems based on psychological concrete data** covered under a rhetorical web of fascinating artifice (typically baroque).
- **Religious metaphors are used in love poems and metaphors of physical love appear in religious poems.**

T.S. Eliot on J. Donne

- Interesting for present age
- Fidelity to emotion as he finds it → honesty in expressing his genuine whole of tangled feelings (like the early Italians, Heine, Baudelaire)
- Recognition of the complexity of feeling and its rapid alterations and antithesis.
- He is modern because he neither suppresses nor falsifies and expresses complicated states of mind.
- Impossible to isolate his ecstasy, sensuality, cynicism.