

Poetry
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Lecture 17
Metaphysical Poetry

(Refer Slide Time: 0:17)

Metaphysical Poetry



- Seventeenth century
- Historical Context
- Literary Context
 - Practitioners: Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Marvell
 - Concept: Drummond, Dryden, Johnson, Grierson, Eliot, and Williamson
- Features of Metaphysical Poetry
- W Bradford Smith's Definition
 - Best Examples: Smith and Brooks



Hello, in the third week of this course we are going to deal with Metaphysical Poetry. This is a phenomenon in the 17th century. So, we will look into the historical context and the literary context that made this metaphysical poetry possible. We will examine some of the practitioners of metaphysical poetry John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan and Andrew Marvell.

We will also examine the evolution of the concept of metaphysical poetry from William Drummond, John Dryden, Dr Samuel Johnson, H. J. C. Grierson, T S Eliot, George Williamson. We will see the several features that make up this concept called metaphysical poetry. We will discuss the definition of W Bradford Smith about this metaphysical poetry. We will also see two best examples one from Smith, another from Brooks as part of this lecture today.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:34)

Historical Context



- East India Company (1600)
- King James I (r.1603-1625)
- Hampton Court Conference (1604)
- The Gunpowder Plot
- William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of blood
- War with Spain (1624)
- King Charles I (r.1625-1649)
- The Irish Rebellion (1641)
- Three Civil Wars (1642-1651)
- The Commonwealth (1649-1660) Puritanism
- King Charles II (1660-1685) Restoration
- The Royal Society (1662), science, trade, colonialism



As you can see many historical events join together to make up this era early 17th century. First, we notice the East India Company was formed in 1600, then we see King James the first becoming the king ruling England from 1603 to 1625. At this time, we find a very interesting phenomenon of religious conference that is called Hampton Court Conference, where different factions belonging to various religious groups try to arrive at a common consensus, they could not succeed. That is a different story. And that led to the gun powder plot meant to kill the king and other courtiers but they did not succeed.

It was at this time we find William Harvey discovering the circulation of blood. What is there inside our own body we were able to scientifically understand. There was also a war with Spain in 1624 and then we find a change of government from James I to Charles I. Charles I ruled England from 1625 to 1649. Unfortunately, because of the differences between the parliament and the King a civil war occurred and this civil war was fought in three different stages from 1642 to 1651.

We also have this problem of the Irish rebellion at this time. Then, after King Charles I was executed the commonwealth was formed and we had this commonwealth period from 1649 to 1660 when the monarchy was restored in England with King Charles II. We also have another interesting phenomenon of establishment of this royal society in 1662 focusing on these scientific developments in the context of expansive trade and colonialism during this period.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:06)

Literary Context



- Transition from the Elizabethan to the Jacobean period
- Shakespeare, Jonson, Drayton, and Daniel continued their writing
- The Authorized Version of the Bible in 1611
- The sermons of Lancelot Andrews and John Donne
- Jacobean, Caroline and Cavalier poets
- Court and church poets



It is also interesting to see the literary context which is a kind of transition from Elizabethan poetry to Jacobean poetry. We find the old Stalwarts, Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, Michael Drayton and Samuel Daniel writing in this period as well. A remarkable event of this period historically, religiously and literally is the publication of this authorized version of the Bible, otherwise known as 'King James Bible' which was published in 1611.

Another interesting point that we have to notice is the rise of popular sermons from remarkable Priest like Lancelot Andrews and John Donne. We have actually three different groups of poets writing in this early 17th century. Poets from Jacobin period, Caroline period and also this commonwealth period where we have Cavalier poets supporting monarchy. Similarly, we also have poets who write for the court and poets who write for the church in the sense of thinking about gods, particularly Christ, father and things like that. So, we have both secular poetry and religious poetry at this point of time.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:44)

Practitioners



John Donne (1572-1631)	Jacobean poets
George Herbert (1593-1633)	King James I
Henry Vaughan (1621-1695)	(1603-1625)
Thomas Carew (1594-1640)	Caroline poets
Robert Herrick (1591-1674)	King Charles I
Richard Lovelace (1618-1656?)	(1625-1649)
Abraham Cowley (1618-1667)	Cavalier poets
Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)	Poet-priests
John Milton (1608-1674)	
Richard Crashaw (1613-1649)	



Who are the well-known practitioners of this metaphysical poetry? Actually, the several kinds of poets we have. In some sense or the other they share certain features of metaphysical poetry. We begin with John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Carew, Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, Abraham Cowley. We have to pay some special attention to him because of the life of Abraham Cowley by Dr Johnson we have this concept metaphysical poetry well explained to us.

Then Andrew Marvell, Richard Crashaw, John Milton also was writing in this period but he is not considered to be a metaphysical poet. We have included him to indicate that he also belongs to this early 17th century. Based on the kings who ruled the country and the kind of system of administration they had we have Jacobean poets belonging to Kings James I period, we have Caroline poets belonging to Charles I period, and then we have Cavalier poets and many of these poets are poet-priests. That is, they were preaching in the church and still writing poetry very intensely.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:16)

Origin of the Term



- Drummond, Dryden, Johnson, Grierson, Eliot, Williamson
- William Drummond of Hawthornden (1630)
 - In a letter to Dr. Arthur Johnston
 - Used “metaphysical” pejoratively
 - Objected to “metaphysical ideas and scholastic quiddities” in his contemporaries
- Dryden’s *Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693)
 - Donne “affects the metaphysics”
 - use of scientific terms and obscure arguments
 - scholastic philosophers



How did the term metaphysical poetry originate? that is what we are going to see in the next few minutes. We have a number of theories. If you want to use that word, from William Drummond, John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Grierson, T S Eliot to George Williamson. We will begin with William Drummond of Hawthornden.

He wrote a letter in 1630 to one, Dr Arthur Johnston and he used the expression “metaphysical” pejoratively, that is, negatively. He objected to “metaphysical ideas and scholastic quiddities” in his contemporaries particularly poets, the extreme kind of images idiosyncrasies that he noticed in his colleagues he did not appreciate.

Then we have John Dryden writing in ‘Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire’ in 1693. He mentioned with reference to John Donne that, “Donne affects metaphysics.” He had this in his mind when he wrote this phrase affects the metaphysics. Donne was using a number of scientific terms and he was making obscure arguments of scholastic philosophers and so Dryden also did not use this expression very happily.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:07)

Dr Johnson's *Life of Cowley* (1779)



- Abraham Cowley, a metaphysical poet
- Not relating to the subject but the manner of writing
- Johnson actually complained about the poets:

“Wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. . . *The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together*; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions.”



Then we come to the site of this concept metaphysical poetry. It was Dr Johnson in the 18th century who wrote the life of Abraham Cowley in 1779. In this context, while writing the life of Abraham Cowley, who was a reasonably respectable poet at that time. We have to remember that Johnson did not consider Donne to be a serious poet for his biographical series, Cowley was. So, he wrote the biography of Cowley.

And at that time, he mentioned in passing about the kind of writing that happened during 17th century. This concept metaphysical poetry does not rely to any subject or theme. It actually refers to the way in which the poem was written, that is the manner of writing. Actually, Johnson was complaining about the poets who were using such extreme expressions, images, symbols, which disturbed the common sense.

So, he wrote a passage like this.

“Wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; it means, a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions.”

Probably Johnson was also affected by this kind of far-fetched images and that is why he is using that violent image himself ransacking nature and art for illustrations, comparisons and allusions. This phrase ‘the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together’ is the soul of metaphysical poetry.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:32)

Dr Johnson's Pejorative Use



- Reference to a race of writers known for their
 1. display of learning, 2. far-fetched comparisons, and 3. absence of feeling
- Writers include Donne, Cleveland, Marvell, **Cowley**, Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw
- A witty composition combining quite opposite things
- Pejorative meaning but has survived to describe a group of 17th century poets



Obviously, Dr Johnson used this concept metaphysical poetry very pejoratively that is negatively. He referred to a race of writers known for their display of learning, far-fetched comparisons and absence of feeling. That is what Johnson felt about these writers. He included Donne, Cleveland, Marvel, of course Cowley, Herbert, Vaughan and Crashaw.

In some, this metaphysical poetry is a witty composition combining quite opposite things, ideas, images. It had the pejorative meaning earlier but now it has rose above this negativity and survived to describe a group of 17th century poets positively. We will see one example from Abraham Cowley.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:34)

Abraham Cowley's "The Heart Breaking"



Serpent-Love-Poison-Remedy-Monarch-Tyrant

1. It gave a piteous groan, and so it broke;
In vain it something would have spoke:
The love within too strong for 't was,
Like poison put into a Venice-glass.
2. I thought that this some remedy might prove;
But oh, the mighty serpent Love,
Cut by this chance in pieces small,
In all still liv'd, and still it stung in all.



Abraham Cowley had a volume called 'The Mysteries.' And in this volume, he has a poem called "The Heart Breaking," this heart-breaking poem has this kind of combination of images, serpent, love, poison, remedy, monarch, tyrant all in just five stanzas. Disparate things are brought together violent images are violently yoked together; you can see in these five stanzas now. Let us see the first two stanzas.

"The heart Breaking"

1. It gave a piteous groan, and so it broke;

In vain if something would have spoke:

The love within too strong for 't was,

Like poison put into a Venice-glass.
2. I thought that this some remedy might prove;

But oh, the mighty serpent Love,

Cut by this chance in pieces small,

In all still liv'd and still it stung in all.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:42)

Juxtaposition of Dissimilar Images



3. And now, alas! each little broken part
 Feels the whole pain of all my heart;
 And every smallest corner still
 Lives with **that torment** which the whole did kill.
4. Even so **rude armies**, when the field they quit,
 And into several quarters get;
 Each troop does spoil and ruin more
 Than all join'd in one body did before.
5. How **many Loves** reign in my bosom now!
 How many loves, yet all of you!
 Thus have I chang'd with evil fate
 My Monarch-love into a Tyrant-state.



The next three stanzas now, where you can find the juxtaposition of dissimilar images, that is Discordia concords.

3. And now, alas! each little broken part

 Feels a whole pain of all my heart;

 And every smallest corner still

 Lives with that torment which the whole did kill.
4. Even so rude armies, when the field they quit,

 And into several quarters get;

 Each troop does spoil and ruin more

 Than all join in one body did before.
5. How many loves reign in my bosom now!

 How many loves, yet all of you!

 Thus have I changed with evil fate

My monarch-love into a Tyrant-state.”

Various images, from the serpent love, poison, remedy, monarch, tyrant and in between we have rude armies, armies which are not controlled moving in different directions. So, the poet says he has different loves but all of them finally turn into a tyrant state. He suffers more, so his heart is broken. It is not surprising that Johnson found this to be discordant for his ears.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:05)

Grierson's Publication (1921)

- H. J. C. Grierson (1866-1960)
- A Scottish scholar of 17th century poetry
- A critic, anthologist, and historian of English poetry
- An anthology of 17th century poems in 1921
- *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (1921)
- Reviewed by T S Eliot
- Strong revival of metaphysical poetry in 20th century



Next let us look into Grierson's publication which changed the face of metaphysical poetry in 1921. H. J. C. Grierson was a Scottish scholar interested in the 17th century poetry. He was a critic, an anthologist and a historian of English poetry. He has published many collections of poems by various writers including Blake, Tennyson.

He came out with an anthology of 17th century poems in 1921 called “Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century.” T S Eliot reviewed this volume of metaphysical lyrics and poems of the 17th century for ‘Times Literary Supplement’ and with the publication of this volume and the review by T S Eliot there was a strong revival of metaphysical poetry in the 20th century.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:08)

Grierson's Classification



- Distinguished between two kinds of metaphysical poetry
- **Dante's** philosophical conception of the universe
- **Donne's** metaphysical poetry
 - 17th century metaphysical poetry
 - Intellectual, witty, argumentative, subtle, passionate and thoughtful, exotic
- Excluded Milton from this category



In his introduction to the volume, Grierson classified metaphysical poetry into two groups. One is Dante's kind of writing where we have a philosophical conception of the universe and the second one is the kind of poem written by Donne and his colleagues. Grierson is referring to Donne's metaphysical poetry with reference to a few features. They are, intellectual, witty, argumentative, subtle, passionate, thoughtful and exotic. These are the common features that Grierson noticed in metaphysical poetry of 17th century. However, he did not include Milton because he considered Milton to be different from Dante or Donne.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:06)

Eliot's "The Metaphysical Poets"

- A review of H J C Grierson's anthology
- Noticed a blend of thought and feeling in Donne and other poets – "unified sensibility"
 - "A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility"
- Thinking and feeling poets – Metaphysical poets
 - Observed "a dissociation of sensibility" in the 17th century after Donne
 - Early 20th century modernist poets resemble metaphysical poets in telescoping of images and multiples associations
- Eliot's cultivation of his own poetic taste



In his review of Grierson's volume, Eliot noted a blend of thought and feeling in Donne and other poets. He called it "unified sensibility." So, he said a thought to Donne was an experience, it modified his sensibility. What Eliot emphasized in this unified sensibility is thinking and feeling going together making up these metaphysical poets.

Eliot also observed "a dissociation of sensibility" in the 17th century, particularly after Donne. In early 20th century many modernist poets started writing like metaphysical poets or Eliot found a similarity between metaphysical poetry and early 20th century poets particularly modernist poets in terms of telescoping of images and multiple associations. Actually, Eliot was cultivating his own taste for poetry and creating a different kind of readership for modernist poetry in early 20th century.

(Refer Slide Time: 18:29)

George Williamson's Exposition



- The crux of metaphysical poetry: wit
 - Grierson's "peculiar blend of passion and thought"
 - Eliot's "sensuous apprehension of thought"
 - Herbert Read's "emotional apprehension of thought"
 - Williamson's "embodiment of thought"
- The wit manifests in conceits of far-fetched and **shockingly disparate** elements
- Revolt against the Elizabethan poetic conventions
- Complex, sensuous and intellectual strain
- **Effect:** Johnsonian vices turned out to be virtues



Later, we have a critic George Williamson. He also discussed metaphysical poetry. According to him 'the crux of metaphysical poetry is wit.' And this wit is understood by various critics in different ways. For Grierson wit is a "peculiar blend of passion and thought." For Eliot it is a "sensuous apprehension of thought." Similarly, for Herbert Read it is "emotional apprehension of thought." And for Williamson himself "wit is an embodiment of thought."

This wit manifests in conceits of far-fetched and shockingly disparate elements. This shocking element is something noticeable and it is appreciated by early 20th century poets like Eliot whereas, it was not liked by Dr Johnson. Williamson also observed that this metaphysical poetry was a kind of revolt against the Elizabethan poetic conventions. In contrast to Elizabethan poetry, metaphysical poetry is more complex, sensuous and it had more intellectual strain. The effect of all these critical thoughts in course of time is what Johnson considered vices turned out to be virtues and appreciated later on.

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Features of Metaphysical Poetry



- Colloquial, arresting and unifying language
- Commands, plain and familiar language
- Conceits – far-fetched and extended comparisons
- Intellectual, witty, and paradoxical arguments
- a good example, Donne's "The Flea"



What are the characteristics of metaphysical poetry? We have already seen a few features, now here we have a listing of all of them. First, metaphysical poet is colloquial, conversational, arresting and unifying language. Metaphysical poetry uses more of commands that is imperatives, it uses more of plain and familiar language.

The chief characteristic of metaphysical poetry is of course conceits, far-fetched conceits and extended comparisons; there is no limit to comparing one thing with another. Of course, it is highly intellectual, witty and paradoxical. It makes arguments, logical arguments and readers are expected to be convinced by the arguments of these poets. A good example we have is John Donne's "The Flea." Let us look into the first stanza alone here.

(Refer Slide Time: 21:21)

Donne's "The Flea" Stanza 1



"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;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do."



Here it goes,

"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;

Thou know'st that this cannot be said

A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,

Yet this enjoys before it woo,

And pampered swells with one blood made of two,

And this, alas, is more than we would do."

It is a very common situation of a flea biting man and the woman and in the flea the poet finds a union of the man and the woman. What is considered to be something infectious, something a disease, something unhealthy, unwelcome, Donne makes use of this image to support his own

love. Without any kind of pejorative connotation of this sexual union, the poet and the lady, the speaker and the lady they are united in the blood which is infused into the body of this flea.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:40)

Smith's Metaphysical Poetry



"Metaphysical poetry is a **paradoxical inquiry**, imaginative and intellectual, which exhausts, by its use of **antithesis and contradiction and unusual imagery**, all the possibilities in a given idea. This idea will predominantly be a **psychological probing of love, death, or religion** as the more important matters of experience in the life of the poet, and will be embodied in **striking metaphorical utterance** or in the use of common (familiar) or the scientific word." (263)



According to Bradford Smith,

"Metaphysical poetry is a paradoxical inquiry, imaginative and intellectual, which exhausts, by its use of antithesis and contradiction and unusual imagery, all the possibilities in a given idea. This idea will predominantly be a psychological probing of love, death, or religion as the more important matters of experience in the life of the poet, and will be embodied in striking metaphorical utterance or in the use of common that is familiar or the scientific word." (263)

If you look into this definition given by Smith, we see all metaphysical poetry is a paradoxical inquiry and it uses antithesis and contradiction and unusual imagery. It probes into experiences like love, death and religion and it has a striking metaphorical utterance.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:51)

Smith's Best Example



- Smith's best example: Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*.
- It has the metaphysical combination of thought and image, the sensuality, the universal outlook, the distinctively common diction ('my vegetable love'), the **metaphysical shudder**.

➤ Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"

"But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near,
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity." (22-24)



For Smith, the best example of metaphysical poetry is from Andrew Marvell. Smith says, 'it has the metaphysical combination of thought and image, the sensuality, the universal outlook, the distinctively common diction, he gives this example 'my vegetable love,' and also, he mentions another characteristic of metaphysical poetry that is the metaphysical shudder which comes out of the awareness of the impending death.'

Smith quotes this passage from Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress."

"But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near,
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity." (22-37)

(Refer Slide Time: 24:41)

Brooks's Best Example



- Cleanth Brooks's idea of *the Well-Wrought Urn*
- "The language of poetry is the language of paradox."
- Brooks claims, the only way by which the poet could say what Donne's "The Canonization" says is by paradox.
- What does the poet say?
- Just like the saints, the lovers too renounce the world.
- The lovers can then rightfully be canonized, that is made saints.
- Donne's "The Canonization"
"And by these hymns, all shall approve
Us canonized for Love." (36-37)



Another best example we have from Cleanth Brooks. He came out with this concept of this Well-Wrought Urn. that is the image for a well-made poem for Cleanth Brooks. According to him, the language of poetry is a language of paradox; paradoxical inquiry and paradoxical language we can connect them together now.

Brooks claims that, the only way by which the poet could say what Donne's "The Canonization" says is by paradox by nothing else. What does the poet say? He says just like the saints, the religious saints, the lovers to renounce the world for the sake of their own love. The lovers can then rightfully be canonized that is made into saints. Here we have these two lines from Donne's poem "The Canonization."

"And by these hymns, songs in praise of love, all shall approve

Us canonized for Love." (36-37)

(Refer Slide Time: 25:57)

Summary



- Seventeenth century
- Historical Context
- Literary Context
 - Practitioners: Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Marvell
 - Concept: Drummond, Dryden, Johnson, Grierson, Eliot, and Williamson
- Features of Metaphysical Poetry
- W Bradford Smith's Definition
 - Best Examples: Smith and Brooks



In this lecture we have seen 17th century metaphysical poetry against the historical and literary context with reference to the well-known practitioners John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan and Andrew Marvel. We traced the evolution of the metaphysical poetry concept from Drummond to Dryden to Johnson, Grierson, Eliot and George Williamson. We identified the features of metaphysical poetry. Particularly wit, paradox, unusual imagery, colloquial language and so on. We examined two best examples, one from Smith and another from Brooks; they have quoted both Marvel and Donne as the best exemplars of metaphysical poetry.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:56)

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As usual we have some references for you. It will be ideal for you to know more about metaphysical poetry by reading Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets" and Smith's article "What is Metaphysical Poetry?" Thank you.