

The Use of Metaphysical Elements and Conceits in Andrew Marvell's Poetry

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Abstract: *Andrew Marvell's poetry shows all the qualities of metaphysical poetry having the characteristics of complexity, intellectual tone, abundance of subtle wit, fusion of thought and feeling, colloquial argumentative tone, witty and fantastic conceits, scholarly allusions, dramatic tone and philosophic or reflective element.*

Keywords: *Andrew Marvell, metaphysical poetry, conceits, complexity, allusions*

1. INTRODUCTION

The word “metaphysical” has been defined differently by various writers. R. S. Hillyer writes: “Literally it has to do with the conception of existence, with the living universe and Man’s place therein. Loosely, it has taken such meaning as these – “difficult, philosophical, obscure, ethereal, involved, supercilious, ingenious, fantastic and incongruous”

According to Grierson, Donne’s poetry is metaphysical, “not only in sense of being erudite and witty, but in the proper sense of being reflective and philosophical”. In other words the learned critic feels that the metaphysical poetry is “inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence”

The word 'meta' means 'after,' so the literal translation of 'metaphysical' is 'after the physical.' Basically, metaphysics deals with questions that can't be explained by science. It questions the nature of reality in a philosophical way.

Here are some common metaphysical questions:

- Does God exist?
- Is there a difference between the way things appear to us and the way they really are? Essentially, what is the difference between reality and perception?
- Is everything that happens already predetermined? If so, then is free choice non-existent?
- Is consciousness limited to the brain?

Metaphysics can cover a broad range of topics from religious to consciousness; however, all the questions about metaphysics ponder the nature of reality. And of course, there is no one correct answers to any of these questions. Metaphysics is about exploration and philosophy, not about science and math.

2. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF METAPHYSICAL MOVEMENT

Literary critic and poet Samuel Johnson first coined the term 'metaphysical poetry' in his book *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1179-1781). In the book, Johnson wrote about a group of 17th-century British poets that included John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan. He noted how the poets shared many common characteristics, especially ones of wit and elaborates style.

Metaphysical poetry resolved itself into two broad divisions: Love Poetry, Religious Poetry. The habit of writing both types of poetry, amorous and religious verses, is derived from Donne who wrote love poetry in the first period of his life and the devotional lyrics in the later period, both with same passion. Later in the seventeenth century poets like Carew, Suckling and Lovelace wrote only amorous verses. The devotional schools of metaphysical poets, Herbert, Crashaw and Vaughan dedicated their poetic gifts to the service of Christian religion. Thus, in later period, it split up into two groups ---- one group writing secular poetry and imitating all the techniques developed by Donne.

The Metaphysical Poets are known for their ability to startle the reader and coax new perspective through paradoxical images, subtle argument, inventive syntax, and imagery from art, philosophy, and religion using an extended metaphor known as a conceit.

Andrew Marvell is in something of a class by himself, and is a kind of forerunner of the classicism that was to come later in the century.

3. BACKGROUND OF ANDREW MARVELL

Due to the inconsistencies and ambiguities within his work and the scarcity of information about his personal life, Andrew Marvell has been a source of fascination for scholars and readers since his work found recognition in the early decades of the twentieth century. Born in 1621, Marvell grew up in the Yorkshire town of Hull where his father, Reverend Andrew Marvell, was a lecturer at Holy Trinity Church and master of the Charterhouse. At age twelve Marvell began his studies at Trinity College, Cambridge. Four years later two of Marvell's poems, one in Latin and one in Greek, were published in an anthology of Cambridge poets. After receiving his B.A. in 1639, Marvell stayed on at Trinity, apparently to complete an M.A. degree. In 1641, however, his father drowned in the Hull estuary and Marvell abandoned his studies. During the 1640's Marvell traveled extensively on the Continent, adding Dutch, French, Spanish, and Italian, to his Latin and Greek—missing the English civil wars entirely.

A well-known politician, Marvell held office in Cromwell's government and represented Hull to Parliament during the Restoration. His very public position—in a time of tremendous political turmoil and upheaval—almost certainly led Marvell away from publication. No faction escaped Marvell's satirical eye: he criticized and lampooned both the court and parliament. Indeed, had they been published during his lifetime, many of Marvell's more famous poems—in particular, "Tom May's Death," an attack on the famous Cromwellian—would have made him rather unpopular with Royalist and republican alike.

Marvell used his political status to free Milton, who was jailed during the Restoration, and quite possibly saved the elder poet's life. In the early years of his tenure, Marvell made two extraordinary diplomatic journeys: to Holland (1662-1663) and to Russia, Sweden, and Denmark (1663-1665). In 1678, after 18 years in Parliament, Marvell died rather suddenly of a fever. Gossip of the time suggested that the Jesuits (a target of Marvell's satire) had poisoned him. After his death he was remembered as a fierce and loyal patriot.

Andrew Marvell, now considered one of the greatest poets of the seventeenth century, published very little of his scathing political satire and complex lyric verse in his lifetime. Although Marvell published a handful of poems in anthologies, a collection of Marvell's work did not appear until

1681, three years after his death, when his nephew compiled and found a publisher for *Miscellaneous Poems*. The circumstances surrounding the publication of the volume aroused some suspicion: a person named "Mary Marvell," who claimed to be Marvell's wife, wrote the preface to the book. "Mary Marvell" was, in fact, Mary Palmer—Marvell's housekeeper—who posed as Marvell's wife, apparently, in order to keep Marvell's small estate from the creditors of his business partners. Her ruse, of course, merely contributes to the mystery that surrounds the life of this great poet.

4. METAPHYSICAL CONCEITS IN MARVELL'S POETRY

Marvell beautifully establishes in several of his poems the metaphysical themes of the human soul to the body, to this world and to the world beyond. "A Dialogue between the Soul and Body".

Vividly brings out the fundamental problems of the nature, of the universe and main place in the world.

A soul hung up, as 'twere, in chains
Of nerves, and arteries, and veins;
Tortur'd, besides each other part,
In a vain head, and double heart.

(Line 7 – 10) "A Dialogue Between the Soul and Body"

We can notice a plenty -physical conceit in this poem. The theme of the poem is metaphysical that the soul and body are "separate entities". The body feels the soul and on the other hand the soul treats itself as a prisoner inside the body. We fell amused by the manner in which the soul and the body attack each other.

But physic yet could never reach
The maladies thou me dost teach;
Whom first the cramp of hope does tear,
And then the palsy shakes of fear;

(Line 31- 34) "A Dialogue Between the Soul and Body"

In the debate between the soul and the body, the body certainly succeeds in building up a strong case for itself, but the soul asserts its superiority and its sublime nature with great self-confidence. We can also see dramatic tone and form in this poem which is very much metaphysical. The various speeches possess a dramatic quality in so far as they excite various strong emotion in us.

5. DISCUSSION

A number of Marvell's poems show the peculiar blend of passion and thought which a distinctive mark of metaphysical poetry is. The most outstanding example of this is "To his coy Mistress", it is one of the Marvell's best known love poems based upon a logically developed line of reasoning. The poem narrates a fairly strong emotion and at the same time it has an intellectual character. It has an argumentative quality and the argument proceeds in a logical manner. This syllogistic structural poem thus clearly portrays a successful fusion of deep passion and intellectual thought in the last stanza where the poet gives a solution of what he and his beloved should do.

Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of life:

(Line 39-42) "To His Coy Mistress"

Marvell's poetry abounds in wit and metaphysical conceits. "The Definition of love" opens with metaphysical conceits when the poet says that his love was "begotten by despair upon impossibility".

My love is of a birth as rare
As 'tis for object strange and high;
It was begotten by Despair
Upon Impossibility

(Line 1- 4) "The Definition of Love"

There is a conceit in almost every stanza of the poem. Yet another conceit occurs in the stanza in which the poet compares the loves between him and his beloved to the parallel lines which can never meet. Only oblique lines meet in all geometrical angles, and in the same way only the potion of guilty or adulterous lovers can be satisfied. This love is the "Conjunction of the mind, and opposition of the stars" which is really remarkable and magnificent.

As lines, so loves oblique may well

Themselves in every angle greet;
But ours so truly parallel,
Though infinite, can never meet.

(Line 25 – 28) “The Definition of Love”

"To His coy Mistress" is full of wonderful metaphysical conceits. When the poet compares His loves growth with the growth of vegetables we become amused. This strange comparison evokes our attention and wonder at the same time.

My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;

(Line 11-12) “To His Coy Mistress”

The picture of Time's a four wheeled carriage chariot hurrying and coming closer and closer to overtake the lovers vividly brings before another remarkable metaphysical conceit. The picture of the women lying in her grave and the worms attacking her long preserved virginity and her honour turning to dust are also wonderful conceits showing the poets wit.

Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

(Line 21-23) “To His Coy Mistress”

Much of the imagery in Marvell's poetry is of the learned kind, and it is characterized also by that vividness and concreteness which are among the marks of metaphysical poetry. The second half of "The Definition of Love" has the learned kind of imagery. The poet imagines that fate has placed their two lovers as far apart from each other as the North Pole and the South Pole. The poet says that his love may be achieved if these two conditions are fulfilled.

Unless the giddy heaven fall,
And earth some new convulsion tear;
And, us to join, the world should all
Be cramp'd into a planisphere.

(Line 21-24) “The Definition of Love”

Next he gives us a geometrical image which is then followed by an astronomical one.

Abrupt openings are another distinct feature of metaphysical poetry and some of Marvell's poems have this dramatic quality. “A Dialogue Between the Soul and Body” starts dramatically by the soul's lament.

O who shall from this Dungeon raise
A soul enslav'd so many ways ?”

(Line 1-2) “A Dialogue Between the Soul and Body”

Marvell's poetry is also remarkable for the terseness of its style Marvell shows a rare talent for condensation is so extreme that we have to think very hard in order to understand the full meaning and all the implications of certain lines. In the poem "To His coy Mistress" the following two lines have a similar epigrammatic quality.

The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

(Line 30-31) “To His Coy Mistress”

6. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis we find Marvell as a perfect metaphysical poet in all sense. His poems are more searching and intellectual, and it is more worldly wise and witty than most romantic poetry. From the poems that are discussed here it should be clear that Marvell is a true

metaphysical poet, not confronting to any tradition but making use of all the metaphysical qualities to write poems that are unmistakably new and his own.

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