



Included in this workshop:

**READING 2C** Relate the characters, setting, and theme of a literary work to the historical and social ideas of its time. **3** Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods. **7** Analyze how the author's patterns of imagery and conceits reveal theme, set tone, and create meaning in metaphors, passages, and literary works.

## Metaphysical Poetry

Does logic apply to the emotions? Can you express deep feeling and spiritual devotion through the use of argument, rhetoric, and reasoning? In the 17th century, a small group of poets, who later became known as the metaphysical poets, attempted to do just that. Though criticized by generations of writers, their works ushered in a unique approach to the language of poetry.

### Transcending the Elizabethans

During the 1600s, a group of poets rejected the highly ornamented style of late-Elizabethan lyric poetry and began to write what became known as metaphysical poetry. The word *metaphysical* literally means “of or relating to the transcendent or to a reality beyond what is perceptible” and “abstract and theoretical reasoning.” The term is appropriate because **metaphysical poetry** is primarily devotional and often mystical in content, even

when dealing with subjects such as physical love and relationships. Typically, metaphysical poets used intellect, logic, and even argument to explore abstract concepts, such as love and the nature of death. The result is a poetry that is highly intellectual, slightly irreverent, and marked by unconventional imagery. John Donne is considered the movement's central figure. His innovative style led the way for other metaphysical poets, including Andrew Marvell, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughan.



*Portrait of John Donne (1595), Anonymous. Private Collection. Photo © Bridgeman Art Library.*

In the late 1700s, Samuel Johnson named the group “metaphysical poets,” which he intended as a criticism, because he believed they used their poetry merely to show off their knowledge. Earlier, the writer John Dryden had made a similar criticism of Donne's poetry. Dryden wrote that Donne “affects the metaphysics . . . [even] in his amorous verse, where nature only should reign.” Such criticism diminished the popularity of the metaphysical poets until the early 20th century, when poet and critic T. S. Eliot published a famous essay in which he praised them as having the ability to unify experience—in particular, to “feel their thought as immediately as the odor of a rose.”

### Experiments with Language

Metaphysical poetry can be difficult to understand, which is another chief complaint of its critics. The challenge of the poetry is mainly due to the poets' attempts at experimenting with language in order to explain and depict life's

complexities in imaginative ways. Although each metaphysical poet had a unique style, their poetry tended to share several traits.

- simple, conversational **vocabulary**, but complex sentence patterns
- **metaphysical conceits**, a type of extended metaphor comparing very dissimilar things
- **paradoxes**, or statements that seem to contradict themselves
- disruptions of **poetic meter**
- witty and imaginative plays on words

The most distinguishing feature is the **metaphysical conceit**, an extended metaphor that makes a surprising connection between two quite dissimilar things. It is often used to persuade, or to bolster the “argument” of the speaker. An example is Donne’s description of how his love for someone will outlast them both in “The Canonization.”

We can die by it, if not live by love;  
And if unfit for tombs and hearse  
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;  
And if no piece of chronicle we prove  
We’ll build in sonnets pretty rooms

—John Donne, “The Canonization”

### Close Read

Paraphrase the argument being made in this passage.

Another important characteristic of metaphysical poetry is **paradox**—a statement that seems contradictory but nevertheless suggests a truth. The use of paradox forces the reader to think about an image or a subject from a new perspective. For this reason, it may strike some readers as irreverent.

Oh do not die, for I shall hate  
All women so when thou art gone,  
That thee I shall not celebrate  
When I remember, thou wast one.

—John Donne, “A Fever”

### Close Read

Identify the paradox in these lines. What feeling is the speaker attempting to express about his loved one?

One of the criticisms of metaphysical poetry concerned its disruption of poetic meter (the regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables). The metaphysical poets intentionally created “roughness,” or a deliberate unevenness, in their meters. In the eyes of many critics, Donne used this poetic technique too often. Poet Ben Jonson, although a great admirer of Donne’s, once declared that “Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging.”