

# UNIT 3

# POETIC CONVENTIONS Metaphysical Poetry

- The term “metaphysical” or “metaphysics” in poetry is the fruit of renaissance tree.
- The word meta means beyond the physical means of nature.
- Thus, Metaphysical poetry means poetry that goes beyond the physical world of the senses and explores the spiritual/abstract world.
- Metaphysical poetry is a very intellectual poetry and interrogates abstract concepts.
- It deals with abstract or philosophical subjects such as love, religion, God, beauty, faith and so on.
- Metaphysical is characterized with witty conceits and farfetched imagery.

# Main Features of metaphysical poetry

- The use of wit and conceit
- Exhibition of learning
- Directness of speech
- Scientific speculations
- Argumentative presentation of emotions
- The use of daring images
- Dialogic and mostly scholarly language
- Religious and dramatic elements

# Major Metaphysical poets

- John Donne
- Robert Herrick
- Andrew Marvell
- George Herbert
- Thomas Crashaw
- Abraham Cowley

# “The Metaphysical poets”

## T. S. Eliot

- This essay was published in 1921.
- The article is actually a review of a new anthology of Robert Grierson.
- In this essay, Eliot identifies his own approach to poetry after he had studied the canon of great English.
- Eliot presents the value and significance of metaphysical poets in the development of English poetry.
- According to Eliot, it is difficult to define metaphysical poetry since there is a considerable difference in style and technique between poets who are given such label as metaphysical.
- It is difficult to find characteristics which are common to all poets labelled as metaphysical (From Donne, Marvell, Johnson to Crashaw).

# “The Metaphysical poets”

- Eliot then proceeds to examine the poets one by one with suitable illustrating characteristics generally considered ‘metaphysical’.
- First, there is the elaboration of a simile to the farthest possible extent to be met with frequently in the poetry of Donne and Cowley.
- Secondly, there is the development of imagery and rapid association of thought requiring considerable agility on the part of the reader.
- Thirdly, on other occasions Donne produces his effects by sudden contrasts.

# Eliot's Response to Johnson's Definition

- Eliot then takes up Dr. Johnson's definition of metaphysical poetry where Eliot tries to define Metaphysical poetry by its faults.
- He said that, in Metaphysical poetry "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together".
- They bring together heterogeneous ideas and compel them into unity by the operation of the poet's mind.
  - Countless instances of such fusion of opposite and dissimilar concepts can be cited at random from all poets.
- Such unity is present even in the poetry of Johnson himself.

# “The Metaphysical poets”

- Dr. Johnson’s remark lies in the fact that the Metaphysical poetry could only violently yoke dissimilar ideas.
- They could unite them or fuse them into a single whole. But this is not a fact. A number of poets of this school have eminently succeeded in uniting heterogeneous ideas.
- Eliot quotes from Herbert Cowley, Bishop King and other poets in support of his contention.
- Eliot concludes that Metaphysical poetry cannot be distinguished from other poetry by Dr. Johnson’s definition.
- Eliot presents that metaphysical poetry is distinguished from other poetry by unification of sensibility, and subsequently, dissociation of sensibility.

# Unification of Sensibility

- By unification sensibility, T. S. Eliot means “a fusion of thought and feeling”, “a recreation of thought into feeling”, “a direct sensuous apprehension of thought”. Such fusion of thought and feeling is essential for good poetry.
- Eliot gives concrete illustrations to show that such unification of sensibility, thought and feeling, is to be found in the poetry of Donne as well as in much of modern poetry, but it is lacking in the poetry of Tennyson.

# Dissociation of Sensibility

- The fact is that after Donne and Herbert a change came over the mind of England. The poets lost the capacity of uniting thought and feeling. The 'unification of sensibility' was lost, and 'dissociation of sensibility' set in.
- After that the poets can either think or they can feel; there are either intellectual poets who can only think, or there are poets, who can only feel.
- The poets of the 18th century were intellectuals, they thought but did not feel; the romantics of the 19th century felt but did not think.
- Tennyson and Browning can merely reflect or ruminate.

# Sample questions

- What are the characteristics of the metaphysical poets according to T. S. Eliot?
- How does Eliot respond to Dr. Johnson's definition of metaphysical poetry in the essay?

# “Preface to Shakespeare”

## Samuel Johnson

- This essay was written by Samuel Johnson as an introduction to a book on Shakespeare.
- **Johnson’s** essay is considered a classic document of English literary criticism.
- He presents an appreciative analysis of both the merits and demerits of Shakespeare as a true critic.
- This preface was written after Johnson spending nine years in producing an edition of Shakespeare’s plays.

# “Preface to Shakespeare”

- Three basic concerns are discussed in this essay:
  - how a poet’s reputation is established
  - The poet’s relation to nature
  - The relative virtues of nature and experience of life
- Johnson states that the excellence of a work is determined by “length of duration and continuous esteem”.
- No work is deemed worthy unless it is compared to other works of its kind.
- Johnson opines that if we judge Shakespeare by this criteria, we can say that he has exceeded the importance of the ancient since his reputation survived his time, still read and appreciated after centuries.

# The strength of Shakespeare's works: his characters

- Johnson identifies the reason behind Shakespeare's success as he dealt with human truth that are
  - permanent
  - universal
  - stands the test of time.
- Important aspects of Shakespeare's works that Johnson focuses on:
  - Shakespeare's characters
    - ✓ As real to life
    - ✓ Reflecting all manner of people
- Johnson points out that Shakespeare's characters are not molded by the accident of time, place and local custom.
- Reflect "the genuine progeny of common humanity"

# Shakespeare's Characters

- ❑ Act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated”
- ❑ True to age, sex, and profession
- ❑ One character's speech cannot be put in the mouth of another
- ❑ They are not exaggerated.
- ❑ Shakespeare's characters are not heroes but men.
- ❑ It expresses human sentiment in human language
- Johnson defends criticism that Shakespeare's characters insufficiently reflect their time period and status.
- He states that Shakespeare always makes nature predominate over accident and he preserves the essential characters.

# Shakespeare's plays

- Johnson presents Shakespeare's plays as a storehouse of practical wisdom.
- We can formulate a philosophy of life from his plays.
- His plays represent not just love but a variety of human passion.
- He approximates the remote and familiarizes the wonderful.
- Shakespeare's plays represent real human life which is mixed with good and evil, joy and sorrow etc.

# Faults of Shakespeare

- He seems to write without moral purpose.
- There is an absence of social duty in his plays.
- There is no poetic justice in his plays, “he makes no just distribution of good or evil”.
- Good and bad actions operate by chance in Shakespeare’s plays.
- A writer’s duty is to make the world better hence Shakespeare’s absence of poetic justice does not follow the writer’s duty.
- Shakespeare’s plots, according to Johnson, is loose.
- The tragedies in Shakespeare’s plays are forced or improbable.

# The three unities

- Shakespeare neglects the unities of time and place but Johnson defends him that these are not essential to the play.

## Conclusion

- Johnson's essay is a good example of a criticism as it clearly focuses on Shakespeare's works and not his personality.
- He carefully passes a judgement on Shakespeare's works by evaluating and analyzing various aspects of his work.
- He reveals the strength and weaknesses in Shakespeare's works.
- Thus, Johnson establishes the relevance of Shakespeare as a literary writer.
- His essay highlights the issue of universalism in literary criticism.

# Sample Questions

- In view of Johnson, to what are some of the strengths of Shakespeare's works?
- Explain some weaknesses of Shakespeare's works that Johnson identifies.
- How does Shakespeare's works reflect the universality of humanity?

# ROMANTICISM AND LITERARY CRITICISM

- What is romanticism?
- The romantic period is one of the most important periods in English literature.
- It started during the times of the French Revolution (1778), the year in which “Lyrical Ballads” was published by Wordsworth and Coleridge.
- It is a movement that sought to revolt against the stereotyped diction and content of neoclassicism.
- The romantic period was shaped by the French revolution (1789-1799).

# Romanticism

- It is a literary and philosophical engagement of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- It is considered as a period of man's escape from the shackles of commerce and industry to freedom of nature:
  - a period that sought an intense relationship with the natural world.
- It is reaction against the industrial revolution and enlightenment.
- It enables man to appreciate nature than industry or materialism.

Romanticism is characterized by:

- Emotion
- The appreciation or deification of nature
- Absolute truth
- Simple language
- Ordinary life

# Romantic poets

- Some Romantic poets
  - William Wordsworth
  - John Keats
  - S. T. Coleridge
  - Shelley
- Romanticism is inspired by three ideas:
  - Nature
  - Imagination
  - Individual.
- Romantics move beyond individualism and focused on subjective emotions (against reason and intellect)
- Favour spontaneity over order.
- Romantics reject the emphasis on reason, and retreat from the neoclassical norm of writing.

# Preface to Lyrical Ballads

## William Wordsworth

- It was written by William Wordsworth in 1802
  - It is a text of literary criticism.
  - It is considered the Manifesto of Romanticism
  
- It deals with :
  - The content of poetry
  - Creation of poetry
  - The language of poetry
  - The features of the poet
  - The definition of poetry

# The content of poetry

- The poet chooses to relate and to describe incidents and situations from common life
- Everything expressed implies the use of imagination
- Interest is added by tracing events and situations in the way people associate with ideas in a state of excitement.
- Low and rustic life is chosen
- Poetry should present ordinary things in an unusual aspect

# The Language of Poetry

- The poet should use a selection of language really used by men.
- The language has to be familiar, plain and simple.
- The poet should convey feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions
- The language of low classes should be purified from defects and disgusts

# The features of the poet

- He is a man speaking to men
- He has a more lively sensibility, enthusiasm and tenderness than common men
- He has got a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul
- He contemplates volitions and passions in the Universe
- He creates passions where he does not find them

# The Definition of poetry

- It is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings
- The feelings originated from emotion recollected in tranquility
- Its ultimate goal is pleasure
- It is based on experience

# Sample questions

- What are the features or characteristics of the romantic period in poetry?
- Who are romantic poets according to Wordsworth?
- What makes Wordsworth “Preface to Lyrical Ballad” a literary criticism?
- How does Wordsworth define poetry?
- What should be the features and functions of poetry according to the essay?