

# **Block-1**

**Unit 1 : An Introduction to Renaissance Poetry**

**Unit 2 : Poetry in the Neo Classical Age**

**Unit 3 : An Introduction to Metaphysical Poetry**

**Unit 4 : John Donne: “The Canonization”, “The Flea”**

**Unit 5 : John Donne: “The Canonization”, “The Flea”**

**Unit 6 : Alexander Pope: An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot**

**Unit 7 : Anna Letitia Barbauld: “The Caterpillar”,  
“Washing Day”**

**Unit 8 : Anna Letitia Barbauld: “The Caterpillar”,  
“Washing Day”**



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## Unit 1: An Introduction to Renaissance Poetry

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### Unit Structure:

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- 1.2 Introduction
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### 1.1 Objectives

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This unit is designed to introduce the students to the poetry produced during the Renaissance period in England. In this regard, a brief survey of the trajectory of the Renaissance can be helpful to contextualize English Renaissance poetry. Thus, after going through this unit, you will be able to

- *understand* and *describe* the characteristic traits Renaissance movement and its impacts upon the writers, especially poets
- *identify* the element of humanism that earmarked the movement
- *know* the major traits of English Renaissance poetry including its trends
- *familiarize* with the prominent figures of Renaissance poetry

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### 1.2 Introduction

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The term ‘Renaissance’ literally denotes ‘rebirth’. It may also signify a reawakening into the knowledge which existed in the past or revival of interest in the antiquity of classical Greek, Rome, etc. The term has its roots in Italian *rinascenza* or *rinascimento*. It is generally applied to signify the

historical period that followed the Middle Ages or the Medieval Period. Many scholars believe that the Renaissance proper began in Europe (Italy) in the latter half of the 14th Century and continued throughout Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and even after that. This period is marked by a renewed interest in ancient languages, the recovery of antique manuscripts, and the return to the classical ideals underlying the era's defining intellectual movement called humanism. They took a greater interest in their heritage, as was there in Greek and Roman times as opposed to what the Church had taught them. It was a period that brought about profound changes in the philosophical outlook of the people of Europe. The intellectual minds were ignited and the zest for exploring intellectual and geographical dimensions was at its peak. Renaissance thinkers showed immense interest in classical art and culture and there was a deviation from the obsolete literature of the middle ages to the classical literature. There was a deviation from the whole to the individual – from general to particular in the Renaissance. In general, Renaissance opened the door of immense possibilities.

#### **Check Your Progress**

1. What did Wyatt and Surrey do for English poetry?  
(Hint: Look for their contribution and their achievements)
2. What is *Blank Verse*?  
(Hint: Surrey introduced it to English.)

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### **1.3 Renaissance Humanism**

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Humanism was the philosophical backbone of this movement of the Renaissance. It helped people discover their potential as opposed to the emphasis on religion. The impact was so overwhelming that it changed the mindset of the people from the darkness of the Medieval period to the sunshine of the modern age. The language and literature don new clothes in the new day. The impulse was instrumental in intensifying individual scholarship of scientific, geographical, and classical cognition to a so far unthinkable extent. There was an immense faith in the potential of individual man as he existed in this world. It also asserted that religion did not constitute the core of human life on earth. The Renaissance emphasized the present and secular lives that involve the appreciation of beauty and artifacts, and the emphasis on the other

senses had a tremendous impact on human life. Renaissance men and women studied Greek literature with tremendous enthusiasm and inquisitiveness and developed new insights with every rereading. The works of Aristotle and Plato and the plays of Euripides, Sophocles, and Aristophanes were rediscovered, reread, and reinterpreted. Thus, man, in general, becomes the essence of Renaissance scholarship. Renaissance scholars wisely called themselves humanists, who are interested in anything that talked about human existence in this life. Petrarch and Boccaccio were among the early humanists, and their works are described as the dawn of the Renaissance. Great scientist Copernicus tried to prove that the Sun and not the Earth, was the center of the Universe. In religion, John Wycliffe and John Huss, and Martin Luther fought against the evils of the Church and the foul authority. The Renaissance minds considered themselves as modern in every aspect and tried to break free of the shackles of the middle ages. The Renaissance spread rapidly from its birthplace in Florence to the rest of Italy in the 15th century, and soon to the rest of Europe. The invention of the printing press by German printer Johannes Gutenberg allowed the rapid transmission of these new ideas. As it spread, its ideas diversified and changed, being adapted to local culture leading to the rise of vernacular literature throughout Europe.

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**SAQ**

1. From your reading what do you understand by the term Renaissance?  
(30 words)

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2. What is Renaissance Humanism? (20 words)

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**Stop to Consider**

Renaissance and Humanism: Let's consider the following comments:

According to literary Historian William J. Long:

“The term Renaissance, though used by many writers to denote the whole transition from the Middle Ages to the modern world is more correctly applied to the revival of art resulting from the discovery and imitation of classic models in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Humanism applies to the revival of classical literature. . . .”

And according to J. A. Cuddon, the humanists of the Renaissance period were students of *literae humaniores* – the literature of the Greek and Latin poets, dramatists, philosophers, historians, and rhetoricians. As a European phenomenon, it was more worldly and thus espoused more secular and anthropocentric philosophy. It helped to civilize man, to make him realize potential powers and gifts, rather than on the preparation for eternal and spiritual life.

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## 1.4 Renaissance in Britain

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In Britain, the impact of the Renaissance begun to be felt with the rise of the Tudor Dynasty (1485–1603) and attained its peak during the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603) and manifested in different genres like drama, poetry, and prose. This can also be taken as a cultural and artistic movement visible after the end of the Wars of Roses (1455-1485) and started with the Tudor dynasty. The second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is usually regarded as the height of the English Renaissance. The resultant intellectual thrust of the Renaissance moved the people forward from the primarily gloomy and passive literature of the past and got engaged in the modern active life that gave some meaning to their spirit of exploration. The major issues that manifested during Renaissance reflected the evolved culture, appetite for exploration, and enthusiasm to create new literature. However, this period also witnessed the continuation of some aspects of the literary practices of the Middle Ages and writers tried to incorporate the same with the newfound secular ideas. The pragmatic, anthropocentric approach and the passion to reform society was the hallmark of Renaissance literature. The development of the printing press in England by Caxton in 1474 propelled the widespread impact of the Renaissance throughout England.

### **Stop to Consider**

There were many great civilizations in Europe. Still, why the Renaissance first started in Italy? Why of all European countries Renaissance had to be started in Italy? The geographical location of Italy has got something to do with it. Italy used to connect the rest of Europe with the Byzantium Empire and the Arab worlds as a trade route. As the trade progressed, this particular area comprising Florence, Venice, Milan, and Rome flourished financially competing among them to patronise culture, sculpture, music, and any forms of scholasticism. They became the epicenter of the Renaissance.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Italian authors began writing in their native vernacular language rather than in Latin, French, or Provencal. The earliest Renaissance literature appeared in 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy with writers like Dante, Petrarch, and Machiavelli. From the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century onwards the influence of the Renaissance rapidly spread across Europe. Renaissance literature is characterized by the adoption of a Humanist philosophy and the recovery of the classical literature of Antiquity, experimentation with form and structure, modern outlook, and benefited from the spread of printing in the latter part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

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## **1.5 Renaissance Poetry**

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### **1.5.1 Introduction**

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Many critics consider Elizabethan Poetry as the high Renaissance poetry in English and is one of the major literary outputs of this period. The kind of poetry that was produced in this period was very different in style, outlook, treatment of the subject matter, and theme from the poetry that was produced in the Medieval period. However, there was a certain continuity of medieval history and values into the Elizabethan times evident in the poetry of this period. It was primarily secular and relatively modern, and the Renaissance intellectual input and effect of Reformation were very much visible in it. The printing of texts helped establish English as a literary language by standardizing modern English. Caxton printed English poetry of Gower, Lydgate, and Chaucer as well as translations of classical and continental poetry. This opened the intellectual horizon of English minds. Gradually printing

manifold and literacy increased, and English education was transformed by Renaissance humanism with an emphasis on disciplines of rhetoric and eloquence. Renaissance poetry was beginning to emerge. The Reformation, together with the Renaissance pushed poetry towards new and hitherto unexplored directions. A clear shift from the narrative poetry of the earlier times towards lyrical poetry like sonnet, pastoral poetry was visible. English Renaissance poetry can be categorised into three different phases.

### Check Your Progress

1. How did Renaissance influence English writers, especially poets?  
(Hint: enquire how classical writers worked as models for English poets)
2. How did printing help in the development of Renaissance poetry?  
(Hint: Consider the effect of printing press in the publication of books etc.)
3. What are the differences between Medieval poetry and Renaissance poetry?  
(Consider the differences in language, outlook of poet, theme, structure etc)

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### **1.5.2 Tudor and Early Elizabethan Poets:**

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The earliest phase of the English Renaissance can be taken as the native phase because of its roots in medieval tradition. Notable poets of this phase are John Skelton, Sir Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard, Thomas Sackville, George Gascoigne, Thomas Churchyard, George Whetstone, George Whetstone, BarnabeGooge, etc. John Skelton (1460-1529) is usually considered the first Renaissance poet of England. Learned and versatile, Skelton wrote occasional poetry celebrating the reign of the Tudors. Most of his poems, however, reveal an independent mind, which is also reflective, playful, and satiric at times. His short, rhyme-rich lines featuring colloquial diction and rhythms came to be known as Skeltonics later on. His major poems include *The Bouge of Court* (1499), an allegorical dream vision

warning of court corruption; “Speak, Parrot,” “Colin Clout,” and “Why Come Ye Not to Court?” (1522).

The first fruit of the English Renaissance was *Tottel’s Miscellany* (first titled as *Songes and Sonettes*), printed by an enterprising printer Richard Tottel in 1557. It included poems written by poets or courtly makers that existed in manuscript form till then. Almost half of the poems were by Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. These two poets were hugely influenced by the Italian Renaissance. Wyatt wrote verse letters, lyrics, and satires warning court corruption, and his dozens of poems are about love recount and disillusionment included his much-anthologized rhyme-royal masterpiece “They Flee from Me” (1530). Surrey introduced blank verse into the English Literary scenario in Book II and IV of translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. He developed the English sonnet by organizing the fourteen lines into three quatrains and a couplet (*abab, cdcd, efef, gg*) instead of the Italian sonnet’s structure of octave and sestet. Thus, the chief literary contributions of these two men are the introduction of the blank verse and sonnet to the Elizabethan audience. Another popular book in the second half of the 16th century was *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), a collection of verse laments by various authors recounting the downfall of princes and other powerful figures in English history.

Two other poets of the significance of this period are Thomas Sackville (1536-1608), the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Dorset, and George Gascoigne. Sackville’s poem “Induction” (1563) is considered the finest single poem written between Chaucer and Spenser. In 1561 he composed the first English play in blank verse, *Gorboduc* with Thomas Norton, which deals with the consequences of political rivalry. There were very few poets of significance after Chaucer and before Spenser that English literary history has to reckon with. The co-author of *Gorboduc*, Thomas Norton (1532-84) is known for plays and verse, especially sonnets he composed with Jasper Heywood. He also contributed to *Tottel’s Miscellany*. George Gascoigne (1525-77), poet and soldier, wrote the first blank verse satire of English literature titled *Steel Glass* (1576). He is also known for his amorous and mock-heroic poem *Dan Bartholomew of Bath*. There was the discernible influence of Petrarch in Gascoigne and his other significant contribution include *The Drum of Doomsday*, *The View of Worldly Vanities*, *The Shame of Sin*, *The Needle’s Eye*, *Remedies against the*

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*Bitterness of Death, A Delicate Diet for Dainty-mouthed Drunkards, The Grief of Joy, The Grievs or Discommodities of Lusty Youth, The Vanities of Beauty, The Faults of Force and Strength, The Vanities of Activities*, etc. Another versatile writer of this period was Thomas Churchyard (1520-1604). He rose to brief fame through his occasional verse, pamphlets on wartime experiences, and pageants for Queen Elizabeth I. Churchyard's earliest work *A Myrroure for Man* (1552) reflects on the state of man. His most important poem, "The Legend of Shore's Wife," was printed in the 1563 edition of *A Mirror for Magistrates* and also authored lyrics in *Tottel's Miscellany*. Another little-known writer of this early Tudor period George Whetstone (1544-87) commemorated his friend George Gascoigne in a long elegy. His first volume, the *Rocke of Regarde* (1576), consisted of tales in prose and verse adapted from the Italian. George Turberville (1540-1610) is the first English poet to publish a book of verses to his lady, a genre that became popular in the Elizabethan age later on. He wrote *Epitaphes, Epigrams, Songs, and Sonnets* (1567), which had models in *Tottel's Miscellany* and the *Greek Anthology*, addressing poems to his lady, the Countess of Warwick. He is also remembered for his translations of Ovid and Mantuanus (1567), which included early attempts at the blank verse in English. Lesser known but significant Barnabe Googe (1540-94) was one of the earliest English pastoral poets and translators who wrote in a plain or native style. Googe's important contribution to pastoral poetry in English rests with his cycle of eclogues that synthesise trends from classical pastoral, the work of Mantuan, and the pastoral elements of Spanish romance. The poems of George Turberville, Thomas More, George Gascoigne, and Walter Raleigh are examples of a similar style. The English pastoral poem "Phyllida was a fayer maid" (from *Tottel's Miscellany*) has been doubtfully ascribed to Googe.

### **Check Your Progress**

3. What did Wyatt and Surrey do for English poetry?  
(Hint: Look for their contribution and their achievements)
4. What is *Blank Verse*?  
(Hint: Surrey introduced it to English.)

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### 1.5.3 Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney and other

#### Elizabethans

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With Edmund Spenser (1552-99), the “poet’s poet” (C. Lamb) English poetry entered into a new age of refreshing variety. He was one of the most important non-dramatic poetic figures of the English Renaissance. Although very little biographical detail is available about Spenser, it is believed that he received a befitting education and rose to prominence in London at a very young age without having any privileged birth. Edmund Spenser popularised pastoral poetry in England and with the publication of *The Shepherd’s Calendar* in 1579 Elizabethan age entered the Golden Age of Literature, especially for poetry in England. Spenser held Chaucer in high regard and he considered Chaucer as “The well of English undefiled”. This respect for the past in Spenser created a balanced blend of all the finer things of medieval poetry and contemporary poetic trends in his poetic discourse. He is the one who lent English poetry a relatively modern structure with modern thoughts and attitudes. The protestant influence was reflected in his writing as well as in his attitude towards life and politics in general. Spenser died at the very young age of 46 in 1599. Most of his poetic oeuvre was composed during his stay in Ireland. His first poem, *The Shepherd’s Calendar* which can be called the first work of the English literary Renaissance, was published while he was only 27 and was dedicated to his friend Phillip Sidney. It is a pastoral elegy concerning the theme of a sense of loss and the golden age. His best work and undoubtedly one of the finest poetic works of Elizabethan time is the heroic or allegorical epic *The Faerie Queen* (1589-96), written in what came to be known as the Spenserian stanza. It has some affinity with Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* in its structure and is written in the form of a set of six books (the original plan was to write 12 books). The design is grand and expansive and some of its parts are still unfinished. It is believed that Spenser published *The Faerie Queen* with the assistance of Walter Raleigh, who encouraged him to write and made all his works public. In *The Faerie Queene* Spenser proved himself a master artist of musing picture, music, meter, and story together. It seems that the epic celebrates Elizabeth I and Tudor rule, but it is also a satiric, suggestive text, full of surprises and contradictions. Spenser created

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a new stanza for his masterpiece which came to be known as the Spenserian stanza later on. The Spenserian stanza is more or less an expansion and intensification of rhyme royal and makes *The Faerie Queene* all the more suspenseful, thought-provoking, musical, and even mesmerizing. Two of Spenser's works *Amoretti* (1595), and *Epithalamion* (1595) were written while he was in a relationship with Elizabeth Boyle, his future wife. *Amoretti*, which celebrates immortality of spiritual love and temporality of physical love, is a set of 88 sonnets where he talks about his luck towards his lady love. His lyric poem *Epithalamion* can be taken as the noblest wedding hymn in contemporary English literature. This set of poems is unique among Renaissance sonnet sequences in that it celebrates a successful love affair culminating in marriage. One of Spenser's most effective pastoral poems *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe* (1595) describes a provincial lad's resistance against the authority, with subsequent reflections on false, superficial love. During this time, he supervised the printing of some of his other poems in a collection called *Complaints* (1591), many of which had probably been written earlier in his career and were now being published to benefit from the great success of his new heroic poem.

Spenser's illustrious friend Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86) is another prominent figure of English Renaissance poetry. He was born into the nobility and was the eldest son of Sir Henry Sidney and his wife, Lady Mary Dudley, daughter of the duke of Northumberland. The noble lineage provides him easy access to many influential political and social circles of contemporary times. Sidney was the model of a perfect Renaissance gentleman – soldier, courtier, scholar, diplomat, knight, lover, and poet – all rolled into one. He was awarded a knighthood in the year 1583 by the Queen herself and was the patron of several artists and writers that included Edmund Spenser, Abraham Fraunce, Thomas Lodge, etc. He was a complete courtier poet having all sorts of military and diplomatic prowess and a protestant to the core with strong English roots. It is rightly said that no one can get more English than him. Being a member of the parliament, he had the opportunity to travel widely across European countries like France, Germany, Poland, Austria, Hungary, and Italy. This experience of coming into close contact with different cultures and society accounted for the kind of poetry that we see in him. In the year 1582, he composed the sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella* (1591) that

recounts a courtier's passion in delicately fictionalized terms. These witty and impassioned sonnets helped Elizabethan poetry attain a kind of maturity. His *An Apology for Poetry* or *The Defence of Poesie* (1579) remains the finest work of Elizabethan literary criticism. It was written as a response to Stephen Gosson's attack on the poetic expression and morality of the stage.

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### **Stop to Consider**

It will not be wrong to say that Phillip Sidney was the person who set the literary tone in England and started the trend of formulating literary clubs that became the centre of numerous discussions igniting the minds of many literary brains of England.

Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) was another Renaissance man like Sidney. He was a statesman, soldier, spy, writer, poet, explorer, and learned gentleman. One of the most notable figures of the Elizabethan era, he played a leading part in the English colonization of North America. C. S. Lewis considered him as one of the era's "silver poets", a group of writers who resisted the Italian Renaissance influence of dense classical reference and elaborate poetic devices. Written in a relatively straightforward and plain style, Raleigh's poetry contains strong personal treatments of themes such as love, loss, beauty, and time. Most of his poems are short lyrics that were inspired by actual events. In poems such as "What is Our Life" and "The Lie", Raleigh expresses an attitude more characteristic of the Middle Ages than of the dawning era of humanistic optimism. However, his lesser-known long poem "The Ocean's Love to Cynthia" combines medieval vein with the more elaborate conceits associated with his contemporaries Edmund Spenser and John Donne.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. How did minor poets contributed to Renaissance poetry?  
(Hint: Make a list of lesser known poets from your study and see what they wrote)
2. What is pastoral elegy?  
(Hint: A very favorite narrative poetry with the Renaissance poet )

Fulke Greville (1554-1628), a poet, dramatist, and statesman was the principal courtly writer of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, apart from his short-lived friend Sir Philip Sidney. Known as a composer of short poems, Greville's other poetic contributions include sonnet sequence *Caelica* (1633); and verse treatises *An Inquisition upon Fame and Honor* (1633), *A Treatise of Humane Learning* (1633), *A Treatise of Wars* (1633), *A Treatise of Monarchy* (1670), and *A Treatise of Religion* (1670). *Caelica* differed in tone from most Elizabethan sequences, and its treatment being realistic and ironic rather than romantic. His verse treatises reflected the role of the statesmen in keeping order in a naughty world. His poem "Humane Learning" ponders over the effectiveness of instruments and aims of earthly knowledge and, in stressing practical improvements, probably owed something to his friend Francis Bacon.

Better known as a classical scholar and an important figure in the English Renaissance, George Chapman (1559-1634) was a playwright, poet, and translator. An anticipator of the metaphysical poets of the 17th century, Chapman's first published work was *The Shadow of Night* (1594), composed of two hymns, one to Night and one to Cynthia. It is partly allegorical as in the tale of Euthymia (whose name means "Cheerfulness") and the hunt (or chase of the passions) in "Cynthiam". Despite the notoriety of obscurity, this poem displays throughout a quite remarkable and clear handling of syntax within some powerful pentameter couplets. Chapman is best remembered for his translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the Homeric *Batrachomyomachia*. His translation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were penned in iambic heptameter and iambic pentameter respectively, extending and elaborating on Homer's original contents to add descriptive detail or moral and philosophical interpretation and emphasis. Chapman's translation of Homer was much admired by John Keats in his famous poem *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*, and also drew attention from Samuel Taylor Coleridge and T. S. Eliot. Other poems by Chapman include *De Guiana*, *Carmen Epicum* (1596), on the exploits of Sir Walter Raleigh; a continuation of Christopher Marlowe's unfinished *Hero and Leander* (1598); and *Euthymiae Raptus; or the Tears of Peace* (1609). Some critics hold that Chapman to be the 'rival poet' of Shakespeare's sonnets (in sonnets 78–86). Chapman also

translated the *Homeric Hymns*, the *Georgics* of Virgil, *The Works of Hesiod* (1618, dedicated to Francis Bacon), the *Hero and Leander* of Musaeus (1618), and the *Fifth Satire* of Juvenal (1624).

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**SAQ**

Who according to you are three major poets of Renaissance in England? (30 words)

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What are the major poetic trends of English Renaissance? (30 words)

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**1.5.4 Marlowe and Shakespeare**

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The poetic works of the two Elizabethan greats, Christopher Marlowe (1564-93) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616) are integral to Renaissance poetry. They not only excelled as dramatists but also dominated the poetic scene of the Elizabethan age. Both the dramatic and non-dramatic verses of these two greats are of high quality. Christopher Marlowe, in his short life, became a role model for most of the dramatic poets of the 16th century, especially in their use of language and the blank-verse lines. According to Havelock Ellis, “Marlowe’s place is at the heart of English poetry”. Thomas Nashe described Marlowe as “a diviner Muse” than Musaeus; George Peele called him “the Muses’ darling”. Marlowe began writing verse by translating the Roman poets Ovid and Lucan. Marlowe’s translations of these elegies are not uniformly successful, but they nevertheless form an impressive achievement. There are 48 poems in the collection *All Ovids Elegies. Amores*, the first book of Latin elegiac couplets by Ovid with translation by Marlowe (1580) was burned publicly as offensive in 1599. Marlowe’s *The Passionate*

*Shepherd to His Love* (1587–88) is a popular lyric of the time. His unfinished but splendid narrative poem *Hero and Leander* (1593), completed by George Chapman in 1598, is one of the finest non-dramatic Elizabethan poems apart from those produced by Edmund Spenser. It is based on the work of the poet Musaeus on Greek mythology and is considered a mock-epic because of the prevalence of humour in it. This poem is also called an “epillyon” or mini-epic due to its themes, length, and subject matter. The influence of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* is very evident in Marlowe’s version of *Hero and Leander*. He also successfully translated Book One of Lucan’s epic poem *Pharsalia* (1593).

Marlowe’s coveted successor William Shakespeare conquered the Renaissance poetic scene in the same manner he did with the Renaissance drama. Apart from his sonnets, the study of his non-dramatic poetry can illuminate Shakespeare’s activities as a poet emphatically of his own age, especially in the period of extraordinary literary flourish in the last decade of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The closure of theatre during 1593-94 because of the Plague prompted Shakespeare to venture into poetry. Shakespeare’s long narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593) is unquestionably a Renaissance product and can be read as a traditional Ovidian fable, locating the origin of the inseparability of love and sorrow in Venus’s reaction to the death of Adonis. Like Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, *Venus and Adonis* is rightly appreciated as an erotic fantasy glorifying the inversion of established categories and values. After the success of *Venus and Adonis* Shakespeare wrote *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) which works on a combination of ancient and contemporary elements. Unlike *Venus and Adonis*, *Lucrece* is not set in a mythical golden age, but in a fallen, violent world of corrupt morality. In *Venus and Adonis*, an innocent Adonis rejects the sexual advances of Venus; while in *The Rape of Lucrece*, the virtuous wife Lucrece is raped by the lustful Tarquin. Influenced by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, both the poems show the guilt and moral confusion that result from uncontrolled lust. A third narrative poem, *A Lover’s Complaint*, in which a young woman laments her seduction by a persuasive suitor, was printed in the first edition of the *Sonnets* in 1609. Most scholars now accept that Shakespeare wrote *A Lover’s Complaint*. *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, printed in Robert Chester’s 1601 *Love’s Martyr*, mourns

the deaths of the legendary phoenix and his lover, the faithful turtle dove. In 1599, two early drafts of sonnets 138 and 144 appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, published under Shakespeare's name but without his permission. Both Marlowe and Shakespeare's long narrative poems were very popular.

Another prominent name of this period, Michael Drayton (1563-1631) published his first book verse translations from *Old Testament* prayers entitled *The Harmonie of the Church* in 1591. After that, he experimented with different contemporary genres that were in fashion. His *Idea, The Shepherds Garland* (1593) is pastoral eclogues modeled on Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*. *Idea's Mirrour* (1594) is a sonnet sequence of 51 poems of three or four quatrains concluded by a couplet. Erotic idyll *Endimion and Phoebe* (1595) is a mythological narrative in couplets describing the fortunes of Endimion (Drayton), who falls in love with Phoebe (Lucy Harington). *Robert, Duke of Normandy* (1596) and *Mortimeriados* (1596) are his historical heroic poem. The last poem was originally written in rhyme royal and was recast in Ludovico Ariosto's ottava rima verse as *The Barrons Warres* (1603). Drayton's most original poem of this period includes *Englands Heroicall Epistles* (1597) which is a series of pairs of letters exchanged between famous lovers in English history.

John Marston (1576-1634) was a poet, playwright, and satirist during the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods. He contributed to the development of a distinctively Jacobean style in poetry and its idiosyncratic vocabulary. He is fondly remembered for the energetic and often obscure style of his poetry.

Thomas Lodge (1576-1625) was another popular poet of the Elizabethan era who wrote the Ovidian verse fables *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (1589). It is one of the earliest English poems to retell a classical story with imaginative embellishments, and strongly influenced Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. Lodge's next collection *Phillis* (1593) contains amorous sonnets and pastoral eclogues from French and Italian originals. In *A Fig for Momus* (1595), he introduced classical satires and verse epistles into English literature for the first time. Nearly two hundred poets were recorded in the short period from 1558 to 1625, including many prolific

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writers. This is testified in *The Paradyse of Daynty Devices* (1576), or *A Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions* (1578), where we can find hundreds of songs written by numerous poets.

**SAQ**

What according to you are the major publications of Renaissance poetry? (20 words)

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Why Blank Verse became so popular with the Renaissance poets? (25 words)

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Discuss major narrative poetry composed by Marlowe and Shakespeare. (30 words)

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**1.5.5 Elizabethan sonnet:**

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Sonnets were the most important fruit of the Renaissance poetry which was beginning to be written from the early Elizabethan period onwards. It has an Italian origin and dates back to the days of Dante and Petrarch. Believed to be originated in Sicily and Provence, the sonnet is a short poem of fourteen lines, usually in iambic pentameter, expressing one single feeling in two parts – octave and sestet. The octave, a stanza of eight lines, has two rhymes appearing alternately *abba, abba*. The sestet, a stanza of six lines, has either three or two rhymes, *cdecde* or *cdcdcd*. In Britain, it was almost in the 1590s that saw the heyday of English sonnets. Sonnet became more popular than it ever was during any earlier times even in its place of origin, i.e. Italy. The credit of popularizing sonnets in the English literary scenario mainly goes to Shakespeare and it is a tribute to this great literary genius that English sonnet is known as

Shakespearean sonnet as well. However, it was Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-47) who first introduced sonnets to the English audience. These two gentlemen wrote amorous sonnets that were modeled after the Italian master Petrarch. But, the English variety of sonnet underwent a change that adopted a rhyme scheme widely different from the original one. Surrey completed his sonnets in three quatrains in alternate rhyme, *abab, cdcd, efef*, followed by a concluding couplet *gg*. This was later on used magnificently by Shakespeare in the true Renaissance spirit. Thus, the two-part scheme of Petrarchan sonnet was modified by the English practitioners including the great Shakespeare which went on to become one of the poetic mainstays of the Renaissance. Apart from these varieties of Renaissance sonnet, Edmund Spenser evolved a new one, in which each of the quatrains was interlinked by an intricate rhyme scheme: *abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee*. Though there is no fixity of the subject matter of the sonnet, the Elizabethan has mostly restricted the thematic concern to love and friendship.

Sonnet rose to its pinnacle of glory in the Elizabethan period itself at a time when drama enjoyed overwhelming popularity. But, how it rose to prominence and changed the status of the sonnet form. In this regard, we must consider the influence Sir Phillip Sidney (1580-83) created upon Elizabethan writers to take up sonnet form as serious literature. The first major sonnet cycle of Renaissance England was Sir Phillip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591). This sequence included 108 sonnets that talk about the unsuccessful courtship through the two main figures of Astrophil and Stella. Sidney's sequence was followed shortly by Daniel's *Delia* (1592), Lodge's *Phyllis* (1593), Constable's *Diana* (1594), Drayton's *Idea's Mirror* (1594), and Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595).

After Sidney, William Shakespeare, with his sequence of 154 sonnets published in 1606, put the Elizabethan sonnet at its pinnacle of glory in English literature. This sequence is not only the most innovative and psychologically complex of all the sonnet sequences but also arguably one of the greatest collections of lyric poems in English. Developing further the English sonnet first established by Wyatt and Surrey, Shakespeare captures the mind in many moods and patterns of thought - vulnerability, anxiety, longing, rejection, confidence, disgust, worldliness, anger, regret, hope, jealousy,

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depression, etc in different sonnets. His sonnets are not imitations but original and unconventional in nature. Here, the poet-lover addresses not a lady but a beloved young man (in sonnets 1-126), and a lady (in sonnets 127-52) - the poet-lover's sexual partners. He was followed sincerely by many English poets over the years.

### Stop to Consider

Until the days of Shakespeare, the sonnet was considered a minor form of poetry. It was dismissed as an exhausted genre and many writers did not want to experiment with the form since nothing much has left to be done with this form of writing – thematically more theological with little possibility of cultural traction. The sonnet form was also seen as too feminine and was not considered a masculine kind of art by the male writers. Moreover, the sonnet had a catholic connection because of its origin in Italy. As English was one of a protestant stronghold, it was considered blasphemous to practice a catholic form of expression. Some even rejected as too artificial for English rhymes. In comparison, drama enjoyed more popularity amongst the Elizabethan writers, and the stage was considered more profitable in comparison to the sonnet form. However, we can find there were three varieties of sonnets are Petrarchan, Shakespearean and Spenserian.

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### **1.5.6 Did women have a Renaissance?**

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Although there was not much literature created by women during this period, there were few women writers who managed to achieve some sort of personal articulation in the form of poetry. Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621), and sister of Phillip Sidney was an exception because of her noble birth. She is listed alongside Spenser, Shakespeare, and her brother in English literary history. She was the most accomplished female writer of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. She translated Petrarch's *Triumph of Death* into English terza rima and Robert Garnier's *Antonius, A Tragedy* (1592) into English blank verse. Anne Askew (1521-46), is another important and earliest known woman poet of English Literature. Another important poet was Isabella Whitney (active during 1567-73) who published a love

complaint (1567) and a collection of secular poems and prose, *A Sweet Nosgay, or Pleasant Posye* (1573). Her next publication *The Flowers of Philosophy* (1572) evidences her female experience, colloquial voice, and sense of purpose. Other prominent names of women writers include Margaret Tyler, Emilia Lanyer, Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639), and Lady Mary Wroth (1587-1651). Margaret Tyler is known for her successful translation of the Spanish romance *The Mirror of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* into English in 1578. Emilia Lanyer, whose work is considered as the earliest feminist work of England is known for her single volume of poems titled *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611). Elizabeth Cary was a poet, translator, and dramatist. Her *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry* (1613) was the first play written by a woman. Lady Mary Wroth wrote an important sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*.

Most of the critics and historians discussing the Renaissance literature do not accord any space to the female writers of the Renaissance period. There may be many reasons that account for the absence of women writers from the literary landscape of the Renaissance, e. g. low literacy rates among women, non-availability of the printed form of writing by women, restricted circulation, presence of non-canonical forms (letters, diaries, etc), the possibility of censorship by male authority, etc. Although some intellectual leaders of the later 16th century advocated literacy in women, few encouraged them to study rhetoric, humanism, and poetics. So, the question is – did women were part of this celebration of the secular, free spirit of Renaissance literature? This question was raised by Joan Kelly-Gadol’s 1997 essay “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” She argued that women’s historical experiences differ from that of men. While there were lots of options available for men during the Renaissance’s celebrated concept of courtly love was structured in such a way that it highlighted women’s passivity and virginity. This did not take into account the women’s point of view. In general, the status of women was pathetic in this age of rational thinking. Women of this period were mostly perceived in gendered roles and had no suffrage and access to university education.

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**SAQ**

1. Describe the major characteristics of Renaissance poetry.  
(100 words)

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.....  
.....

2. Define sonnet with proper examples. (30 words)

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.....  
.....

3. Evaluate Elizabethan sonnets and its major exponents. (50 words)

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What according to you are the reasons behind Sonnets becoming a major trend of Renaissance poetry in England? (50 words)

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**1.6 Summing Up**

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It is difficult to point out precisely when the phenomenon of the Renaissance came to an end. Probable it never ended and its effect continued to be felt throughout ages. Literary achievements don't neatly conform to an era's political and social milestones. It should be noted that by Elizabeth's death, many of the greatest Elizabethan poets were writing at or near their peak. The Metaphysical schools of poets, who were the men of letters, were beginning to assert their presence including Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Andrew Marvell, and others. Though the Metaphysical poets were criticised by their contemporary Johnson for combining most heterogeneous ideas and their use of conceit and ingenuity, they are held in high esteem by modernists like T. S. Eliot. A famous example is Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," where he compares two lovers' souls to the "stiff twin" legs of a geometer's compass, one moving, the other fixed, the two

inextricably connected. Later on, a contrasting school of poets appeared on the scene - the Cavalier poets, including Robert Herrick, Thomas Carew, and Richard Lovelace. They were Royalists and tended to harmonize classical moderation and cosmopolitan wit in measured verses. Most of the celebrated virtues of the English Renaissance religious and secular, classical and topical got reflected in the poetry of John Milton, whose synthesizing mind produced *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674) that stands tall over other poetry of many English greats.

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## 1.7 Glossary

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**Blank Verse:** This literary device or verse pattern was introduced into English poetry by the Earl of Surrey in the 16th century in his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book II and IV) in 1540. It consists of unrhymed iambic pentameter lines, usually in any kind of meter, such as iamb, trochee, spondee, and dactyl. Surrey might have borrowed the idea from the *versi sciolti* (freed verse) of Molza's Italian translations of *Aeneid* (1539). This verse form became very popular because of the freedom it allowed to the writer as there was no fixed number of lines. In English literature, it is mostly used in narrative and reflective poems and dramas, especially in dramatic monologues. After Surrey, Sackville and Norton used it in *Gorboduc* (1561). Afterward, it became a standard verse form for later Tudor and Jacobean dramatists, who made it a more subtle and flexible device. Milton made the best use of it in his magnum opus *Paradise Lost* (1667). Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge are some of its later exponents in the Neoclassical and Romantic age.

**Pastoral Elegy:** An elegy, in general, is a poem of lamentation for the dead. So, a pastoral elegy is a type of elegy where the speaker, mostly a shepherd laments the loss of a companion. Pastoral elegy became very popular during the Renaissance period. The manner of speech and the setting were borrowed from rustic life, and display nostalgia, or a lost love. Thus, the pastoral elegy tends to be an idealization of shepherd's life and creates an image of a peaceful and uncorrupted simple existence away from the court and the town. During the Renaissance period, the expression of a longing for this ideal world was worked in great detail. Spenser's *Shepherds Calender*, *Colin Clout*, *Astrophil* (on the death of Sidney, Spenser's friend), Marlowe's *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love* are some famous examples of Pastoral Elegy from Renaissance England.

**Spenserian Stanza:** This stanza form was invented by Edmund Spenser for his long allegorical poem *The Faerie Queen* (1589-96). It consists of nine iambic lines, of which the first eight are pentameter; the ninth line is hexameter or alexandrine. The rhyme scheme followed by the Spenserian stanza is *ababbcbcc*. It is considered as one of the important innovations in the history of English poetry. It has its roots in the Old French ballade (eight-line stanzas, rhyming *ababbcbc*), and in the Italian ottava rima (eight iambic pentameter lines with a rhyme scheme of *abababcc*). A similar stanza form, the octave was used by Chaucer in his “Monk’s Tale” (eight lines rhyming *ababbcbc*).

**Sonnet Cycle:** A sonnet cycle or sonnet sequence is a group or series of sonnets on a particular theme addressed to a particular individual. According to J. A. Cuddon, “love is the commonest theme and the advantages of the cycle are that it enables the poet to explore many different aspects and moods of the experience, to analyse his feelings in detail and to record the vicissitudes of the affair. At the same time each individual sonnet lives as an independent poem.” Some examples of sonnet sequence are: Spenser’s *Amoretti*, Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, Donne’s *HolySonnets* etc.

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## 1.8 References and Suggested Readings

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## Unit 2 : Poetry in the Neoclassical Age

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### Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Development of Neoclassicism: A Historical Background
- 2.4 Poetry in the Neoclassical Age
- 2.5 Major Literary Critics of the Neoclassical Age and their concept of poetry
  - 2.5.1 Ben Jonson
  - 2.5.2 John Dryden
  - 2.5.3 Alexander Pope
- 2.6 Basic Concepts of Neoclassical poetry
- 2.7 Summing Up
- 2.8 References & Suggested Readings

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### 2.1 Objectives

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After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- *Understand* what Neo-classical poetry is.
- *Know* about the major Neo-classical poets.
- *Learn* the characteristic features of Neo-classical poetry.
- *Define* neo-classicism as definite set of ideas
- *Learn* the basic concepts of Neo-classical literature.

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### 2.2 Introduction

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The Neoclassical era refers to the eighteenth century literary period which marks the return to or the revival of the Classical Greek and Roman conventions of literature as well as of music, painting, sculpture, architecture, etc. The art produced during that period derived its inspiration from the classical period which is reflected in the style and spirit of the literary works and in other forms of art as well. Specifically, in terms of English Literature, this era is also known as the Augustan Period. The term “Augustan Age” refers to the period’s writers’ conscious imitation of the Augustan writers, Virgil and Horace. The Augustan Age, in particular, was the period following the Restoration era until the death of Alexander Pope (1690–1744). Some of the great luminaries

of the age were John Dryden, Dr. Samuel Johnson, Jonathan Swift, Joseph Addison, Daniel Defoe, and Burke and Gibbon, among others. Dryden serves as a bridge between Restoration and Augustan literature. Although he wrote ribald comedies in the Restoration style, his verse satires were highly admired by the generation of poets who followed him, and his writings on literature were very much in the neoclassical spirit. Alexander Pope wrote a couplet that intended to be Newton's epitaph "Nature, and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night, God said, Let Newton be! And all was Light." This view of the universe as a well-ordered, organized place was an aspect of the neoclassical emphasis on order and structure, which also manifested itself in the arts, including literature and poetry. The literature of this period is distinguished by its striving for harmony and precision, its urbanity, and its imitation of classical models such as Homer, Cicero, Virgil, and Horace, as seen, for example, in the work of many Augustan writers and poets. In the context of English literature, the Neoclassical Age is typically divided into three periods: the Restoration Age (1660-1700), the Augustan Age (1700-1750), and the Age of Johnson (1750-1798).

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### **2.3 Development of Neoclassicism: A Historical Background**

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If we were to chart the history of Western literary criticism in full, we would have to study the contributions of philosophers like Plotinus (204/5 - 270 AD) and neo-Platonism; the thoughts of St. Augustine; the "Christian Aristotelianism" of Thomas Aquinas; the theories of scholars like Geoffrey of Vinsauf during the Middle Ages; till the revival of classical learning in the sixteenth-century Renaissance. By turning to neo-classicism from the first-century Longinus, you might begin to think that there is no major event to consider in the intervening period. It will be helpful to remember that scholarship continued with well-known figures we have mentioned above as well as with Dante Alighieri (1265 - 1321), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313 - 1375), and also Christine de Pisan (c. 1365 - 1429) through the centuries against the backdrop of historical events of the Christian era and the Middle Ages.

In the twelfth century, came scholasticism, built through a sequence of events, on the foundations of Aristotelian thought. The sixteenth-century Renaissance turn towards classical works was at variance with the medieval tendency to reconcile the teachings of Christian scripture with classical philosophy. Classicism was in the hands now of secular humanists who fostered classical studies with an emphasis on poetry, philosophy, history, rhetoric and

the study of classical languages (Latin and Greek). Ancient texts thus came to be studied directly without commentaries. Latin, which had so far been the medium of learning and literature, was now removed from its primal position and in a new development, theorizing about the rules of grammar and composition in the vernacular languages came to the fore. The humanists succeeded in supplanting the medieval aversion to poetry and rhetoric with a renewed interest and emphasis on the moral value of these disciplines.

Renaissance literary criticism thus gave a new thrust to the attention to language. In the new socio-political climate of the period, the poet and critic inevitably came to assume new responsibilities and hence placed greater importance on the social functions of poetry and its entailment of rhetorical skills. Renaissance criticism thus emerged in the defence of poetry against charges of irrelevance to society, and of immorality. Also, there was much commentary on classical texts, as in commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica*. Recurrent themes included the concept of imitation, the idea of verisimilitude, the didactic role of literature, the classical concept of 'unities', and more. Among those who engaged with this classical heritage were critics and scholars like Giambattista Giraldi, Lodovico Castelvetro, Giacompo Mazzoni, Torquato Tasso, Joachim du Bellay, Pierre de Ronsard, Sir Philip Sidney, George Gascoigne, and George Puttenham.

When ancient manuscripts preserved in Byzantium had to move westward into European provinces as Constantinople fell into Turkish hands in 1453, a new, closer acquaintance with classical work brought to life fresh scrutiny of ancient Greek and Roman texts. Aristotle's *Poetics* earlier nearly unknown except through an abridged version, proved to be a major infusion into literary discussions. In 1554, Francisco Robortello brought out his accomplished version of Longinus' *Peri Hupsous*, in Greek, with a Latin commentary. Quintilian's *Institutio Oratorio*, which had been known to scholars in the Middle Ages only in fragments, was edited by Cardinal Campano in 1470. The Aldine editions in Venice of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and the *Rhetores Graeci* helped powerfully stimulate theoretical work in this time.

What was the response to this immediate stimulus of classical works? Some degree of imitation of classical writers like Aristotle or Horace can be seen in the productions of the Italian Bishop Marco Girolamo Vida (his *De Arte Poetica*), reflected in the Frenchman Boileau's *Art Poetique* (1674) and then in Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711). Aristotle's influence can be seen in the Latin *De Poeta Libri Sex* (1559) by the Bishop of Ugento Antonio Minturno, to which he added his Italian *L'Arte Poetica* (1564). It can also

be seen in the *Poetices Libri Septem* by the Frenchman Julius Caesar Scaliger, in 1561. This classical influence was also behind such an essay like Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* or the *Apologie for Poetrie*, in 1595.

#### Stop to Consider

##### **Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*:**

The immediate cause of this famous piece of critical writing is the attack through a pamphlet on the London professional theatre which began in 1571, by a Puritan writer, Stephen Gosson. The title of his pamphlet was long-winded: "School of Abuse: Containing a pleasant invective against Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters and such like Caterpillars of a Commonwealth: Setting up the Flag of Defiance to their mischievous exercise, and overthrowing their Bulwarks, by Prophane Writers, Natural Reason, and common experience: A Discourse as Pleasant for them that favour learning, as profitable for all that will follow virtue."

Sidney's *Defence* is conventionally regarded as a reply to Gosson, written around 1585, circulated in manuscript in literary circles and quoted by important critics like George Puttenham's *Arte* (1589). Perhaps the most interesting fact about Sidney's treatise is that is the point of closest - and the best - contact between English and Italian criticism. We can see classical Greek and Roman influences on it and it has been observed that there are derivations of Minturno, Scaliger and Castelvetro also besides Aristotle's *Poetics* and Plato's *Republic*.

In 1595 the essay was published simultaneously by two printers, Ponsonby and Olney, under two titles: *The Defence of Poesie* and *An Apologie for Poetrie*.

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## **2.4 Poetry in the Neoclassical Age**

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The literature of the neoclassical period marked the breaking of ties with Elizabethan literature. By the year 1660, Elizabethan romanticism had all but spent itself. The spirit of neoclassical literature was very much different from the spirit of Elizabethan literature. In the Age of the Renaissance, even intellectual inquiry was begun by the rapture of sense and feeling. In other words, it represented a rich flowering or romantic inspiration. The boundaries of human thought, like those of human activity, seemed infinitely distant; the imagination

whether dealing with power, as in Marlowe, or knowledge, as in Bacon, took wings and flew. But from 1660, there was a gradual change in the tone of literature as well as in the temperament of writers. The Restoration ushers in a period of literature that is more intellectual than imaginative or emotional. The works of the neo-classical writers such as Dryden, Pope, Swift, Addison, and John Gay, as well as many of their contemporaries, exhibit qualities of order, clarity, and stylistic decorum that were formulated in the major critical documents of the age: Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), and Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711). These works, forming the basis of modern English literary criticism, insist that 'nature' is the true model and standard of writing. This 'nature' of the Augustans, however, was not the wild, spiritual nature the romantic poets would later idealize, but nature as derived from classical theory: a rational and comprehensible moral order in the universe, demonstrating God's providential design. The literary circle around Pope considered Homer preeminent among ancient poets in his descriptions of nature, and concluded in a circuitous feat of logic that the writer who 'imitates' Homer is also describing nature. From this follows the rules inductively based on the classics that Pope articulated in his *Essay on Criticism*:

“Those rules of old discovered, not devised,  
Are nature still, but nature methodized”

Many of the important genres of this period were, as you observe, adaptations of classical forms such as mock epic, translation, and imitation. In verse, heroic couplet was common and in prose essay and satire were predominant forms. The neoclassicist impulse was only one of the strains in the literature of the first half of the 18th century. But its representatives were the defining voices in literary circles, and as a result it is often some aspect of 'neoclassicism' which is used to describe the era.

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## **2.5 Major Literary Critics of the Neoclassical Age and their concept of poetry**

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Neoclassical literature flourished roughly between 1660, when the Stuarts re-ascended the throne, and 1798, the year of publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth, a collaborative literary work with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. As mentioned above, Neoclassical literature spans three periods: the Restoration Age, the Augustan Age, and the Age of Johnson. In the Restoration Age, the ode and the classical poetic forms such as those

using heroic couplet became popular forms of poetry. The Augustan Age is remarkable for Alexander Pope and his literary creations. This era also saw the rise of journalism and fiction, especially in the works of writers like Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, and many others. The Age of Johnson marked the era of Samuel Johnson and some of his most influential works such as *The Dictionary of the English Language* (1745-1755). Particularly, in terms of poetry, the ballad and sentimental poetry as written by William Cowper, Thomas Gray, among others, gained popularity and were widely read during the time.

To understand Neoclassical poetry, we need to first learn the basic concepts and the critical study of the poetic genre from the lens of the following critics:

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### **2.5.1. Ben Jonson**

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Jonson's collection of classical ideas is to be found in his *Timber: or, Discoveries; Made upon Men and Matter: As they have flowed out of his daily Reading; or had their refluxe to his peculiar Notion of the Times*. Many of these ideas are traceable back to classical and Renaissance sources: Cicero, Petronius, Quintilian, the two Senecas, Erasmus, Machiavelli, Vives, Bacon, among others. This book was published posthumously in 1641. Critics such as Wimsatt and Brooks are agreed that Jonson's manner and mode of using this stock of classical ideas can be called Jonson's own brand of classicism.

A consistent concern of Jonson's is with the imitation of models: "to be able to convert the substance or Riches of another Poet, to his own use. To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him, till he grow very Hee; or so like him, as the Copie may be mistaken for the Principal." However, we should not suppose that Jonson endorsed abject submission to the ancients, or that their ideas should be freely stolen: "Not, to imitate servilely, as Horace said ... but to draw forth out of the best, and choisest flowers, with the Bee, and turn all into Honey." Jonson's notion of imitation of classical models saw it as the result of hard work and study, art, and practice.

Ben Jonson stands as a precursor to the English neoclassicism of the later seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. But the question that springs to mind regarding his conception of the poet, Jonson

does not fully conform to the classical idea of the poet as being divinely inspired. At the same time, he is consistently a neo- classicist among the English.

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**SAQ**

How extensive is the classical influence on Ben Jonson’s drama ?  
Can you give a concrete example? (About 60 words)

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**2.5.2 John Dryden**

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Between 1665 and 1666, Dryden wrote what is now taken to be one of the most important documents of English neoclassical critical theory, *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668). This is written as a debate between four speakers (Crites, Eugenius, Lisideius, Neander). Crites, who probably stands for Dryden’s brother-in-law, Sir Robert Howard who had collaborated with Dryden and had already debated on the use of rhyme in drama, gives arguments in favour of extreme classicism. There is an argument regarding the relative merits of the “ancients” versus the “moderns”. In effect, Dryden dramatizes three different kinds of classicism through these speakers till the entry of the speaker who represents Dryden’s own views regarding the native tradition of English drama, Neander. The debate has turned upon the question of ancient authority and the value of drama in terms of verisimilitude. Linked with this question arise the issues of classical ‘unities’ of time, place and action, classical decorum and propriety, the use of rhyme in drama, the rigid separation of genres such tragedy and comedy.

A critical point that comes up in Dryden’s *Essay* is the comparative assessment of English and French drama. This recalls the origin of the *Essay* itself since Dryden’s work came almost as a response to charges against English theatre by a Frenchman in 1663. Neander, who represents Dryden’s own arguments, champions English drama against the French. Towards the end of the *Essay* the argument

is centred on the use of rhyme in drama. We should note here that Neander - as representative of Dryden's views - is ambivalent and endorses the use of rhyme in drama on grounds that show Dryden's own departure from classicism. Rhyme could be used in certain kinds of drama where the characters or the subject are great; neither rhyme nor blank verse relate to real life and the only difference that must be maintained is between tragedy and comedy. While comedy relates to ordinary life, tragedy shows Nature elevated to a higher pitch, worked up by the poet's imagination.

Dryden's *Essay* may be taken as marking a stage in the transition from the early modern period to the period of neoclassicism. In the debate between the four points of view in the *Essay*, the subject turns to the classical notion of the unities of time, place, and action. The debate is lively and even displays irreverence for the ancients, and accommodates the moderns. What Neander finally says justifies the mixed genre of tragicomedy and in fact gives support to Shakespeare's method of following his own instincts rather than look to the ancients for guidance. Neander asserts that observance of the classical rules disallow the proper representation of Nature. This assertion takes the path of going through the refutation of Pope's claim that the imitation of ancient writers led to the better copy of Nature. Eugenius, in the essay, overturns this claim with the argument that the wisdom of the ancients is now overtaken by further advancements in scientific understanding of the world which can now bolster what was taken from ancient wisdom. Thus the arts must now draw upon our own experience to better draw the representation of Nature.

Dryden's defence of the use of rhyme in drama undergoes further modification by the time of his later "Defence of *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy*". Rhyme, in this latter argument, is justified on the grounds of the 'delight' as the ends of poesy - "instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poesy only instructs as it delights". We can gauge from such an affirmation the total view of literature that now comes to hold its own: from the Aristotelian view-point, or even Philip Sidney's, where poetry contained only the ethical or the moral aim, here it is self-justified and not tied to morality or ethics. It must not consist of bare imitation but imitation must strive to delight with all its instruments of causing excitement of the passions. Such ideas tend to make us see Dryden as anticipating later Romantic predispositions,

or of modern ideas of literary autonomy. But Dryden, later in the same ‘Defence’ shows his belief in literature as rational activity which is bound to ethicality and to its moral responsibility of “imitating Nature”, and Nature’s truth. In 1695, in “Parallel of Poetry and Painting”, he went on to assert the classical principle that both the poet and the painter imitate not the individual instance but the ultimate forms, the archetypes, of Nature. By modifying the customs of depicting Nature, the poet does finally imitate it, albeit in its new form. In effect, we can place Dryden as marking the transition from strict classicism to Romanticism.

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### 2.5.3 Alexander Pope

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In 1711, Pope published his *Essay on Criticism*, written in verse and in the tradition of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*. To that extent it is an “imitation” of an ancient model with a complicating subject, literary theory. The whole exercise is brilliant because not only is Pope influenced by the tradition, but he even talks about it in the poem and by writing a classical poem in the manner of Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, Pope is relating to the theory in three ways. It is also notable that Pope is writing on “criticism” and not on poetry, which alone clarifies that he is taking a different standpoint on the subject. Pope’s *Essay* is variously concerned, to a large extent, with “nature” and “wit”. Considering the fact that “nature” had been variously interpreted in different traditions, Pope’s dictum asking for a “return to nature” generates a complex of meanings:

“First follow Nature, and your judgment frame  
By her just standard, which is still the same.

Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,  
One clear, unchang’d, and universal light.

Life, Force, and Beauty, must to all impart,  
At once the Source, and End, and Test of Art.” (ll.68-73)

Nature holds out three meanings for Pope: a superior Platonic reality. Then Nature, the universal order that comes into alignment with man’s own efforts to assimilate that order into human affairs which bespeaks social conduct, delivering the normative path; and, the nature that was audible - later - to Rousseau and Wordsworth, in their moments of primitivism. Another meaning of Nature for Pope was

congruent with that of the classical models, the classical virtues as expressed in the classical authors and whose lineage can be traced back to Aristotle.

Nature supplies the norms which should guide the use of ‘wit’. For Pope, ‘wit’ had a range of meanings: it could carry the modern sense of cleverness, a capacity to discern similarities between different entities and the invisible relationships behind surface appearances. In ‘dressing’ nature, wit expresses the reality of nature. Wit helps to express natural insights; the poet expresses a universal truth. The poet must distinguish between true and false wit.

Criticism itself is an art and must submit to the same rules as those of literature. Pope sees as much creativity in criticism as in art and indeed sees criticism as being a component of the creative process. The *Essay* proceeds on the notion of both poetry and criticism as being constitutive of art itself. Poet and critic must both follow the Aristotelian dictum: “Avoid Extremes.” It is only pride which leads poet or critic to excess in any one direction, against universal truths, and against the balance of wit and judgment. He advises both poet and critic:

“Learn hence for Ancient Rules a just Esteem;  
To copy Nature is to copy Them” (ll.139 - 140)

**SAQ**

Do you think that there is a paradox in talking about ‘Nature’ and ‘rules’ as equivalent terms ? What would be a neo-classical resolution of such an apparent paradox ? (50 +50 words)

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## **2.6 Basic Concepts of Neoclassical poetry**

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Some basic concepts associated with Neoclassical poetry are:

**a) Imitation of Models**

The word ‘imitation’ in neoclassicism has taken on more than the simple

meaning of ‘copying’ predecessors in a particular tradition or a genre. ‘Imitation’ brings in ideas of permanent truths since only what is lasting and universal can give us reality in a complete form, in its totality. Imitation of the world and human action was based on the principles of impersonality and objectivity. But imitation also looks back to Homer and Virgil as voiced by Pope. Imitation is here also tied to nature in which the universe is arranged in a harmonious arrangement of a hierarchical order.

### b) Wit

By the time of Dryden’s youth, the term “wit” was attached to poetry, the name for its central principle. In 1672, in his *Defence of the Epilogue*, he attempts a double definition of the term. In 1677, in his *Apologie for Heroic Poetry*, he defines it as: “a propriety of thoughts and words; or, in other terms, thought and words elegantly adapted to the subject.” By 1690, Locke gives to it an uncomplimentary sense in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Pope’s use of ‘wit’ in his *Essay on Criticism* occurs forty-six times and it is remarkable that he brings in the various shades of meaning applicable through the term. In 1699, Sir Richard Blackmore published his *Satyr Against Wit*, in which he saw ‘wit’ as giving scope for laxity. Johnson, later (in commenting on Pope’s definition) sees wit as showing what is rightly just. In Elizabethan times ‘wit’ had implied what is poetic and imaginative in addition to what is cleverly amusing. By the neo-classic age the term is split up into its meanings containing the sense of “propriety” (what is proper, apt, just) and the other sense of what is clever (witty) repartee in comedy. The association of wit with what was simply, nasty, and trivializing humour gained ground from this time onwards.

### c) Decorum

Decorum appears as a classical virtue upheld by the neo-classicists. We have to return here to the Roman poet, Horace, in whose *Ars Poetica* ‘decorum’ is discussed as the principle behind the alignment of form with content, subject-matter with style, or thought with its expression. His theory of decorum underlies much of what he formulates in the *Ars Poetica* and in his other works like *Epistle to Augustus* and the *Odes* and *Epodes*. Decorum amounts to propriety in the terms by which Horace writes his poem. But Horace’s poem has given rise to various interpretations and one of the difficulties that critics face here is that Horace does not really put into practice what he preaches. Decorum also implies ‘fitness’ and one issue arising here- as phrased by Wimsatt and Brooks - is whether Horace had in mind the idea of fitness as

something essential in the nature of things, or whether it was related to convention which determined it. However, even though we may not come to definite conclusions on this score, the neo-classicists saw decorum as a criterion which the poet and the critic, too, must confront or be sensitive to.

**d) Poetic Justice**

The notion interested Dryden as clear from his works of the late 1670's. This was a reference back to the French critics under whose influence Dryden wrote his criticism, as *Apology for Heroic Poetry*, 1677, the Preface to *All for Love* of 1678, and his version of *Troilus and Cressida* of 1679. Under this French neoclassical influence, Dryden refined his own classicism especially in his writing of the stories of Antony and Cleopatra (*All for Love*) and Troilus and Cressida. In the Preface to *Troilus and Cressida* Dryden uses the phrase "poetical justice" in an echo of Thomas Rymer who was fanatical about classicism and had used this concept around 1678. Thenceforth the phrase was taken up by critics and eventually was loudly advocated by Pope's opponent, John Dennis. The idea comes from the over-emphasis on the punishment of the tragic flaw of the tragic protagonist which Aristotle had made out in his *Poetics*. What has to be realised about this concept is that it actually invites moral questions of the nature of wickedness and justice, in tragedy to a great extent but also to works with a mixed ending. Dryden saw it necessary to reason why he introduced the figure of Octavia (Mark Antony's wife) into Alexandria (Cleopatra's palace) at the risk of what that could do to the audience's sympathy for Antony's and Cleopatra's love for each other. It could also impair the feelings of tragic sympathy for Antony which is so integral to the moral stature of the tragic protagonist.

**e) Poetic Diction**

This concept is most useful in bringing to us in compact form many issues lying at the core of critical theory. The problem of poetic diction can be traced back through English literary history to Chaucer and later developments through the works of various poets and the gradual enrichment of the language itself. Several standards were applied to work through the problem of which stock of words were suited to poetic purposes. Addison believed that poetic diction needed to avoid idiomatic expressions while Pope drew a barrier to keep out the common and the vulgar. Samuel Johnson thought that the plain, common word unworthy of carrying high passion. But he did, too, while writing of Dryden, asserted, "There was . . . before the time of Dryden no poetical diction. . . . Those happy combinations of words which distinguished poetry

from prose had been rarely attempted; we had few elegancies or flowers of speech.”

Thomas Gray claimed in 1742 that “The language of the age is never the language of poetry . . . Our poetry . . . has a language peculiar to itself, to which almost everyone that has written has added something by enriching it with foreign idioms and derivations: nay, sometimes words of their own composition or invention.”

‘Diction’ and ‘poetic diction’ had caught the attention of Augustan criticism and John Dennis used the phrase “poetic diction” in 1701, in *Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry*. In 1715, Pope made the remark in his Preface to the *Iliad*, that “We acknowledge him [Homer] the father of poetical diction.” Spenser, Milton and Pope need to be remembered for their contributions towards creating an English poetic diction. But the neo-classicists also were eager to distinguish between a refined poetic diction and an inauthentic one which could not communicate sound sense or was not decorous.

#### **f) Rhetoric**

We must move here to the legacy of the ancient tradition of rhetoric which gradually became reduced to a concern with style as the Renaissance progressed. Rhetoric got subsumed under poetics and began to exclude any wider attention to audience, or with techniques of argumentation. The French logician whose promotion of educational reform in the late sixteenth century included the revision of traditional rhetoric, Petrus Ramus, had many English followers and it was under this climate of opinion that rhetoric was broken down into various categories of study. These categories divided rhetoric into a study of the different performative aspects of language. From the late seventeenth century Cartesian philosophy and scientific empiricism exerted an influence which recast rhetoric as constituted by specific elements rather than as a mode of logical capable of inquiry in a wide number of disciplines.

#### **g) The Three Unities**

In the debate on drama in Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, the speakers turn to the question of the three unities of time, place and action. Crites, who supports the ancients against the moderns, explains the need for unity in a play and upholds the ancients’ stipulation that unity of action is essential to depict a complete action. Eugenius, who supports the moderns, refers to the establishment of five acts in a play by the time of Horace but also points out the deficiencies in the works of the ancients which actually undermined their constructions. The debate also gets involved in the relative merits of the

French and the English dramatists in the course of which we get several insights into the workings of the contemporary stage. Lisideius, on the side of the French dramatists, points to the virtues of the French drama particularly on the subject of the unities. The discussion initially gets under way from the definition of drama proposed by Lisideius: "A just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind." The use of "just" brings out the focus on the merit of drama as being properly connected to the degree of verisimilitude it can achieve.

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## 2.7 Summing Up

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Neoclassical thinking belonged to the period stretching from the early seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth. It generally asked for a return to the ideals enshrined in the work of the ancient Greek and Roman authors and thinkers. The Neo-classicist thinkers, basically, insisted on literary composition as a rational activity subject to well-considered rules. Neoclassicism gave its own meaning to 'nature' and 'imitation', terms which can be said to encapsulate some typically neoclassical ideas. Its main aim was the revival of classical forms of art and literature.

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## 2.8 References & Suggested Readings

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## Unit 3 : Introduction to Metaphysical Poetry

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### Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objective
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Historical Contexts
- 3.4 What is Metaphysical Poetry?
- 3.5 Introducing the Metaphysical poets
  - 3.5.1 John Donne
  - 3.5.2 George Herbert
  - 3.5.3 Richard Crashaw
  - 3.5.4 Abraham Cowley
  - 3.5.5 Andrew Marvel
  - 3.5.6 Henry Vaughan
- 3.6 Summing Up
- 3.7 Glossary
- 3.8 Reference and Suggested Reading

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### 3.1 Objectives

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After reading this unit, you will be able to

- *evaluate* the social context in which Metaphysical Poets emerged
- *learn* about the distinguishing features of metaphysical poetry
- *familiarize* yourself with the most celebrated Metaphysical poets
- *understand* some of the key concepts associated with metaphysical poetry.

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### 3.2 Introduction

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In this section of the unit, the learner will be introduced to the origins of Metaphysical Poetry and its reception across centuries, up to the present day. Metaphysical poetry is a genre of poetry that emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century England. It refers to a kind of poetry written by a loose group of 17<sup>th</sup> century poets who were writing individually in their own contexts, and had little or no familiarity with each other's work. Yet, their poetry had certain traits that were common to all of them. This is why, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, they

were grouped together as the “Metaphysical poets” by critics and scholars of poetry. The term “metaphysical” was not used by these poets themselves.

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### 3.3 Historical Context

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The use of the word “metaphysical” to refer to this group of poets and their works was, arguably, first done by a Scottish poet and pamphleteer, William Drummond of Hawthornden, who, in an undated letter, complained that some of his contemporaries “attempted to abstract poetry to Metaphysical ideas and Scholastical quiddities.” This letter is believed to have been written circa 1630. Then came John Dryden, who in his “Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire” (1693) talked about how the poet John Donne affected the metaphysics. It was only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the word “metaphysical” was used as a label to categorize a specific group of poets. Samuel Johnson wrote *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779-1781), a collection of biographies of some of the most well known poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. There, in his biography of Abraham Cowley Johnson says that in 17<sup>th</sup> century England, there “appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets.” Though Johnson wasn’t the first to make use of the word “metaphysical”, he was the first to consolidate under one label this group of 17<sup>th</sup> century poets whose works showed traces of metaphysical elements.

Metaphysical poetry began as a reaction against Elizabethan poetry which was felt to have become exhausted by the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Metaphysical poetry rose as a revolt against the conventions of Elizabethan poetry. As opposed to the romantic, harmonious sweetness of Elizabethan poetic expressions, metaphysical poetry was rather coarse and prosaic. There was an intellectual and psychological depth to it which was more often than not, absent in Elizabethan poetry. Metaphysical poets, consciously or otherwise, sought to break away from the Elizabethan traditions.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, metaphysical poetry was not seen and studied in a positive light. Instead, it was treated with contempt. As a matter of fact, the label of “metaphysical poets” was used in a derogatory sense, and as a mockery. Samuel Johnson went ahead to call this genre of poetry to be “violent”. In a rather condescending manner, Johnson says that the Metaphysicals were “men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour. They neither copied nature, nor life, their thought were new but seldom natural.” He also attacked the metaphysical poets on grounds of

exhibiting extreme artificialities and ransacking art and nature. John Dryden who was one of the literary stalwarts of his time also criticized the metaphysical poets for their “unnaturalness” and their use of extravagant conceits. Talking about John Donne, who is regarded as the father of Metaphysical poetry, Dryden says: “He affects the Metaphysics.... In his amorous verses... [he] perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, where he should engage their hearts.” For over two centuries, Metaphysical poetry remained eclipsed by Romantic and Victorian poetry. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Metaphysical poets continued to receive harsh criticisms, accusations and condemnations. They were seen as a group of people who indulged in unnecessary and complicated comparisons, and conceits simply to establish and assert their intellectual superiority over others, leading to the creation of artificial, rough, strained, and obscure poetry.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Alexander Grosart published an edition of some of John Donne’s poems in 1872. The edition on Donne was subsequently followed by editions of poems of George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell and Abraham Cowley. In 1899, Edmund Gosse published a biography of Donne. These, amongst others, triggered a renewed interest in readers and critics to read metaphysical poetry from newer perspectives.

It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the Metaphysical poets firmly began to emerge from the shadows of disdain. It began with T.S. Eliot’s essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921) where he talked favourably about the Metaphysical poets. Eliot used his concept of “**unification of sensibility**” to describe the Metaphysical poets. Talking about the contribution of Metaphysical poetry in the landscape of English poetry, Eliot says that in the works of the metaphysical poets, we find a fusion of thoughts and feelings—that is, we find a unification of sensibility. Unlike the critics of the earlier centuries who were sceptical about the use of **metaphysical conceits**, Eliot actually praises the use of conceits and says that “the elaboration of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it”, as done by the metaphysical poets is what has enriched English poetry, instead of contaminating it, as accused early critics. He appreciated the group for being able to “devour all kinds of experiences.” Besides Eliot, other proponents of New Criticism like Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate also worked towards reviving metaphysical poetry

In 1921, besides the works of New Critics, Herbert Grierson’s *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: From Donne to Butler* was also published and gained limelight. This anthology proved

instrumental in reviving literary and scholarly interest in the 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysical poets. In the introductory essay to this anthology, Grierson discussed various aspects of metaphysical poetry. He extensively investigated into the works of John Donne who is usually regarded as the first metaphysical poet, and praises him and remarks that “the divine poets who follow Donne have each inherited metaphysic.”

Theodore Spenser and Mark Van Doren, in *Studies in Metaphysical Poetry* (1939) also traced the origins of metaphysical poetry, and contributed to the revival of the genre. Joseph D. Duncan, who traced the revival of metaphysical poetry in “The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry, 1872-1912”, says that in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the acceptance of metaphysical poetry broadened both in Great Britain and in the United States. He also acknowledges the contribution of the three Gs- Grosart, Gosse, and Grierson in preparing the stage of revival for the metaphysicals.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, scholars and critics began to observe that that poetry with metaphysical traits were being written in other parts of the world as well, including the United States. However, the term “metaphysical poetry” did not include under its purview these writers from different regions, but remained exclusive to the 17<sup>th</sup> century poets of England. Hence, many contemporary scholars today argue for bringing together all of these poets under the umbrella term “**baroque**”, which they believe would be more inclusive than the term “metaphysical poets”.

**SAQ**

Write a short note on the revival and revaluation of metaphysical poetry in the twentieth century. ( 60 words)

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How did metaphysical poetry evolve? (100 words)

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### 3.4 What is Metaphysical Poetry?

So far, the unit has discussed how Metaphysical poetry came into existence, its reception, and its place in the canon of English literature. In this section of the unit, the learner will be introduced to “what” Metaphysical poetry is all about, what are its traits and characteristics, and how is it distinct from other genres of poetry.

Etymologically, the word “metaphysical” is derived from two words- “meta” and “physical” where “meta” means “beyond”. Therefore, the word “metaphysical” means “something that goes beyond the physical”. Metaphysical poetry refers to a kind of poetry that originated in 17<sup>th</sup> century England, and is characterized by the extensive use of intellect, philosophy, wit, and conceits. Love, time, the human soul, and religion are some of the most predominant themes of metaphysical poetry.

According to Grierson, “metaphysical poetry, in the full sense of the term, is a poetry which . . . has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence.” Metaphysical poetry is characterized, as Grierson points out, by “the more intellectual, less verbal character of their wit compared with the conceits of the Elizabethans; their finer psychology of which their conceits are often expressions; their learned imager; the argumentative style, the subtle evolution of their lyrics; and above all, the peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination which is their greatest achievement.”

The works of the poets who have been clustered together as the “metaphysical poets” are distinct from each other. However, there are some common traits that bind them together as a group, and set them apart from other poets. Some of these characteristics have been discussed below”

- **The choice of spiritual and philosophical subjects:** The Metaphysical poets were men of great intellect and learning. They pondered at depth about matters concerning everyday life. They were also well versed with the scientific developments happening in their contemporary times, and were inquisitive about human psychology. Their poetry is reflective of their intellect. Hence in their poems, we often find an exploration of the spiritual realm and a philosophizing of commonplace subjects. Philosophies like *carpe diem* and *tempus fugit* are also found in many of the metaphysical poems. They question the co-relationship between the physical and the spiritual aspects of human beings. For example, in his poem “The Extasie”, John Donne narrates how the souls of two lovers

leave their human bodies to engage and interact with each other. While he acknowledges the powerful connection between two souls, he also expresses desire for physical intimacy. He asserts that the complete union of two beings can happen only when the physical and the spiritual fuse, and hence it is futile to restrict oneself from indulging in carnal pleasures that the human body seeks:

We then, who are this new soul, know  
Of what we are compos'd and made,  
...But O alas, so long, so far  
Our bodies why do we forbear?

- **The use of metaphysical conceit:** The metaphysical poets are known for their wit and the use of conceit. Their poems contain unfamiliar and unexpected comparisons. The use of extravagant metaphors and enormous hyperboles that often might look like absurdities to those unversed with conceits. The use of conceits is a pervasive element in metaphysical poetry. Two very dissimilar objects are brought together by metaphysical poets to draw comparisons with human experiences. These figures of speech are drawn from various fields like nature, recent scientific discoveries, medicines, law, mythology, astronomy etc. The use of conceits adds intellectual depth to metaphysical poetry. It also sometimes adds layers of ambiguities to the poems, making them open to multiple interpretations. The most famous use of metaphysical conceit is, perhaps, done by John Donne, who, in his poem “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning”, compares the souls of two lovers with the two legs of a compass. Donne wrote this poem for his wife, Anne, before he left on a trip. According to Donne, just like the legs of a compass remain linked even when they are parted, the souls of two true lovers also remain connected, even when they are temporarily and spatially distanced:

As stiff twin compasses are two  
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show  
To move....  
And though it in the centersit,  
Yet when the other far doth roam,  
It leans, and harkens after it,  
And grows erect, as that comes home.

- **The use of love and religion as themes of their poetry:** Metaphysical poetry is sometimes divided into two broad categories- love poems and religious poetry. While some of the stalwarts like John Donne and Andrew Marvell dabbled both with love and religion, it is Carew, Suckling and Lovelace who are known mostly known for their amorous poems. Vaughan, Herbert and Crashaw are considered more of religious poets.

Even though poetry across time and space have engaged with issues of love and religion, the metaphysical treatment of love and religion are strikingly different from that of their contemporaries. Metaphysical poems are amorous. However, the metaphysical expression of love is nothing similar to the sweet, subtle expressions of their Elizabethan precursors. The amorous verses of the Metaphysicals do not follow the traditions of Spenserian or Shakespearean love poetry. In metaphysical poetry we find direct, blatant pursuit of carnal pleasures along with the spiritual. Metaphysical poems are often songs of seductions. Unlike their contemporaries, the metaphysicals did not shy away from the sensual dimensions of love. Emotional conflict, pain of separation, death and eroticism are issues that the metaphysical poets deal with in their love poems.

Metaphysical poetry also deals with different preoccupations of man through the avenues of religion and religious thought. Some of the metaphysical poets, including George Herbert, were members of the clergy. Their poetry critiqued many aspects of Christian life. Some characteristics of Morality Plays are sometimes seen in some of the metaphysical verses. John Donne's "Holy Sonnet" and "Batter my Heart"; and Herbert's "The Collar" and "The Church Porch" are some of the finest metaphysical verses dealing with themes of religion.

- **The fusion of emotions and intellect:** The metaphysical poets were men of learning. Their poems reflected their knowledge and logic. However, their use of intellect did not exclude their acknowledgement and experience of human emotions. In the poems composed by the metaphysical poets, we find a fine blend and balance of emotions as well as intellect. Grierson, in his "Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century" (1921) elaborated how "passionate thinking" is an indispensable part of Metaphysical Poetry. He says, "Metaphysical poetry is the blend of passionate feelings and paradoxical ratiocination." The expression of love, faith, and all other human experiences was done with intellectuality as well as intense passion. T.S.Eliot calls it the unification of sensibility.

Eliot asserts that one of the achievements of the Metaphysical poets is that they were able to unify the sensibilities. Their verses emanated out of sheer emotional experiences and thoughts, the thoughts were articulated with exquisite use of reason. For instance, in John Donne's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning", there an analysis of why it is futile for lovers to grief at parting, because even though they might part on the physical level, eventually they would unite on the spiritual plane:

So let us melt, and make no noise,  
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempest move,  
'twere profanation of our joys  
To tell the laity our love

- **The development of an argument:** As already mentioned, the metaphysical poets were learned men who were in possession of scientific as well as philosophical knowledge. They were deep thinkers who dished out their emotions and thoughts in a very logical, systematic and organized manner. Hence, Metaphysical poetry is often argumentative in nature. The subject matter of a poem is often presented in the form of a syllogism. Along with the progress of the poem, the argument put forward by the poet also develops. By the end of the poem, the reader is usually convinced of the validity of the poet's argument. This use of deductive logic, combined with persuasive analogies and imageries from different domains of field contributes to the poems quest for truth. The conceits, paradoxes and all other literary devices used contribute in consolidating the central argument of the poem. For instance, Andrew Marvell presents his poem "To his Coy Mistress" in the form of a syllogism where the first two stanzas of the poem act as the premises, and the third and concluding stanza is the conclusion to the argument that Marvell tried to establish in his poem. The said poem argues that if they had all the time in the world, the lovers could afford to delay their union. But since their time on earth is limited, and their bodies continue to age and wither away with every passing minute, they must hurry and consummate their love:

Now therefore, while the youthful hue  
Sits on thy skin...  
Now let us sport us while we may,  
And now, like amorous birds of prey,  
Rather at once our time devour  
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.

- **The extensive use of imagery:** One of the striking characteristics of metaphysical poetry is that it indulges in the usage of grand, dramatic, uncommon, and unfamiliar imagery. The metaphysical use of imagery often establishes links and relationships between things that are usually seen as independent of and unrelated to each other. They are born out of the use of metaphysical conceits. Alice S. Brandenburg, in her essay “The Dynamic Image in Metaphysical Poetry” (1942) talks about how all imagery can be classified into categories- static and dynamic. She says that the Petrarchan and Elizabethan poets that came before the Metaphysicals made use of static images. The imagery of the Metaphysicals, however made use of dynamic imagery. According to Brandenburg, the Metaphysical poets made use of static imagery when they wanted to achieve comic or satirical effects. In the context of metaphysical poetry, the use of symbols and images makes intangible concepts and intense emotions appear somewhat comprehensible to the average reader. For instance, in the poem “The Flea”, John Donne uses the imagery of a flea as an elaborate and extended metaphor to express his desire for his beloved. The flea, that sucked the blood of both the lovers becomes a symbol of union of the two lovers:

It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,

And in this flea our bloods mingled be...

Because the blood of the two “mingled” inside the flea, the flea becomes a “temple of marriage” and a “marriage bed”, and thus, when the poet’s beloved tried to smother the flea, the poet sees it as almost an act of sacrilege. The choice of the parasitic insect as an image and symbol of love is unconventional, in a truly metaphysical fashion.

- **The use of colloquial language:** The metaphysical poets deliberately tried to break away from the formal and conventional poetic expressions that were traditionally used in composing poetry. Their poetic diction did not usually include grand and complex use of language. Their priority was more upon the use of wit and intellect, rather than embellished language, rhyme, or rhythm. Therefore, their verses often felt prosaic, with rather coarse rhyme. In metaphysical poetry, we find a sharp juxtaposition of grand intellect and commonplace language. The metaphysical poets chose intricate and delicate subjects which they treated with complex use of conceits, albeit in a simple language. Their verses had a spoken, rather than lyrical quality. However, the use of

colloquialism should not be confused with use of “incorrect” language. The metaphysical poets merely avoided using laboured, artificially lofty speeches, as done by their neoclassical contemporaries. A prominent use of colloquialism is John Donne’s “The Canonization” where he makes use of a very spoken-like diction:

For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love...

Along with colloquialism, comes brevity. It is to be noted that most metaphysical poems are brief and concise. Every line is succinct, straightforward, and loaded with meaning, and appeals to the senses.

**SAQ**

Write a note on the salient features of metaphysical poetry.

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### 3.5 Introducing the Metaphysical Poets

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T.S. Eliot, in his review of Grierson’s anthology talked about the difficulties in defining Metaphysical poetry. Along with defining the genre, there also comes the difficulties in deciding who are the poets who come under the purview of this genre. There is no consensus amongst scholars as to who exactly comprise the metaphysical poets.

Collin Burrow, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, includes John Donne, Andrew Marvell, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan and Richard Crashaw as metaphysical poets. Some of the Cavalier Poets and the **Sons of Ben** and the **Cavalier Poets** are also included as Metaphysical Poets by some scholars and critics.

Helen Gardner, in the anthology *Metaphysical Poets* (1957) also included proto-metaphysical poets like Shakespeare and Walter Raleigh, and extended the arena of the metaphysical upto the Restoration period to include Edmund Waller and Earl of Rochester.

American scholar and critic, Harold Bloom, known for his theories of Influence, went to the extent of calling the term “metaphysical poets” to be a misnomer in his introductory essay in *John Donne and the Metaphysical Poets*. In fact, it is not just Bloom, but many others who resisted to category “metaphysical poets”. One of the reasons behind the disfavour of the term in

the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, according to Colin Burrow, is that “the poets known as metaphysicals are all different from each other and they wrote in a wide range of genres and historical circumstances. . . . These poets were all doing very different things from different political and geographical positions. Their poems are correspondingly different.” Some of their works from these different genres and positions that they dabbled with had metaphysical traits. According to these scholars, there is no poet who is exclusively metaphysical. Instead, there is a subset of poetry that is metaphysical in nature. Therefore, they advocate the replacing of the term “metaphysical poets” with “metaphysical poetry”.

Nonetheless, for most parts, the terminology “metaphysical poets” continues to persist amongst the readers and scholars. Some of the major poets seventeenth century poets of England who are regarded as the metaphysical poets have been introduced in this section of the unit.

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### **3.5.1 John Donne (1572-1631)**

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John Donne is usually regarded as the founder of the Metaphysical School of poetry. He wrote religious poetry, elegies, sonnets, satire and amorous poetry. He was one of the predominant poets of his time who continues to be relevant and widely read to this day. Donne went out of fashion during the Restoration, but was revived by the likes of T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

His works bear the very essence of metaphysical poetry. He is known for the use of conceits and wit. In a rather colloquial language, Donne often asked startling questions in his poems, and forwarded his argument with the use of exalted metaphors. The use of images and metaphors often makes his poetry ambiguous. According to Grierson, Donne is “metaphysical not only in virtue of his scholasticism but by his deep reflective interest in the experiences of which his poetry is the expression, the new psychological curiosity with which he writes of love and religion.”

John Donne’s poetry is usually broadly divided into two broad categories- religious and love poems. He was born into a Roman Catholic family, but later in life, he embraced the Church of England, and went on to become an Anglican clergyman. His personal religious journey had an impact on his writings. He talks extensively about Christianity, of God and spiritualism, of truth and lies, of life and death; and of sins and redemption in many of his poems. John Donne was

also a deeply in love with his wife Anne Donne whom he married against the wishes of her family, and was devastated by her untimely death. His love for her is reflected in many of his poems. Furthermore, he also led a brazenly sexual life, and wrote some of the most erotic and intense love poetry in English literature. Some of Donne's famous works are:

- *Satires*: Donne's Satires usually considered to be his earliest works. In this collection of poems he satirized the corruption of the English legal system, the profanity of the courtiers, and the vanity of lesser poets of his times
- *Pseudo Martyr*: This is a prose tract in which is anti-Catholic in nature. In this tract he accused the Roman Catholics of promoting a pseudo patriotism and martyrdom for accumulating wealth.
- *Ignatius His Conclave*: This is a satirical attack on the Jesuits and their founder St. Ignatius of Loyola.
- *The Good Morrow*: This poem is thematically considered to be the first poem in Donne's Songs and Sonnets. Though it is a fourteen line poem, it does not follow the structure of traditional sonnets. This poem compares love with religion, and makes use of Biblical and Catholic references. Here, Donne says that both love and religion are equally profound.
- *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*: This is one of the most celebrated poems by Donne. The poem is known for its use of metaphysical conceit where he compared lovers with the two legs of a compass.
- *The Anniversary*: This poem was written by Donne to commemorate his first year of being in love. Here, he talks about the immortality of true love which, he believes, can transcend even death.
- *The Exstasie*: This is one of the longer poems of Donne. The poem has a pastoral setting. In this poem he emphasizes upon the importance of not only the spiritual, but also of the sensual aspects of love. While talking about the union of souls, he also acknowledges the need for physical union.
- *Sweetest Love*: In this love poem, Donne deals with the issue of separation of lovers. He says his beloved that he must go away from her not because he doesn't love her anymore, but because

his duty beckons him. And just like the sun goes away each night only to return the next morning, he would return to his lover again.

- *A Hymn to God the Father*: As the title of the poem suggests, this poem is about God and religion. The poet begins by describing the sinful world that we inhabit, and how he too is a contributor in all the prevailing sins. He also asks for forgiveness from God for the sins that he committed.
- *Death Be Not Proud*: This sonnet is one of the nineteen sonnets in Donne's *Holy Sonnets*. Here Donne paints Death as a proud and vain figure, and argues that it need not be so proud because Death is but a temporary sleep between man's earthly life and eternal after-life.
- *The Canonization*: In this poem, a friend talks to another friend where he asks the listener not to disturb him in his pursuit of love. Love, according to the poet, is above all things and that love will canonise him into sainthood.

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### 3.5.2. George Herbert (1593- 1633)

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George Herbert, like Donne, was an Anglican priest. He is chiefly known for his religious verses. Herbert was follower of Donne, and was heavily influenced by Donne's works. In turn, he influenced the later metaphysical poets like Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw, and Thomas Traherne. In the later centuries, poets like Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, Gerard Manley and W.H.Auden also reflected in their works the influence of Herbert.

Herbert composed poems early in life, right from his days at Cambridge. However, he did not publish his poems in his life time. When in his deathbed, Herbert sent a manuscript of his poems to his friend Nicholas Ferrar, asking Ferrar to either destroy or publish them. The poems were eventually published by Ferrar with the title *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (1633). The collection is divided into three sections which are called "The Church Porch", "The Church" and "The Church Militant". Many scholars opine that *The Temple* is reminiscent of Sir Philip Sidney's secular sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella* (1580).

Herbert's verses are mostly devotional in nature, and are written in a simple diction. In his own words, Herbert described his poems as "a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul.". Some of the most well known poems by Herbert are:

- *The Collar*: This poem is a reflection of the poet's own struggle with his religious beliefs. The collar here refers to the collar worn by clergymen. The collar is symbolically used by the poet to refer to the restraints imposed on the lives of the clergymen. The poet seeks to take off the collar, and break free into a more liberated life outside the bindings of the church.
- *The Altar*: It is **shape poem** that is written in the shape of an altar. It makes use of conceit where the human heart is compared to an altar. In this poem, the poet expresses his desire to make sacrifices like Christ. The poet describes how he will endeavour to create an altar out of his own heart.
- *Jordan I*: In this poem, the poet discusses what should the material for poetry be. He says that instead of always choosing fictional topics, one should opt for topics out of one's own life.
- *Love III*: In this poem, the poet personifies Love as a host who has invited Herbert as a guest for dinner. Here, God is equated with Love. The poet hesitates to accept Love's invitation for dinner because he is aware of the many sins that he has committed, and hence he doesn't consider himself worthy of being Love's guest.

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### 3.5.3 Richard Crashaw (1612-1649)

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Richard Crashaw too, like Donne and Herbert, was an Anglican cleric who was known for his Puritan beliefs. However, in his later life, he converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. While at university, he was in the matrix of some of the best poets of his era: John Milton, John Donne, Andrew Marvell, Sir John Suckling, and Abraham Cowley, to name a few. Crashaw was also influenced by the Italian and Spanish mystics, particularly by Giambattista Marino some of whose works Crashaw also translated.

Crashaw's poetry may be categorized into three groups- the early epigrams, the secular poetry, and religious poems. The epigrams are to be found in his *Epigrammatum Sacrorum Liber*. The epigrams bear the influence of classical writers and biblical motifs. Crashaw's secular poems are found in *The Delight of the Muses* which is his second collection of poems. This collection contains some of his famous poems like "Love's Horoscope", "Wishes to His (supposed) Mistress", and "Venus Putting on Mars his Armour". These poems have an urbane feeling to them, and have irregular rhyme and meter. *Steps to the Temple* is where we find most of Crashaw's religious poems. Another collection of Crashaw's poems. Christianity, the life of Christ, God, justice, humanity are some of the frequently recurring themes in his religious poetry. *Carmen de Nostro*, was published posthumously. Crashaw's poetry is characterized by the use of puns, repetition, and conceits which are reminiscent of John Donne. He talks about the physical as well as the spiritual aspects of human existence. Crashaw's poetry is marked by an unwavering optimism. Some of his best known poems include

- *The Weeper or The Sainte Mary Magadlene*: This poem traces the legend of Mary Magdalene who Crashaw describes as weeping. The poem contains a number of conceits and images related to the act of crying, like cheeks drenched with tears, and tears falling like dewdrops
- *In the Holy Nativity of our Lord*: The poem deals with conventional Christian images. It deals with the birth of Christ and the revelation of it to the three shepherds who try to find the perfect bed for the infant Christ. The poem is known for its use of paradoxes and dualities.

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#### 3.5.4. Abraham Cowley (1618-1667)

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Abraham Cowley was an English poet and essayist, and was influenced by the works of Edmund Spenser, particularly *The Faerie Queene*. He wrote his first poem at the age of ten. He was a Royalist. He was a student at Cambridge and was working on a poem on King David when the Civil War broke out, and he was ousted from Cambridge on account of his political stance. Cowley spent twelve years in exile as a secretary to Queen Henrietta, and returned to

England only after the Restoration. Upon his return, he was reinstated as a Cambridge fellow.

Cowley is regarded as a transitional poet who unlike Donne, focused less on emotions, and prioritized wit and reason. As a poet, he was more flexible and versatile in his style and themes, as compared to the early metaphysicals. Cowley drew from Ben Jonson and John Donne, while also experimenting with the Pindaric ode. His choice of subjects were more diverse than the early metaphysical, and he adapted with the contemporary sensibilities as far as his poetic imagination is concerned. He avoided extravagance and wrote with propriety. Some of Cowley's noted works are

- *Poetical Blossomes*: This was Cowley's first collection of works which was published when he was fifteen. It has five poems which includes the epic poem "The Tragical History of Piramus and Thisbe" that Cowley wrote when he was ten. "Constantia and Philetus", the second poem in this collection is a supplement to the first one.
- *The Mistress*: It is a collection of a hundred Metaphysical love poems. It is written in a courtly and clever style that bears the influence of both Metaphysical and Cavalier traditions. *The Mistress* was Cowley's most widely read work in those days.
- *Pindaric Odes*: Cowley did not follow the traditional structure of the Pindaric ode, but experimented with the form to create irregular odes. His intention, as he himself states, was to introduce the English to odes. Cowley's odes are known for their bold imagery.
- *Davideis*: This is an unfinished Biblical epic that Cowley conceptualized way before Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*. Of the twelve books that were planned, Cowley completed four.
- *Hymn to Light*: This poem is known for the way it strikes a balance between Cowley's knowledge and imagination. The poem is a deliberation upon beams of light
- *Ode to the Royal Society*: This poem was written by Cowley at the request of his friend John Evelyn as complement to Thomas Sprat's *The History of the Royal Society*. This is considered to be Cowley's last significant work.

Most of Cowley's poems were published in the collection *Poems* which underwent many editions.

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### 3.5.5. Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)

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Andrew Marvell was a poet as well as a civil servant and a politician. He initially wrote poems supporting the Royalist cause, but later shifted to supporting the Parliamentary cause so much so that he came to be known as Cromwell's poet. His works were posthumously published in a collection called *Miscellaneous Poems*. The life and Andrew Marvell have been discussed at length in a different chapter.

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### 3.5.6. Henry Vaughan (1621-1695)

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Henry Vaughan, besides being a poet and a translator, was also a doctor. He was a Royalist, and is best known for his lyrical and religious poetry. Vaughan is usually credited for introducing the **slant rhyme** in English literature. His poetry bears the influence of Ben Jonson, John Donne and George Herbert. He credits Herbert for being behind his conversion from "idle lyrics" to "religious verses". His poetry is concise and mystical. He wrote extensively about nature and drew inspiration from his native environment. He used the term "silurist" to describe this native setting, a term evocative of the Silures tribe that Herbert's ancestors belonged to. His treatment of nature led to Vaughan being regarded as a Proto-Romantic. In fact, the Romantic stalwarts, including William Wordsworth is said to have been influenced by Vaughan. The works of Vaughan include:

- *Poems with the Tenth Satyre of Juvenal Englished*: This is Vaughan's first collection of poems. It has thirteen poems along with the translation of the tenth Juvenal. This work is regarded as derivative work with less originality. Many of the poems in this collection are dedicated to Amorett. Amorett is usually believed to be Catherine Wise, a lady that Vaughan courted.
- *OlorsIschanus*: When translated to English, "OlorsIschanus" means "The Swan of Usk". This collection has Silurist settings, and is believed to have been written by Vaughan in the darkest and lowest period of his life. It alludes to the Civil wars, the despotic Republican Government, and Vaughan's eviction from his own home. It contains poems lamenting the defeat of the Royalists and elegies in memory of those he lost in the War.

- *Silex Scintillians*: This is Vaughan’s most celebrated work. Translated, it means “sparks from the flint”. *Silex Scintillians* is a two volume work that contains the best known religious lyrics by Vaughan. This collection marks Vaughan’s “conversion” from secular poetry to religious poetry. It bears the influence of Vaughan’s Welsh origins and that of George Herbert, who, as a matter of fact, was also Welsh. In *Silex Scintillians*, Vaughan makes use of Biblical and scriptural symbols. This collection includes poems like “The Retreat”, “The Nativity”, “The Morning Watch”, and “The Dawning”.
- *The Mount of Olives*: This is a prose piece that contains many devotional prayers.
- *Thalia Rediviva*: This work is Vaughan’s last collection of poems. It is subtitled *The Pass-Times and Diversions of a Country-Muse*. It contains many pastorals and translations

**Check Your Progress**

Write a note on the metaphysical poets, with special emphasis on John Donne. (150 words)

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**3.6. Summing Up:**

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Metaphysical Poetry is a term that refers to a specific kind of poetry that was written by a loose group of poets in 17<sup>th</sup> Century England. The term was first used by Samuel Johnson. The Metaphysical poets did not deliberately write as one “group” or “team” with a similar agenda or ideology. Instead, they wrote in their own time and space, with little or no contact with each other. The term “Metaphysical Poetry” is an umbrella term to bring a loose group of poets under one banner for academic convenience. Different scholars and critics include different poets under this label. The best known amongst the Metaphysical Poets include John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Abraham Cowley, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughan.

Metaphysical poetry is characterised by the use of Metaphysical conceits and wit, use of uncommon metaphors and images, and use of colloquial

language. Love, religion, and spirituality are some of the recurrent themes of Metaphysical poetry. These poems are usually written in a very concise and precise manner, in the form of a very well argued syllogism.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Metaphysical Poetry was looked down upon, and dismissed as trivial and superfluous. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a renewed interest in Metaphysical poetry after T.S. Eliot lauded the genre in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” (1921). Many contemporary critics also prefer the use of the term “baroque poets”/ “baroque poetry” instead of “metaphysical poets/ metaphysical poetry” because they are of the opinion that the latter is not a very inclusive term.

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### **3.7 Glossary**

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- **Baroque:** The word “baroque” derived from the word “barocco” which means “irregular pearl/stone”. It is a specific style of expression of art and architecture that developed in Europe in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century. It is characterized by the use of complex forms and intricate ornamentation. Baroque style was supported by the Catholic Church.

In the context of poetry, baroque poetry is characterized by the use of exalted language, extended metaphor and dramatic intensity. Religion and Mysticism are predominant themes in Baroque poetry. The baroque poets were preoccupied with philosophizing the mystical and spiritual aspects of everyday life. They also wrote satires on their contemporary socio-political circumstances.

- **Cavalier Poets:** The term refers to a group of English poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century who were Royalists and supported King Charles-I and Charles-II during the English Civil Wars. They were mostly members of the aristocracy who were lavish and elegant not only in their lifestyle and conduct, but also in their lyrics. They wrote liberal poems about love, sensual pleasures, seizing the day, and making merry. The attitude of their poetry reflected the attitude of the royal courts of the pre-Commonwealth era. Many of the Cavalier poets were also soldiers and members of the clergy. Famous Cavalier poets include Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, Sir. John Suckling, and Thomas Carew.
- **Disassociation/ Unification of Sensibility:** These are critical concepts that were put forward by T.S. Eliot in his essay “Metaphysical Poets” (1921). In this essay, he said that the metaphysical poets wrote poetry in which there was a unification of sensibility. But the poetry that came after

the metaphysicals carried a dissociation of sensibility. “in the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in from which we have never recovered.”

Unification of sensibility is the “fusion of thoughts and feelings”. In other words, it is the blending of elevated thoughts with intense emotions. The Elizabethan poets and the early Jacobean poets and dramatists, along with the Metaphysical poets, according to Eliot, wrote poetry that contained unification of sensibility. Their works accommodated not only exalted thoughts and philosophies, but also deeply emotional experiences. In particular, William Shakespeare and John Donne in particular, were in possession of unified sensibility. This means that they could express their state of mind and emotions with precision.

According to Eliot, after the era of the metaphysical, the later poets began to lose unification of sensibility. Instead, their works reflected a dissociation of sensibility. That is, there was a fracture or disparity between the thoughts conceptualized and the poetic expression of it. Eliot was specifically critical of Browning and Tennyson, and disfavoured the artificiality of their language. The poets with dissociated sensibility are those who are either thinkers or are poets, but not. They often fail to synchronise between their thoughts and poetic expressions.

- **Metaphysical conceit:** The use of metaphysical conceit is the trademark of the metaphysical conceit of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Metaphysical conceit is a complex literary device that makes use of extended metaphors. Strange, uncommon and seemingly unrelated objects are usually brought together in comparison to give exotic expressions to lofty thoughts and feelings. The use of conceit is a reflection of intellect and wit. Metaphysical conceits often appear unnatural and exaggerated at the first glance.
- **Shape Poem:** A kind of poem whose words are written out in such a shape that it resembles the subject it is talking about. It is also called structure poem.
- **Slant Rhyme:** It is also called “half rhyme” or “imperfect rhyme”. It refers to a kind of rhyme where the rhyming words have similar, but not exactly identical sounds.
- **Sons of Ben:** A term applied to a loose group of poets and dramatists of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century England who were influenced by and followed Ben Jonson. Thomas Nabbes, Richard Brome, Thomas Killigrew, Sir William Davenant, and Thomas Randolph are a few that are regarded as

Sons of Ben. Some of the Cavalier poets like Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, and Sir John Suckling also acknowledged the influence of Jonson, and self-labelled themselves as Sons of Ben. “Tribe of Ben” is an alternative term that is used to refer to this group. Some believed that this group gathered in different taverns of London to hold meetings amongst themselves. They drew from the styles and philosophies of Ben Jonson, and hence had a classicalist bent to their works. They wrote witty satires and epigrammatic works.

*Space for Learner*

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### **3.8 References and Suggested Readings**

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## Unit 4 : John Donne: “The Canonization”, “The Flea”

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### Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3. Introduction to Metaphysical Poetry
- 4.4 John Donne: The Poet
  - 4.4.1 His Life
  - 4.4.2 His Works
- 4.5. Reading the Poems
  - 4.5.1 “The Canonization”
  - 4.5.2 “The Flea”
- 4.6 Summing Up
- 4.7 References and Suggested Readings

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### 4.1 Objectives

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The Unit is an attempt to analyse the poems of the Metaphysical poet, John Donne. After going through the unit you will be able to-

- *define* the term “metaphysical poetry”
- *discuss* the life and works of the poet John Donne
- *explain* the text of the prescribed poems
- *appreciate* the prescribed poems of John Donne

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### 4.2 Introduction

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A thorough study of the unit shall familiarise you with the life and works of the poet while also providing explanation of the four prescribed poems. Therefore, we shall proceed with a systematic and a step-by-step approach in discussing the poet, the representative poems as well as the time and context in which these were written so that we may fully appreciate the same.

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### 4.3 Introduction to Metaphysical Poetry

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Let us quickly analyse the term ‘metaphysical’ which is derived from the words ‘meta’ meaning ‘after’ and ‘physical’ referring to the physical world.

Metaphysical poetry is characterized by elements of sharp wit and intellectual thought in terms of its characteristics that have a charm of their own. The concepts and ideas reflected in metaphysical poetry provides a reader much food-for-thought as it usually leaving him or her thinking seriously about various aspects. Some of the distinct features of metaphysical poetry are the use of wit and humour; use of conceits and paradoxes; ratiocination (logical reasoning) mixed with emotions; abrupt openings and colloquial style. While poetical conceits reflect complex intellectual ideas, poetical paradoxes are contradictory or opposing statements that are common in metaphysical poetry.

For the ease of general reference, practitioners of metaphysical poetry are referred to as metaphysical poets. When these poets wrote in their time, they had no way of knowing that ‘they’ or ‘their poetry’ would be identified as ‘metaphysical poets’ or ‘metaphysical poetry’. It was the literary critic, biographer and writer, Samuel Johnson who had first coined the term ‘metaphysical poetry’ which he had mentioned in his seminal work entitled *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*. You will do well to know that apart from its leading practitioner John Donne, some of the other important metaphysical poets who wrote during this period are Andrew Marvell, John Cleveland, Henry Vaughan, Abraham Cowley, George Herbert and Richard Crashaw.

**Stop to Consider**

You may have read or come across the term ‘metaphysical speculation’. Have you ever wondered what it means? To help you gain an idea regarding the same, you would be interested to know that it has to do with one’s philosophical plane of thought where a person deeply reflects or examines the nature of reality and workings of the universe. Perhaps, such speculations or search for definite answers will always remain endless but the human mind is ever inquisitive or curious to explore the uncertain or the unknown. At some point in your life, you must have surely found yourself lost in such patterns of philosophical thought.

**Check Your Progress**

What is the derived meaning of the term ‘metaphysical’?

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Who had first coined the term ‘metaphysical poetry’?

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Mention the names of some important practitioners of metaphysical poetry.

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*Space for Learner*

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## **4.4 John Donne: The Poet**

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Before we explore the prescribed poems of John Donne, let us gain an insight into the life and works of the poet in the following subsections so that we may gain an idea of the time and context in which he lived and wrote.

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### **4.4.1 His Life**

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John Donne (22 January 1572 – 31 March 1631) was born in a Roman Catholic family at a time when members of the denomination or faith were expected to conform or follow the practices of the newly established Church of England instead of their own. You can imagine the difficulty of being in such a situation where individuals or families had to be cautious and live in the fear of being persecuted owing to their faith. His father who worked as a merchant had passed away in 1576 when Donne was barely five years old. Donne was the third among his six siblings and his mother Elizabeth Heywood who worked as warden of the Ironmongers Company later married and settled down with a prosperous widower named John Syminges.

In terms of his early education, Donne was mostly home-schooled or tutored at home. Then, he went on to pursue his studies at Hart Hall, Oxford, followed by his higher studies at the University of Cambridge which he was unfortunately unable to complete. He could not obtain his degree from the University on the grounds of his faith and his refusal to take the Oath of Supremacy in order to graduate. The Oath of Supremacy was solely based on the necessity of affirming one’s faith in the power, authority and supremacy of the ruling monarch.

Thus, for a brief period, he travelled to Spain and Italy before he returned home to London.

Donne found a new opportunity to study at the Thavies Inn Legal School in London and later went on to work at the Inns of Court in the year 1592. His independent life in London saw him engaging himself with new social circles, interacting with elite women, widening his reading and also practicing his writings. Although, Donne worked as a private secretary to a prominent person in England known as Sir Thomas Egerton, his career prospects had suffered after he had secretly married his employer's niece named Anne More. Owing to their secret marriage, Donne's official career suffered as his future prospects of such privilege or official employment were sealed. The couple had to rely on financial help from Anne More's cousin and the generous help of patrons. To add to it, their family kept growing with twelve children of which five sadly passed away. However, while looking out for new work opportunities, Donne continued working on his writings and travelled to northwest Europe with his patron Sir Robert Drury. Later, Sir Drury also provided the couple with a home at the Drury estate where Donne and his wife lived for a while.

Then came another turning point in his life, where Donne had finally made up his mind to take the Holy Orders and priesthood in the Church of England in the year 1615. He was made a royal chaplain and with the orders of King James I, he was conferred the degree of doctor of divinity by Cambridge. Donne also took up his religious duties as the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral and he carried them out to the best of his abilities. However, Donne suffered a major setback in life when he lost his dear wife in the year 1617 after she had given birth to a stillborn child.

Donne took a vow that he would never marry again and dedicated the rest of his life to the service of the Church as a leading preacher in England. During this period, he travelled on diplomatic mission to Germany with Viscount Doncaster while continuing his preaching, writing and publishing his works. At the final stages of his life, he suffered from stomach cancer and breathed his last in March 1631. Donne was laid to rest at the St. Paul's Cathedral.

### **Check Your Progress**

What was the major problem that many like Donne had to face owing to their faith?

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Where did John Donne pursue his higher studies? Why was he unable to obtain his degree from the University of Cambridge?

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Why did Donne's career prospects suffer in his younger days?

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What was the major turning point in the life of John Donne?

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*Space for Learner*

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#### **4.4.2 His Works**

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John Donne did not prefer print publication like most of his contemporaries. Despite the advantages of the 'printing press' that could reach out to the larger masses, Donne preferred publication of (handwritten) 'manuscript' i.e., original drafts or copies for select readership. However, it was only due to his friends, patrons and well-wishers that he gave his consent to print just a few of his works. In fact, you will be surprised to note that he was also uncomfortable with the thought of being considered a professional writer and did not mind publishing his works anonymously i.e., without mentioning his own name.

Some of the important works by John Donne in the first phase of his writing journey which are namely, *Biathanos* (1608), *Pseudo Martyr* (1610), *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611), *The First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World* (1611) and *The Second Anniversary: Of Progress of the Soul* (1612). Also, in the second phase of his writing career following his turn to a religious life, are the works *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), *Poems* (1633),

*Juvenilia: or Certain Paradoxes and Problems* (1633), *LXXX Sermons* (1640), *Fifty Sermons* (1649), *Essays in Divinity* (1651), *Letters to Several Persons of Honour* (1651) and *XXVI Sermons* (1661).

Throughout his journey as a poet, Donne explored different strains of poetry such as religious or spiritual verses as well as the more secular kind of writings that represented worldly affairs including his love poetry. In this regard, it may be mentioned that although Donne suffered financial setbacks for a decade following his secret marriage with Anne More, yet several poems that were written during this period does reflect a sense of happiness and fulfilment in love. In this regard Achsah Guibbory mentions in his chapter in *English Poetry: Donne to Marvel* thus, “Love and salvation are not only the two great subjects of his poetry; they were also preoccupations that gave dramatic shape to his life” (125). You may also note that Donne wrote several holy sonnets and hymns or religious lyrics which we shall further discuss in the next unit.

The intellectual aspects of his writing simply set his literary works apart from many of his contemporary poets and writers. In his time, young writers wrote and circulated their works within closed circles that often brought them new opportunities of employment i.e., in the service of influential people. However, Donne himself was aware of the nature of his writings that had every possibility of stirring unwanted controversy for he had deviated from the social and moral temperament of his age in his writings. Instead of conforming to literary traditions of the time, Donne poured his intellectual thoughts into his writing ranging from social or religious satires to political questioning, references to sexuality or moral propriety to a certain sense of dissent. However, he knew very well that publication of such writings without much thought or care would not be well received by his readers. Moreover, he was much conscious of his social privilege and position as a gentleman which he had a desire to maintain.

Donne also wrote several elegies or in simple words poems to mourn death, several of which were written in memory of his patrons and acquaintances. He also wrote letters to his friends and well-wishers that reflected his thoughts, intellectual stirrings, opinions and ideas on various aspects. In fact, Donne experimented with a new form of verse epistles which were poems written in the form of letters and

addressed to some of his friends namely Rowland Woodward, Thomas Woodward, Christopher Brooke and Henry Wotton among a few others. Arthur F. Marotti in his chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (2006) mentions, “We find some of Donne’s most reflective and philosophical pieces of writing not only in his prose letters, but also in his verse epistles” (42).

*Space for Learner*

**Check Your Progress**

Did John Donne prefer printed publication? Mention his choice or preference.

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Name some of the early works of John Donne.

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Name the works of Donne following his turn to a religious life.

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**4.5. Reading the Poems**

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**4.5.1 “The Canonization”**

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“The Canonization” was published in the year 1633 and is one of the widely anthologised poems of John Donne. To begin with, the term ‘canonization’ refers to the practice of the Roman Catholic Church whereby a saint is ‘canonized’ following an official declaration of sainthood by the Papal authority or the Pope. Thus, the name of a holy saint enters into the official ‘canon’ or list of highly regarded saints following the demise of a saint.

If you read the text of the poem, you will find that the reference to ‘canonization’ is to indirectly represent or highlight the natural desire of lovers to be remembered forever, to immortalise their love and thereby to simply imagine their names in the canons of time. Thus, it tries to bring out the spiritual essence of love and the possibility of

immortalising one's love through creative verses or expression. The poem opens with the line "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love" which indicates that the speaker wishes to be left alone.

In expressing his displeasure, he makes it clear that the lovers desire a little space or privacy for themselves. He does not wish to be bothered by worldly affairs and rather wishes to shut out the world from intruding his personal space. Here, he dismisses the person who disturbs his peace and states that there are plenty of things for others to be bothered about. They would rather be comfortable together in their "pretty room" than step out of their private world. They feel like their entire world is shrunken and reflected in their eyes that meet. Their eyes and eyebeams or the light in their eyes reflect each other's world and thereby becoming uniting to form one world that is filled with so much fulfilment, trust and contentment.

The speaker then declares that their mutual love and respect for each other is sincere and spontaneous as well as free from any form of superficiality. While the world is preoccupied with its own day-to-day activities, the lovers are lost in their cocoon of love. In fact, the poet notes that their souls are intertwined and that their love goes beyond physical intimacy as indicated in the following lines:

"By us; we two being one, are it.  
So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.  
We die and rise the same, and prove  
Mysterious by this love"

*(John Donne's Poetry pg. 78)*

It is by virtue of their true love for each other that they wish to be immortal, honoured and revered for generations to come. If history fails to "chronicle" or record, to testify their extraordinary love, then poetry would prove its worth and narrate their legacy long after they depart from this world. To them their love stems from a deep sense of dedication, sincerity and spirituality that deserves validation and high regard.

For the same reason, they are inspired by the practice of religious canonization of saints and express their desire to be similarly canonized by the world for their everlasting love. Their legendary lives or story of love would be an inspiration for young lovers who seek the true essence of love that is fulfilling, soulful and enriching. The poem contains

a total of five stanzas. There are elements of paradox, conceits and striking images that project the immediacy of the lover’s thought and expression. We shall highlight some of these aspects in the next unit while discussing aspects of style and language employed in each of the poems discussed in the unit.

*Space for Learner*

**Stop To Consider**

Do you know that Mother Teresa was ‘canonized’ in 2016 and that she is referred to as St. Teresa of Calcutta? Mother Teresa who is also a recipient of Nobel Prize for Peace (1979) had dedicated her entire life to the service of the poor and the downtrodden in India. You could try and read more about her life and extraordinary service to humanity which is both inspiring and truly worth knowing.

**Check Your Progress**

What is the meaning of the term ‘canonization’? How is a saint canonized?

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What do the two lover’s wish in terms of immortalizing their true love?

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**4.5.2 “The Flea”**

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John Donne’s “The Flea” was first published in the anthology of love poems titled *Songs and Sonnets* in 1633 and several years after his demise. This poem reflects the intensity of love and natural desires together with the sensitivity and rationality of one’s thought combined with a dash of Donne’s characteristic wit. This poem was penned by Donne in his younger days reflecting his extensive use of allusions and conceits where the tiny flea embodies the couple’s love for each other in the poem.

While the allusion is a reference or hint to something that a writer may wish to convey, the metaphysical conceit is an unconventional and extended metaphor that compares two different or unrelated things, as you will find in the prescribed poem. For an instance, the intermingling of blood through the flea-bite is an allusion to their indirect physical union and again, the flea itself is an extended metaphor that represents the couple's relationship.

John Donne's "The Flea" conjures various images in the mind of the readers and makes even the trivial of things seem important. The learner will find that the use of conceits also adds a dramatic quality to the poem. The text of the poem is presented in three stanzas and is discussed in a detailed manner in this particular subsection. While going through the explanation of the poem, the learner would do well to read, re-read the text and thereby, add his or her own interpretations of the poem. Let us then try to grasp the content and gain a detailed idea of the poem.

**Stanza 1:**

The opening lines of the poem that begins with the word 'Mark' simply directs the readers' attention straight to the point of discussion among the two lovers. The attention is drawn towards the image of a 'flea', which plays a central role in the poem. Although, a flea is a tiny insect yet it makes its presence felt in the poem and eventually gains a certain significance owing to which it is referred to as "The Flea" in the title. Here, the poet asks his lady to firstly take a look at the flea and to secondly look at how "this flea" that seems tiny is similar to his tiny request for physical intimacy which she somehow refuses to accept.

The moment it bites the poet followed by the lady, it begins to make its presence and importance felt all the more. The poet is quick to notice that the flea in sucking both their blood has intermingled their lives into one (within its tiny body). Suddenly, the flea gains significance owing to the impact and intensity of its natural deed. Here, the learner will notice how the poet intends to make such a trivial matter as a flea bite, one that bears great significance. In general, it never occurs to the lay readers to look at tiny or trivial matters as seriously as a metaphysical poet would do. This makes one realise that the poet is trying to elaborate and put forth his observations right from the beginning of the poem, perhaps in order to debate or to create an argument that he can ultimately justify and win.

In Christianity, the symbol of 'blood' is very significant as it represents the blood of Jesus Christ who was crucified or nailed on the cross for the redemption of humankind. A religious ceremony of the Church is known as the Holy Eucharist or Communion is where 'wine' and 'bread' is administered to the faithful followers of Christ representing the bones/body and blood of the Lord. Thus, the religious sacrament symbolically refers to one's devotion towards Jesus Christ.

However, the poet in drawing partially from the above reference i.e., divine communion or union through the symbolic sacrament, tries to highlight how their blood has intermingled and united both literally as well as symbolically. Moreover, *John Donne's Poetry* (2007) that provides a few connotations of the poem "The Flea" also mentions that according to Aristotle's ideas of physiology, the physical union of a couple was considered a mingling of blood to which the poet may have alluded or referred to as well. Here, it is seen that the poet draws an unlikely comparison between two unrelated/ different things i.e., flea-bite and a couple's union.

Thus, the poet states that by virtue of the intermingling of their blood, the two souls can be considered as 'one'. This also points to the fact that even as the lady has denied the poet's advances and desires for intimacy, they have now been united in a different plane altogether, i.e., the spiritual plane, which apparently is all the more superior in a religious or philosophical sense. Thus, their union has now attained a divine or rather a spiritual status. The poet now claims that this cannot be considered 'sinful' and 'shameful' or even as the loss of 'maidenhead' or 'virginity' as it is purely a result of their spiritual union. It is much above even one's marital and physical union.

Moreover, the pampered little flea is drunk and swells or becomes bigger and fuller as their blood mingles together with the blood of the flea. This in itself is much more than they could have done through their physical union, had the lady agreed to the same. Thus, the flea plays the medium of their spiritual union and a 'catalyst' to their union, making their relationship much more meaningful and strong. Also, the swelling of the flea's body with the intermingling of blood can be read as an allusion to a woman's pregnancy.

**Stanza 2:**

In the second stanza of the poem, the poet is quick to request his beloved to spare the life of the little flea saying "Oh Stay" so that the

tiny creature is left alone. In killing the flea, she would be taking three lives at once i.e., both their lives and the life of the little flea as well. Thus, the poet is bent on saving the life of the flea saying, “This flea is you and I”. Further, he notes that within the body of the flea is their life blood, that it is their “marriage bed” where they have spiritually consummated their marriage and also their “marriage temple” where their religious ceremony of their communion has taken place.

Moreover, the poet says “we are met” to mean that even as their parents may seem displeased and hold a grudge against their relationship, the couple is already united in every way. So much so that they could now declare themselves as one. Therefore, hidden from the watchful eyes, the talk and displeasures of society, their union was complete and contained within the room or “living walls” of the flea’s body. Their ‘love’ or the intensity of their love, which was otherwise subject to people’s discussion or opinions was now “cloistered” or sheltered in this safe and sacred space.

The poet says that given her ‘habit’, his beloved was prone to acting according to her wish. If she would now impulsively kill the flea, she would not only be murdering her beloved and committing suicide by killing herself but also would be commit sacrilege by killing the innocent being that has brought them together, validating their love and union. This would amount to three unpardonable sins “in killing three” or taking three lives at once. The learner will notice that the allusion drawn here is also to that of the ‘Holy Trinity’ in Christianity that comprises God the Father, His son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The poet here indirectly refers to the trinity in a more personal sense.

### **Stanza 3:**

However, in the third and final stanza, the poet’s beloved kills the flea despite his request. Thus, the lady is presented as an unrelenting person who refuses to entertain his desires and also someone who is least bothered about something as tiny as a flea. It was only the poet, who seemed to be thoughtful thereby, extending and connecting his intellectual thoughts with his/their emotions as is also characteristic of metaphysical poetry. The learner may find it interesting to know that in *Metaphysical Poetry* (2006), Donne’s characteristic style of poetry is described thus, “His [Donne’s] poetry is not expressive; instead it links reason and emotion by representing transparently motivated

argumentation. That is, it invites us to think at once about the arguments we're hearing and about the motives which made someone argue that way" (xxvi).

Thus, the flea that was seen in a different light by the poet was only killed by the lady who failed to see anything significant in the same. This also reflects how perspectives differ from person to person and here, the poet paints her in poor light calling her action as "cruel". She did not pay any heed to the poet and thus, ended up staining her fingernail "purple" with the blood of the innocent flea. Therefore, the poet argues on behalf of the flea that it had only sucked a drop of their precious blood that had instantly led to the creation of such a special union. Therefore, the flea did not deserve such a death penalty in the hands of his beloved. It was only "guilty" of a tiny transgression compared to the cruel death that it received.

The poet says that his beloved argued that neither she nor he was any less "weaker" or noble for having killed the flea. However in his closing statement, the poet replies that even as what she states is 'true', yet she must also learn how her fears of yielding or surrendering to him is only 'false'. He says that, in relenting to his advances and willing to surrender herself to their physical desires, it would hardly result in any loss of her/their respect or "honour"; just as the flea's death (having drunk a drop of their blood) had hardly resulted in taking away their life/lives. Thus, the poet logically proves his point in the end and wins the case if not the confidence of his beloved.

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## **4.6 Summing Up**

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After having gone through the unit, the learner will be familiar with the life and works of the poet. Also through the discussions of the prescribed poems, you will be able to provide detailed explanations of the poems and provide your own critical appreciation of the same. You will also gain a clear idea about the definition of the term and characteristics of metaphysical poetry as well as some of the important metaphysical poets. After going through the text and explanation of the poems, the learner shall gain a detailed idea on the content of the poem. The "The Canonization" the poet desires to immortalize their love. He does not want to be disturbed in the privacy of love and in the mutuality of love that seeks to form one world through their unique worlds

reflected through each other's eyes. In "The Flea", the poet tries to establish his argument that the tiny flea had a major significance in sanctifying their relationship through the intermingling of their blood and that it did not deserve to die such a cruel death. The lady is in no way convinced by the persuasions of the poet and the argument as well with regard to the flea. However, at the end of the poem, the poet tries yet again to persuade his beloved towards giving up her false fears and fulfilling their physical desires and consummating their love. He justifies his point by saying that in doing so, she would not lose her honour just as she did not lose it while killing the innocent flea.

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#### **4.7 References and Suggested Readings**

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Corns, Thomas N. (ed.) (1993). *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry: Donne to Marvell*. New York: Cambridge University Press

Dickson, Donald R. (ed.) (2007) *John Donne's Poetry*. New York: W.W Norton & Company

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## Unit 5 : John Donne: “The Canonization”, “The Flea”

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### Supplementary Unit

#### Unit Structure

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Overview of Donne’s Work
- 5.4 Critical Reception as a Poet
- 5.5 Other Poems by Donne that you Should Read
- 5.6 Donne’s Poetical Style
  - 5.6.1 Poetical Style of some of the poems by Donne
- 5.7 Probable questions and Suggested Answer
- 5.8 Summing Up
- 5.9 References and Suggested Readings

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#### 5.1 Objectives

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The Unit is an attempt to discuss various aspects of the poems by John Donne. After going through the unit you will be able to-

- *provide* a broad overview of the works written by John Donne
- *discuss* the critical reception of Donne’s work
- *explain* the poetic style and language employed by Donne in the prescribed poems
- *gain* a holistic idea on the literary contributions and various aspects of John Donne’s writings

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#### 5.2 Introduction

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In the previous unit, we gained a familiarity with the life and literary contributions of the English Metaphysical poet John Donne who lived and wrote in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The unit had also provided you an idea on the term ‘metaphysical poetry’ while also mentioning some of its distinct features and important practitioners. Also, the prescribed poems in the course were taken up for discussion in which we gained an insight into the basic theme and core content of these interesting poems. Besides, we had also received an idea on

the sonnet form while discussing the Holy Sonnets or divine poems of John Donne.

The present unit shall provide the learner a broad overview of the works of John Donne and highlight some of his other important poetical works. We shall take up further discussion on how John Donne was received as a poet in his contemporary time and beyond. In addition, we shall also look at the poetic style of John Donne as reflected in the prescribed poems. By the end of the unit, the learner will thus be able to appreciate the literary credibility and contributions of the poet.

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### **5.3 Overview of Donne's Work**

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By now, the learner is familiar with the poet John Donne and his representative poems. However, it is also important to gain a broad overview of his literary contributions particularly his varied poetical works. You must ask yourself how to approach the poet John Donne along with his poetical works in a more comprehensive way. In this subsection, we shall try to elaborate and address the same. While discussing the works of the poet we had already learnt that John Donne had a wide range of literary contributions to his credit. To gain a broad overview on some of the various works by Donne, we shall do well to highlight some of the various types of writings that he had undertaken during his literary journey.

To start with, you will find it interesting to note that Donne wrote a couple of satires that included various observations, ideas and opinions of the poet. In simple words, satire often tends to take a dig at the society, at certain individuals or figures, varied circumstances etc. This often redirects attention of readers towards certain distinct flaws and shortcomings, problems and realities. Donne's satires read like poetical verses owing to its tight structure in which these were written. While it included his keen observations, the satirical perspectives were presented with a sense of irony and sharp wit.

Further, Donne also wrote around 43 verse letters most of which were addressed to his close friends and acquaintances. Some of them were his dear friends like Sir Henry Wotton from his Oxford days as well as Christopher Brooke and Rowland Woodward from his days at the Lincoln's Inn. A few of the verse letters were also addressed to the Countess of Bedford, named Lucy Harrington Russell (also his patron for around eight years) and Everard Guilpin, a poet and satirist. Besides these works, Donne also wrote several elegies, sonnets, songs, hymns (songs of worship) and divine poems that include

the ‘Holy Sonnets’ as well. In the course of your study, you must approach these works with a fair idea of the life and times in which the poet wrote. This is precisely because it forms the basic context as well as background in question. In addition, the poems written by Donne are relatively difficult to grasp without proper annotations and references and owing to this you must refer to good text sources if possible.

Therefore, the learner would do well to read and reread both the units on John Donne thoroughly with a step-by-step approach, moving from one subsection to the other in order to gain a comprehensive idea of the poet and his poetry with a sense of appreciation. Further, you must try to explore some of these various poetical works by John Donne on your own apart from studying the prescribed poems in details. This will enable you to gain an idea on the various preoccupations of the poet, his intellectual bent of mind, stream of ideas and distinctive style of writing.

To start with, you could refer to other significant poems such as: “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning”, “The Good Morrow”, “Go Catch a Falling Star”, “Sweetest Love, I Do Not Go”, “The Sun Rising”, “The Triple Fool”, “Lovers’ Infiniteness”, “Love’s Growth”, “Love’s Exchange”, “The Flea”, “The Ecstasy”, “Farewell to Love”, “Self-Love” and “Image of Her Whom I Love” among others. As evident in the title of most of these poems, several of these reflect the themes of passionate love and ecstasy, the communion of mind and the soul as well as the significant value of the present moment and time beyond. You could also read some of the other Holy Sonnets by Donne such as “Death, Be Not Proud”, “What if This Present”, “Wilt Thou Love God”, “I am a Little World”, “Since She Whom I Loved”, “Show Me, Dear Christ” or “A Hymn to God the Father” to mention a few.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Name some of the significant poems by John Donne apart from the ones prescribed in your course.

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2. Mention some of the themes reflected in the poetry of John Donne.

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## 5.4 Critical Reception as a Poet

During his long literary journey, John Donne particularly ensured that most of his works were circulated in the form of manuscripts (as already mentioned in the previous unit). However, it is important to note that much early in his writing career, Donne had a clear idea of the general interests, preferences as well as temperament (or in other words general ‘outlook’) of the general readership of his time. Perhaps, owing to this reason he chose not to print most of his works for it had every possibility of leading towards controversy and an onslaught of harsh criticism. In other words, Donne could easily perceive the kind of reception his works would have received given the fact that most of his writings had objectionable content for his time. However, today it is perhaps his progressive thoughts or reflections combined with his distinct style of writing that adds to his credibility or worth as a poet.

Donne was conscious of being widely known as a professional writer. However, he was much keen to share his works within his immediate circle and to receive their feedback. In his heydays, Donne had gathered quite a circle of friends and acquaintances right from his Oxford days to his employment with Egerton. Also, some of the contemporary poets were his known acquaintances who had access to his poetical output. However, when his prospects suffered following Donne’s secret marriage, he had to build a new circle of noble patrons in order to sustain himself. Following this phase, he had joined the Church and there was no looking back. From then on, he continued to produce some of his best poetical works to the last days of his life. In fact, in an elegy dedicated to John Donne, the English poet Thomas Carew expressed his appreciation of the poet thus,

“Here lies a king that rul’d, as he thought fit,  
The universal monarchy of wit;  
Here lie two flamens, and both those, the best:  
Apollo’s first, at last, the true God’s priest”

*(John Donne’s Poetry, pg. 182)*

While many poets and writers held Donne in high regard for his scholarship and literary merit, he was also at the receiving end of harsh criticism with regard to his radical poetry. The English poet and writer, Ben Jonson who wrote in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was acquainted with the poet in his younger days could not even come to terms with the practice of metaphysical poetry for it was strikingly different.

In the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century also known as the neoclassical age,

poets drew inspiration from the classical masters and adhered to their own set of structured conventions or rules of poetry. The neoclassical poets again could not relate much to the earlier practice of metaphysical poetry. However, Samuel Johnson in his reference of the metaphysical poets considered them witty in the treatment of their subject and nature of poetical reflections. At the same time, Johnson is known to have expressed serious reservations regarding such poetry. He had also extended his harsh (and perhaps, unfair) criticism of Donne and metaphysical poetry. This had further influenced the perception of many towards metaphysical poetry and new crop of poets in its entirety. Johnson had opined that metaphysical poetry seemed to be a forceful combination or compilation of unrelated and varied ideas famously stating thus,

“But 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. Of wit thus defined, they have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusion; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly brought, and though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased” (*John Donne’s Poetry*, pg. 194)

You would do well to note that these opinions were owing to the fact that Samuel Johnson belonged to a different age and practiced a different type of poetry altogether.

You will be interested to learn that during the Romantic Age, there was a revived interest in metaphysical poetry. Romantic poets like S.T. Coleridge and De Quincey appreciated the radical spirit and literary experimentation of the Metaphysical poets. However, the Romantics experienced a certain sense of disassociation and could not relate much to their poetical practices such as the extensive use of wit and conceits. You may know that the Romantic poets were essentially romantic, spontaneous, emotive and relatively simplistic in their poetical approach.

If you glance at the wider reception of metaphysical poetry through the ages, its philosophical essence and intellectual aspects had long been overlooked or even underestimated. This was until Modern literary critics like F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot redirected much attention to the works of John Donne. In fact, for the first time the literary world took a new approach towards metaphysical poetry. Particularly, the modern poet and critic T.S. Eliot saw

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through the value of metaphysical poetry and acknowledged its natural expression that captured the range and difficulty of everyday experiences.

In his work titled *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921), Eliot discussed the metaphysical poetry of 17<sup>th</sup> century and appreciated its defining qualities that were criticised in an earlier time by the likes of Samuel Johnson. Therefore, it will do well for you to know that Donne’s fresh ideas, heightened reflections, thematic exploration and literary experimentation continues to draw admiration from his readers even today. John Donne was the leading proponent of metaphysical poetry and he stands tall as one of the remarkable poets of his age and beyond.

**Stop to Consider**

Have you noticed that the titles the English writers ‘Ben Jonson’ is spelled without ‘h’ and that of ‘Samuel Johnson’ with ‘h’? You would do well to take care of the same while writing or mentioning their names. As mentioned in the unit, Ben Jonson wrote during the later phase of English Renaissance i.e., 16<sup>th</sup> century and in his younger days had a cordial relation with his friend John Donne. In fact, they both appreciated the difference in their writing styles and each other’s works. However, Ben Jonson could not bring himself to appreciate metaphysical poetry as such. On the other hand, Samuel Johnson who wrote in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is credited to have first formalised the term ‘metaphysical’ with reference to the metaphysical poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Name any two Romantic poets who appreciated the metaphysical poets.

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2. What did T.S. Eliot opine in his major work on the metaphysical poets?

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3. How is John Donne viewed as a poet today?

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## 5.5 Other Poems by Donne that you Should Read

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### “The Ecstasy”

The title of this metaphysical poem is sometimes spelled as “The Extasie”. The term ‘ecstasy’ is derived from the Greek word ‘ekstasis’ and refers to a person’s extraordinary or elevating feeling and experience. The poem contains a total of nineteen ‘quatrains’ i.e., four lines in each stanza. It is certainly worth a complete reading on your part.

You may note that the opening lines of the poem presents a couple seated beside the bank of a river with blooming violets, simply soaking in the beauty of the surroundings and peaceful moment of being together. It is a picturesque place and an ideal setting where the lovers spend time with each other and thus it reads:

“Where, like a pillow on a bed,  
A pregnant bank swell’d up to rest  
The violet’s reclining head  
Sat we two, one another’s best”

*(Donne’s Poetry pg. 100)*

The speaker shares his thought that the only intimacy that they had shared so far was regarding their “firmly cemented” hands and their glancing into each other’s eyes. They spent their entire day comfortable in each other’s silence, while their souls “negotiated” without them uttering a word to each other. Such was the intensity of their love and understanding.

The speaker compares their souls to two separate armies that did not necessarily require proving their worth or winning a victory over the other. The speaker then goes on to say that if a third person would be present in that moment he or she would witness what true love was and how rich it was in its purity. Although, such a person would have no way of knowing of the invisible exchange between the two souls, atleast he or she would be transformed into a pure soul in their presence. Such was the aura that surrounded the souls of the lovers and their inspiring love. The speaker thus tries to capture the soulful, radiating, transforming and magnetic quality of love in his poetical expressions.

However, the poet also addresses the inherent natural desires of two lovers to experience physical intimacy. Thus on one hand, the speaker glorifies the union of pure souls, which is ‘platonic’ in terms of its thought and on the other hand, he admits the desire to consummate their soulful love through physical union as well. Therefore, while Donne agrees with Plato’s concept of

spiritual or soulful love, he also seems to struggle with the thought that ‘soul’ and the ‘body’ are two separate entities after all which find their final meeting ground in physical intimacy. This is evident in the following lines:

“But oh. Alas, so long, so far,  
Our bodies why do we forbear?  
They’re ours, though they’re not we; we are  
Th’intelligences, they the sphere.”

*(Donne’s Poetry pg. 101)*

The speaker notes that just like a violet transplanted into new soil would still grow beautiful and healthy, similarly when their united soul conceive a newborn, their love would grow all the more. It would also relieve any sense of loneliness and complete their sense of being in this world. Further, he states that there is nothing to be ashamed or to in admitting the importance of our bodily or physical desires. The body is likened to alloys which can be fused to form stronger and durable metals. Similarly, when the body fuses with the soul, it creates something ecstatic or extraordinary. Towards the tail end of the poem, it mentions that just like a great prince would find himself completely ‘entrapped’ in a prison, similarly the soul would find itself ‘confined’ without the freedom of physical union as highlighted in the following lines:

“So must pure lovers; souls descend  
T’affections, and to faculties,  
Which sense may reach and apprehend,  
Else a great prince in prison lies”

*(Donne’s Poetry pg. 102)*

Thus. the poem has elements of the both the spiritual and the sensuous, the soulful and the physical. If any lover like them would hear of this, he would also do well to note that their soulful love would remain unchanged despite their physical intimacy or even long after they depart from this world.

As you may realize by now, “The Canonization” and “The Ecstasy” may also be considered Donne’s kind of love poetry. Now, the two poems or rather sonnets that follow are religious poems also referred to as Divine Poems or Holy Sonnets. Ideally, the ‘sonnet’ or a little poetical song is a structured poem of fourteen lines only. Poets like the Italian classical master, Petrarch and the English poet, William Shakespeare primarily practiced and popularised the sonnet form. Also as already mentioned, you may note that the fourteen lined poem is divided into first eight lines (octave) followed by a response in the next six lines (sestet) which is known as a Petrarchan styled sonnet.

Sir Thomas Wyatt had first brought the practice of Petrarchan sonnets to England. Thus, when Shakespeare adopted the sonnet form, he divided the fourteen lined poem into three quatrains or three stanzas of four lines each (3x4=12 lines) followed by a couplet (two more lines in response). This alteration within the prescribed structure of fourteen lines came to be referred to as the ‘Shakespearean sonnet’. Thus, the sonnet form gained new variations in the hands of other English poets that followed like John Milton and Edmund Spenser. John Donne combined elements of both the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean sonnet with a more divine or religious approach. Let us then explore more about the two Holy Sonnets in the following subsections.

### **“At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners”**

Among Donne’s nineteen Holy Sonnets, “At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners” is numbered Holy Sonnet 4 and is rather written in a Petrarchan style. If we look at the opening lines of the poem, we are directed towards the Christian belief of the day of Judgement and Resurrection. The day of Judgement is supposedly to be the predestined day when all believers shall be accountable to God and His judgement. On this day, God shall hold all believers accountable.

Here, at the beginning of the poem we find the image of ‘angels’ who are called upon by the poet to blow their trumpets in order to be heard in every nook and corner of this earth. As the earth is spherical or rather round in shape, there is no corner as such but he symbolically refers to the four corners or directions i.e., north, east, west, south. The angels are called upon to rise up and also awaken the countless souls who had departed from their physical forms or existence following their demise. The trumpet call would enable the souls to return to the physical world and to search for their scattered, lifeless bodies as reflected in the following lines:

“At the round earth’s imagin’d corners blow  
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise  
From death you numberless infinities  
Of souls and to your scatter’d bodies go;”

*(Donne’s Poetry, pg. 137)*

Ultimately, the poet as a mortal being states that none shall be spared from God’s final Judgement. Also, the speaker makes a Biblical reference (as mentioned in the Old Testament) to the myth of the

Great Flood that had swept away all sinners and living beings on earth according to God's will. Also, in the future events that shall be revealed on the final Judgement day, 'fire' shall also reduce life and all living things from the face of this earth. This final event is also referred to as the 'Reckoning Day of Judgement' (commonly referred as 'doomsday') as revealed at the end of the Bible.

You may note that the lines point to how the natural elements are determined and are all under the control of Almighty God. Many have already perished down the ages in wars, droughts, calamities, sufferings, diseases, degeneration, tortures, helpless circumstances and owing to verdicts of law as well. However, there is only the enlightened and 'chosen few' who by virtue of their service and dedication to God as well as the appropriate accountability of their deeds shall be pardoned from God's punishment. The difference is that they shall witness the coming of God's son with their own eyes unlike the rest of the world as reflected in the following lines:

"All whom the Flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,  
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,  
Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you whose eyes  
Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe."

*(Donne's Poetry, pg. 138)*

Thus, the learner may note that Christians uphold the belief of Resurrection, which means that those who die shall be resurrected or brought to life by God's grace and their sins shall be forgiven when they finally meet their creator. Thus, the speaker makes a clear distinction between the fate of those who die for different reasons (as previously mentioned) and the fate of the enlightened who die but get to behold God in their eyes. Therefore, the latter receives the blessing of seeing God with his or her own eyes and thereby uniting with God's grace.

"But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space;  
For if above all these my sins abound,  
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace"

*(Donne's Poetry, pg. 138)*

The speaker then reflects on his own thoughts and requests God to let the dead remain in their sleep for a while. He confesses the sins that he has committed in his own life, admitting that he is like most other human beings who are inclined towards sin or other wrong-

doing which is forbidden. Also, he realises that perhaps it is too late in life (especially when nearing Judgement Day) to ask for God's mercy and forgiveness as he writes:

When we are there: Here on this lowly ground,  
Teach me how to repent, for that's as good  
As if thou had'st sealed my pardon with thy blood.  
(*Donne's Poetry*, pg. 138)

The closing lines of the sonnet reflects the speaker's thoughts as he considers the benevolence and generosity of God too. This is why he prays to God so that he may walk in the right path with repentance through the teachings of God. The "lowly ground" refers to earth where he wishes to atone for his sins instead of waiting until his dying day and his resurrection. Therefore, he wishes to reflect on the present and to live it well as an enlightened being with God's grace. Thus, he hopes in his heart that God would forgive and absolve him of all his sins imagining God writing a document granting His pardon sealed with God's own blood.

### **"Batter My Heart, Three- Person'd God"**

The following sonnet titled "Batter My Heart, Three- Person'd God" is numbered Holy Sonnet 10. If, you read the text of the poem, you will find that the sonnet is divided into octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). The opening lines of the poem reflects the intensity of the speaker's desire where he wishes his heart to be symbolically battered meaning beaten or pounded with God's will. It again means that he wishes to be enlightened by God's grace, to both learn and unlearn the ways of this world. This he desires with utmost sincerity even if it means learning everything the hard way.

You may know that the Christians believe in the Holy Trinity i.e., God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit. Thus, the speaker refers to the "three-person'd God" in the poem. Further, he request the divine powers to make him undergo the toughest tests so that he may highly improve himself, be righteous and enlightened. This it refers to his complete transformation.

As precious metals are forcibly broken, burnt and beaten in order for it to turn malleable and gain a desired shape, similarly the speaker urges God to mould and transform him all over again. Thus, it expresses the speaker's dissatisfaction with his 'present self' and his

‘inherent weaknesses’ which he wishes to change seeking God’s firm discipline. He compares himself to a ‘usurped’ town or a town taken over by evil forces which needs to be undone. Therefore, the emphasis is on rectifying himself, cleansing his soul and turning towards God’s blessings as reflected in the following lines:

“Batter my heart, three-person’d God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me; and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I like an usurp’d town due t’another due,”

*(Donne’s Poetry, pg. 140)*

In the next few lines, the speaker notes that he has decided to labour or work hard on himself but the journey is also much difficult. Just as a Viceroy has official responsibilities towards the welfare of the people or territory, similarly God’s gift of ‘reason’ is to ensure an individual’s welfare as also indicated in the following lines:

“Labor t’admit you, but oh, to no end.  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captiv’d and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain:”

*(Donne’s Poetry, pg. 140)*

However, moments of weakness and his misdeeds happens to capture and overthrow his gift of reasoning owing to which he is often defeated in his mind. Therefore, the speaker wishes to be greatly empowered for the love of God that he holds in his heart. His love for God is so true that he dedicates his entire life in God’s service and to be simply worthy of His blessings. It is as though his ‘commitment to God’ could be compared to ‘one’s commitment towards marriage’. Thus, he wishes to be punished and to be divorced from ‘God’s grace’ if necessary, so that he can pursue and work hard to receive heavenly blessings all over again. Also, his own distractions and wavering from the path of righteousness makes it seem as though he were married to God’s enemy. Therefore, he takes into account his own promised fight against God’s enemy, i.e., all kinds of sin and vices.

He wishes to surrender himself to the grace and mercy of God. The speaker pleads for God’s intervention so that he may be

“imprisoned” or taken captive by God’s power. For he feels that without the same he may be constantly overpowered by sinful distractions. Unless God “enthalls” or takes him to new heights of enlightenment and self-contentment, he could never be ‘free’ or ‘pure’ in the true sense of the word. The only way he could turn ‘chaste’ or pure in thought, word or deeds is through God’s enforcement of discipline and obedience. The closing lines thus reflect the thoughts of the speaker who wishes to be a transformed individual, a true believer and a better version of himself in the eyes of God, declaring thus:

“Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,  
“But am bethroth’d unto your enemy:  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.”

*(Donne’s Poetry, pg. 140)*

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## **5.6 Donne’s Poetical Style**

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Donne had dedicated a bunch of his significant poems to his beloved Anne Donne reflecting the magical heights of love and passion to the sublimity of soulful and spiritual reflections as also popularised in poems like “The Sunne Rising”, “The Good Morrow”, “The Flea” and “The Canonization”. In addition, the widely anthologised poem titled “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” was written referring to his wife Anne (who was pregnant at the time) when he had to embark on a journey to Europe. Another significant Holy Sonnet titled “Since She Whom I Loved” was written in memory of his beloved wife after she had passed away. If it were not for these poems and sonnets, Anne Donne would have been long forgotten by the world as there is not much in terms of records on her life.

If you analyse the style and language employed in his poetical works, you will certainly note that through the use of striking imagery and symbolical ideas, Donne created some of the most memorable verses in English poetry. He simply created pictures through words as he had a flair for the language and a sharp intellectual wit to present the same. If you go through the larger body of his poetical works, you will notice that these were concise and compact in terms of both structure and the economy of words. Donne’s poetical style was very unconventional given his new experimentation with poetry, which we refer to as metaphysical poetry today. His poetry reflected wide readings and cross references to aspects of philosophy, spirituality, religion, socio-

politics, contemporary culture and consciousness to mention a few. Therefore, in terms of style, language and content, Donne did not restrict himself to the conventions of his time and infused a sense of intellectual as well as bold representations of his poetical sensibilities.

Notably, Achsah Guibbory in a chapter on Donne in *John Donne's Poetry* aptly mentions thus, "Love and salvation are not only the two great subjects of his poetry; they were also preoccupations that gave dramatic shape to his life" (125). Donne had indeed written what he lived, experienced and firmly believed in. Most of his poetical works delved on the themes of love, passion, soul, salvation, faith, divinity, the individual self and the contemporary society. In the following subsection, let us analyse the poetic style and language employed by Donne with particular reference to his prescribed poems.

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### 5.6.1 Poetic Style in some of the poems by Donne

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Let us first gain an idea on the poetical style used in the prescribed love poems titled "The Canonization" and "The Ecstasy". Following this we shall further analyse the poetic style employed in the two Holy Sonnets entitled, "At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners", "Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God".

#### "The Canonization"

"To begin with "The Canonization", the poem is presented in the form of 'an argument' and 'explanation' or 'justification' of the spiritual as well as passionate indulgence of the two lovers. The speaker in the poem assumes the presence of a stranger and begins with the exclamation "For Godsake". In addition, a certain sense of exaggeration can be clearly noted in the opening lines where the speaker over-reacts at the sudden intrusion or unexpected presence of a stranger,

"Or chide my palsie, or my gout,  
My five gray haire, or ruin'd fortune flout"

In these lines cited above, the speaker asks the stranger to rather chide or scold anything even his medical problems like palsy (paralysis) and gout (joint pain) or to even count his 'five strands of grey hair' (an exaggeration) instead of disturbing him and his beloved. Donne draws varied references in his argument such as social affluence, the monarchy, the warring soldiers, lawyers, historians chronicling history,

epidemics, the merchant ships venturing out for new fortunes, the arts, sciences, the mythological and the divine. Thereby, you will note the range of subjects and aspects that he draws into the poem.

The speaker also refers to the changing seasons and draws various comparisons to their love with the use of metaphors of “flye” (fly), “Tapers” (candles), “Eagle and Dove” as well as the mythical figure ‘Phoenix’. The phoenix refers to a bird that dies and then rises up again from its ashes. Finding in themselves the “Eagle and Dove” is also a symbolical representation of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Further, just as the phoenix is believed to rise from its bits and pieces similarly the two lovers declare that they “dye and rise the same” i.e., they fall deep into and then arise again in the strength of their love as well as physical passion. The moment the speaker states, “we are Tapers too” it implies the use of a metaphor that equates two dissimilar or different things, concepts and ideas. Also, the extreme fanciful comparisons are nothing but conceits which is distinct in metaphysical poetry.

To give you an example, you may note the comparisons of love and sainthood, i.e. the symbolical comparison of two opposite aspects, the secular and the religious. Lines such as “And wee in us finds the Eagle and the Dove”, “We’ll build in sonnets pretty roomes”, “Who did the whole worlds soule extract and drove/ Into the glasses of your eyes” express the grandeur and glory attributed to the lovers and the grand love that they define. You will find several contrasting or rather opposite ideas at work in the poem as also evident in the ‘title’ of the poem referring to ‘canonization’ itself indicating or marking their love for eternity.

If you notice closely there is a repetition of words in the poem for instance, “let me love”, “so will you let me love”, “who’s injured by my love”, “Mysterious by this love”, “Us canoniz’d for Love”, “You whom reverend love” and “A pattern of your love!” What it does is that it somehow emphasises the statements made by the assertive speaker. In other words, it clearly highlights what the speaker desires to assert and establish. Besides the verses, present words from old English spelled slightly different from Modern English for eg. palsie (palsy), minde (mind), saies (says), teares (tears), warres (wars), flye (fly), wee (we), finde (find), dye (die), peece (piece), roomes (rooms), urne (urn), halfe (half), neutrall (neutral), tombes

(tomb), hymnes (hymns), soule (soul), towne (towns), patterne (pattern).

If you follow the rhyming words, you will find the pattern of rhyme scheme as evident in each stanza of the poem i.e., *abbaccdd*. Therefore, there is a certain lyrical flow in each stanza and at the same time there are also contrasting or even a wide range of images/ ideas associated with 'love' in the poem.

### **“The Ecstasy”**

It is yet another declaration and assertion of profound love. There is a certain sense of musicality in these verses owing to the rhyming pattern i.e., *abab* in each stanza. There is an interesting use of 'simile' (when two different things are 'likened' together to draw a parallel comparison). For an instance, in the opening lines itself you will notice that the two lovers sitting by the river bank are compared thus, "Where, like a pillow on a bed", "A pregnant bank swell'd up to rest", "The violet's reclining head" are the comparisons made by the speaker. Further, he compares themselves to "two equal armies" or "like sepulchral statues" as twin souls who intermingle and fuse into a single entity.

The mood of the poem is pensive or reflective in which the speaker tries to grasp the mystery of love and longing. There is a constant reference to and emphasis on the soul and this is again to highlight the significance and beauty of the same. To highlight several such repetitions note these lines taken from different stanzas of the poem: "Our Souls, which to advance their state"; "And whilst our souls negotiate there"; "That he soul's language understood"; "He (though he knew not which soul spake ...)"; "But as all several souls contain"; "Love, these mix'd souls doth mix again"; "Interinimates two souls"; "We then, who are this new soul, know"; "So soul into soul may flow"; "Spirits, as like souls as it can"; "So must pure lover' souls descend"; or "Love's mysteries in souls do grow". You will also find several grand metaphors or even conceits in this poem.

Look at the following lines: "Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread/ Our eyes upon one double string". It points to the symbolical union of the lovers as also further represented in the other stanzas where souls "advance their state", where there's a mention of "soul's language understood", one soul speaking to the other, souls mixing

or even flowing into the other, souls controlling bodies, souls growing the mysteries of love etc. Towards the end of the poem, much emphasis is laid on the metaphor of 'body' which is compared to the spheres (controlled by angels), to a prison, to a book that contains the soul and love's mysteries.

It extends the idea that even bodily or physical desires are as significant as the soulful or spiritual experiences. In the poem, there are certain paradoxes or opposite strands of ideas as well eg. "As 'twixt two equal armies fate/ Suspends uncertain victory", "we see, we saw not, what did move" or "Our bodies why do we forbear/ They're ours, though they're not we; we are. Once you go through the text of the love poems that are relatively easy to grasp, you will have a better idea of what has been discussed above with regard to Donne's poetical style and language.

#### **"At the Round Earth's Imagin'd Corners**

The various structural aspects with regard to the prescribed Holy Sonnets were already discussed in details (refer to the earlier unit). However, we shall further take up some of the other nuances of these sonnets. If you note the structures of this sonnet, it is inspired by the Petrarchan sonnet structure. The rhyme scheme or pattern that you will find in "Blow" is abba, abba, cdcd, ee. Here, the first eight lines is known as the *octet* and the next six lines as the *sestet*. The opening lines of the sonnet reveals an imagined and Biblical reference to the angels and stirs the reader's imagination on what the Christian Judgement Day might seem like.

The tone of the poem is rather gloomy as it brings to mind the pictures of war, poverty, pain, despair, misfortune and helpless circumstances. After unravelling the fate of believers, the sudden interrupting word 'but' (refer to line 9) brings us back to the present situation. It presents the prayers of the speaker who wishes to learn the way to repent and receive the grace of God. This is specially expressed and established in the last two rhyming lines of the poem which reads thus, "Teach me how to repent, for that's as good/ As if thou had'st seal'd my pardon with thy blood". The speaker brings forth a few references and Biblical images as already discussed in the explanation of the text in the previous unit.

**“Batter My Heart, Three-Person’d God”**

In this sonnet you will find the same rhyming pattern i.e., *abba, abba, cdcd, ee*. The opening line which also forms the title of the poem itself produces a shocking effect if you look at the use of the words “Batter My Heart” which also symbolically refers to the necessity of strict discipline from God or the Holy Trinity also referred to as the “Three-Person’d God”.

In fact starting from the opening lines to the body of the poem, you will find that the poem is replete with verbs or action words such as “batter”, “knock”, “breathe”, “shine”, “seek”, “mend”, “rise”, “stand”, “o’erthrow” (overthrow), “bend”. “force”, “break”, “blow”, “burn”, “make”, “usurp’d” (usurped), “Labor”, “admit”, “defend”, “captiv’d”, proves”, “love”, betroth’d” (betrothed or married), “divorce”, “untie”, “break”, “Take”, “imprison”, “enthrall” or “ravish”. If you read the poem carefully, you will note that the line “I like an usurp’d town” is an example of simile and “Reason, your Viceroy in me” is metaphorical. This sonnet conveys a certain sense of restlessness and desperation of a believer to be loved at the expense of being punished to the extreme, being enslaved, being swept away by God’s will as well as being overtaken with violence as evident in the closing lines.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Highlight the use of simile in the poem “The Ecstasy”.

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2. Comment on the comparisons made between love and sainthood in the poem “The Canonization”

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3. Mention the rhyme scheme of the poem “The Canonization” and “At the Round Earth’s Imagin’d Corners”?

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## 5.7 Probable Questions and Suggested Answer:

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I. Write a critical appreciation of the poem “The Flea”.

Answer: Read the poem thoroughly. Your answer should contain the following points

- (a) How the poem starts: The opening lines of the poem that begins with the word ‘Mark’ simply directs the readers’ attention straight to the point of discussion among the two lovers. The attention is drawn towards the image of a ‘flea’, which plays a central role in the poem.
- (b) Why is the symbol of ‘blood’ pertinent: In Christianity, the symbol of ‘blood’ is very significant as it represents the blood of Jesus Christ who was crucified or nailed on the cross for the redemption of humankind. One of the sacrament or religious ceremony of the Church is known as the Holy Eucharist or Communion in which ‘wine’ and ‘bread’ is administered to the faithful followers of Christ representing the bones/ body and blood of the Lord.
- (c) What would be the result of the lady killing the flea according to the poet?: In killing the flea, she would be taking three lives at once i.e., both their lives and the life of the little flea as well. If she would now impulsively kill the flea, she would not only be murdering her beloved and committing suicide by killing herself but also would be commit sacrilege by killing the innocent being that has brought them together, validating their love and union. This would amount to three unpardonable sins “in killing three” or taking three lives at once.
- (d) The argument on behalf of the dead flea: The poet argues on behalf of the flea that it had only sucked a drop of their precious blood that had instantly led to the creation of such a special union. Therefore, the flea did not deserve such a death penalty in the hands of his beloved. It was only “guilty” of a tiny transgression compared to the cruel death that it received.
- (e) How the argument concludes: The Flea only sucked a drop of their precious blood that had instantly led to the creation of such a special union. Therefore, the flea did not deserve such a death penalty in the hands of his beloved. It was only “guilty” of a tiny transgression compared to the cruel death that it received.
- (f) Write on the poetic style

II. In what way are the love poems by Donne different from the qualities usual romantic quality attributed to love poems?

Answer: To answer this question, the following points need to be elaborated.

1. The peculiar character of metaphysical poetry is the first and foremost point to consider. An important aspect of metaphysical poetry is its use of metaphysical conceit which goes against the emotional aura of Romantic love poetry. The lyrical, emotional tone carried through musical flow of poetic language had been a hallmark of the English poetic style. John Donne marks a departure from this poetic emotionalism.
2. Take few poems by Donne, such as “The Canonization” and “The Flea”. Look at the tone of the lover’s displeasure at the other’s intrusion into the private space of love. Tonal aspect of such poems as “The Sun Rising” would be startling to one who is accustomed to conventional poetic expression of romantic love. Further, follow the argument the poet develops in favour of love.

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### **5.8 Summing Up:**

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After having gone through the details of the poem, the learner will now be completely familiar with the details of John Donne’s literary works. In the earlier unit, the discussion on the life and works of John Donne has already given you a detailed idea of the contemporary times and context in which the poet wrote some of his best works. The explanations of the prescribed poems had focused on supplementing your own reading and interpretations of the texts.

A detailed reading of these explanations together with the poetic style employed (as discussed in the present unit) shall benefit you with a clear conception of the content and presentation of the Donne’s poetical reflections. The critical reception of the literary works by Donne will enable you to learn more about the value of his literary contributions. You may have already noted how the works of Donne had received constructive criticism as well as validation by several other great poets, writers and thinkers of his age and beyond. Therefore, you are now in a better position to appreciate Donne, his writing style and particularly his representative poems in a holistic manner. The unit will enable you to grasp the reflected thoughts and ideas in these poems and appreciate the same with a more enlightened approach.

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## 5.9 References and Suggested Readings

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## **Unit 6 : Alexander Pope: An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot**

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### **Unit Structure:**

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Introducing the poet
- 6.3 His works
- 6.4 Critical Reception
- 6.5 Context of the poem
- 6.6 Reading the Poem
- 6.7 Summing Up
- 6.8 References and Suggested Readings

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### **6.1 Objectives:**

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This unit is intended to acquaint you with Alexander Pope, an eighteenth-century English poet. A brief but adequate biographical account of his life is detailed, along with certain historical and cultural aspects of his time which will provide you with the required information to proceed with the study.

The purpose of this design is to achieve the following objectives-

- To help you understand the historical and social background of the poet
- To discuss the literary, social and political influences on the author
- To analyze the corpus of his poetic output, and its reception through time
- To broadly discuss the select text, and evaluate the concepts and philosophy delineated by the poet

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### **6.2 Introducing the poet:**

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Alexander Pope was born on May 21, 1688 to Catholic parents in London. His father, Alexander Pope, was an affluent linen merchant, while his mother, Edith Turner, was the daughter of the Esquire of York. This was the year when the Glorious Revolution had erupted, culminating in the deposition

of James II, who was replaced by William III of Orange and his wife, Mary II. Consequently, the Protestant Church of England issued a series of laws, known as the Test Acts which restricted the civil rights of Roman Catholics and minor religious orders. As a result, Pope was among those who could not attend public schools or universities, and had to be educated mostly at home, by priests, private tutors or even relatives. Few Catholic schools functioned, although unlawfully, and Pope managed to go to a couple of such schools. Not only were Catholics denied formal education, they weren't allowed to reside within London as well. The Pope family thereby relocated to Binfield in Windsor Forest.

Even as a young boy, Pope was inclined to learning, and self-taught himself several languages, such as French, Italian, Latin and Greek. He profusely read the works of various authors and began writing verses at a very tender age. However, he was about twelve years when he suffered from Pott's disease, a form of spinal tuberculosis, which contributed to his physical deformities, asthmatic problems and lifelong ill health. His stature remained at a height of four feet six inches, with a hunched back, although he was able to perform certain physical activities, like horse riding, travelling, and possessed excellent calligraphy.

It is probably due to such infirmities that Pope became more engrossed in reading and writing, while challenging his mental capacities. Against all odds, he soon gained recognition among the intellectual circles, the likes of whom included William Wycherley, William Congreve, John Caryll, Samuel Garth, Henry Cromwell and William Marsh. Pope contributed writing for his Whig friends, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in their magazine *The Spectator* (1711). Along with his Tory friends- Jonathan Swift, Thomas Parnell, John Gay, and John Arbuthnot, he formed the *Scriblerus Club* (1714), a satirical literary group which mocked inept writing through the fictitious identity of Martinus Scriblerus. Although they began working on the *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* in 1713, the completed book was finally published in 1741. Parts of the invented biography considerably influenced Pope's "Dunciad", as well as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

**Stop to consider**

As outlined earlier, you would be required to have some basic knowledge of the historical context during the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century that followed. Significant socio-political, and cultural events that took place around this time period constitute of the Bubonic

Plague of 1665-66, also called 'The Great Plague of London', the Third Dutch War (1672-74) which ended with the Treaty of Westminster, the Glorious Revolution (1688-89), and the Treaty of Union (1707). Both Charles II and his brother James II, who were Catholic converts, tried to usher in religious equality in their monarchy by passing the Royal Declaration of Indulgence (1672) and Declaration of Indulgence (1687) respectively. They were both withdrawn and replaced by the repressively intolerant Test Acts (1673-1828). To take refuge from the anti-Papist laws, Pope's family moved to Binfield (and later to Chiswick), which inspired his interest in gardens, landscape, and where he wrote his first poems. Pope's Meadow, a park near his manor, is named after him.

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Despite having a number of prominent friends, Pope also had several adversaries and critics. He was targeted for his satires, public feuds, his disfigured appearance, his belonging to a minority religion, and his informal education. He also remained unmarried though he was acquainted with many women, like the Blount sisters, of who Martha Blount is favorably addressed in his poem, "Epistle to a Lady". As a writer, Pope quickly advanced from his initial poems which includes "Ode on Solitude", "Pastorals" to his more famous works, like "Essay on Criticism", "Rape of the Lock" and the "Epistles". He developed the heroic couplet drawing inspiration from John Dryden, and both are regarded as the foremost Neoclassical poets of the Augustan age. Pope placed emphasis on traditional, moral values and reasoning as could be seen in the works of ancient Greek and Roman poets, such as Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Homer.

His writing focused on virtues, intellect and realism rather than the romantic notions of fancy, idealism or passions. His witty yet vilifying satires were more often objective, aimed at human evils and falsity of the society at large. His caricatures of particular individuals were cleverly renamed with some exaggeration, but were not blatantly informative. Nevertheless, the recipients of his opprobrium threatened him to the point where he had to be accompanied by pistols and his Great Dane on walks. Pope also ventured in scholastic work, adeptly translating Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and publishing editions of Shakespeare. Upon the success of his translations, Pope acquired a magnificent villa at Twickenham, where he flourished at landscape gardening. Here, with a few of his friends beside him, Pope breathed his last on May 30, 1744.

Space for Learner

**SAQ**

1. Pope was highly attuned to the rivers and gardens around his countryside residence, besides his taste for Greco-Roman pastoral poetry. Explore this idea in the context of some of his poems. (100 words)

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2. How does the religious sentiments of the age figure in Pope’s poetry? Do you find him taking a stance on it through his poetry? (100 words)

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3. What political comments can be found in Pope’s poetry, given that he was familiar with people of rival political groups? (80 words)

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**6.3 His works**

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Pope was a precocious child and began reading the classics, Homer, Quintilian, Juvenal, and Longinus, as early as age six, which largely inspired him to write. He started composing poems in the manner of the masters, and by the age of twelve had written a proper verse, “Ode on Solitude”. The poem exudes a budding simplicity, although bearing the structural soundness of established poetry. He attempted paraphrasing Thomas à Kempis around the same age, and later worked on his “Imitations of English Poets”. By 1704, Pope was engaged in circulating the manuscript of his “Pastorals”, a quartet of poems emulating the style of Virgil, among the London literati. This attributed to his growing popularity in the next few years. He was soon noticed by the book seller, Jacob Tonson who published the collection in his *Poetical Miscellanies* in 1709.

It was followed by Pope’s first major work “An Essay on Criticism” (1711), written in heroic couplets and anonymously published. The poem reflects the young author’s mature thoughts on the purpose and obligation of the ideal critic while judging poetry. Pope claimed that such critics should have true taste and virtue, and should abide by the poetical norms and standards founded by the classical writers. Even more successful was his next publication,

“Rape of the Lock” (1712) dedicated to his good friend, John Caryl. It was a heroi-comical poem (a term first used by Pope) in five cantos, which takes up a commonplace argument between two noble families and portrays it in the epic tradition. Pope based this on a real dispute between two Catholic families over a stolen lock of hair, thus mocking the trivialities and shallowness of high society.

Although started around 1704, the later part of Pope’s first political poem, “Windsor-Forest”, was completed and published in 1703. Similar to Virgil’s panegyric on Augustus, this patriotic poem was a tribute to the rule of Queen Anne, celebrating the Peace of Utrecht which ended the War of Spanish Succession. Around that time, Pope had also written the poem “Ode for Music on St. Cecilia’s Day”, which appeared in 1713, at the request of Richard Steele. His ode to the Roman patroness of music is often mentioned alongside Dryden’s “A Song for St. Cecilia’s Day” and “Alexander’s Feast”. A number of poems were composed during 1713- 1717 which include “Prologue to Mr. Addison’s Cato”, “Epilogue to Mr. Rowe’s Jane Shore”, “The Temple of Fame: A Vision”, “Epistle to Mrs. Teresa Blount”, and “The Challenge: A Court Ballad”. His other memorable poem, “Eloisa to Abelard” (1717) was framed upon the medieval legend of Heloise-Abelard of France, and written in the genre of Ovid’s heroic epistles. Pope ascribed the ending of the poem to the grief he felt upon being separated from his friend, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. In the same Ovidian conventions, he composed the melancholy lyric “Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate lady” (1717), where the speaker exalts the deceased lady who had been wronged by her family. Both these poems consist of intense, emotional rhetoric which is usually not characteristic of the satirist.

By this time, Pope had resumed his translation of Homer’s *The Iliad*, a task he began around 1714 upon the insistence of Swift; the complete version was published between 1717- 1720. The grand success of this work extended his readership and popularity, providing him the impetus to translate the *Odyssey* as well in 1726. His six volumed editions of Shakespeare (1723-1725) were also well-received despite certain criticism. He very famously responded to such critics and the people he despised in his four books of *The Dunciad* (1728-1743). First published anonymously, there was no mistaking that the scathing remarks set in mock-heroic narrative were the words of Pope. Lettered men like Lewis Theobald and Colley Cibber were not spared the smite of Pope’s ingenuity. He also expressed his dismay in the deteriorating art, literature and culture of the contemporary society, signifying that it was gradually turning

into a land of ‘dunces’. Pope additionally published a manual on how to write terrible poetry, as a way of scorning contemporaneous versifiers of the time. “Peri Bathous, Or The Art of Sinking in Poetry” (1727) is a short treatise parodying “Peri Hopsous” (*On the Sublime*) by Longinus. Pope introduced the term ‘bathos’ to connote how writers in their attempt at sublimity absurdly fall short of the very purpose.

Pope’s “Epistles to Several Persons”, better known as “Moral essays” as they discuss ethical issues, were written at different times to select individuals. Four of the epistles were published from 1731 to 1735, the fifth poem addressed to Addison in 1715 was decidedly added by William Warburton in the posthumous edition of his friend’s works. Around 1733 appeared Pope’s brilliant philosophical work “An Essay on Man”, in four epistles to the Viscount of Bolingbroke. This was followed by his collection of the Satires, “Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot” and “Imitations of Horace”. With Arbuthnot, Pope also contributed in writing John Gay’s comedy *Three Hours After Marriage* (1717). Alexander Pope was a prolific author; the works mentioned thus far are some of the prominent ones from his vast oeuvre. His fame had declined with the rise of Romanticism, but the twentieth century renewed interest in him, and rightly termed the early eighteenth century- the ‘Age of Pope’.

#### **Stop to Consider**

Look up the trends in the contemporary literature and society that prevailed just before and during the time of Pope. The Cavalier poets and the Metaphysicals lost their popularity which then moved on to a new classical revival. Pope however used the style of Cowley and Donne, and the theme of metaphysics for some of his poems. Some Restoration age writers also had a significant influence on Pope, such as Milton and Dryden. The philosophy of the scientific revolution was developed further by the Enlightenment thinkers like Hume, Locke, Kant, Rousseau and Montesquieu. They have a bearing on Pope’s writing; Leibniz, in particular, in “Essay on Man”. The tradition of court poetry was replaced by coffeehouse culture; it invited larger social intermingling, debates and discussions. Pope’s “Rape of the Lock” is a response to such gatherings as popular but uncultured, and not a place for learning. The middle class had begun to strengthen as a social group and comprised much of the reading public. They were also becoming indignant of the rakish behavior of the fashionable elite, and sought the moral and noble values of the golden days. Pope’s satires ridiculed the lack of decorum and dignity in

the society, and the poor writing which catered to the masses, while using classical literary genre. The intentions behind his works may be debatable, but they clearly represent the conditions of his era.

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## 6.4 Critical Reception:

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Pope being the child prodigy that he was, did not let the lack of mainstream education obstruct his foray into language and literature. Free to read what he liked, he chose the great classics of Homer, Ovid, Virgil, Statius, and so on. He looked up to the older writers of his time such as Waller, Dryden and Boileau, and had a propensity for writing satires and odes from a very young age. The milieu of the forested lands at Binfield facilitated his writing as much as the scholarly books surrounding him did. Some of his *Juvenile Poems*, which include his “Pastorals”, “Windsor Forest” and the “Odes”, bear the idyllic imagery and setting of the countryside scenes. The poems succeeded in introducing Pope to the literary elite, and rapidly secured him the position of a burgeoning writer.

His “Imitations” of Chaucer, Spencer, Cowley, John Wilmot and Charles Sackville put his artistic style at par with the renowned English poets around him. The invalid Pope, soon became a recognized figure in the thriving coffee houses of London, engaging in discourse with popular writers, scientists, philosophers, Whigs and Tories. With the publication of “The Rape of the Lock”, Pope put forth his commentary as a social critic in the form of a burlesque. It was enjoyed by the readers, and soon translations in different European languages began to be published. However, like the rest of his works, the poem also had its share of criticism and parodies. Pope vindictively retaliated against his detractors by means of his masterly crafted epistles, of which “The Dunciad” and “Epistle to Arbuthnot” are considered prime specimens of his intrinsic wit and sarcasm.

In the year 1717, Warburton published *The Works of Alexander Pope* in nine volumes, which further fortified his legacy. Wycherley, Fenton, Harcourt, Broome and Lyttelton wrote favourably on him in the edition. His translation of Homer, and the “Essays”, were praised by the likes of Dr. Johnson and Voltaire. Pope’s success however, began to decline posthumously as traditional neo-classical values gave way to romantic standards. The literary movement that followed found the didacticism of the former rather unsuitable to the emergent nineteenth century sensibilities. The Victorian society went on reading the genre initiated by Wordsworth and Coleridge, but overall disregarded the

works of Pope. This was the era of the novelists- Dickens, the Brontes, George Eliot, Carroll, Hardy- and essayists like Ruskin, J. S. Mill, Darwin, and Arnold, while the major poets included Alfred Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett, Robert Browning, and the Rossetis. Literary critics like Matthew Arnold, De Quincey, and Lord Jeffrey considered Pope's prose and critical writings better than his poetry, whereas Oscar Wilde expressed a strong aversion to his versification.

In this way, a century passed before the wave of Modernism washed over the Romantic sublime and rekindled interest in Pope's writings. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) mentions the notable writer several times as one of the great wits of his age. He was critically assessed in Austin Warren's *Alexander Pope as Critic and Humanist* (1929), which led to further re-evaluations. In the 1930s, the New Critics- F. R. Leavis, William Empson, W.K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks- with their advocacy of close reading, found Pope's texts, and his use of poetic diction rather compelling. Similar opinions were voiced by other twentieth century poets, like Edith Sitwell, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W. H. Auden. Scholars of Pope began editing compilations and detailed biographies of the author, of which George Sherman's *Early Career of Alexander Pope* (1934), and *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope* (1939-69) by John Butt and Maynard Mack are most significant. Firmly established as one of the greatest eighteenth-century poets, Pope's life and genius continue to be reevaluated by readers and academics till date.

#### **Stop to Consider**

Critical reception of literature implies the opinions and reviews accorded by critics or scholarly individuals to any literary work. Such appraisals vary among critics and across time. Pope's poetry and translations had gained immense popularity during his time. The common readers enjoyed his polished words and their contextual import, but the critics who gave their professional views differed on various points. Some, like John Dennis and Lytton Strachey found him inconsistent and lacking true poetic sense, while others appreciated his genius, such as Byron and Geoffrey Tillotson. Compare this variety of perception with the current criticism on Pope.

**Check Your Progress**

Mention important landmarks in the critical reception of Pope as a poet till the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (80 words)

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**6.5 Context of the poem:**

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Alexander Pope’s *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* is a satirical poem addressed to Pope’s friend John Arbuthnot who was a physician. The poem was composed in 1734 and published in 1735. It was written when Pope got the information that his friend was dying. This poem is a memorial and celebration of the friendship between Alexander Pope and John Arbuthnot.

John Arbuthnot was a member of the Martinus Scriblerus Club along with other members like Alexander Pope, John Gay, Jonathan Swift etc. among others. In 1734, Dr. Arbuthnot wrote a letter to Pope informing him of a terminal illness that he was suffering from. Dr. Arbuthnot in his letter also asks Pope to be careful while critiquing others. This poem is a response to that letter of Dr. Arbuthnot. John Arbuthnot died eight weeks after the publication of the poem.

It is important to note that the poem was also written in response to personal attacks and criticism that Pope had faced throughout his literary career. It was addressed to John Arbuthnot, as a means of expressing his thoughts and emotions regarding his detractors and the literary and social circles of the time.

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**6.6 Reading the Poem:**

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During the 18th century, the literary scene in England was marked by a growing emphasis on reason, wit, and satire. Pope, along with other writers of the Augustan Age, sought to satirize and critique the follies and vices of society, often targeting specific individuals or institutions. This period was also characterized by a flourishing of literary criticism and debate, as well as the rise of periodicals and newspapers that shaped public opinion.

Pope’s poem reflects the cultural and social context of the time by

engaging with the literary and intellectual debates of his era. He uses satire to criticize the literary works and practices of his contemporaries, including playwrights, poets, and critics. Through his poetic voice, Pope defends his own work, explores the challenges faced by artists, and reflects on the nature of creativity and fame. Pope tries to defend his works from the attacks of writers like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Joseph Addison, and John, Lord Hervey. Pope, in this poem, also uses caricatures to talk about his contemporaries.

The poem begins with the speaker asking John, a household help, to lock the door so that they can prevent the entry of other people while they are inside the house. From the speaker's description it seems as if the house is surrounded by different other writers who appear to be mad. The words "All Bedlam" in Line-4 might be a reference to a mental institution and the speaker indicates that he doesn't want to let loose the people surrounding his house like madmen. "Parnassus" is a mountain in Greece where, it is believed, the Muse resides. According to the speaker, people often find out a way to blame him or write negatively about him. It is like the people are always trying to catch the speaker unawares. They seem to find him wherever he goes. He mentions how they come to him by climbing the walls of his home, get into his chariot, follow him to church. They don't even let him pray peacefully. "No place is sacred, not the church is free;" (Line 11) is indicative of that. The speaker uses comic exaggeration when he says in the first stanza "say I'm sick, I'm dead." He is, in a way, asking John to make up any excuse to let the people know that he is unavailable. After having talked about how people bother him, he goes on to list few of the people who he can see among the rest coming to pester him. In the speaker's words, they are "a parson", "a maudlin poetess", "a rhyming peer", and "a clerk". He says all of them come to Twitnam, Pope's house, to bother him. Everyone seems to find something or the other to accuse Pope with. A husband, for example, curses Pope because his wife seems to have eloped to Twitnam to gather Pope's opinion regarding her work.

The speaker finally addresses his friend Arbuthnot in the next stanza with the words "Friend to my Life!" (Line 27). He says how his friend Dr. Arbuthnot, a physician, has helped to cure many of Pope's ailments. According to the speaker, what is ailing him at present are the people who are trying to be good writers and how they are continuously coming to him seeking advice on good writing. The speaker calls it a "dire dilemma" because he doesn't want to lie to them by saying that their work is good and yet he cannot be fully

honest because he doesn't want to hurt them with his words of harsh criticism. The speaker then takes the mock-heroic approach and calls himself a martyr. He also asks the people to follow Horace's idea of waiting for about nine years before finally publishing their own works. "And drop at last, but in unwilling ears,/ This saving counsel, "Keep your piece nine years.'" (Line 40). According to some, Pope should spend his time correcting poetry if he finds any fault in it.

The speaker also mentions how people take advantage of him. A person named Pitholeon asks the speaker to find a patron for his poetry. If the speaker writes negatively about a person's work, then the person ends up threatening him. And if he writes positively about someone's work then they sometimes even ask Pope to use his fame and make the work popular among public too or help in getting the work published. The speaker next uses the analogy of Midas to call the people who treat him as such as asses. He also uses the term "minister", "king", and "queen". These might be references to King George II, Queen Caroline and Walpole. It is at this point that Dr. Arbuthnot asks Pope not to personally criticize such important and known people. "Good friend, forbear! you deal in dang'rousthings./ I'd never name queens, ministers, or kings;" However, Pope wants to be honest while calling out names and how people make use of him as a person. Some, he ridicules, even tries to flatter him by comparing him to figures like Alexander the Great, Horace, Ovid, Virgil and Homer. Pope, unapologetically names people who he thinks has tried to take advantage of him or have caused him various conflicts. For example, he brings in the reference to Colley Cibber and Ambrose Phillips, John Henley, James Moore Smythe etc. among others. Pope also brings in the reference to Sapho, that is, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu but is interrupted by Dr. Arbuthnot who again asks him not to call out to people publicly. Pope, however, ignores all advice from his friend and continues his scornful attack. He justifies this by saying that these people have, in the past, criticized many of Pope's works, especially his pamphlets.

Pope goes on to speak about himself and how he became a poet. He says poetry came naturally to him. One unique quality that Pope exhibits in this poem is that even though he attacks viciously various other people, he also makes fun of himself. He says he finds it hard to learn mathematics or numbers. He refers to his own physical stature as "am short". He talks about his own shortcomings too in one part of the poem. On being asked by Dr. Arbuthnot as to why he wrote poetry, he says that he wrote because his friends like Swift and Congreve liked to read his works. Dryden too praised

Pope's works. And this is one of the main reasons why he wrote poetry. We see here that Pope talks about his good qualities as well as his shortcomings. This suggests Pope's greatness as a poet.

One section of the poem is dedicated to Pope's response to other critics' words against him. Two critics named Gildon and Dennis attacked Pope but the speaker claims that he did not respond to their attacks because he believed that those were triggered by "madness" or a need for money. He did not find it important to respond to such hack writers.

However, he also has a different approach to some other critics whom he considered to be comparatively sober. He says if someone commented wrongly on his works, he just smiled in response and didn't add anything to it. But if the critics are right, according to him, he acknowledged their words. Pope also tries to justify his attacks on certain writers by saying that he attacked them because he felt that they deserved it. To him, such writers lacked talent but had a high sense of self-esteem.

"A man's true merit 'tis not hard to find,  
But each man's secret standard in his mind,  
That casting weight pride adds to emptiness,  
This, who can gratify? for who can guess?"

One example of such writer, according to the speaker, is Ambrose Phillips who he thinks wrote just for the sake of money. Another writer is attacked for trying to plagiarise in his works. Pope attacks writers for their writing style as well. Addison is called Atticus here and is praised for his genius and talent. But Addison is also referred to as a coward because he attacks others but doesn't want to hear any criticism about himself. The speaker attacks Lord Hervey next by using the name "Sporus". To Pope, a Sporus is someone who is dull and insensitive. At this point, he is being scolded by Dr. Arbuthnot for such a reference. Pope also uses the poem to address the contemporary literary scene and its key figures. He employs satire to mock his rivals and enemies, such as Colley Cibber, a prominent playwright and actor, and John Dennis, a critic who had attacked Pope's earlier work. Pope highlights the flaws and pretensions of these individuals, portraying them as symbols of the degenerate state of literature and taste. Pope throughout this work tries to explain to Arbuthnot as to why certain writers deserved such harsh criticism.

The speaker, next recalls one of his friends, John Gay. He condemns everyone who mistreated Gay. He then moves to self-pity and says that people often want to know what his next work will be or information as such. Pope

asks the poetasters to leave him alone because he wants to live a peaceful life. He believes that only liars should be afraid of him because he is not bad at heart. He claims that he doesn't write for money. He just feels it important to point out whenever he finds faults in others' works. He says he doesn't believe in flattery. He ends the poem by telling Arbuthnot that he is a good friend and he hopes that Dr. Arbuthnot will have "domestic bliss". He ends the poem after wishing happiness and a good life for the ailing John Arbuthnot. In conclusion, we can say that, Alexander Pope's "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" is a multi-faceted work that serves as a defense of the poet's career, a critique of contemporary society, and an exploration of the challenges faced by artists.

Overall, "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" is situated within the cultural and literary milieu of 18th-century England. It exemplifies the satirical spirit and intellectual climate of the Augustan Age while providing insight into Pope's own life, artistic aspirations, and the societal dynamics of his time.

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#### **Stop to Consider**

(a) "Poetaster" is a term used to describe an aspiring or untalented poet who pretentiously attempts to write poetry but lacks skill, originality, or genuine artistic ability. It is often used to mock or criticize those who try to imitate the style or themes of established poets without achieving the same level of mastery. The term "poetaster" was popularized by Ben Jonson, an English playwright and poet of the 17th century. Jonson used it in his play "Poetaster" (1601) to satirize the contemporary literary scene and to target his rival, John Marston, whom he perceived as an inferior poet.

Poetasters are often characterized by their excessive use of clichés, lack of depth or substance in their writing, and their attempts to mimic the styles of renowned poets without understanding the underlying craftsmanship. Their works may be seen as derivative, lacking originality, and lacking the genuine emotional or intellectual engagement that distinguishes great poetry.

Poetasters may also display a pretentious attitude, seeking recognition and admiration for their mediocre work. They may imitate the themes, imagery, or language of established poets without bringing anything new or meaningful to their own writing. Throughout literary history, there have been various examples of poets or writers who have been labelled as poetasters. They often become targets of satire and ridicule, as their attempts to match the great poets of their time fall short.

*Space for Learner*

However, it's important to note that the term "poetaster" is subjective and can be used in a derogatory manner. Different individuals may have varying opinions on what constitutes talent or skill in poetry. What one person may consider a poetaster, another person may appreciate for their unique voice or approach.

(b) "Hack writers" is a term used to refer to writers who produce work that is perceived as lacking in originality, artistic merit, or skill. It is a derogatory term used to describe writers who prioritize quantity over quality and are often accused of producing formulaic, uninspired, or poorly crafted work. The term "hack" originally referred to a person hired to do menial or repetitive tasks, and it later came to be associated with writers who were paid to produce content quickly and without much consideration for literary excellence. Hack writers are often seen as prioritizing commercial success and financial gain over artistic integrity.

**Check Your Progress**

(1) Whom does Pope address in the poem? (20 words)

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(2) What is the predominant poetic form used in the poem? Explain in brief your understanding of the poetic form used in this poem. (30 words)

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(3) What poetic techniques does Pope employ in "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" to enhance the satirical and didactic nature of the poem? (40 words)

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(4) How does Pope employ satire in "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" to critique the contemporary literary scene and its key figures? (100 words)

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## 6.7 Summing Up:

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Pope's work is a rich mine of myriad observations on the contemporary society and culture, its follies and foibles, its conflicts and loopholes. He enriched himself through learning of classical and contemporary literature, and his writings show influences of natural sciences and continental philosophy. He is essentially a man of satire which is characterized by its power and facility. The motifs he chose to compose upon have more to deal with humanity in general and less with particular agendas. His writing had a moral bent; he judged and criticized all that he deemed unethical. Despite structural defects in his work, Pope's intellectual and epigrammatic prowess continue to intrigue and expand Popean scholarship

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## 6.8 References and Suggested Readings:

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## Unit 7: Anna Letitia Barbauld: “The Caterpillar”, “Washing Day”

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### Unit Structure

- 7.1 Objectives
- 7.2 Introduction
- 7.3 Overview of Barbauld’s poetic oeuvre
- 7.4 Critical reception
- 7.5 Reading the poems
  - 7.5.1 “The Caterpillar”
  - 7.5.2 “Washing Day”
- 7.6 Summing Up
- 7.7 References and Suggested Readings

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### 7.1. Objectives

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This unit is an attempt to look at the prescribed poems of Barbauld. After going through this unit you will be able to

- *see* Barbauld’s stand on patriarchy and women’s place in it
- *evaluate* her ideas on motherhood
- *understand* her political views
- *appreciate* her valorisation of women’s writing and female imagination
- *understand* the unique character of her poetry

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### 7.2 Introduction

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Born in 1743, Anna Letitia Barbauld was one of those rare people who earned immediate literary fame and recognition with the publication of her first collection of poetry titled *Poems* (1773). Besides being a poet, Barbauld was also a teacher, a literary critic, an essayist and a writer of children’s literature. While she taught at the Palgrave Academy she wrote a number of books for children that were explicitly didactic in intent. As an essayist, she emphasised the fact that women have much potential to contribute significantly to the public sphere. As a literary critic, her anthology of eighteenth-century

novels helped in consolidating the canon. Her life spans both the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries and her work displays sensibilities of both the ages. Barbauld's poetry evinces strains of enlightenment thoughts as well as the celebration of nature and the individual which was predominant in nineteenth-century poetry. In fact, her poetry is recognised as proto-Romantic as it facilitated the development of British Romanticism.

As is well-known, the precocious and intelligent Anna Letitia Aikin was born to a family of Dissenters. This is noteworthy as the religious background of her family served as a very important influence in her creative enterprises. She drew a lot from her Dissent philosophy in her works which is confirmed by even a casual reading of the same. Her poetry takes up a lot of socio-political concerns and they are informed by the Dissenter's stance of wariness towards all social structures and political campaigns. She does not endorse radicalism and mere disruption of order as the solution to the endemic ills and evils, but she does provoke questions in the minds of readers which are aimed at a careful re-evaluation of prejudices and an interrogation of the status quo. Among her radical and liberal views is her denouncement of the system of slavery and support for abolitionism. She was also supportive of the French Revolutionaries, but the consequent 'Reign of Terror' and France's declaration of war on England made her withdraw her support. Barbauld's radicalism is therefore a cautious or a prudent brand of radicalism, inflected with a certain amount of conservatism—resulting in a dialectical thought that shatters complacency.

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### **7.3. Overview of Barbauld's poetic oeuvre**

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Barbauld covers a diverse range of topics in her poetry. Her first poetry collection simply titled as *Poems* (1773) shows this diversity. She attends to political and national issues while also addressing the personal or domestic and the religious or spiritual. Her poem "Corsica" is a celebration of the spirit of revolution and the struggle for independence. But it also carries a caveat about the way justified revolutions may go awry. In her next poem "Invitation", she therefore retreats to a pastoral setting and from that location, she reckons the troubled world outside—hoping for a transformation. The series of hymns towards the end of the volume focus on appreciating the divinity and the

humanity of Christ. Barbauld's dexterity in employing different poetic strategies is proven with some other poems like "The Groans of the Tankard", "On the Backwardness of the Spring 1771", "Verses Written in an Alcove", "A Mouse's Petition", etc., where she changes tack—but to serve the same purpose of promoting a visionary goal. In these poems she uses the satirical and the anti-pastoral mode to forward her critique. In her more personal poems such as "To Mrs P.—", "Characters", "On a Lady's Writing", "To Wisdom", "Hymn to Content", Barbauld addresses specific people or specific episodes in her life and deals with issues such as personhood, imagination, friendship, desire, etc. Other poems like "Songs", "Delia", "The Origin of Song-writing", "Ovid to His wife", etc., are self-reflexive in that they engage with the problem of writing and creativity, literary taste and sensibility, usefulness of artifice and what constitutes visionary poetry. Barbauld is also regarded as a major figure in children's literature. Although disparaged by Samuel Johnson for wasting her literary talent by putting out works for children, Barbauld's *Lessons for Children* and *Hymns in Prose* which were massively popular are hailed for making a considerable impact on the tradition of children's literature. With these expressly didactic and pedagogic works, Barbauld infused a much-needed seriousness into juvenile literature.

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#### 7.4 Critical Reception

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Barbauld's literary career did not enjoy a steady reputation. Her work has also suffered from a lack of critical attention and it is only in the recent years with the rise of feminist literary criticism in the 1980's, that her poems and other writings saw a revived interest and restoration in the cannon. Some of the reasons why Barbauld's works suffered from critical disrepute were because of the negative comments that she received from revered literary giants like Samuel Johnson and the Romantics. Johnson lamented Anna Letitia Aikin's marriage to the schoolmaster Rochemont Barbauld as the promising poet will now be primarily occupied with writing supposedly trivial poems for children. Wordsworth and Coleridge, who were initially effusive in their praise for Barbauld, changed their opinion about her and condemned her for some of her views. The Victorians were also not sympathetic to the poet for they saw her as a sentimental poet whose ambiguous and ambivalent poetry did not offer much value. Barbauld's works were thus dismissed even before they were taken up for a serious consideration and the poet thus gradually

lost her footing and presence in the literary scene. Many have attributed the beginning of this unfortunate and regrettable turn of events to the publication of her infamous poem “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” in 1812 which drew severe flak. The poem which is considered as responsible for her literary downfall is critical of England’s political condition. It is written in the manner of a prophecy about the nation’s ruin due to its many hypocrisies and errors of judgement. This did not sit well with the nationalists of the day and both the poem and the poet were doomed to ignominy. However, when Barbauld died in 1825, she was recognised as one of the most important female poets of her time. And with the advent of feminist literary criticism, she finally recovered her lost honour and place in female literary tradition. Recent studies have discovered the significance of Barbauld’s poetry which is, as already mentioned, marked by ambiguity, liminality, irony, ambivalence and open-endedness. These qualities have emerged as the strengths of her creative endeavour as they contribute to richer meanings. Her poems continue to spawn engaging discussions on many concepts that are treated with subtlety and great nuances. Daniel P. Watkins says in his *Anna Letitia Barbauld and Eighteenth-Century Visionary Poetics* that feminist criticism has contributed a lot to uncover and underscore “the thematic gravity, subtlety of thought, stylistic range, and cultural awareness of her poetic output” (Watkins 29). But besides feminist scholars, other critics like William Keach, John Guillory, and Stephen Behrendt have looked at the ways in which Barbauld’s thought and writing deal with pertinent social, economic and political issues of her age. They have discovered the “seriousness of her intellectual interest and the reach of her historical imagination” which “reflect[s] the richness of her mind and the range and substance of her poetic interest” (Watkins 29). Watkins observes that Daniel E. White’s *Early Romanticism And Religious Dissent*, wherein White situates Barbauld in the British Dissenting community in the eighteenth century, is another sustained critical effort to emphasise Barbauld’s background and the importance of her poetry. William McCarthy’s autobiography *Anna Letitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment*, is another seminal work which highlights the significance of Barbauld as a creative artist as well as a social critic. This “magisterial biography”—as Watkins calls it—“not only recounts the particulars of the poet’s life; it is also an astonishingly detailed intellectual and critical history of Barbauld’s literary output” (Watkins 30). This book thus serves as one of the most important sources of information on the poet and her creative or literary journey.

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## 7.5. Reading the Poems

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*Space for Learner*

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### 7.5.1 “The Caterpillar”

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#### Context

Barbauld’s poem “The Caterpillar” is thought to have been composed around 1816 and it was published posthumously in 1825 in the collection of poems, *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld—With a Memoir by Lucy Aikin, Volume 1*. It is another interesting and multi-layered poem full of ambiguity. As evident from the title itself, this is a poem in which an animal or a non-human other gets featured prominently. It can be read as representative of the eighteenth-century burlesque convention of addressing animals in poetry, for instance, Thomas Gray’s “Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat”, or Robert Fergusson’s “The Sow of Feeling”.

#### Reading the Poem

The titular caterpillar is the subject of the poem, but as the poem progresses it becomes clear that it serves more as an opportunity for self-reflection for the speaker, than a discussion about the creature itself. The poem begins in medias-res with the speaker passionately addressing the captive caterpillar wriggling in her arms. We are made to understand that preceding the scene presented to us in the beginning, the speaker had violently wiped out the entire caterpillar community living in her garden in a fit of furious frenzy. She vividly recalls and recounts the scenes of the mass slaughter before the titular caterpillar who is the lone survivor of this terrible attack. This caterpillar escapes death because the speaker is suddenly overcome by feelings of pity and sympathy at the sight of this poor and “helpless thing”. She feels as if the desperate movements of the caterpillar signify a request for mercy and protection. She is also mildly awed by the beauty of the caterpillar whose colourful patterns fascinate her. The close physical contact with the caterpillar seems to intensify her sympathy for the critter. This response is a marked deviation from the stereotypical Victorian reflex of fright or disgust towards reviled insects which can be seen in nursery rhymes like “Little Miss Muffet”. In an act symbolic of great mercy, the speaker releases the caterpillar—not into the wild—but back into her garden. She thus allows the critter to remain in her garden and eat away the fruit of her trees. This mercy curiously,

had not been extended to the whole brood of caterpillars who were ruthlessly killed off. Mercy for the titular caterpillar therefore seems like a momentary suspension of judgement on the part of the speaker that allows her to spare the life of one from the decimated tribe.

The speaker gets very animated when she describes the scenes of death and destruction to the caterpillar in her hands. She reveals in a graphic manner her “persecuting zeal” against the hated pests. “Thriving and happy” caterpillars were exterminated as whole families were either crushed under the weight of her foot or burnt alive by her “vials of destruction”. She didn’t feel any guilt or qualms of conscience while exterminating them en masse. But when she comes upon the sole survivor, she curiously finds herself relenting and forgoes the idea of killing it. Moved by the critter’s plight and its desperate movements, her mood changes dramatically and she goes from her murderous fit of rage to endearing compassion. By sparing its life, she goes from being a destroyer to becoming a hero-saviour of sorts. In an epiphany-like moment, the speaker is able to identify with the caterpillar and realise that its “individual existence” is akin to her own and all other living beings. That is why she is unable to kill it off with the ease with which she killed the others.

The kindness of the speaker however comes across as duplicitous. While she did not hesitate to kill the entire caterpillar community, she relents in the case of this single caterpillar—may be because she knows that it cannot harm her garden to the extent that a legion of the same would. She says to the caterpillar that she cannot hurt its weakness. The defenceless caterpillar gives her an opportunity to exercise kindness and magnanimity—qualities that are prized and glorified in her society by her contemporaries. It would be beneath her if she were to hurt this individual caterpillar who is no more posing itself as an offensive opponent. She compares her act of mercy to the way a victorious soldier spares the life of one vanquished foe in the battlefield—an instance found in many war accounts. Finding a clear analogy in a soldier whose aggression is melted away by the sight of a helpless enemy, the speaker goes on to re-imagine the entire carnage in her garden in extended battlemetaphor. She tells to the caterpillar that she had made “horrid war” against the caterpillar community who were living in their “peaceful villages” in her garden. As a soldier “enjoys/The roar of cannon and the clang of arms”, the speaker too is

thrilled and enjoys launching an attack upon the unsuspecting community. She explains her persecuting zeal to the caterpillar and says that she is like any other soldier in a battle who fights heroically to defend his nation and in the process remorselessly kills people by the thousands. But the same soldier—given a unique circumstance—is also open to feelings of pity towards a defeated enemy. As the speaker narrates, this soldier in fact begins to “grow human” and weep for the captive soldier pleading for life. Sympathy and empathy—emotions which are kept at bay during moments of confrontation—helps the soldier to relent and he goes from a barbaric rage to humane compassion. The speaker similarly identifies with the helpless caterpillar at her mercy and in spite of herself, lets it go free.

It must be noted here that this analogy which involves picturing the speaker as a magnanimous warrior, is undercut by the speaker with the self-deprecatory tone employed towards the end. She acknowledges before the caterpillar that her act of pity towards it is a singular instance. While executing the caterpillar population some time back, she did not extend pity towards the thousands of innocent caterpillar civilians that she slew. It is therefore doubtful whether her magnanimous act towards one is truly praiseworthy or not. As with the soldier, the “sympathy spontaneous” is actually an emotional lapse on her part which makes her take a decidedly irrational decision. She herself calls her pity “capricious” because it does not “stir for thousands” but “melts for one”. Pity is one quality which makes up “Virtue”. But in this case, the pity extended cannot be considered as virtuous, but rather “the weakness of a virtuous mind”. This is so because the pity felt in this case was based on whim—inspired by a weaker being who stokes her ego and tugs at her heart. This was not the case when she dealt with the caterpillar’s relatives. Even after her deed of destruction—as she confesses to the caterpillar in her hand—she does not feel apologetic for her cruelty. Her pity is therefore somewhat hypocritical and extremely partial.

The ending of the poem is therefore somewhat anti-climactic. It raises more questions than answers by showing a complicated and conflicted character who feels a varied range of emotions upon encounter with the survivor of a hated species. The morality of the speaker is also made questionable as her pity is shown to be an act of misplaced sentimentality. This contributes to the open-ended quality

of the poem as it leaves to the readers to make sense of its ambiguity. In a different light, the poem can also be read as a statement on the way men destroy nature—disturb and harm other living beings. It may be a nod to the contemporary agricultural practices which did not tolerate weeds or pests of any kind—even though the latter have an equal right to the planet. Her Dissent background is a significant influence here as it is known to disparage cruelty towards animals. Throughout much of her career, Barbauld wrote for children and in many of those works aimed towards a juvenile readership, she incorporated animals. They are didactic in nature and seem to be an attempt to steer children who are prone to committing mindless atrocities against weaker life-forms. The poem has also been read along political lines with the suggestion that the released pest or the caterpillar is Britain’s enemy. Therefore granting mercy to such pests becomes a complex issue as one cannot readily deem it as the right course of action for it may turn out to be injurious to the nation in the long run.

**Stop to consider**

Otter says that the pest-control motif in “The Caterpillar” might be an allusion to the agricultural practices of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The agricultural propaganda of the day declared that the elimination of pests and parasites is a morally justified course of action as it is simply a removal of the hindrances to profit. Insecticides and pesticides therefore saw a proliferation in the agricultural revolution of a society which prized productivity and profit. The speaker’s lack of regret for annihilating “tribes and embryo nations” in her garden may be inspired by this attitude prevalent in the society.

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**7.5.2 “Washing Day”**

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**Context:**

First published in the *Monthly Magazine* in December, 1797, the poem “Washing Day” by Barbauld is an instance of celebration as well as defence of women’s writing. This poem can be read as a complement to “The Rights of Women” in that while the said poem is an oblique assertion of equal rights for women, “Washing Day” is an

oblique assertion of the value of the tradition of women's writing or feminist literature. In both poems Barbauld employs satire to a great effect as she shatters hypocrisies and prejudices surrounding women.

### **Reading the Poem:**

The dialectical current of thought practiced by Barbauld becomes evident again in her choice of adopting a mock-epic tone in "Washing Day". She does a parodical appropriation of the styles of the literary giants—John Milton and Alexander Pope. The poem begins with the disclosure that the Muses (the Greek goddesses who inspire writers and artists) have turned gossipy—a trait attributed as wont to women. As such they no longer inspire writers who aim to take up a grand subject-matter in their literary enterprises. They have lost the "clear high-sounding phrase" and the "language of gods". The speaker therefore cannot invoke the Muses before her creative endeavour of writing about doing laundry—one of the most routine but solemn tasks performed by women. She thus calls on the "domestic Muse" to help her "sing the dreaded washing day". She does not need the Muses worshipped by men to write about a formidable and weighty subject-matter in impressive poetic diction. Her "domestic Muse" suffices as an alternative source of inspiration for literary undertakings.

In her "slip-shod measure", the domestic Muse prattles on about the varied aspects and incidents comprising domestic life—of pleasant and wholesome topics of "farm or orchard, pleasant curds and cream". The domestic Muse, imagined as a matriarch, can also inspire one to write about the not-so-pleasant episodes of domestic life—one of them being the washing day. The speaker, adequately inspired, proceeds to write about the same in a blank verse, but with the high-flown and ornate manner typical of epics and mock-epics. In an inflated style, the seriousness of the communal activity of washing on a washing day is emphasized. The seemingly inconsequential activity of washing is lent a grave aura and imagined as a joint struggle against the evils of filthiness, impurity or defilement. However, unlike the mock-epics where the trivial is heightened to the effect of ridicule, the poem elevates and exalts the usually dismissed domestic activity of washing with serious intent and as akin to the struggles of men against forces beyond their control (as portrayed in epics). With this, the speaker claims the domestic sphere as a competent source and wellspring for creative inspiration and thereby venerates the tradition of women's writing.

*Space for Learner*

The washing day is pervaded with an awe-inspiring mood. The solemnity of the act of washing clothes is emphasised as it reads like a rite performed by women periodically. The women gather early in the morning as they begin their ceremonial washing of clothes. The forbidding task performed by women saps the “mirth”, “peace” and “comfort” of the entire household. With the frenzied rush of activities, the women “chase repose” and a tense atmosphere saturates the house. Finding warmth and cheerfulness on a washing day is next to impossible. Even the stray cat who is often indulged by the women is rudely surprised to discover the kitchen “wet” and the unattended hearth “reeking”. The women have a “silent breakfast meal” hastily and in a state of anxiety regarding the day’s weather. They continually cast “anxious looks” at the sky—apprehensive about a sudden rainfall which will spoil their hard work. A sudden and ominous turn of weather resulting in a torrent of rain would be the “last evil”—a fate which they needed to avert. The speaker pleads unto the “heavens” to save the women from such a misfortune. If it rained at all, all the remnants of peace and quiet in the household will be lost to the announcements of “sad disasters”. The disasters here are a reference to the “dirt and gravel stains” which are “hard to efface”—and may be symbolic of chastity or moral purity. It gets splattered on clothes spread out in clotheslines after a spell of shower. Besides that, all the clotheslines loaded with freshly washed clothes would snap after a heavy downpour—ensuing the “petty miseries of life”. With all their hard work thus put to nought, the women would have to resume the laborious task of washing—all hopes for respite lost.

The speaker writes that while saints and vanquished monarchs have been calm under great duress and physical torture, the mistress of a household has never been observed to be calm on a washing day—and rightfully so. The speaker here exhorts the male authority of the household to grant the women some leeway and freedom from their usual duties on a washing day. He should not expect their service with his study room swept, his coats dusted or his burst stockings mended. If he does one of his customary garden walks, his “eye shall rue” the sight of crushed flowers and their plucked stems—”twitched off” in haste by the maidservants. And when he comes upon the clotheslines, the “wet cold sheet” flapping before his face will make him uncomfortably wet in turn. Not only the master of the household,

his friend visiting on a washing day will experience the same discomfiture. His “evil stars” had urged him to pay a visit on a washing day and he will fail to receive the “hospitable rites” with which guests are entertained. He will only manage to get “stinted courtesy” from the mistress of the household and his hopes for being fed with choice dishes of “roast chicken”, “savoury pie”, “tart” and “pudding” will be dashed. And with mortification and embarrassment, he will slink away. This instance reinforces the gloomy and solemn mood preponderant among the women on a washing day as they gather their energies for a greater task ahead.

The speaker then draws on her childhood memories of the “dreaded washing day”. She says that the day had struck her with awe and that she could sense the gravity of the impending task. She found that the usually cheerful maids “looked cross” and was deprived of their “soft caresses”. She will also not get the delicious treats and the “thrilling tale[s]” of “ghost, or witch, or murder” with which she was indulged as their “petted one”. Finding no company and left to her own devices, she would go to her grandmother who would be seated “beside the parlour fire” as she watched over the children of the house. From there she would hear her mother’s voice shouting orders—almost in the manner of an army commander—and “urging dispatch”. Washing would be done in a methodical fashion with a chain of action or command followed by the army of servants. As the speaker writes:

All hands employed to wash, to rinse, to wring,  
Or fold, and starch, and clap, and iron, and plait

The lines above clearly emphasise the physically taxing and exhausting nature of the job. They might also suggest the symbolic battle that women wage with dirt.

As the women are engaged in washing, the children take up blowing bubbles with the soapy water. The speaker compares the “floating bubbles” blown by the children with Montgolfier’s “silken ball”—a reference to the first hot-air balloon in the world. And just like the “silken ball” which flies “buoyant through the clouds”, so does the bubble soar high. This comparison elevates the domestic realm and associates it with the celestial. The bubble is a synecdoche of washing day which in its turn is a synecdoche of the domestic sphere. The rise of the bubble to the heavenlies is thus an indicator of the

presence of the sublime in the banal, mundane and oft-dismissed domestic. The bubble is also a symbol of the domestically-inspired tradition of women's writing. All the elements comprising the world—"earth, air, and sky, and ocean" have their bubbles. And verses or other literary creations are another instance of such bubbles—bubbles of fanciful imagination. Verses inspired by the domestic muse—though emerging from the confined spaces of the domestic sphere—display an elemental simplicity and profundity. They point to the culture of story-telling done by women in a household which contribute to sparking and fostering a creative and imaginative spirit among the children—as suggested by the regaling gothic tales told to the speaker by the maids.

One can say that the comparison of the flimsy and evanescent bubbles with female imagination and writing is derogatory. As observed by Elizabeth Kraft, many critics have in fact posited that these lines are "insistently self-deprecatory" [Kraft 36]. However, as S. T. Kareem points out in her reading of the poem, bubbles in eighteenth-century discourse, stood for "richer and more capacious vessels of meaning" [Kareem 85]. Kraft argues that the bubble was seen as a metaphor of imagination. According to her, the speaker's act of imagination in the poem is very similar to the speculative scientific thought pervasive in the eighteenth century. The image of the bubble transforming to the "silken ball" of a "hot-air balloon" is evidence of the same. Kareem is of the opinion that the bubble, besides being a metaphor of imagination, is "a figure for the fictional world" itself [Kareem 94]. The poet uses the trope of the bubble and its association with world-making to construct alternate worlds. An example here is the maids' tales with which the speaker would get transported to fictional worlds. The poem is therefore a strong statement to the effect that with the liminal and the transcendent aspects of the metonymic bubble, a woman could engage in creative pursuits and foray into worlds of wonder from within the restricted spaces of the domestic orbit.

**Stop to Consider**

Barbauld is known to have attended the exhibition of ballooning at the Pantheon in January 1784. In the previous year, the Montgolfier brothers—Joseph Michel and Jacques Etienne had successfully

conducted the first flight of a hot-air balloon in France. The fantastic view of the hot air balloon soaring high in sky has inspired the poet to link a bubble's— and thereby poetry's movement with a “free, upward motion” [Markidou, 27]. It is suggestive of the freedom achieved by women writers through their literary pursuits.

*Space for Learner*

### **Check Your Progress**

(1) Why can't the speaker invoke the Muses? ( 60words )

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(2) What is the “last evil” dreaded by women?(50 words)

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(3) What is the treatment meted out to guests and children on a washing day? (140 words)

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(4) What are bubbles blown by children compared with?(80 words)

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## **7.6. Summing Up**

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The poetry of Anna Letitia Barbauld is informed, nuanced and characterised by multiple layers of meaning and plurality of perspectives. She takes into consideration various topical issues in her poems which speak of her involvement and engagement with contemporary discourses. Her Dissent background with its allegiance to non-conformist tradition is a strong influence in her poetry. Her poetry, as remarked by Alice G. D. Otter is characterised by “barbed endings”—especially pronounced in the case of “The Rights of Woman” and “The Caterpillar” where readers are left with inconclusive endings to grapple with. This is not a weakness on the part of Barbauld as a poet because her plural perspectives and ambiguities only serve to lend richer meaning to her works. “The Rights of Woman” shows how Barbauld, while

identifying with women's cause, critically dissects the popular but misdirected feminist enterprise to examine its pros and cons and suggests a way out of extremely polarised reactions to patriarchal domination. "To a Little Invisible Being" is again multi-layered, suggestive of not only a very laborious process of pregnancy and anticipated birth, but also the birth of a work of art by a creative artist after painful mental toil, or the birth of a new era or polity based on equality and meritocracy after a violent but much-needed revolution. Barbauld's "The Caterpillar" is a simple story about a gardener who while killing off the entire population of detestable and destructive pests in her garden, shows a touch of magnanimity in releasing a stray caterpillar who survived the massacre. Pity extended by the speaker thus looks grand and laudable. But we cannot come to straightforward conclusion as the speaker makes the whole thing profoundly ambiguous and ambivalent by questioning the validity and morality of pity when extended arbitrarily. From the political perspective as well, the ambiguity of the act of pitying a dangerous adversary is emphasised. "Washing Day" is a glorification of female poetry which is wrongly dismissed and undermined because of its domesticity. All the poems yield to complex readings and interpretations and serve as important repositories of contemporary concerns and attitudes of a nation and society undergoing huge transformations.

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*Space for Learner*



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## Unit 8 : Anna Laetitia Barbauld: “The Caterpillar”, “Washing Day”

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### *Supplementary Unit*

#### Unit Structure

- 8.1 Objectives
- 8.2 How to approach the poet and read her poems
- 8.3 Other important poems by the poet
- 8.4 Important essays on the poet and the prescribed poems
- 8.5 Probable questions and suggested answers; Answers to SAQ
- 8.6 Summing Up
- 8.7 References and Suggested Readings

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#### 8.1 Objectives

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This unit is an attempt to look at the prescribed poems of Barbauld again. After going through this unit you will be able to—

- *understand* the Dissent aspects informing much of Barbauld’s ambiguous poetry
- *discern* Barbauld’s visionary and dialectic tendencies
- *gauge* her interest and opinion on the political matters of the day
- *reappraise* how Barbauld valorises and lauds themes of domesticity in the tradition of women’s writing

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#### 8.2 How to approach the poet and read her poems

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While reading Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s poetry, it is important to remind oneself of her background. The progressive-radical and also somewhat conservative views found in her poetry have much to do with the Dissent philosophy which recognises that power structures in a society are not perfect and are therefore prone to many wrongs and evils. The desire to subvert arbitrary authorities is thus a justifiable one but it may be dangerous for the one who tries to do it. However, the disruption of hierarchies and constructed roles of gender and class in society is a necessary intervention. But such

interventions must come with a lot of caution as they may lead to the same hypocrisies and grievances that was sought to be resisted and opposed. The conservatism towards the radical impulse is evident in this cautiousness. The Dissent philosophy is thus a sort of juggling of both pragmatism and idealism. Barbauld's poems are thereby riddled with profound ambiguities and ambivalences. Her poem "The Rights of Woman" is a good example of the Dissent bent as we see an interplay of the radical and the conservative. The Dissent thought also encouraged sensitivity of humans towards nature and other living beings. Seen from this perspective, the poem "The Caterpillar" is an instance of the Dissent kindness towards other creatures. It also encapsulates the Romantic inclination to favour the individual over the crowd. However, this poem is also full of ambiguities as Barbauld makes readers re-think their views on what makes for true virtue as against the weaknesses of a sentimentally virtuous mind. The multi-layered poem is also read as a political allegory of England's sentimentally virtuous treatment of a political enemy. The Dissent background similarly informs Barbauld's "To A Little Invisible Being" wherein an unborn baby is looked upon as a cherished creation with unbridled potential endowed by the Almighty that is waiting to be realised after its birth. The religious background of the poet thus serves as both creative and critical well-spring for her works. One therefore needs to take into account the various beliefs attached to the Dissent tradition when studying Barbauld's works.

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### **8.3 Other important poems by the poet**

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- Barbauld's "The Rights of Woman" can be considered as a kind of follow-up to her other poem "To a Lady, with some Painted Flowers". In both the poems we find allusions to soft feminine charms which serve as a woman's asset. In the latter poem, Barbauld had written that a woman's job is to please people by being beautiful like flowers. In "The Rights of Woman" we similarly find that a woman may accede to a position of power with her delicate feminine graces that is powerful enough to not only please men, but also enthrall or enchant him unto surrender.
- "To the Little Invisible Being" is addressed to a yet-to-be born baby who will go on to become a brilliant person in his or her own right. In its address, didactic bent and a sense of optimism, it is similar to the verses found in her *Hymns in Prose for Children* (1781). In these hymns we see a celebration of the beautiful natural world and the

reverence for God Almighty who is the Creator—reflections echoed in “To the Little Invisible Being”. While in the prescribed poem, Barbauld tries to ease the foetus’ fear of coming out into the world, in the hymns we find the poet dealing with childhood fears of darkness and death.

- A reading of Barbauld’s poem “The Mouse’s Petition” and “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” will contribute to a better understanding of the prescribed poem “The Caterpillar”. “The Mouse’s Petition” is written from the perspective of a lab-mouse who is fated to be experimented upon. The poem had been praised for dealing with the neglected issue of animal-experimentation and has been seen as an ethical intervention on the aspect of animal cruelty. The other poem “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” in which Barbauld criticised England’s war with France and imagined the nation’s future as dark and inglorious will shed some light on the political undertones of “The Caterpillar” wherein the action of releasing the caterpillar, though apparently kind, is symbolic of England’s sentimental oversight in important national matters.
- Barbauld’s “Washing Day” can be read along with the short poem, “On a Lady’s Writing”, published in the collection of her poems titled as *Poems* (1773). In this poem, Barbauld describes the characteristic features of women’s writing. She writes how a poem composed by a woman is suffused with her own personality. It evinces her “steady temper”, her neatness and is polished like her “brow”. Her poetry judges fairly and is liberally unprejudiced. The “same graces” who influence her graceful manners, also “preside” over her creative writing. Instead of the “graces”, we find the “domestic Muse” inspiring women writers in “Washing Day”. Both the poems uphold the valuable tradition of women’s writing. Usually disparaged as silly, frivolous or overly sentimental, women’s writing is justifiably lent the gravity and dignity it possesses by the poet.

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#### **8.4 Important essays/articles on the poet or the prescribed poems**

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- Barbauld’s dissent background finds a sustained study in Brad Sullivan’s “Cultivating a ‘Dissenting Frame of Mind’: Radical Education, the Rhetoric of Inquiry, and Anna Barbauld’s Poetry”. In it the author looks at the ways in which Barbauld’s opinions were informed by the

Dissent views and how she integrated or incorporated those views into her poetry and non-fiction. The poet often employs the Dissent “rhetoric of inquiry” as she engages with important social or personal issues. The Protestant Dissenting faith stood for free thought and nonconformity. It was also visionary as it believed that if the principles of love taught in the *Bible* were thoroughly followed—informed by intellectual earnestness and historical understanding—the world will change for the better. Barbauld’s creative enterprise can therefore be characterised as visionary poetics. A utopian impulse is evident in her poems as she comes to terms with the ugly realities of this world and asserts hope for change by emphasising that the practice of good values will truly make an impact and a difference. This idealism however is not atavistic and does not espouse unrealistic expectations; as Watkins says (in his *Anna Letitia Barbauld and Eighteenth-Century Visionary Poetics*), Barbauld forwards utopian principles that are “neither rooted in nostalgia nor derived from or constrained by the rational discourses and political struggles that define the modern world” [Watkins 9]. Watkins observes that Barbauld’s *Poems* is a “carefully constructed visionary statement” [xi] wherein the poet addresses a range of topics which are philosophical, political, domestic, pastoral, biblical, secular, etc. Her visionary idealism has a unique quality in that it is sober and checked by self-reflection. The “*Poems* follow this course of expression consistently, giving voice to the dream of what might be and checking that voice against the realities of circumstance that would stifle it” [xi]. Taking cue from other critics, Watkins elaborates on the common characteristics of eighteenth-century visionary poetry and writes that such poetry is marked by a restlessness rather than calmness; it is not static or fixed but transformative and dynamic; it is marked by intense engagement rather than mere expression. Barbauld’s poems evince all these features or qualities of visionary poetics. The visionary ethos in much of eighteenth-century poetry is inspired by the *Bible*. As Watkins writes, “the debt that British poetry owes to the Bible, both as a source of formal experimentation and idealistic hope, and shows the importance of thinking systematically and historically about the British visionary imagination... intertextual and corrective strategies of visionary writing” (xii). Besides Barbauld, many other women writers who were her contemporaries, such as Elizabeth Hands, Ann Yearsley, Anna Seward, Ann Batten Crisall, and Ann Bannerman, show the characteristic

visionary stance in their works. They used the “strategies of poetic engagement to contest dominant and more culturally conservative modes of literary expression” (xii). Their visionary poetics thus questioned the status quo and the complacent attitudes of society. Referring to Wittreich’s views on the subject, Watkins writes that these women poets show that they kept disruptive and idealistic thought alive in “a period dominated by writers who form a line of wit” (xiii). Barbauld’s visionary practice involves engagement with other texts—sometimes to get inspired; at other times to correct or revise certain ideas. Her poetic oeuvre reveals the fact that she was always enthused with an informed idealism and like Blake, another visionary poet, she desires to bring about a transformed and renovated world of peace and stability. Although she is heavily reliant on the *Bible* for her visionary spirit and poetic strategies, she also draws from other sources—classical and contemporary, religious and secular—to guide her visionary spirit” (xiii). Watkins therefore says that Barbauld does not belong to just one “line of vision” but rather to a “kaleidoscopic collection of visionary influences, drawing her interests from a broad and diverse range of literary source materials and using them to shape a vision that brings her idealism directly to bear on the modern age” (xiii). Barbauld’s visionary enterprise has been characterised as radical because of her “corrective intervention into the tradition of British thought and poetry” (1). She wrote careful and cautious poetry which intended to “trouble passive understanding or acceptance of convention and thereby to create imaginative spaces for remaking reality” (3). The great political events of the day—the American and French revolutions—actually facilitated and encouraged an atmosphere of visionary idealism and imagination which began to dominate the cultural space as “rigid formalisms” began to give way. The variety of poetic strategies that Barbauld uses to project her visionary interest in ushering a utopian world built along humane lines include the pastoral, satire, poetic epistle, prophecy, hymns, songs, lyrics, etc. It must also be noted that her idealistic and “transformative poetic vision” is oftentimes undercut by a reflexive critical attitude—making for “barbed endings” or open-endedness as marked by Otter. Barbauld’s visionary poetics and idealism is therefore one which curiously accommodates an amount of scepticism which in effect serves as a veiled critique of society’s reluctance to revolutionary change.

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- Barbauld's "The Rights of Woman" has been deemed as anti-feminist for it was seen as a caustic reply to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which the latter criticised Barbauld's poem "To a Lady". But Elizabeth Raisanen in her study titled "Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Barbauld, and Equality Feminism" argues that Barbauld's poem is in fact an espousal of Wollstonecraft's view on the way to achieve true and lasting liberation for women. Raisanen writes that, "Barbauld's poem does not mock Wollstonecraft's reason-based equality feminism but rather an irrational, emotionally-based difference feminism whose goal is to dominate men". The poem has unfortunately suffered from a long tradition of homogenous interpretation which see it as a counter-attack to Wollstonecraft's comment on the treatise. But a close reading of the poem will reveal the fact that Barbauld actually endorses many of the key concepts in Wollstonecraft's book. In *Vindication*, the kind of feminism that Wollstonecraft envisions is an equality feminism which is based on reason and not an emotional feminism which is impulsive and inarticulate. Barbauld's poem is an oblique critique of the latter. Women's lack of education is responsible for the emotionally-driven feminism. It has handicapped them from using rational arguments or redoubtable reason-based framework to present their case for equality. In fact, emotion-based feminism is counter-productive in many ways. It simply tends to topple the existing order and hierarchy with women taking the position of authority as men are relegated to a subservient position. Wollstonecraft had similarly derided difference feminism when she complained in *Rights of Woman* that women gain power by "unjust means" (such as exploiting their physical beauty) and then become "capricious tyrants" [27]. However, she strays from Wollstonecraft's view somewhat as the dominant mood of the poem towards the end is suggestive of the fact that for the moment, women should opt for a compromise of sorts that is available to them in the form of "mutual love". But overall, Barbauld's take on rational education for women from her commentaries and other writings beside this poem, will show that her brand of feminism is completely in agreement with Wollstonecraft's feminism. Her borrowing of key phrases and concepts, such as "mutual love" from *Vindication* proves that. Wollstonecraft had said in her book that the solution to ending endemic misogyny or sexism is not by snatching power and privilege from men, for with this arrogation women will be repeating the same history of gender

inequality. Women's short-lived domination over men will be just as tyrannical, oppressive, objectionable and as unjust. A mere reversal of roles is therefore not enough. Wollstonecraft never asked for such a skewed feminism. She was more for gender parity, which unfortunately might be too long in coming as women have been denied education that could have facilitated a world of reason-based equality and friendship between both the sexes. This is worsened by the fact that girls are instilled with a desire of conquest over men through their physical beauty, which serves as her "sceptre". This erroneous notion cultivated among women lead them to develop the idea that they can rule over men or exact men's attention, indulgence and favours with their looks. They therefore choose "rather to be short-lived queens than labour to obtain the sober pleasures that arise from equality" (30). This power is therefore a sham—as the poem also shows. It is implied that the same women who are objects of admiration, will be shunned and repelled once they lose their "sceptre"—their secret weapon of beauty because of old age. That is why an emotion-based solution to gender inequality is misdirected as it will make tyrants and despots out of women who want to hold on to their power.

- In an essay titled "The Stranger Guest: The Literature of Pregnancy and New Motherhood", Lily Gurton-Wachter writes that Barbauld's "To the Little Invisible Being" is actually very ambivalent about the experience of pregnancy and motherhood. The poem emphasises that pregnancy is an uncanny experience for most women. While the foetus is imagined as imprisoned in the "living tomb" of the womb, the mother is shown as feeding the foetus with "her own life" which may be a reference to the ominous end of pregnancy for most mothers in death. The poem also underscores the strangeness of the foetus inside the mother which, though a part of the mother's body, is wholly different and separate from her. Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach to motherhood may shed some light on the paradoxical nature of pregnancy as hinted in Barbauld's poem which is as much about the mother as about the foetus within her. The gestating mother both loses and confirms her identity as she begins to harbour another being inside herself. The strange two-in-oneness is pronounced as the foetus is the "graft" or the "other" inside the mother and it may signify different things to different people. As one writes, "For Kristeva, the pregnant woman...is a figure of the doubling of self into other, and the eventual

splitting of the self into the other, a figure that bespeaks both the identification of the self with the other, and the negation of self in the other that makes the recognition of the other possible.” (Covino 22). So there are splits or ruptures involved in the liminal realm of female reproduction. In psychoanalytical theories, the unavoidable ruptures are not welcome. But Kristeva sees ruptures of pregnancy positively by highlighting female agency during gestation. The mother is a strong figure, a “place or space of significant activity, rather than an empty receptacle. The child’s early intimacy with the mother’s body is not only itself a kind of language, defined as it is by patterns of sound and movement, but it is the ground of all symbolic, or social language; it is what makes language acquisition possible” (Kristeva 19). Unlike Lacan, who in his focus on the infant neglected the importance of the mother’s role in the subject-object formation of the infant, Kristeva re-asserts the importance of the mother or the maternal body in infant development. The Enlightenment philosophies presciently observed that the proper development of human subjectivity is inextricably tied up with female reproduction. In Barbauld’s poem, we see that the father-figure is not mentioned—not even alluded to indirectly. The godmother appeals unto the baby to step out and enter a fascinating and beautiful world and go straight to the arms of the loving mother who will bring him or her up. With the mother in attendance, the foetus will grow up to be a diligent person who will realize his or her full or true potential and in his or her own turn, usher in a world of peace. It is thus clear that Barbauld puts a great importance on mothers—especially in their capacity to mould the future by educating their children. Donelle Ruwe says in “Barbauld and the Body-Part Game—Maternal Pedagogy in the Long Eighteenth-Century” that Barbauld’s view on mothering is about “intimate and immediate” associations—especially evident in her “Lessons for Children” (1778-79). The poet seems to be very sensitive towards mother-child interactions; Ruwe writes, “Barbauld captures the language of real-life mothers and their toddlers, and her simple, lucid prose in a natural idiom is compelling” (29). Unlike the godmother figure who appeals to the foetus in “To a Little Invisible Being”, we see an engaging conversation between a mother and a child in the “Lessons”. Ruwe notes that the “*Lessons* was inspired by actual parent-child interactions between Barbauld and her adopted son, Charles Aikin”. Through her works for children, Barbauld has in fact become a moral mother of the nation. Mitzi Myers

says in her “Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames, and Moral Mothers: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Female Tradition in Georgian Children’s Books” that a new type of protagonist arose in the eighteenth-century—the educating mother. This moral mother stood for the “heroic potential available in ordinary female” (Myers 50). Barbauld thus came to adopt “the powerful position of a moral mother who addresses the nation” and this “rise of the moral mother as a literary hero type was a reflection of the increasing visibility of parenting in the long eighteenth century (Ruwe 27). “To a Little Invisible Being”—though from the perspective of a godmother than a mother—reaffirms Barbauld’s role as a moral mother of the nation as she already begins to exhort the foetus to be born and live a virtuous and blessed life, reaching his or her full potential and realizing their destiny.

- Regarding the explicit war analogy and imagery in the poem “The Caterpillar”, Alice G. D. Otter puts forth an interesting observation in her essay, “Pests, Parasites and Positionality”. Otter says that the poem works like a sequel to the poet’s other poem, “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven”. Published four years before, “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” is infamous for the bitter criticism it brought to the otherwise favoured poet. It is a political poem wherein Barbauld boldly condemns Britain’s foreign affairs. Otter says that the sentimental sympathy displayed by the speaker in “The Caterpillar” towards a potentially destructive pest is a covert allusion to the British public’s changed stand on the captured Napoleon Bonaparte. She writes that Barbauld’s “fellow Britons had begun to soften towards Napoleon Bonaparte (...) Seeming to echo this softening atmosphere, “The Caterpillar” moves from sympathy for a little insect to pity for a defeated enemy, employing a conventional analogy between garden pests and political adversaries” (212). This reading is validated by the battle motif in the poem as it lifts the poem from its mere domestic setting. Besides its obvious domesticity therefore, the poem is also very political in nature. As Otter says, “More is at stake than caterpillars and defeated soldiers” (213). While “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” was a harsh political diatribe, “The Caterpillar” is a much softer censure cloaked in an allegory. The latter is a veiled critique and a “more subtle tirade against the vanity of British sympathies” (222). Barbauld adopts a “gentle and maternal” approach in the poem in order to win the “emotional acquiescence of her audience, only to challenge their morality from the inside out” (213).

Why the helpless caterpillar which was released is a potentially dangerous or harmful creature is given away by its patterns. Its streaks and colouring which earn the admiration of the speaker actually reveals the fact that it is a Lackey caterpillar which “has the potential to be a very severe pest...this worm metaphorically is strong enough to destroy a great nation” (214). The beauty of the caterpillar belies its innocence. The same is the case with a nation’s sworn enemy who is shown mercy on a sentimental whim. Britain pardoning and withholding the execution of its political prisoner Napoleon Bonaparte was seen as sentimental weakness by the Prussians. The heroism of the speaker who releases the pest is thus deflated as she is not a saviour per se but a gullible Romantic who gives in to excessive sentimentality and flattery and is manipulated into letting her guard down. The escaped caterpillar or the enemy thereby “resumes his pest status” and is a “potential destroyer, like the Trojan Horse” (224). Referring to the self-deprecatory note of the speaker, Otter says that, “Excessive sensibility is too responsive to changing circumstance, whereas Virtue remains constant. Thus it is not Virtue to make exceptions for one ‘single sufferer’, although the intent may be virtuous” (224). The noble quality of pity, when it is excess, might be exploited to condone immoral behaviour. It leads to the corruption of character, the sense of good judgement and spawns a lack of integrity. It is therefore not very virtuous of the speaker to harbour pity for the caterpillar—just as it was not very virtuous of Britain to pardon Bonaparte. Read in this light, the poem is a “judgement about British sensibility” as it is suggestive of the fact that “the sympathies and caprices of the nineteenth-century middle-class audience lack Virtue, despite virtuous intentions” (227). With the poem, Barbauld thus makes her readers re-examine their cherished notions of sympathy and pity. True virtue is displayed by the strength of resolve and that is why “isolated and selective excesses of pity are not desirable” (229). Oftentimes, the excesses of sentimentally virtuous minds hinder the enactments of truly virtuous acts. And the ambiguous ending makes us wonder if it is “virtuous to protect pests and parasites as necessary parts of this system or is such protection merely an indulgent weakness of a virtuous mind” (211).

- In the article titled “Bubble[s] and Female Verse: A reading of Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s “Washing Day””, Vassiliki Markidou writes that

Barbauld's poem is about the "distinctly female, down-to-earth discourse" which is very different from the "elevated male discourse" (Markidou 21). Imagination or fantasy—evoked by the bubble imagery in the poem—has been read by many critics as contrasts to trivial domestic rituals (25). Markidou notes Terry Castle's observation that with the action of bubbles being blown by the children, the poem achieves a marked shift from a domestic setting and "veers off into pure fantasia" (Castle 25). Markidou does not fully agree with this interpretation and suggests that "domesticity and imagination are strongly interrelated" in the poem (25). She points how Barbauld herself is a testament to the fact of how one's imagination co-exists with one's responsibilities as a married woman (25). The trope of the bubble lends an ethereal effect to a domestic product and Karina Williamson argues that Barbauld's proclamation of her verse as the supreme bubble in the final lines of the poem is "defiant rather than self-mocking" (Williamson 186). Markidou remarks that this "female poetic self-affirmation" with the image of the bubble reveals the dialectical aspect recurring in Barbauld's craft. Like the bubbles, her poetry is "fluid, fecund and ever-changing", but also dangerously fragile (26). She therefore writes that Barbauld maintains "a self-conscious liminal position between feminism and conservatism, female self-assertion and feminine decorum, making grand claims for her art and depreciating it" (26).

Markidou also makes a very interesting intertextual study of Barbauld's poem. She writes that the poem might be a response to Alexander Pope's mock-heroic poem *The Dunciad*. The "slip-shod measure" of the domestic Muse in the poem echoes the "slip-shod Muses" in the third book of *The Dunciad* (28). Pope's work derides the literary output of female poets as "product[s] of female madness" (29). With the figure of the Goddess of Dullness, Pope in fact launches a full-blown attack on the supposedly bad poetry written by women. The mock-heroic gives a statement to the effect that female poetry is insipid, devoid of any literary value and chock-full of "babble and destruction" (29). Barbauld counters this misogynist view and "rewrites his satirical, caustic poem" with "Washing Day" (29). As Markidou explains:

If *The Dunciad* is considered Pope's mock-heroic attack on 'dull' poetry, including female poetry, "Washing Day" demonstrates

Barbauld's mock-heroic counterattack on Pope's critical attitude towards women's verse (Markidou 290)

Barbauld's domestic poetry can clearly contend with the lofty Neoclassical verse. Markidou offers the suggestion that the washed clothes hung in clotheslines and referred to as "loaded lines" and "crossing lines" (which discomfits the male authority of the household in his garden walk) can be read as symbols of female poetry that unsettles and subverts patriarchal perspectives. Moreover, the hard work of the women behind the rite of washing clothes is symbolic of the "hands of female poets, working hard under adverse circumstances, to bring order and light into the house of poetry" (30). The allegory here thus emphasises that female wit is cathartic and triumphant—dismissing the allegation that women's writing is worthless, inferior and aesthetically unattractive.

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### 8.5 Probable questions and suggested answers

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- I) Would you consider Barbauld's poem "The Rights of Woman" as a feminist poem or as an anti-feminist poem? Explain why.

Answer: For a long time Barbauld's "The Rights of Woman" had been considered as a decidedly anti-feminist poem as it seems to question and doubt if women's liberation from their oppression under patriarchy is even an achievable goal. It was also considered to be anti-feminist as it seemed like a counter-attack to Wollstonecraft's criticism of Barbauld's "To a Lady" in *Vindication on the Rights of Woman*. But a closer reading of the poem shows that the poem which makes a clear allusion to Wollstonecraft's treatise actually works in tandem with many of the views presented in the seminal text. Like *Vindication*, it is in fact critical of an emotional and impulsive sort of feminism which only seeks to do a role-reversal and does not want to eradicate arbitrary hierarchy. The poem is therefore feminist in spirit while being critical of the dangers and uselessness of a misguided brand of feminism.

- II) In what way does the experience of pregnancy become uncanny for women?

Answer: In "To the Little Invisible Being", Barbauld subtly highlights that the cherished and prized experience of pregnancy might become uncanny for the would-be mother as she is essentially hosting a stranger in her body who remains "unknown" to her throughout the entire period of gestation. Though

the baby is a part of her and comes out of her, it is not herself but a different and separate individual altogether in his or her own right.

III) What is the political subtext of “The Caterpillar”

Answer: Barbauld’s “The Caterpillar”, while being a poem plainly addressed to a caterpillar, also alludes to a contemporary political situation. According to one critical interpretation, the freeing of the caterpillar or the pest in the poem serves as a metaphor of the way England freed its political enemy Napoleon Bonaparte. The distinct battle imagery of the poem also adds to the political dimension of the poem as it shows confrontation and conflict caused by territorial issues.

IV) How does the poem uphold the domestic Muse as an alternative stimulus for creative inspiration?

Answer: In the beginning of the poem, the speaker invokes the domestic Muse instead of the nine patriarchal Muses usually worshipped by male artists and poets. An unlikely candidate for fostering the creative arts, the domestic Muse replaces the original Muses with her range of elemental and profound subject-matter emerging from the domestic realm. Imagined as a matriarch, the domestic Muse can inspire one to write about the everyday joys and struggles of life found in the banal and the ordinary. The poetry influenced by her can both transcend and associate the domestic with the celestial and the global. As such, the richly liminal is of greatly valuable and a fecund source for creative projects.

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## 8.6 Summing Up

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It is clear that in her poetry, Barbauld does not shy away from contentious issues of the day. Her Dissent tendency of nonconformism is apparent as she puts up questions and raises doubts which shatter smug social attitudes. As mentioned in the previous chapter, her layered, dialectical and open-ended poetry makes for what Alice G. D. Otter calls as “barbed endings”. One can say that she employs a sort of heteroglossia which accommodates differing perspectives on a subject. It can be easily inferred from what the critics have commented so far that this is the strength of Barbauld’s poetry as it cannot be reduced to a single viewpoint. Barbauld is a poet with a cause and she engages in topical and debatable subjects with an argumentative flair unique to her. Mostly noted for her didactic stance, a satirical strain is also prevalent in her poetry which aims to cut through the many prejudices of society surrounding women’s rights, women’s writing and the state of the nation.

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