

# Aula 2

## THE METAPHYSICAL POETRY

### **META**

Apresentar um panorama histórico contextualizado sobre a poesia metafísica e seus principais representantes.

### **OBJETIVOS**

Ao final desta aula, o aluno deverá:  
Reconhecer e identificar os principais elementos da poesia metafísica, tal como se encontram inscritos nos poemas de John Donne.

### **PRÉ-REQUISITOS**

Familiaridade com a problemática do conceito de Literatura;  
O contexto sócio-histórico da formação da história da literatura inglesa.

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## INTRODUÇÃO

Nesta segunda aula, conheceremos mais de perto a produção poética de John Donne, o contexto no qual produziu suas obras, um pouco de sua biografia e, finalmente sua recepção e apreciação crítica. Trabalharemos, ao final da aula, com o poema, “Elegy XX”, que foi traduzido para o português em pleno século XX por Augusto de Campos e musicado por Caetano Veloso (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YX4K5Beibc>).

Observaremos a sua complexidade de sua estrutura, o uso inusitado de imagens e metáforas, as referências ao momento sócio-histórico e, claro, sua beleza poética, marcada pela fluidez do seu ritmo e a sonoridade cristalina de suas rimas.

John Donne is regarded as both the pioneer and the chief spokesperson of metaphysical poetry. Robert Browning rightly complemented on Donne’s poetic proliferation by the words: —Who was the Prince of wits, amongst whom he reign’d / High as a Prince, and as great State maintain’d?”. Donne had a prosperous literary life, garnished with numerous love poems, songs, sonnets, elegies, satires, sermons, religious verse and treatises but a majority of Donne’s poetical works were published posthumously, barring a few like *The Anniversaries* (1612) and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1623).

By his glorious poems, Donne helped the readers to taste the metaphysical flavour of his poetic expressions. In his major love lyrics like “The Sun Rising”, “The Canonization”, “The Good Morrow”, “The Anniversary”, “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”, “The Ecstasy”, “Lovers’ Infiniteness”, “The Flea”, “The Indifferent”, “A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy’s Day”, “A Valediction: Of Weeping”, “The Undertaking”, “The Relic”, “The Apparition”, “Love’s Growth”, “The Dream”, “The Triple Fool”, “Song: Go And Catch A Falling Star” etc. Donne critically sketched human love to differentiate it from the conventional concept of love given by others. While most of the poets through ages contend that love remains beyond the compass of time’s bending sickle, Donne in his poem “The Canonization” has blended love’s timeless fragrance with love’s unifying power, through the symbol of ☐ phoenix’ and here lies Donne’s ingenious talent as a poet sermoning on love.

## DESENVOLVIMENTO

The term “metaphysical”, when applied to English literature, was coined by the influential critic Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) to describe a group of seventeenth century poets who were characterized by the creative use of conceits and by an emphasis on the spoken quality of their verse. Until the twentieth century, they were treated as minor poets by the literary historians of English literature. Because of the diversity of style among the poets, they are sometimes generally considered as Baroque, just like our contemporary Brazilian poets, like Gregório de Matos Guerra (1636-1696).



Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), often referred to as Dr Johnson, was an English writer who made great contributions to English literature as a poet, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer. Johnson was a devout Anglican and committed Tory, and is described by the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography as “arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history”. He is also the subject of perhaps the most famous biography in English literature, namely *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, by James Boswell (1740-1795). Fonte: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel\\_Johnson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Johnson)

Thus, there is no consensus regarding which English poets or poems can be considered to be metaphysical. Colin Burrow, in his *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (1885), mentions John Donne (1573-1631), George Herbert (1593-1633), Henry Vaughan (1621-1695), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), and Richard Crashaw (1613-1649) as “central figures”. Two important twentieth century anthologies helped to define the Metaphysical canon: Herbert Grierson’s *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (1921) and Helen Gardner’s *Metaphysical Poets* (1957), who also included a group of “proto-metaphysical” poets, with names like William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and Sir Walter Raleigh (c. 1552-1554), and “post-Metaphysicals” of the Restoration period which included Edmund Waller (1606-1687) and the John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester (1647-1680). The poet and critic T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), in turn, became a constant theoretical reference for those who try to define this literary school.



Thomas Stearns “T. S.” Eliot (1888-1965) was a British essayist, publisher, playwright, literary and social critic, and “one of the twentieth century’s major poets”. He moved from his native United States to England in 1914 at the age of 25, settling, working, and marrying there. He was eventually naturalised as a British subject in 1927 at the age of 39, renouncing his American citizenship. Fonte: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T.\\_S.\\_Eliot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._S._Eliot)

Nowadays the Metaphysical poets are part of the canon of English history, but the fact is that the most influential and characteristic Metaphysical poetry was that produced by John Donne, who can be said to be the founder of this kind of poetry. According to Piu Sarkar (2012), the term “metaphysical” refers to a philosophical view of the nature of things. In other words, it is a kind of poetry inspired by a philosophical concept of the universe and the role attributed to the human kind in the great drama of existence. From this perspective, Donne and his associates are considered metaphysical so far as their poetic works have been enriched by

the varied aspects of human life like love, religion, death etc. Metaphysical poetry explores and expresses ideas and feelings about the terrestrial world and its diverse phenomena in a rational way to mesmerize the readers. Making innovative and shocking use of puns, paradoxes and employing subtle logical propositions, the metaphysical poetry has achieved a style that is energetic and vigorous. In historical terms, however, metaphysical poetry can be conceived as the result of a revolt against the conventional Elizabethan love poetry.

According to T. S. Eliot, the name was ascribed to poets who dealt with subjects concerning the abstract in concrete terms, using logic and ratiocination to explain the inexplicable. Philosophically speaking, metaphysical means “to transcend above or beyond the physical or concrete”. They used to do that with a kind of play on words. From this perspective, “Metaphysical poetry” was a product of the popularisation of the study of mental phenomena.

Here are some characteristics of Metaphysical poetry:

- 1) Intellectually rigorous, scholastic, dialectical, subtle.
- 2) Argumentative – using logic, syllogisms or paradox in persuasion.
- 3) Concentrated complex and difficult thought
- 4) Dramatic, with abrupt aggressive opening but modulating tones.
- 5) Style – concise, succinct, epigrammatic
- 6) Use of conceits; commonplace medieval topics with lots of comparisons to unusual, unexpected things or images called conceits or extended metaphors.
- 7) Deals with dichotomies, dualities, paradoxes, antithesis in a dialectic manner:
  - 7.1) Body and soul (corporal and spiritual)
  - 7.2) Time and eternity (finite and infinite)
  - 7.3) Real (concrete) and the ideal (abstract)
  - 7.4) Carnal (profane) and divine (sacred) love
  - 7.5) Sin and redemption
  - 7.6) Emotion (passion) and Reason (logic)

### **John Donne**

Besides being a poet, John Donne was also a cleric in the Church of England. He was born in London into a recusant Roman Catholic Family, when the practice of that religion was illegal in England. Donne was the third of six children. His father, also named John Donne, was of Welsh descent and a warden of the Ironmongers Company in the City of London. His literary production includes sonnets, love poems, religious poems,

Latin translations, epigrams, elegies, songs, satires and sermons. His main characteristic of his poetry is his care for the language and the inventiveness of metaphors. His poetry, thus, is full of abrupt openings, paradoxes, ironies and dislocations. These features, as has been said, were both a reaction against the conventional Elizabethan poetry and an adaptation into English of European baroque and mannerist techniques. His early career is marked by a poetry characterized by an impressive knowledge of English society, something which is shown with sharp criticism. Another important theme in Donne's poetry is the idea of true religion, something which he often theorized. He wrote secular, erotic and love poems and is particularly famous for his mastery of metaphysical conceits.



John Donne

### THE FLEA

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,  
How little that which thou deniest me is;  
It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,  
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;  
Thou know'st that this cannot be said  
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,

Yet this enjoys before it woo,  
 And pampered swells with one blood made of two,  
 And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,  
 Where we almost, nay more than married are.  
 This flea is you and I, and this  
 Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;  
 Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,  
 And cloistered in these living walls of jet.  
     Though use make you apt to kill me,  
     Let not to that, self-murder added be,  
     And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since  
 Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?  
 Wherein could this flea guilty be,  
 Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?  
 Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou  
 Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now;  
     'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be:  
     Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,  
     Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

### Here is a good summary pf the poem

In this poem, the speaker tells his beloved to look at the flea before them and to note “how little” is that thing that she denies him. For the flea, he says, has sucked first his blood, then her blood, so that now, inside the flea, they are mingled; and that mingling cannot be called “sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead.” The flea has joined them together in a way that, “alas, is more than we would do”.

As his beloved moves to kill the flea, the speaker stays her hand, asking her to spare the three lives in the flea: his life, her life, and the flea's own life. In the flea, he says, where their blood is mingled, they are almost married—no, more than married—and the flea is their marriage bed and marriage temple mixed into one. Though their parents grudge their romance and though she will not make love to him, they are nevertheless united and cloistered in the living walls of the flea. She is apt to kill him, he says, but he asks that she not kill herself by killing the flea that contains her blood; he says that to kill the flea would be sacrilege, “three sins in killing three.”

“Cruel and sudden,” the speaker calls his lover, who has now killed the flea, “purpling” her fingernail with the “blood of innocence.” The speaker asks his lover what the flea's sin was, other than having sucked from each of

them a drop of blood. He says that his lover replies that neither of them is less noble for having killed the flea. It is true, he says, and it is this very fact that proves that her fears are false: If she were to sleep with him (“yield to me”), she would lose no more honor than she lost when she killed the flea.

### Form

This poem alternates metrically between lines in iambic tetrameter and lines in iambic pentameter, a 4-5 stress pattern ending with two pentameter lines at the end of each stanza. Thus, the stress pattern in each of the nine-line stanzas is 454545455. The rhyme scheme in each stanza is similarly regular, in couplets, with the final line rhyming with the final couplet: AABBCDDDD.

Fonte: <http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/donne/section3.rhtml>

A film to be watched



Wit is a 2001 American television movie directed by Mike Nichols. The teleplay by Nichols and Emma Thompson is based on the 1999 Pulitzer Prize winning play of the same title by Margaret Edson. In the story, Vivian Bearing (Emma Thompson) is a professor of English literature known for her intense knowledge of metaphysical poetry, especially the Holy Sonnets of John Donne. Her life takes a turn when she is diagnosed with metastatic Stage IV ovarian cancer. Oncologist Harvey Kelekian prescribes various chemotherapy treatments to treat her disease, and as she suffers through the various side-effects (such as fever, chills, vomiting, and abdominal pain), she attempts to put everything in perspective. The story periodically flashes back to previous moments in her life, including her childhood, her graduate school studies, and her career prior to her diagnosis. During the course of the film, she continually breaks the fourth wall by looking into the camera and expressing her feelings and quoting some of Donne's verses. Fonte: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wit\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wit_(film))



## CONCLUSÃO

Despite his education and talent, Donne lived in poverty for several years, being dependent on wealthy friends. In 1601, Donne secretly married Anne More, with whom he had twelve children, and in 1615, attending an order given by the king himself, he became an Anglican priest. In 1621, he was appointed the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London. Between 1601 and 1614, he was a member of Parliament.

Donne is celebrated as a priest in the calendar of the Church of England and in the Calendar of Saints of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States. The memorial to Donne, modelled after the engraving pictured above, was one of the few such memorials to survive the Great Fire of London in 1666 and now is in St Paul's Cathedral, where the poet was buried. He became a kind of precursor of modern poetry, being translated in many different languages. The Brazilian poet Augusto translated brilliantly one of his most famous poems, the "Elegy XX", which was transformed into a song by Caetano Veloso in 1984.

While among the Elizabethan poets, use of wit has been decorative and ornamental, Donne in his writings has employed wit sometimes in the form of satire and hyperbolic statements and often in a serious and sincere manner. In "The Sun Rising", for example, Donne has categorically applied satire: "Thy beams, so reverend, and strong/ Why shouldst thou think? / I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink". In the same poem Donne's witty approach is conveyed by way of hyperbolic expression: "She is all states, and all princes, I, / Nothing else is" to suggest that the lady-love is the empress of the kingdom where the lover is merely the prince. The following lines from Donne's *The Canonization*: "We can die by it, if not live by love/ And if unfit for tombs and hearse/ Our legend be", it will be fit for verse" highlight how the speaker has used poetic wit in a serious and sincere tone to emphasize the immortality of terrestrial lovers through verse even if after death nothing is mentioned on their tombs.



## RESUMO

John Donne is considered one of the most important English poets. He is admired for his contribution to what is known as “metaphysical poetry”. In his poems, he uses witty approaches full of satire, passionate feelings, striking conceits etc. This new kind of poetry attracted the readers through ages, although many eminent writers like John Dryden (1631-1700) and Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) discarded and did not approve the metaphysical aspects of his poetry. Although the other metaphysical poets have produced great poetry, John Donne shines amongst them like a solitary star because of his unrivaled genius in rationalizing his creative imagination. It is Donne who is responsible for changing pattern of Elizabethan poetry. Reading his poems, no one can deny his talent and the force of his poetry, which has transcended time and space.



## ATIVIDADES

Leia cuidadosamente o poema abaixo:

### ELEGY XX.

#### TO HIS MISTRESS GOING TO BED.

by John Donne

COME, madam, come, all rest my powers defy ;  
Until I labour, I in labour lie.  
The foe oft times, having the foe in sight,  
Is tired with standing, though he never fight.  
Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone glittering,  
But a far fairer world encompassing.  
Unpin that spangled breast-plate, which you wear,  
That th' eyes of busy fools may be stopp'd there.  
Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime  
Tells me from you that now it is bed-time.  
Off with that happy busk, which I envy,  
That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.

Your gown going off such beauteous state reveals,  
 As when from flowery meads th' hill's shadow steals.  
 Off with your wiry coronet, and show  
 The hairy diadems which on you do grow.  
 Off with your hose and shoes ; then softly tread  
 In this love's hallow'd temple, this soft bed.  
 In such white robes heaven's angels used to be  
 Revealed to men ; thou, angel, bring'st with thee  
 A heaven-like Mahomet's paradise ; and though  
 Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know  
 By this these angels from an evil sprite ;  
 Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.

Licence my roving hands, and let them go  
 Before, behind, between, above, below.  
 O, my America, my Newfoundland,  
 My kingdom, safest when with one man mann'd,  
 My mine of precious stones, my empery ;  
 How am I blest in thus discovering thee !  
 To enter in these bonds, is to be free ;  
 Then, where my hand is set, my soul shall be.

Full nakedness ! All joys are due to thee ;  
 As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be  
 To taste whole joys. Gems which you women use  
 Are like Atlanta's ball cast in men's views ;  
 That, when a fool's eye lighteth on a gem,  
 His earthly soul might court that, not them.  
 Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made  
 For laymen, are all women thus array'd.  
 Themselves are only mystic books, which we  
 —Whom their imputed grace will dignify—  
 Must see reveal'd. Then, since that I may know,  
 As liberally as to thy midwife show  
 Thyself ; cast all, yea, this white linen hence ;  
 There is no penance due to innocence :  
 To teach thee, I am naked first ; why then,  
 What needst thou have more covering than a man?  
 Fonte: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/his-mistress-going-bed>  
 Em seguida, tente identificar os seguintes elementos:

- 1) estrutura rítmica e rímica
- 2) uso de metáforas ou símiles incomuns
- 3) Referência ao ambiente sócio-histórico e cultural do poema

### COMENTÁRIO SOBRE AS ATIVIDADES

Esta atividade tem por finalidade principal fazer você se familiarize com a leitura e interpretação de poemas. Será importante também compreender o tipo de língua que se falava no período, bem como as referências culturais do momento. Em seguida, o aluno estará apto para considerar a estrutura formal dos poemas estudados.



### PRÓXIMA AULA

The Age of Milton

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