

Review

# Nineteenth century American metaphysical women poets

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**This study is an attempt to contest the assumption that nineteenth century American women poets were sentimental. Accordingly, the main intuition is otherwise; some of these women are highly intellectual and their poetry is not of less vigor and complexity as that of the poetry written by the English metaphysical poets in the second half of seventeenth century England. In order to account for this intuition, the study has tried to delineate the main features of nineteenth century American poetry in order to have them as a yardstick against the wit and the ingenuity of three famous nineteenth century American women poets: Emily Dickinson, Helen Jackson and Mary Ritter. To substantiate the study assumption that these poets can aptly be dubbed American metaphysical poets, representative poems for the three writers were analyzed, and it was found out that the poetry of those poets is highly intellectual, both in theme and style.**

**Key words:** Poetic tradition, sentimental poetry; intellectual poetry, elliptical syntax, American metaphysical poetry, Emily Dickson, Helen Hunt Jackson, Mary .L Ritter.

## INTRODUCTION

Except for that of Dickenson's, the bulk of poetry written by women in nineteenth century America has always been dismissed as artificial, superficial and sentimental. Bennett (1998) tries to downplay such an accusation by arguing that sentimentalism does not contradict with subtlety and ingenuity. She contends that:

*The point here is that even if much nineteenth century women's poetry is "sentimental" which it is, what is meant by that term and how it plays out in any particular text or writer's oeuvre can be exceedingly complicated and even treacherous to sort out (P. 39).*

Bennett goes on arguing that nineteenth century women

literature, fiction, and poetry is neither simplistic nor "transparent," but it is artistic, and it requires careful reading in order to grasp and appreciate its merits. Nineteenth century American women poets, according to Walker (1982), have the potentiality to reform the poetic traditions and define the role of a female poet; Walker asserts:

*Nineteenth century women poets reformed the conception of poetry that had previously existed. By defining the poet in terms of the capacity for pain, they implied that women had a special talent for verse. While men were out working in the marketplace, women...were at home suffering quietly and writing poems. Their feelings were*

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*more profound than men; they were touched with tragic inside (P. 88).*

Those women, as such, have established themselves as creative poets; they possessed both experience and talents for writing poetry which is not of less vigor and grandeur than that poetry written by the English metaphysical poets. They manage to write in a very sophisticated style which made them modern. In her biographical notes on some of the nineteenth century women poets, Bennett (1998) labels them as either modernist or harbingers of modernism.

In the light of these assumptions and the meticulous reading of some of these poems, one tends to agree with Bennett and Walker and embrace the fact that these women are as creative as men, and their poetry does not exhibit less vigor and spirit than the poetry of their contemporary male poets. Moreover, some of these women poets are witty and their poetry can be aptly termed metaphysical.

Out of this intuition, the purpose of this study emerges as an attempt to show that some nineteenth century women poets such as Emily Dickinson, Helen Hunt Jackson and Mary L. Ritter can be duly classified as American metaphysical women poets. Accordingly, the discussion of some poems written by the above mentioned women poets is intended to show how these poets are as witty as the English metaphysical poets, and they can be justly called nineteenth century American metaphysical women poets. To set up the scene for such discussion, it is indispensable, if not imperative, to give a brief account of English metaphysical poetry in terms of its philosophy and striking features.

The term "metaphysical" is a slang word used by Johnson (2011) to disparagingly refer to a group of English poets who wrote poetry at the beginning of the seventeenth century (p. 17). However, it was not until the twentieth century that this term began to acquire different and favorable connotations. Eliot (1923) a keen admirer of the Metaphysical poets, describes Donne and his followers as "witty" and "serious". Eliot highly speaks of these poets: "They have enough been praised in terms which are implicit limitations because they are 'metaphysical', or 'witty', 'quaint', or 'obscure' though at their best they have these attributes more than other serious poets".

As mentioned earlier, these poets were not popular during their time because their poetry was subversive in both content and form. Their poetry is full of philosophical and religious speculations that reflect the spirit of the age. In fact, their poetry comes as a response to a changing world, a world which lost its certainty as a result of scientific empiricism in astrology, botany, astronomy, zoology, navigation and geographical exploration, etc. These poets, however, remain faithful to the old system of belief that life on earth is a mere shadow of the eternal world. Therefore, the poetry of most of the metaphysical

poets is an attempt to understand the dual reality and show man's relation to the divine presence.

Seelig (2015) argues that each of these poets tries in a "unique form and religious meditation to represent the two worlds and show the best ways of connecting them" (p.6). In this respect, she confirms that the poetry of Herbert, Vaughan, Traherene and other metaphysical poets: "create a universe of assent with particular limits" (p. 6). Gardner (1972) confirms that the term "metaphysical" suggests more than nice philosophical speculations. She argues that:

"what we call metaphysical poetry was referred to by contemporaries as 'strong lines,' a term which calls attention to other elements in metaphysical poetry than its fondness for indulging in 'nice speculations of philosophy' in unusual contexts" (p.15).

In fact metaphysical poetry is strongly lined in terms of its rough versification, elliptical syntax and concise forms. It is not easy to read because it usually fuses feelings with wit in a very ingenuous manner. In this sense, metaphysical poetry is difficult to read and this difficulty, according to Gardner, is either a merit or demerit; it is a demerit for those who favor poetry to be appealing to the heart, while it is a merit for those who believe that good poetry should appeal to both, the heart and the mind. In fact, the first type of readers does not like metaphysical poetry because it confuses the pleasure of poetry with the pleasure of puzzles; however, the second type of readers finds it most artistic and most intellectual. In her attempt to demystify the vagueness that has wrapped up metaphysical poetry, Gardner gives a list of some of the characteristics of this poetry, characteristics which are shared among most of the metaphysical poets.

## DISCUSSION

According to Gardner (1972), the first characteristic is "concentration." She argues that metaphysical poetry does not demand the reader to be held by an argument or a line, then pause to reflect on, but rather it requires the reader to pay attention and go on. This reader must go on because the striking beauty of the poem lies in the argument as a whole. In addition, the metaphysical poem is always short and concise; it is interwoven in an ingenuous manner; thus, failing to read the poem in this way might make the reader loose the originality of the poetic experience. A second characteristic, Gardner lists, is the use of conceits. In fact, the metaphysical conceit is a point of departure in the metaphysical poem; it is not as ornamental as is the case in Elizabethan poetry, but rather an essential part whose function is to develop the argument. A conceit is a far-fetched image where two dissimilar things are compared to each other and the poet, in a very striking manner persuades us of the justness of this comparison. Gardner is specific in her definition of the metaphysical conceits when she says:

*A conceit is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its aptness, or, at least, is more immediately striking. All comparisons discover likeness in things unlike: a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness ....Here, a conceit is like a spark made by striking two stones together. After the flash the stones are just two stones (P. 19).*

This kind of witty analogy is very subversive in a sense that it demands some kind of ingenuity on the part of the poet to elaborate to make it comprehensible, and in the meantime, it requires the reader to focus on the image in order to discern the latent meaning in such far-fetched images. A famous example of a metaphysical conceit is Donne's comparison, in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," of himself and his wife to the legs of a twin compass where the wife is portrayed as the "fixed foot" and the husband as the rooming one whose movement affects the other leg. This conceit reflects the kind of relationship between the husband and the wife; physically they are two, yet spiritually they are one. A third characteristic is the argumentative nature of metaphysical poetry. Gardner confirms that:

*"Argument and persuasion and the use of conceit as their instrument are the elements or body of the metaphysical poem" (p. 23).*

The soul of the poem is an imaginative situation or a moment of experience out of which arises the need to argue and persuade.

Therefore, it is not strange when the study observe that most of metaphysical poetry is marked by abrupt openings, whereby the poet addresses his mistress or his God in a casual manner. Accordingly, this poetry is marked by a dramatic aspect; it is written by poets who are accustomed and frequent of plays or the art of dramaturgy. A fourth characteristic is the use of language. The Metaphysical poets use simple words, nearly everyday language, sometimes vulgar words; however, this language is often difficult to understand; it is a language which is impregnated by excessive use of antithetical statements, in terms of paradox and oxymoron. Sometimes, the meaning of the whole poem is based on understanding the paradox as is the case in Herbert's "Easter Wings": "Then shall the fall further the flight in me" (as cited in DeCesare (1978).

A final characteristic of metaphysical poetry is the novelty of its imagery. These poets often use images drawn from religion, philosophy and science; they never use the image in a cliché manner; in each poem, the same image acquires a new shape and new meaning. Sometimes, the image can be a symbol, a parable or an allegory. In "The Flea" for instance, Donne associates the symbol and the conceit with the image of flea to convey the idea of the Holy Trinity. It is a very complex image in

which the symbol is superseded by the parable of sacrificing the body to transcend to the world of divinity. In fact, religious obsession is a recurrent element in most of metaphysical poetry; however, sometimes the metaphysical poets are subversive in expressing their religious concerns. Some of them would use an erotic image in order to convey a religious belief.

Hence, on approaching any metaphysical poem, readers should be cautious before giving any judgment. Now, with this caution in mind and the characteristics of metaphysical poetry set up, it is time to turn to the nineteenth century American women poets. In fact a careful and critical reader of Emily Dickinson's poetry might find difficulty in contesting the study assumptions simply because Emily Dickinson, as confirmed by Keller, classified as metaphysical, argues that "Most of the more significant features of Emily Dickinson's poetry have at one time or another been rather loosely classified as metaphysical—her playfulness, her unusual vocabulary, her tension of thought" (Emsley, 2003). Hence, Keller goes on and identifies Dickinson's poetry by showing how it resembles the poetry of the metaphysical poets in its "complexity of attitudes towards experience" (p. 251).

Indeed Dickinson's poetry is typically metaphysical and the ensuing examples illustrate this assumption. Dickinson's poem number (280), "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain" is as witty and ambiguous as those poems written by the metaphysical poets, mainly Herbert. If we look closely at the poem, we find the opening lines as abrupt as any those of Donne's poems. The poem opens with: "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain/And Mourners are to and fro/kept treading- treading" (Dickinson, 1896). The reader, as is the case in most of metaphysical poetry must not pause and dwell to reflect on the seemingly nonsensical opening, otherwise, he/she will miss the whole meaning of the poem. Apparently, the poem is not about actual death, but rather about a metaphoric death of conscious thoughts. Cameron (1986) speculates that "The poem charts the stages in the speaker's loss of consciousness, and this loss of consciousness is the dramatization of the deadening forces that today would be known as repression" (Bloom,1986).

Evidently, the central argument is encapsulated in the witty conceit; the transference of thoughts from consciousness into unconsciousness is brilliantly compared to the transference of soul from one world to another as in the case of actual death. The process of thought transference is subtly compared to the real death and its accompanying rituals; it is as sad and painful as death and involves much pain and suffering. Dickinson, then, does not cast off the analogy without elaboration; otherwise, the whole image remains limited to a simple analogy. Cameron attempts to explicate the conceit and show how it works in the poem; he confirms: "Examining the conceit, we speculate that the mourners represent that part of the self which fights to resurrect or keep alive the thought the speaker is trying to commit to burial" (p.

46). The beauty and the “spark” of this conceit are actually revealed in the last line of the poem, “And Finished knowing –then- (L. 20).

One, however, should admit that the closure of the conceit as it is implied in Cameron’s elaboration of the elaboration, does not resolve the mystery involved. Dickinson, in a very deliberate and brilliant manner leaves out part of the mystery to be figured out by the potential reader. The poem unlikely seems to be only about the mourning of dead thoughts or even about repression of these thoughts in negative manner. In his attempt to resolve this mystery, Cameron employs De Man’s theory of functional allegory; he argues:

“Thus the allegory of the funeral attempts to exteriorize and give a temporal structure what is in fact interior and simultaneous” (Bloom, 1986).

Within this argument, Cameron hints at the irony embedded in the last line, however, he seems to remain limited to his initial thesis that the poem is about repression. At this juncture, it seems fair to push such an interpretation forward and reflect further on the possible interpretations embedded in either the mysterious conceit or the open-ended allegory. Certainly, the poem seems to be about something more than repression or total annihilation of the conscious self. One could argue the opposite and say that the poem is a celebration of a new birth; a celebration of the birth of the creative process in the mind of the writer. In his discussion of Lacan, Syrup (1989) argues that, for Lacan the language of unconsciousness is privileged over the language of consciousness in the sense that it is much credible. Syrup argues:

*“The true speech- the unconscious- breaks through usually in a veiled and incomprehensible” (p. 11).*

According to Lacan, Syrup says, the language of conscious is the condition for the unconscious, in the sense that it creates and forms the unconsciousness. In fact, this theory seems to be in resonance with Coleridge’s theory of imagination, primary and secondary.

In the light of these two theories, Dickinson seems to be celebrating this process of creativity, a process which involves much pain and suffering.

In this context, the mourners and the sad rituals are nothing more than the tortuous and painful experience of creativity which finally helps the writer transcend impermanence into permanence. In this context, the irony in the last line “And finished knowing- then-” (Syrup, 1989) is accounted for; the real and the valuable knowledge is this transcendental knowledge which makes people lose sight of one world but gain a larger and magnifying sight of another world. In this sense, Dickinson shares the metaphysical poets the belief in the duality of life; therefore, one can confirm that the poem resembles metaphysical poetry in style and content. Another example of Dickinson’s metaphysical poetry is

her poem number (605). In this poem, Dickinson uses the allegory of the spider weaving to convey the process and the purpose of creative writing:

*The spider holds a Sliver Ball  
In unperceived Hands-  
And dancing softly to Himself  
His yarn of Pearl-unwinds-(Dickinson, 1896)*

Martin (1984) compares this poem with another spider poem written by Walt Whitman. In his point of view, the spider in Whitman’s poem is used as a metaphor for his soul; it is lonely and isolated in a promontory, yet it tried to build a bridge in order to connect with the outside world “Till the bridge you will need be formed, till the ductile anchor hold / Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul” (p. 135 L.9-10). In her comparison between the two poems, Martin argues that Whitman’s spider *launched* (my italics) its filament in order to reach its goal while the spider in Dickinson’s poem is obsessed with its activity, without any concern for the outside world. Accordingly, she concludes that Dickinson’s poetry is “self-contained” and only beautiful as a process rather than a product. Martin even goes further and asserts that the stress in Dickinson’s poem is on impermanence:

*Impermanence rather than permanence is stressed as is the process of spinning rather than mystery or agency is Dickinson’s concern. If Dickinson’s spider is a metaphor for her soul, one can safely say that her view of herself as a poet is less assertive, more self contained, less egocentric and more of relative perspectives than is Whitman’s. (P. 134).*

To some extent, this interpretation seems to hold; however, if we interpret the poem within the context of metaphysical poetry, we might come up with a different interpretation which highlights the depth of meaning inherent in the weaving process. In fact the weaving metaphor in Dickinson’s poem is sustained to the level of allegory; it is an allegory which is often used by Edward Taylor, the first American poet who has been acknowledged as a metaphysical poet. In his poem, “Housewifery,” Taylor uses the allegory of weaving to convey the hope of attaining God’s grace required for redemption, a hope that justifies his persistent and strong appeal to God:

*Make me, O Lord thy Spinning Wheele compleate.  
Thy Holy Worde my Distaff makes for mee  
Make mine Affections thy Swift Flyers neate.  
And make my Soul thy holy Spoole to bee. (Taylor, 1991).*

Dickinson seems to be using the same allegory but in a different way; what she is concerned in, is this moment of

illumination which comes out as a result of weaving, metaphorically, creative writing. The beauty of this moment is conveyed via the subtle conceit “The continent of light”; the poet as well as this spider create this world of celestial light which seems to be ephemeral. But, if we consider seriously and take the stylistic features into consideration, we might reach a completely different conclusion in terms of the issue of permanence and impermanence. Looking again at Dickinson’s poem in comparison with that of Whitman, we might observe that Whitman’s spider is involved in a single and an isolated action: “It launched filament, filament, and filament out of itself” (Whitman, 2015), while Dickinson’s spider is involved in a continuous effort which is confirmed by the recurrent repetition of the action; this repetition is sustained by the use of the factual present tense in “holds, unwinds, plies, supplants and dancing” (Dickinson, 1896).

Therefore, one can assert that even if this continent of light is dangled by the housewife and the “boundaries forgot,” it will come back as long as this spider keeps weaving. The light, then, is permanent by the token of its repetition, and in this sense, the allegory of weaving is brought back in its metaphysical context. With these permanent flashes of Dickinson’s light, we might be guided to have a metaphysical journey into the poetry of her close friend Helen Jackson.

Helen Jackson is as great as her Amherst friend, Emily Dickinson, who elegized her with the following words:

“Helen of Troy will die, but Helen of Colorado never. Dear friend, can you walk, were the last words that I wrote her. Dear friend, I can fly- her immortal reply” (Dickinson, 1896).

Jackson was considered a leading poet in the nineteenth century. Pollack (1998) asserts Jackson was deemed by Samuel Bowles as a great literary figure of her time. He announces that: “Mrs. Hunt stands on the threshold of literary triumph ever on by an American woman” (p. 325) Ralph Waldo Emerson, a 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet, also describes her as “the leading poet, not just leading poet on the continent”.

As space precludes, Jackson’s poem “Habeas Corpus” will be discussed to substantiate the assumption about the poetry of those nineteenth century American woman poets. If one carefully and critically looks into this poem, he/she would verily find that it has most of the characteristics of metaphysical poetry; it is argumentative, full of paradoxes and has a witty conceit. In this poem which was written few days before her death, Jackson, like Donne is addressing herself to death in a very casual manner. Donne, in his “Hymn to God, my God in my Sickness”, also a poem written months before his death, does not show any fear of death; on the contrary, he sees death as a conductor to the gate to eternal life:

*I joy, that in these straits, I see my West  
For though their current yield return to none  
What shall my west hurt me? As West and East  
In all flat maps (and I am one)  
So death touches the resurrection.* (Donne, 2001. L. 16-19).

Jackson also is not scared of death; on the contrary she embraces it as a friend. Death for her is an emancipator and a savior. This paradox is typically metaphysical, where death is always seen as a transforming power from the shadow of reality to reality itself. Therefore, it is not strange when we find Jackson addressing death in this way: “My body. Eh? Friend Death, how now? / Why all this tedious pomp of writ? / Thou has reclaimed it sure and slow” (Jackson, 2001. L.1-3).

Jackson here seems to be sarcastic of death because she thinks it has already worked on her by weakening her body and reclaiming it bit by bit. This attitude towards death is also reminiscent of Donne’s attitude in his sonnet number X when he addresses death as follows:

“Death be not proud, though some have called thee/Thou are slave to fate, chance, kings and desperate men/And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell” (Jackson, 2001. L.1-3). Jackson, as well as Donne, derides death and consider it complicit with sickness in the premature decay of her body. Therefore, it is not strange, when we find Jackson prompting death to put an end to her physical sickness:

*Do quickly all thou hast to do  
Not I nor mine will hindrance make  
I shall be free when thou are through  
I grudge thee naught that thou must take.* (Jackson, 2001. L.17-20).

What is interesting in this stanza is the use of paradox in “I shall be free.” This paradox has to do with the speaker’s desire to be free himself/herself from sickness and its painful consequences. However, this paradox seems to fit with the main conceit of the poem:

“This shriveled lump of suffering clay/ To which I now I am chained and bound” (Jackson, 2001. L.7-8).

This conceit which is based on the analogy between the body and prison is a recurrent feature in metaphysical poetry. Jackson, in the fashion of metaphysical poets, elaborates this conceit throughout the poem by showing how the soul is captive in the body, and becomes free only when it leaves the prison of “the suffering clay.” It should be noted, however, that Jackson’s attitude toward death is one of ambivalence; this ambivalence has nothing to do with her solid conviction in the duality of life, but rather in her relentless ambition to complete the unfinished tasks in life. Being a talented writer, Jackson believes in the holy mission of her writings to liberate

women. Therefore, it is not surprising when we find her grudging death her hand and heart: "I grudge thee this right hand of mine/I grudge thee this quick beautiful-heart" (Jackson, 2001. L. 25-26). These two parts have made her acquire a leading and a holy role which is embodied in the parable of crucifixion:

*I see now why in olden days  
Men in Barbaric love or hate  
Nailed enemies' hands and wild crossways  
Shrined leaders' hearts in costly state.* (Jackson, 2001. L.29-32).

Jackson believes that the role of the messiah she might have assumed by the vigor of her creative writings has not yet been completed; therefore, the final stanza comes out as a hymn for her soul and prayer that Heaven supplement women's efforts on earth. Accordingly Jackson, as is the case with metaphysical poets, has deep conviction in the dual life, the earthy one as opposed to life in heaven. A final example of metaphysical poetry written by a nineteenth century American women is "Irrevocable" by Mary Ritter (1998) who also recalls Donne's "The Ecstasy," where divine love is contingent on physical love:

*But Oh, alas, so long, so far Our bodies why do we for bear?  
They're ours, they're the sphere  
We owe them thanks because they thus  
Did us to us at first convey  
Yielded their forces, sense to us  
Nor are dross to us, but allay.* (Donne, 2001. L.49-56)

In Ritter's poem, the speaker admits ignorance of the value of the physical love; she thinks that physical love is an end itself: "I thought summer of idyllic pleasure / For us, was summit (L.7-8)" Later, however, she discovers that the value of this love goes beyond her initial assumption:

"These days where sin is not, nor selfish feeling/ But two souls made one."(L. 13-14).

The realization of the value of physical love is encapsulated in the paradox: "We die that we may love."(L.34) This is a clear parable of the idea of incarnation where man can only touch the grace of God through sacrificing the body. In this sense, this physical love is nothing more than an act of redemption, necessary to transcend the body into the divine realm. Accordingly, this physical love has not been an end but rather a mean to an end; it consumes their bodies, yet it helps them to outlive death: "Living or dead in essence we shall prove / The indivisibility of love" (L35-36). Again the poem has a subtle conceit which is tinged in biblical context: "What if the oil consumes itself in burning / we die that we may live" (L.34). This type of paradox is

inherent in the parable of incarnation mentioned earlier, therefore, the moment of revelation in which the vision of the promised land looms, is only a sign of heavenly reward for those who embrace the philosophy of the body as a means to an end:

"Behold around them arid desert sand / Beyond their reach the blessed Promised Land" (L.30.31).

Therefore, in the light of this discussion, one can affirm that Ritter's poem is another typical example of, metaphysical poetry written by a nineteenth century American women poet; the poem is metaphysical in both style and content.

## CONCLUSION

One can strongly confirm that some of the nineteenth century American women poets have been unfairly stigmatized as sentimentalists and any attempt to associate sentimentalism with creativity might not do justice to many female poets in nineteenth century America. As it has been shown earlier, some of these poets manifest a talent and skill that if not equal to male poets, they may surpass them; the poetry of these women is highly artistic in the sense that it blends feelings with wit in the same fashion the highly intellectual English poets did. Some of these poets were, as described by Watts (2014), religious as is the case with the English metaphysical poets; yet those poets had the chance to express their uncertainty and pessimism in an age which was totally masculine. In this regard, Watt asserts that "Most American women poets have been religious, although they have experience a great gulf between God and woman, heaven and earth" (p. 5). Those poets succeeded in expressing their dilemma, whether religious or social, through poetry that is not sentimental as described by male critics, but rather poetry which is artistically interwoven in a metaphysical fashion. Therefore, it is neither an ornament nor a hasty judgment to call these women, nineteenth century American Metaphysical women poets.

## Conflict of interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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