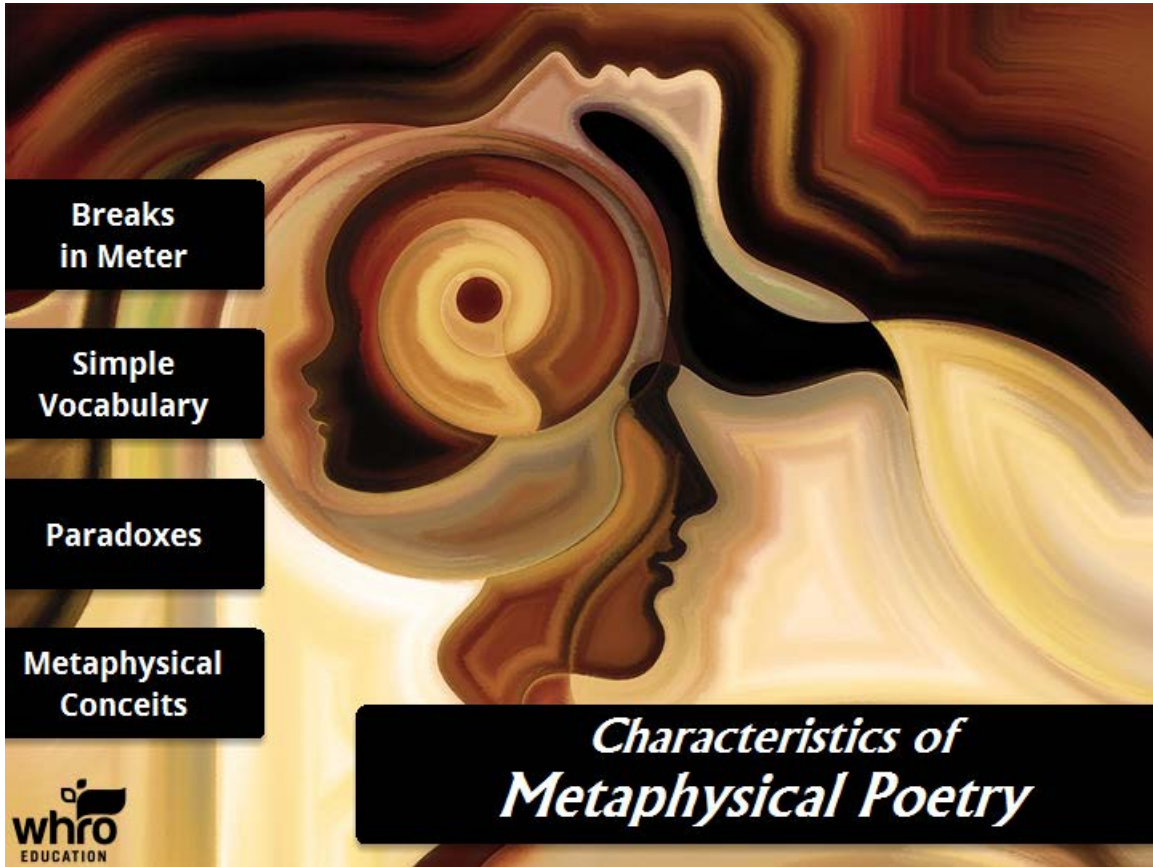


Module 4: Examining Love, Friendship, and Power
Topic 3 Content: Characteristics of Metaphysical Poetry

Introduction



Breaks in Meter

Simple Vocabulary

Paradoxes

Metaphysical Conceits

*Characteristics of
Metaphysical Poetry*

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EDUCATION

Select a characteristic of metaphysical poetry from the menu on the left.

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Breaks in Meter

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Although sonneteers such as William Shakespeare mastered poetic meter to create a consistent sing-song rhythm, metaphysical poets like John Donne did not hesitate to break a strict adherence to meter, or the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poem, especially when the disruption in meter serves to highlight or give meaning to a particular passage. Although his poetry lacks a consistent songlike rhythm, Donne's poetry tends to take on a more natural and conversational tone with its readers.

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For example, in Donne's poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," the sixth stanza is missing a syllable in its third line, thus disrupting the iambic tetrameter and emphasizing the meaning of the word *breach*.

*Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.*

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Simple Vocabulary

Breaks in Meter

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The metaphysical poets favored simple, everyday vocabulary over the elaborate, flowery language characteristic of other Renaissance poetry. However, this simplified vocabulary does not necessarily mean that their poems were easier to understand. In fact, metaphysical poets often utilized very complex grammar structures to elaborate on even more complex and philosophical ideas. Critics of metaphysical poetry often cite the difficulty of understanding these types of poems as a significant fault.

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For example, in Donne's poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," the sixth stanza uses common vocabulary, yet its complex grammar structure breaks up the sentence, requiring more attention from the reader in order to piece together the main message. In this stanza, the speaker says that the two souls endure an expansion. Interspersed in this main clause are other pieces of information: the two souls are one, one of the two souls must go, the two souls are not experiencing a breach, and this expansion is similar to the thinning and shaping of gold.

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A paradox is a statement that seems to contradict itself, yet it somehow reveals a deeper truth. For example, in Donne's poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," the sixth stanza explains that even though one soul must separate from the other, the couple is still one. This paradox seems to be a contradiction because how can the couple be one if they are separated? The truth of the paradox is revealed when the speaker explains that although the two souls are separated, they are still one if the separation is seen as an expansion and not a complete severance, just as beaten gold can be hammered very thin yet remain as one piece.

*Our two souls therefore, which are one,
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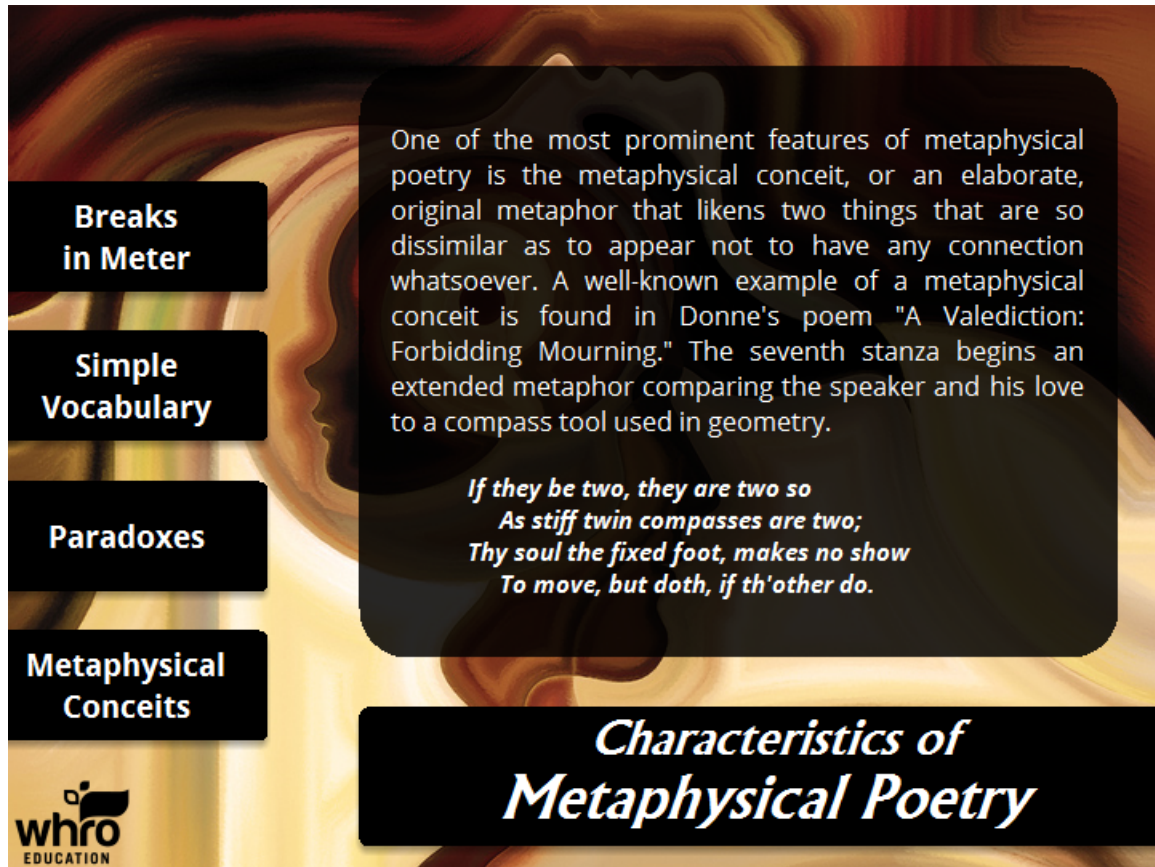
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One of the most prominent features of metaphysical poetry is the metaphysical conceit, or an elaborate, original metaphor that likens two things that are so dissimilar as to appear not to have any connection whatsoever. A well-known example of a metaphysical conceit is found in Donne's poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." The seventh stanza begins an extended metaphor comparing the speaker and his love to a compass tool used in geometry.

*If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th'other do.*

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