Eliot’s essay on The Metaphysical Poets was first published as a review of J.C. Grierson’s edition of Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the 17th Century. But the essay is much more than a mere review. It is a critical document of much value and significance. It is an important landmark in the history of English literary criticism, it has brought about a revaluation and reassessment of Donne and other Metaphysical poets, and has caused a revival of interest in these poets who had been neglected for a considerable time. It is in this essay that Eliot has used, for the first time, the phrases Dissociation of Sensibility and Unification of Sensibility, phrases which have acquired worldwide currency and which, ever since, have had a far reaching impact on literary criticism.

Eliot’s Purpose

Eliot begins the essay by praising Grierson’s scholarly edition of metaphysical lyrics and poems of the 17th century. This book is an admirable piece of criticism in itself, as well as a provocation to criticism. It is a great irritant to thought. It sets Eliot himself thinking, and he proposes to consider the significance of the label ‘Metaphysical’ which has generally been used as a term of abuse to indicate the quaint tastes of these poets, and also to examine whether the so-called ‘metaphysical’ poets constituted a school or movement in themselves, or were they merely a continuation of some older tradition.

Difficulties in the Way

Eliot is quite conscious of the difficulties of the task he has undertaken. First, it is difficult to define the term, “metaphysical” and explain the characteristics which differentiate metaphysical poetry from other kinds of poetry. Secondly, it is difficult to decide which poets practised it and which did not, and which of their verses have such characteristics. In the beginning of the 17th century, there are noticeable three different schools of poetry: First, there is Donne, a late Elizabethan, and Marvell and Bishop King who are very close to him. Secondly, there is Ben Jonson and his, courtly school, of poetry, a kind of poetry which expired in the next century in the verses of Prior. Thirdly, there is the religious poetry of Herbert, Vaughan and Crashaw. It is difficult to find characteristics which are common to all those poets, and which are dominant enough to mark out these poets as constituting a
Metaphysical Poetry: Its Characteristics

Eliot then proceeds to examine one by one with suitable illustrations the characteristics which are generally considered ‘metaphysical’. First, there is the elaboration of a simile to the farthest possible extent to be met with frequently in the poetry of Donne and Cowley. The most striking instance of such elaboration is the famous conceit of a pair of compasses in Donne’s A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning. Secondly, there is the device of the development of an image by rapid association of thought requiring considerable agility on the part of the reader. For example, in Donne’s A Valediction: of Weeping, we got three separate images: the picture of the geographer’s globe, the tears of the poet’s beloved, and the picture of the Great Flood. Though these three pictures are entirely separate, the poet has unified them by stressing the likeness between his lady’s tears and the globe, and further that they are capable of overflowing the earth. Thirdly, on other occasions Donne produces his effects by sudden contrasts. Thus in the line, “A bracelet of bright hair about the bone”, the most powerful effect is produced by sudden contrast of the associations of ‘bright hair’ and ‘bone’. But such telescoping of images and contrast of associations are not a characteristic of the poetry of Donne alone. It also characterises Elizabethan dramatists like Shakespeare, Webster, Tourneur and Middleton. This suggests that Donne, Cowley and others belong to the Elizabethan tradition and not to any new school. The dominant characteristics of Donne’s poetry are also the characteristics of the great Elizabethans.

Dr. Johnson’s Definition

Eliot then takes up Dr. Johnson’s famous definition of metaphysical poetry, in which the great doctor has tried to define this poetry by its faults. Dr. Johnson in his Life of Cowley points out that in Metaphysical poetry “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked violence together”. They bringing together of heterogeneous ideas and compelling them into unity by the operation of the poet’s mind is universal in poetry. Countless instances of such fusion of opposite and dissimilar concepts can be cited at random from all poets. Such unity is present even in the poetry of Johnson himself. The force of Dr. Johnson’s remark lies in the fact that in his view the Metaphysical poetry could only Yoke by violence dissimilar ideas. They could unite them or fuse them into a single whole. But this is not a fact. A number of poets of this school have eminently succeeded in uniting heterogeneous ideas. Eliot quotes from Herbert Cowley, Bishop King and other poets in support of his contention. Therefore, he concludes that Metaphysical poetry cannot be differentiated from other poetry by Dr. Johnson’s definition. The fault which the learned doctor points out is not there, and the unity of heterogeneous ideas is common to all poetry.

The Special Virtue of the Metaphysicals

As a matter of fact, it is futile to try to define metaphysical poetry by its faults. Even such a shrewd and sensitive critic as Dr. Johnson failed to do so. Eliot, therefore, purposes to use the opposite method, the positive approach, and point out the characteristic virtue of this school of poetry. He would show that Donne and the other poets of the 17th century, “were the direct and normal development of the precedent age”, and that their characteristic virtue was
something valuable which subsequently disappeared. Dr. Johnson has rightly pointed out that these poets were ‘analytic’; they were given too much analysis and direction of particular emotional situations. But he has failed to see that they could also unite into new wholes the concepts they had analysed. Eliot would show that their special virtue was the fusion of heterogeneous material into a new unity after its dissociation. In other words, he would show that metaphysical poetry is distinguished from other poetry by unification of sensibility, and that subsequently, dissociation of sensibility, overtook English poetry, and this was unfortunate.

Unification of Sensibility

The great Elizabethans and early Jacobians had a developed unified sensibility which is expressed in their poetry. By ‘sensibility’ Eliot does not merely mean feeling or the capacity to receive sense impressions. He means much more than that. By ‘sensibility’ he means a synthetic faculty which can amalgamate and unite thought and feeling, which can fuse into a single whole the varied and disparate, often opposite and contradictory experiences. The Elizabethans had such a sensibility. They were widely read, they thought on what they read, and their thinking and learning modified their mode of feeling. Thus in the poetry of Chapman and others there is, “a sensuous apprehension of thought”—a unification of thought and feeling—and a recreation of thought into feeling. Their reading and thinking alters their feeling, this modified feeling is expressed in their poetry, and hence their unification or synthesis of thought and feeling. Eliot gives concrete illustrations to show that such unification of sensibility, such fusion of thought and feeling, is to be found in the poetry of Donne as well as in much of modern poetry, but it is lacking in the poetry of Tennyson.

Dissociation of Sensibility

The fact is that after Donne and Herbert a change came over the mind of England. The poets lost the capacity of uniting thought and feeling. The ‘unification of sensibility’ was lost, and ‘dissociation of sensibility’ set in. After that the poets can either think or they can feel; there are either intellectual poets who can only think, or there are poets, who can only feel. The poets of the 18th century were intellectuals, they thought but did not feel; the romantics of the 19th century felt but did not think. Tennyson and Browning can merely reflect or ruminate, i.e. mediate poetically on their experience, but cannot express it poetically. Eliot expresses this view in words which have become famous, which are frequently quoted, and which clearly bring out his capacity for ‘trenchant phasing’, his originality and critical insight. He writes: “Tennyson and Browning are poets and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking, in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.”

Metaphysical Sensibility

In other words, the metaphysical poets had a mechanism of sensibility—a unified
sensibility—which enabled them to assimilate and fuse into new wholes most disparate and heterogeneous experiences. They could feel their thoughts as intensely as the odour of a rose, that is to say they could express their thoughts through sensuous imagery. In his poems, Donne express his thoughts and ideas by embodying them in sensuous imagery and it is mainly through the imagery that the unification of sensibility finds its appropriate expression. The operation of the unified sensibility in Donne may be illustrated by the following lines from Dante’s Paradise: Within its depths I saw ingathered, bound by love in one mass, the scattered leaves of the universe: substance and accidents and their relations, as though together fused, so that what I speak of is in one simple flame. In the above lines the spiritual experience, which is so very different from the ordinary experience, has been expressed by Dante concretely by a masterly use of the imagery of light. Dante has given expression to his spiritual experience in sensuous terms, in a visual image, the simple flame. This is also frequently the method of Donne.

Milton and Dryden: Their Influence

In this respect, the poets of the 17th century were the successors of the Elizabethan dramatists. Like them, the Metaphysicals, too, could be simple, artificial, difficult or fantastic. Then came Milton and Dryden, and their influence was most unhealthy, because as a result of their influence there set in a ‘dissociation of sensibility’ from which English poetry has recovered only in one modern age. Both Milton and Dryden were great poets and they rendered important service to the cause, of poetry. Under their influence, the English language became more pure and refined. But at the same time, the feeling became more crude. It is for this reason that the feeling expressed in Gray’s Country Churchyard is cruder and less satisfying than the feeling expressed in Marvell’s Coy Mistress.

There was another effect of the influence of Milton and Dryden, an effect which was indirect and which manifested itself at a later date. Early in the 18th century there was a reaction against the intellectual and ratiocinative (given to reasoning and argumentation) poetry of the pseudo-classics. The pendulum swung to the other extreme, and the poets thought and felt by fits and starts. They lacked balance and they reflected. By ‘reflection’ Eliot means that they ‘ruminated’, they ‘mused’, they ‘mediated poetically’, they enjoyed the luxury of dwelling upon some feeling, but could not express that feeling poetically. In some passages of Shelley’s Triumph of Life and in Keats’ second Hyperion, we find a struggle toward a unification of sensibility. But Shelley and Keats died young, and their successors, Tennyson and Browning, could only reflect. They mediated upon their experiences poetically, but failed to turn them into poetry. The Metaphysical poets certainly had their faults. But they had one great virtue. They tried, and often succeeded in expressing their states of mind and feeling in appropriate words and imagery. They had ‘unified sensibility’ and they could find verbal equivalents for it. They were, therefore, more mature and better than later poets.

The Modern Age: Its Metaphysical Temper

Eliot then proceeds to examine the close similarity between the age of Donne and the modern age, and the consequent similarity between the sensibility of the Metaphysicals and the modern poets. The Metaphysicals are difficult and the poet in the modern age is also bound to be difficult. As he puts it, “Our Civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and
complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning.” Hence the modern poet also uses concepts and methods very much similar to those of the Metaphysicals who also lived in complex and rapidly changing times. Like them the modern poet also transmutes into sensations, and transforms feelings into thought or states of mind.

In other words, Donne and the other Metaphysicals are in the direct current of English poetry, and the modern poets are their direct descendants. This current flows direct from the Elizabethan age right up to the modern age. Only, and unfortunately, this continuity was broken for a time under the influence of Milton and Dryden who are great masters of language, but not of the soul. The poet must look not only into their hearts and write, but also they must look in to “the cerebral cortex, the nervous system and the digestive tracts.” The poet has different faculties and sensibilities, must achieve a unification of his sensibilities, and must express this unified sensibility into his poetry. Only such a poetry would be complete; but it would be complex and difficult. The Metaphysicals, as well as the moderns, have this complexity, and also this completeness and maturity.

The Essay: Its Significance

Eliot’s essay on The Metaphysical Poets is one of the most significant critical documents of the modern age. Eliot has thrown new light on the metaphysical poets, and shown that they are neither quaint nor fantastic, but great and mature poets. They do not represent a digression from the mainstream of English poetry, but rather a continuation of it. His theory of the ‘dissociation of sensibility’, has caused much critical re-value and re-thinking. In the words of Frank Kermode, the poets henceforth began, “to charge their thinking with passion, to restore to poetry a truth independent of the presumptuous intellect.”

In this essay, Eliot discusses three questions:

To what extent did the so-called metaphysical form a school or a movement?

How far is this so-called school or movement a digression from the main current?

What is the importance in the modern age, of the study of these poets?

The essay may be summarized under four headings:

1) DEFINITION OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY

According to T. S. Eliot, it is extremely difficult to define metaphysical poetry. The difficulty arises when we are to decide what poets practised it and in which of their poems. The poetry of Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw, Cowley and Donne is usually called metaphysical. However, it is difficult to find any precise use of metaphor, simile or other conceit, which is common to all these poets.
Donne and often Cowley, “employ a device which is sometimes considered characteristically metaphysical: the elaboration of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it”.

Donne develops a comparison of two lovers to a pair of compasses. Sometimes we find in them

“a development by rapid association of thought which requires considerable agility on the part of the reader”.

Donne is more successful than Cowley because in developing comparisons, he uses brief words and sudden contrasts:

“A bracelet of bright hair about the bone”
where the most powerful effect is produced by the sudden contrast of the associations of “bright hair” and of “bone”. So it is to be maintained that metaphysical poetry is the elaboration of far-fetched images and communicated association of poet’s mental processes. Johnson employed the term ‘metaphysical poets’, apparently having Donne, Cleveland and Cowley chiefly in mind. In their poetry, he remarks:

“the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together”.

The force of this accusation lies in the fact that often the ideas are yoked but not united. But this is not blameworthy in itself, as it has been practised by a number of poets and even by Johnson himself. Johnson, shrewd and sensitive critic, Eliot concludes, failed to define metaphysical poetry by its faults.

Eliot adopts the opposite method to define metaphysical poetry. Instead of calling these poets metaphysical, he calls them “the poets of the seventeenth century”. He assumes that these poets were the direct and normal development of the precedent age. Without prejudicing their case by the adjective ‘metaphysical’, we may consider

“whether their virtue was not something permanently valuable”.

Eliot lays emphasis on the synthetic quality in these poets. Eliot praises the metaphysical poets for their successful attempt to unite what resists unification. To unite thought and feeling, the poetic and unpoetic, form and content, was the main quality of the metaphysical poets. Eliot points out the difference by dividing the poets into two kinds: intellectual poets and reflective poets.

“Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their though as immediately as the odour of a rose. A though to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly merging disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular fragmentary”.

In the mind of the poet experiences are related to one another and from new wholes.

2) DISSOCIATION OF SENSIBILITY

The poets of the 17th century possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult or fantastic. In the 17th century
dissociation of sensibility set in and Milton and Dryden, the two great poets carried on with this process. While the language became more refined, the feeling became cruder. The language became unnatural and artificial. But this development of language reduced the importance of feeling. The logical conclusion of the influence of Milton and Dryden was that:

“The sentimental age began early in the 18th century and continued. The poets revolted against the ratiocinative”.

In Shelley and Keats, there are traces of a struggle towards unification of sensibility. But they died and reflective poets Tennyson and Browning held the ground. If there had been no gap between the 17th and 18th centuries, poets like Donne would not have been called metaphysical. The poets in question have, like other poets, various faults.

3) THE METAPHYSICAL POETS AND THE MODERN AGE
It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. But our present civilization demands the poets to be difficult.

“Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and refined results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning”.

Hence we get something which looks very much like the conceit. If this is done, the poets of the present age will draw closer to the metaphysical poets, because both use obscure words and simple phrasing.

4) CONCLUSION
In the end, Eliot defends the metaphysical poets that the charges such as quaintness, obscurity, witiness and unintelligibility are found even in serious poets. The metaphysical ideas are not simply the possession of this group of poets. They are found in other poets as well.

From this essay we can draw three conclusions: First, the main quality of the metaphysical poets is their fidelity to thought and feeling, an attempt to merge into one whole the most heterogeneous ideas; secondly, if dissociation of sensibility has not taken place during the 17th century and a gap had not occurred, they would not have been called metaphysical; thirdly, modern poets are tending to become like them in their use of language and ideas and hence the metaphysical poets are in the direct current of English poetry.