The group of seventeenth-century writers known as the metaphysical poets drew on the rich legacy of their sixteenth-century predecessors--sometimes copying their style, sometimes refining it, and sometimes departing from it altogether. At the center of the group was John Donne, whose philosophical approach to everyday subjects, use of striking comparisons, and controversial style are hallmarks of metaphysical poetry.

*Use of argument: Like much sixteenth-century poetry, metaphysical poetry often takes the form of an argument, but the argument appeals to the intellect, as well as the emotions, and the subject matter is usually serious and complex. In addition to writing about love and the physical attraction between men
and women, metaphysical poets wrote about death, the individual's relationship with God, and the spiritual bond between husband and wife.

*Use of comparison: Sixteenth-century poets were fond of conceits, or witty comparison, which they considered to be necessary "ornaments" of poetry. Often these conceits compared the beauty of a woman to the beauty of a natural object, such as a star. The metaphysical poets took conceits one step further, creating arresting comparison between very dissimilar things. For example, in "A Valediction of Weeping," Donne compares the tears on a man's face to newly minted coins. Donne's comparison is typical of the metaphysical conceit in that 1.) it is based on similarities between two very different things, 2.) it takes thought and interpretation to unravel, and 3.) it is an integral part of the argument that the poem attempts to prove.

*Use of language: Sixteenth-century poets usually wrote in a "high style," using melodious words, elegant phrasing, and poetic inversions of typical speech patterns. In contrast, the metaphysical poets often wrote in a "plain style" that more closely resembles speech. For example, compare the opening line of "Sonnet 31" by Elizabethan poet Sir Philip Sidney with that of Donne's "The Canonization":

"With how sad steps, O Moon, thou clim'st the skies!"

---Sidney

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

---Donne

The influence of metaphysical poetry extends to the works of many twentieth-century poets, including W.H. Auden and T.S. Eliot, who praised the metaphysicals for their ability to appeal to the mind as well as to the heart.