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A Shortcut to the Study of Poetry Analysis



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Tamnong Jaroenroop

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What is Poetry?

In fact the question “What is poetry?” would seem to be a very simple one but it has never been satisfactorily answered, although men and women, from past to present day, have attempted to provide their definitions.

The attempt to answer such a question is a difficult task and leads to abstract intellectual analysis. This is due to the fact that poetry means different things to different people. It is not just a form of writing that often employs rhyme, a regular rhythm, unusual word order and an intense or heightened language. Some poems are straightforward, requiring little by way of analysis; others, dense and complex by comparison, seem to yield little without some study.

A poem is recognized as a primarily private and personal experience that can evoke individual responses from the reader. This means that our response to a poem may not be the same as someone else’s response. However, this does not mean that you can say just what you want about a poem. Your views need to be supported by close reference to the text itself. (Croft, 2002, p.39)

Some features that a poem might have:

1. Poetry can rhyme.
2. Poetry can be organized in lines.
3. Each line can begin with a capital letter.
4. The poem can be organized in stanzas.
5. The poem might have a regular rhythm.
6. The poem might contain imagery.

Poetry is a kind of writing which is unparaphrasable, understandable. Its primary purpose is not to communicate information, but to induce in the reader or listener feelings as close as possible to those which have moved the poet to write. Its purpose is not to inform but to inflame. Poetry is less interested in telling us about a thing, than in presenting the thing itself. Successful poetry is dependent upon its ability to make the reader respond to the words, not as information, but as a stimulus to one's imagination. Poetry is experience, not merely definition. It is not mere 'understanding' or 'judging', but 'feeling'. The value of poetry is in the gaining of experience which can be built upon throughout life. (Conley, 1979, p.2)

Poetry might be defined as a kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language, using various devices. Among them are connotation, imagery, metaphor, symbol, paradox, irony, allusion, sound, repetition, rhythm, and pattern. The poet shapes and "makes" his/her poem by using these devices and his/her materials of life i.e. gained from his/her own background of felt, observed, or imagined experiences, which can be selected, combined and reorganized according to the poet's fancy. The poet creates significant new experiences in which the reader can participate, and receive a greater awareness and understanding of the poet's world. Poetry, to the intellectual can add a sensuous dimension, an emotional dimension, or an imaginative dimension. Poetry is the mirror of man. Poetry as a whole is concerned with all kinds of experiences - beautiful or ugly, strange or common, noble or ignoble, actual or imaginary. (Perrine, 1963, p.9)

Poetry is a special form of writing in which words are chosen and arranged in lines to create certain effects. Poetry is meant to be read aloud; poets carefully select words for their sounds and connotations and combine

them in different and unusual ways in order to communicate feelings, experiences, and different points of view. Poets use form, rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, consonance, imagery, figurative language, a speaker or persona, and theme, known collectively as the elements of poetry, to convey the sounds, emotions, pictures, experiences, and ideas they want to express. Poems can also tell stories. Some poems follow strict rules for form, rhythm, and rhyme, while those that follow no rules are said to be written in free verse. (Bernstein, 1992, p.943)

Definitions of poetry are numerous. Some of them are famous. All of them, finally, are inadequate. The definitions that follow reflect a spectrum of positions and attitudes towards poetry and poets. A definition presupposes a philosophical base of at least some standards from which ideas are judged. For each definition of poetry given, one should attempt to place it in the total attitude toward poetry implied. The definitions of poetry may lead to further analysis not only of the definitions themselves but also of the literary and philosophical assumptions from which they sprang.

Some definitions of poetry and poems:

Throughout the ages scholars, including the poets themselves, have tried to define 'poetry' and 'poems'. Here are some attempts at stating what poetry is or telling what poetry means. (Hurtik & Yarber, 1972, pp.237-241)

1. John F. Kennedy (1917-1963)

When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.

2. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965)

The crown of literature is poetry. It is its end and aim. It is the sublimest activity of the human mind. It is the achievement of beauty and delicacy. The writer of prose can only step aside when the poet passes.

3. William Hazlitt (1778-1830)

Poetry is the language of the imagination and the passions..... the universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself..... an imitation of nature..... the high - wrought enthusiasm of fancy and feeling.

4. Leigh Hunt (1784-1859)

Poetry is the utterance of a passion for truth, beauty, and power, embodying and illustrating its conceptions by imagination and fancy, and modulating its language on the principle of variety and uniformity.

5. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with beauty by calling imagination to the help of reason.

6. Carl Sandberg (1878-1967)

Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during a moment.

7. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586)

Poetry is an art of imitation..... a speaking picture with this end,.... to teach and delight.

8. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

Poetry implies the whole truth, philosophy expresses a particle of it.

9. William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616)

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of thing unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothings
A local habitation and a name.

10. William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Poetry is the imaginative expression of strong feeling, usually rhythmical.... the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity.

11. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

Prose: Words in their best order; poetry: the best words in the best order.

12. Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?

13. Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935)

Poetry is a language that tells us, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said. All poetry, great or small, does this. And it seems to me that poetry has two outstanding characteristics. One is that it is, after all, indefinable. The other is that it is eventually unmistakable.

Robert Frost has also written in the preface to his *Collected Poems* (1939) that a poem **“begins in delight and ends in wisdom”**. (Fuller & Kinnick, 1963, p.251)

Conclusion

Poetry, finally, when compressed into a single phrase, is rhythmical, imaginative language, expressing the invention, taste, thought, passion, and insight of the human soul.

A Shortcut to the Study of Poetry Analysis

If you are looking for a guide book to poetry for beginners, especially for college students, please try this one. The materials ranging from the simple to the more complex, consist of introductory analyses of the most important poetic devices that students should know and illustrated by poems chosen for their apt use of these devices. At the end of each example, a short test will be given in which the students must apply what they have learned to previously unseen quotations.

Though poetry is the great monster for some Thai students, hopefully this book may be useful in providing help to students, as well as to teachers of English literature as a source of literary texts and also beneficial to any interested persons who want to read it merely for their literary appreciation.

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