
THE YELLOWED PAGE

Volume 1, Issue 4

November 2024

WHAT IS POETRY?

In all honesty, this is the age-old question for which there is no answer. Many people have tried, but no-one has succeeded. Yes, all have failed. The point where failure begins is when personal opinions come into the discussion, debate or in some cases argument.

What poetry is to you or me is what we may call a personal taste. But is this *taste* something that is naturally acquired or fed to us from an early age? Perhaps it is that we learn to feed ourselves later in life with a more palatable diet. For some that would be no poetry at all.

Now the chances are that what I like to read and think is poetry will not be to your liking. It may be, but possibly not. This now sets the scene for a discussion because we will have different ideas of what poetry is, and we may not agree on the finer details. Hence the problem. What is it that I find and you find that is so different?

To begin with, I think we can both agree that poetry has undergone significant changes over decades and centuries. I do not intend to recount any of the historical changes, but this fact remains true, irrespective of your taste. There have been many knowledgeable poets and critics who have given a very detailed account of the various stages, and these cannot be bettered here.

As a general question, I can ask you this: Why does poetry appeal to you? In other words, what is it about poetry that makes you keep coming back? Surely there must be something about what is considered a poem that does something for us, perhaps even does something to us. There must be, otherwise you and I would not be bothered with it. Just toss it aside and read a novel instead.

Is it because you can relate to the poem? In some instances yes, but you would not relate to every poem you read. Yet you continue to read the stuff. Is it the person who wrote it? Maybe you admire them and want to write in the same manner. We know this is not a great thing really. Imitation is fine for the beginner, but you do not want to stay in that childish state of being. So it cannot be that either.

You see, this is where we have difficulties. We will always find it difficult to articulate what it is about poetry that makes us want to read more, even though we will find the good with the bad. You do not need to be reminded that there is not a single poet in the history of poetry that has not written a crappy poem, or has a poem that they wished had never seen the light of day. No doubt you have read the work of other poets, or at least have tried to. Why was it that you liked one and not the other? Clearly there must be something about this poetry business.

Poetry also has the distinction of being classified as being different to prose or even this essay. How is it done? What are the differences? Well? What is the go of it?

Would it surprise you if I said that I cannot give you a firm answer or definition or formula to decide? Probably not, because you would struggle in the same manner. After all, some prose has a somewhat poetic nature, and I suppose an essay too, but what do we mean by *poetic* or *poetic nature*? More questions.

There you have it. We have more in common than what you thought. Now we have something to explore together.

What does a poem look like? You have read many poems, you call them poems. Do they look

like what a poem should look. It is true that some poetry has a somewhat aesthetic appeal. They may be well set out, nicely indented perhaps in a shape of some description. Does this make the poem? Unfortunately it is not that simple.

If I decide to start typing shorter lines, and break up what I am trying to say, or perhaps make it look different, would you now classify it as a poem?

After a quick glance you may decide it is written in quatrains. That is what some people do with their prose to pass it off as some type of avant-garde, style or form.

It may even have an appropriate syllable count for each line often called a verse. Of course you are not taken in: If I could write iambic all the time.

Just to make a point, the last line is iambic pentameter, but the whole business of this is pure deception. This is what some people do. Lengthy lines of prattle butchered to appear as what most would identify as a poem. Why quatrains? Because our experience with poetry at an early school level, most of the poetry was written in quatrains. You have to admit quatrains are very effective and quite delightful, but in many ways they will always be associated with children's poetry. Nevertheless, what is above is not a poem. Hence it cannot be the appearance.

What is with this syllable count business? It seems like I just threw that in. In a manner, yes. This is often a source of criticism by those poets who are proponents of the formal or structured poetry. Many are insistent that an iambic pentameter line must have ten syllables. So it was something to make my example a little more believable. Did it work? Of course not. Anyway, their belief is unfounded as you may have seen in some of my analyses, but enough of that.

Whereas appearance in some instances may stimulate our senses, this alone does not determine a poem.

At this stage, we have one factor out of the way. I do not think you will have disagreed with what I have said to this point. Perhaps a few with a hint of disgust with me mentioning iambic pentameter. You know, there are some good things about it.

What can we chat about now? How about the language, as in how the poet expresses

themselves. This will be a little more interesting, especially those of you with an awesome and above average vocabulary. I mean that in the nicest way.

What type of words do you prefer? Do you think we should avoid the commonplace words and look for something more exotic? Why not use pulchritudinous rather than beautiful or pretty. I suppose Latin students would think it wonderful, and yes, it would have its use ... somewhere. But what is wrong with beautiful, pretty or comely? Maybe you do not like comely. My point is that it is not so much the word but the effort people put into using the thesaurus to find another than the simpler word. Of course some people naturally have a broader vocabulary, nothing wrong with that.

However, when the reader is constantly exposed to unfamiliar words or words that are not in the general vernacular, there can be a snobbishness or treatment of the reader as uneducated. Best be beware. We use the words that are necessary not as an exercise in using a thesaurus. Why? An attempt to appear intelligent? Makes you wonder.

Now apparently it would not be the words. But let us be fair, some poets have a very eloquent way with words. There's no disputing this. Let me take Shelley as an example. Shelley's poetry can be difficult to like, but there is something very captivating by his wording and vocabulary, if you like. One might say that it is quite flowery, even purple. Yet nevertheless, how he writes is fascinating.

T. S. Eliot was not enamored with Shelley's poetry. Not because it wasn't good poetry, but because he did not agree with Shelley's ideals or beliefs. This is not so much the place of the critic, and I think it is necessary to separate the poetry of the poet from the poet themselves. Just because we do not believe what the poet believes does not make it bad poetry.

For the most, I agree with Eliot. Yet this is not the place to discuss Shelley's poetry. It is purely an example of what has been said before.

So at this stage it would appear that words, the type of words and how they may be used could have some place in defining what poetry may be. One sense that would go with words is the enunciation ... the sound of the words. But what is it about the sound of the words that makes

poetry? In our previous point, we have basically discarded words or at least they are not the sole determination of poetry.

We may think that words do not determine poetry, but the sound of the words may. Each syllable has some measure of emphasis. Each syllable does or does not make some stress of importance. It may not necessarily be the sound, but the pronunciation, even enunciation. It is the reading that is important and thus the sound.

Personally, I would say that the reading of a poem out loud is far more important than the reading silently. Who was it that suggested that reading to one's self was the best thing to do? Silence does not enable the sound! Hence we may say that *sound* is an important factor in determining a poem.

Something that goes with sound is the rime. Rime is an interesting structure because rime involves sound and we may hear certain sounds differently and hence the rime. However, rime too is not something to define a poem. Rime is often associated with children's verse. Not a good thing. Rime is also a test of the poet's skill. At times, the rime becomes childish and predictable. Predictable in that the English language is not the best one for riming, especially if you were writing a Petrarchan sonnet.

We have a liking for rime. I think most people do. Yet Milton apparently did not even though he did right numerous sonnets. It is rime that catches children's attention. There is some thing about it and we have to accept that. But! It is not even the rime that can be used to determine a poem. All that we have made out thus far are a number of characteristics possessed by poem, but nothing much that will give us a formula to make the decision of what is or is not a poem.

Then we come across some thing that is known as *blank verse*, not a new style and some may be tempted to call it some form of *vers libre*. Mind, some think this because it does not rime. Well not every line rimes and if they do, it may be accidental. So clearly rime does not play an important part all in determining a poem or poetry.

Is it the way the words are combined? Now this may be getting a bit closer. Some refer to this phenomena as *wordsmithing*. Yet again, we need

to look at this carefully even though it does show some promise.

This terminology sounds like we might have a bit of logopoeia happening, but just because someone is able to string a sensible line of words together is not logopoeia. Logopoeia is very different and involves word or group of words that are used in different ways and may possibly give a different or unusual meaning or different use of the word, something uncommon but effective. Often when someone is called a wordsmith, it is generally some type of inflated compliment. Compliments do not make the poet.

Now, I think you will agree that the skill for a meaningful and effective line is using the right word at the right time and in the right place. This is not always simple as it seems.

Now this shows some promise, but prose can also exhibit the same or similar characteristic. So in effect, we are no closer. At this point we have not been able to find anything that is peculiar to poetry alone. All points can be included for other forms of writing. Let's press on.

What are your thoughts on rhythm? Surely poetry can be defined by its rhythmic nature. Rhythm would play a large part in poetry. Does all poetry exhibit or possess a rhythm? Is it always evident or come to the surface when we read a poem?

This is getting into an area that some poets do not feel comfortable with, and that is meter. For some meter is that fictional stuff from the Greeks. As upsetting as that may sound, it is partially correct. Well, in a way. Meter is not a fictitious quantity. It means to measure, but what is it actually measuring? One may say that it is a way to control the rhythm. Indeed meter is organized rhythm. What many new poets dislike is the terminology or the act of scansion and classification of poems. However, it would do the new poets a great service to their own work if they spent a little time with the terminology and tried to understand where it is coming from. Just because you like to write in *vers libre*, it does not imply that meter does not exist. Where you have any type of rhythm, there is always meter. The error made in discussing meter is that it is considered to be consistent throughout the poem. Common to popular belief, this is not the case. It can be as regular or irregular as you like, or need it to be.

On the surface, it appears that we may have hit on some thing. Unfortunately, this is not the case. If we consider how a written piece is to be read, then we can also determine the rhythm of the piece, or at least a possible rhythm.

You see, rhythm is open to all manner of structures depending on how it is meant to be read. So rhythm by itself is not the determining factor. But I have made mention of another aspect of the spoken word. How it is meant to be read.

One of the most important factors to be remembered, especially in the case of scansion, is the manner in which the poem is read. But in general terms, it is the manner we read the poem itself, or indeed any piece of written work. So is it possible to determine a poem simply by how one reads it.

Once again we come across a stumbling block. This all depends on someone reading out loud. Most times we lose all sense of meaning by not hearing the words. No-one is expecting everyone to be the perfect reader, but it certainly helps to convey a meaning or feeling.

Sometimes it is difficult to know how a piece is meant to be read. It can take some time and practice to determine what may be the appropriate manner. This what we mean by pre-reading whether poetry or prose.

Unlike reading to ourselves, as in silently, reading out loud enables us to hear the speech stress in the words. Speech stress can be very different to metrical accent, but if the two do not align the piece can sound horrendous.

Clearly written work is meant to be read a certain way, but what is the correct way? What is the right way, and what is the wrong way? Can we tell?

The truthful answer is NO! The manner in which something is read is still no indication as to classify what is a poem. Hence the dilemma still exists.

To be honest, there is not much else that we may consider in our quest to answer the question: What is poetry? It seems that everything we consider can also be applied to other forms of written work. What does this tell us?

Since there is no formula of any sort, it would seem that it is a very personal judgment. It comes down to what we think poetry is. It is like us trying to define beauty. Beauty is something very personal. What is beautiful to one person is not necessarily beautiful to another. We say that *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. So too it appears with poetry. What I consider to be poetry may not be what you do. And we find that this is the case.

It appears that when we ask someone, anyone: What is poetry? We are really asking for a personal opinion. We have to be prepared for that, and no manner of argument is going to solve the problem ... or answer the question. Those of whom think they know, know nothing at all, except perhaps to justify their argument. At best, we walk away thinking: Well, they don't really know at all. But then, neither do we.

Albeit that we have an inner sense of it, we are unable to articulate that inner sense into a statement that defines or helps us to determine what a poem really is or answer the question: What is poetry?

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NOVEMBER 2024
