

POETICALLY SPEAKING

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BELIEVABILITY & UNDERSTANDABILITY IN POETRY

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Poetry is written for different reasons. Some to appeal to our emotions, some to make us think, but all are to amuse, entertain, educate or stimulate thought, and in some manner to hopefully impart an enjoyable reading experience. In this discussion I am looking at serious poetry written to English forms, and so discounting children's poetry which deserves a separate discussion at some point in time.

Success of a poem can rarely be gauged by the poet themselves. Mostly it is the reader who determines the success or failure of a poem. There are two factors to be considered, these being believability and understandability. The structure or style of the poem rests with its understandability.

In most cases it is the failure of believability which brings the demise of both poem and poet. However, both believability and understandability must sit well with the reader and not only the poet. The poet on the other hand may have some personal opinion regarding the poem, but this is inconsequential.

The validity of these two aspects may be of interest to one who does not write verses, and they may wonder what the whole business is about. Yet this is rarely an issue today, because it is so easy to determine what the poem in question is about. The poet tells you with numerous adjectives, it is obvious and poetry it is not. This is the way it has become.

Whatever the content or context of the poem, what the poet writes must be believable. This does not mean it needs to be factual or any real event, but what transpires and what happens must be believable in the context of the poem including what occurs with any characters or objects. In other words, the setting—the poem's world.

Now the aspect of believability needs to be addressed from two perspectives:

- (a) the poet, and
- (b) the reader.

The two are not always in agreement, but aim of the poet is to bring them to one and the same, or make so that the second is not necessary. By this last point I mean that the poem is believable purely due to the poet. The reader does not need to try to make it believable.

Believing the poem is very different to understanding the poem. The poem may be very obscure and difficult to fathom for one reason or another, but what is written in believable in that yes, it could happen.

The poet's idea of believing stems from their experiences. True, some have written utter trash which is basically random thoughts jotted down that pretend to be a poem and is only butchered prose. Some border on the fantastic because the content itself cannot be believed in the context it is used. Too many adjectives is a notable giveaway, trying too hard to impress. It is this type or style of writing that the reader will generally pick up very quickly and likely dismissing the poem as rubbish. When a poet's personal beliefs begin to appear as more radical or unpopular, this too can affect the reader's opinion of the poet, especially if they do not agree.

Personal beliefs may include sensitive topics that are prone to debate. These poets and poems must take a chance with the reader. Shelley was known for this and was rebuked many a time for his radical views. This accounted for his unpopularity when alive. Mind, things have changed since, although there is still some debate over his talent in some areas.

If a poem is particularly straight-forward as most are today, it becomes a decision of the reader to determine if it is believable. I know that readers of good poetry do not expect something trivial or pithy. The only advantage to most of today's poetry is that it does not expect much from the imagination—no thinking required. The reader has been supplied with everything and so the experience can seem shallow and dissatisfying.

What the poet believes is satisfactory can be far from satisfactory for the reader. The secret is not to tell your reader how they should feel or think. There must be enough mystery or questioning to allow the reader to engage the poem on their own terms. Reading poetry cannot be an idle pastime.

The point of understanding a poem is an interesting matter because it is totally divorced from believing the poem. Poems are one of:

- a) understood but unbelievable;
- b) unable to be understood and unbelievable;
- c) understood and believable; or
- d) unable to be understood, but believable.

It is the last two points a poet should strive for. They will hold more substance and meaning than the first two, more interest and engagement in the reader's mind.

Whereas understanding a poem may well lead to it being more enjoyable to a point, it is not a necessary requirement. Not understanding where the poet is coming from allows the reader to place themselves in the poem. In this way they interpret the poem according to their own experiences without the poet telling them what they should be seeing or experiencing. This is an important facet of poetry, good poetry, in allowing the reader to be part of the poem—active engagement rather than being bored with trivial and pithy verses. Poets who demonstrated this ability were Eliot and Pound. Their poetry may be quite obscure at times, but patience and careful reading can open more doors and understanding of what the poem means, not only to ourselves, but also to the poet. This is very different to what is commonly seen today with modern poets.

We may also take as an example, the sonnets of Shakespeare. Some of them are difficult to interpret to our satisfaction, but there is also a mysterious and questionable element to them, primarily in who they were written for and why. We do not necessarily understand them in the context that they may have been written, yet we still find beauty and appeal. Who has not wished that they had written some of those verses!

Poets such as Byron make themselves more appreciable due to their content, whereas others like Shelley and Keats and Wordsworth tend to border on the unbelievable even if they can be understood. Granted Shelley and Keats died young and no doubt would have evolved in poetic prowess with their verses, but for Wordsworth there is no excuse. He is dull, repetitive and uninviting, but this is a personal opinion.

We look at others such as Pope, Dryden and Marlowe and there is much more engaging verse, both believable and understood. Same too with Chaucer no matter how bawdy and humorous, yet Milton is a drag, again a personal opinion.

Other things to consider are the length and type of poem. The length of a poem may or may not influence believability or understandability. By far the greatest issue with longer poems is the onset of boredom. As to what is called a long poem would be debatable. Longer than what? For some, a long poem may be around the forty or fifty verse mark. Poets of today tend to write much shorter poems in the fictitious vers libre category. Three reasons:

- (a) lack of reading or studying the past poets, and/or
- (b) lack of skill, and/or
- (c) the inability of poets and readers to concentrate.

Sad but true. Reading and writing is not seen as a productive pastime. Preference is more for the visual and auditory, i.e. watching and listening without any other sensory engagement.

I really do not think it makes any difference who the poet is, but to write a poem of length that engages the reader in every verse and stanza is extremely difficult to accomplish. At some point boredom will set in, especially in fixed forms where a formula for construction is repeated. Few, if any poets have succeeded in this task. Hence the necessity of variations that are suitable for the poem.

Thus it is difficult to determine what fails first. Recall that understanding is not an indicator in appreciating a poem. All this will do is consume more time and effort as we unravel its meaning. So we may say that the end result is that it is unbelievable or boredom has kicked in.

For boredom to be the culprit, it would imply that to a certain point the poem was believable else there would be no reason to continue. This disappointment arrives in:

- (a) monotony, and/or
- (b) the imagination is no longer stimulated, and/or
- (c) the poem's content becomes familiar to the reader from other poems.

This last point is a problem when rehashing well known themes, stories or characters.

Poets may also damage their own reputation by producing poems on the same theme. This makes them predictable and dull, neither of which a poet wants to become. It is this that gives another meaning to unbelievable, and not a good one, thus turning readers away from their work.

The modern poet has a lot to consider today. It is not merely the act of jotting down thoughts and saying this is a poem. It might be, but likely not. We do not measure the reputation or ability of a poet by how much they have written. It is far better to produce fewer poems of a high standard than to produce a lot of poems of a mediocre standard.

Of course, what poetry actually is, is personal and to a point I think we are able to accept this, but the standard of verses today has fallen to greater depths than in any other period of time. Why would this be the case now?

The style of poetry, or what is accepted as poetry has changed greatly, especially due to the popularity of social media groups. By far the greatest problem with this type of platform is the perceived notion that little or no editing of a poem is required. It is just put out there. Furthermore, there is generally little or no criticism.

In earlier times, poetry and prose appeared in the many available reviews or was published in books or pamphlets. For any work to be successful or to be published, editors would review the work and offer some criticism or suggestions that would be appropriate. Primarily, a publishing house had a reputation to uphold.

Today it is very difficult to deal directly with a traditional publishing house and so the proliferation of self-publishing or payment to independent publishers to produce the book irrespective of its quality. As a result, we find that most poems are average or below average in quality.

But what has this to do with believing and understanding? Both of these are related to the content of the poems. Often they are short and emotional according to what is deemed popular. This means that emotions take precedence over any other content or context and it is difficult to believe these emotional verses. Though easily understood, the emotional aspect detracts from appreciating the poem. More so, its shortness and obvious lack of editing presents something which is meaningless. It has nothing to do with the style, but hints at imitation of other writers all writing to the same theme. This type of poetry cannot always be believable because it is closely, too closely entwined with the poet's feelings. This can be good or bad, but the obvious will destroy the beauty of any poem. You could say there is a lack of originality and thought inherited from the desire to seek something better. Perhaps a general lack of reading could be responsible for the dissatisfaction in reading some poetry.

We read what appeals to us, but it is not merely a process of mimicking the style. Regardless of understandability, believability vanishes with imitation because it is not the poet's natural voice.

Great poetry requires time and patience. It requires reworking, it is not something that comes off an assembly line. Those who produce a large number of poems over a short period of time, produce work which is likely not worth reading. All poetry must be believable because it will make sense to the reader, and that alone will be greatly appreciated, all without the emotion or flights of fancy. Sprinkled with a touch of mystery or questioning allows the reader to engage your poem and achieve a sense of satisfaction. It does not need to be completely understood, that in part is left to the imagination. Never treat the reader of your work like a fool.
