

Sophee Engle

Dr. Rebecca Todd

ENGL221 – 01 Poetry

30 April 2024

The Art of Poetry: Its Elements, Tricks, and Reception

Poetry: Its Defining Traditions and Breaking Them

Poetry's subjectivity and centuries-long evolution posit quite the conundrum; what forms Poetry, what makes Poetry good, what are the necessities that poets must include. Poetry's nature, as an art, must change over time and can at each poet's whim. Stereotypes based on 'earlier' characteristics of Poetry persist in public memory. Does one need quatrains, ABAB rhymes, or sonnets with the correct number of lines if English or Italian, must each stanza have two to four pairs of perfectly bouncing, rhythmic lines.

While older poems demonstrating the 'ideals' conjured at the thought of Poetry are grand, I appreciate when poets create something new or fascinating that sets their work apart from the deluge of time's traditional poems. With lines carrying over and without restrictions in rhyme or punctuation, "Poem (Lana Turner Has Collapsed!)" is a refreshing work of art. Frank O'Hara's "Poem" embodies a breathless, spiraling of emotions from the speaker as the startling news headline stuns into their life.

The speaker was "trotting along" casually with a run-on description of the reader's surroundings when the headline occurs. The description continues and builds in intensity until the catalyst of the spiral, the news headline returns – LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED! (line 2). The speaker's focus, and so the reader's focus, shifts from rain to snow to hail to the effect of hail back to snow and rain and traffic and the sky and then the climatic reference to the headline,

after which the speaker deflates and exits the spiral (I just simulated the rush and dispersal of emotion utilized by O'Hara). The continuing lines flow faster and faster until they halt at the climactic phrase and promptly fizzle into a grounding ending. The mounting of anxiety within the reader scanning their eyes over a page is something new, compared to the stereotypical standards or traditions one conjures at the thought of Poetry at large. While I concede how 'new' Frank O'Hara is compared to the birth of Poetry, the traditions established in the more ancient ages of Poetry persevered into later centuries and have remain staples of the literary art.

Poets' Responsibilities to Themselves and Their Audiences

If Poetry can be 'anything', what do poets feel they are confined to? What elements persist throughout the generational changes of Poetry? Fantastical settings emerge as extensions of real-world locations or as inner fabrications of the poet. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" takes its name from Genghis Khan's grandson, evoking a sense of exoticism along with the fantasy of the poem's contents.

While some areas are up for open exploration, Poetry often 'traps' poets firmly within their century and their personal experiences with what was 'allowed' for them to write. In the case of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, she writes within the bounds that was allowed to her as a female poet in her time, but managed to include levels of satire and sarcasm that would go over the heads of those that wanted to see her jokes at face value. Similarly, on the American Academy of Poets organizational website, William Meredith says that Robert Hayden (creator of "Middle Passage" and "Night, Death, Mississippi", addressing transatlantic slavery and the KKK) "declared himself, at considerable cost in popularity, an American poet rather than a Black poet," demonstrating that which of those identities he wrote from. Poets may be cemented

themselves in ‘wheelhouses’ or with identities that may confine their expressions, affecting their poems’ longevity during and after their lifetime.

Can Poets ‘Fool You’ with Convincing Speakers?

With poets being so closely related to their works, it can be difficult for readers to mentally separate the author or author’s presence in popular culture from the poem in front of them. A practice of analyzing Poetry involves referring to the ‘voice’ of the words as the *speaker* and see what that entity says that may be ‘beyond’ the poet’s experiences or identities. A speaker’s particular viewpoint or supposed backstory may form a distinct character that the poem’s viewpoint is written from. Richard Lovelace’s “To Lucasta, Going to the Wars” features a ‘man’s man’ who tells his love, this Lucasta, that he needs to go off to war. He loves his mistress, but “a new mistress now [he] chase[s],” the enemies in the field of battle (lines 5-8). After reading the poem (or any of the *others* centered on Lucasta), one may be startled to find out that Lucasta is entirely fictional but can find minimal solace in the fact that Lovelace *did* fight in the English Civil War.

Transparent and truthful, however, should describe poems that do not create a character or fictional setting for their contents. Beat poet Allen Ginsberg’s “America” is *so* truthful and transparent that Ginsberg’s returned to the work multiple times to edit it, with continuing contemporary references over decades, and insert adlibs when reading it live in front of audiences. In an ‘older’, slightly more ‘rigid’ manner than the Beat movement, Percy Shelley’s “Massacre at Manchester” functions similarly. Both poems, separated by century and nationality, ‘call out’ social and political problems of their times, through the perspective of the poet. Ginsberg refers to more general concepts or examples of injustice, while Shelley personified *known* political heads of his time as “Murder”, “Fraud”, “Hypocrisy”, “Anarchy”, and “many

more Destructions [that played] / in this ghastly masquerade” of the real-life massacre in St. Peter’s Field (lines 5, 14, 24, 26-27). Both poems evoke ‘fill-in’ people or events for readers despite the years since their publications.

Lost Ownership of Ideas Once ‘Released’

Other than the initial conception or publication by poets, the *readers* are the most important facet in the longevity or reputation of literary works. Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” was so well-received that people ‘answered’ the Shepherd. Sir Walter Raleigh’s “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd” isn’t an ordinary acceptance of a proposed future together, as the Shepherd would like, but rather an answer that may embolden or liberate women of their Elizabethan age. The Nymph says his offer would be great, if time didn’t pass, or “”, referencing *Philomel* to ensure the Nymph’s priority to maintain her safety does not go unnoticed by audiences aware of the *unfortunate* myth. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary’s online entry on Philomela, another name for the same mythological Athenian princess, she was “raped and deprived of her tongue by her brother-in-law Tereus, avenged by the killing of his son, and changed into a nightingale while fleeing from him.” A woman being raped, and her voice being taken from her aren’t exactly endearing or hopeful images for a future relationship between a Shepherd and a Nymph...

Returning to Robert Hayden, his stance on being an American poet (rather than a Black one) resulted in criticism of him and his works. Additionally, the personal choices he made for the black characters in “Middle Passage” to unnamed and voiceless, and for the elderly narrator in “Night, Death, Mississippi” to be a former Klansmen reminisces on *his* time ruining black Americans’ lives while a younger relation of his is out committing the same atrocities. Sadly, the

criticism he faced likely kept his works from being as prominent and acclaimed as they should have been.

'Gut Feelings' of Poetry's Subjectivity

Again, the readers are the most important facet of a poem's 'lifespan' after the poet lets their work out into the world. Criticism of Poetry can have 'physical' backing, such as a distaste for the form, structure, content, punctuation, figurative language, etc. Unfortunately for poets, neutral or negative views of Poetry can also come from 'vibes' alone, the reader 'just not feeling it' or preferring the effects that other poems had on them. An example of this, as the poet is quite venerated and well-known, is my personal distaste for the works of T.S. Eliot. I am aware of the controversy associated with this take, but I can only attempt to defend my 'harsh' stance.

I appreciated "The Wasteland", and how it 'revolutionized' following expressions in the Modernist movement, I could not easily follow the shifting point of view and connect what was supposed to be carrying throughout the *large* work. Similarly, I did not 'feel' for the speaker in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", who never left the room after stanzas of 'daring to', described women by individual characteristics or body parts, and is condescending towards himself for more than 130 lines. Considering Poetry as the entire art, audiences need to be 'hooked' to understand, appreciate, or love longer works, and personally, I was not compelled to *want* to understand or love these works by T.S. Eliot. But Poetry is an art, and how much weight can a singular view have on the longevity, 'lifespan' or reputation of a work or poet.