

## CRITICAL FACETS FOR UNDERSTANDING AND ENJOYMENT OF ENGLISH POETRY

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this article various critical opinions of prominent critics and poets on poetry and poems are to be examined in detail. Firstly, some statements and opinions, in connection with poetry are to be presented critically. An acquaintance with poetry opens the mind to the wonder and joy of living and it can be related to 'form' as well as 'meaning' and how poets of different centuries have seen new and fresh possibilities within the unchanging limitations of poetry. It is also examined many critical observations of some particular poets and critics are done. This paper also related various poetical issues of great literary persons from classical age to modern age i.e. Horace to W. B. Yeats. In addition, the other poets such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Eliot and Auden are presented with apt instances. Finally the conclusion is drawn on the basis of the review of literature indicated.*

**KEYWORDS:** Poetry, Metre, Appreciation, Understanding, Imagination, Creativity.

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### INTRODUCTION

The Roman critic Horace said all poets aim at giving either pleasure or instruction, and though the modern fashion is to think only of the first as the true function of poetry, yet the poets have in all ages regarded themselves as teachers, and, if they are, their work must, surely, find a place in the education of the young. We may admit all and still maintain that many English poems may be found which do appeal to young students and which do have a real educational value for them. An acquaintance with poetry opens the mind to the wonder and joy of living. One is influenced insensibly to observe and enjoy the beautiful, the unusual and the interesting. The idea arises that there is a pleasant as well as an unpleasant aspect of the world and that it is in our power to look at the one habitually rather than the other. This we may call the aesthetic value of poetry to the young.

### Understanding Poetry

A poet has necessarily to be far more careful in his choice of words than the writer of prose. He is always trying to produce a picture in the mind of his reader, or to express some emotion exactly as he feels it himself. Accordingly he pays great attention to the accuracy of his language. Whether we are studying English as a language and attempting to learn how to express in it our own thoughts accurately, it will help us much to examine its poetry. This is the reason why poetry is read in most of the schools as it teaches the importance of form and descriptive expression, and this is called its linguistic value. The following is the most famous long-winded introduction in English poetry, from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales: General Prologue*, (lines 1- 4)

*Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,*

*And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;*

Every poet worthy of the name is a ‘thinker’. He has tried to see deeper into the meaning of life than other men. He also has studied human nature, and thought much about the actions of men and the various ways in which they are affected by the things about them, or by the great forces of the universe. He endeavours in his poetry to point out a way of life by following which we shall find happiness for ourselves and confer upon others. Further he interprets for us, in language that we can understand and enjoy, the teaching of the philosophers and the saints just as Milton wrote in his *Paradise Lost*,

*what in me is dark  
Illumine; what is low, raise and support;  
That to the height of this great argument  
I may assert Eternal Providence,  
And justify the ways of God to men.  
– Paradise Lost (1667), Book I, 21-26*

### Ends and Means of Poetry

Therefore poetry has a moral value especially for the young, to whom more formal instruction upon conduct often seems tedious. For these three reasons: the aesthetic, the linguistic and the moral, we believe that poetry has its place in education if it be suitably selected. Decadents owned allegiance to the doctrine enunciated by Pater in his conclusion to *The Renaissance* (1873): “Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art’s sake has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake (Walter Pater)”.

In order to realize the poetic experience, it is essential to know from the poets themselves what this experience is, by what means the poet is able to bring it about, and how we can share in it. Though Philip Sidney’s vocabulary is very different from that of T. S. Eliot, what these poets are saying is not entirely dissimilar. Further question may be related to form – how poets of different centuries have seen new and fresh possibilities within the unchanging limitations of poetry – is the question which by the arrangement of the poems, we wish to propose. Though the fundamental theory of poetry remains more or less constant, the concrete expression of it in poetry itself is never the same. Between these two points of theory and example lie the answers to all enquiries into poetic form.

With a general historical knowledge of English poetry, and a thoughtful reading of some selected poems a reader can meditate on the nature of poetry itself. Poetry is metrical, rhymed utterance pointing to a meaning. By considering at once the unchanging character of form and the changing styles of different eras and of different poets, the reader should learn to read poetry more critically and more appreciatively. What the poets aim to do – “to please and to instruct – does not differ very markedly from generation to generation. As the basic means at his disposal, rhythm and meter, metaphor and simile, remain fundamentally the same. In this connection, T. S. Eliot observed in his critical essay ‘*Tradition and Individual Talent*’ that “the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new work of art among them” and “no poet, no artist or any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.” But for reasons too complex for us entirely to understand, the

poet finds himself in a different relation to himself, his reader, and his world, in different periods of history, and these altered relationships are seen in the particular expression he finds for his feelings. Though lyrics have been written throughout the literary history, the pure and untroubled desire to sing a song seems to have marked particularly Renaissance.

As the influence of science and the reasoning mind discouraged this burst of song, and made the attitude of teaching natural to poets, the later English poetry became more characteristically didactic than that of earlier periods. 'Metaphysical Poetry' is a progressive union of emotion with thought.

*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
– Donne, Holy Sonnets, Sonnet 10 (1633), 1-2*

But narrative, lyrical and didactic poems have been written in every period. One may read and enjoy the narratives of Wordsworth and Byron besides those of Chaucer, the lyrics of Browning and Housman besides those of Shakespeare and Herrick, the didactic poems of Hardy beside those of Pope, and speculate as to the effect of the century on the poet's manner of writing. In fact, the poetry cannot really be classified as lyric or narrative or didactic, because a lyric by Donne or a narrative by Browning may also be intended to teach a lesson. The main purpose of a poet is "to tell a story, or to sing a song, or to teach a lesson. Alexander Pope and other poets like Thomas Gray too used their poetry for didactic purpose as in the following poetical lines:

*"A little Learning is a dang'rous Thing;  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring:"  
– Pope, An Essay on Criticism, Part 2, 217-18*

*"where ignorance is bliss,  
'Tis folly to be wise."*

Thomas Gray, "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" (1742), 99 -100

The 19th century differs from the preceding centuries in that the poets attempted to excel in all three forms i.e. narrative, lyrical, and philosophical poetry. It is also noted that the narrative power of Arnold, the lyrical reach of Shelley, the ethical penetration of Browning indicate that they were indeed remarkably successful poets.

P. B. Shelley and Lord Gordon Byron return to romantic individualism. Further Byron recalled his "poetry is the sense of a former world and of a future", in revolt against the cult of the machine, the mass, factual observation, the direction of art to limitedly political and social ends. Poetry is not lawless, but its laws are the laws of its own being. Genius, in the words of Coleridge, "cannot be lawless; for it is even this that constitutes it genius the power of acting creatively under laws of its own origination." The main driving force of the Romantic impulse, so evident in the poetry of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was the belief in a world of reality underlying the superficial aspects of existence, and in the power of the creative imagination to establish contact with that intangible world. In Wordsworth's view, Romantic poetry differed from Neo-classical poetry in its emphasis on spontaneity and its use of simple language. He wrote in his *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* (1798), "In hours of weariness, sensations sweet, Felt in the

blood, and felt among the heart" (27-38). In this connection, Wordsworth also said that "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. It is also said that poetry as "the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science" further he also called poetry as "the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge". One of the main objectives of reading poetry according to Samuel Taylor Coleridge is "Not the poem which we have read, but that to which we return, with the greatest pleasure, possesses the genuine power, and claims the name of essential poetry (Biog. Lit. i. 14)"; He also wrote in, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), "As if it had been a Christian soul, We hailed it in God's name" (55-56).

*"Poetry fettered fetters the human  
race. Nations are destroyed, or  
flourish, in proportion as their poetry,  
painting, and music are destroyed or  
flourish!"*

(To the Public, Plate 1 - Jerusalem c. 1803–1820, William Blake)

Referring to his poem, *The Scholar Gipsy*, Arnold remarked: "But what does it do to you? Homer animates Shakespeare animates in its poor way I think Sohrab and Rustum animates the Gipsy Scholar at best awakens a pleasing melancholy.

But this is not what we want; Arnold in his *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems*, The Youth of Nature mentioned, "The complaining millions of men/ Darken in labour and pain – what they want is something to animate and ennoble them-not merely to add zest to their melancholy or grace to their dreams." Tennyson and Browning, however, conceived the poet's function to be that of proclaiming a "message" of inspiration, and each aimed in his own manner at providing a philosophy acceptable to the cultivated middle-class public for whom his work was intended. In defence of Tennyson it has been stated that "his compromise was an attempt to combine the best of the old and new".

Imagism grew out of a Poet's Club founded in jest by T. E. Hulme in 1908, and out of subsequent plans for revolutionising English poetry by vers libre and adaptations of the Japanese haiku which has seventeen syllables distributed over three lines in the pattern of 5–7–5. Ezra Pound invented the term "Imagist" with pieces by H.D., F. S. Flint, A. Lowell, James Joyce, W. Carlos Williams, and himself. Later he fell out, and Amy Lowell took command; but after 1917 the school as such ceased to exist, partly because of dissensions, partly because its original theories no longer satisfied its members. T. E. Hulme in his fragmentary *Speculations* gave the aesthetic basis of the movement. He also viewed that "all emotion depends on real solid vision or sound. It is physical." This overemphasis provided the Imagists with their technique and limited the subject-matter of their poetry. Further "an image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," wrote Pound.

Robert Frost viewed that "A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom," "A poem begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness" and "Poetry has got me indirectly or directly practically all the living I have had." In poetry the factual is to be preferred to the abstract, words to music, the real to the ideal. In his periodical *Twentieth Century Verse* (No. 8), Symons expressed views which are of use to us in assessing his poetry, "Poetry has social value; but his own poetry should have no social value to a poet." "Art is to the artist an autobiographical game."

There are two conflicting views or theories of poetry, the Romantic and the Neo-Classical; the former having its source in Platonism, the latter proceeding from Aristotle's definition of poetry as a mimetic art. Dryden writes, "Poetry is not only a true imitation of Nature, but of the best Nature, of that which is wrought up to a nobler pitch ... It presents us with the scattered beauties of Nature united by a happy chemistry, without its deformities or faults. Poetry makes life more exciting and richer by putting things in a new light and by passing on to you the most exciting experiences of other men. As Shelley says, "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds." There are many definitions of poetry, but none is quite satisfactory. The trouble is that poetry records human experience and is, therefore, as hard to define as human experience itself. "Critics give themselves great labor," Matthew Arnold says, "to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples." The poems of one generation that subsequent generations preserve and value are those with general human reference. For this reason the tradition of great poetry is a record and testimony of the oneness of humanity. "What led me to poetry," said Bridges, "was the inexhaustible satisfaction of form, the magic of speech, lying as it seemed to me in the masterly control of the material", and throughout his life he continued to apply himself to the study of form and rhythm, not without effect upon his Georgian successors.

In his *New Bearings in English Poetry* F. R. Leavis stated in similar terms the aims that should inspire the modern poet: "All that we can fairly ask of the poet is that he shall show himself to have been fully alive in our time. The evidence will be in the very texture of his poetry." Further, the poet is recommended "To invent techniques that shall be adequate to the ways of feeling, or modes of experience, of adult, sensitive moderns." F. R. Leavis gives T. S. Eliot his highest praise when he says that he has written "poetry that expresses freely a modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience, of one fully alive in his own age." Further T. S. Eliot defined "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."

Romanticism is a movement that can be dated as beginning with William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798. Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* says that poetry, in a general sense, might be defined to be "the expression of the imagination," further it is mentioned that poetry is connate with the origin of man. The poet also opined that "Poetry turns all things to loveliness ... it strips the veil of familiarity from the world and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty" and he argued at the end of his *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), that the "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World." For Keats, the natural world was much more specific, more localized, and much fuller of sensual richness. He would write that poetry had better come like leaves to a tree, and the quick spontaneity of this sonnet shows him to have fulfilled his own definition of the poet.

Arnold says, in his seminal work *The Study of Poetry* (1909-14), "the future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay;" and Shakespeare in his Sonnet 18 mentioned as –

*So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

In contrary, W. H. Auden opined that "Poetry makes nothing happen. It survives in the valley of its saying." (In Memory of W.B. Yeats, Sec II) Herbert Read remarks: "The modern poet does not deny the right of regular verse to exist, or to be poetic. He merely affirms that poetry



is sincerity, and has no essential alliance with regular schemes of any sort. He reserves the right to adapt his rhythm to his mood, to modulate his metre as he progresses.” If in the attempt to be true to experience the poet appears to concentrate on the uglier aspects of life, his explanation is, in Rupert Brooke’s words: “There are common and sordid things situations or details—that may suddenly bring all tragedy, or at least the brutality of actual emotions, to you. I rather grasp relieved at them, after I have beaten vain hands in the rosy mists of poets’ experiences.”

## CONCLUSION

Understanding and appreciation of poetry requires analysis of a necessary preliminary to the experience. Anyone can “appreciate poetry” with an attempt to find out what is said in the poem. The reading of a poem requires activity on the reader's part, and questions which draw attention to what is significant, or to what may be difficult, are the best means of directing that activity of understanding and appreciation. We hope that the future of poetry is certainly immense and worthy of its high destinies as stated by Arnold and human beings will ‘find an ever surer and surer stay’.

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