

The Essentials of Poetry

Language :

Language is one of the most essential features of poetry. Poems are made of words. The selection of words in a poem is called diction. The poet communicates his ideas, thoughts, vision through the words he chooses, placing them in a particular order. Whatever the poet is doing - expressing an emotion, telling a story, describing a scene, reflecting on life - he does it through the use of words or language.

In considering the language of a poem we have to distinguish between the meaning that a word has in the dictionary (what is called denotation) and the more hidden meaning of the word, implying attitudes and values (what is called connotation). "Connotations appeal to the feelings, denotations to the brain". Take the word 'spring', for instance. Spring is one of the four seasons; but because of its nature, that is, its being clean, fresh, beautiful, it has come to be associated with innocence, purity, youthfulness, life itself. Such usage of language is frequent in poetry. Poetry is rich with connotations.

Another aspect of language is the use of symbols (symbolic language). A symbol language is a kind of metaphor, a comparison which "represents or sums up a much more larger sphere of activity or interest". Hence, the cross is a symbol for the Christian religion. The flag is a symbol of a nation. Flowers, the rose, in particular, are symbols of love and beauty. Symbols are of two kinds: the public or conventional symbol (the cross, the flag ...) which is easily understood by readers, and the private symbol, which is created by the poet himself and is difficult to grasp unless an explanation is provided. Whether public or private, symbols are highly suggestive and play an important role in enriching and enlarging meaning of a poem. Here are the 'lily' and the 'rose' used as two symbols of two different kinds of love: the passionate and the spiritual.

Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls,
Come hither, the dance are done,
In gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls,
Queen lily and rose in one.

(Tennyson)

Besides symbols, the use of images or imagery is vital in poetry. Imagery is the art of producing pictures in the mind of the reader (mental pictures). An image is "any concrete representation of a sense impression or idea".⁹ It is a representation of some subject "which is unnamed and which may or may not be implied". That is, an image enables the reader to feel, touch, hear, taste or smell whatever the poet is trying to convey. Images can be produced by different devices: by referring to a name. A down the Tigris I was borne/By Bagdat's shrines of fretted gold". The words 'Tigris' and 'Bagdat' are images, reflecting the Eastern world. Images are also created by descriptive words: "In the deserted, moon-lanched street, /How lonely ringss the echo of my feet". 'deserted' and 'lonely' are images suggesting emptiness, loneliness so terrible that it could be even heard, "rings the echo of my feet". Rhythm can also produce an image: "For I have known them all already, known them all - /ave known the evenings, mornings, afternoons". The lingering heavy ythm here is creating an image of monotony, boredom, and lack of initiative.

The poet may use images taken from different sources, from nature, the city, the East, The Middle Ages, religion ... etc. Shelley in these lines using images from nature. He is expressing sadness for the death of the beauty of the old year, symbolised by autumn:

The warm sun is failing, the bleak wind is wailing,
The bare boughs are sighing, the pale flowers are dying,
And the year
On the earth her death-bed, in a shroud of leaves dead,
Is lying.

Another important feature of language is the use of figures of speech (figurative language). Figures of speech are varied but they all deal with something by relating it to something else. The most common ones in English poetry are: simile, metaphor and personification.

A) Simile is an obvious, explicit comparison, using 'like' or 'as' between different kinds of things, as in these lines where Wordsworth is writing about Milton: "Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart/Thou had'st voice whose sound was like the sea". Or Burns, saying "My love is like a

red, red rose". Sometimes a whole poem or a whole stanza is built on similes, as in this stanza:

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot;
My heart is like an apple tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickest fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me.

(Christina Rossetti)

A metaphor is an implied or stated comparison between two unconnected subjects, without the use of 'like' or 'as'. The metaphor is more striking, compressed and suggestive than the simile, and is used frequently in poetry. Instead of saying a thing is like another, it states that that one thing is another: "She is a rose", or in these lines: "My thoughts are drooping flowers/And sulking, silent birds". "My thoughts are dancing flowers/And joyful singing birds". A more sophisticated example is where Shakespeare is comparing life to a player on the stage and to a tale told by an idiot:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Personification means to describe inanimate objects in terms of people and animals, as if the inanimate objects had minds or feelings. "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes." The fog here is acting as an animal. Or here where 'Spring' is acting as a human being:

So Spring comes merry toward me here, but
No answering smile from me, whose life is twin'd
With the dead boughs that winter still must bind.

(D.G. Rossetti)

Sound devices

Another aspect of language is the use of sound devices. The most frequent sound devices in English poetry are: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance and onomatopoeia.

Rhyme is one of the first elements of form in poetry. Lines of a poem are said to rhyme, or to have rhyme, or to have a rhyme scheme, when the ends of their final words have identical sounds:

There was a lady live in a hall, a
Large in eyes, and slim and tall; a
And ever she sung from noon to noon, b
Two red roses across the moon. b

(William Morris)

The usual position of rhyme is at the end of lines. This is called end-rhyme. When rhyme comes in the middle of the line, it is called internal rhyme: "The long light shakes across the lakes" and "The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew". Rhyme is called single or masculine when only single syllables rhyme as in (all/pall; air/fair). It is called double or feminine when two syllables rhyme as in (duty/beauty; rosy/posy). Triple rhyme is when three syllables rhyme as in (tenderly/slenderly; charity/clarity). Another type of rhyme is eye-rhyme or incomplete rhyme. Eye-rhyme is when the vowel sounds are not pronounced in the same way, when they look the same in print but are pronounced differently, as in (love/move). Half rhyme, slant rhyme or para-rhyme is when vowel sounds are different, as in (groined/groaned; hall/hell). This kind of rhyme has a very harsh or jarring sound effect.

Rhyme serves different purposes in poetry. It creates music or harmony which is very pleasing to the ear, especially when a poem is read aloud. It gives the poem a shape. It serves as a unifying agent, a binder, binding groups of lines together, or lines in a stanza, thus creating a unified poem both in thought and form.

The usual practice in marking rhyme schemes is to use letters of the alphabet. That is, to label the first rhyming line, and each successive line

that rhymes with it with a small a; the next line that ends with a different rhyme is marked b, as are all successive lines that rhyme with it, and so on:

What voice of gladness. Hark! a
In heaven is ringing! b
From the sad fields the lark a
Is upward winging. b

Closely associated with rhyme is another sound device: alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of initial letters or consonants in a line of poetry or in closely adjacent lines.

Soft, soft wind, from out the sweet south sliding
Waif thy silver cloud webs athwart the summer sea.

Alliteration creates a beautiful effects in poem. It creates music and emphasizes rhythm; but it can also enrich meaning, as it does in this example where the poet is describing the Queen:

Pale, beyond porch and portal,
Crowned with calm leaves, she stands
Who gathers all things mortal
With cold immortal hands.

(A. C. Swinburne)

The other two common sound devices are assonance and consonance. Assonance is the repetition of a vowel sound in the same line or closely adjacent lines of poetry:

Life like a dome of many-coloured glass

Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in a line of poetry:

Proud and unafraid he stood
Nor said a word to those around.

Onomatopoeia is the use of words in which the sound suggests the sense,
as in buzz, murmur, bang, hiss ... etc.

The moan of doves in iminemiaelm,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

Rhythm and Metre

Rhythm is an essential quality of poetry. It is the pulse of poetry, as the hearts beats are the pulse of life. The word rhythm is derived from the Greek. It means 'motion' or 'flow'. In poetry, rhythm is marked by accents or stresses placed on certain syllables which need to be emphasized.

The terms rhythm and metre are often used interchangeably. Metre is organized rhythm. That is, when rhythm follows a definite pattern, so that the number of syllables between accents is regular, we have metre. In other words, rhythm is the larger term; metre, the smaller, the more particular. Metre means 'measure' and it applies mainly to poetry. In English poetry, metre is made up of recurring patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. Take these two lines from Keats:

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen hath gleaned my teeming brain.

Each of these two lines has ten syllables, arranged so that we have one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Each of these units, which are repeated five times, giving us five feet to a line, is called a Foot. A foot then is a certain number of syllables constituting part of a line:

When I/have fears/that I/may cease/to be.

In English poetry, the symbols that are used to mark the unstressed and stressed syllables are: for the unstressed syllables, we use (v or x); for the stressed (- or '). This process of sorting out the metrical pattern of a poem is called Scansion. Scansion, in other words, means marking stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of verse. The line above would be scanned in this way:

v - v - v - v - v -
When I/ have fears/ that I/ may cease/ to be.

In poetry, these feet are usually grouped in certain definite patterns to form lines which are named according to the number of feet in each line.

A line of poetry with one foot is called monometer; with two feet, dimeter; with three, trimeter; with four, tetrameter; with five, pentameter; with six, hexameter (also called an Alexandrine); with seven, heptameter, with eight, octameter. Lines of one foot and nine feet are rare in English verse. The most common meters are tetrameter and pentameter.

There are many different patterns of syllables which make up the various feet used in English poetry. The most common is the iambic foot.

An iambic foot, or an iamb, is one composed of two syllables:

unstressed followed by stressed (v -), as in infer, correct, delight:

v - v - v - v -
My heart/ is like/ a sin/ ing bird.

The other types are:

A trochaic foot, or a trochee, is one composed of two syllables: one

stressed followed by one unstressed (- v) as in accent, gather,

laughter:

- v - v - v - v
Soft and/ easy/ is thy / cradle

A Dactylic foot, or a dactyl, is one composed of three syllables, one

stressed followed by the two unstressed (- v v), as in mystical,

happiness:

- v v - v v - v v - v v
Love again / song again / nest again, / young again.

An Anapestic foot, or an anapest, is one composed of three syllables, two unstressed followed by one stressed (v v -), as in

v v - v v - v v -
employee, interrupt, disappear:

V V - V V - V V - V V -

With the sheep / in the fold / and the cows / in their stalls.

A Spondaic foot, or the spondee, is one composed of two stressed syllables (- -) as in heartbreak, childhood, bookcase. This type of foot is rare and is used as a variation of the rhythm.

Lines in poetry may further be distinguished as end-stopped lines or run-on lines (also called enjambment). The end-stopped line occurs when the sense stops at the end of a line of poetry.

Hark! Hark! Hark!
The lark sings high in the dark.

When the sense of the line carries over to the next line this is called enjambment or run-on lines:

Sweet birds, far out of sight
Your songs of pleasure
Dome us with joy as bright
A heaven's best azure.

(Robert Bridges)

When there is a pause in a line of poetry, to emphasize the beat of the rhythm, we have a caesura (also spelt cesura), as in this example where the caesura is marked by a vertical line:

I nod in company, / I wake at night,
Fools tush into my head, / and so I write.

(Alexander pope)