

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,

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

The warm sun is failing, the bleak wind is wailing,

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.

A Simile is an obvious, explicit comparison, using 'like' or 'as' between different kinds of things as in these lines where Wordsworth is talking about Milton: 'Thy soul was like a star dwelt apart/Thou had'st a 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,