

Poetry
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Lecture 1
The Relevance of Poetry

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The Relevance of Poetry



Critical Debate on the relevance of poetry

The Benefits of Poetry

An Example: John Milton's "On His Blindness"

T S Eliot and C A Duffy on the Use of Poetry

A working definition:

Poetry is an "elevated expression of an elevated thought or feeling in an elevated language in a metrical or non-metrical form."



We begin our course on poetry with the topic - The Relevance of Poetry. In this lecture, we will look at a few points. The critical debate on the relevance of poetry, the benefits of poetry, we will also look at an example from John Milton's famous poem 'On His Blindness.' And then, we will look at the views of T S Eliot and C A Duffy on the use of poetry. For this course, we have a working definition of poetry as follows; "Poetry is an elevated expression of an elevated thought or feeling in an elevated language in a metrical or non-metrical form."

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Critical Debate



What is the use of poetry?

From Plato to the Present

Plato banned poets from his republic.

Poets: fact and fiction; outer and inner reality

Defended by both ancient and modern theorists

Supported by contemporary poets like Carol Ann Duffy

A Working description:

Poetry is "the music of being human."



Now, let us examine this Critical Debate. The question that has always been asked is, what is a use of poetry.? Right from Plato in the ancient Greece, to this day we have questions on the use of poetry. When you compare poetry with all other activities of human beings, it appears that poetry has less uses. Not only that but also poetry is attributed certain qualities, which are not desirable for society.

So, Plato actually banned poets from his republic, from his ideal republic. Because he felt that poets were misleading the young people of his day. But we must realize that poets have different purposes than what Plato thought. So, over a period of time right from Plato to this day, we have a number of poets, critics, philosophers supporting poetry and poets. They believe that poets and poetry have a different dimension altogether from what Plato thought. Poets actually deal with fact and fiction in their poems. They also deal with the outer and inner reality of human beings. Therefore, what poets do is different and has to be defended by right-minded people.

So, ancient theorists like Aristotle, modern theorists like T S Eliot, they have all supported poets and poetry throughout the human history. Recently, we have this poet Carol Ann Duffy, from Britain; She was the poet laureate before Simon Armitage. She was able to create a climate of support for poetry in contemporary Britain and in this world. She has a beautiful working description of poetry. She says, "poetry is a music of being human." So, to be human is to be in touch with poetry and therefore, poetry is always relevant.

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Self-Understanding



- To understand self-image (picture)
- To develop self-awareness (knowledge)
- To enhance self-esteem (feeling)
- To increase self-efficacy (capacity)

e.g. John Clare's "I Am"

I am — yet what I am none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
I am the self-consumer of my woes—
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes
And yet I am, and live ...



We will look at certain ways in which poetry is relevant to human beings. We start with this idea of Self-Understanding. When we read poetry what happens to us? I believe we understand ourselves more. How? We can understand the self-image, the picture that we have of ourselves through poetry. Next, we can have more knowledge of our own self, we call it self-awareness by reading poetry. Then we can also have better feeling about ourselves when we read poetry. And lastly, we can also increase the kind of capacity, physical and mental capacity, that we have in doing our own activities or even living our life; We can improve our capacity by reading poetry.

Here is a beautiful extract from John Clare, a 19th century poet called 'I Am,'

“I am-yet what I am none cares or knows;

My friends forsake me like a memory lost:

I am the self-consumer of my woes-

They rise and vanish in oblivious host,

Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes

And yet I am, and live...”

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Self-Expression



An expression of the basic emotions of love, faith, fears, hopes, etc.

An chance to read a poet's self-expression as our own

Development and use of a persona or mask

Our own feelings and thoughts in a poetic voice

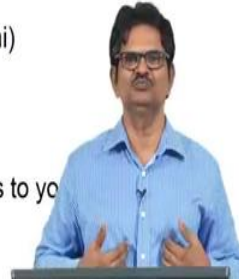
"poetry matters, in part, because of voice." (Parini)

e.g. Whitman, "Song of Myself"

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you



Here we have the idea of Self-Expression. When we read poems, what do we find in them? We find an expression of the basic emotions of love, faith, fears, hopes, everything that we feel about ourselves. When we read a poem, we get a chance to read a poet's own self-expression as our own. And what we gain by reading this poetry is, a development and use of a persona or a mask, that the poetry has attempted. And we also develop such mask in our own self. And when we interact with them, we are able to increase our own feelings and thoughts through a poetic voice. That is why Parini says, "Poetry matters, in part, because of voice."

Here we have an example from Walt Whitman, the American poet, his well-known poem is 'Song of Myself.' Just a few lines, celebrated lines from the celebrated poet Whitman.

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

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Appreciation of Language



Poems are a feast to our eyes and ears.
Sound mind in a sound body for a sound person
Sound words in a sound poem for a sound society
Tennyson's "The Brook" (1886)

"And out again I curve and flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on for ever."



When we read poems, we are able to appreciate the beauty of Language. Actually, poems are a feast to our eyes and ears. A sound mind in a sound body for a sound person is possible through poetry. And how it happens? It happens through words. So, we look at sound words, in a sound poem for a sound society.

To give an example, Lord Tennyson's poem, 'The Brook' is here. We have a small extract.

"And out again I curve and flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on forever."

Well! you may wonder now; Do we have rivers? Do they run? Do they brim? We may have questions. In each day, it was possible we may have a different situation and we may have to think about different kinds of eternal flow. Today perhaps data science or data flow is possible.

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Education in Metaphor



Poetry uses a metaphorical language which makes connections between apparently unconnected ideas.

“Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House”

A K Ramanujan

“Unread library books
usually **mature** in two weeks
and begin to **lay** a row

of little **eggs** in the ledgers
for fines,”



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Next, we have a wonderful education through Metaphor in poetry. Actually, Poetry uses a metaphorical language, which makes connections between apparently unconnected ideas and brings them together. We have a small example from our Indian poet A K Ramanujan, from his poem, ‘Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House.’ This is a small extract here it goes:

“Unread library books,

usually mature in two weeks

and begin to lay a row

of little eggs in ledgers

for fines,”

You can see the kind of connection that we can make between this line and our own life. When we go to libraries, we borrow books and then when we return, if we delay, we have to pay fines, that is one context. Another is when books are not read in the library, actually some insects start laying eggs in the books themselves. So, in both ways we have a maturity laying of eggs and probably some consequence, financial consequence or damage to the books.

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Creativity and innovation



Poetry is creation and poets are creators.

They create their world in language through their creative imagination.

Januchowski-Hartley and others, scientists, believe:

“exercising creativity through poetry writing, reading, or speaking can develop, maintain, and enhance empathic and innovation skills.”



Next, we have the idea of Creativity and Innovation. Poetry is actually creation and poets are creators. They create their world in a language through their own creative imagination. We have a group of scientists under the leadership of Januchowski-Hartley. They have a research article in which they say,

“exercising creativity through poetry writing, reading, or speaking can develop maintain and enhance empathic and innovation skills.”

How it is done? We will see.

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Problem Solving



Poetry creates rich meanings through word plays.
To understand poetry is to solve the problem of
meaning.

We can use this skill in our interaction with the
world.

Understanding poetry is thus a transferable
survival skill.

e.g. John Donne, "Hymn to God the Father"

"When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more."



Then, we have this idea of Problem Solving. Poetry creates rich meanings through word plays in poems, in language. To understand poetry is to solve the problem of meaning. How do we solve the problem of meaning? We can use our linguistic skill, we can use our mental skill, and we can interact with the world, we can interact with the poem, and then we can solve the problems. Therefore, understanding poetry is a transferable skill; it is also a survival skill.

Here is an example from John Donne. His poem is 'Hymn to God the Father.' There he says,

"When thou hast done, thou hast not done,

For I have more."

Remember the poet's name is Donne, the poet's wife's name is Anne More. So, he plays with the names of his own self and that of his wife and tries to convey some meaning to the world through his poem.

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Validation of Experience



Human experience is the stuff of all poetry,
literature, and art.

Poets clarify our confusions and validate our own
feelings in our critical moments.

Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken"

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood ...

I took the one less travelled by
That has made all the difference.

A poem is "a momentary stay against confusion."



Now, we have this idea of Validation of Experience. If you look at the whole of poetry, you will see that human experience is a stuff of all poetry, literature, and art. And when they write about human experiences, they clarify their own confusions and validate our own feelings in our own critical moments. The best example that we can think of is Robert Frost, his well-known poem, The Road Not Taken, deals with a decisive critical moment. And there he says. We have the first three lines and the last two lines from this poem.

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood...

I took the one less traveled by

That has made all the difference.”

He also says, “a poem is a momentary stay against confusion.” Whatever difficulties we may have, when we read poems we find some clarifications and also validate our own experience.

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Personal Connections



We live in an increasingly disruptive world.
Social, technological, economic, political, etc.,
upheavals affect us to no end.
We find ourselves suddenly cut off from the rest
of the world.
Writing and reading poems help us stay
connected with ourselves and others.



And we come to the last point of relevance. This is called Personal Connections. The best part of reading poetry is, we are able to connect with poetry. Today we live in an increasingly disruptive world. Our world is facing so many challenges. We have social, technological, economic, political, and many other upheavals which affect us to no end. We find ourselves suddenly cut off from the rest of the world. Then what we do? How do we connect ourselves? One of the best ways is to read and write poems. This writing and reading can help us stay connected with ourselves and with others.

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Example: Milton's "On His Blindness"

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. When I consider how my light is spent | A |
| 2. Ere half my days in this dark world and wide, | B |
| 3. And that one talent which is death to hide | B |
| 4. Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent | A |
| 5. To serve therewith my Maker, and present | A |
| 6. My true account, lest he returning chide, | B |
| 7. "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" | B |
| 8. I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent | A |
| 9. That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need | C |
| 10. Either man's work or his own gifts: who best | D |
| 11. Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state | C |
| 12. Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed | C |
| 13. And post o'er land and ocean without rest: | D |
| 14. They also serve who only stand and wait." | C |



Let us look at this example, John Milton's 'On His Blindness.' It is a well-known poem. Here we have this poem and also the rhyme scheme.

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve there with my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent,
That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best,
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly, thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."

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Questions



How does the speaker understand and express himself?

How do the readers appreciate the language and educate themselves in metaphor?

How do the speaker and the readers develop their creativity, innovation, problem solving skills?

How do they validate their experience and connect themselves with others?



We have a number of questions, now to ask. How does a speaker in the poem understand and express himself? How do the readers appreciate the language and educate themselves in metaphor? How do the speaker and the readers develop their creativity, innovation, problem solving skills? And how do they validate their experience and connect themselves with others? Let us look at the answers to these questions one after another.

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Answers



1. understanding, expression, language and metaphor: questioning God about a complex situation.
2. Use the scripture to ask questions and then use the same to answer them. Ask questions and you will get answers. Never be satisfied with the blind alley.
3. See how others live their lives and learn from their examples.
4. Our problem is one of the problems. This is not the only problem in the world for ourselves or anybody else for that matter.



When we read this poem what do we gain? We have understanding, we understand our own problems like, the problem that Milton faced. We are given life. We are given some talent. But when we face difficulties in using our talent, to find out our own true potential, we have a huge crisis in our mind. What am I to do? So, we understand Milton's problem, we understand our own problem. What Milton expresses is an example for us to express our own feelings, the kind of language that Milton uses, the kind of metaphor that he uses, we understand. What he does is to question god about a complex situation. Who is there in the world who has not questioned god or the creation, or the entire humanity.? So, Milton gives us a chance to understand ourselves.

Next, what Milton does is to use a scripture that is the Bible to ask questions. There is a tradition; there is a path. But that path does not give him complete solution. So, he asks questions and then he answers the same question by using the same tradition. So, the point that we have to understand is only when we ask questions, we will get answers. That is one of the basic principles of any scientific or religious endeavor. We ask questions, so that we get answers and we are never supposed to be happy with whatever situation we are in. We can overcome all those difficulties. We have to remember that John Milton wrote his best epic in English, when he was completely blind. Can you imagine? Homer was blind; Homer, the Greek epic poet was blind. The English poet was also blind when he wrote this poem.

Next, when we read a poem like this, we see how others live their lives and learn from their examples. And lastly, we have to understand our problem is only one of the problems, this is not the only problem in the world for ourselves or for anybody else for that matter. We have to realize that we are one individual, we have one problem. But there are many individuals, many problems and we ourselves may have many problems. But then, we have to realize there is a time and place for everything to solve. It will get solved.

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Analyzing the Poem

Poetic Form: Petrarchan sonnet

Structure: Octave and Sestet

Volta – a turn of thought in lines 8-9

Rhyme scheme: ABBA ABBA CDC CDC

Rhyming words: spent, wide, hide, bent,
present, chide, denied, prevent,
need, best, state, speed, rest, wait

Rhythm/ Meter: iambic pentameter

Run-on, end-stopped lines, and caesura:

6. To serve therewith my Maker, and present
7. My true account, lest he returning chide,
8. "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"



When we approach the poem, how do we analyze the poem? We can look at the form of the poem; that is Petrarchan Sonnet. Slowly by and by you will understand sonnet Petrarchan and all that even Octave, Sestet, we have some technical terms. These are poetic conventions. We will gradually learn all about them. The rhyme scheme is ABBA, ABBA, CDC and CDC. And the rhyming words at the end in the poem that we have are spent, wide, hide, bent -First Part; present, chide, denied, prevent -Second Part; need, best, state -Third One; and Last One - speed, rest, and wait.

The whole poem is written in another technical term iambic pentameter. Penta is five - five feet, iambic means a word may have stresses, or it may not have. So, one word unstressed and stressed, having this combination of unstressed and stressed is called 'iam.' We will look at all these technical terms in the course of our lecture in the first week. We will define them, give them examples and then we will proceed.

Next, last part of this analyzing the poem is, how are these lines flowing? We have some end-stopped lines, that means there is a pause. We also have pause in the middle of a line. So, that is called caesura.

These are the lines from this poem.

“To serve there with my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”

So, ‘to’ is unstressed, ‘serve’ is stressed, that is ‘iam.’ So, we have some examples like this within these three lines.

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Analyzing the Poem

Syntax: Complex sentence structure
Active and passive construction
Yes/No Question
Elaborate answer



Allusion/Metaphor: Parable of the talent

Dialogue: The speaker and Patience

Personification: Patience

Theme: Opposition between light and darkness

Epigram: “They also serve who only stand and wait.”
The speaker’s dissatisfaction with his own helpless condition is resolved by faith and not by reason



Further, we move on to analyzing the poem. We can look at the syntax, that is sentence structure, the very first sentence is a complex sentence. So, we have, within this first line we have this active and passive instruction in the sentence. We also have yes or no question and then we have an elaborate answer. So, the language used, the sentence structure used, the words used, all form a complex construction or complex sentence structure or complex poem, the poet builds. He also uses something called allusion, that is reference to something else. And this allusion can be metaphorical as well, or it can create an image, it can create a whole story within your poem.

So, what we have in this poem is an allusion to the bible, that is the parable of the talent. Here we have god giving talents, coins to three disciples. And then asking them what did you do with them? And then how they reply to god is what we have. When you are given a talent, you have to use it, improve it, and grow it. And when you do not use it, when it remains whatever it is given, then that is no good. So, the whole poem, this idea of this parable is there in the poem and the whole poem is presented to us in the form of a dialogue between the speaker and patience.

Patience - this is personified. Somebody speaking, giving an answer to the poet. And the whole theme of this poem is the opposition between light and darkness; blindness and this ability to see inside; blindness and inside; day and night; we have this contrast between these two ideas. The poem ends with an epigram a short pithy beautiful saying “They also serve who only stand and wait.” The speaker's dissatisfaction with his own helpless condition is resolved by faith and not by reason. And that is what we have in this poem.

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T S Eliot on the Use of Poetry



“The people which ceases to care for its literary inheritance becomes barbaric; the people which ceases to produce literature ceases to move in thought and sensibility. **The poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it;** and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility”.



Here we have the idea of T S Eliot on the use of poetry. He says,

“The people which ceases to care for its literary inheritance becomes barbaric; the people which ceases to produce literature ceases to move in thought and sensibility. The poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it; and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility.”

The key point from what Eliot says is, the poetry of your people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it. If you use the same old language, we may not have new energy, new vitality. So poets continue to refresh the language.

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Carol Ann Duffy on Poetry



“A poem if you like is the attire of feeling: the literary form where words seem tailor-made for memory or desire However fashionably we dress ourselves up, **we are all, in our common humanity, the same under the skin.**”

“Without **poetry to reinvigorate our language**, we will in the end find ourselves in a kind of linguistic hell.”



We also have the contemporary poet, Carol Ann Duffy’s view on poetry. It is poetic actually.

“A poem if you like is the attire of feeling; the literary form where words seem tailor-made for memory or desire... However fashionably we dress ourselves up, we are all in our common humanity, the same under the skin.”

That is the essence of literature, that is the essence of great understanding- wisdom. She also says,

“Without poetry to reinvigorate our language, we will in the end find ourselves in a kind of linguistic hell.”

Poetry actually creates a heaven for us by using new language.

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Summary



Critical Debate on the role of poetry
The Benefits of Poetry
An Example: Milton's "On His Blindness"
T S Eliot and C A Duffy on the Use of Poetry



In all what we have looked into this lecture, we have summarized here. We have examined the critical debate on the role of poetry. We found the benefits of poetry, self-understanding, self-expression, appreciation of language, problem solving, creativity and innovation, personal connections, education by metaphor and all that.

We also examined Milton's 'On His Blindness' and saw how we could connect with Milton's own blindness and understanding of life. Finally, we looked at the views of T S Eliot and C A Duffy on the use of poetry, particularly focused on the idea of refreshing language, refreshing our own life. We will come back with another video next time.