

Poetry
Professor S P Dhanavel
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Lecture 3
Functions of Poetry

(Refer Slide Time: 0:14)

Functions of Poetry



Various functions of poetry:

1. **Identity:** Patriotic Pride
2. **Morality:** Ethical Value
3. **Mystery:** Religious Understanding
4. **Communication:** Linguistic Innovation
5. **Entertainment:** Therapeutic Aid
6. **Record:** Reflective Mirror
7. **Truth:** Factual Negotiation
8. **Beauty:** Artistic Value
9. **Justice:** Social Protest
10. **Self:** Human Affirmation
11. **Nature:** Ecological Awareness



So far, we have looked at two lectures. One on the relevance of poetry and other on approaches to poetry. Today, we will discuss the topic Functions of Poetry. It refers to the ‘what question’ of Simon Sinek. This is about knowing what we do. First question is Why: Why we do? Why do we believe certain things? Second question is How: How we do certain things? that is doing and third one What: What kind of poetry do we study?

And here, we connect this question of what kind of poetry we study or what kind of poetry people write with the question of knowing what we do, and we connect further this with different functions of poetry. For the purpose of this lecture we have identified 11 functions of poetry. We begin with identity, morality, mystery, communication, entertainment, record, truth, beauty, justice, self, and nature. Under these categories we have specific functions. We will examine them one after another.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:42)

Identity: Patriotic Pride



- Founding stories
- Epics to uplift national pride
 - India:** *The Mahabharat* [Bharat]
 - Greek:** Homer's *Iliad* [Ilium]
 - Roman:** Virgil's *Aeneid* [Aeneas]
 - English:** Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* [Elizabeth I]
- Britain from Brutus, a Trojan hero, transformed into Britomart to suit Queen Elizabeth
- Powerful stories once created float around to give a sense of heritage and identity to the people of the land.



The first concept, the first function - Identity, How do we form a sense of identity? We belong to a country. We belong to a geography. We belong to a culture. How do we have the sense of belonging to a country in terms of nation, nationalism, patriotism, and the kind of cultural pride that we have? Poetry has this function of building the identity of your nation. So, we have a number of founding stories for each country and the major founding story for any country is an epic. So, the epics uplift the national pride. In the case of India, we have 'Mahabharat' and it explains what it means to have a Bharat, that is India.

Similarly, we have Homer's 'Iliad' in Greece. In Rome we have this Virgil's 'Aeneid' and in English we have Edmund Spenser's 'The Fairie Queene'. Specifically, in the context of 16th Century Spenser wrote this epic *The Fairie Queene* referring to the Queen Elizabeth the 1st and this queen Elizabeth indirectly is connected to Britain from Brutus the Trojan Hero who was transformed into Britomart to suit Queen Elizabeth in this epic. These epics are powerful stories. Once created they float around to give essence of heritage and identity to the people of the land.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:22)

Morality: Ethical Value



- Didactic poems with morals
- The moral being and the moral intelligence
- Religious, secular, material and spiritual aspects
Thirukural, The Gita, The Bible, The Koran
- Wordsworth's narrative poem "Michael"
- The story of a hard working family
- Their dream of a sheepfold remains unfinished because their son lost himself in the city's ways.
"And [Michael] never lifted up a single stone."



Next, we move onto moral function of poems. Morality and ethical value are the key points in literature. And we have a specific kind of poems, they are called didactic poems. They have some morals. Some poems have implicit morals and these didactic poems have explicit moral values. And these poems address as moral being and it touches on our moral intelligence. You know, we have different kinds of intelligence. Emotional intelligence, spiritual intelligence, natural intelligence, we have so many. And one of the intelligences that we discuss when it comes to poetry or literature is moral intelligence.

Naturally poets who has some kind of belief in God or some kind of concept which is something ideal, something to do with the spiritual aspects or idealistic aspects of human beings. The poem may have some relation to material life. But how to live this material life with some moral values? that is what we have in great poems like Thirukural from Tamil Nadu, India, from The Gita from India. We have such ideas in The Bible. Some of you may know that the greatest literature in the western context is The Bible. Similarly for Muslims, The Quran is the best literature.

And when it comes to English literature, we have many such poems. Wordsworth has a narrative poem called 'Michael' and it deals with the story of a hard-working family. The family has a dream of building a sheepfold, but the sheepfold remains unfinished because the son who goes to the city London, loses himself in the ways of city life, the corrupt world. So, when you have this comparison between a pure world and a corrupt world naturally the

element of morality comes in. So, the poem has a beautiful line like this at the end “I never lifted up a single stone.”

(Refer Slide Time: 5:44)

Mystery: Religious Understanding



- Religious/Spiritual poems
- God, Life, Death, Love: great themes in literature, especially in poetry
 - Dante's *The Divine Comedy*
 - Donne's *Holy Sonnets*
 - George Herbert's "The Collar"
- Human beings's need to have faith in god
- Inability to have complete faith and yet having it
 - "Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Childe*:
 - And I reply'd , *My Lord*."



The next concept, the function of poetry that we deal with is religious understanding. We have to understand the fact that, there is some sense of mystery in the world and this mysterious end connected with some creator, some source of organizing this world into some particular order. So, we have religious poetry or spiritual poet, specifically religious poetry with reference to some religion and in general some spiritual poems we have. These poems deal with God, Life, Death, Love and these are the greatest themes in literature, especially in poetry.

We have this great epic Dante's 'The Divine Comedy.' It deals with entire universe, heaven, hell, purgatory. And we also have British poet John Donne. He deals with his religious understanding in Holy Sonnets. These are called terrible sonnets as well and specifically we have one poet from British literature that too metaphysical poetry George Herbert. He has a poem called 'The Collar'. There, he deals with the question of being a slave to God. How can an individual have freedom? that is the question that he asks. Do I have to be a slave of God or somebody? Why should I be? I want to have my freedom. That is what George Herbert says and so at the end when after expressing all his doubts, after his expressing all his struggles, he begins to have some faith. This poem shows the inability to have complete faith and yet having it. The poem ends like this,

“Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Childe*:

And I reply'd, My Lord.”

(Refer Slide Time: 7:44)

Communication: Linguistic Innovation



- T S Eliot on genuine poetry in Dante
 - “What is surprising about the poetry of Dante is that it is, in one sense, extremely easy to read...
genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.”
- Great poets use the common language of the people and bring life to poetry
 - Geoffrey Chaucer's *The General Prologue***
When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,



The next function of poetry that we will look at is Communication. Poetry by default communicates something to the reader, to the people. And when poets write poems they communicate. When they communicate some message, they also do some kind of innovation, experiment with the language that they use. They communicate and also experiment with the language that they use.

T S Eliot has a wonderful statement on genuine poetry in the context of an essay on Dante. He says, ‘What is surprising about the poetry of Dante is that it is, in one sense, extremely easy to read.’ He says, ‘Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.’ This is your point that we have to take into consideration very seriously when we have some kind of hesitation about poetry. Is poetry easy to understand? Can I read poetry? Can I make sense out of it? Nothing to worry about at all. Just imagine T S Eliot, a great poet writing about another great poet saying, ‘genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.’

What we deal with in this course is all genuine poetry. You can easily understand them though you may find some obstacles. You will be able to overcome all those obstacles as we go through this course. Great poets use the common language of the people and bring life to poetry. In British literature we have Geoffrey Chaucer. He begins his poem ‘The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales’ like this:

“When in April the sweet showers fall

And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all

The veins are bathed in liquor of such power

As brings about the engendering of the flower.”

This is the beginning. This is one of the famous beginnings of any poem in British literature particularly about Spring.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:50)

Entertainment: Therapeutic Aid



- Cathartic poems
 - Poetry is a **sanctuary** for both poets and readers.
 - Forgetting the harsh realities of life
 - Consoling our wounded heart and mind
 - Making sense of the confusing and chaotic life
- Bob Dylan' "Blowin' in the wind"**
- When we are determined not to see life with plain open eyes, the answer is blowing in the wind.
 "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
 The answer is blowin' in the wind"



The next function of poetry that we discuss is Entertainment. When you read poem, it gives pleasure. It gives some kind of profit. You feel happy about it and psychologically we have a tendency to have our own emotions being relieved from our mind when we enjoy poems. That is why we say that poetry is therapeutic. It is a kind of therapeutic aid. It has cathartic, that is emotional relief effect on the reader.

Some poets have said, and some readers also have said this, 'poetry is a sanctuary.' It is a sanctuary, a place of rest for both poets and readers. When we go to sanctuary what happens is, we forget the harsh realities of life. Sometimes we may find poems consoling us. We may get wounded by the kind of life that we see in our life. So, we get some kind of comfort from reading poetry.

We are also able to make sense of the confusing and the chaotic life that we see around us. The Nobel laureate Bob Dylan has a poem "Blowin' in the wind." It is a mind-blowing poem. What it says is,

“When we are determined not to see life with plain
open eyes, the answer is blowing in the wind.”

The answer is there very much in front of all of us, but we are not willing to see. So, he says,

“The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind.

The answer is blowin’ in the wind.”

(Refer Slide Time: 11:25)

Record: Reflective Mirror



- Poetry is a criticism of life; first, it is record of life.
- It holds a mirror up to reality, despite the critical problem of representation.
- We have official documents and records.
- But it is poetry that bares the soul of people.
Nissim Ezekiel's "Night of the Scorpion"
- A poem that portrays the Indian mother and culture
"My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children."



We have another function of poetry, it records, it reflects life as it is. So, it is a kind of mirror we have in literature especially in poetry. Matthew Arnold said this, 'poetry is a criticism of life.' It is a record of life. Then it holds a mirror up to reality, despite the critical problem of representation. We may believe that language cannot represent reality as it is, still we are able to see some sense of reality through language and literature particularly poetry. Look at the official documents and records that we have. Compare them with the kind of records that we have in poetry. There is a vast difference. One is objective: official. Another is subjective: emotionally felt impression that we have.

So, poetry actually bears a soul of people. An interesting poem in this context that we have is of the Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel. He has a famous poem 'Night of the Scorpion.' This poem portrays the Indian mother and the Indian culture that we have. A mother is bitten by a scorpion. She says,

"My mother only said,

Thank God the scorpion picked on me

And spared my children."

She is relieved that her children have been spared and she is bitten by the scorpion. She can bear the pain, whereas children may not be able to bear it.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:08)

Truth: Factual Negotiation



- Is truth subjective or objective?
- Most narrative, dramatic and lyric poems deal with the truth of life, albeit slantingly.
- Political and economic failures or mismanagements affecting society on large-scale

Simon Armitage's "Lockdown"

- A comment on what happens during a pandemic
"And I couldn't escape the waking dream
of infected fleas
in the warp and weft of soggy cloth
by the tailor's hearth ..."



Poetry deals with truth. What kind of truth we have in poetry? It may be factual. It may be imaginative. It may be an imaginative representation of your factual truth, but it is a kind of negotiation of truth that every poet has in his or her poetry. So, the question that we have to ask is, Is truth subjective or objective? Most narrative, dramatic and lyric poems deal with the truth of life, albeit slantingly, partially, incompletely, indirectly. This indirect understanding of truth or indirect representation of truth is what we have in poetry. Political and economic failures or mismanagements may affect a whole society on large scale. We have this example of Covid-19. The British poet laureate Simon Armitage has recently written a poem on 'Lockdown.' It is a comment on what happens during a pandemic. He says,

"And I could not escape the waking dream

Of infected fleas

in the warp and weft of soggy cloth

by the tailor's hearth... "

(Refer Slide Time: 14:25)

Beauty: Artistic Value



- Poetry is a verbal art, an icon, a well-wrought icon.
- Verbs, words, are problematic as they are ambiguous.
- Words well used in a structure of feeling, value, truth, etc., can create a beautiful and appealing form.

Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

- The poet calls the art form "Cold pastoral" but the art he has created in his poem is not cold.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."



We come to one of the greatest functions of poetry. It has some Artistic Value. It captures the beauty of life, the evanescent beauty of life, the temporal beauty of life, the changing flexible life. In this context we have this concept of poetry as a verbal art, an icon, a well-wrought, well-designed, well-constructed icon. This icon uses verbs, words. These are problematic as they are ambiguous. They may have multiple meanings but then if poets used words, well in a structure of feeling, with a structure of value or truth, they could create a beautiful and appealing form in poetry. One of the good examples that we have is John Keats's poem 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' Keats calls art form 'Cold pastoral' but the art he has created in his poem is not exactly cold. It has some life. It goes like this,

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all,

ye know on earth,

and all you need to know.'

(Refer Slide Time: 15:41)

Justice: Social Protest



- Our existence is inextricable from protests.
- Individual and social protests against visible and invisible forms of injustice find their way into poetry.
- Protests against different forms of exploitations

A Rich's "The Phenomenology of Anger"

- The poet expresses against her anger patriarchy.

"I hate you.
I hate the mask you wear, your eyes
assuming a depth
they do not possess, drawing me
into the grotto of your skull ..."



Another function of poetry that we have to look at is Justice. Here and there we find some social protest and some poets write about their own sense of indignation about the kind of injustice they see around them. Our existence as you know cannot be easily differentiated from the kind of protest that are going on around us. We may have some individual protests or social protests, some maybe visible, some maybe invisible but here and there you will find different forms of protest, particularly in poetry. These are protests against different forms of exploitations, oppressions.

Adrienne Rich, a feminist poet has a poem called 'The Phenomenology of Anger.' She feels angry about the patriarchal society that she lives in. So, she expresses her anger against patriarchy.

"I hate you.

I hate the mask you wear, your eyes

assuming a depth

they do not possess, drawing me

into the grotto of your skull ..."

(Refer Slide Time: 16:50)

Self: Human Affirmation



- To write poetry is to affirm one's self in language.
- Majority of people are disturbed and disrupted, esp., after the disruptive technologies and businesses in the globalized economy.
- Racism, sexism, casteism, neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism, anthropocentrism, globalism, etc., are threats to humanity and the planet.

Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"

- A wonderful poem of self-affirmation from the oppressed
"You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise."



Yet another function of poetry is Human Affirmation, human self-affirmation. The idea that you write poetry is a kind of affirmation of one's own self in language. Majority of people are disrupted especially after the disruptive technologies and businesses in the globalized economy. We have some kind of disturbances or other throughout our life, throughout centuries. So how do we overcome them and how do we deal with them?

We have some major forms of disturbances through some oppressive forces: racism, sexism, casteism, neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism, anthropocentrism and today globalism. These are all threats to humanity and the planet. We have seen this happening and many poets have expressed their discomfort with these kinds of oppressive forces. Maya Angelou, an American poet has a poem 'Still I Rise.' It is a wonderful poem of self-affirmation from the oppressed group of people. You will find it very interesting to watch her reading of this poem on the YouTube.

"You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I will rise."

(Refer Slide Time: 18:26)

Nature: Ecological Awareness



- Poetry may be composed through craft.
- But nature has remained a major theme in poetry.
- High awareness of nature in contemporary poetry

A R Ammons's *Garbage*

- COVID-19 is a stark reminder for us to protect nature for us and for our posterity.

“garbage has to be the poem of our time because garbage is spiritual, believable enough

to get our attention, getting in the way, piling up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and ...”



We come to one of the major functions of poetry today and it has always been there in the form of pastoral poetry and other concerns. Right from the beginning of humanity today we call it ecological poetry with an Ecological Awareness. It is not just nature poetry as we have in Wordsworth. We have a specific form of poetry, eco-poetry.

Poetry may be composed through craft, artistry. It has always dealt with nature as a major theme in poetry. Some poets have high awareness of nature in contemporary poetry. A well-known example of this eco-poetry is A R Ammons's *Garbage*. *Garbage*? What do you mean? Do you have a poem on garbage? Yes, we have many poems on garbage, and it is not just a poem. It is an epic poem. Epic poem on the kind of garbage mounts that we see in every city wherever you go. Today Covid-19 is a stark reminder for us to protect nature for us and for our posterity. Here is a small example from A R Ammons's *Garbage*, he says,

“garbage has to be the poem of our time because

garbage is spiritual, believable enough

to get our attention, getting in the way, piling

up stinking turning brooks brownish and ...”

It goes.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:00)

Summary



Various functions of poetry:

1. **Identity:** Patriotic Pride
2. **Morality:** Ethical Value
3. **Mystery:** Religious Understanding
4. **Communication:** Linguistic Innovation
5. **Entertainment:** Therapeutic Aid
6. **Record:** Reflective Mirror
7. **Truth:** Factual Negotiation
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11. **Nature:** Ecological Awareness



So far, we have looked at various functions of poetry. We began with

1. **Identity:** Touching upon patriotic pride
2. **Morality:** Concerning ethical value
3. **Mystery:** Dealing with religious understanding of life
4. **Communication:** Experimenting with language to express ideas very clearly to the audience
5. **Entertainment:** Having some therapeutic healing effect on the audience
6. **Record:** Showing the real life as it is in society
7. **Truth:** Referring to the factual negotiation that poets do through imagination in their poems
8. **Beauty:** Having the artistic function of poetry
9. **Justice:** Relating to social protest by people in various forms especially poetry
10. **Self:** Finally, you will understand all of us have to deal with our own self.

What are we? Who are we? Where are we? and How do we deal with the world? and first of all we must know Where we are and what we do? What kind of idea that we have about ourselves? Affirmation of our own self is a major function of poetry and lastly, we have found nature to be a predominant theme in poetry particularly, in contemporary poetry where ecological problems are addressed for our own welfare.

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References



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We have some references as usual. Please refer to these articles for further understanding of various functions of poetry. Thank you.