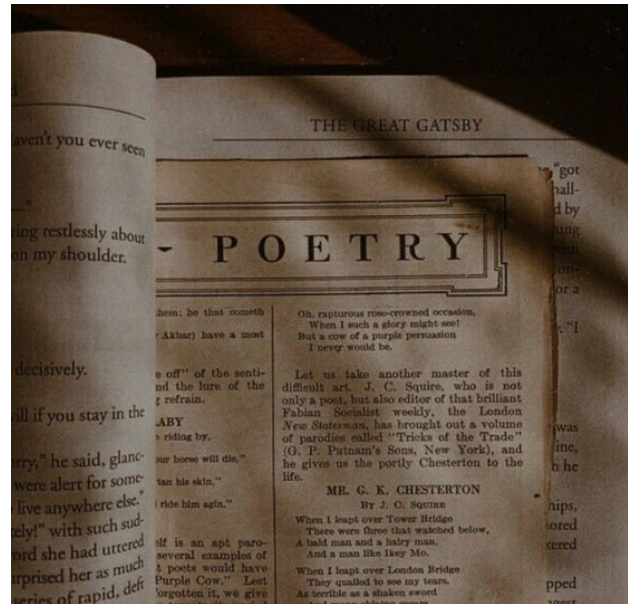


IN DEFENSE OF POETRY



Almost every single year, it happens. The squeak of the whiteboard markers scribbles ruthlessly at the front of the classroom, carving out each of the 6 letters as slow as humanly possible as if to delay the inevitable reaction. I can hear the simultaneous groans of my classmates even before the teacher turns around, a pained grin pasted on their face. And...wait for it...

"Alright, class," they say. "Today's the day we talk about...poetry."

Ah, there it is. The word that every student has dreaded hearing each year since the 4th grade. And yet each year it comes back to haunt the classroom, hanging over heads like a death sentence. Will today be the day we are forced to learn about limericks? Sit bored and tired as the teacher gives the same spiel on rhyme and meter that we get every year? Oh, I know! Maybe this time we'll learn about iambic pentameter...oh, right, we already learned about it last year. A shrug. I'll just scribble out the same haiku I've been submitting for years. Works like a charm.

Now, don't get me wrong. I know from experience how exhausting these one-off lessons shoved somewhere in between *The Great Gatsby* and *The Crucible* in the English curriculum can be. There is no denying the frustration and, yes, boredom that has struck me when the teacher announces that we will be analyzing Robert Frost -- for the fifth year in a row. To this day, a little part of me dies inside every time I have to read "The Road Not Taken," and it can feel so much easier to give up at that point. To jab a finger at teachers and declare that poetry is for wussies and romantics.

After all, no one *really* uses poetry...do they?

Actually, yes. And that weirdo would be me. And believe me, that face that you're making right now (Yep. That one) is the same one people usually give me when I say that I would, of my own volition, choose to spend my free time writing the same thing that makes most teenagers want to drop everything and run screaming out of the classroom. It's the same incredulous "oh," the "wow that's really cool"

before quickly moving on to the next topic that always makes me feel a little embarrassed to have even confessed something like that in the first place.

To me, though, poetry is so much more than an embarrassed confession, more than the sappy Shakespearean sonnets and badly rhymed love professions of countless rom coms that people make it out to be; from developing awareness and connections between ourselves and others to its abstractly beautiful way of capturing emotions, poetry possesses a power unique from that of other genres.

But when we dismiss these words as a lesser form of literature, we don't just deprive individuals of the chance to learn the difference between haikus and limericks; we rob them of the opportunity to explore this method of expression and human connection -- for likely the rest of their lives.

A HISTORY OF HATRED

But poetry wasn't always this way. With a history rooted in the very beginnings of language itself, poetry first began, not in any structured form, but as an extension of speech, even predating the creation of written text. With hymns, psalms, verses, and stories, poems served, not as meaningless rambles to an unhearing public, but "instruments of teaching and learning" (Aguasaco). As human language developed and evolved with the people, poetry expand along with it. And it was through this pattern of growth that language and poetry became intertwined, where Emerson declared that "every word was once a poem" and every poet "a maker of words" (qtd in Aguasaco). Language acts as the "fundamental instrument" of poetry, but poetry similarly drives language as it continues to pay testament to the rich history of words.

Compare this idea with the derogatory comments of the modern day, and you might wonder where it all began. As it turns out, this derision is nothing new. The likes of Plato and Aristotle attacked poetry for its "imaginative projections" and its corrupting influence on "the citizens of the just city, especially the impressionable youth" (Lerner). And the criticism didn't end there. All through the Renaissance, intellectuals barraged poetry with metaphorical tomatoes declaring it "useless" and "dangerous," made less valuable because it was less real than history and philosophy. To them, poetry, and indeed many of the liberal arts, are made to feel less than -- simply because they are "soft skills" deemed somehow too weak to have any proper use in society.

Looking at today's reality, society doesn't appear much changed. I mean, in all those years, you would think that poetry, adapted in so many ways to our modern society would be more admired? Or at least more appreciated in hindsight? But with a mere 6.7% of Americans who have read poetry at least once within the past year and the trend showing no signs of relenting, this is certainly not the case (qtd in Ingraham). So, how is it that these opinions continue to rear their ugly heads?

To answer this question, let's take a trip back in time to my old elementary school 4th grade classroom. It was there, among smiling posters and haphazardly colored drawings, that we gained mastery through "confidence and real experience," exploration and experimentation (Harris). But when it came to poetry? They gave us structured haikus and cinquains, blueprints for diamantes that were dictated by half a dozen rules from syllables to capitalization, punctuation to word usage. Compared to the unshackled opportunities that other subjects afforded, poetry was a strict master, binding our creativity to grammatical conventions and trapping our voices in our throats.

It only got worse in middle school and high school where "students complain of this forensic approach to the study of poetry, in which a text is dissected and rearranged to support a formulaic argument: spoonfed, memorised, regurgitated in the exam hall" (Regis). With systems like these, it's no wonder that students have come to hate poetry. The same poems have been dichotomized, dismembered, disassembled

so many times that their original meanings have been lost -- and with it, our appreciation for them. As Andrew Simmons, writer for *The Atlantic* and teacher puts it, "the literature itself becomes secondary, boiled down to its Cliff's Notes demi-glace" (Simmons).

But what happens when we continue to think like this is far more devastating than a low grade on an English assignment. You don't have to pick a poem apart word by word to appreciate its message or feel the gut-punch of a particularly heart-wrenching line. You don't have to write a rhetorical analysis to acknowledge the power of words and connect with the poet writing (or speaking!) them. But by debasing the entire genre of poetry, we don't even give ourselves a chance to do either.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Let's face it: life isn't at all like the sunshine and rainbow-filled adventure that lots of poems make it out to be. But as it turns out, poetry has a lot more to teach the world than the wonders of true love and nature. People like Maya Angelou tell the violent history of African American people through poetry. Others tell their own stories of eating disorders and depression, gender identity and childhood trauma. These are no subjects for a light-hearted assignment; they are thought-provoking topics worthy of people's awareness. And it is these poets, from Maya Angelou to E.E Cummings, that lead the charge in expanding people's worldviews as they reforge traditional poetry through the lenses of relatable and relevant subjects, lending their voices towards revealing these truths to the world.

With the rise of social media and the seemingly never-ending flood of opinions not to mention the "social separation" induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing these truths becomes all the more important to maintaining our connections with others. As poetry continues to give voice to other people's hardships and struggles, Dr. Robert Thomas, Professor of Practice at the Scheller College of Business, argues that it acts as "a way to ground people through experiences of others in shared humanity" (qtd in "Empathy in Business"). There is something so brave and so binding about watching someone expose the deepest parts of themselves, trusting the audience to appreciate their words and listen to their experiences. In those moments of such intense vulnerability, poetry isn't just distant advice from some beard-stroking philosopher; it is a glimpse into another person's reality and a chance to empathize and understand their pain -- even if you've never experienced it yourself.

Even when it comes to our own internal connections, poetry acts as a vehicle for reflection, forcing us to slow and down and pay attention to both our inner selves and the world around us. In this day and age where technology monopolizes our attention spans, it's all too easy to "feel overwhelmed by the notifications, busyness and loudness of our lives" (Warren). But unlike the faced-paced nature of tweets and Instagram posts that encourage you to scroll as fast as possible through endless feeds (alas, I am no exception), poetry forces you to reflect on another person's thoughts and truly contemplate their perception of the world -- even (and perhaps especially) if it differs from your own. Even if it's only a two-minute interim before launching yourself back into the storm of Internet information, this call "back to... the embodied world around us and to our internal lives" is certainly a step in the right direction (Warren).

And though this connection and reflection is arguably true for all types of literature, poetry is uniquely equipped to evoke thought and emotion. While novels and theatre tell narratives, poetry is all about capturing the essence of the soul. It is this emotion combined with a greater awareness of the self and the realities of the world that has the potential to inspire change. I recently attended a talk on environmental awareness while on a school field trip to a local poetry festival. And though I was initially hesitant to believe that anyone could advocate something so science-y as environmentalism through such a blatant clash of English-ness like poetry, the poets onstage left me floored. They told stories rife with biological

terms about the symbiotic relationships in nature, wove imagery-driven arguments about the need for environmental action. By the time my group and I tiptoed out the door, I was positively spell-bound. And I'd like to think that some of the others in the room left feeling just as inspired as I was. Maybe I imagined it, but in those lingering moments, everyone in the theatre was ready to take up arms for the cause of the environment after hearing only a half hours' worth of poetry. Is it too much to believe that other poetry could do the same?

From reflection to connection, awareness to emotion, poetry is built around forging a vision for hope and a better -- or at least more understanding -- future. Because while reading might make you think, poetry goes beyond thought; it makes you *feel*. And it is this feeling that inspires growth, whether that be something as simple as getting to know one another a little better or using that empathy to drive change.

LANGUAGE OF THE SOUL

Whether it's in elementary school or high school, the same cycle repeats itself. I'd like to say that it's gotten better, that my fellow classmates' eyes don't glaze over anymore, that their heads don't drop like flies onto their desks whenever the mention of poetry darts past their ears. But I would be lying. I won't say that there hasn't been change; there has. Between Amanda Gorman's inspiring poem at President Joe Biden's inauguration and Friday Poems in AP Lang (thank you, Mr. Melvin), there is a greater appreciation for poetry than I've seen before. But the truth is, I'm not sure this is enough.

Between social media and the easy access that technology affords us, we seem to be diving even deeper down the technological rabbit hole every day. And though these things do give us the gift of convenience, when we degrade ourselves by falling into the trap of non-expression and shallow communication, when we deny ourselves and others the freedom that poetry offers, we do just that: we fall. There is something far greater that comes with getting to read someone else's experiences and feel them like they're your own or hear someone pour their heart and soul into a spoken word poem and think "That's it. That's exactly what that felt like." Poetry is, as they say, the language of the soul, and its ability to capture the essence of imagination and emotion, its ability to form connections within ourselves and with others doesn't just lend itself to complexity; it adds to our humanity.

And, no, I'm not saying that if we don't read poetry we will inevitably turn into blood-sucking monsters or will be fated to live perpetually in a state of desolation like Lord Byron describes in "Darkness." But I am saying that it's about time poetry got some of the appreciation that it deserves. Because our current society, one that glazes its eyes over with television and abbreviates text messages and analyzes the soul out of what few art forms continue to exist within the system only deprives us of the in-depth connections that we gain from others.

And the result? The result is a society who has grown up hating poetry and never bothered to seriously consider why. A society who slowly loses out on the ability to be vulnerable, to show each other the deepest, truest parts of others. But who are we without our expressions, our emotions, our empathy? When we give up our ability to use language, what do we become then?

Unfortunately, I don't have the answers for you. I'm only a 16-year-old high school student/poet/sleep deprived teenager; I don't know the answers to most math problems. But I can tell you this: our ability to express and connect is a part of what makes us human. So, don't be afraid to write that poem. Don't be ashamed to look up spoken word on YouTube or plug "poetry" into a Google search. We may not all be the next William Shakespeare, but we can allow ourselves to contribute to a more connected community through poetry. We can allow ourselves to grow and inspire and *feel*. And, hopefully, as we begin to embrace our humanity, the world will begin to follow.

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