

A Brief Remark on Interpreting Poetry

Qiaoling Yu

Huanghe Science and Technology College
Zhengzhou, China 450056

Abstract—When we analyze poems, we explore the words to see how they move and, more specifically, how they move us. When our initial excitement subsides, it's time to take a close look at the inner workings of the poet's art. So, we should learn how to analyze a poem to understand and appreciate its craftsmanship. We should explore such poetic devices such as rhyme, figurative language, and vision.

Key words—*rhyme; figurative language; vision; interpret*

I. WHAT POETRY IS

Poetry is universal to all people, all places, and all times. The most unlettered people have memorized poetry; the most cultured have nurtured it. Poetry knows no barriers, neither culture, age, gender, nor religion. Why is poetry the closest thing humanity has to a universal language? Because poetry delights the ear, mind, and soul. It satisfies our craving for beauty and music through the power of its language.

Now, many poets have tried to define poetry. Edgar Allan Poe believed that poetry was “the rhythmical creation of beauty”. Robert Frost believed it was “a reaching out toward expression, an effort to find fulfillment.” According to Matthew Arnold, “Poetry is simply the most beautiful, the most impressive, and the most effective mode of saying things.” Professor Wang Baotong said, “Poetry is the art of representing human experiences, in so far as they are of lasting or universal interest, in metrical language, usually with chief reference to the emotions and by means of the imagination.” Poetry is a beautiful language, and poets display the wonderful world to us with such writings.

II. RHYME AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

A. Rhyme

Rhyme is the repetition of the same or similar sounds often occurring at set intervals in a poem. For example, the word “light” rhymes with “fight” “sight”, and so on. The rhyming consonant is the sound “ight”, on which the poet forms other rhymes by changing the first letters. Many people find rhyme pleasing in itself, but it also serves to suggest order and pattern to a poem. In addition, rhyme often relates to the meaning of the verse; it brings words together and suggests relationships.

To some extent, the use of rhyme is similar to the musical pattern of returning to a recognized theme or note. In ancient poetry, before the advent of writing, rhyme was invaluable, for it was far easier to commit to memory a poem that had a strong pattern of rhyme.

B. Figurative Language

Robert frost, one of the most famous twentieth-century poets, once said, “Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another.” Of course, this is an exaggeration, but it does underline the importance of figurative language—saying one thing in terms of another. Words have a literal meaning that can be looked up in any dictionary, but they can also be employed so that something other than that literal dictionary meaning is intended. What is impossible or difficult to convey to a reader through the literal use of language may be highly possible through the use of figures of speech, also called tropes. Figures of speech make language significant, moving, and fascinating. “My love is a rose” is, when taken at face value, ridiculous, for few people love a plant with a prickly, thorny stem. But “rose” suggests many other possible interpretations—delicate beauty, something soft and rare, a costly item, etc. and so it can be implied in a figurative sense to mean “love” or “loved one”.

If a reader comes across the phrase “Brutus growled,” the reader is forced, if the poem has indicated that Brutus is human, to accept “growled” in a nonlinearly manner. We understand that it is likely that the poet is suggesting that Brutus sounded like an animal, perhaps a lion or a bear, and indicates Brutus's irritation or unrest. The author calls forth the suggestion of wild animals to describe Brutus most vividly and accurately. This is far more effective than saying “Brutus spoke roughly” or “Brutus acted like a loud person.” By using a vivid figure of speech, the author calls the reader's imagination into play.

III. CREATED VISION

When we use the term “vision” in relationship to verse, we are saying that the poet's vision is shared by the audience. By the end of a successful poem, then, we should have something that we recognize, perhaps even a reflection of our inner selves as we have not before experienced it.

There are two ways in which a poet can create this successful vision. The first is to express his or her views so clearly that we are seeing what the poet wishes us to see with a new closeness and clarity. The second way involves using figures of speech or unexpected comparisons or juxtapositions of words to force us to make comparisons we have never before imagined.

IV. READING AND INTERPRETING POETRY

One way to read a poem is to scan it once, then go back and note all the figures of speech. Identify each one, and decide what elements make up the comparison (what is being compared to what). Make some notes about why the poet would want readers to think about these specific comparisons. Then, read the poem through once again. Look at the figures of speech that you have noted and see how each relates to the meaning of the poem. Decide what the speaker's feeling are toward the subject and how many subjects of comparison there are. Here are some questions you may wish to ask yourself:

- is each subject compared to one thing, or is one subject compared to many?
- is the comparison developed at length? If so, to what purpose?
- what is the point that poet is making through the comparison?
- if the subject is related to several things, how do the different images fit together?
- are they unrelated, leaving it to the reader to create a pattern of meaning?
- or does the poet suggest some sort of relationship or contrast between them?
- how does the pattern thus created form your sense of the poet's.

While there are different methods of approaching poetry, there are some general guidelines that have proved helpful for many readers. Try these steps:

- Read through the poem once and see how much of the author's meaning you can immediately grasp.
- Then go back through the poem a second time, line by line. Define all the images and symbols that refer to outside reference works or to other poems by the same author, if necessary.
- If you are still having difficulty understanding the poem, consider "translating" each line into prose. Or substitute simpler words for more difficult ones.
- When you understand all the basic words and ideas in the poem, reread the poem a few more times to grasp its entire meaning.

Poetry will make a great deal more sense if you read it in an everyday speaking tone, letting the accents fall where they seem natural. Pay attention to the punctuation the author uses, ending a line only when the punctuation indicates that it is correct to do so. The punctuation marks in poetry tell us how the author wishes the work to be read. For example, a period or an exclamation mark can be thought of as a complete stop, while a comma, in contrast, would be a pause or a half-stop. As a result, there is no need to stop at the end of a line of poetry unless there is some punctuation mark to indicate that we must.

Let's apply the suggestions outlined above to the reading and interpretation of the poems that follow:

Among School Children

1

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and history,
To cut and sew, to be neat in everything
In the beat modern way --- the children's eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

2

I dream of a Ledaean baby, bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy---
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blend
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

3

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage
I look upon one child or t' other there
And wonder if she stood so at that age---
For even daughters of the swan can share
Something of every paddlers' heritage---
And had that color upon cheek or hair,
And thereupon my heart is driven wild:
She stands before me as a living child.

4

The present image floats into the mind---
Did Quattro cento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?
And I though never of Ledaean kind
Had pretty plumage once---enough of that,
Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

5

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
 Honey of generation had betrayed,
 And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
 As recollection or the drug decide,
 Would think her son, did she but see that shape
 With sixty or more winters on its head,
 A compensation of his setting forth?
 Or the uncertainty of his setting forth

6

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
 Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
 Solider Aristotle played the taws
 Upon the bottom of a king of kings;
 Would-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
 Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
 What a star sang and careless Muses heard:
 Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

7

Both nuns and mothers worship images,
 But those the candles light as not as those
 That animate a mother's reveries,
 But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
 And yet they too break hearts---O Presences
 That passion, piety or affection knows,
 And that all heavenly glory symbolise---
 O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

8

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
 Nor bleat-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
 O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,
 Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
 How can we know the dance from the dance?

---William Butler Yeats

A. Look at the First Line and First Stanza

The first stanza tells us that the speaker, a "sixty-year-old smiling public man," is touring a parochial school, asking what the children are learning. Again, we can infer from this information that the speaker bears some relation to Yeats, as we check the dates and discover that he was indeed in his early sixties when he wrote this poem. A quick look at his biography reveals that he was very well known and well respected at this time.

B. Study the Second Stanza

This stanza can be seen as describing the child telling the speaker some tale that changed their normally happy and carefree child-hood day to tragedy (as it would seem to a child). After they shared the sadness of the event, they were in such sympathy and agreement with each other that their very natures blend into the form of a single being. Thus, the image suggests how two persons can share grief and blend into one when their natures are in accord.

C. Move on to the Third Stanza

Suddenly back in the present again, the speaker wonders if any of the little girls before him looks as Maud did all those years ago when they were children together. In this third stanza, he suddenly sees a little girl who looks just as Maud did, many years ago, and his "heart is driven wild".

D. Analyze the Fourth Stanza

In the fourth stanza, the speaker thinks about how Maud looks in the present, as a mature woman. Quattro cento is a reference to the fifteenth century, and here he is calling to mind the painters of the period, especially Botticelli, noted for his lovely portraits of woman. The speaker notes that although he was never as handsome as she was beautiful, he did have "pretty plumage once." He stops his remembrances then, for that is all passed now, and it is better to smile about the past for the sake of all the schoolchildren looking at the famous visitor. He now sees himself as "a comfortable kind of old scarecrow," smiling nicely for the children.

E. Infer Meaning from the Fifth Stanza

In this stanza he thinks of his mother, looking at her infant son now sixty years old. The infant will either "sleep" or "struggle" to escape from the world, depending on whether the drug works or the memory of the bliss of life before birth takes over. Would his mother, looking at her sixty-year-old son, think that his present "shape" (i.e., condition, status, fame) was compensation for the pain of his birth or her fear of what fate would allot to him?

F. Connect Meaning in the Sixth Stanza

In the sixth stanza, we see that Plato believed that nature was but an appearance ("spume"), covering the final spiritual and mathematical reality ("ghostly paradigm"). Aristotle was Alexander the Great's tutor and beat him by using "taws" or straps. Aristotle believed that form was really in the matter of nature and thus nature itself had reality. So the first two lines here explain what Plato thought about nature, and the second two tell us that Aristotle disciplined Alexander (the king of kings) with a strap.

The last line of this stanza is a contemptuous description of all three philosophers.

G. Turn to the Seventh Stanza

The beginning of this stanza says that both nuns and mothers worship images: Nuns worship images of Christ or the Virgin; mothers worship their own inward images of their children. Mothers do not worship the same images nuns do, as the next line states.

V. CONCLUDE WITH THE FINAL STANZA

The final stanza draws together all the images and expresses Yeast's theme: life is a cosmic dance in which every human ability and part joins smoothly. The individual becomes part of the whole, as the dance becomes one with dance. He sees this cosmic dance as a means of bringing together the conflicting parts of past and present and daily life. This concluding image has become very famous.

VI. CONCLUSION

When you read poetry, follow the poet's directions. Do not insert punctuation where none is indicated, and do not force a word to be stressed that would not normally be stressed. Some poets frequently indicate to readers that a certain word should be stressed by the addition of a stress mark. Readers, of course, should follow such directions. Some lines may be read in more than one way, depending, for example, on the reader's background. For instance, a poem read by a Southerner might sound very different from one read by a New Englander. Use your common sense and pronounce each line as you would normally speak, and the poem will make a great deal more sense to you.

REFERENCES

- [1] *Round the Realms of Gold*, Wang Baotong, Apr.2004.
- [2] *Interpret poetry*, Laurie E. Rozakis, W.B.Yezhi, Thomson Learning, Jan.2005.
- [3] *Internet*.
- [4] *A Survey of American Literature*, Chang Yaoxin, Dec.2003.
- [5] *Selected Readings in American Literature*, Yang Kaishen, Jul.2003.
- [6] *A Short History of English Literature*, Liu Bingshan, Jan.2004.
- [7] Wangdao Ding ,Qing Zu.English Poetry Introduction [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1994.
- [8] Weilian Ye.Poetics in China [M]. Shanghai: Joint Publishing Company LTD..1994.
- [9] Suhua Dong.Appreciate and Analyze the Well-known Poems[z]. Xi'an: World Book Publishing Company,1999.