
UNIT 1 POETRY: AN INTRODUCTION

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Poetry in its Linkage with Society
- 1.3 Poetry in the Process of Historical Development
 - 1.3.1 Poetry in the Augustan Age
 - 1.3.2 The Romantic trend
 - 1.3.3 Modernism and Poetry
 - 1.3.4 Poetry in Our Time
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Questions
- 1.6 References
- 1.7 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall grapple with the literary form known as poetry. First, we shall raise the question—What is poetry and how should one interpret it in general terms? After talking about it briefly, we shall proceed to consider a few opinions of established poets and critics to learn of the nature of poetry as well as its role and function. I am sure that this popular subject will be of some interest to you as scholars and students of literature. It will help you distinguish poetry from prose and take you into the domain of feelings and emotions as well as those ideas and attitudes that relate to higher goals of life, and the ideals to be pursued for making us self-aware and sensitive. Let us consider the precise sense in which the word poetry is used.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Under this head, the distinctive aspect of poetry may be considered. In this regard, let us take help from Philip Sydney who said of poetry that it was “almost the highest estimation of learning” (Enright 4). That means human learning realizes itself at a truly supreme level through the poetic act. It is assumed that wisdom is crystallized in poetry and enlighten those areas of life that generally remained shrouded in darkness. Sydney has left some scope for other forms of literature to come equal to poetry, to contend with them, through use of the word “almost.” For him, then, debate is needed to affirm the place that poetry enjoys with respect to rational and thoughtful prose. The latter belongs to philosophy where mind is active to understand the phenomena of the world surrounding us. Also mark that philosophy defines and explains even as poetry shares and communicates. The target for poetry is learning where for philosophy it is distinct and precise finding. In that sense, learning is simpler since based on observation and awareness. The terms of poetry and prose are laid out through deployment of specific vocabulary. Sydney knows the value of distinction and sticks to the set of words that would assist him in the enunciation of the point. His aim is to explore the region of truth as he has said that poetry “in the noblest nations and languages that are known,

hath been the first light-giver to ignorance, and first nurse, whose milk by little and little, enabled them to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges.” Clearly, in human social existence, poetry is the first measure of light, and source of nurturing, as it sets the tone for approaching complex processes of knowing that will then be mastered gradually. Here, we see that there is no binary between light and nurturing on one side and increased knowing on the other. Seeing and observing are one with continuance of effort to grasp deeper aspects of nature and society. So far as Sydney is concerned, beginnings of learning in its pure and spontaneous way are to be recognized in poetry across nations and communities.

Sydney wrote *An Apology for Poetry, or The Defence of Poetry* (from which the lines quoted above have been taken) in 1580, way before Shakespeare appeared on the English literary scene. That means poetry had come under attack at the time and “an apology” or a “defence” was needed to underpin the veracity of this art form. Let us not forget that for a long period of time literature and poetry had been synonymous. Thus, poetry or the whole of literature had come to lose their sheen as they were seen to be engaged with “unreality,” not with areas of contention in politics, religion or nature that were accepted as tangible and real. The same may be true for the times to come, as in our own time, too, we connect with poetry partly defensively, but chiefly to assert its place in the real imaginative act. One says this because knowledge soon went in the direction of science and learning as a seminal enterprise had to fend for itself through evoking support in feelings and fantasy. But the effort to assert has continued uninterrupted. Reference can be made to Dryden’s *Dramatic Poesy*, Wordsworth’s *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge’s and Matthew Arnold’s discussions on poetry, and T.S. Eliot’s “Individual Talent,” among others. All these take up the cause of poetic expression unmistakably.

1.2 POETRY IN ITS LINKAGE WITH SOCIETY

Let us look at poetry from a slightly different perspective, that of social significance enshrined in the verse form. It is not merely to do with various branches of knowledge or with imagining scenes of peace and harmony in life as the Romantics in England did in the early nineteenth century. For this purpose, we pick the poet and critic Jose Marti (1853-1895) tell us about the poetic use to which the great American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892) put in the same century when the Romantics lived and wrote. Talking of Whitman, Marti says about poetry the following:

It is a matter of expressing in words the hubbub of throngs of people settling down, of cities at work, and of oceans and rivers harnessed and put to man’s use. Will Walt Whitman pair consonants and combine in tame couplets these mountains of merchandise, these forest of mast, these cities of ships, these battles where millions are felled to preserve man’s rights, and let the sun, whose limpid fire spreads over the vast landscape, rule over all? (Marti 182)

We note here words that denote larger than life developments such as merchandise, ships, man’s rights, and vast landscape. Obviously, the change occurring in America is the issue. Firstly, should literature take cognizance of this change, and if yes, can the mentioned aspect be contained in simple description? For Marti, the change in conditions of life should be reflected in literary writing so that it may prepare itself for holding the range and intensity of contemporary

happenings. Literature in general and poetry in particular take cognizance of the happenings around them. Also, the happenings would relate to occupations and workings of people that keep them in good shape. Motivations of living are a good source of inspiration as well as actual experimentation for improving upon existing methods of techniques to produce. For this reason, poetry depicts people in their states of happiness and sadness. It appears quite simple to write a happy or sad song or a tragic account of failures in life. But come to think of it, these states carry within their fabric a whole area of human survival and struggle. As such, the emotional states are records of people's working in their circumstances. On another plane, they set standards of quality that humans created by dint of hard work and discipline. Good poetry makes the reader aware about the said circumstances and the struggles waged by people working in a spirit of mutuality and unity. So, we have individuals and groups living in a social ethos. In the process of living, individuals and groups construct ideas to suit their requirements. The general nature of the activity mentioned in our discussion is the raw material that poetry uses to project its meaning, ideals, lessons drawn from life and specific morals to pursue. Above, we have cited a response to Whitman's poetry. Taking help from the reference to Whitman, Marti has responded to the issue of representing life in the following manner:

Walt Whitman speaks in verses that seem bereft of music until, after listening to them for a while, one hears something like the earth echoing to glorious, unshod, conquering armies riding across it. At times his language strikes one as the window of a butcher shop hung with sides of beef; at others like the song of patriarchs singing in chorus with that gentle world-weariness, at the hour when smoke vanishes in the clouds. (Marti 183)

In this quote, we are struck by the earth echoing to the march of armies. It signifies the power of poetry that can hold a conversation with the working of the earth. Which are the armies crossing the vast grounds of various countries on a mission of victory? In an obvious sense, the armies comprise energetic young men going in a particular direction bound to an aim. See that the armies do not have to concern with personal desires but to achieve a commonly held ideal. The mention of patriarchs and clouds lifts the level of the account to an altogether different level. The comment says about the times of high passion, glory and big triumphs. Soon we become conscious about the nineteenth century America caught in turbulence and vigour. Also note how poetry in an essential sense covers all aspects of nature and society, of human and other forms of life and spreads its net. That is where poetry is elemental, touching only broader parts of reality. That is where we might start from for making of poetry.

1.3 POETRY IN THE PROCESS OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

From here on, we go into the specific areas of society and history from where poetry draws its inspiration and gets moulded by the existing environment. In this part of discussion, we shall talk about poetic trends and also seek assistance from poets and critics if necessary. What comes straight to mind in this regard are the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the post-Elizabethan decades in the seventeenth century, poetry as a literary medium was in use quite consistently. First the Metaphysical poetry that experimented with a new kind of emphasis. It went by wit essentially. The emotion was sought to be held in check most of the

time. The language of poetry was distinct and self-conscious. It defied convention and offered a challenge to the reader's imagination. The mode was of a game that poets played. Since drama had been in the air for a long while, the poets enjoyed the deployment of dialogue. Tension prevailed at the centre of the poem more in the manner of a device than a naturally occurring flow. Also, the poets dealt with such philosophical concerns as death, love, time and ideas playing a crucial role in life. We might as well say that a sort of culmination of all these happened in the way Milton composed his poetic works, mainly *Paradise Lost*. Clash of views was the hallmark of Milton's expression. Let us remember that Milton had initially planned to write *Paradise Lost* as a drama. His intention was to bring issues such as the fall, the role of Satan, God and Son as well as other important figures in the ambit of interaction. Significantly, both Adam and Eve were to move through the perspective of sin in terms that would bring them closer to the reader and make him see the concerned tussles as if his own. So far as poetry was concerned, Milton interpreted it as "the precious life-blood of a master spirit." This is high praise. Think of the words in this statement that raise the level of poetry to the uppermost level of human creativity. Of this kind of poetic expression, Milton is the last example, giving his all to it and showing the said expression is akin to man's cherished emotions and goals.

1.3.1 Poetry in the Augustan Age

However, poetry could not sustain any longer the vigour that Chaucer, Marlowe, Shakespeare and Donne had expressed through it. One may ask about the reason behind the decline of it towards the end of the seventeenth century. It moved out of the territory of drama and threat to it came also from pressures asking for prose. In that context, the eighteenth century was in the middle of preparing ground for realistic appraisal of things, the mundane and immediate. No more those flights either in intellect or passion that had made poetry their companion. In general, issues cropping up in the wake of mercantilism gave a different turn to poetry by confining it to the life in the city. The eighteenth century was termed the Augustan age and its ideals had undergone vital changes. It aligned itself with stability, social manners, moral conduct, considerations of harmony and a new definition of art at the centre of which stood the heroic couplet. In that scheme, reason and intellect occupied superior position satire as a form was thought to be corrector of deviations from the norms. The strengths of the eighteenth-century poetry lay in exposing hypocrisy, sham and falsehood that was on display in day-to-day dealings of people in the urban centres. The times had to do much with the powerful section of trade and commerce that had wealth but no dignity. With them, depth of emotions and feelings was never the issue and success alone mattered. Folly and humbug reigned supreme. Those were the new realities. Let us remind ourselves, however, that literature cannot impose its own traditional norms, the ones rooted in the earlier circumstance, on the act of representation. Instead, writing has to keep pace with novelty on which it has limited control, if at all. We note in the eighteenth century an empowerment of the ordinary folk in the country. The merchants who came to rule the roost were an offspring of the ordinary masses busy with production in small towns and villages from where they were heading towards the cities. Their produce was becoming merchandise since it was meant to be made available to a wider section of consumers away from the place where producers lived. Increased amount of wealth in the hands of this section was the result. At the same time, this section required manners and morals going parallel to their social influence. At the core

of their activity and aspiration was planning, appropriate articulation to communicate with fellow tradesman, handling the class of artisans and labour skillfully, to name a few. On its side, skillfulness would bring in clever ways to bring round difference and disagreement. In sum, mind and reason were the requisites. Even if prosaic, these traits suited the new ethos better than imaginative exploring of the surroundings. Put them next to the literary representation of the day, the sharply satirical verse, and see that the two were identical in nature. This is what eighteenth century poetry, such as that of Alexander Pope, was. Many of Pope's titles contained the word "essay"—*An Essay on Man*, and *An Essay on Criticism*, for instance. The word had a somewhat connotation then, nevertheless it was indicative of the changed scenario. Those became examples of the Augustan poetry that contributed towards lending support and authenticity to the society unfolding at the time. Two things, then—closeness to prose and drawing attention to reason than emotion came up concretely. The following poetic manner comes to mind:

In Poets as true genius is but rare,
 True Taste as seldom is the Critic's share;
 Both must alike from Heav'n derive their light,
 These born to judge, as well as those to write.

(Enright, *An Essay on Criticism* 111)

In these lines, Pope is remarkably near the spoken idiom. For the sake of clarity, let us paraphrase Pope's lines—"In poets, we do not see genuine talent these days. In the same manner, critics also do not exhibit any sense of judgment. Both poets and critics draw their wisdom from the heavenly powers, the former have their role in judging what is wrong or right and the job of the latter is to write." The point made by Pope is to differentiate the two from the angle of that which they are supposed to do in society. The only word of contention here is "heavenly powers" that denotes less the figure of God or gods than the inclination inherent in the minds of the two. Further, judging and writing are placed in the context of work and its merit. Reduce work and merit to labour and value and the poetic line begins to resemble a statement made by a shopkeeper in terms of the trade. At the same time though, Pope is no less a poet than his counterparts in the seventeenth or nineteenth centuries since he raises fundamentally the question of what is beneficial for society and how the act of writing can tell us about the evaluation of effort in the domain of human creativity. Indeed, he complains about the falling standards of writing in poetry and criticism. The irony lies in the fact that literary writing is under attack, in these lines, from those who do not take their job seriously and let idleness and mediocrity enter creativity. Also, mediocrity would work through the mundane and average, not inspired engagement with truth and intellectual substance. Pope's poetry is rooted in the reality of his time and reflects the rot spreading in contemporary sensibility.

1.3.2 The Romantic Trend

It is interesting to note that in the eighteenth century, foundations had been laid for a new kind of writing that swore by imagination, something that was not figuring in Augustan poetry. In the period, mundane ruled and the lofty occupied back seat. Reason and intellect were at work, not the aspect of life that drew strength as well as appeal from feelings and emotions. I have the Romantic

movement in mind that recognized the place of high ideals in life and evoked the hidden areas of human interest. The Romantic movement also had a close alliance with nature, the simplicity of rural life and the wonder residing in dreaming about social change and human fulfilment. These last poems were absent in the urban setting of mercantilism, money, profit-making and success. A third thing stayed in the background. Next to England, just on the other side of the border in France, a chain of momentous happenings had started that would take in its grip the thinking of the whole of Europe. That was the French Revolution. At a higher level, the French upheaval had much in common with the American War of Independence a couple of decades before, in the seventies. The American War was characterized by the spirit of anti-colonialism and the French Revolution, starting in 1789, had the struggle against monarchy at its centre. These two movements would not make political sense to bourgeois consolidation in England. I am deliberately using this reference to show that poetry might tap emotional resources of a whole nation, if not of a multiplicity of nations, and shake up deeply entrenched structures all over the place. Romanticism was such an example of a poetic trend. Thus, I return to the nature of poetry and project a changed point of view of literature in the context. Let me draw your attention to what William Wordsworth would say about poetry towards the close of the eighteenth century. At the threshold of a new era of literary writing, Wordsworth's object was to

choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (Enright 164)

The argument put forward by Wordsworth has two important expressions, "language really used by men" and "a certain colouring of imagination." The men denote in the context common people in the village who share their intent with the neighbour directly and through simple language. The scope of the intent is widened with use of imagination. The emphasis is clearly on simplicity and genuineness. This was missing in the poetry of the eighteenth century where wit, insight and criticism as well redefining of norms were central. Wordsworth's departure from the convention indeed clarifies for us the crucial trait of Romanticism. In one major step, Wordsworth crosses the boundary of culture and reaches the rural setting. For Romanticism, the village is the well-considered preference. See that the note struck by Wordsworth is an act of conscious assertion.

And the assertion is not of the royalty or the moneyed and privileged, but of the simple folk who speak “a plainer and more emphatic language.” In the last part of the passage, we note the mention of the “elementary feelings” twice. What could be the reason for this? The elementary signifies both fundamental and vital, something without which humans will cease to be human. Poetry for the Romantic viewpoint is partial to the trait of innocence. At a deeper level, this becomes a sharp critique of ostentation and prosperity, laying bare their hollowness. As you remember, Romanticism has a connect with the dominant passion that the French Revolution generated. Looked at in this manner, the Romantic definition of poetry relates with the feelings yet to be recognized in their true potential. The future of poetry is to rest with those who dream of an alternative paradigm of creativity.

To take the cause of poetry further, Wordsworth touched upon the idea of the poetic process, the act in which the poet is aware of the job he performs. That is the beginning of a new aspect with which any future poet deals with. In this regard, the famous lines of Wordsworth are the following:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. (Enright 180)

This quote is a good guide to anyone aiming to be a poet. For Wordsworth, the aim is to capture a feeling the poet had in the raw. That, however, was not the time to write but to wait for a tranquil moment when he revisited the feeling to affirm its true nature. The feeling having meanwhile attained a concrete form became fit for capturing. It takes the poet back to the moment when he had the feeling initially. Thus, tranquillity has a functional role, and “the tranquility gradually disappears.” We have seen that Wordsworth as a Romantic poet is careful about his poetic act and is driven by the cause of awakening the self and asserting it.

1.3.3 Modernism and Poetry

For the literary trend that started in the latter half of the nineteenth century and reigned supreme in the twentieth century, I use the blanket term Modernism. Firstly, the word itself is problematic. Immediately as modernism is used, the nineteenth century, howsoever appealing a literature it may have produced, is pushed into the background as unmodern. Secondly, modernism does not indicate a direct link with the established viewpoint of modernity. Interestingly, humanism or rationality, too, have been kept outside the fold of modernism. The word sticks to the present time, namely the late nineteenth century when social systems in Europe had become shaky. The truth of that moment became the watchword of literature. Let us have a look at the reason behind this interpretation of modernism.

The regimes of the period could not move towards increased production any longer. The glut of goods in the market caused crash in the prices and profits fell. Alternatively, if production was restricted, factories faced closure and workers lost jobs which in turn affected demand for goods in the market. It appeared that laissez faire or the free market principle had lost relevance in the new situation.

In the realm of writing, this meant human initiative had become weak and control on it from invisible forces in the economic environment had grown stronger. Think of its connection with a writer who felt stifled by the society he lived in. What kind of human figures would he visualize for depiction in his writing? For him, success or failure became meaningless since writing suffered loss of faith. Literary expression was removed from its central position in society and the writer was without a point from where to view life. This aspect of a dead end was projected as modernism. Meanwhile, clouds of a world war hovered over Europe. It was no longer possible to be a pessimist like Matthew Arnold or an optimist like Browning. Both situations had a common basis in a goal meant to be pursued.

An important departure from literary trends we talk of was that modernism of the twentieth century had no historical placing. It was an independent and autonomous entity; it seems to have descended suddenly on the literary scene. One could call it an ideology of loneliness, alienation and being. The modern individual carried it on his shoulders. Indeed, the individuality of a person was the very thing according to it. There being no link with or support from society, neighbourhood, and relationships as well as institutions such as the family or the work place, the individuality floated around helplessly. T.S. Eliot's "Love Song" comes to mind. The figure of Prufrock searches for a point of reference in vain. We see in the poem his psychological domain. He doubts and self-doubts. The sense of emptiness haunts him all the time. Prufrock is a product of pre-War years when nothing seemed to make sense. The goals and concerns of nationalism, human good, social equality, and justice attracted people no more, or Eliot exhibits this view in his poems quite definitively. The accepted idea of modernism since the Renaissance period had taken in its fold principles of rationality, humanism and questioning of ills and evils without break. The new modernism turned a blind eye to that. In order to justify such a position, Eliot sought to separate art from life's processes and underlined a cleavage between art and social issues. He did it while discussing the nature and relevance of art. Let us consider the following:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. (Enright 294)

Mark that Eliot mentions historical criticism only in passing and deals with the question of art only in aesthetic terms. For him art is not a social product, it does not require a social base. Also, the cohering and conforming of the poet are at the individual level—he shall conform, he shall cohere. In addition, the work of art is also a single and autonomous entity. The work of art is on one side and "all the works of art which preceded it" are on the other as if standing at distance from each. I wonder if that is a lapse, but Eliot has in mind solely the living poet whereas all those who belong to an earlier period fall in the category of "the dead." The main contention, however, is about a neat division between the alive, the practicing, and the dead. That may be unacceptable to a whole section of the deprived and oppressed authors and the larger audience in the western capitalist world and the colonized communities. Is Eliot aware of such a division, such a

distance? The interesting part is that the colonized communities might have a different and more meaningful centre of existence than available to the inhabitants of the waste land.

1.3.4 Poetry in Our Time

What the modernist Eliot failed to see was noted in concrete terms by a different set of poets in the thirties and forties. These latter were called pink poets. They were mindful of fissures in western and other societies caught in the web of mixed cultures and ideologies. In that sense, the challenge for poetry in the twentieth century was the shrinking scope of art that came to terms with the tangle material developments. In fact, the aesthetic had to be in vital connect with the human-social dynamic. There could be spotted an urge in the contemporary world to look at the surroundings critically. Outside the gloom in the market-dominated world existed hope for change in the anti-imperialist struggles at the time. Emergence of Soviet Russia was one sharp pointer. The modernist mind saw in it a certain doom of tradition. As indicated, for poetry beyond Eliot and his contemporaries were expressions of protest discernible in poets such as W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender. It was an unmistakable turn to revolutionary strategies in art in corners of Europe, Africa and Asia. Bertolt Brecht in Germany, Pablo Neruda in Chile appeared on scene with paradigms of freedom and justice in an idiom that stretched from the literary heights already touched by Walt Whitman in the previous century.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have gained familiarity with a few basic aspects of poetry such as its link with society and history. Even as based in feelings and emotions, poetry seeks its inspiration from its surroundings. It follows the rhythms of life around it, whether of the people sitting at the top of the ladder or those placed at the bottom of it. All the same, the writers of poetry project the dimension of the past the way it was shaped initially and the way it changed into the form it assumed later. We realized how poetry evolved a specific character under pressures from outside as well as from the writer's consciousness. It kept pace with changes in its environment and contributed in its own way to the process of cultural and social development. From its beginnings in the period of Renaissance to its weakening in the modern period as also its flowering in far away cultures of the colonies, poetry exhibited its inner dynamic. These should help us connect meaningfully with the next three units in this block.

1.5 QUESTIONS

- 1) There is a specific way in which poetry carried the influence of life in the eighteenth century. Elaborate.
- 2) What was the distinctive feature of Romantic poetry? Explain.
- 3) What did modernism come to mean in the twentieth century? Explain with reference to T.S. Eliot.

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