

Poetry and Devices

Tala Dufresne

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Instructor: Mr. Paul Crawford

Essay Type: Problem/Solution

From early Irish scopic literature to Greek tragedy to nursery rhymes, poetry has its roots in spoken word; its transmission was oral. James Fenton speaks of childhood nursery rhymes and how one learns them before one can read through the rhythm of the spoken poems (Fenton 7). Aristotle describes the language of poetry as “lofty and raised above the commonplace” (Aristotle 1). It is true; the language of poetry differs from normal language. Poets enlist metaphors and personification and even varied structures to achieve this higher language Aristotle speaks of. Aristotle then goes on to say that “a certain infusion . . . of these elements is necessary to style” (1). Good poetry uses such elements as similes, metaphors, and other persuasions of style to enrich the language and a reader’s experience.

One of the most emphatic literary devices all writers use is imagery, or “use of sensory description to make what is being described more vivid” (Kirszner and Mandell 751). Because there are no visual elements in writing, a writer must employ imagery to provoke a reader’s imagination. For example, imagery in Carolyn Forché’s “The Colonel” poses the setting of the ordinary surroundings: “[t]here were daily papers, pet dogs, and a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house” (Forché 597). Using no flowery vocabulary, the speaker governs the poem with the same iron hand as a militant colonel, using plain and rigid language. The speaker’s candid style of imagery connotes a sense of honesty; she employs no fantastic visuals. After all, “what you have heard is true” (Forché 597), so the speaker is simply relaying to the reader a true story.

Unlike “The Colonel,” T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Story of J. Alfred Prufrock” is an assault of images. The narrator beautifully opens the piece to set the pace. He says, “the yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes, / the yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the windowpanes / . . . curls once about the house, and fell asleep” (Eliot 118). More like ‘The Farewell Ballad of Mr. Prufrock,’ the poem creates a bittersweet longing of an age gone. The speaker is sagelike, balding, and grey; “[f]or I have known them all already, known them all” (Eliot 119). Eliot’s imagery is his curator, enriching the reader’s experience with every well-chosen adjective.

Apart from these two poems, the poem “Rolling Naked in the Morning Dew” richly depicts the beauty and innocence of the morning. Rogers writes, “Out among the wet grasses and wild barley-covered / Meadows, backside, frontside, through the white clover / [a]nd feather peabrush, over spongy tussocks” (Rogers 300). Likewise, every line is ingrained with the speaker’s vast and imaginative descriptions. Vivid and meticulous descriptions like, “the stemmed bulbs of orange and scarlet tulips / . . . the bent blossoms of sweet William, / . . . to the ferny edge of the goldfish pond” (Rogers 300) reiterate the speaker’s excitement at the early morning ritual and take the reader to the speaker’s own fantasy garden.

Another poetic device is tone, “the attitude of the speaker toward a work’s subject . . . conveyed by the work’s word choice and arrangement of words” (Kirszner and Mandell 751). Tone employs other devices (such as imagery and simile) to evoke feeling. Used efficiently, tone will bind the poem with an emotional theme. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” has a clever duo of imagery and tone. In the first stanza, the speaker sets the tone. His words create a withering picture of an “obtuse,” weary man in a modern world: “like a patient etherised upon a table; / let us go, through certain half-deserted streets / the muttering retreats / of restless nights”

(Eliot 118). The lines become shorter and simpler, trailing off like a senile old man. The speaker creates a gloomy and dismal backdrop of the hopeless inevitability of his death.

On the other hand, although thorough and pictorial, the descriptions of the garden in the first stanza impress little feeling upon the reader. The imagery in “Rolling Naked in the Morning Dew” describes the beauty of the morning, yet the all-encompassing depictions seem less sincere because of their repetitious use; “all of the skin exposed directly to the killy cry / of the kingbird, the buzzing of grasshopper sparrows / those calls merging with the dawn-red mists / of crimson steeplebrush” (Rogers 300). The reader feels overwhelmed with the visual comprehension the poem demands. This poem, although it creates a thorough mental image, lacks the strength in tone of that of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

Finally, the poem with the strongest tone is “The Colonel.” The speaker uses a curt manner of speaking which goes well with the mood the colonel imposes. Unlike the speaker in “Rolling Naked in the Morning Dew,” the speaker’s lines are succinct, with every word having meaning and no word wasted. Like the militant colonel, the words leave the reader feeling cold and callous. The strict wording illustrates the tension in the poem.

A final poetic device is personification, or “the attributing of human actions, features, or feelings to inanimate objects” (Kirszner and Mandell 751). When a writer allows these objects to come alive, he gives them a personality and stresses their importance. In Forche’s piece, the speaker tells of the dismembered ears, “some / of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of voice. / Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground” (Forche 597). Because the reader knows the setting of the poem is war, this is a powerful reference to the victims of the colonel’s wrath.

In “Rolling Naked in the Morning Dew,” the speaker uses little personification. She speaks of being “face to face with vole trails” and even describes the Sweet Williams as being “shoulder to shoulder” (Rogers 300) but utilizes this tool very little; therefore, her poem is lacking. On the other hand, and finally, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is alive with personification. From the sleeping yellow smoke to the muttering nightfall, the poem also uses personification to make it well-rounded.

In short, there are many literary devices which a poet may use in order to make his writing interesting and fresh. Good poetry employs many different devices; not only that, but it also must be able to tie them all into the theme. “The Colonel” could not have been as somber and tense if the speaker had used the flowery language found in “Rolling Naked in the Morning Dew.” Yet some poems, through brilliant use of enrichment, are better examples of good poetry than others. For example, “Rolling Naked in the Morning Dew” is a poem of imagery. Where it is strong in visual elements, it lacks in a focused tone. The piece paints a vivid picture but tells the reader nothing of what to do with it. On the other hand, “The Colonel” is quite the opposite. While the tone adequately portrays the colonel’s cold demeanor, the poem’s lack of varied images makes it rather journalistic. The speaker describes nothing of how she feels toward the colonel or anyone else. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the speaker is willing to accept yet lament the proximity of his death. Imagistic words such as “etherised” and the personification of the “malingering evening” give the feeling of a certain farewell (Eliot 118). With each device, the reader is led toward a bittersweet ending. The final poem, by T. S. Eliot, is the best example of a well-balanced and well-written poem.

Works Cited

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Tala Dufresne is an Elementary Education major.

Mr. Crawford's Comments: *The assignment for Ms. Dufresne's essay was to choose three poems or three short stories from our textbook and to evaluate those using four criteria from many we discussed in class. Her essay is exceptional both in the choices of the poems and the criteria she selected to apply to those poems.*