UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- the art of writing and receiving poetry,
- the language of poetry and close reading,
- the nature of poetry or the definition of poetry.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

The response to poetry as the impulse to write it is often innate. That is perhaps not surprising. After all, even the most significant scientific discoveries are ultimately intuitive. So why not get to know what it is all about? But why poetry? Can't we do it all with good old prose? The answer, history tells us, is a definitive 'no'. Our earliest extant literature is poetry, be it the ***Ramayana*** or the ***Illiad***. It would not do either to ignore the centuries of oral literature before the first word came to be written. Poetry gives us pleasure and an insight into reality. It enriches our understanding of life. Poetry, as W. B. Yeats says, is the social act of the solitary man. It is about man in society. A poem is 'an answering look' given back by the poet to life:

"Life fixed him, wandering on the stair of glass,
With its attentive eyes….
A hatching that stared and demanded an answering look."
(Wallace Stevens)

1.3 HOW TO KNOW POETRY

The best way to know poetry and to equip ourselves to receive it is by studying its history and evolution. Not every one can be a musician but an idea of its elements makes our response richer. Poetry is written with words and it is, therefore, limited. It is limited because the words belong to a particular language. Poetic language and the special use of words in poetry are crucial areas of our study. A word in a poem is different from a lexical entry. It has an emotional hinterland. Poetry extends the significance of words. It is best to hear it from the horse's mouth, and so, here is Marianne Moore on poetry:

> "Poetry
> I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
> Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine……."

No theme is inherently poetic. There is, in fact, a movement in poetry from the Romantics till our day against the conventionally poetic. Poetic images and expressions are allowed to harden to bring them closer to the struggles of life. Life in the country is different from life in the city as Romantic poetry, written with the ease and assurance of the countryside is different from modern poetry reflecting contemporary urban disillusion. The locale or setting of poetry also determines its character. City poetry is often more celebratory. We will also familiarize ourselves with the 'grammar' or technicalities of poetry and its vitally metaphoric language. We shall look at some poets at work to see how practitioners revise and rework their material. In the end, it is an invitation to pleasure or else why bother with it at all.

LET US KNOW



Poets are often from unlikely professions. Wallace Stevens (1879 - 1955) was an insurance lawyer and did quite well in his profession. He considered poetry the 'supreme fiction' which demanded its own 'order'.

1.3.1 What poetry is



***Genre* —**

A literary type like epic, drama, satire, novel etc.

Poetry is a major ***genre*** or branch of imaginative literature. It is the most concentrated and intense form of communication. With a poem, we want to communicate something to someone, or to many. A successful communication is that where meanings are mutually available. We have, therefore, to underline the primacy of meaning in poetry. A paraphrase of a poem may give us some idea about the poem but it is not the poem. A close reading or critical appreciation may make the poem more immediately available to us but nothing can be a substitute for the poem. Let us consider the last of Wordsworth's Lucy Poems, 'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal', called the 'sublime epitaph' by Coleridge.

"A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round is earth's diurnal course,
With rocks and stones and trees".

The structural basis of the poem is clearly the contrast between the two verses. Verse one deals with the past (there are no less than four verbs in the past tense- did, had, seemed, could). Lucy had been such a vital person that the possibility of her growing old or dying had not crossed Wordsworth's mind. Verse two concerns the present (in addition to the 'now' in the first line, there are three main verbs in the present tense - has, hears, sees). Lucy is dead. The invulnerable creature is now as lifeless and immobile as rocks and stones. The contrast is emphasized by the repetition of 'earth'. Lucy, who had seemed immune from the passage of 'earthly years', must now, submit to 'earth's diurnal

course'. So, far from escaping the 'touch' of years, she is now undergoing a daily contact with the earth. The use of the solemn Latinism 'diurnal', the only three- syllable word in this mainly monosyllabic poem, completes the contrast. But the final impression the poem leaves is not of two contrasting moods, but of a single mood mounting to a climax in the pantheistic magnificence of the last two lines. The identity of the metrical pattern in the two verses is paralleled by the virtual identity of the word- order, helping to reconcile the moods. The gap between the two verses is also bridged by the negatives. As the first line really means 'I was not mentally awake', all the sentences are essentially negative propositions, until we reach the tremendous positive of the last two lines. The ***alliteration*** in the last two lines implies that the ***pantheistic*** universe is solidly one. The all importance of meaning and the comparative insignificance of sound may be seen from the above analysis.



Pantheism —

belief that God is in everything. Pan- all, theism- belief in one God as creator

Alliteration —

repetition of initial consonant sounds

On the other hand, Pope demanded that 'the sound must seem an echo to the sense', and we can see that when Coleridge writes of ice:

"It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swond."

The sounds, likewise, support the meaning in the following lines from Tennyson:

"The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees."

A similar function of sound and internal rhyme is noticeable in the following poem by Louis MacNeice:

"The sunlight on the garden
Hardens and grows cold,
We cannot cage the minute
Within its nets of gold,
When all is told
We cannot beg for pardon.

Our freedom as free lances
Advances towards its end;

The earth compels, upon it
Sonnets and birds descend;
And soon, my friend,
We shall have no time for dances.

The sky was good for flying
Defying the church bells
And every evil iron
Siren and what it tells:
The earth compels,
We are dying, Egypt, dying

And not expecting pardon,
Hardened in heart anew,
But glad to have sat under
Thunder and rain with you,
And grateful too
For sunlight on the garden."

Rhyme, which is repetition of terminal sounds, adds to the cohesion of a poem. This poem was written in the late 1930s under the shadow of the impending war. MacNeice makes his limited but compelling affirmation in the face of chaos. Whatever lies ahead, the part has been good. The very achievement of pattern is itself a kind of affirmation in the face of chaos.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Was there literature before writing? How was it preserved?

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2. Quote or write a line with alliteration.

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Shelley, in 'The Cloud', exploits sounds and internal rhymes for pure, simple description. His descriptions, however, are also scientifically exact.

"I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers
From the seas and the streams;
I bear light shade for the leaves when laid
In their noonday dreams.
From my wings are shaken the dews that waken
The sweet birds everyone,
When rocked to rest on their mother's breast,
A she dances about the sun.
I wield the flail of the lashing hail,
And whiten the green plains under,
And then again I dissolve it in rain
And laugh as I pass in thunder."

Such rhyming lines may attract too much attention to themselves and they appear mechanical. It can be used unexpectedly to add emphasis and cohesion. Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 86' and Eliot's 'The Dry Salvages' will serve to illustrate the point.

"Was it the proud full saile of his great verse,
Bound for the prize of (all too precious) you,
That did my ripe thoughts in my braine inhearce,
Making their tombe the wombe wherein they grew?"

"Tomb" and "Womb" are tied together by the rhyme emphasizing them as important concepts in the statement. There is a more complex use in Eliot's 'The Dry Salvages':

"Also pray for those who were in ships, and
Ended their voyage on the sand, in the sea's lips
Or in the dark throat which will not reject them……"

Rhyme, rhythm, metre, music are used and exploited in poems for different purposes. The examples above are serious, even too serious. But it is not necessary to be solemn to be serious. Chaucer (1340-1400), in the late Middle Ages, writes in rhyme, and rhyme adds to the surprise element of his lines and underscore their humour:

"She was a worthy womman all her lyve,
Housebonds at churche- dore she hadde fyve."

LET US KNOW



Some sonnets had more while others had fewer than 14 lines. A 14- line poem is not necessarily a sonnet. It is a lyric on one subject, usually love, and it is divided into two unequal parts. Shakespeare's sonnet 99 has 15 lines and Hopkins wrote many sonnets of 12 lines. Shakespeare's sonnet 126 has 6 couplets or 12 rhyming lines.

W. H. Auden's rhymes, unexpected as they often are, highlight his irony and use of paradox, as in the following poem:

The Unknown Citizen
(To JS/ 07/ M/ 378
This Marble Monument
Is Erected by the State)

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against where there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old- fashioned word, he was a saint,
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employees, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,

(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.
Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,
And his Health- card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.
Both Producers Research and High- Grade Living declare
He was sensible to the advantages of the installment plan
And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;
When there was peace, he was for peace;
when there was war, he went.
He was married and added few children to the population,
Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a
parent of his generation,
And our teachers report that he interfered with their education.
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

This is a satire on a bureaucratic and mechanistic society and it used clichés to clinch an argument against such a society.

LET US KNOW

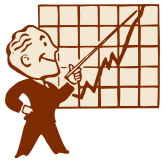


Poems are different from prose pieces. It is more formal and its look on the page is different. What Auden or MacNeice says in verse cannot be said in prose and never so effectively. Poems have their own grammar and a familiarity with it improves understanding and appreciation and should help one with the impulse to write poetry. You can pick your choice and have your own preferences. Only the auctioneer is equally enthusiastic about all the products. But who on earth would dislike the following piece by Ogden Nash:

'The Turtle'

The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex,
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a fix to be so fertile.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. What is internal rhyme? Illustrate from 'The Sunlight on the Garden'.

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2. What is rhyme? Show its uses.

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3. What does 'The Unknown Citizen' satirize?

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1.4 POETRY AND PROSE: LANGUAGE AND SYNTAX; CLOSE READING

In this section, we will discuss the question of language and syntax in poetry. Let us begin with the question: 'Why do poets write in verse?' It may be because that is the way they are, which is to say that what they say is not different from how they say it. Coleridge said: 'I write in metre because I am about to use a language different from that of prose." Wordsworth is not too keen to agree. Both of them wrote

poetry as well as prose and should know the difference. Poetry and prose are different though both draw from the same resource base- the language of the community. Metre makes poetry purposely formal and the reader is invited to and warned about a different kind of writing than prose. When we try to reduce a poem to a prose statement or make a paraphrase of it, we tend to separate the form from its content. Cleanth Brooks calls it the 'heresy of paraphrase'. In poetry and the arts in general, intuition and expression are not separate. It is through the medium that the poet intuits and expresses. A paraphrase also ignores metre and misconceives metaphor.

Let us now look at the paraphrase of a very well known poem by Wordsworth. ('Upon Westminster Bridge')

> *The earth has nothing more fair to show. He who could pass by a night so moving in its majesty must be dull of soul. The city now wears the beauty of the morning like a garment. It is silent and bare. Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie open unto the fields and unto the sky. All of them lie bright and glittering in the smokeless air.*
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> *The sun never stopped valley, rock, or hill more beautifully in his first splendor. I never saw, never felt so deep a calm! The river glides at his own sweet will. Dear God! The very houses seem asleep. The mighty heart of the city is lying still.*

If this is all Wordsworth meant, he would have said so in the first place and in good old prose. Even when we retain almost all the original words, the effect is entirely different and nowhere near so compelling as in the poem which follows:

Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent bare,

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Hopkins, in his 'Spring and Fall', seems to throw a challenge to the heretics of paraphrasing. He, in effect, says, "Now try and paraphrase this!"

Spring and Fall:
to a young child

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter child, the name:
Sorrow's springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor wind, expressed
What a heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

It definitely is a syntactically complex poem, but it is further complicated by a few individual words coined by compounding: "Goldengrove", "unleaving", "wanwood", "leafmeal". "Goldengrove" with a capital "G"

may simply be a proper name. But we happen to know that the stages of man's life are often compared to the seasons. The title refers to 'Spring' and 'Fall' (Autumn) and is addressed to a 'young child'. Spring is the golden period of life and in Fall or Autumn, leaves grow yellow or golden. The compounding is justified and not just a gratuitous invention. But another '***neologism***' "unleaving" immediately follows it and the unleaving of Goldengrove does not remain a mere fact of nature. Now, as the poem develops, we come across two lines which could be meaningful independently or in isolation. But in the context of the development of the poem, the lines also qualify the 'Fall' of the title and the fall of man is implied unobtrusively. When it does that, "Goldengrove" gains a general significance while remaining a proper name. It could very well be Eden. As a young girl, Margaret can well grieve for the unleaving of Goldengrove, because for her, the leaves are like "the things of man". But,



Neologism —

a word coined to express the poet's exact feelings

"Now no matter child, the name:
Sorrow's springs are the same."

What Margaret weeps for is the inescapable process of ageing, decay, and dying. That is the "blight man was born for".

Poetry uses language precisely and exploits all its resources. Some words lose their contours because of constant and varied use. Poets often have to create words to express their ideas and feelings. Words are also historical counters. In the following sonnet (see Unit 2 Sec i) by Milton, usually known as 'On his Blindness', we have to fall back on the OED to know what 'fondly' meant in Milton's time.

"When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
Doth God exact day- labour, light deny'd,

I fondly ask; But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
Either men's work, or his own gifts: Who best
Bear his mild yoak, they serve him best: his State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and waite."

The ***OED*** tells us that in the seventeenth century 'fondly' meant 'foolishly'. The poet therefore says that he asked this potentially blasphemous question 'foolishly', for of course God is just and could not be guilty of making demands. Poets like Robert Frost are, apparently, more demanding of God:

"Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee
And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me."



***OED* —**

The Oxford English Dictionary - a multi-volume comprehensive lexicon showing the history of the first use of a word.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is neologism? Give illustrations.

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2. Show how a paraphrase is no substitute for a poem.

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3. Write what you understand of the poem 'Spring and Fall' in about 50 words.

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1.5 USE OF WORDS IN POETRY

It is a cliché to say that poetry is written with words. We use it because rejecting everything as old fashioned would rule out the sunshine. But everything is written in words. Words in a poem are different because they exploit many areas of meaning and are more suggestive. This we get to know by reading varieties of poetry. Each individual poet has his/ her own idiom. S/he must be placed in the historical context to bring us closer to the poem. The poem looks different on the page and that is deliberate. This is added to by rhythm and music.

In oral or folk literature, the poet was often anonymous and verses were made up instantly. Since they were transmitted only by word of mouth, there were many versions of the same poem or song or story. These will be discussed in more detail when we consider the history and variety of poetry in Unit 2. Whatever a singer or story teller said was immediately understood by the community. There was a strong sense of community then that the Romantic poets (19th century) feel nostalgic about. The Romantics of the nineteenth century and the earlier sixteenth- seventeenth century Romantic Movement were more individualistic. That subjective emphasis not only continued but became more intense in the modern age. No one seems to speak for the community. Everyone speaks for himself/ herself. Consequently, poetry could no longer communicate so easily. It became increasingly more complex and difficult, even obscure. We have shown that if we know the history and development of poetry down the ages, we can receive poetry better and that is a necessary step in learning to write poetry. We have also said that the faculty of writing poetry is often intimate. But even those who are ‘born’ poets have to learn. A person who can sing has to learn music to be a musician or even a singer. If one is sensitive and observant there is much poetry to be gathered from the life around us. This is what Wallace Stevens seems to imply when he calls poetry an ‘answering look’; Marianne Moore is deliberately ‘prosaic’ in her “poetry’ to underline the fact that nothing is inherently ‘po-

etic' or 'unpoetic'. The poet purifies the language of the tribe and leaves it richer. That is primarily because of the use of metaphoric language. Like poetry, its medium, that is language, too changes. But the roots in speech, especially in the spoken language of the rural folk, must never be forgotten. Folk language is vitally metaphoric. This is evident in expressions like 'her face clouded over'. Poetry tries to be consciously metaphoric. Not that there are no attempts to the contrary. In fact, however inspired a poet may be, s/he must learn his craft and must master his language in such a way that he can make the 'traditional' into something 'novel'. It also, at the same time, must be personal, i.e. the poet creates his own idiom. It is not necessarily a question of coining new words. It is a fresh way of saying things that we find in the poetry of Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, Ogden Mash and others.

The eighteenth century English poets- the neo- classicists, as they are called, underlined this craft or rhetoric of poetry. Pope had in fact defined poetry as "what oft was thought but never so well expresst". The Romantics didn't quite agree. Attitudes to poetry and its definitions continue to change and because it changes and grows, it remains so vitally alive and interesting. The subject of poetry and its nature and function will be found addressed in the following poem by W. H. Auden on W. B. Yeats' death:

In Memory of W. B. Yeats (d. Jan 1939)

"He disappeared in the dead of winter
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sunk in the mouth of the dying day.
O all the instruments agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day."

As Elizabeth Drew (Drew, 1959) says, the beginning of the first part of the poem, besides evoking the natural and cultural weather of the time of Yeats' death uses a metaphoric language where landscape is symbolic of inner qualities. While the first part concerns the man and

his environs, the second distinguishes between the man and the poet. Yeats was also quite fallibly human and the death of the man is not the important part. What is important is that the poetry survives:

"You were silly like us: you survived it all;
……..it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper; it flows south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth."

Poetry can make nothing happen in the world of political and bureaucratic action but it survives language, in the words in which it is said.

The concluding part of the poem is positive, even celebratory. He, therefore, exploits the use of rhyme and the assurance of a simple, traditional pattern. What Auden does with it is something forceful, urgent and concentrated:

"Earth, receive an honoured guest;
William Butler Yeats is laid to rest:
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.
……..
Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,

In the prison of his days

Teach the free man how to praise."

The metaphoric language and the exploitation of the landscape symbolically is sustained. The abiding values of poetry are contrasted to the contemporary situation. The creative, affirmative voice of the poet which liberates us from the dark confusion of the war and its violence will strive against all odds. Poetry can grow out of even the tragic and human failures are celebrated as all too human. The dark cold day of the poets' death is transfigured into joy and freedom and human achievement.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have been acquainted with the three basic aspects of poetry, viz., 'writing and receiving poetry', language of poetry' and the 'nature of poetry'. All these topics under discussion in the unit have been dealt with in detail. The best way to know and receive poetry is studying its history and evolution. Poetry is written in words, and words belong to particular language. But in poetry, the use of words is rather special. We may call it 'poetic language'. Images and expressions used in poetry bring it closer to us, just as the poetry on the countryside is different from the poetry of the urban realties. The unit goes into the fundamentals of poetry by asking the question 'what poetry is'. A major genre of imaginative literature, poetry can be called a communication of something to someone or to many. We have illustrated profusely from the poetry of Wordsworth, Louis MacNeice, Shelley, Shakespeare (sonnet 86) and T. S. Eliot to buttress the point that the primacy of meaning is an important element of poetry, but a paraphrase may give us some idea of a poem, but it is not the poem. The example of Wordsworth's Lucy poem ('A Slumber Deep…..') strengthens this view. There has been also a discussion on the difference between prose and poetry and language and syntax have been particularly emphasized in respect of poetry. Here also a good number of examples are drawn form many great poets. Finally in the unit, you will come across a discussion on the use of words in

poetry for which a number of illustrations are given from many a celebrated poet of the English language.



1.7 FURTHER READINGS

1. Andrew Sanders: *The Short Oxford History of English Literature.*
2. Beaty and Matchet: *Poetry from Statement to Meaning.*
3. R. A. Scott James: *The Making of Literature.*
4. Scholes, Comley, Klaus, Silverman: *Elements of Literature.*



1.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

1. Considering its variety, is a comprehensive definition of poetry possible? Discuss with reference to what you have read above.
2. How are words used differently in a poem? How does context change the character of poetry?
3. Contextualize the lines quoted form Chaucer in the text and consider him as a satirist.
4. Analyze a poem of your choice to illustrate the point that a poem has meaning.

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