

The Versatility of Poetry

by Doug Cartwright

April is National Poetry Month, and I'm sure that each and every one of you, has been busy celebrating the wonderful world of poetry these past few days and rediscovering your connection to the genre practiced by everyone from Ovid to Shakespeare to Frost to the lovesick teenager living down the street from you who has just penned a poem incorporating the first letters of his girlfriend's name.

Indeed love is associated with poetry because it has been used to woo a potential mate, celebrate the anniversary of true love, and even lament the loss of love. But poetry is much more than its familiar romantic side. It's been used as satire, political and social commentary, celebrations of nature, reflections on the human condition, and oh so much more. Let's take a look at the versatility of poetry.

As I said, poetry is naturally associated with love and romance; I suppose because of our assumption that poetry is filled with flowery phrases and contorted syntax. It's also filled with insinuation, double meanings, symbolism, and all sorts of sound devices and literary gimmicks which gave you fits in high school. But with a little attention to the phrasing, we can manage to discern the intention of the poet. Take, for example, Andrew Marvell's seventeenth century lament, "To His Coy Mistress," a poem which pleased all adolescent teens in high school because

it was about the titillating subject of sex, specifically the wooing of a maiden who is determined to play hard to get.

Had we but world enough and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.

But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust;
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Marvell's intentions are as clear as Jack's in the John Mellencamp song "Jack and Diane" in which he sings:

"Hey, Diane, let's run off behind a shady tree
Dribble off those Bobby Brooks
Let me do what I please"
Saying oh yeah
Life goes on, long after the thrill of living is gone.

The lyrics may be separated by 300 years, but they say the same thing: Life is short, seize the day, and let's enjoy our love while we can.

And when love is won, the inevitable separation from those that you love wears at your soul and invades your thoughts. Shakespeare popularized a style of sonnet (a 14 line poem) which encompassed three images in three separate quatrains followed by a final couplet which summed up the message. Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets, many to a "dark lady" who was obviously younger

than he. In this sonnet, he compares himself to the onset of winter, the fading light of day, and the dying embers of a fire, followed by the couplet which asks her to love him all the more because he will, like they, soon be gone.

Here is Sonnet 73, "That Time of Year."

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

In the nineteenth century, the romanticists and transcendentalists took over and wrote poetry comparing man and nature and celebrating self reliance. Poetry remained full of images and flowery language, but became more direct in addressing lessons we can learn about ourselves from nature. Walt Whitman celebrated Nature as teacher in his poem: "My Heart Leaps Up."

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;

So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

Notice the rainbow as a recognizable symbol of hope and God's covenant, and also the phrase "The Child is Father of the Man," which is meant to convey the idea of our adult beliefs and personalities being formed in our youth by our child-like love of nature.

I want to touch on some poetry written by women and which comment on social conditions. Sara Cleghorn, a 19th-20th century poet, was so horrified by child labor laws that led to widespread abuse, that she wrote this four-line social commentary called "The Golf Links." She says more in four lines than some essayist could say in a 1000 word treatise.

The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.

A later poem by Sara Teasdale proves especially prescient in predicting the ultimate destruction of civilization by man's own hand. In fact, Ray Bradbury incorporated the poem in his novel, "The Martian Chronicles," which deals with earth's destruction through nuclear war and the subsequent colonization of Mars. The title of the chapter in the novel is the same as the title of the poem, "There Will Come Soft Rains." The setting is a house in suburbia which has survived destruction in the year 2026, and

whose automated voice selects a poem to read to the mistress of the house, a house which is now, hauntingly, totally devoid of human life.

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild plum trees in tremulous white,

Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

Amazingly, this poem predates the novel by 75 years. Think about it. In the ensuing years, the world was to fight another world war and go through a nuclear scare; and people continue to fight one another around the globe even today. Human kind has provided fodder for such anti-war poems as "Dulce Et Decorum Est," "Arms and the Boy," and Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner;" which contains one of the most gruesome and lasting images of war's carnage, condemning war in its horrific final line.

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,

I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Of course, on the opposite end of the spectrum, humor also has its place in poetry as well as social commentary, love, nature's lessons, etc. But humor in poetry usually takes on an edgy satirical message. Take one of America's leading columnists and poets, Dorothy Parker. Dorothy once wrote of Katherine Hepburn's performance in a play that "Miss Hepburn runs the gamut of emotions from A to B." Parker was the epitome of the catty understatement. Here's her take on the stress of modern life. It's called "Resume."

Razors pain you;
Rivers are damp;
Acids stain you;
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful;
Nooses give;
Gas smells awful;
You might as well live.

Many of you may have noticed that I haven't mentioned Robert Frost once....yet. As you know, Robert Frost had a simple philosophy on poetry: It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. He was a master of this particular craft. I cannot end without citing one of my favorites, "Birches." I'll not use the first section, the delight, if you will. Chances are you are already familiar with the poem. The poem starts as a simple observation about birch trees and the suppleness of them for a boy tempted to swing on the

trees. After his description of the joy of swinging on birches, he ends with these words of wisdom.

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

How many of you have had the feeling of being tired of the daily grind and wishing to take a momentary vacation? I call it the “Stop the World I want to Get Off” syndrome. But it’s a vacation we wish for, not a termination. That’s Frost’s wisdom shining through, reflecting a universal human emotion.

With this I close. The world of poetry is too vast for anything but a cursory examination of it. Ultimately, poetry is a way of telling a story, exemplifying the poet’s message without launching into lengthy explanations. Thus, poetry functions as just another way to connect with an audience and send a message. I would like

to use the national poet of Scotland to drive home the point. Robert Burns wrote a poem called “To a Louse,” in which at church, the speaker sees a louse crawling up the bonnet of a lady in front of him. She is finely dressed and unaware of this intrusion into her well-put together outfit and carefully coifed hair. He uses the opportunity to muse on the fact that the lady is oblivious to the critter and is obviously proud of her demeanor and dress. The reveal, as it were, is in the last stanza, and it could be said to be the purpose of all poetry - to lay bare the hypocrisies and foibles of human existence and see ourselves truthfully. I’ll read it as it was written in 18th century Scots then translate into more modern English.

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
An' ev'n devotion!

And now the translation:

And would some Power give us the gift
To see ourselves as others see us!
It would from many a blunder free us,
And foolish notion:
What airs in dress and gait would leave us,
And even devotion!

I prefer the former. Go forth and read some poetry while April is upon us.