

Why I Like Poetry

One of the reasons I like poetry is pretty practical: there's less of it, less *bulk*, to put it simply. Unless you're writing an epic or play in verse, most poetry is a relatively short burst of expression. Usually, it's not something long and drawn-out that you have to sustain over many chapters and pages, which is something I can't do. Mostly, even if poetry tells a story, as it often does, it tells the story in the form of snapshots. You don't have to show the whole movie, just a few key scenes. And often, there's just one scene, or one event, one conversation, one thought or cluster of thoughts. So there's less writing involved. And for the reader, there's less reading.

But that doesn't mean it's easy to write—or to read. There's work involved in writing or reading or listening to poetry, because the language is dense; you dare not waste, or miss, a word or phrase. And that's another thing I like about poetry: it really shows off the flexibility, power, and beauty of language. Language is such an amazing gift to the human family! There's such an incredible diversity of languages, and diverse ways of using each one. Language used well—whether in poetry or prose, writing or speech—has this powerful, flexible, beautiful quality. By powerful, I mean that it communicates a *lot*: what it says is deep and wide and thick and layered and it reverberates. By flexible, I mean that language used well is not easily captured by grammatical rules, or by a dictionary, because it is being used in fresh, new, strange, or inventive ways, and yet somehow, we can still understand it. Language used well gets stretched and bent and twirled and pounded, but it doesn't snap or break or crumple. And by beautiful, I mean that the very sounds and rhythms of the words make you sit up and take notice and draw in your breath. And when you receive the pictures and ideas that are conveyed, it makes you glad to be human. Those ideas and pictures may be sad ones, angry ones, funny or joyful ones, scary or awesome ones, but the way they are communicated gives delight. Like I said, that's true of all language used well and used creatively, but it's magnified in poetry by virtue of the sheer economy of words. And the same poem can do that again and again, a little different each time, and it makes you feel gratitude to the person who crafted it.

And that brings me to yet another reason I like poetry: it's interactive. It's interactive in a way that's challenging. It's best when you hear someone reading it, and you find yourself having to lean in and listen so intently to their voice in order to absorb what they're saying. But that only brings you the first wave of meaning. Even after you're done listening, or when you're just reading and rereading it yourself, you may have to muck around with the poem, chew on it some, tease it apart and put it back together again in order to appreciate all of it. And I like that process, even if sometimes it's frustrating when I can't get everything. In that case, I just savour the parts I can. But that process of interacting with the poem, of wrestling with it, makes you very aware of being drawn out of yourself and into something being shown to you by somebody else.

Last of all, when it comes to the “worldly” value of poetry: a surprising number of poets have had careers in business while writing on the side. The American poet Dana Gioia, who chaired the National Endowment for the Arts for several years and has a lot of management experience, argues that poets are good at that part of business, at management, because writing poetry is such great preparation for the improvisation that goes on in senior leadership roles. So that's another valuable thing about poetry!

But I'm probably preaching to the choir here, because after all, you've come out to hear poetry. You're doubtless looking forward to listening to a lot of good poems this afternoon, and I am too.

Debbie Sawczak

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