

Writing poetry

There are devices in poetry which people use in varying degrees, alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, and meter. I have heard it said that "Traditional verse rhymes, modern verse doesn't," that is not true, Shakespeare and Wordsworth both wrote extensively in blank verse, that is verse with an iambic meter, but not rhyming. I have also heard it said that "The impulsive and spontaneous are what make poetry." I don't think this is any truer than the first statement. There are impulsive and spontaneous poets, if we are to believe their own account; but evidence from letters and notebooks shows that many of the greatest poets spent long periods editing their work, certainly for most of us something worthwhile is the product of hard work as much as the inspiration of drugs or The Divine. It is worth experimenting with formal poetry and getting an understanding of how it is used; even if we then decide not to use our knowledge directly it will colour what we say and lend it depth.

Some arts, such as sculpture or pictorial art, occur mainly in space, poetry occurs mainly in time, though in the arts nothing is definitive. As dance can be seen to be a combination of temporal rhythms and the visual occupation of space it is possible to point to sculpture with a temporal element or poetry that presents a pictorial element on the page, but it is mainly true that rhythm and meter make poetry temporal. They are powerful tools.

Rhythm is with us before we are born, the unborn baby has both its own heart and the heart of its mother to listen to, and after they are born they enjoy the feeling of rhythmical rocking and the sounds of rhythm in songs and lullabies they cannot yet understand. If nobody else does it for them they will rock themselves and make repetitive noises, da da da da, or ma, ma, ma, ma; almost like speech. As adults we look for rhythm so much we see it where it does not exist. Nature is naturally chaotic, it never exactly repeats itself, yet we perceive the rhythms of day and night, Spring and Summer, planetary movement, and the passing of seasons, years and generations. Rhythm is intrinsic to our being, deliberately incorporated into speech it lends power to it.

Like most arts poetry started with a practical purpose; recalling the legend, the history of the group, consistently in epic sagas and songs.

Poetry often seeks the phrase or construction that sounds familiar without being cliché, and rhythm and rhyme help create that familiarity. Look to the people in today's world who want you to remember, advertisers. If someone of my generation thinks "Heinz beans baked beans they're the beans for me," chances are they will be mentally tapping their foot in time.

Think of the alliteration and rhythm of "Clunk click every trip". No doubt you can come up with your own examples. Rhythm makes things memorable and familiar, and holds the attention.

"Clunk click every trip guys 'n gals" may not be PC anymore for other reasons, but it is a sight more memorable than "Fasten up your seat belt every journey ladies and gents."

Meter is a little less accessible, it depends on the alternation of stressed and unstressed

syllables, but it is still an intuitive skill we all use. Where one puts the stress makes all the difference.

“You are going to prison.”

Stress any one of those five words and the emphasis will change the meaning

In poetic terms consider,

‘There was a young man from Calcutta,’

with every third syllable stressed and,

‘Friends, Romans and countrymen, lend me your ears’

With every second syllable stressed. Breaking the meter and rhythm with “Friends Romans and lovers,” was just one of the ways Brutus got it wrong, these things can be important.

I say you have not fully realised your potential as a poet until you have learned and practised these things, having done so of course you may chose not to use them, just as Picasso chose not to use the accurate pictorial representation he learned as an art student, but it affected the quality of what he created later.