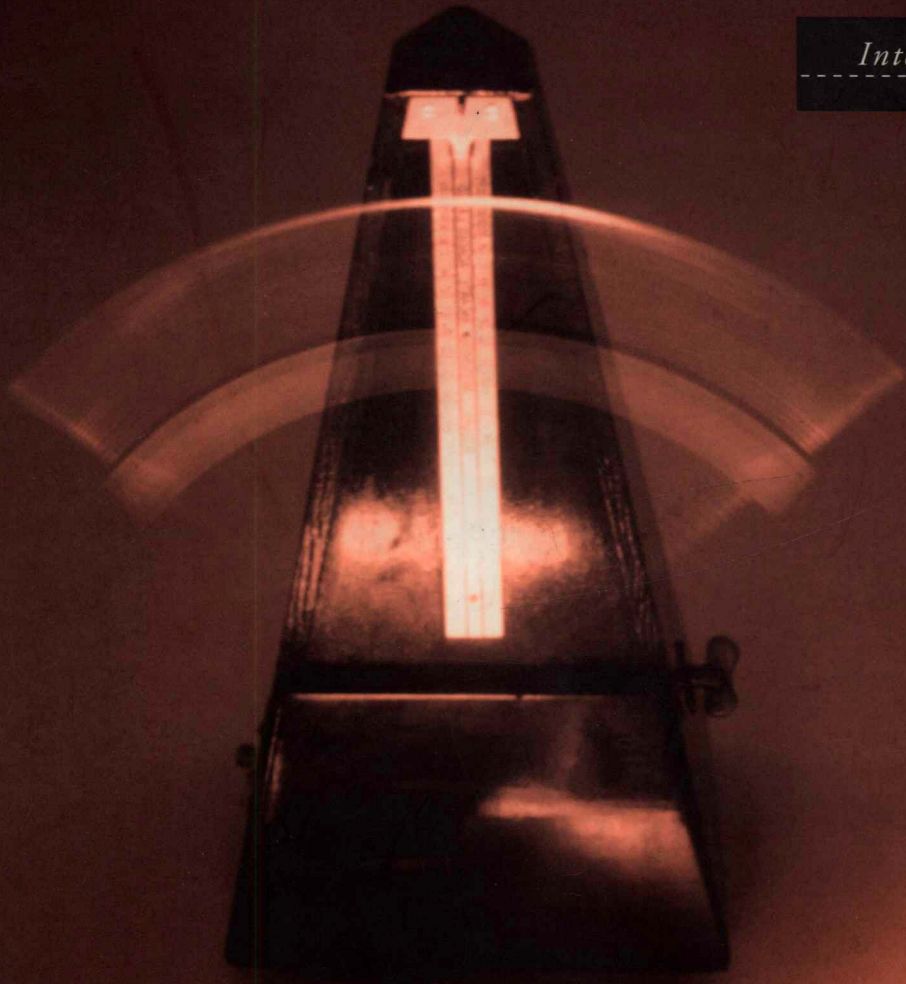


The Language of Poetry

*Inter*text



ROUTLEDGE

John McRae

Inter text

The Language of Poetry

- John McRae



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The Language of Poetry

This accessible satellite textbook in the Routledge INTERTEXT series is unique in offering students hands-on practical experience of textual analysis focused on poetry. Written in a clear, user-friendly style by an experienced writer and practising teacher, it links practical activities with examples of texts. These are followed by commentaries and suggestions for research. It can be used individually or in conjunction with the series core textbook, *Working with Texts: A core book for language analysis*.

Aimed at A-Level and beginning undergraduate students, *The Language of Poetry*:

- ◎ focuses on the 'look, the sound, the movement and the appeal of poetry
- ◎ uses clusters of poems to highlight differences in structure, tone, quality and form
- ◎ explores historical, contemporary, regional and social differences in language and style
- ◎ combines a highly individual and fascinating selection of poems from the canonical to the fringe, among them an Old English lament, a haiku and a poem by Benjamin Zephaniah
- ◎ includes a selection of suggestions for project work
- ◎ has a comprehensive glossary of terms

John McRae is Special Professor of Language in Literature Studies at the University of Nottingham. He has been at the forefront of work on the language and literature interface for many years and is the co-author of *The Routledge History of Literature in English*.

The Intertext series

- ◎ Why does the phrase 'spinning a yarn' refer both to using language and making cloth?
- ◎ What might a piece of literary writing have in common with an advert or a note from the milkman?
- ◎ What aspects of language are important to understand when analysing texts?

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Ronald Carter is Professor of Modern English Language in the Department of English Studies at the University of Nottingham and is the editor of the Routledge INTERFACE series in Language and Literary Studies. He is also co-author of *The Routledge History of Literature in English*. From 1989 to 1992 he was seconded as National Director for the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project, directing a £21.4 million in-service teacher education programme.

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I shall invent a new game; I shall write bits of slang and poetry
on slips and give them to you to separate.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

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Unit one

The look

First of all, what is poetry?

- ⊙ words with a frame round them
- ⊙ 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd'
(Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, 1711)
- ⊙ 'the *best* words in the best order'
(Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from *Table Talk* magazine, 1827)
- ⊙ the words of the current number-one hit
- ⊙ boring old-fashioned soppy stuff
- ⊙ the words inside birthday cards.

Which of these signifies *poetry* to you? Tick one or two - add more if you want to.

In this unit we are going to look at a range of texts, and try to decide what makes them poetry, and see how we react to them subjectively and objectively. To allow the focus to be on the texts themselves, titles and authors are listed at the end of each unit, with a complete list of all the poems quoted appearing at the end of the book (p. 143).

So what makes poetry good or bad?

Activity

Look at these lines and grade them on a 1 to 10 scale, where you think 1 is bad, 6 quite good, 10 really good.

Text: Poems (i)-(x)

(i) The trumpets sounded,
Saint Peter said, 'Come.'
The pearly gates opened
And in walked Mum.

(ii) 'Tis said that some have died for love

(iii) I've measured it from side to side:
'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide.

(iv) What I like about Clive
Is that he is no longer alive.
There is a great deal to be said
For being dead.

(v) God save our gracious Queen,
Long live our noble Queen,
God save the Queen.

(vi) There was an old man of Thermopylae,
Who never did anything properly;
But they said, 'If you choose
To boil eggs in your shoes,
You shall never remain in Thermopylae.'

(vii) Fear no more the heat o' th' sun
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.

(viii) Then hurrah! for the mighty monster whale,
Which has got seventeen feet four inches from tip to tip of a tail!
Which can be seen for a sixpence or a shilling,
That is to say, if the people all are willing.

(ix) How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace. [...]
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints - I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! - and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

(x) They come as a boon and a blessing to men,
The Pickwick, the Owl, and the Waverley pen.

Did any of them make 10 out of 10? Give reasons for your choices. (Discuss the results in groups, if possible.)

List some of the *negative* aspects in the texts and some more *positive* ones.

Negative

Positive

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Commentary

First we might react to the subject matter – so many of them seem to be about death. But they range from fairly banal (i) to serious (vii, ix). Probably (vii), (ii) and (ix) would be the highest-rated for most readers. Compared with the others, they have a range of reference (past, present, future) and touch on more than one idea. In short, they give the reader the chance to explore the potential meanings and resonances in the text, rather than just one level of simplistic meaning or effect.

The length of the lines might add something to the appeal of (ii) and (viii) in particular – compare the short lines of (i). The final line of (i) creates an effect of **bathos**, and might even make the reader laugh: (iv) and (vi) do this more deliberately. Text (v) does none of these, and perhaps sounds least ‘poetic’. **Rhyme** can reinforce the effect created by the ‘sound of the text’ – we will see more of this. But what of ‘poetic’ language? Look at (ii): instead of saying ‘some people have died for love’ it is distanced by the words ‘Tis said’, and another level is introduced – the words, the order of the words, the sound, all come into the equation. Text (vii) is similarly a bit removed from everyday language, with ‘thou’, ‘art’, ‘o’ th’, etc., which sound ‘poetic’ – they are older forms of language. Look also at contrasts: hot/cold, life/death, past/present, which give the poem its movement.

Activity

In Text: Poems (xi)–(xvii) are some lines which have been considered ‘great’, poetry? How do they compare with the ones you have just read?

Text: Poems (xi)-(xvii)

- (xi) Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight?
- (xii) Sweet Thames! run softly, till I end my song.
- (xiii) Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
- (xiv) Tyger! tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
- (xv) Summer is i-cumen in,
Lude sing, cuccu!
Groweth seed and bloweth med
And springth the wode nu.
- (xvi) When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed,
And the great star early drooped in the western sky at night,
I mourned, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.
- (xvii) The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan.

Commentary

Try reading some of these aloud: *sound* makes a contribution to *sense*. Which lines do you find the most musical?

There is a wider range of sounds, emotions and rhymes in these samples: happiness, sadness, power, regret, awe, and more. Repetition features in several of them, reinforcing the effects. The texts make us read them in different ways, by the form, the language they use, the sounds, and even the references (the Thames, the tiger). We construct our readings out of all these influences, plus what we bring to the text. Part of us takes the text subjectively, reacting emotionally, and part can be

objective, thinking about the specific devices, tricks and techniques the poet uses.

For example: unanswered rhetorical questions (xi, xiii, xiv), exclamations (xii, xiv, xv), and images (the first line of (xvi) really means 'last spring', but makes an image of it, combining time, home, and a sense of loss) – all these contribute to how the texts work.

If we try grading these lines on the same scale as before is it easier, or not, to separate them into 'good' or 'bad'? Some of them will simply appeal to you subjectively more than others – just enjoy them!

Extension

Try the same sort of thing with any song lyrics you know well. What makes some work more for you than others?

Keep some of these ideas in mind: we will look back at some of these questions as we go on.

Activity

We are going to move on to what a text looks like, and how that affects its 'poetry'.

Where do you think you might find this?

*This is just to say I have eaten the
plums that were in the icebox and
which you were probably saving for breakfast
Forgive me they were delicious
so sweet and so cold*

- ☉ How can you tell if it's spoken or written?
- ☉ What is the essence of the message? Could it be said in fewer words? What words would you have used?
- ☉ So, what are the other words there for? (Padding, politeness, covering something up, ... etc.)
- ☉ Realistically, who might be writing, and to whom?
- ☉ Is it a poem? Why/why not?

Try writing it as a poem.