

The Powers of Poetry: Story, Symbol, and Incantation

Abstract-----	iii
Introduction-----	1
The Power of Story-----	2
The Power of Symbol-----	6
The Power of Incantation-----	11
Conclusion-----	16
Works Cited-----	17

Abstract

The three elements fueling the healing power of poetry are identified as story, symbol, and incantation. This study breaks down and examines these poetic essentials, defining what they are and how they work, both together and individually. It grapples with the meanings of these basics, and sheds light on how poets who possess an understanding of them can use this knowledge in making their own poems more powerful.

Introduction

The healing power of poetry has been apparent to many throughout the ages. Arguments to this effect can be made by informed poets at the drop of a feathered quill. The complications we face in life: the suffering associated with failed relationships, sickness, the deaths of love ones, and so on represent, in a sense, the beginning of the healing process. Writing or reading poetry can mark a commencement to such healing. Healing through poetry begins, as Gregory Orr contends, “when we ‘translate’ our crisis into language—where we give it symbolic expression as an unfolding drama of self and the forces that assail it” (4). That is, by putting our suffering to page, we have given it a healthy distance from us as well as allowed a sort of reshaping rather than bearing it in an unresponsive way. A single step marks the beginning of a journey. Probing more deeply, however, it becomes evident that collective elements within the personal lyric serve to enhance and fine tune a poem’s healing power. In the following investigation, I

will consider the questions of what these poetic rudiments are and how they work, both independently and cooperatively. Orr has it that “there are three abiding and primordial powers that shape language into poems: . . . story, symbol, and incantation” (94). The journey from the chaotic effects of trauma to an ordered understanding, or making meaning, is accomplished through setting symbolic stories to incantatory rhythms. I would argue that a study of these fundamentals may reveal some instructive possibilities concerning the making of lyric poems. Following Orr, I shall explore the poetic essentials of the power of story, the power of symbol, and the power of incantation.

The Power of Story

An examination of the element of story may offer clues as to how we can create our lyric poems to be more powerful. Perhaps the most revealing and persuasive means of communication between people is the relating of stories. For instance, I could tell you that my Uncle Larry is a great car salesman. At this, you might shrug as if you are not convinced. Or I could tell you the story of how he sold twenty cars in one day, two of them to passersby who did not even know how to drive. In this case, the focus of the story is Uncle Larry’s prowess as a salesman, and *focus* may be the central element of story. This story not only lets us know something about Uncle Larry, it also lets us know a little something about the world in which we live, of our societal values, of how we in the U.S. tend to honor those who perform well in their occupations. As the theorist

Jerome Bruner might say, it helps us to “make sense of the world” (qtd. in Orr 95), which is another way of saying that through storytelling, we are establishing an ordered mindset in the face of disorder. In writing lyric verse, opposed to prose, the focus of our poems is particularly important because, as Orr points out, all that does not reflect the focus is “stripped away, and meaning is compressed into action and detail that reveal significance” (95). The final version of the lyric poem, then, is a scaled down portrait of the poem’s thematic focus.

While maintaining focus is imperative, conflict is another essential element of story. In personal lyric, nearly always there is conflict, often with someone. Someone close to us has hurt us in some way, is sick, or has died. This conflict does not have to be that *outlaw meets sheriff at the O.K. Corral* kind of dramatic action. In the words of Orr, “Merely introducing two pronouns into the opening line of a poem creates the tension essential to story” (95-6). That “I” and “you” tends to have the effect of drawing readers in because they naturally place themselves and their own situations into the equation. Cindy Goff’s “Turning into an Oak” is a good example of the merging of focus and conflict:

I looked down at my husband leaving me.

I’m seventy feet taller than he is now.

The bones in my arms splinter into thousands of twigs;

my legs grow together and twist

into the ground. It doesn’t matter

where my car is parked or where my house keys have fallen;

I no longer care what I weigh.

I am sturdier than a hundred men.
From up here I can see Cape Cod,
shaped like a lobster tail.
I watch my husband become a speck
and consider how I'll miss
being touched. (108)

Nearly anyone could relate to the “I” and “you” in the first line of this poem; that is, any lover who has suffered the pain of a breakup. The conflict becomes apparent in line 1 and lies with the speaker and her husband. The focus begins to reveal itself as the message from each of the following lines meld into a single shattering idea: that empty, disheartening feeling we get when we are suddenly alone after having become used to being together with someone. Not a single line or word in this poem veers from this focus. If one did, as Aristotle reasons, it should never have been there in the first place, “for that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole” (1463). The conflict between speaker and husband is not resolved in the poem; rather, the conflict merges with the focus. The husband becomes “a speck” and is gone. That which remains is the speaker with an inner conflict, which could well describe the true nature of the heart of all personal lyric.

It is true that the focus of a lyric poem is usually on an idea, but this idea, however tragic, would do well to be grounded on a metaphoric center. While it is true that the story in a lyric poem evolves in a narrative fashion, it also, as Orr insists, “wishes to disclose meaning by focusing on something central and leaving out peripheral details unless they reinforce the central subject” (98). Goff’s title, “Turning

into an Oak” offers a barefaced clue as to her metaphoric focus. In line 2 of Goff’s poem, her speaker has suddenly grown to an enormous height. In line 3, her arms transform into branches. In line 4, her “legs grow together and twist / into the ground” (108). Goff’s thorny language, that of splintering arms and nothing matters anymore confirm that she considers the metaphor of becoming an oak to equate with the hardhearted nature of her speaker’s newly found single situation. In reflection, Ariel, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, was not turned into a tree, but was confined “into a cloven pine; within which rift / Imprisoned [he] didst painfully remain / A dozen years” (1.2.77-79). I bring up the Bard because of the possibility that becoming a great oak could be seen as a metaphor for a good thing; however, this is not the way I read Goff.

While abstract ideas have their merit in certain forms of narrative, it is the concrete details that give lyric poems their power. William Blake emphasizes this idea in verse: “Labour well the Minute Particulars:” he writes, “attend to the Little Ones; / . . . / He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars. / General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer; / For Art and Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars” (Blake). It is usually crucial that lyric verse be written using specific details from title to the final line. Goff’s title is not only precise, but it suggests the metaphoric center of the entire poem. As for concrete sensory details, her depiction of seeing “Cape Cod, / shaped like a lobster tail” presents a visual image that is novel and unique. As Orr notes, the “who, what, where, and when” (100) is organic to most all good writing. This includes lyric poetry! Goff shows in very specific detail the who: speaker and husband; the what: husband left speaker lonely as a tree; the when: the present; the where: at their house near Cape Cod. All these minute details merge to

form a cohesive, barebones, and stirring portrait of experience. But they do so much more: such as, fill with affirmative narrative the place where silence might turn into shame or fear and rob us of our present experiences.

The Power of Symbol

While story is often the primary vehicle that carries lyric verse right through to its ending, the narrative is commonly rife with symbolic meaning. Some poems, however, seem to state only the trauma of an experience, offering no solution, no enlightened realization, no healing. In fact, these personal lyrics would seem to affirm the disorder, letting it into our minds and lives. Yet Orr insists “that it is precisely by letting in disorder that we will gain access to poetry’s ability to help us survive. It is the initial act of surrendering to disorder that permits the ordering powers of the imagination to assert themselves” (47). In essence, the mind, when it confronts chaos in narrative, begins to allow compensation to occur, like a person who loses one eye, and the remaining one compensates naturally by developing a wider peripheral range of sight. As Fox asserts, there may be some growing pains to deal with here, but “poetry can be a safe guide, a wise presence, so you don’t feel alone while moving through the inevitable dark place in life” (29). Bottom line, in lyric poems, such recompenses happen due to the symbolic language in the narrative. Marie Howe’s “The Dream” is a good example of just this kind of personal lyric:

I had a dream in the day:

I laid my father’s body down in a narrow boat

and sent him off along a river bank with its cattails and grasses.

And the boat (it was made of skin and wood bent when it was wet.)

took him to his burial finally.

But a day or two later I realized it was my self I wanted

to lay down—hands crossed, eyes closed

—oh, the light coming from down there,

the sweet smell of the water—and finally, the sense of being carried

by a current I could not name or change. (83)

In Howe's poem, the speaker dreams of sending her father off on a watery burial, but the conflict becomes apparent when, "a day or two later [she realizes] it [is her] self [she wants] / to lay down—hands crossed, eyes closed" and cast off upon the river of expiry in that small boat. The speaker and her father exist in a state of dramatic tension, connected undeniably by the poem's focus: the idea of letting go to that impenetrable death experience. As far as the narrative alone is concerned, this is all we have to go on. However, to come to an understanding concerning the healing effects of the poem, we can look to the symbolic language for clues. The biblical story of baby Moses comes to mind. As an infant, in order to save him, he was placed in a small boat and hidden among the grasses and cattails "beside the bank of the Nile". (*Complete Bible*, Exod. 2.3). Is Howe's poem, then, about saving the speaker's father? I think not because it is the speaker herself who desires death, so she really wants to save herself, but from what? The symbolic language Howe uses to describe the father's death ark may provide clues: "(it was made of skin and wood bent when it was wet.)". This wood covered in skin could be symbolic for the body, and the fact that it is wet and bent could

describe some form of trauma (both *wet* and *bent* tend to possess negative connotations) which would explain the speaker's obsession with death, both her father's and her own. The death Howe describes for the speaker is not a dark and scary death; on the contrary, it is one of surrendering to a state of illumination accented by the sensory image of "the sweet smell / of the water." Howe's speaker puts her faith in an afterlife myth associated with being carried along safely on a river of patriarchal benevolence, an experience she had not found in life. So, the poem confronts a trauma associated with the speaker's father and fills the vacuum of silence allowing her to regain her identity, or create one. Having reinterpreted her trauma metaphorically centered on a slow ride down the tranquil river of death, the trauma now has less power over her. The writing or reading of the poem stands in the place of an actual death. The speaker is free to live and write another day. What sort of trauma is Howe really writing about? I'd say there is not enough information to say for sure. Abuse, neglect, the father not living up to the speaker's expectations of what a father should be? Who knows? In basing such speculation on a few symbols, it would be entirely possible to get off the mark concerning Howe's meaning. Symbolic meaning tends to vary from reader to reader, and readers tend to respond to symbolic language in accordance with their own unique experiences.

It is very likely that most any given symbol will possess more than one meaning, or that the meaning remains ambiguous. The small boat among the reeds and grasses is an ancient symbol, one that could hold a multiplicity of meanings. "All the meanings," Orr writes, "do not and cannot emerge; they lurk still in the object/symbol, refusing to give up all their mystery to the need for understanding and explanation" (104). There

could be a hidden meaning within an ancient symbol that we cannot recognize, or, moreover, meaning of which society no longer makes use. For instance, Isler, et. al point out that poetic incantation has been used throughout the centuries for not only relief of headache, but for the general maintenance health of all the body parts. Here's a poem from an 8th century monastery at Lake Constance in Switzerland:

O King, o ruler of the realm,
o friend of Heaven's hymn,
o persecutor of turmoil,
o God of the Heavenly Host!

In the first stanza, the poem repetitively and rhythmically invokes and calls on the Christian God. Today's society certainly has a very good idea of the symbolism connected with God, but our ideas are very contemporary. The 8th century Westerners were very likely, as a whole, way more conservative in their outlooks concerning dogmatic Christianity, and so the symbolism, from their points of view, would necessarily be interpreted differently than most conservatives would interpret it today. Not to mention our societal liberal progression. I'll move ahead to stanza 2 where God is called upon to cool "the noxious fluxes / that flow heated in my head." We do know something of the symbolism concerning the "fluxes," those excessive and flowing discharges associated with various health problems. But, again, medical conditions are looked at differently today than they were in past centuries. The third stanza of the poem takes the healing theme beyond the headache to other parts of the body:

that he cures my head with my kidneys,
and with the other parts afflicted:

with my eyes and with my cheekbones,
with my ears and with my nostrils. (Isle, et. al)

God is beseeched to heal and protect the individual parts of the body. Today, doctors would check all these parts but rely on scientific medicine rather than the spiritual for healing. I wonder if we have, in following science exclusively, found ourselves off the mark. At any rate, no one knows what all the body parts may have been symbolic of for the people who used this poetic remedy. Such symbolism is no longer needed. As society evolves, the minds of the people expand. As we learn more about the past, old meanings may become increasingly clear. New meanings will be discovered throughout the generations. Bottom line, we do not know all there is to know about symbols, but grappling with a poem's meaning in light of its symbolic language is certainly one way of coming to a subjective understanding of it.

The Power of Incantation

While story and symbol merge to make powerful and healing expressions, it is through implementing incantation into our lyric poetry that we, like our ancestors, can confront the more serious traumas that come our way. Incantation, that rhythmic replication of poetic reverberations, according to Orr, "is like a woven raft of sound on which the self floats above the floodwaters of chaos" (106). The incantatory effects of a poem have to do not only with repetitive language but also with rhythm. Rhythmic or musical verse alone can be described as incantatory, but when the element of linguistic repetition is added in the spirit of high emotion, the personal lyric becomes forcefully

and dramatically puissant. American poet Edward Hirsch observes that “Incantation [is] a formulaic use of words to create magical effect” (Hirsch). “Healing Incantation,” performed by Mandy Moore in the Disney movie *Tangled* is a good example of incantatory verse:

Flower, gleam and glow

Let your power shine

Make the clock reverse

Bring back what once was mine

Heal what has been hurt

Change the Fates’ design

Save what has been lost

Bring back what once was mine

What once was mine (Healing Incantation)

In the movie, the animated character Rapunzel, voiceover by Mandy Moore, uses this incantation to heal the character Eugene’s injured hand. I deliberately chose it because it presents an unobstructed view of incantatory verse; that is, it possesses no story and very little symbol and can be a universal panacea, effective in healing just about any trauma one could name. With her opening line, “Flower gleam and glow,” Moore summons the healing light; common in many of the light religions such as Paganism, the light is representative of an omnipotent healing force. Right away, readers sense the rhythm or musicality evident in the prosody of the metered lines. Flower, of course, is symbolic of beauty, so the poet healer confronts trauma with the combined powers of light and beauty. “Make the clock reverse” seeks to bring the

injured person back in time to where the trauma had not yet occurred. Here I get a sense that this poem could be used as a charm against aging. Many feel traumatized by the effects of getting older, our beautiful bodies sagging and wrinkling before our eyes. The poem probably would not stop this natural process, but it could possibly help to slow it down and certainly help a poet or reader to make the psychological adjustment to the change. After all, is it our young bodies that we miss, or is it really our youthful outlooks? We come to the beginning of the repetitive incantatory effect of the poem with “Bring back what once was mine.” Here, Moore is referring to ownership of wholeness. Things were good before, and she wants them to be good once again. The following lines all reiterate that which has already been stated: “Heal what has been hurt,” “Change the Fates’ design,” “Save what has been lost” are all just other ways of claiming that ownership of wholeness that was the norm before the trauma set in. In a sense, the repetition occurs throughout most of the poem, and then we get toward the ending with the reoccurrence of “Bring back what once was mine.” And then the final haunting, echoing ending: “What once was mine.” As powerful as Moore’s poem is, I cannot help but wonder if it would be all the more prevailing written in concrete terms and ripe with symbol.

Many popular poets write in just this rhythmic, incantatory style, Walt Whitman among them. Further, many of Whitman’s poems are also written in story form and packed with symbolism. Here is scene 18 of *Leaves of Grass*, which inspired Martin Espada’s latest book, *Vivas to Those Who Have Failed*.

With music strong I come—with my cornets and my drums,

I play not marches for accepted victors only—I play great marches for conquer'd
and slain persons.

Have you heard that it was good to gain the day?

I also say it is good to fall—battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are
won.

I beat and pound for the dead;

I blow through my embouchures my loudest and gayest for them.

Vivas to those who have fail'd!

And to those whose war-vessels sank in the sea!

And to those themselves who sank in the sea!

And to all generals who lost engagements! and all overcome heroes!

And the numberless unknown heroes, equal to the greatest heroes known.

(18.353-63)

In the area of story, Whitman celebrates not the “winners” as many do in the U.S.—America, it is said, does love a winner—but the losers. The way I read Whitman, he does not celebrate the losers of battles because he believes such people are ethically or morally superior. Rather, he celebrates them because he has realized the value of seeing everyone as being the same. He sees men as being the same as women, a very enlightened concept for his time, 1819-1892. He sees the so called physically normal as being the same as those with deformities. Those of color being the

same as those of no color. Those of same sex sexual orientation being the same as those of opposite sex orientation. The list goes on and on. The man was a social justice warrior! I believe he realizes this sameness not because we do not have our differences, we do, but because, when we look to our likenesses, we begin to heal our differences.

Whitman's sketch is also packed to the brim with symbolism. Cornets and drums are symbols of music, that marching band sort of music played as a call to battle. Whitman describes it as strong music. Marching bands at sports events play fight songs to rally the spectators for the benefit of the home team. During the American Civil War both the North and the South used drummers and buglers on the battle field. Those sounds had the power to move soldiers emotionally to the place where they were willing to kill or be killed with musket, sword, or bayonet. In modern warfare we no longer bring marching bands onto the battle arena. But in the ceremonies before and after, those bands are still playing those celebratory songs. All this from Whitman in one symbolic line. Whitman, of course, gives us a new slant on old symbolism. His idea is to raise readers' spirits for the benefit of those who lost their battles, that ship of a person's life that sank into the sea of oblivion, that forgotten soul. Whitman seems to believe that the losers of battles are just as important to remember and celebrate as the winners, that, effectually, those who lost are the same as those who won because they share a commonality of spirit.

The incantatory effects of Whitman's verse begin in the first lines with the rhythmic ordering of words. "The presence of rhythmic patterns," according to Harmon, "lends both pleasure and heightened emotional response, for it establishes a pattern of

expectations and it rewards the listener or reader with the pleasure of a series of fulfillments of expectation” (416). Whitman seems to very generally use a rising rhythm beginning with his own combination of iambics followed by anapests, terms which refer to particular schemas of stressed and unstressed syllables. I would say this rising rhythm works so well in this case not only because of the repetitional effect of the metering but because those reoccurring couplets also raise the scene to a final climactic quintet. And, in that last stanza, Whitman uses actual repetitive language: *And to those, And to those, And to all, And to* accented by three exclamation points drives the incantatory effect of the entire scene to an explosive peak.

Conclusion

I have followed Orr throughout this inquiry, and it seems on point to relate, in conclusion, his personal statement concerning the healing effects of poetry. Early in his life, he experienced a great trauma; being responsible for his brother's death. Of course, he suffered emotionally for a number of years before he found poetry. On finally finding his way to poetics, he gives the following account:

I wrote a poem one day, and it changed my life. I had a sudden sense that the language in poetry was 'magical,' unlike language in fiction: that it could create or transform reality rather than simply describe it. That first poem I wrote was a simple, escapist fantasy, but it liberated the enormous energy of my despair and oppression as nothing before had ever done. I felt simultaneously revealed to myself and freed of myself by the images and actions of the poem.

I would certainly argue that such liberation from the energy of despair could only promote healing. Continuous worry without reprieve seems like a sickness in itself. This might well be another topic to take up in a future study citing healing poems from various sources.

At any rate, in considering story, the question comes to mind of which comes first, the abstract idea or the concrete details describing it. Good poems possess both. Perhaps this is not an either/or question. Perhaps in looking through the prism of our poet-self, it is essential that we remain open to discovering a priori ideas as we experience life in the concrete. I think, however, that every particular experience, no matter how seemingly trivial, is in reality central and necessary. It is the poet's job to understand this and help others to understand as well. With an idea and a set of details in mind, as we write within the scope of some particular metaphor, those rudimentary symbols will appear quite naturally. In revision, we can shift those raw stones of symbolism into likely places where they can be polished to a glossy finish. Last, as we set our verses to a rhythm for incantatory effect, it may be helpful to be familiar with the various metering techniques, but it is through sounding out our lines that the arrangements are composed. We must write in a solitary cave in order to do this else we be thought insane by passersby.

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