Poetry Definitions & Love – 3 tasks

Task 1- Rhythm vs Rhyme

Rhythm is how a poem ‘feels’ when spoken, and has a beat to it to do with stressed syllables, the speed of speaking and the pauses between syllables. Rhyme is the sound of the choice of words, and rhyming words have the same nucleus and coda (endings) of their final syllables.

Task 2 – Definitions

Form – A form is a developed method of rhyming poetry which attributes rules to how rhyme and rhythm should be used, for example haikus are non-rhyming Japanese poems with 5 syllables in the first and last lines, and 7 in the middle line, or a better example may be a Shakespearian sonnet, which commands that the poem have 14 lines, a rhyme scheme of ABABCDCEDEFGG, and use iambic pentameter (each line has 5 iamb – pairs of syllables which are unstressed-stressed).

Tone – Tone is the emotional mood of a poem conveyed by the poet, and this can vary from mournful to ironic to mocking to gleeful, and this is communicated through the poet’s ability to use language in a creative way, and can be done via rhyme, rhythm or metaphor, as well as other techniques.

Voice – A voice is the format through which the poem is crafted. This can be done in a narrative voice (eg in an epic), in an epistolary voice (eg in a letter), or in the third person (viewing the actions in a poem from afar) or first person (experiencing the poem oneself). The voice also may reflect whether it is the poet or a created character speaking.

Task 3 – Why are there so many poems about death?

Looking through Penguin’s Poems for Life, I was startled by how much of the poetry about death intrigued me and caught my eye, and it is certainly true that death remains one of the big topics that poets regularly write about, the others including love, nature and the human condition.

The first poem that is seen in the book, in its section on death, has perhaps been immortalised in Four Weddings and a Funeral, Funeral Blues by WH Auden, a poem which I adore deeply:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead',
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.
This poem carefully pieces together the emotions running through a grieving lover’s head, and to do this takes rhyming couplets, which seem like lonely little pairs in this poem, reflecting the (lost) love that the speaker felt. The poem uses a plethora of interesting techniques, including the fact that the poem flows from before the funeral (‘stop all the clocks’) to the grieving period afterwards (‘For nothing now can ever come to any good’), tracking the commands of the speaker to the world, as if people will listen and heed and respect a person who is grieving, that all the attention can fall on them – despite their miserable state. The final two stanzas mark what seems to me like a final cry before the speaker fades away into obscurity, the shout of grievance: ‘He was my North, my South, my East and West’, calling and declaring the speaker’s love to the world before he commands that life cease for himself, that all natural significance – the Sun, Moon, ocean and wood – can be gotten rid of. The choice of verbs – ‘pack up’ and ‘dismantle’ to me seem as if someone would ‘pack up’ a tent, or ‘dismantle’ scaffolding before they leave; this poem is the speaker’s swan song, and just as their lover granted them new life, when the lover is gone the speaker loses that life, and so he must pack up and prepare to leave.

Reading through these poems, it seems to me that death is a medium, a magnifying glass or a microscope into the intricacies of human nature, as well as an opportunity to philosophise. In Auden’s Funeral Blues, as we saw, death is an opportunity to remember a loved one, and to commemorate the life had together. However, death can also be used to discuss war, youth (Anthem for Doomed Youth), those mourners left behind (Grief, Barrett Browning), the speaker’s own wrongdoing (My Last Duchess, Browning), and the feeling of dying itself (After great pain, Dickinson), or even fear of loss (Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night, Thomas) In all of these, I see three fundamental questions:

1. Why do people die? (What reason and how is it just?)
2. How can we comprehend death, the final endeavour?
3. What is our relationship to death?

For example, if I were to discuss these three in the context of Anthem for Doomed Youth by Wilfred Owen, I would write that:

1. People die in the name of what they are taught is just by the state due to their youthful naiveté, and this lacks moral conscience.
2. We can comprehend death, at least on the battlefield, as a moment of intense violence and isolation, separated from the world, and away from home.
3. We have an ignorant relationship to death in war; it is not death, but another number and a glory in itself.

The human condition is in essence curious, and because we lose people that we are attached to, we do not hesitate to question death and attempt to comprehend it. Arguably we do what we can with death, as there is little science on what happens in death, we only have the personal and emotional to rely on, and so poetry flourishes, as humans turn to poetry when rational thought cannot console them. We also have a romantic image of death because it is the fall, it is the failure after years of being a human (i.e. top of the food chain), and with the inevitability of death (that humans like to deny and make it socially unacceptable to think of), it is only natural that death would be seen as this distant traveller that has an aroma of the exotic and yet tragic, and as we know, tragedy and fascination make for enticing literature, and so death remains a topic often turned to by poets of all creeds.

Commented [1]: Ambitious analysis with some exploratory thinking in evidence.