

Why Poetry?

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Expository statements utilize commonly defined language for the primary purpose of communicating accurate information. Poetry is expressive in nature and is designed to communicate by utilizing non-standard/surprising language which often evokes emotions.

Consider the following three examples dealing with the same topic:

The Expository Description

The old dog raised its weak tail, howled at the full moon, and completed its way to its death.

The Poetic Statement

The Bedraggled Dog
Raised Its Failed Tail
Whimpered a Mournful Tune to the Moon
And Whispered Its Way
Into Everlasting.

The Extreme Metaphorical Statement

The Double Downed Dog
Liberated Its Limp Rear Lasso
Billowed To Forlorn Moon Beams
And Zippered Its Way
Into Zerodom.

The Expository – the facts stated plainly, in a straight forward manner, and written in standard information purposeful, paragraph format. The Poetic – the facts delivered in compressed, expressive signaled stanza format with rhythmic “sound bite” phrases that introduce unusual reality connections and emotionally charged images. The Extreme – poetic statement embellished to the point of introducing new words and risking the underlying facts being lost. A good thing can be carried too far! Poetry must not be so exotic that it fails to communicate.

Commentary

Language arises to facilitate straight forward communication in order to deal effectively with the needs of everyday life. It achieves this by assigning different words to different things [nouns] and actions [verbs] and locating them in a time

frame [past, present, future]. The problem is that this “assignment” process is both limited and arbitrary [example: distinguishing the color blue from the color green] creating different categories and imposing them on reality where they fail to capture the actual continuum that exists and the connections that prevails among all things. Poetry exposes this failure by first signaling a brief “time out” from essential communicative life activities – the “presentation” [a reading event or a book of poetry] – and then by using language itself to explore non-standard connections and to ask the hearer/reader to consider reality more expansively and as more unified. In this way, poetry helps to loosen the grip of language to permanently fix the human conception of reality. And in this process poetry comments on any and all human issues helping to keep the view of these issues fluid and potentially creative. Poetry asks us to see “things” differently, more fully, and with greater flexibility. In doing so, poetry serves an important adaptive function in human society, as does all of expressive/artistic culture.

Of course, poetry is just one of our language designated “categories” – in itself limited and arbitrary! Accordingly, poetry is part of our larger arbitrary category of “language communication” which includes poetry, song, description, narration, exposition, etc. As a continuum, these subcategories in fact flow into and among one another. So, what we call “description” in either expository or narrative expression can be more or less poetic. And in recent times as traditional poetic forms have been mostly abandoned in favor of free verse, some of what passes for poetry is difficult to distinguish from description or narration, if it were not for the use of poetic formatting. Thus, the “confusion” or “debate” over what is poetry reflects the basic underlying problem of language itself – categories that are arbitrary and imposed on phenomenological continua. It follows that the view I offer above is only one way – hopefully useful to others – to define our language category of “Poetry.”

In the final analysis, the creation of language that performs the function of poetry is more important than struggling over the inherently impossible task of trying to determine its precise definition as a language use category.