

Why Poetry?

2024

Thomas A. Burns PhD.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

Expository statements utilize commonly understood 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 instrumental 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.

Poetry often utilizes special formatting that signals that the written message is not a standard communication – stanzas being typical. Poetry also can employ many special language devices: alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, simile, and metaphor. Among these language devices, metaphor is the major tool in the poetic arsenal for asserting non-standard connections. Example: “Jeff is a loose fitting cucumber sandwich.” The simile version of this statement is: “Jeff is like a loose fitting cucumber sandwich.” Metaphor drops the comparative and unifies the identity of Jeff and the sandwich – insisting on their being viewed as one and the same. Beyond this base sandwich metaphor, “loose fitting” is assigned as an attribute of the sandwich which adds an additional layer of metaphor: “loose fitting” acting as a metaphorical way to indicate: “poorly put together.” So, the simple statement, “Jeff is a loose fitting cucumber sandwich” contains a double metaphor claiming connections that are non-standard – to say the least – in our “given,” language “captured” reality.

Metaphorical language statements stretch the boundaries of our standard conception of reality, and poetry takes a special interest in this mechanism as a key way to promote our “seeing things differently” in the service of achieving poetry’s important adaptive function.

Returning to the relationship of poetry to language, we have to recognize that poetry itself is one of our language designated “categories” and thereby is both limited and arbitrary! Accordingly, our larger arbitrary category of “language communication” 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 [with their insistence on fixed meter and/or rhyme requirements] 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.