

CHAPTER 3

APPRECIATION OF POETRY

تذوق الشعر

*"The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And from things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name."*

Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

To appreciate a poem, you must lay yourself wide open to its charm; that means you have to get rid of your inhibitions, and open your heart, mind and ears to it. Read it aloud several times, and let the poem's music, imagery, ideas and emotions seep يتسرب through you; only then will you begin to appreciate the poem you are reading.

We will discuss appreciation of poetry at three levels; the first is for beginners (English Language Secondary Schools), the second is for Intermediate students (Usually 1st and 2nd year University Course), the third is for advanced students (usually from the 3rd year University Course onwards).

For Beginners:

At the Secondary (high) school stage, a continuous description of all the essential qualities of a good poem is not required. A student's appreciation of a particular piece of poetry may be judged by asking specific questions like the following:

- What is the central idea of the poem?
- What is the poet's attitude to life, or to nature, or to whatever is the subject of the poem?
- What is the significance of certain given lines or expressions in the poem?
- What picture is sketched in the lines specified?
- How are certain sound effects produced by the poet?
- What figures of speech are to be found in the poem and how can they be explained?
- What title (or alternative title) can be given to the poem?

EXAMPLES

Here are five short poems with certain questions on appreciation given below each of them and the answers worked out.

1. *"She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove;
A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love.*

*A violet by a mossy stone
Half-hidden from the eye!
Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.*

*She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!"*
(W. Wordsworth)

Questions

- Give a suitable title to the poem.
- Name and explain the figure(s) of speech used in the second stanza.
- What do you think of the last two lines?
- What do you think of the language used in the poem?

Answers

- "The Lost Love" or "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways."
- The figures of speech are a metaphor: The girl is compared to the half hidden violet, and a simile: she is again compared to a lonely star to emphasise (a) her solitude and obscurity, and (b) her beauty of soul and body.
- The last two lines should have expressed the feelings of love and bereavement, but the poet ends his poem rather bathetically by an anticlimax هبوط: "The difference to me!". He should have striven for a climax تصاعد بلاغى like: "That could I with her be!".
- The most striking feature of the language is its simplicity. The poet has used simple, everyday words, mostly of one syllable; yet they produce a poem that has a magic charm.

2. *"Laugh and be merry, better the world with a song.
Better the world with a blow in the teeth of a wrong.
Laugh, for the time is brief, a thread the length of a span.
Laugh and be proud to belong to the old proud pageant of man.*

*Laugh and be merry: remember, in olden time,
 God made Heaven and Earth for joy, He took in a rhyme.
 Made them, and filled them full with the strong red wine of His mirth,
 The splendid joy of the stars, the joy of the earth.
 So we must laugh and drink from the deep blue cup of the sky,
 Join the jubilant song of the great stars sweeping by.
 Laugh, and battle, and work, and drink of the wine outpoured
 In the dear green earth, the sign of the joy of the Lord.
 Laugh and be merry together, like brothers akin,
 Guesting awhile in the rooms of a beautiful inn,
 Glad till the dancing stops, and the lilt of the music ends.
 Laugh till the game is played: and be you merry, my friends.*

(John Masefield)

Questions:

- (a) What is the central idea of the poem?
- (b) What is the “blow” with which the poet wants us to better the world?
- (c) Quote three striking examples of metaphors used in the poem.
- (d) Explain:
 - (1) “the old proud pageant of man.”
 - (2) “Guesting awhile in the rooms of a beautiful inn.”

Answers:

- (a) Life is short and we must therefore laugh and be cheerful, and enjoy all the beauty and happiness that can be found on this earth.
- (b) It is our laughter and merriment that will serve as a blow and hit out boldly against wrong and injustice in the world.
- (c)
 - (1) “Laugh, for the time is brief, a thread the length of a span.”
 - (2) “Made them and filled them with the strong red wine of His mirth.”
 - (3) “Laugh till the game is played.”
- (d)
 - (1) We are part of the spectacular progress of mankind which is marked with many glorious achievements.
 - (2) We should be happy and cheerful together during the short time we are in this beautiful world in the same way as brothers who are staying for a short while in a beautiful inn where there is dancing and music.

3. *“What is this life if, full of care,
 We have no time to stand and stare?”*

*No time to stand beneath the boughs
 And stare as long as sheep or cows.*

No time to see, when woods we pass,

Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.

*No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night?*

*No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance ?*

*No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began?*

*A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare."*

(William Henry Davies)

Questions:

- (a) What kind of life does the poet condemn?
- (b) What are the "stars" of which the streams are full?
- (c) Name and explain the figures or speech in lines 9-10.
- (d) Explain :

*"No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began"*

Answers:

- (a) The poet condemns the kind of life that is full of care, and which allows us no time to enjoy the beauties of nature.
- (b) The "stars" are the reflections of light on the surface of the water, the silvery fish glittering near the surface, and the flowers floating with the stream.
- (c) This is Personification: The poet represents Beauty as a person.
- (d) When a beautiful woman smiles, the smile begins in her eyes, then it spreads down to her lips. The poet uses Hyperbole to exaggerate the shortness of time that we have; for it is but a moment for the smile to extend from the eyes to the lips.

4. *"My days among the Dead are past;
Around me I behold,
Wherever these casual eyes are cast,
The mighty minds of old;
My never-failing friends are they,
With whom I converse day by day
With them I take delight in weal
And seek relief in woe;
And while I understand and feel*

*How much to them I owe.
My Cheeks have often been bedew'd
With tears of thoughtful gratitude".*

(Robert Southey)

Questions:

- (a) What is the central idea of the poem ?
- (b) Who are the "mighty minds" ?
- (c) Who are the poet's friends and how are they never-failing ?
- (d) Explain :

*"My Cheeks have often been bedew'd
With tears of thoughtful gratitude."*

Answers:

(a) If the word "past" in the first line is the past participle of the verb "pass" meaning "spent", then the poet had the following idea: The poet regards books as living, faithful friends with whom he can always talk, and who can always be relied upon, for they provide solace when he is miserable, and share his joys when he is happy.

But if the word "past" is an adverb meaning "over", then the meaning is drastically added to: The poet considers people "Dead" as they have none of the great qualities of books which he considers living as they are faithful, wise and can always be consulted and talked to.

(b) These are the minds of the great authors who put all their theories, ideas and wisdom inside their books.

(c) These are the books, for they are always with him, helping, advising, solacing and laughing with him. They can never fail him as they have no human frailties as cowardice, betrayal or covetousness.

(d) The poet was so grateful to his books that he often cried and wet his cheeks with tears of thankfulness.

5. *"We scatter seeds with careless hand
And dream we ne'er shall see them more:
But for a thousand years
Their fruit appears
In weeds that mar the land,
Or healthful store.
The deeds we do - the words we say
Into still air they seem to float;
We count them ever past-
But they shall last,
In the dread judgement, they
And we shall meet!"*

Questions:

- (a) What is the central idea of the poem?
- (b) Explain the imagery of the first stanza.
- (c) Show how wrong we are about the consequences of our words and our deeds.
- (d) What figures of speech are used in the first six lines?

Answers:

- (a) We should never think that whatever we do or say is over, and that we need not concern ourselves about it. Our actions and words have repercussions upon others, and these effects, whether good or bad, will be accounted for in the Day of Judgement.
- (b) Our words and actions are like seeds. When we scatter them carelessly, we do not think any more about them, but they grow and multiply. If they are good, then they are like beneficial plants, but if they are bad, then they are like harmful weeds.
- (c) We never think about the effect of our words and actions upon others, but they do have an effect, and we will have to answer for our actions on the Day of Judgement.
- (d) The poet uses a sustained metaphor, for he likens our actions to seeds, and their consequences (if bad) to harmful weeds, and (if good) to beneficial plants.

For Intermediate Students:

We are going to give here a somewhat detailed appreciation of the poem, "The Daffodils". The points amplified below in connection with Wordsworth's beautiful poem will make you understand what you should look for in good poetry in order that you may enjoy it in a better way.

Let us now take this well-known poem by William Wordsworth and try and find out what essentials of good poetry it contains:

*"I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils,
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

*Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance*

Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

*The waves beside them danced. but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:
A Poet could not but be gay
In such a jocund company!
I gazed - and gazed - but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought.*

*For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills.
And dances with the daffodils."*

Now let us examine what we have discovered about the poem:

(1) Substance المحتوى: After carefully reading the poem through, several times, ask yourself: What is it all about? What is the subject? And what does the poet say about the subject?

The poet tells us that as he was taking a solitary walk beside a lake one bright and breezy Spring morning, he suddenly came upon a sight that filled him with delighted wonder at its beauty, and with gaiety of heart. There stretched before his wondering gaze thousands and thousands of yellow daffodils under the trees beside the sparkling waters of the lake, "Fluttering and dancing in the breeze." The sight filled him with pleasure; but he did not know at the time all that the experience had added to his life. For many times afterwards, memory brought back that beautiful scene as a mental picture, which gave him over and over again the same feeling of joy.

(2) Language: The poem is in very simple language and there are no really difficult words. (Daffodil is a bulbous plant of the lily family bearing a yellow trumpet-shaped flower that grows wild in English woods and flowers in Spring).

(3) Imagery: (a) The first three verses are a description of a host of daffodils under the trees by the side of a lake, lit up by the sun and dancing in the wind.

(b) There are two similes: the comparison between the solitary poet and a lonely cloud in the first stanza, and the comparison between the endless line of daffodils and innumerable stars in the milky way given in the second stanza.

(c) There is also an example of personification in the second stanza and again in the third stanza. The daffodils are described as dancing in glee

and tossing their heads like human beings and are said to be “such a jocund company.”

The statement: “Ten thousand saw I at a glance”, is a figure of speech known as hyperbole; it is a poetic exaggeration not intended to be taken literally.

(4) Sound effects: (a) The quickened movement of line 6 of the first stanza, in comparison with the stately movement of the preceding lines, well echoes and reinforces the sense.

(b) There is an example of alliteration in line 6 of the fourth stanza. “And dances with the daffodils”. Note also the repetition in line 5 of the third stanza, “I gazed - and gazed”; it emphasises the length of time the poet stood looking in delighted wonder at the beautiful scene.

(5) Striking lines: The most striking lines are lines 3 and 4 of the last stanza. The “inward eye” is the faculty of visualising, or calling up mental pictures from memory or the imagination. Such mind-pictures give us joy when we are alone and at leisure.

For Advanced Students:

A perfect poem, like any perfect art form, must appeal to the mind, heart and senses; also it must be technically brilliant. All good poetry contains the four elements mentioned, Throughout history you will discover that the tide veers towards one element at the expense of the other three. Augustan poetry gave more emphasis to clarity of the thought content, the Metaphysists restricted themselves to metaphysical subjects, the Symbolists insisted on suggestive vagueness, Surrealists dredged the subconscious, the Parnassians of France demanded brilliant imagery, while Romantic poetry talked to the heart. But verse without appeal to the heart or mind, however technically brilliant is nothing but jingling versification, and is not poetry.

Now, let us discuss these characteristics individually:

1. Appeal to the mind جاذبية للعقل = purpose and meaning: A poem must have some thought content; for a thoughtless poem is just nonsense. We must ask ourselves the following questions in order to fully understand the poem:

- (a) What is the poet’s intent (purpose) in writing this poem?
- (b) What does he mean?
- (c) Did he succeed in delivering his message (if any) to the reader or hearer?
- (d) What is the poet’s attitude towards his subject? And towards his reader? Is he being cynical, humorous, negative, optimistic, pessimistic, realistic, sentimental, satirical, nostalgic, playful or whatever?

(e) Who is talking in the poem? The poet himself? Or some character or personality? And whom is he talking to? Is there a difference of opinion between the poet and the personality that is speaking?

(f) Where is the speaker? What time of day it is? What season? What historical occasion?

(g) Are there any allusions to historical or mythological persons or events?

(h) Are there any contrasts in the poem? What are their relations to the characters and theme of the poem?

(i) Does the poem's title relate to its content?

(j) What about imagery? Are there any striking images? How does he achieve them?

2. Appeal to the heart **جانبية للقلب** = ability to raise emotion: A poem must raise some emotion in our hearts, whatever that emotion is; be it happiness, sorrow, anger, nostalgia, pride, etc. An emotionless poem is a contradiction of terms. So, we have to ask ourselves the following questions:

(a) What emotion did the poet strive to raise in the hearer's bosom?

(b) Did he succeed in affecting the hearer in the way he intended?

(c) What is the most poignant or striking line written by the poet?

3. Appeal to the ear **جانبية للأذن** = musical or sound effects: Poetry has music. This music can be soft, or it can be jarring; it can have a speedy or a slow beat; it can be harmonious or it can be cacophonous. But when we read poetry aloud, we must feel its music. If it has no music, then it is not poetry. So, we have to ask ourselves the following questions:

(a) Does the poem have music?

(b) Is this music in harmony with its subject?

(c) What devices is the poet using to achieve his musical effects?

4. Technical perfection **اكتمال الصنعة** = versification, language, and figures of speech: A Poet must know his instruments in the same way that a painter knows his colours, canvases, brushes, lighting, etc. The instruments of the poet are: Words, Rules of Versification, and Figures of speech, and he must be master of all. So, you have to ask yourself the following questions:

(a) What feet, metres, rhymes and stanzas is the poet using?

(b) What about the poet's diction? Does he use simple everyday words, or difficult, archaic, and so called, "poetic" language? How does the poet's language affect the tone of the poem? Does it make its tone lofty, heroic, melancholic, angry, lyrical, sarcastic, playful, compassionate, sorrowful, amused, disdainful, sentimental, nostalgic, romantic etc.?

(c) What figures of speech is the poet using? Are they original and effective, or trite and hackneyed?

Exercises

Now here are five poems, read them carefully and do an appreciation of them *according to your own level*. Beginners are to content themselves with answering the questions set below each:

1. *“Oh, sweet content. that turns the labourer’s sweat
To tears of joy, and shines the roughest face;
How often have I sought you high and low
And found you still in some quiet place;
Here in my room, when full of happy dreams
With no life heard beyond that merry sound
Of moths that on my lighted ceiling kiss
Their shadows as they dance and dance around;
Or in a garden, on a summer’s night
When I have seen the dark and solemn air
Blink with the blind bat’s wings, and heaven’s bright face
Twitch with the stars that shine in thousands there.”*

- (a) Where does the poet seek sweet content? Where does he find it!
(b) What striking word-pictures are contained in the poem?
(c) Name and explain the figures of speech in the last two lines.
(d) Give a suitable title to the poem.

2. (Keats’ poem on first reading Chapman’s translation of the Iliad.)

*“Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold,
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told.
That deepbrow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold;
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific - and all his men
Look’d at each other with a wild surmise-
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.”* (John Keats)

- (a) What idea is expressed in the first four lines of the sonnet?

- (b) Explain the significance of the phrase “deepbrow’d Homer”.
 (c) What striking pictures are presented in the last six lines of the poem?
 (d) Quote the line which you think produces the greatest musical effect.
 (e) Explain: “pure serene”; “eagle eyes”; “wild surmise”.

3. *“Strew on her roses, roses.
 And never a spray of yew!
 In quiet she reposes;
 Ah, would that I did too;
 Her mirth the world required;
 She bathed it in smiles of glee
 But her heart was tired, tired.
 And now they let her be.
 Her life was turning, turning,
 In mazes of heat and sound.
 But for peace her soul was yearning,
 And now peace laps her round,
 Her cabin’d, ample spirit,
 It flutter’d and fail’d for breath.
 To-night it doth inherit
 The vasty hall of death.”*

(Matthew Arnold)

- (a) Does the poet show any grief at the person’s death?
 What exactly are his feelings on the occasion ?
 (b) Quote examples of repetition from the poem.
 (c) What do you gather about the life of the dead person from the poem?
 (d) Explain:
 (i) “Her cabin’d, ample spirit,
 It flutter’d and fail’d for breath.”
 (ii) “To-night it doth inherit
 The vasty hall of death.”

4. *“Books! ’tis a dull and endless strife”:
 Come, hear the woodland linnet.
 How sweet his music! on my life
 There’s more of wisdom in it.
 And hark! how blithe the throstle sings,
 He too is no mean preacher:
 Come Forth into the light of things,
 Let Nature be your teacher...
 Enough or Science and of Art;
 Come forth, and bring with you a heart*

That watches and receives."

- (a) Name and explain the figure of speech in the sixth line.
- (b) What feelings does the poet seek to awaken in you by the following exclamations: "Books!"; "hark!"?
- (c) What kind of teaching does Nature give?
- (d) Explain: "the light of things"; "a heart that watches and receives".

5. *"They tell us of an Indian tree
Which, howsoe'er the sun and the sky
May tempt its boughs to wander free
And shoot and blossom wide and high
Far better loves to bend its arms
Downwards again to that dear earth,
From which the life that fills and warms
Its grateful being first had birth.
'Tis thus, though wooed by flattering friends
And fed with fame (if fame it be),
This heart, my own dear mother, bends
With love's true instinct back to thee."*

- (a) Name the figures of speech in the second and the third lines.
- (b) Why is the tree considered "grateful"?
- (c) In what respect is the poet like the tree ?
- (d) Explain: "Wooed by flattering friends"; "Shoot and blossom wide and high."