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Theories of Writing

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Poetry has been around since the early oral culture of storytelling and verse (Ong, 44), and still exists today in a big upswing of recurrence and popularity in 2018. For something that has been around for so long, it has been through countless phases, circulating in and out of the old and new ways. While poetry is known everywhere as a form of creative writing, couldn't it also be classified as a fashion? Of course poetry is no article of clothing, but through the exploration of poetic history, poetry is a big cultural element that can, indeed, be considered a fashion.

First, poetry can be seen as a fashion in the way it uses basic writing evolution forms as a fad, which after so long can make reappearances in new and current trends. Next, when looking at how poetry has gone through its different time periods, it may be just as easy to depict a 1920's poem from a 2010's poem, as it would be to tell a 1920's outfit from a 2010's ensemble. Finally, like all fashion statements throughout time, the many trends in poetry can be brought back, revisited, and referenced in newer work, which is something seen very often. Throughout this exploration of viewing poetry as a fashion, it will prove useful to draw analogies to the fashion of the clothing business, as that is the most familiar form of fashion that exists today.

When fashion evolves, there are always "ins" and "outs" to be explored with the same trends. Hair scrunchies used to be "in," then they were "out," and now they are back "in." The same thing has happened with high-waisted jeans, wire-framed glasses, and crop-top shirts.

When writing first started off there was no alphabet and there were only the interpretations of three dimensional, then two-dimensional symbols (Schmandt-Besserat, 8). Not speaking of symbols as in symbolism, because while in poetry symbolism is highly important, it is physical symbols in which is being talked about. Symbols held all meaning in what writing was, and from different looking symbols came different meanings, words, and interpretations. These symbols of course started simple and then became more complex until it evolved into alphabetical writing. This use of symbols can be dated back to 3200 BCE, so nowhere near the current times in what writing is today. Of course though, the statements of symbols and use of this as a tool again in writing actually has now resurfaced in the art of poetry.

The idea of using symbols, shapes, and images, by use of creating physical pictures through word arrangements in poetry resurfaced first around 1920 with the introduction of concrete poems. Again, not symbolism through word use, but symbol and pictures made seen by word, line, and stanza arrangements. When a poem in its entirety makes the shape of a teardrop, that symbol of a teardrop artistically sculpts a sad tone on the poem, even when the words may not explicitly be sad. This symbol-work was very big at this time, spanning for a few decades. A quick example is “Kite” by Jo Daniel:

I
fly high
in the sky
catch me if you can
the wind takes
me where
I want to
go

Aside from concrete poems, there are other symbols that have come into poetics, and this is a recent fashion being taken on by many contemporary poets (unless referencing Emily

Dickenson, who was ahead of her time). When poets use an ampersand instead of saying “and,” use dashes instead of typical punctuation, or use long spaces between words to represent a pause, they are using the trend of symbols. Contemporary poets like Olivia Gatwood, Chelsey Minnis, Ocean Vuong, and many more, use this technique, and use symbols through their poems to create a stronger meaning that the poems would not have without such symbols. As an example of this, here is the last stanza from Olivia Gatwood’s “Gamble”:

he pondered over them like a poker deck,
selected one, carefully, of me & a headless boy, let it dangle
between his thumb & forefinger, waited a moment
for me to drink it in, to look myself in the eye,
& then asked who i was.

Of course, as this is a present trend, there is no telling how long these symbols will stay around, but eventually, like all fads, this, too, will fade out, until the next form of symbol use comes back into style.

Along this same idea, spoken poetry has seen its “ins” and “outs” over history. The beginning of poetics started orally, with Homer and other poets. Many of the poems have been recorded afterward, but initially these were purely oral practices, where storytelling through poetry was born (Bolter, 57, 109). After the oral traditions faded out though, poetry became a written, creative practice, and continues to be this way today. Through history since poetry has been written down, some poets would do occasional readings of their popular works, and most commonly this has been done for canonical works of poetry whose poets were still alive and accessible in its time. Nonetheless though, poetry evolved into a heavily writing-based style, and only certain poets dabbled in in the spoken works with slam competitions and famous readings here and there. It was not until very recently that this fashion of spoken poetry became relevant again, and in a booming way. Many poetry organizations today like Button Poetry, Youth

Speaks, and even Ted Talks support emerging spoken word poets, whose poetic recognition relies on the performance aspect of each piece. Slam poetry nights have become more of a norm around cities and poets are now selling out on US tours where they perform their poems as if it were a concert. In the development of this oral poetry fashion, the Internet played an important role as such poets and performances could start up through online bases. The aforementioned organizations all have an internet presence on their own sites and have videos posted to YouTube in order to get this fashion out to as many eyes and interests as possible. Without such a big Internet growth at the start, this oral tradition would not have come back as strongly as it has today. Oral culture is once again in fashion, and possibly not even in full swing yet, showing this trendy poetic style may be here to stay for a while. The fluctuating trends of poetry as a fashion definitely take more time to fade in and out than the clothing fashion industry, but nevertheless, these patterns are hard to ignore.

Since poetry, and any form of writing, is well documented and archived due to the nature of how writing works and exists, the history of all poetry throughout time is easily accessed. If one were to look at some Langston Hughes, Wallace Stevens, or T.S. Elliot, there would be some features of these writers' poems that seemed almost foreign. A good example might be Langston Hughes' "Harlem" from the Harlem Renaissance:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

In this example, such a foreign feel comes from the fact that a poem as such published now would have less of relevance than it had in the Harlem Renaissance. The foreign feel I talk about comes undoubtedly from the time period such poems were written. Much like the fashionable clothing people wore on their backs several decades ago, poetry was also in a different world back then. While flapper dresses and feather boas were the go-to style in the roaring twenties, poets brought modernism, imagism, nostalgia, and the use of aesthetics to the written world during this time. In Lola Ridge's "The Ghetto," there is the twenties poetic styles of modernism and imagism among the frame of historical reality in New York, one of the stanzas goes as follows:

Time spins like a crazy dial in his brain,
And night by night
I see the love-gesture of his arm
In its green-greasy coat-sleeve
Circling the Book,
And the candles gleaming starkly
On the blotched-paper whiteness of his face,
Like a miswritten psalm...
Night by night
I hear his lifted praise,
Like a broken whinnying
Before the Lord's shut gate.

Of course the Harlem Renaissance was what gave these poems such context and purpose, but fashion is always connected to its history. What was being worn during the twenties was also representing the Harlem Renaissance and the aftermath of World War I. Looking back on any poetry from the past easily represents time—much like any form of fashion would—and when comparing such timely poems to current day poems, the drastic changes can easily be seen, and with background knowledge of past styles and trends in poetic fashion, one could also identify

the rough time frame in which a past poem was written. This can be done for all eras like Elizabethan, classicism, cavalier, and World War I poetries.

From these many types of past styles and trends in the world of poetry, current poetries can now use such “vintage” styles and incorporate them in new works. As explained earlier, the reappearance of past fads is an important aspect in fashion, and exists in poetry as a fashion as well. Many contemporary poets today will incorporate historical styles and forms from Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Langston Hughes, and let’s not forget William Shakespeare, among many more. A poem that brings back such an older fashion would be “i am warm and powerful” by Lauren Hunter:

i am warm and powerful

this happens when i am between asleep
and you when my hair is wet
call me hurricane i answer to anything
these warm waters feed
my frenzy be kind to me it has
no bearing on your survival
put me in the car i need
constant motion i am a still
still thing i need to be pressed

back inside my borders
everynight i come
with only these instructions
expect southern weather

This poem shows the use of what is called confessional poetry, which is a style used by Sylvia Plath, with this confessional “I” rather than the lyric “I” used by Dickinson, and this poet, Lauren Hunter, shows a high influence from Plath confessional poems in her poems like this one. While today’s clothing industry includes bell-bottom jeans from 70’s fashion trends, publishers today are highly interested in the confessional poetry previously used by Sylvia Plath in her time. In this case and many, drawing from older poets’ styles like this can provide a grander scope for the

reader to interpret a piece with, like alluding to a historical figure in poetry, and it draws in more context. In other cases, older styles might come back in other poets' pieces simply because that poet likes the style and wants to experiment more with it, or it is something they simply like, and absorb into their own style.

As Walter Ong has said, "Everybody, or almost everybody, must repeat and repeat and repeat the truths that have come down from the ancestors. Otherwise these truths will escape, and culture will be back on square one, where it started before the ancestors got the truths from their-ancestors" (25). Fashions make up this inquisitively repetitive culture, and as it is easily seen, poetry is undoubtedly one of these fashions. While poetic writing continues to evolve and new styles and trends enter this realm constantly, the styles that stick with the public are what are in fashion, and of course, as it always goes, fashion itself is representing of its time, representing of its culture, and always repeating.

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