

Theme and voice in poetry

Sushil Lamichhane
Teaching Assistant of English
Bhojpur Multiple Campus, Bhojpur
lamichhaneushil39@gmail.com

Abstract

Poetry is an ancient form of literature with musical qualities. A reader should go through the language structure, figures of speech and theme to explicitly analyze the poem. This article tries to define the theme and voice in a poem and explores the role of theme and voice in analyzing poetry. Analytical and descriptive research design has been applied to conclude. Identifying the theme and voice of poetry help to analyze poetry smoothly.

Keywords: Poetry, analyzing poetry, theme, voice, tone.

I. Introduction

Poetry is one of the richest genres of literature which has its own features. Poetry gives pleasure to the readers from the heart to head. Amma Raj Joshi defines poetry as an expressive art. In his workshop paper entitled *Reading the Language of Poetry* he writes, “poetry is more expressive than logical and, therefore, it is called an irrational genre.” A poem can create a world from the artful combinations of beautiful words. Poetry raises the voice of general people whose voice is not heard in society. For Jiblal Sapkota poetry is imaginative, emotional and expressive. In his article entitled *Understanding the Whole of Poetry through the Integration of Rasa and Performance* he writes, “poetry, an imaginative, emotive, expressive, intense and suggestive genre of literature, is composed for performance by the human voice (95).” Sapkota valued poetry in terms of performance or recitation by the sweet voice of human beings. In *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* Marget Ferguson et al. have defined poetry as a composition of the poet for giving the voice of human beings to make the idea of the poem alive. It defines, “a poem as a composition written for performance by the human voice (xi).” Both the authors of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* and Sapkota give priority to the art of recitation or performance of poetry. It means poetry has musical qualities and attracts readers or listeners. Like the other genre of literature, poetry is also a form of literature either spoken or written but it mingles musical sounds in it. *Elements of Literature* defines poetry as a play of language and assumes that this game of language is impossible without the curiosity and activeness of the readers. It defines, “poetry is especially a game, with artificial rules and it takes two- a writer and a reader to play (525).” Pleasuring the readers is the main musical quality of poetry along with playfulness and expressiveness. All the poems may not equally provide pleasure, playfulness or expressiveness but these are the elementary ingredients of poetry.

The theme in poetry means the ideas that the poet wants to explore. The theme is the main point or idea the poet wants to examine. Voice in poetry means the speaker who describes the events or emotions or ideas to the reader. Speaker's voice in the poetry shows the attitude or tone toward the ideas the poet wants to explore with the readers.

II. Statement of the Problem

Different factors need to consider in approaching poetry. The voice of the poem, central theme or core idea, figures of speech, sound, form, word diction, etc. are the important aspects

while analyzing poetry. Theme and voice simultaneously support exploring the meaning of poetry and bring unity while analyzing it. This article tries to answer the following questions regarding the process of analyzing poetry: What factors are needed to focus on while analyzing a poem? What do theme and voice mean in analyzing poetry? How do the theme and voice of the poem help to analyze poetry? How far theme and voice are useful to analyze poetry?

III. Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

- i) To define theme and voice in poetry.
- ii) To explore the role of theme and voice in analyzing poetry.

IV. Research Methodology

This article is based on library research and textual analysis. So the writer has used related articles, criticisms and textbooks from various scholars. A descriptive and analytical research design has been used to answer the issues discussed in the article. Only secondary sources have been used for the collection of data.

V. Literature Review

In the article entitled "Eco-poetic Imaging in Fruit-Gathering: A Repudiation of scientific sanguinity, the critic Joshi pointed out that Tagore describes the relationship between nature, humans and gods, friends and strangers, home, self and world. He concludes that Tagore's poetry dismantles the hierarchy and establishes unity between humans and the world, culture and nature on the pious plane of natural harmony which then generates peace and love to lead humanity further from love to love and joy to a divine domain (94).

In the article entitled "Understanding the whole of poetry through the Integration of Rasa and Performance", the critic Sapkota discussed that the multilayer's meaning and the taste of relishing poetry can't be fully grasped by just eyeing on the black and white of the scripture (9). He concludes that the wholeness of the theme or voice or meaning of Poetry can be understood by the integration of Rasa and Performance.

In the article entitled "Techniques of language in Dylan Thomas's poetry", Dutta studied the techniques and structure of language in Thomas's poems and found that his opaque technique has attracted great interest from the readers. He concludes that the techniques in Thomas's poems have engaged the readers at once and have helped to peel out the meaning of the poems easily.

None of the above-mentioned reviewed works clearly show the role of theme and voice in analyzing poetry. This article has opened further space for the discussion about the analysis process of poems through the help of the theme and voice of a particular poem.

VI. Result and Discussion

Theme in poetry

The theme in poetry means the central idea the poet wants to share with the readers. A reader should be clear about the difference between theme and subject matter. The subject matter is the content or subject that the poet is writing; while the theme in poetry means the message or main idea that the poet is wishing to share with the readers. The theme of poetry may be varied from the ancient to modern to contemporary poets but love and hatred, war and peace, nature and

environment, leisure and duty, life and death, family and friends, ecology and science, dreams and desires, etc. are the common themes in their poems. To explore the theme of the poetry, a critical reader should scrutinize the form, voice, language, structure, images, style, word choice, tone, figures of speech, etc. of the poem. Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R Mandell in *Literature* have suggested to eye upon figures of speech, language structure and musical qualities to explore the theme of the poem. They write, “readers look at its form, its voice, its language, its images, its allusions and its sound (527).” A reader of poetry should be clear about the diverse nature of the theme according to diverse interpretations of varieties of readers. Readers' knowledge and experience of the world also lead to multiple interpretations of the poetry. So a tactful reader should analyze different aspects of poetry to pin down the theme of the poetry.

In *Elements of Literature*, Robert Scholes et al. suggest not judging a poem only by its words but to focus the words to give attention to the musical pattern of the poem. The authors write, “re-read the poem again and again with special attention to its musical dimension (565).” In the same way, Amma Raj Joshi also focuses to internalize the linguistic system of poetry to explicit the theme of the poem. He is the same workshop paper who writes, “precise understanding of the text and the strength to organize ideas coherently.”

Let's examine some poems to interpret the theme of those poems. The joint production of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* is the manifesto of the Romantic Movement in literature and many poems collected in *Lyrical Ballads* have the theme of nature and imagination. The poem *Ode to the West Wind* by P.B. Shelly expresses the theme of change and requests that nature changes the then societies. The theme of the poem *The Chimney Sweeper* by William Blake is, if we all human beings do our duty, we don't need to fear any harm. Alfred Lord Tennyson's beautiful poem *Break Break Break* expresses the sorrow of the death of his friend and has the theme of isolation and loneliness.

The poems of modernist writers bring the issue of modern periods. One of the great poets of the modern period T.S. Eliot uses the diverse human voices in his masterpiece *The Waste Land* to show multiple dimensions of human suffering and experiences as well as ‘the symbolic death of human beings’ in fragmented modern societies. The poem *The Road Not Taken* by another modern poet Robert Frost Shows how people have to choose their lives. The theme of the poem is that human beings have no time to go back after choosing one way in life. The theme of the poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by the same is we have to continue our journey or duty until we die. We have no time to take a rest in this modern life. The theme of the poem *Piano* by D.H. Lawrence is love for a mother or the pain of growing. Another poem *Tree in the Garden* by the same author has the theme of the benefits of trees. Trees show their calmness and have a mystery in themselves.

The theme of the poem *A Woman Mourned by Daughters* by Adrienne Rich is Similar to the idea of Joha Keat's *Ode on a Grecian Urn's* “heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter”, i.e. a person's presence stronger in death rather than in alive. Her other poem *Novella* shows the impatience, unemotional, money-minded, unharmonious married life of postmodern people. The poem *Daddy* by Sylvia Plath is personal suffering of a woman. The poem is full of an emotionally troubled and upset poetess. Different allusions present in the poem show the negative character of the poetess's father. The allusion and title of the poem help to suggest a theme of this poem.

Black American female writer Maya Angelou's *I Know why the caged birds sing* and *Africa* shows her anger at racial and gender discrimination in America towards black American women. As in Maya Angelou's poems, the theme of Langston Hughes's popular poem *Harlem* is the poem for racial equality and the central idea of the poem is there is a protest for the rights if there is continuous discrimination and oppression of Blacks. Another poem *Negro* by the same poet has the same theme and shows the historical exploitation of black people by depriving their rights.

By this, we can say that theme of a single poem may be different according to the different levels of perception of readers but all readers of poetry should look minutely at the structure, language system and figurative language to disclose the theme beholds by the poem.

Voice in poetry

Voice in poetry means the speaker who elaborates on the event or chain of events, emotion, feeling and the main idea to the readers or audience voice of the poem makes the poem recital, memorable and adds value to the readers. Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell define voice as the carriers or presenters of the poet's feelings and behaviour. They write, "speaker's voice conveys the attitude of the poet (577)." The voice of the poem expresses personal experience and enriches the readers' passion. Voice in a poem makes a personal idea of the poet universal. In other words, voice is meant to communicate or convey the message or theme of the poem to the readers. A reader should be aware of the difference between the voice and the poet. A voice in poetry is the speaker who describes the emotion or main message of the poem. Speaker in poetry is a persona that the poet assumes. Poet is the author of the poem who composes the poetry. A poet creates a speaker to enlarge the events and emotion and to convey the ideas voice or speaker in poetry may be singular or plural i.e. sometimes the poet creates singular or plural speakers to convey the message. If the poet uses a singular and plural voice, then the singular voice becomes the private voice and shows the internal aspects of the speaker and the plural voice become a public voice and shows the external aspects of the speaker. The poet may or may not identify himself or herself in poetry and the speaker does that to the need of the poem. The poets use the voice or speaker directly or indirectly or even anonymously to their needs. Understanding the voice in the poetry is important to explicit the theme of the poetry because the voice supports the theme raised in the poem. Voice in poetry comments, and identifies his/her life and assumes the roles in the society. Accordingly, the voice of poetry may be raised by different personas or by speakers. In some poems, the speaker may be a child and raise the voice innocently, in some other poems; the speaker might be an adult and raise the voice maturely. Likewise, the voice of the poems may be human beings or animals or gods or demons. Speakers may sometimes present complex situations as in dramatic monologues or simple situations like in lyrical poems.

Let's examine some poems to identify the voice of those poems that help to reveal the theme of the poem. William Blake creates the voice of an innocent child in his popular poem *The Chimney Sweeper*. The author uses the voice of the child to raise the issue of a child of eighteenth-century industrialized Europe. Through the voice of the child, Blake criticized the system of child labour. In the poem *Tiger* by the same author, the speaker portrays the beauty of the tiger and its organs. The speaker shows his surprise meant by seeing the 'burning bright' beauty of the eyes of the tiger, 'the forest of the night'. Here the speaker is a mature and

experienced person who can critically compare and contrast the beauty of the tiger and lamb as well as their contrasting nature and physical appearance.

Robert Frost depicts beautiful nature through the voice of a mature and dutiful traveller in the poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. In the poem, the poet shows the attractive beautiful winter nature i.e. 'woods fill up with snow,' 'frozen lake,' 'downy flake,' etc. Through the voice of the traveller, the author shows the 'restlessness' or 'dutiful' conditions of European people during the time between the two world wars. In the poem *The Road Not Taken* by the same author, the poet creates a situation where the speaker faced a dilemma to choose the right way of life. In the poem, the poet presents the voice of a traveller who faced difficulties to choose a perfect way of life that makes his life meaningful.

In the poem *Piano* by D.H. Lawrence, the speaker is in an inner conflict to be a man or to return back to his childhood. Here the speaker presents the voice of a man who feels the pain of growing even though, he is becoming mature. In the poem, the speaker is an adult and recollects his childhood experiences with her mother. In Janice Mirikitani's poem entitled "*Suicide Note*", the speaker presents her apologizing voice towards her parents for disappointing them by committing suicide after achieving less than four point grade average. Here the poetess presents the innocent voice of a student who decided to commit suicide after being unable to get a high grade despite her hard work and unfulfilling the desire of her parents. In the poem *Ethics*, the poetess Linda Poston presents the speaker's inability to decide whether the Ram brand painting or an old woman has a long life. In the poem, we can see multiple voices. In the initial phase of the poem, the poetess presents the voice of an innocent student and in the later phase of the poem, the poetess presents the voice of a mature woman who found and realized that woman and painting have the same lifespan.

Related to the voice or speaker in the poem is the tone of the poem. Tone also helps to support the theme of the poem as the voice does. The tone is also crucial to identify the changes in the speaker's voice, speaker's attitude and behaviour towards the subject matter of the poem. Joyful, happy, sad, frosted, worried, serious, gloomy, playful, witty, comic, satirical, ironical, relaxed, etc. are some of the common tones in poetry. Voice and tone help to identify the theme of the poetry. The following saying of John Haines, as cited in *Literature* shows the value of voice to support the theme the poem holds:

the individual experience as related or presented in the poem renews our deep, implicit faith in that greater experience. A poem remains with us to the extent that it allows us to feel that we are listening to a voice at once contemporary and ancient. This makes all the difference (576).

VI. Conclusion

Poetry is an ancient genre of literature with qualities of musical elements. Giving pleasure to the readers, playfulness within self and expressiveness are some of the basic qualities of poetry. A good reader should consider the theme, voice, figurative language, rhyme scheme, word choice, etc. of the poem while analyzing it to open the main message the poet wants to deliver. Theme and voice in poetry are very supportive of each other. The theme is the main idea of the poem; the poet wants to transfer to the readers and the voice is the speaker in the poem. Identifying theme and voice have a crucial role in analyzing and writing poetry.

Work Cited

- Abrams, M.H. and Geoffery Galt Harpham *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 11thed. Delhi: Cengage, 2015.
- Dutta, Rajan. "Techniques of language in Dylan Thomas's poetry". *TUTA Journal*. Vol.8. No. 1. Aug. Biratnagar: TUTA Unit Mahendra Morang Adarsha Multiple Campus, Biratnagar, 2018.
- Ferguson, Margaret, Mary Jo Salter, John Stallworthy, ed. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. 4th ed. Newyork: Norton, 1996.
- Joshi, Dr Amma Raj. *Reading the Language of Poetry*. Unpublished workshop paper. Biratchowk, 2017. Print.
- "Eco-poetic Imagining in Fruit-Gathering: A Repudiation of scientific sanguinity". *TU Bulletin Special 2012-13*. Kritipur: TU Information section, 2012.
- High, Peter B. *An outline of American Literature*. New York: Longman, 1997.
- Kirszner, Laurie g. and Stephen R. Mandell, ed. *Literature: Reading Reacting Writing*. 4th ed. Bostan: Heinle and Heinle, 2000.
- Sapkota, Jiblal. "Understanding the Whole of poetry through the integration of Rasa and Performance." *Curriculum Development Journal*. No. 40. Aug. Kritipur: CDC TU, 2012.
- Scholes, Robert et al., ed. *Elements of Literature*. 4th ed. Newyork: OUP, 1999.