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English 4

April 19th, 2016

### **What Makes a Poet**

Harold Bloom once stated, “I can’t bear these accounts I read in the Times and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other. The whole thing is judged by an applause meter which is actually not there, but might as well be. This isn’t even silly; it is the death of art” (quoted in the Paris Review). Harold Bloom was right about one thing, poetry is art. Poetry is defined as “an art form in which human language is used for its aesthetic qualities in addition to, or instead of, its notional and semantic content” (Dictionary.com). Not only is poetry a form of art but it is also said to predate literacy itself. It has been used in the past to record history, tell stories and even set laws. In preliterate societies we saw a lot of performance poetry being used. Over hundreds of years poetry has evolved thanks to things such as literacy, technology, and society’s growing in general. The question I pose is, what is poetry? What makes poetry, poetry? Is Harold Bloom right about poetry slams being “the death of art”? Are newer forms of poetry such as spoken word and slam nonsense? Or is it proof that our ideas and ways of getting them across have evolved just as we have?

Before we jump into the politics of poetry we should start with some background information. Through literacy and technology we saw poetry boom from its small start to something major. But what makes poetry, poetry? It has been said that great poetry is set apart by its intricacies and content. A poet will often give us an image in a new, refreshing way. Poets weave together a story for us, entrancing us in their words. There are other aspects that play a role in poetry such as literary devices. Some of the most common literary devices are alliteration, assonance and repetition. Alliteration is when you used the same sound or letter at the beginning of “adjacent or closely connected words.” It helps us emphasize and define a rhythmic pattern and give structure in general. When combined with rhyming, alliteration often creates patterns, pleasing sounds and adds emphasis. Similarly, assonance is also used many times in poetry to do the same things. It is defined as “the repetition of the sound of a vowel in nonrhyming stressed syllables near enough to each other for the echo to be discernible.” The use of assonance as a literary device establishes a pattern that forms a connection in the viewer’s mind. In both of these literary devices we see repetition, which is when the poet replicates something that has already been said or written. These three devices can help add value to poetry. Most commonly we see 2 major other devices play a role in poetry, those are, rhythm and rhyme. Poetry is sound and sound is poetry. The way a poem is read can help shape it, define it and convey intended emotions. By using rhythm, poets can progress their poems further and tell more of a story to a certain beat. When a lot of people think of poetry, rhyming comes to mind. For example, the black cat chased after the railroad rat. While rhyming can often be seen in poetry, it is not always used in

the same way. Some poets may choose to rhyme every other line or only certain words. Many poets don't use rhyme at all. As far as form goes, the structure of poetry is fluid. At times it completely lacks a firm structure and is free verse, like slam poetry. However, the way the words are organized is often what makes the poem what it is. You can see the contrast between a poet who uses stanzas and or couplets versus someone who uses verse paragraphs.

Slam poetry is defined as “a form of poetry that is mainly influenced by free verse poetry and beat poets.” (powerpoetry.com) Slam poetry originated in Chicago in the 1980s, many point to Marc Kelly Smith, a Chicago poet and construction worker, as the person who started it. Smith, who was also known as “Slampapi”, believed that academic poetry had too much structure. He wanted to change that. Smith hosted poetry readings at a jazz club called “Get Me High Lounge.” He wanted to put poets up against each other and see the results. Soon after, Smith contacted the owner of Green Mill, another jazz club in Chicago, and pitched his idea to host weekly competitions on Sundays, the club's slow night. That day, July 25th, 1986, Uptown Poetry Slam had its start. Smith began to create a new kind of poetry, one in which the audience was the judge and a poet had to communicate in a new and effective way to win. Smith took poetry, which is often just read by someone on paper, and brought it to life. For many, performing was liberating and kept them coming back. As word spread, so did the reach of slam poetry. In 1992, The Seattle Poetry Slam was created by Paul Grajner and David Meinert. Grajner was from Chicago and Meinert was a local Seattle music promoter. Meinert was booking acts for various venues such as the Emerald Diner, when Grajner

pitched him the idea about hosting a slam. Meinert was thrilled by the idea, he was unhappy with the poetry scene in Seattle and said he was happy to create a venue where “drunks could read poetry, poets could get drunk, and the crowd could give them all hell” (qtd. in Burrows). As Wednesdays became the regular slam night, people poured into the diner and made it one of the busiest nights of the week. But in 1994 the owner sold the diner and the new owner decided to no longer host slam nights. Meinert, not to be discouraged, found a new location and the slam nights grew once again. In 1989, all the way in NYC, The Nuyorican Café held the first poetry slam in Manhattan. Slam Poetry quickly spread across the nation, drawing young and old artists alike. Another major force that started slam poetry was the popular TV show *Def Poetry* which aired from 2000-2007. Many young people, and those of diverse backgrounds took to slam poetry and joined the new movement. They spoke of bold matters such as race, gender, socioeconomic status and more. They used slam poetry to tell their stories and others. Their poetry was provoking and thoughtful often using different tones to convey what they wanted to say. Organizations such as Youth Speaks catered to these young voices, giving them a platform to express themselves and even compete. Slam poetry gives the poet, or performer as you might call them an opportunity to connect with their audience. Four years earlier the nation had watched as the first ever National Poetry Slam was held in San Francisco. The slam hosted three teams from Chicago, San Francisco and New York. They chose these three teams because they all had significance. Chicago was the birthplace of slam poetry, San Francisco was the host city, and New York was the home of the Nuyorican Café. For seventeen years the National

Poetry Slam Inc. held a separate event for individuals known as “Indies.” Poets competed for two days, those with the highest ranking moved on to the semifinals and then the finals. In 2004, Poetry Slam Inc. went on to create another competition called Individual World Poetry Slam where once again, individual poets competed for the title. This competition soon replaced the indies. Another competition that was created was the Women of the World of Poetry Slam where female poets could compete against one another. Andrea Gibson, a well known poet and author, was the first ever winner. This was just the mere beginning for slam poetry, it started off in big cities but can now even be heard even in a coffee shop in the suburbs. Cafés everywhere promote open mic nights where many poets alike come and perform, bearing their soul. What started off as a small trend, grew into a phenomenon that took over the nation. (para. Burrows)

Despite its resounding success, many critics, such as Bloom, still found faults in slam poetry. Susan B. A Somers-Willett, a writer for *The Rattle*, wrote, “It wasn’t too long ago that poetry critics were decrying the decline of American poetry’s public audience. In the late 1980s Joseph Epstein and Dana Gioia declared poetry dead to the average reader.” Critics everywhere were lamenting the “death of poetry” while poetry was finding a new form. Slam poetry at a Chicago bar. However, as the influence of slam poetry grew, often reaching the youth, it became clear that it was not just some trend. Dana Gioia, the same poet who originally criticized the rise of this new poetry, declared the popularity of these slams “evidence of a populist revival of verse, inspired by the oral culture of radio, television, film and internet media. (qtd. In *Rattle*)” Traditional poets believed that slam poetry consisted of loud, obnoxious young people flinging their

political and world views in a confrontational way. However, that is a common misconception that many have made about slam poetry. It is about embodying who you are and what you believe. Sometimes gently and yes, sometimes loudly. It is the tones and emotions that weave in and out of a poet's verse that make it so popular. In Shane Koyczak's poem "To This Day" he speaks to the audience heart. He tugs at our heart strings with lines such as "and if a kid breaks in a school and no one around chooses to hear it, do they make a sound or are they just background noise of a soundtrack stuck on repeat when people say things like kids can be cruel?" There is nothing like the connection made between the audience and the poets, it is aweinspiring. Many critics have said this is where slam poetry is flawed, when their main focus is pleasing the audience. However, while these poets do exist, audiences will be quick to dismiss poets who do not meet their standards or make that ever important connection. Many have related slam poetry to Greek poetry competition and their performances, however that was only the beginning. Ancient societies did indeed use poetry for many means, including personal ones, but it grew into much more. Poetry slams establish a creative community where poetry lovers and poets alike can listen to, discuss and enjoy the beauty that slam poetry has to offer. Yes, slam poetry has its flaws but it is not going away, it is here to stay.

It is my belief that slam poetry is not the death of poetry, or silly, it is amazing. What started off as a small group in a bar in Chicago transformed to something that has reached the ends of the world. There will always be critics and there will always be flaws to find, but what matters is those who try. The ones who risk it all and open up to a

coffee house full of strangers or an international audience. Those willing to face berating comments online and criticism from traditional writers who refuse to catch up with the times. Slam poetry is for the performers, and maybe if those same critics opened up their mind, they would hear the millions of people finding their voice.

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