



Approaches to Poetry

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Biology, as we know, is the study of life. It requires familiarity with **forms** of life, a thorough knowledge of **categories** (plants, mammals, reptiles, etc.), and a knowledge of **processes** (from biochemical to environmental).

The Humanities—no surprise here—is the study of humans. Political scientists study human civic institutions, historians study human history, and so forth. In literary studies, we examine the ubiquitous phenomena of human storytelling. From the narratives of everyday life to the fabulous narratives of folklore and myth, storytelling is one of the fundamental aspects of human behavior. (Consider how many fictional stories you ingest every day—from television, internet, and books to video games and advertising.)

Like any other formal study, the study of literature requires familiarity with forms, categories, and processes. And like other human phenomena, stories are patterned behavior. Even variation in these patterns occurs within limited deviations from a norm.

So, our task in approaching poetry not as writers, but as students is to investigate the poem as an object within larger systems, namely the systems of language and symbolic communication. In our classes together, we will divide the investigation into three categories:

1 MIMESIS

Mimesis is a Greek word from which we get the English word “mimic.” It means roughly, to copy or to imitate.

From the Greeks we inherit an understanding of the literary arts as imitations of reality; that is, imitations of characters and actions. Sometimes that reality is what we see every day around us, sometimes it is a vision of what an author thinks reality *ought to be like*. In other words, literature is either a mirror of nature or an idealization of nature. (Or a bit of both.) And by “nature” is meant more than birds and trees; the term includes human nature, civil society, and so forth.



Our interest here is the fidelity of literature to nature.

2 POESIS

Poesis is also a Greek word, and it means to make or to shape (a work of art, especially).

Literature is a made thing, it is fabricated. Its tools are words, phrases, and syntactic and rhetorical structures. As an instrument of pleasure and instruction, literature employs its tools to particular effects. For example, limericks rarely make people cry, and an epic poem is unsuitable for pithy sentiments. When a writer moves his or her audience, we ask how. What particularly did the moving? Which words, or phrases? How is this thing made? What is its structure? How are its tropes disposed?

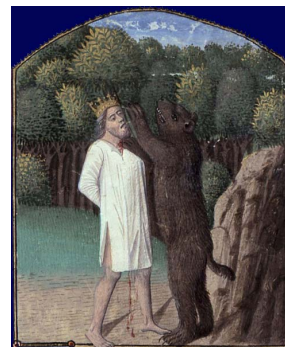


Our interest here is in the mechanics of the effects.

3 PATHOS

Pathos is, as you might have guessed, another Greek word. It can mean a passion or an affection.

In his *Preface* to his 1802 *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth called good poetry the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (pp. x–xi). This marked a watershed in the study and production of poetry, and we now take it as given that poetry is somehow about emotions. Following this Romantic line of thought, we ask after the poet’s feelings, imagination, and internal world. We ask whether or not it is genuine or authentic? Is it conventional? And what of the reader’s feelings and inner world: what shape do they take?



Our interest here is in the emotions of both the author and reader.



During the long history of literature in the West, various of these approaches has taken precedent over the others. Sometimes there is an intense interest in *poesis*, sometimes in *mimesis*. Although there are famous recent examples of experiments in poetics (Joyce, for example), today, we tend to emphasize *pathos*, the emotional or ideological content of literature, as its singular characteristic. The pathetic function of literature was not, with a few obvious exceptions, the chief interest of medieval and renaissance authors. Consequently, we will focus our energies on *mimesis* and *poesis*.