

Does poetry still matter?

Brandon Griggs – CNN – 25 June 2015

Quick: Name a famous living poet.
Somebody. Anybody. No, not Maya Angelou. She died last year.

Unless you're a literary scholar or a subscriber to The New Yorker, it's not easy. That's because poetry, once a preeminent form of entertainment, has long since receded to the far, dusty corners of popular culture.

Most Americans don't encounter poetry in the course of their daily lives. Most mainstream magazines don't publish it. Chain stores such as Walmart and Target don't carry it. The cult of people who buy books of poetry in the U.S. is almost certainly dwarfed by the 20 million or so viewers who watch a single episode of "Game of Thrones."

Poetry, said poet and associate professor Kyle Dargan of American University in Washington, is "not the kind of thing people are going to run into on their own. It's not 'Jurassic World.' "

It's this cultural landscape that greets Juan Felipe Herrera, who this month was appointed the next poet laureate of the United States. As poet laureate, Herrera will be expected to serve as an ambassador for the art form and help boost its visibility through readings, workshops and other events.

At first glance, Herrera would seem to have his work cut out for him. Cultural critics, citing dwindling sales and visibility, have been bemoaning the Death of Poetry for decades now. But is poetry really on life support as a cultural force in America? Or are people just consuming it in surprising new ways?

"It's been very fashionable to say that poetry is dead," said Robert Polito, president of the Poetry Foundation, publisher of Poetry magazine, which seeks to celebrate the art form. "But all of the evidence I see belies that."

Let's break it down.

Why poetry is dying

Centuries ago, poets were like rock stars, widely celebrated for their insights and graceful way with words. Homer, Rumi, Dante, Shakespeare, the Romantic poets and others left vast literary legacies that continue to this day.

Just think of all the phrases that classical poetry have given to daily speech: To err is human; to forgive, divine. Not with a bang but a whimper. 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Do not go gentle into that good night.

Will we be quoting today's poets centuries in the future? Maybe, but we're not quoting -- or even reading -- them now.

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Between TV, movies, music, video games, sports and the Internet -- not to mention the fine arts -- consumers are overwhelmed with content. To cut through the clutter, our entertainments are becoming louder, edgier and flashier. That leaves little room for the quiet charms of poetry, which can demand close readings to be fully appreciated.

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Why it's still very much alive

Herrera believes poetry, or "verbal art," as he calls it, is at the heart of almost all text, from chants and songs and sacred books to ads and greeting cards.

"You could say we live in poetry," the new laureate said.

You could argue that many of today's mainstream poets are songwriters and rappers, whose lyrics are analyzed for meanings the way scholars used to pore over T.S. Eliot. There's even poetry to be found in the compressed, fragmented language of texting, Twitter and other messaging platforms of the digital age.

In times of national crisis, when ordinary language fails us, we still turn to poetry to express the inexpressible. Witness the tender days after September 11, when many circulated a 1939 W.H. Auden poem about the outbreak of World War II in an attempt to make sense of the terrorist attacks.

More recently, educators have encouraged students to write poetry to express their feelings about racially charged clashes with police in Baltimore and Ferguson, Missouri.

Polito, the Poetry Foundation president, argues that poetry's reach shouldn't be measured merely by sales of books or literary journals. As it has with everything else, the Internet has democratized poetry by making it free and instantly accessible to everyone, he said.

"There's clearly a paradigm shift going on," he said. "A lot of people experience poetry not through printed books ... but online and through social media."

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And why it matters

Advocates for the art form say that reading and writing poems can sharpen powers of observation and boost critical thought.

"Through reading poems, you really can learn how to think," said Polito, of the Poetry Foundation. "If you can read a poem, you can read a film, read a painting, read a political speech."

Herrera believes it can help us "notice things that are almost impossible to take into account if we do not stop our rush through our precious life."

Take a famous short poem written by William Carlos Williams after he spied a red wheelbarrow beside some chickens in a man's yard.

The Red Wheelbarrow so much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens William Carlos Williams

Those who read or write poetry say the art form helps them make sense of their lives.

"Poems are comprised of everyday material expertly arranged in ways that require a reader's time and reflection," said Benka, of the Academy of American Poets. "But the reward is great: a memorable insight into our humanity, a line that perfectly encapsulates a moment or a truth we want to remember, an experience with language that provokes new ideas and deeper understanding."

Perhaps most important, Herrera and other poets say poetry can help us find common ground with other Americans at a time when our nation feels socially fractured.

"It's very important that poetry puts us back in touch with our humanity," Dargan said. "It can help you see yourself in someone else's struggle."

Reflection Prompt:

This article considers the declining popularity of poetry in our culture today. Do you agree that poetry seems to be less popular today than it was in the past? Do you think it is fair to consider today's song artists modern poets? Do you think that reading and interpreting poetry is important? Why or why not?

Work Cited

Griggs, Brandon. "Does poetry still matter?" *CNN*. 25 June 2015. Print.