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**Title of the Paper :** Modern Poetry : A new Vision of an Otherwise Cruel World

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Abstract :

Unlike traditional poetry, whose main concern was to play up the artistic and imaginative aspects of the creative mind, modern poetry seeks to target the cerebral and intellectual powers of the thinking mind. Actually, it undertakes to denounce those frustrating aspects of modern life. Late 19th century marked a new era with its rapid technological advances, cold materialism, world struggles over natural resources and territorial *lebensraum* (i.e., vital space), and the callousness of individuals to the sufferings of their fellow men. All this led to the feeling that society was about to fall apart and collapse. More than anybody else, modern poets bore the brunt of those devastating feelings of frustration, disappointment and helplessness. The corollary of that was their tendency to portray the other ugly face of humanity, disillusionment, hopelessness, and hollowness of modern life. This was clearly reflected in their adherence to new ways, themes, styles and approaches taken vis-à-vis the *steel jungle* surrounding them. On score of that, they propose a return to simple, intuitive

reliance on senses to attain knowledge, satisfaction of the individual's physical being, and the primitive unconscious spring vitality of the human race. However, the failure of the stakeholders (here, teachers and students) to notice these insights about modern poetry makes the teaching of modern literature and more specifically modern poetry a real chore. Every reason exists to maximize the importance of rethinking fresher ways to present modern poetry to an otherwise disenchanted audience of students. Unless serious strategies are adopted, the whole teaching endeavor of the literature curriculum is compromised. In this paper, I shall attempt to address the issue of the divergence between traditional and modern poetry all while underlying the reasons for such a dramatic switch. Finally, I shall propose ways to help both teachers and students appreciate modern poetry and put up with its differences from an otherwise beautiful though less practical traditional poetry.

**Key Terms :** traditional poetry, modern poetry, frustration, ugliness, appreciation of modern poetry.

## Introduction

Unlike traditional poetry, whose main concern was to play up the artistic and imaginative aspects of the creative mind, modern poetry seeks to target the cerebral and intellectual powers of the thinking mind. With the view of achieving that purpose, it undertakes to denounce in most strong terms possible those frustrating aspects of modern life. Late 19th century marked a new era with its rapid technological advances, cold materialism, world struggles over natural resources and territorial *lebensraum* (i.e., vital space), and the callousness of individuals to the sufferings of their fellow men. All this led to the feeling that society was about to fall apart and collapse. More than anybody else, modern poets bore the brunt of those devastating feelings of frustration, disappointment and helplessness. The corollary of that was their tendency to portray the other ugly face of humanity, disillusionment, hopelessness, and hollowness of modern life. This was clearly reflected in their adherence to new ways, themes, styles and approaches taken vis-à-vis the *steel jungle* surrounding them. On score of that, they propose a return to simple, intuitive reliance on senses to attain knowledge, satisfaction of the individual's physical being, and the primitive unconscious spring vitality of the human race. However, the failure of the stakeholders (here, teachers and students) to notice these insights about modern poetry makes the teaching of modern literature and more specifically modern poetry a real chore. Every reason exists to maximize the importance of rethinking fresher ways to present modern poetry to an otherwise disenchanting audience of students. Unless serious strategies are adopted, the whole teaching endeavor of the literature curriculum is compromised. In this paper, I shall attempt to address the issue of the divergence between traditional and modern poetry all while underlying the reasons for such a dramatic switch. Finally, I shall propose ways to help both teachers and students appreciate modern poetry and put up with its differences from an otherwise beautiful though less practical traditional poetry.

Allow me from the very onset to make a straightforward confession : I have never meant to endeavor writing a literary critique of modern poetry. I wholeheartedly apologize to all those who have high expectations to attend a presentation that attempts to explore, explain, and/ or « exegesize » the quirky and esoteric aspects of modern poetry. It is therefore, out of the scope of this paper to write a critique on modern poets and their creative productions. However, having been a teacher of literature (both American and British) for several years, I have noticed students' uncomfortable reaction to modern poetry. They usually express negative attitudes vis-à-vis their teachers' excessive focus on « gibberish » that they can make very little of it. They feel estranged by a type of poetry that seems outlandish to their taste of traditional poetry and its transparency and

sound and imagery beauty. Their encounter with modern poetry, it must be recognized is such abrupt that they resist to respond to its themes and scopes. Nothing is so frustrating to a teacher as students who do not react to his effortful endeavor to introduce them to an interesting topic and eventually induce in them the love of a new type of poetry that speaks about their daily awkward life. The present paper aims at helping teachers change their classroom practices so that they can achieve optimal learning and scaffold their students' intellectual growth. The leitmotif (viz, ugliness) in modern poetry will be the focus of our study.

### Definition of Modern Poetry

For short of a better term, I have opted for the term « modern » in my attempt to categorize that creative, literary production that characterized the 20th C. Therefore, *modern poetry in the context of the present paper is taken to mean all the poetic production that has been generated as from the turn of the 20th C. and whose form and subject have done away with traditional conception of the art in verse.* It should be noted, however, that modern poetry does not refer specifically to modernist poetry. Rather, it deals with that poetry that has broken away with exaltation of emotions or the regularity and excellence in production. A posteriori, the poets' concern has shifted from being a more passive literary beautician to someone whose frustration urged him to question those most cherished values of the 20th C society.

It appears that modern poetry has shifted its perspective from the description of beauty to the portrayal of ugliness. The duality beauty-ugliness actually completes its double facets rather than playing up one concept at the detriment of the other. Traditional poets seem to be ignoring « ugliness » while modern poets are so aware of both that their focus on ugliness meant only that that they want to efface that ugliness that disturbs and maim beauty. Precisely, this new vision of the other half makes modern poetry more appealing. According to Ryan (2007 :2) « Good literature disturbs us and takes us out of our habitual and routine ways of seeing the world ».

To achieve the desired effect on their audiences, modern poets resort to a special use of language. Language becomes metaphoric – frequently extremely metaphoric- to the extent it breaks away with conventions. McLuhan (1962 :5) corroborates « Language is a metaphor in the sense that it not only stores but translates experience from one mode into another ». Both form and content of modern poetry are manipulated to the extremes , which may account for the ambiguity and difficulty to grasp the evasive meaning couched by modern poets. Consequently, modern poets prove themselves to be « riddle makers » for their audiences. Womser and Cappella (2000 :xi) explain « As poetry has been

constructed of fragments.. poets have been careful to distance themselves from sheer eloquence ».

What is more, modern poetry seems to be interested in juxtaposing paradoxes. Through the use seemingly contradictory to the common sense, modern poets increase tension and suspense in their readers' minds. According to Brooks, « paradox is the only one of expressing or describing the unity of the eternal and the temporal, the universal and the momentary » (quoted in Ryan, *op.cit.* :3). Contradictory concepts may be better expressed and understood when standing face to face. The utilization of the paradox is one way to put the duality beauty-ugliness at the fore of the modern poetry.

Certainly, modern poetry is no simple read especially as Womser and Cappella observe « There is no poetry (particularly contemporary poetry) in students' homes » (*op.cit.* :ix). This is true not only of students, but also of a good number of people whose interest, it seems, directed to films or novels.

#### Historical Overview :

The 20th C. has been a blessing in disguise for the society and its intellectual élite. True enough, technological breakthroughs and the development of transportation means as well as the accessibility to media gave the impression that world turned into a better place. The real weight of the iceberg lies in the frozen depth of the ocean : imperialism, conflicts of economic interests, balance of powers, lebensraum (vital space) skirmishes, trade privileges, maritime hegemony all led to severe consequences. The world that seemed a better place turned into world of bloody and oftentimes ruthless extermination of the human race. The sea-changes witnessed around the globe regurgitated the ills of societies in great troubles and perils concerning their very existence.

Race supremacy ravaged the world ; economic and trade capitalized on the defenseless ; territorial gains acquired oftentimes with a great deal of the suffering ; parvenu societies started to expand at the detriment of conservative old ones and finally a new sensational media that made the world look irrationally « rosy ». the most devastating events, however, were the world wars which upset the sleep of the all the values however marginal they were. In an attempt to make sense of the rapid and often painful change in society, the intellectual élite, more than anyone else, felt that society was in a great danger. Their literary production started to reflect that frustration and in the process, they produced a new type of poetry. Poetry that was revolutionary in that it reflected faithfully the broken and fragmented picture of the world.

These socio-historical and socio-political events appear so influential in the emergence of a new form of poetry that feels disturbed by the direct scorn of the

values. Womser and Cappella conclude that « it seems a tenable generalization to say that the work of American 20th C poetry has been to honor the fragments of the century's damnable wars, its race hatreds and genocides, its belittlement of the value of the individual life » (op.cit. :xvii). All in all, modern poetry mirrors the ugliness of the human nature in language and form that faithfully reflect those horrid man-made events.

Features of Modern Poetry :

Perhaps no one expressed the personality and sensitivity of modern poets than T.S. Eliot. He clearly, directly and soberly frames that « Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion ; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things ». The detachment expressed below shows to what wanted to get rid of those either dwarfish and/ or titanic garments they made to bear. The corollary of that was that modern poets bore the brunt and their crosses and launched their own messianic campaigns to denounce the ails that society felt complacent to voice any criticism against them.

It is worth of note to point out that modern poets face a challenge : to balance their being humans and poets in a world that defines itself in unpoetic terms. In the book *Modern Poetry*, the author (nn) argues that

*« The poet is the spokesman, making statements or incantations on behalf of himself or others\_ usually for both, for it is difficult to speak for oneself without speaking for others or to speak for others without speaking for oneself. The poet, therefore, in a sense is a man at his most self-conscious, but this means consciousness of himself as man, not consciousness of himself as poet. Poets for more than a hundred years now have been suffering from latter kind of self-consciousness. They have have felt that their expressed attitude to the world must be particularly the attitude of poets, that therefore much of the world was unfit subject for poetry because it was itself unpoet » (p. 1).*

This suffering, alienation, frustration, and disillusionment of the modern poets are processed in that kind of poetry that denounces these contradictions and paradoxes.

The following features of modern poetry are by no means exhaustive. However, they rate among the most quoted by specialists.

## 1. Fragmented Imagery :

Modern poets perceived the world in a fragmented fashion ; on score of that they tailored that poetry to reflect just that W.B. Yeats in his « Second Coming » clearly describes in a series of fragmented pictures how the world is broken down into incoherent icons : a falcon which cannot hear its master and keeps turning in the sky ; things collapse in shambles ; anarchy is prevailing everywhere ; the seas turn red as if rivers were fiked of killed bodies and driven all along to once blue seas ; innocence ands drowned in the red seas and finally only villains are listened to, while honest people are hedged.

### **THE SECOND COMING**

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

## 2. Portrayal of Ugliness :

The depiction of ugliness a powerful theme and comes at the core of modern poetry. According to Scott ( ) « All poets are not concerned with the portrayal of beauty. This may account for their resort to tailor their creative talent to the ugliness that they see and feel around them. This attitude may a psychological reaction to an otherwise cruel world. « Some poets protest against the ugliness of the modern world in verse that reflects that ugliness » (Idem). Beautiful imagery appears to be the last thing a modern poet seeks. Rather, the atmosphere in which ugly things occur is probably a modern poet desperately seeks and wants to recreate in the minds of his audience. By way of an illustration, we shall examine T. S. Eliot's *Preludes*, which appears to sum up the aforementioned claims :

The winter evening settles down  
With the smell of steaks in passageways.  
Six o'clock.  
The burn-out ends of smoky days,  
And now a gusty shower wraps  
The grimy scraps

Of withered leaves about your feet  
And newspapers from vacant lots ;  
The showers beat  
On broken blinds and chimney pots,  
And at the corner of the street  
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.  
And then the lighting of the lamps.

The poet attempts to portray a good instance of a sordid place in a modern world where the feelings of loneliness, disgust, sordidness wraps the poets. Galt ( ) alleges that « the central theme of the poem is about the feeling of despair at the decline and decadence of modern civilization ». The theme of the poem is even more appalling when we consider the date wherein it was written, 1917. It was the middle year of a catastrophic world war in which all the human genius was used to bring disaster and death. Modern poets started questioning the values of western civilization, especially as the horrors of the wars came to be taped on films and presented to the public. The sense of mission, therefore, that had been attributed to the western civilization, democracy, freedom, equality , and justice was damaged beyond repair. Eliot's *Preludes* fall within the framework of a general critique of the meaning and direction of the values so much cherished in the western world. In this poem, Eliot « describes the modern city as a vacuum of meaning and uses imagery to intensify this feeling » (Idem).

### 3. Frustration and Disillusionment

The contingency of wars, economic crises, the rise of fascism and communism, and the appearance of the cinema, cars, electricity, radio, and competition were more than what the creative minds of the poets could bear. So many changes in very few years. To make bad things worse, all of the human achievements and the human socio-political environment were antagonistic. Democracy brought Nazism, fascism, and anarchy. Wars brought breakthroughs in technology and medicine but only to destroy the other humans. The cinema industry brought a new class of VIP whose main interests were fashionable clothes, jewelry, and fancy cars. Free enterprise brought economic depressions that were so severe that people could not find any jobs to support one's family. This antagonism led to frustration and disillusionment. In his poem, W. H. Davies magnificently depicts a scene of heavy fog that made him lose his « judgement » :

I saw the fog grow thick  
Which soon made blind my ken ;

And giants of all men.  
It clutched my throat, I coughed ;  
Nothing was in my head  
Except two heavy eyes  
Like balls of burning lead.  
And then it grew so black so black  
That I could know no place,  
I lost all judgement then,  
Of distance and of space.  
The street lamps, and the lights  
Upon the halted cars, could either be on earth  
Or be the heavenly stars.  
A man passed by me close,  
I asked my way ; he said  
'Come follow me, my friend »  
I followed where he led.  
He rapped the stones in front,  
« Trust me, » he said, « and come »  
I followed like a child  
A blind man led me home.

W. H. Davies brilliantly describes his loneliness in a dark fog that dwarfs men, and makes you lose the sense of judgment. What a frustrating experience ! In a modern city where street lamps are lit, and cars pass by noisily with lights on, a city man loses his way home ! Who cannot but feel disillusioned by such a horrible experience to be lost where you were supposed to know your way around ! And how disheartening to be unable to go home by yourself all the while relying on a blind man to lead you through the darkness to your destination. In a world where democracy, freedom, equality, and justice are said to be prevailing,



you are led by short sighted politicians whose major interests are power and privileges at the detriment of the welfare of the whole society.

### Understanding Modern Poetry :

Teaching and understanding modern poetry is arguably a daunting task, particularly for teachers. Showalter (2003 :viii) claims that « teaching literature in the 21st C will be demand more flexibility and less specialization ». Differently stated, teaching effectively literature needs to be carried out by teachers using different materials and pedagogical supports, not by literary critics whose approaches may are not meant for pedagogical purposes. A casual survey of the teachers of literature will come to the following attitude : Ideal settings with an audience with exceptional skill in perceiving the subtle meanings of an otherwise complex poetry seem to be sine qua non. At least this is the attitude of most people whose engagement in literature ; this is more salient in settings where the literature being taught is carried out in a foreign language.

Teachers of literature in non-native settings, need to bear in mind that they are dealing with students whose knowledge of the foreign language is limited beside their not being particularly interested in what they learn, especially when it comes to a subject that challenges their intelligence. Kravis (1995:8) notes that « the reality for most teachers is that they are introducing books to people who are not attracted by books ». Teachers primary concern should focus on involving students in approaching modern poetry from different perspectives. The following strategies can be very engaging if judiciously utilized and periodically evaluated.

1. Introducing poets : The focus will be on their psyche and creative talents rather than mere dates in their bibliography.
2. Introducing modern poetry : Modern poetry needs to be introduced independently from traditional poetry. The types of analyzing questions should focus on what the poets convey not the beauty and harmony of sounds and imagery.
3. Using multimedia resources : Multimedia resources provide the teachers with innumerable opportunities to meet their students' learning styles.
4. Open discussion conferences and workshops : Modern poetry should not be approached as ends in themselves, but springboards to understanding modern societies and the challenges of our times.
5. Writing papers : Students should be encouraged to express themselves independently from their teachers by approaching modern poetry creatively.

### Conclusion

Teaching literature in general and modern poetry is a frustrating task for most teachers. Frustration stems from their being introducing subjects to students who lack the motive and skill to appreciate an otherwise different but practical poetry. By diversifying the teachers' approaches to teaching poetry and meaningfully engaging students by leading them to understand the multifarious

aspects of modern poetry. Moreover, modern poetry need not be juxtaposed to traditional poetry, nor should it be approached in the same way. Should students be motivated to continue in their involvement of modern poetry, they should be trusted and encouraged to express and defend their interpretations of what they make of the poems they read in literature modules. As a final note, modern poetry may be complex in structure and content, but amenable to different scopre, interpreatations and understanding.

Bibliography :