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Department of English

Module: ITL (Initiation Aux Textes Littéraires)

Level: 1st year students

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Week (I)

Poetry (I)

In all ages, poetry has been written and eagerly read or listened to by all kinds of people (kings, queens, philosophers and even soldiers). It is one of the most ancient literary genres that has been regarded not just as one of the ways of amusement but as something fundamental to existence. While the term “poetry” goes back to the Greek word “poieo” which means “to make” or “to produce”, defining poetry as a form of literature has been the concern of critics, philosophers, and poets for ages.

I-What is Poetry:

To begin with, poetry can be defined as a “kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language.” In other words, language has different uses. On the one hand, there is the ordinary use of language which is commonly used to convey information. We say, for example, the corona virus (Covid-19) is affecting 200 countries and territories around the world; the Second World War lasted from 1939 to 1945; George Washington was the first president of the United States. On the other hand, poetry, as a form of language, is not intended primarily to convey information. For poets, words are combined in an organized and concentrated way to create new experiences that help readers build and widen their perceptions of life. Let us see as an example William Blake’s “The Clod and the Pebble” to illustrate the poet’s sensuous and condensed use of language to address the subject of love and its meaning.

Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell’s despair.

So sung a little Clod of Clay
Trodden with the cattle’s feet,
But a Pebble of the brook
Warbled out these meters meet:

Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.

This poem does not simply transmit information about what love is to readers. It vividly represents two contrasted perspectives on the subject of love through the experiences of a "Clod" and a "Pebble", two things that symbolize the selfless and the selfish views on love, respectively.

II- The Distinction between Poetry and Other Forms of Literature:

We have already dealt with two of the most important literary genres for contemporary critics: fiction which takes the written word in prose as its means of expression, and drama in which both verbal (spoken) and non-verbal (visual) tools are fundamental to the dramatic performance. Now, what distinguishes poetry from these two forms of literature is its verse form that is arranged by the use of rhyme and meter. This makes poetry the most condensed and concentrated form of literature, saying most in the fewest number of words.

III- How to Understand Poetry?

Readers of poetry, especially students, need to follow some strategies to develop their ability to understand and appreciate poetry. Here are some suggestions:

- Read a poem all the way through at least twice. A poem is not to be read hastily like a newspaper. Poetry is an art, and it takes time to understand and appreciate this form of art. So, one should read the poem as slowly as possible.
- Keep a dictionary by you and use it, because before you get to understand the poem as a whole, you need to learn the meanings of the vague or difficult words of which it is composed.
- Poetry is closely related to music, and it is written to be heard. Its meanings are conveyed through print as well as through sound. That is why you should read it aloud or listen to it as often as possible.

- As you read, pay close attention to what the poem says in order to grasp the themes or ideas that it expresses.
- Think of every poem you read as the utterance of a fictional character rather than the poet him/herself.
- While reading, ask questions that can help you understand the poem like: who is the speaker and what is the occasion? What is the central purpose of the poem?

Poetry (II)

IV- The Basic Elements of Poetry:

To succeed in analyzing a poem, i.e. to pick up its basic elements, you need to get a good grasp of what the poet wants to say. Reading the poem several times paves the way for you to attain this.

1- Poetic voice/Speaker:

- It is usually the voice that the reader assumes he is talking in the poem.
- This voice is not necessarily the poet's voice as he can choose someone else to replace him.

◦ **Persona:** The voice that normally substitutes the poet as a speaker.

◦ **Dramatic monologue:** It refers to a poem which includes one persona.

◦ **Audience:**

Having a speaker in the poem implies having an addressee. The person to whom the poem is directed is known as the audience.

The audience can be:

- Another character in the poem.
- A character who is not present or who is dead.
- The reader (you).

2-Theme:

It is the central idea of the poem. Theme is often used interchangeably with meaning.

We can distinguish two types of meaning:

- **General meaning (surface meaning):** the overall idea that the poem aims to convey.
- **Detailed meaning:** it has to do with identifying the supporting ideas that help to frame the general understanding of the poem. Like paragraphs in prose, it is believed that every single stanza holds a distinctive idea.

3-Tone and Mood:

Depending on the writer's intention, any piece of literature is supposed to arouse certain feelings in the readers and to reflect certain feelings of the writer himself. And so it is the case in poetry.

- **Tone**: represents often the attitude the poet has towards the topic of his poem. His vocabulary is helpful to identify his tone (angry, joyful ...)
- **Mood**: is the impact the poem has upon the reader. In other words, it refers to that overflow of feelings taking place after reading the poem, be they happiness, sadness ...

NB:

Both are generally related in the sense that a particular tone produces the same mood in the reader. Yet, this is not the case in the ironic tone.

4-Diction:

It refers to the poet's careful choice of words as this contributes significantly to construct an appealing system of meaning and sound evenly.

Each word has two meanings:

- **Denotation**: its dictionary/literal definition.
- **Connotation**: connotative/ figurative meaning of the word represents those associations that it may assume depending on a particular cultural context.

Examples:

| Word | Denotation | Connotation |
|-------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Rose | plant | beauty, peace |
| Red | color | anger, war |