

“Studying poetry is like looking at life through a magnifying glass.” Discuss.

Poetry has existed at the centre of humanity’s entertainment for an estimated 200,000 years of oral communication. The question of how one defines poetry, therefore, is one which has been attempted on numerous occasions by a plethora of prominent figures, with most ironically resorting to figurative features in order to do so. Within this essay, I will contend with the opinion that it is “like looking at life through a magnifying glass”, and by engaging with the works of poets such as Simon Armitage, Tony Harrison, Adelaide Anne Procter and John Keats, I aim to explore the views on both sides of this argument. On one hand, I will begin by investigating how the study of poetry can certainly provide readers with focused, vivid images, answers to questions and insights into society relative to the functions of a magnifying glass. On the other hand, I will suggest that poetry is too expansive and life too complex to be accurately described in a singular simile, and that literature’s purpose is not to find solutions but to probe queries or create debate. Ultimately, I will argue that, while the simile of looking at life through a magnifying glass is useful in some respects, it is a largely limited way of comprehending the nature of poetry and does not capture the complexity and expansiveness of the art form.

Many poems observe singular issues in a focused, detail-oriented manner and compact complex ideas and experiences into a succinct piece of literature. Coupled with the creation of evocative images through language, it can certainly be argued that a multitude of poems are reflective of the intricacy a magnifying glass may augment. Brian Wakeman argues that poetry “provides a space of compressed ideas, and as the reader stops and reflects, the meanings can explode in the mind,”¹ and Simon Armitage’s publication *Mother, any distance* is an eminent example of this, using imagery to capture the experience of movement from adolescence to adulthood through the metaphor of moving house. He demonstrates the evolving nature of the relationship between mother and son through the simple statements “Anchor. Kite.” - Armitage is able to represent the exceedingly complicated association in merely two words, expressing a simplicity and focus parallel to that of a microscope. While the mother adopts the metaphorical role of “Anchor”, suggesting stability and reassurance but also restriction, the son assumes the position of “Kite”, symbolising the liberation of ageing and advancing. The myriad of opinions he possesses towards his mother are exposed to the reader, and Judith Palmer of the Poetry Society contends that this attentiveness and “way of observing the world, of noticing things and seeing them differently”² is an imperative and universal aspect of poetry. Armitage’s poem intricately encapsulates a single situation which allows the reader to understand an otherwise complex relationship, thus *Mother, any distance* can certainly be classified as an example of poetry which looks at life through a magnifying glass.

This reasoning can be applied to countless poems. *The Farm Woman*, originally published as *La Granjera* by Gabriela Mistral, reinforces this statement through its depiction of torment,

¹ Brian Wakeman, “Poetry as Research and as Therapy,” *Transformation* Vol.32, No.1 (2015): p51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90010960>.

² Stephen Moss, “What is the future of poetry?” *The Guardian*, June 18, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/18/the-future-of-poetry>.

abandonment and craving for interpersonal relationships. Mistral imports vibrant pastoral imagery into her works, for instance crafting visions of “lilac”, “azaleas” and “an ermine” to signify the subject’s conflicting relationship with life and death, and provides the reader with a powerful, relatable experience of grief. Again, the compression of nuanced, melancholic emotion into a short piece of literature undoubtedly illustrates poetry as like looking at life through a magnifying glass. Therefore, through the examination of Armitage’s *Mother, any distance* and Mistral’s *The Farm Woman*, one could argue that by studying poetry, we are able to observe the intricate convolutions of life in intense and microscopic detail, parallel to the manner in which an object could be viewed through a magnifying lens.

Furthermore, the study of poetry may be synonymous with viewing life through a magnifying glass if it is able to provide answers and give wider insight into various societal areas. Arguably, the works of Tony Harrison do this by offering solutions to the prevalent inequalities in society which he depicts - perhaps the most obvious example of this is within *Them & [uz]*, consisting of two Meredithian sonnets setting out class and educational divisions and his own ideas regarding how to overcome these. Harrison’s setting of the classroom allows the intrusive unattributed voice of a teacher to proclaim that “Poetry’s the speech of kings” while he is merely “one of those Shakespeare gives the comic bits to”, assuming a derogatory, dismissive stance which the poet attempts to expel. He suggests that, in order to solve the contrasting educational assumptions between the upper and lower classes, articulate rebellion and reclamation of language must be accomplished, recalling how he “chewed up Littererchewer” by permeating poetry with demotics and protesting against the dubbing of language. Therefore, by studying *Them & [uz]*, the reader may find clarity in ways to rectify the inequalities of life comparable to the discoveries or solutions one may find through the use of a magnifying glass.

Conversely, Harrison’s most controversial poem *V* contestably does not pledge answers to the “versuses of life” it portrays, such as gender, racial or class inequalities. While it does give wider insight into these sections of society, his poem appears much more preoccupied by his own personal conflict between his working class upbringing and middle class occupation - personified through the juxtaposed dialogue and voices of the narrator and the “skin” - which implies an incredibly personal purpose or instigation of an intimate connection between the poet and the reader, rather than the public and solutionary motivation which the statement proposes. Harrison endorses this in many of his art forms, for example stating that he desires “a direct relationship between actor and audience”³ in his plays. Also, Harrison’s poem may not be considered in the same way as a magnifying lens as it continuously and somewhat equivocally muses over the issue of how “opposites seem sometimes unified” as opposed to suggesting ways to combat this: a magnifying glass would be used to provide answers. This ambivalence is reinforced by Harrison’s structure of the poem. Its incredibly ambiguous ending, in addition to its sheer size, may again confuse or negate his intentions and disallow direct, coherent protest, again conflicting with the purpose of a magnifying glass which is to provide clarity. Furthermore, the cyclical nature of *V* which both begins and ends with the setting of a “graveyard” somewhat traps the reader in the poem with no comprehensible exit or solution. Thus, Tony Harrison’s poetry introduces a complex debate as to whether studying

³ Sarah Hemming, “Fram, National Theatre, London,” *Financial Times*, April 14, 2008, <https://www.ft.com/content/70d57242-0756-11dd-b41e-0000779fd2ac>.

poetry is like looking at life through a magnifying glass through their inconsistent purposes and attempts to overcome or challenge societal issues.

Equally, a multitude of poems cannot constitute a magnifying glass as they survey events panoramically and philosophically, engaging with concepts and emotions rather than events and again contradicting the detail and clarity of a magnifying lens. Plato was said to have defined poetry as “concerned with the world of appearance, not of reality”⁴ and this is true of many of Robert Browning’s poems which concentrate on the obscured nature and appearances of humanity, consistently illustrating themes of madness and delusion in his dramatic monologues. Both *Porphyria’s Lover* and *My Last Duchess* utilise unreliable narrators to convey these. Within the former, the final line, “God has not yet said a word!” arguably encapsulates the narrator’s mental instability by creating a tableau vivant, with the exclamatory statement suggesting a mocking of God for his lack of power or morality in comparison to the speaker and a frightening justification of his own actions which amalgamates his self-mythologising, obsessive and prideful attitudes throughout the poem. Coupled with the symbolic name “Porphyria”, which derives from a disease resulting in madness, *Porphyria’s Lover* may not act as a magnifying glass as it instead aims to represent the wider, ambiguous human nature that cannot be magnified and made clear, and to recite a tale instead of having an investigatory or analytical purpose.

Adelaide Anne Procter’s poem *Envy*, written in 1861, follows a similar line of argument to this, as it provides the reader with a panoramic and diachronic view of the emotion of jealousy on several occurrences rather than focusing on a single isolated event as one may expect of a magnifying glass. Perhaps the poet suggests that life is too incongruous for us to view it through a singular magnifying lens, regardless of how detailed our descriptions of singular incidents are, something which can also be seen in Tony Harrison’s *V* discussed earlier in this essay. Therefore, by considering Browning’s *Porphyria’s Lover* and Procter’s *Envy*, one could conclude that many poems adopt a more philosophical standpoint in their depictions of life which are widely ranging and exploratory of a vast range of emotions, which disallow them to meet the criteria of viewing life through a magnifying glass as they are devoid of specific, situational focus pertaining to a singular event.

In addition, studying poetry is not like looking at life through a magnifying glass if it is not intended to be scrutinised. This is a view adopted by many Romantic poets, but notably John Keats, who coined the term ‘negative capability’ to describe “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason”⁵ and it can be viewed consistently throughout his works. For instance, in *Lamia*, he prominently provides the analogy of how one can “unweave a rainbow” by analysing it, tethering it to the mundanity of reality rather than allowing its beauty to simply exist, and poses the rhetorical interrogative “Do not all charms fly at the mere touch of cold philosophy?” With this metatextual comment, Keats probes the reader to question logic, reason and rationale and forces them to watch as it destroys love, dreams and the abstract beauty of poetry - this is a theme which underpins the entirety of *Lamia*, and indeed his other poetry, such as *The Eve of St Agnes*.

⁴ William Chase Greene, “Plato’s View of Poetry,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* Vol.29 (1918): p1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/310558>

⁵ John Keats, “To George and Thomas Keats, 1817” in *Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends*, ed. Sidney Colvin (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p48.

He would vastly disagree with the simile that studying poetry is like perceiving life through a magnifying glass, as he critiques the very nature of agonising over definition and meaning. Therefore, through the (albeit ironic) study of Keats' *Lamia*, one could confidently suggest that the intentions of many poems are to be admired, preserved and simply allowed to exist, and the proposed semblance of studying poetry to a magnifying glass is a flawed one.

Ultimately, poetry, its purpose and its study is expansive and subjective, as explored throughout this essay, so it cannot be defined as merely intending to do one thing, such as "looking at life through a magnifying glass" - I would argue that this is a relatively limiting view. While many poems do enhance our understanding of the society we live in, I contend that the vast majority of poems do not intended to answer questions, a key function of viewing objects through a magnifying lens, but instead aim to probe them themselves and ask the reader to consider their own views in a thoughtful and personal manner. Further to this, the statement raises the issue of the intent of poetry - what should its purpose be, and does it need a purpose to be classed as poetry? Personally, I believe that poetry does require intention, but this is so vast that it cannot be so simply defined. Poetry, and its study, is something that should be experienced, discussed and immersed in one's life, and the way in which this manifests is ever-evolving and beyond succinct human definition.

1940 words

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