

December 15th: Poetry as an Integrative Outlet

Gillian Belcher

December 15th

Cold water
washes
over my face.
My skin
seeps down the drain.

I scratch
at my neck
as the temperature
rises,
leaving red marks
carved into the shell
that embodies
my pain.

I fold over
to let my back
burn
in the heat.
Tears
become
lost
in streams
that brush cheeks.

I wash my face
in cold blood,
until it bleeds
clean—
Rising tides
of regret
form

as water pools
at my feet.

I dry off my body.

I remember him
on me.

I get back
in the shower,

again.

I remember writing this poem. With each word that touched the paper, a weight lifted from my tired shoulders. Burdens I had been blind to carrying left without saying goodbye. I watched the ignorance that once consumed me as a child walk away from my battered body. I wrote several pieces that I thought reflected times in my life where I began to truly understand what it meant to *feel*: to feel pain; sadness; happiness; emptiness. These words are an honest representation of what I internalized for so long. I saw how disgusted I was with myself and my choices. How isolated I felt by the thought that I wasn't, and still am not in control of everything I experience. Through writing this poem, I took a moment that was weighing on my shoulders and gave it away to artistic freedom. This moment may have been a difficult part of my reality, but it was still a part of my story: it was an honest part of myself I could not forget, but one that I could redefine. Poetry helped me rewrite these moments and how they shaped me.

I use poetry as an outlet to express feelings derived from experiences that are powerful enough to prevail on the page. Within a poem, moments of one's life can be presented with enough ambiguity that many interpretations can come from even the simplest stanzas. If crafted carefully, each word can create a mirror accustomed to its reader allowing them to see themselves and their own story in a unique manner. At the same time poetry can account for every breath taken with astonishing specificity, eliciting emotions through every detail. Poetry achieves both specificity and ambiguity through figurative language, otherwise known as "imagery" (Oliver, 92). Figurative language uses the same words we speak every day but arranges them in ways that differ greatly from how they are used in typical conversations.

Metaphors are a great example through which writers can create imagery. They allow abstract concepts to be explained in a concrete

but creative way. For example, in my poem, *December 15th*, the overarching metaphor of physically trying to cleanse a body in the shower mirrors the attempt to remove disgust, shame and regret I had. The latter concepts are abstract emotions and hard to picture, but specific and detailed phrases like "rising tides of regret" allow readers to produce visual images associated with the abstractions conveyed. Using detailed language like "my skin seeps down the drain" allows a vivid picture to arise and elicit emotion (which in this case may be fear due to the line's eeriness) in each reader's mind before making inferences about the phrase. At the same time, the metaphor is ambiguous enough that readers can derive different meanings based on their own interpretations. I intended for the poem to reflect self-inflicted punishment due to regret, as well as the inability to remove the feeling of shame and disgust. However, I understand that another reader could infer that this poem reflects a persona losing innocence or changing dramatically with phrases like, "my skin seeps down the drain" and "I wash my face in cold blood until it bleeds clean", suggesting physical removal of "the old self". An interpretation besides the one I intended isn't wrong, it is the beauty of poetry's ambiguity. I think a poem means whatever its reader *needs* it to. Therefore, figurative language such as through metaphor can allow for specificity that elicits detailed imagery while simultaneously necessitating ambiguity in meaning.

Figurative language is not the only aspect of the passage (above) that makes it different from say, how I am writing in this reflection. *December 15th* sounds as if it has rhythm and rhyme. I demonstrate the use of both slant rhymes and alliteration to achieve this sense of musicality. True rhymes exist between words like "pot" and "hot" (Oliver, 53). Slant rhymes are words that almost rhyme but are not true rhyming words (Oliver, 53). In my poem I demonstrate slant rhymes with words like "face"

and “drain” in the first verse, as well as “body” and “on me” in the fifth verse. I also use alliteration; this is when there is “repetition of the initial sound of words in a line or lines of verse” (Oliver 29). For example, in the following verse, “*I fold over/to let my back/burn/in the heat/Tears/become/lost/in streams/that brush cheeks*”, I repeat the [b] sound multiple times. Both alliteration and rhyming “brightens the language and helps to hold the reader in thrall” (Oliver, 29).

Above I have only touched upon a few of the many language devices used to create a poetic piece, but they are significant devices I use the most. The aspect that is more difficult to convey is idea generation and the integration between lived experiences and language devices. Collaboration does not only exist between yourself and those who surround you. I believe poetry is derived from the undervalued but important collaboration of various forms of knowledge that exist within a singular mind. Of course, your individual experiences come from interactions between yourself and the world; however, my existence, and experiences within it, contribute to knowledge that I have privileged access to. Poetry is about taking your internal interpretations and feelings about each life experience and combining them with knowledge about poetic language devices.

These internalized experiences and feelings can be accessed via writing prompts which can be discovered (through the internet/peers/professors etc.) or created on your own. In writing the poem *December 15th*, I used 2 prompts provided by my creative writing professor: “think of someone you haven’t talked to in a while and discuss why” and “record, in detail, the nature of your surroundings using all five senses”. The first prompt initiated written discussion about how I felt hurt, both physically and mentally, by the person who elicited the feelings represented in this poem. Since it was raining on the day I wrote in response to the second prompt, I went outside and sat on my balcony to record detailed information about

the state of my surroundings using all five senses. When I attempted to put these two very different descriptions together I found myself writing about the events of December 15th in a different way. I was reminded of the shower I took when I returned to my apartment that morning and what that shower, and the many that followed, represented for me. What seemed to be emphasized in my written responses to each prompt was the desire to “become clean” when feeling (literally and metaphorically) “dirty”. On paper, I could see how hurt this persona was and I realized this persona was me. However, I discovered that the feelings I had weren’t derived from hurt inflicted by another person (anymore) but shame and disgust I was still inflicting upon myself. Picking a starting point (prompt) and writing down ideas as they came, allowed me to refrain from processing, thinking about, or judging them.

Using prompts, whether they are about describing your surroundings or pulling on past emotions, can lead to revealing deeply personal information, and therefore, inspiration: this is because mental groupings of objects and events with certain commonalities, or concepts, are closely connected with sensory experiences and other concepts thought to be unrelated (Ormrod & Jones, 33; Hamilton, 221). For example, seeing a butterfly can lead to thinking about swimming simply because the butterfly is a type of stroke and our mind quickly and often makes these concept connections unconsciously (Ormrod & Jones, 33). Therefore, if specific concepts were present in a memory, related stimuli in one’s external environment can trigger these memories if connected to the mental objects/events in the remembered scenario. Our senses contribute to making these connections and triggering involuntary retrieval of certain memories, especially our sense of smell (Hamilton, 221-223). That is why when using any prompt that involves describing surroundings (past or present) it is a good idea to do so in terms of your five senses. Something as simple as the concept of rain specifically, how it feels, looks, smells, sounds etc., can easily trigger past experiences to come

to the forefront of one's mind through relatedness with other concepts: rain is water that falls from above and a shower replicates this event therefore, rain triggers the concept of shower through perceptual relatedness. This is especially true when combined with more explicitly personal prompts that encourage making these connections. The combination of prompts allowed for a more creative interpretation of my story rather than a straightforward discussion of events. As indicated above, describing my surroundings lead to developing a metaphor that could represent my feelings towards what I experienced on *December 15th*.

Writing reveals a secret that has burdened you and poetic language devices ensure that your truth is exposed in an encrypted and beautiful way. I believe that with poetry you can

push boundaries of spoken and written language that everyday conversation can only scratches the surface of. However, poetry goes beyond the knowledge of language devices and creative writing techniques. As shown above, every time you respond to a writing prompt you risk reliving past events that have caused a variety of emotions both positive and negative. Therefore, it requires vulnerability and bravery in order to relive memories that have haunted you, as shown with the process of writing *December 15th*. Poetry requires the internal collaboration of language devices and creative writing techniques with the internal representation of one's lived experiences, and the emotions each of these moments have caused. Different ways of knowing can be found within yourself, and when combined can set you free.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Gillian Belcher is enrolled in the Knowledge Integration program at the University of Waterloo. Her academic interests include English, Philosophy and Psychology. The goal of this piece was to integrate concepts across these disciplines to advocate for the importance of mental health and women's rights. Her program provides expertise in interdisciplinarity, allowing her to use creative writing skills to express psychological states and reflect upon this process. She wanted to tell her story in order to connect with and encourage others to do the same. Gillian wants to ensure that artistic, creative freedom does not get lost in academia.

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