

Research Article

Ten Inherent Functions of Poetry as a Literary Genre

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Abstract

Talking about poetry, Oripeloye (2017:41) noted that ‘all the definitions point to peculiar features of poetry such as content, form and effects that are recognized in particular poems when they are read’. The fact is that “while reading any poem, the reader learns about events and reflects on them, and he/she is able to draw certain conclusions which become part of his/her experience about life”. Oripeloye also lists the functions of poetry, but he does not comment on the functions he has listed into his book. This article comments on the functions of poetry that I found useful and adds two more other functions. The umbrella term covering poetry as a literary genre is art and art itself is part of culture. “Culture is a complex set which includes arts, education, technology, traditions, customs, beliefs, the way people of a given society talk, dress, their eating habits, their mind-set...” and that can be improved by education (Ngwaba, 2017:8).

Keywords: Literature, Art, Poetry, Functions of Poetry.

1. The Functions of Poetry as Listed by Oripeloye

- 1) Poetry increases human experience and knowledge,
- 2) Poetry gives pleasure to the readers,
- 3) Poetry preserves the people’s tradition and belief system,
- 4) Poetry documents the history and the background of a people,
- 5) Poetry is a means of expressing the thoughts and ideas in a community,
- 6) Poetry expresses personal feelings,
- 7) Poetry functions as propaganda in the achievement of political goals,
- 8) Poetry performs mystical functions-magic or ritual performance.

Poetry plays many functions in the society. The eight functions listed by Oripeloye are just some among many others. Two more functions will be added on the eight to have ten. Still these ten functions of poetry are not exhaustive. Those ten functions could be considered inherent functions of poetry.

- 9) Poetry educates the society,
- 10) Poetry civilizes the readers.

But before tackling those ten functions, a word shall be said on literature, arts and poetry for the purpose of this paper.

2. Definitions

2.1. Understanding and Defining Literature

Literature is one of the seven branches of Fine Arts apart from music, architecture, sculpture, painting, ceramic, and cinema. Literature has been defined by many scholars among which the following shall be considered to cite only a few.

(1) Aristotle refers to literature as “any kind of composition in prose or verse which has for its purpose, not the communication of fact, but the telling of a story (either wholly invented or given new life through some use of the inventive imagination in the employment of words” (cited in Daiches, 1956:4-5).

(2) Bredsley in Olsen (1978:15) in the 1970’s the semantic theory of literature came to define literature as “discourse with implicit meanings”, and a literary work itself as: “a piece of discourse which is semantically dense i.e. having important meanings or connotations”.

(3) Literature is “a translinguistic discourse_ that is _ a discourse involving more than mere systems of language and where the admission of a wider social, historical, and political context is seen as essential to the teaching of literature” (Brumfit and Carter, 1986:5).

(4) In his book *Reading Literature: An Introduction* (2017:11), Oripeloye argues that literature is an imaginary but plausible narrative which dramatizes changes in human relationships. For him, reading meaning to literature is like discovering the meaning of life itself. As we observe events and reflect on them, we are able to draw certain conclusions which form part of our experience about life; hence literature is referred to as the “imitation of life”. From Oripeloye’s definition we may say that literature is a portrait of life.

(5) Literature could be interpreted as an aesthetic, implicit expression of an ideal–belief in high principles or perfect standards–through an invented, connoted story (either oral or written) addressing in significant ways universal issues of what it means to be human; it is always used in context, and is always open i.e. incomplete because it does not contain all the elements that are needed for its understanding, it is always addressed to an implied reader by an implied author (Ngwaba, 2005:37).

(6) Literature could also be defined by what it is not i.e. the purpose of literature is not the communication of facts. The story that literature tells is not a true story but it is based on reality that becomes a source of inspiration for the author. Literature is not written in vacuum and it is not meant to destroy but to build and civilize. Literature is not about animals, although animals may be used as characters, as in fables and beast epics.

2.2. Arts

For now, it is worth to tackle the concept “art” as far as literature has been cited in this paper. ‘Art which include music, literature, architecture, sculpture, painting, ceramic, and cinema, is an aesthetic expression of an ideal, for the satisfaction of man’s natural instincts as beauty, pleasure and admiration, imitation, order, justice, conservation, curiosity, and learning. Human beings cannot do without them these natural instincts’ (Ngwaba 2013:15). Another definition to pay attention at considers art as the application of skill, dexterity, knowledge, and taste to the aesthetic expression of beauty, feeling, and emotion through the media of color and form and a work of art itself has been defined as a product of the human intellect and imagination (Komonchak, 1992:59). Oripeloye says that a work of art arrests us by the excitement it creates in the same way we are satisfied with the food we like eating. A special question we may ask here is: How would producers of art/literature possibly make people enjoy their productions as if they were enjoying the kind of food they like? In this special case of literature as art, Oripeloye says that the materials for literature are drawn from the author’s experience and observation of life and that the author selects these experiences and shape them to achieve some purposes which include criticism, entertainment and the illumination of the human experience (Oripeloye, 2017:11).

3. A Brief Historical Background and Origin of Poetry

I so much like this historical background taken from literature writers and that I am sharing here given its importance to this article.

‘Storytelling is as old as humanity itself. The tradition of capturing the events and beliefs of communities reaches back to a time when humans first sat by a fire and told tales. History was preserved in the form of legends and mythologies that were passed down from one generation to the next, and offered answers to the mysteries of the universe and its creation. And around 4,000 years ago, the first stories to be written down came in the form of poems such as the Mesopotamia’s The Epic of Gilgamesh and India’s Mahabharata, which were based on oral traditions. Rhyme, rhythm, and meter were essential aids to memory in songs and oral accounts, so it is unsurprising that the first texts made use of familiar poetic devices. Richard says that at that very beginning of literature many texts were religious and sacred texts which were telling the stories of early historians, and have influenced writing for centuries. The form of literature that became Greek drama used a narrative ballad-like form and introduced characters with individual voices, choruses of commentary, and the distinct categories of comedy and tragedy that continue to be used today’ (Richard et al., 2016: 12-14).

In a chronological way of doing things, we will note that prose writing came very after poetry. On the origins of poetry, Aristotle (cited in Russell and Winterbottom, 1989:54) points out that: “Poetry, I believe, has two over-all causes, both of them natural:

- a) *Mimēsis* is innate in human beings from childhood and pleasure in instances of *mimēsis* is equally general;
- b) As well as *mimēsis*, harmony and rhythm are natural to us, and verses are obviously definite sections of rhythm”.

Therefore, in the same way the critic Aristotle makes 'imitation' (*mimēsis*) the foundation of his view of poetry. The desire to 'imitate', far from being somehow undesirable, is basic in man, and provides pleasure to the imitator and his audience (Russell and Winterbottom, 1989: xi).

4. Defining Poetry

Poetry is the very first component of literature which is a type of Fine Arts. Deuter, *et al.*, (2015:1182) define poetry as a collection of poems; poems in general. "Poetry is a composition in verse form that expresses high feelings and thoughts in a condensed language, especially imagery which is used by poets to achieve the aim of creating resemblance between one object and the other as shown through metaphor in order to arouse strong feelings in the readers. He says again that poetry is the articulation of experiences and feelings in a language that is particularly arresting" (Oripeloye, 2017:39).

Another definition is from (Shaw, 1972:292) who argues that, poetry is "the art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, designed to produce pleasure through beautiful, elevated imagination or profound thoughts". Let's note with the critic (Richards, 1925:226) that "to define the poem as the artist's experience is a better solution".

There is another very detailed definition of poetry taken as poetic discourse that says:

"Poetic discourse could be interpreted as a coherent artistic communication set: the sum total of language, paralinguage and semiotic signs used in poetry, and the striking way they are used to convey meanings, arouse feelings and create specific effects; or a threefold artistic literary discourse per excellence made of language, paralinguage and semiotic evidences skillfully and artistically used for communication in a poem. It is the most condensed, the most incomplete, and the most connoted of all the literary discourses. Language, paralinguage, punctuation marks, rhetorical devices and even the striking and skillful way these are used to communicate meanings, arouse feelings and create specific effects are all variables that the definition draws attention to" (Ngwaba, 2013: 16).

Besides, "Each poem is life that has endured into literature, a world which has taken up residence in words. And in the center of this process stands the individual poet" (Maline, 1965:4).

5. Identifying the Functions of Poetry

- Poetry increases human experience and knowledge,
- It gives pleasure to the readers,
- It preserves the people's tradition and belief system,
- It documents the history and the background of a people,
- It is a means of expressing the thoughts and ideas in a community,
- It expresses personal feelings,
- It functions as propaganda in the achievement of political goals,
- It performs mystical functions-magic or ritual performance,
- Poetry educates the society,
- Poetry civilizes the readers.

5.1. Poetry Increases Human Experience and Knowledge

Maline argues that the reading and studying of poetry increases the reader's knowledge by opening the mind and transforming him. The reader builds higher-level thinking skills after reading a piece of poetry. Individual learning strategies find their exhibition while reading poetry (Maline, 1965: 31). And Sir Sidney says that poetry is "a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth: to speak metaphorically, a moving picture with this end: to teach and delight" (Sir Philip Sidney, cited in Skiba *et al.*, 2003:14). Moreover the aim of education in poetry is to fit a person to deal with thought in all its forms-to think intelligently, to read accurately, to write clearly; and that "As you read a book on poetry, poems teach you to understand poetry and poems themselves teach you better ways of seeing the things about you (Maline, 1965: 31).

When Ngwaba says: "I see poetry as art and art itself as an esthetic expression of an ideal that an artist has in mind, and would like to express. An ideal is a belief in high principles, or in perfect standards, such as education and learning, immortality, order and justice, love as opposed to hatred, beauty as opposed to dirt/ugliness, tolerance, freedom, sensitivity, creativity, honesty, commonsense, hard work, determination, self-discipline, patience etc. (Ngwaba, 2009: 8-9). The time spent in reading poetry is worth because the reader gains those instances of ideal which is meant to change us into other people after the reading.

Last time I revisited my literature notebook, I came across a quote from Robert Frost that goes: “poetry begins with pleasure and ends in wisdom” (National Council of Teachers, 1964:197 in Ngwaba, 2017:33). And Andrew argues that poetry is the succession of experiences—sounds, images, thoughts, emotions—through which we can pass when we are reading as poetically as we can (Andrew Bradley cited in Oripeloye, 2017: 40).

5.2. Poetry Gives Pleasure to the Readers

Pleasure is the feeling of enjoyment, happiness or satisfaction that you get from an experience. The followings are some scholars’ view points on this sub point:

(1) “The proper and immediate object of poetry is the communication of pleasure” Coleridge (Cited in Henri Oripeloye, 2107: 40).

(2) “It is not enough for poetry to be beautiful; it must also be pleasing and lead the hearer’s mind wherever it will” (Shaw and Winterbottom, 1989: xiii).

(3) “Poetry gives pleasure once” (Russell and Winterbottom, 1989: 107).

5.3. Poetry Preserves the People’s Tradition and Belief System

Traditions and beliefs are part of culture. “A belief is a strong feeling that something/somebody exists or is true; confidence that something/somebody is good or right” (Deuter, *et al.*, 2015: 126).

Furthermore, Richard *et al.*, (2016:12) say: “Storytelling is as old as humanity itself, back from the time when humans first sat by a fire and told tales before people started writing. “Poetry is the first literary genre often associated with oral traditional literature and the first poems ever composed by men were songs to mean that poetry has the same age as that of humanity.

So it may be assumed that it is through this function that poetry displays the ways of doing things of a people and things in which the people really believe in and that conduct their ways of behaving throughout years and transmit from generation to generation.

5.4. Poetry Documents the History and the Background of a People

Besides the function of preserving the people’s tradition and belief system, poetry contributes to the documentation of the history and the background of a people. It helps think about the past of the society. “People love to hear and tell stories. Stories help us to explore who we are, who other people are, what our past experiences mean, and what the future might hold. In our stories we not only pose our questions but express our hopes and sorrows, our disappointments and expectations” (Skiba *et al.*, 2003: 4). And addressing his readers, Maline (1965:4) says that a poem is a permanent example for all men of life lived fully—grasped and expressed to the fullest possible degree. It is an example from which you can learn to appreciate the richness of the world and of man’s life in it, the bounty of diverse human beings, and the wealth of language well used. Another argument to be considered is from Horace (Cited in Russell and Winterbottom, 1989: xii-xiii) in his view of any poet in the Art argues that “the poet gives us the traditional picture of the influence of poets on the development of civilization”.

These three arguments from the literary scholars confirm poetry as playing the role of granary for history documentation of people living into a given society, chiefly the community that produces the poetry in question.

5.5. Poetry is a Means of Expressing the Thoughts and Ideas in a Community

There might be many things to say here in so far as this function considers poetry as being a platform for poets to stand and toll the bell to invite their communities to come to hear the message intended to them/communities. For instance Ngwaba says:

“For long, a poet has been referred to as a prophet which, once inspired and told, stands to ring the bell to inform, or warn people about a potential event or danger. A poet doesn’t deal with lies to fool people. He tells truth. Writing is, for him, talking sense, ringing the bell to raise significant issues and awake people’s conscience about those issues. Hemingway once wrote For Whom the Bell Tolls. The bell tolls for everybody. And not tolling the bell when it should be tolled could be detrimental and prejudicial to lives. In any case it is a dereliction of duty for a poet-prophet as “sentinel” (Ngwaba, 2017:9).

It is at this very goal of poetry where I shall consider poetry as text, communication and discourse which is written by an implied writer addressed to an implied reader, the community. It is on this platform where

poets express themselves, talk to their audiences differently as they wish, tell people what they want and think is good for them/audiences to learn for their education. Hence, this function seems to be more complex and complete than the seven other functions of poetry at the heart of this article because it involves the poet and his audience, to which poetry is addressed. At this point Ngwaba says:

"The poet is there to toll such a bell by rendering the best of his own personal experience sensibly so as to make it relevant news that shall stay great and worth reading...all of the life issues of great significance... Poets care about truth and values to draw people's attention back to wisdom..." (Ngwaba, 2017:10).

It is through poems that the communities learn about the mind of their poets on any topic concerning human life for instance religion, culture, beliefs, customs, history, geography, moral, linguistics, etc.

5.6. Poetry Expresses Personal Feelings

One of the multiple functions of poetry is the expression of one's feelings, especially the poet's feelings. For example, in their introduction, Russell and Winterbottom (1989: xii) assert that poetry is a private matter, written for the satisfaction of the poet himself and a few favorite friends.

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5.7. Poetry Functions as Propaganda in the Achievement of Political Goals

The synonyms for propaganda are information, promotion, advertise or advertisement. There has always been a special place of politics in literature/poetry since the ancient Greek period, poets are also interested in politics to teach, awake and/or warn their communities. They also deal with politics.

The following instances from some scholars are illustrations of poetry functioning as propaganda in the achievement of political goals: "Aristotle's *Poetics* envisages a variety of different interests in literature, the politician's, the poet's, the critic's..." (Cited in Russell and Winterbottom, 1989:220). "Poet and political agent provide the ideal figure through which to explore the dimensions of the dialogue between poetic and political discourse and the function of poetry in archaic politics" (Irwin, 2005:9).

"Poetry treats of species of love: there are many different kinds of human love. Among them are a man's love of God, the love of a husband for his wife or his fellow men, the love of a patriot for his country or its leader, and the love of a man for nature. Each of these ways of loving is different, and each has its own proper place in a fully developed human life" (Maline, 1965:67). "On a politically theoretical level, the New Critics argue that their methods would help people see the harmony that's always naturally present in ambiguity, paradox, or irony" (Venturino, 2013: 36).

5.8. Poetry Performs Mystical Functions-Magic or Ritual Performance

Magic means having or using special powers to make impossible things happen or seem to happen; mystical means having spiritual powers or qualities that are difficult to understand or to explain; and the noun ritual refers to a series of actions that are always performed in the same way, especially as part of a religious ceremony (Deuter *et al.*, 2015: 937, 1023, 1340). In the sense of an act of performing a dramatic role, synonyms for performance are for instance show, production, presentation, entertainment, conducting and act, just to mention those six.

Mystical and magic poems are also concerned with supernatural matters, involve with fairies, gods and ghosts and much else. Some instances of poems with magic characteristics are: John Donne's 'The Apparition' (1633) where the ghost of the killed lover keeps on appearing to the beloved in her bedroom. Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Haunted Palace' (1839), mixes angels, fair and humans. Percy B. Shelley's 'The Witch of Atlas' (1824) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 'The Magic Net' and many other poems. As their titles suggest, the last two works by Percy and Johann are instances showing that poetry performs mystical or magic performances.

In the epic poem of Gilgamesh written around 2150 BCE for example tells how the oppressive ruler of the Mesopotamian city of Uruk is taught a lesson, and goes on to become a local hero. To punish Gilgamesh for

his arrogance, the gods send the “wild man” Enkidu, formed from clay, to torment him. After a fight, however, they become friends, and embark on a series of monster-slaying adventures. Angered by this turn of events, the gods sentence Enkidu to death... (Richard *et al.*, 2016: 20). Throughout the Latin epic poem *Aeneid* written by Virgil between 29 and 19 BC, emphasizes Aeneas’s virtue and duty, which is steered by fate and the intervention of the gods, taking him from his home to his destiny in Latium, from Troy to Italy (Richard *et al.*, 2016: 41).

5.8.1. The Causes of These Rituals

There are many mysterious areas within the human experience and areas which to some degree at least defy complete understanding. Maline (1965:53) argues: “Life and death, the individual and the species, youth and age, the part and the whole, the general and the particular are all pairs of opposites which have caused men to wonder, to ask, and propose answers. So, there are poems dealing with many of these important natural mysteries. For example, writers like Housman treats the mystery of life and death; Thomas Hardy writes of the endurance of the species though the individual is destroyed; Yeats gives a portrait of age considering youth and, Column a picture of hopelessness and poverty in old age. Conrad Aiken tells how a part of the world is a portrait of the whole, while John Crowe Ransom deals perceptively with the difficulty of applying a general truth to a particular situation”. He continues in arguing that “these are, of course, not as important mysteries as the religious mysteries that deal with time and eternity, the finite and the infinite, the human and the Divine, and the creature and the Creator.”

At this list of poets of mysteries, there is also the poet Ngwaba Bimbala whose collection of “Poems for Souls” (2017) deals with spiritual matters, life after death; death and themes full of mysteries.

To those eight functions of poetry stated by Oripeloye in his book entitled “Reading Literature: An Introduction” we will add two more functions which are also important functions of poetry given their impact onto the audiences. These two more functions of poetry are education or instruction and civilization.

5.9. Poetry Educates the Society

Poetry bears the quality and power of educating the masses. Gandhi once said: “Confession of error is like a broom that sweeps away dirt and leaves the surface cleaner than before” (Beautiful Quotation in Murthy, 2015:518). Poetry educates because by the end of the reading of a poem or a literary work, the reader remains no longer the same as before but rather, he/she becomes another people, a new people, and a mentally transformed human being.

5.10. Poetry Civilizes the Readers

Poetry has the capacity to civilize the society. The definition of literature as argued by Culler (1997:37) says that literature has been seen as a special kind of writing which, it was argued, could civilize not just the lower classes but, also the aristocrats and the middle classes. This view of literature as an aesthetic object that could make us “better people”...

6. Conclusion

This article has been tackling ten of the inherent functions of poetry as a literary genre among which eight were picked from Oripeloye’s “Reading Literature: An Introduction” and two other were added because of their great impact onto the readers. Poetry increases human experience and knowledge when reading and studying poems. It gives pleasure to the readers as they get the feeling of enjoyment, happiness or even satisfaction while reading poems. Poetry preserves the people’s tradition and belief system since it is the very first literary genre that is often associated with oral traditional literature whereby people display their ways of doing things in which they believe in throughout years. Also, poetry contributes to the documentation of the history and the background of a people or the society that produces it. Poetry is a means of expressing the thoughts and ideas in a community by the fact that it serves as a platform where poets express themselves. Poetry allows poets to express personal feelings since it allows poets to say a word on things around them. Poetry functions as propaganda in the achievement of political goals in the way that poetry addresses also politics matters as it does with any other field. In its mystical function for instance, human beings interact with ghosts and other supernatural creatures. The two other functions added were education of the society as far as “culture which includes arts, etc. can be improved by education” (Ngwaba 2017:8) and civilization of the entire society.

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