

# WHAT IS POETRY?

OT Poetry Study  
Lesson #1

Pastor Reifsteck

# OPENING POEM

Poet of the Day  
by  
John Donne

# “DEATH, BE NOT PROUD” -JOHN DONNE (1572-1631)

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,  
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

# HOW DO WE KNOW THIS IS POETRY??

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# INTRODUCTION

Goals  
Challenges  
Thesis

# GOALS

- Begin to define poetry
- Begin to identify Old Testament Poetry
- Develop tools for reading poetry, especially OT Poetry

# CHALLENGES

- Does Hebrew poetry actually exist?
- How can we study Hebrew poetry if we aren't working in Hebrew?
- What makes poetry different from the rest of the Bible
- What's the fundamental poetic unit?
- To translate is to Betray  
*Traduttore, traditore*
- Terminology
- How can we study Hebrew poetry if we don't know what it sounds like?

# THESIS

- There is poetry in the Bible.
- Hebrew poetry is typically understandable in translation.
- Understanding the poetic tools used in Hebrew poetry can help us understand the Bible.



IS THIS A POEM?

Quiz time!

# A POEM?

Roses are red,  
Violets are blue,  
Sugar is sweet,  
And so are you.

# SONNET

## “SONNET 18”

-WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564-1616)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of  
    May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance, or nature's changing course  
    untrimmed:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

-MUHAMMAD ALI (1942-2016)  
(CONSIDERED THE WORLD'S SHORTEST POEM)

Me

We

## SONG OF SOLOMON 2:3-5

As an apple tree among the trees of the forest,  
so is my beloved among the young men.

With great delight I sat in his shadow,  
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

He brought me to the banqueting house,  
and his banner over me was love.

Sustain me with raisins;  
refresh me with apples,  
for I am sick with love.

# ACROSTIC

## “ANOTHER ACROSTIC ( IN THE STYLE OF FATHER WILLIAM)” — LEWIS CARROLL (1832-1898)

"Are you deaf, Father William!" the young man said,

"Did you hear what I told you just now?

"Excuse me for shouting! Don't waggle your head

"Like a blundering, sleepy old cow!

"A little maid dwelling in Wallington Town,

"Is my friend, so I beg to remark:

"Do you think she'd be pleased if a book were sent down

"Entitled 'The Hunt of the Snark?'"

"Pack it up in brown paper!" the old man cried,

"And seal it with olive-and-dove.

"I command you to do it!" he added with pride,

"Nor forget, my good fellow to send her beside

"Easter Greetings, and give her my love."

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## LIMERICK (5 LINE, ANAPESTIC, AABBA)

“Hickory dickory dock.

The mouse ran up the clock.

The clock struck one,

And down he run.

Hickory dickory dock.”

“There once was a man from Nantucket

Who kept all his cash in a bucket.

But his daughter, named Nan,

Ran away with a man,

And as for the bucket, Nantucket.”



“HOW STRANGE IT IS”  
-NINA BOGIN (1952- )

How strange it is

To hover over words, like the smoke

From the loggers' fires, over the valley.

## JOB 14:1-4

Man who is born of a woman  
is few of days and full of trouble.  
He comes out like a flower and withers;  
he flees like a shadow and continues not.  
And do you open your eyes on such a one  
and bring me into judgment with you?  
Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?  
There is not one.

## HAIKU (5-7-5)

An old silent pond...  
A frog jumps into the pond,  
splash! Silence again.

- Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694)

The wren  
Earns his living  
Noiselessly.

- Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828)

“L(A”

-E.E. CUMMINGS (1894-1962)

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## PSALM 117 (ESV)

Praise the Lord, all nations!

Extol him, all peoples!

For great is his steadfast love toward us,  
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.

Praise the Lord!

SO WHAT IS POETRY?

# WHAT IS POETRY?

Barbara Hernstein Smith-

“As soon as we perceive that a verbal sequence has a sustained rhythm, that it is formally structured according to a continuously operating principle of organization, we know that we are in the presence of poetry and we respond to it accordingly... expecting certain effects from it and not others.”

## BERLIN: SIX FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

- Referential  
(refers to another thing)
- Emotive  
(expresses emotion)
- Conative  
(means something)
- Phatic  
(social interaction)
- Metalingual  
("This is a short sentence.")
- Poetic  
("The message exists for its own sake.")

"What differentiates poetry is the dominance of the poetic function."



# PETERSEN: THEORIES OF POETRY

## **Emotive Theory**

Expresses powerful emotion

## **Reality Theory**

Focuses on the relation between poem and world

## **Goal-oriented Theory**

Focus on a poem's rhetorical effect

## **Objective Theory**

A poem is an object in itself

## **Indeterminacy Theory**

A poem's value is in its openness to interpretation

## PETERSEN: WHAT IS POETRY?

“There is no single, definitive map regarding theories of poetry. It is more important to understand the ways in which the poem, the poet, and the creative process are interrelated.”

# TOOLS FOR READING POETRY

Definitions &  
Examples

# STANZAS AND STROPHES (AKA DIVIDERS): PSALM 123

<sup>1</sup>To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! <sup>2</sup>Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he has mercy upon us. <sup>3</sup>Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. <sup>4</sup>Our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.

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# SIMILE & METAPHOR

## PROVERBS 25:11-14

A word fitly spoken  
is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold  
is a wise reprovener to a listening ear.

Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest  
is a faithful messenger to those who send him;  
he refreshes the soul of his masters.

Like clouds and wind without rain  
is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give.



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WHAT WILL WE **NOT** BE DOING??

Limitations of our study

# ANALYZING METER & RHYTHM

/ - - /

Roses are Red,

/ - - /

Violets are Blue,

/ - - /

Sugar is sweet,

- / - /

And so are you.

## ANALYZING METER AND RHYTHM

הֲלֵלוּ אֶת־יְהוָה כָּל־גּוֹיִם שִׁבְחֹהוּ כָּל־הָאֲמִיּוֹת:

כִּי גָבַר עָלֵינוּ חַסְדּוֹ וְאַמְתַּיְהוָה לְעוֹלָם הֲלֵלוּ־יְהוָה:

# BEING *REALLY* DOGMATIC ABOUT STRUCTURE.

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Colon, Verset, Line, Hemistych, Verses?

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# ANALYZING SOUND

How strange it is

To hover over words, like the smoke

From the loggers' fires, over the valley.

# ANALYZING RHYMES

Shall I compare thee to a summer's **day**?  
Thou art more lovely and more **temperate**:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of **May**,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a **date**:

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven **shines**,  
And often is his gold complexion **dimmed**,  
And every fair from fair sometime **declines**,  
By chance, or nature's changing course **untrimmed**:

But thy eternal summer shall not **fade**,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou **ow'st**,  
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his **shade**,  
When in eternal lines to time thou **grow'st**,

So long as men can breathe or eyes can **see**,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to **thee**.

# ANALYZING SOUND/RHYMES -ISAIAH 5:7

וַיִּקְוֶה לְמִשְׁפָּט

וְהִנֵּה מִשְׁפָּח

לְצַדִּיקָה

וְהִנֵּה צַעֲקָה:

“He looked for justice [*mišpāṭ*],  
but saw bloodshed [*mispāḥ*];

for righteousness [*šědāqâh*],

but heard cries of distress [*šě ‘āqâh*].”



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WHAT IS OLD TESTAMENT POETRY?

# WHAT IS OLD TESTAMENT POETRY? THEORIES

Poetry is defined by **two** things:

- Terseness
- Parallelism

The ox knows its owner,  
and the donkey its master's trough,  
But Israel knows not,  
my people understand not.”  
-Isaiah 1:3

# OLD TESTAMENT POETRY AS GENRE

Hebrew poetry almost never contains narrative.

‘Narrativity’ can be found in Hebrew Poetry

# NARRATIVITY

## PROVERBS 25:8-10

What your eyes have seen  
do not hastily bring into court,  
for what will you do in the end,  
when your neighbor puts you to shame?  
Argue your case with your neighbor himself,  
and do not reveal another's secret,  
lest he who hears you bring shame upon you,  
and your ill repute have no end.

# WHAT IS OLD TESTAMENT POETRY? THEORIES

Poetry is composed in the tension between:

- Perceptibility
- Interestingness

# PERCEPTIBILITY & INTERESTINGNESS

The Eagle

By Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892)

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

# PERCEPTIBILITY AND INTERESTINGNESS:

## Psalm 117 (ESV)

Praise the Lord, all nations!

Extol him, all peoples!

For great is his steadfast love toward us,  
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.

Praise the Lord!



# WHAT IS OLD TESTAMENT POETRY? THEORIES



## OT Poetry Intensifies!

There are certain things to which intensification is suited.

- Woes
- Pleas
- Lamentations
- Praises

And certain things to which it is not suited.

**NEVER** formulaic. There is nothing mechanical about Hebrew Poetry.

# “BATTER MY HEART THREE PERSON'D GOD” -JOHN DONNE (1572-1631)

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,  
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,

But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,  
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;  
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

# SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

