

Poetic License

Dr. Pona Mahanta

Although poetic license has been in practice in all ages and in all literatures, real poets, however, do not use this at their sweet will knowing very well that too much use of such freedom will make bad poetry.

Poets are believed to have certain freedom in the use of grammatical structures, terms, words and even contents which prose writers do not. This particular phenomenon is known as 'poetic license'. What exactly is 'poetic license'? The word 'poet', derived from Latin 'peta', means a 'maker' or creator and 'licence' or 'license' (American) coming from 'licentia' 'refers to 'permission given'. Simply speaking, therefore, poetic license is permission given to poets as makers or creators. What permission? Who gives them this permission? These are the questions this brief write-up is trying to address.

Be it a poet or a prose writer, he is expected to follow certain rules and regulations while making a composition. If it is not done, i.e, the accepted criteria in the use of words, sentence construction and so on, are not observed, the intended meaning may not be clear and there may be chaos instead. Some people appear to think that since the poet creates 'spontaneously', he may not strictly follow the rules of grammar. Such thinking is erroneous. When Wordsworth says that poetry is "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", he simply speaks about the powerful feelings and emotions arising in the deepest region of a poetic mind activated by past experiences. When these are given expression to in verse, the conventions of the language used and its universally accepted grammar are not or cannot be entirely disregarded. For the sake of rhymes, rhythms and sounds, and to produce the desired effect, the poet may, however, slightly change the order of words or shorten spellings. As an example of this we may take the concluding lines of Wordsworth's well-known poem 'The Solitary Reaper':

I saw her singing at her work,
And ov'r the sickle bending;
I listened, motionless and still,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

If we put these lines in ordinary prose, it would be somewhat like this : "I saw her singing at her work (and) bending over the sickle". This shows that the poet has taken certain liberty in the use of spelling and word order. This is what we call poetic license or freedom taken by and given to a poet which a prose writer is not usually entitled to. Such freedoms enjoyed by poets are allowed without a shrug as a privilege given to them both by readers and critics. There are, however, certain limits to poetic license and anyone overdoing this or using this at his own sweet will is very likely to produce stuff falling short of the poetic.

The foregoing examples are given from English poetry because we have taken the concept of poetic license from western discourse, although poets in all ages and probably in all languages enjoy, as opposed to those writing in prose, similar freedom to certain extent. In classical

literature, which is concerned more with order and decency, we may not find much use of this license, but the fact is that no poetry, ancient or modern, can be exactly like prose. It is to be noted in this context that certain ‘modern’ poems almost look like prose in their linguistic structures, and that they are not only regarded as poems, but some of them are considered even as best creations. Why is it so? Certain features like use of words and expressions, sounds, symbols and so on in such compositions produce special effect bestowing on them poetic qualities. In order to make this point clear, let us take an example from T.S. Eliot who has impacted greatly on modern poetry. Here are the opening lines of one of his well-known and much talked about poems, ‘The Love Song Of J Alfred Prufrock’ :

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky,
Like a patient etherized upon a table...

If we join these lines we find a sentence which has little or no difference from sentence structure in prose. But the qualities mentioned earlier lend such extraordinary poetic flavor that reading these lines gives one the pleasure of reading poetry. It would not be wrong to say that the image or picture the poet is trying to create by associating the evening, the sky and a patient about to be operated on, is a result of the freedom the poet is entitled to enjoy. English metaphysical poets like John Donne and others take ample advantage of poetic license in the use of comparisons, symbols, images and so on.



John Dryden

John Dryden (1631-1700), a neo-classical poet-dramatist and critic, regarded poetic license as “...the liberty which poets have assumed to themselves in all ages, of speaking things in verse, which are beyond the severity of prose.” Let us now have a look at how one of the world’s greatest poet-playwrights, Shakespeare, employs this liberty. In *Julius caesar*, Mark Antony begins his famous oration with the lines quoted below:

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears,
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him...
For Brutus is an honorable man,
So are they all all honorable men.
Come I to speak in Ceasar's funeral."

In these sentences, according to accepted grammatical rules of the English language, there ought to be an 'and' which Shakespeare drops out. Secondly, a close scrutiny reveals that Antony does not follow the rules of order or sequence in sentence construction. The sole aim of the poet-playwright or the speaker here in not minding the rules of grammar like the use of the conjunction 'and' or of changing the order of words like 'Come I' or 'are they' in place of 'I come' and 'they are' respectively, is to put his point more emphatically to have the desired effect on the listeners. Centuries later, the Romantic poet, Coleridge, also does the same thing with similar aims :

I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are! (Dejection Ode)

In ordinary prose, the second sentence should be "I see, but do not feel." But this would not produce the intended emphasis and poetic grandeur or would not have the desired effect on the reader or hearer. The poet wants to say something like this : "I see the moon and the stars in the sky. I just see, but cannot enjoy their beauty." This failure to enjoy is central to an understanding of the poem and to give expression to his feeling, the poet takes recourse to poetic license.

Although poetic license has been in practice in all ages and in all literatures, real poets, however, do not use this at their sweet will knowing very well that too much use of such freedom will make bad poetry. There are others besides poets who, taking advantage of this, make so much of change in a given text that it often loses its identity with the original. Among such writers the most daring are those who make adaptations of well-known books of poetry or fiction in a particular language to another target language. Examples of such works are legion. On account of such overuse of poetic license producing negative results, many writers and readers alike of modern times look down upon this practice. So poets have to be sparing in the use of such freedom and must not take their readers for granted.

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