

Sight and Insight: Describing the Ordinary

by Robert S. Boone

The following class discussion did not actually take place, but it could have.

Teacher: When I say the word "poet," what pops into your mind?

Blanche: An unhealthy person slouching in a filthy room scribbling down thoughts about truth and beauty.

Roscoe: Someone who ends up committing suicide.

Steve: Someone who doesn't know enough to put boots on during a snowstorm; a person you would not call to fix a broken carburetor.

Bliss: A person who ignores reality.

You probably recognize some of these opinions; perhaps you share them. In our society, few groups are more stereotyped than are poets. And even when people discover that poets have been

outstanding athletes, successful business people, and gifted craftsmen, the notion persists that a poet—as the fictitious Bliss tells us—"ignores reality."

Philosophers tell us that few words are harder to define than "real," but if those who characterize poets as "unreal" mean that they ignore the physical world, they could not be more wrong. Instead of walking around with their heads in clouds, most poets are acute observers, their eyes and other senses fixed firmly upon the ground or anyplace else where they can isolate an ordinary object.

Not only are most good poets far from "unrealistic," they are drenched in reality. They take the common objects of the world and make them even more real for the reader who takes the time to read carefully. An editor for a dictionary tells us what all shoes have in common, while a poet is apt to tell us what only *he* has noticed about a shoe.

Sometimes this poetic view of the ordinary is a humorous one. Is the ostrich funny? It is to Ogden Nash.

**The ostrich roams the great Sahara.
Its mouth is wide, its neck is narrow.
It has such long and lofty legs.
I'm glad it sits to lay its eggs.**

How does Nash see the rhinoceros? The same way.

**The rhino is a homely beast,
For human eyes he's not a feast,
But you and I will never know
Why nature chose to make him so.
Farewell, farewell to you old rhinoceros,
I'll stare at something less prepoceros.**

Clearly much of the delight from these two poems is derived from clever wordplay, but much—if not more—comes from being drawn into Nash's comic vision.

Must the poet's view of objects always be comic? Of course not. When Sarah Teasdale considers water lilies, she sees them as terrifying in their singular loveliness. Notice how she addresses us directly.

Water-Lilies

**If you have forgotten water-lilies
floating
On a dark lake among mountains in the
afternoon shade,
If you have forgotten their wet, sleepy
fragrance,
Then you can return and not be afraid.
But if you remember, then turn away
forever
To the plains and the prairies where
pools are far apart,
There you will not come at dusk on
closing water-lilies,
And the shadow of mountains will not
fall on your heart.**

Poems like those composed by Nash and Teasdale ask us to look hard at the objects themselves. Other times a poem will force us to consider an object's resemblance to something else. You probably are familiar with Carl Sandburg's "Fog."

Fog

**The fog comes
on little cat feet.
It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.**

Occasionally a poet will use an ordinary object as a starting point for self-analysis. When she looks at a pebble, for example, Elinor Wylie thinks first of David and Goliath and then of her own inability to muster up total hatred for any individual. Like most of us, she can find some good in almost anyone. Here are the first few lines. ("To shy" means "to throw or fling.")

The Pebble

**If any have a stone to shy,
Let him be David and not I;
The lovely shepherd, brave and vain,
Who has a maggot in the brain,
Which, since the brain is bold and
pliant,
Takes the proportions of a giant.
Alas, my legendary fate!
Who sometimes rage, but never hate.
Long, long before the pebble flieth
I see a virtue in Goliath;**

Frequently a poet sees an ordinary object not just for its physical presence, but also for its symbolic implications. In "Brass Spittoons" Langston Hughes begins with an object which to him epitomizes the servile plight of black people.

Brass Spittoons

**Clean the spittoons, boy.
Detroit,
Chicago,
Atlantic City,
Palm Beach.
Clean the spittoons.
The steam in hotel kitchens,
And the smoke in hotel lobbies,
And the slime in hotel spittoons:
Part of my life.
Hey, boy!
A nickel,
A dime,
A dollar,
Two dollars a day.
Hey, boy!
A nickel,
A dime,
A dollar,
Two dollars
Buys shoes for the baby.
House rent to pay.
Church on Sunday.
My God!
Babies and church
and women and Sunday
all mixed up with dimes and
dollars and clean spittoons**

and house rent to pay.

Hey, boy!

**A bright bowl of brass is beautiful to
the Lord.**

**Bright polished brass like the cymbals
Of King David's dancers,
Like the wine cups of Solomon.**

Hey, boy!

**A clean spittoon on the altar of the
Lord.**

**A clean bright spittoon all newly
polished,—At least I can offer that.**

Com'mere, boy!

Hughes could have selected countless objects with comparable symbolic value, but few would have the power of a brass spittoon.

For Langston Hughes the symbolism of the spittoon related specifically to blacks. In other poems symbolism can be more general. In "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams, the poet describes overlooked or easily ignored objects.

The Red Wheelbarrow

**So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.**

Another poem in which something quite ordinary is made to stand for something important is "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost. Frost talks about roads, but at the same time

wants the reader to think about those moments in our lives when we make consequential decisions.

The Road Not Taken

**Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted
wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the
same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to
way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.**

These poems represent an infinitesimal few of the thousands and thousands of poems in which our notion of an ordinary object is—at least temporarily—altered. Poems have been written about toothpicks, razor blades, pigs, ants, automobiles, dandelions, dogs, and flies. Poems have been written, in fact, about practically any object you can imagine. !

Art by Laura Turney



Extra . . . Extra . . . Ordinary

- Other forms of writing, besides poetry, can be about everyday objects. Write a short story for children which revolves upon a banana, a button, and a flat tire. Or, write a personal essay about a time when a small object dominated your life.

- Using the subject index of *Granger's Index to Poetry*, make a list of poems written about the same, simple subject. Then, using the *Poetry Index*, track down some of these poems, read them, and write a comparative analysis.

- The article suggests one way of looking at poetry. Read the following definitions. Then write an expanded definition of each.

Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat.

—Frost

Prose = words in their best order

Poetry = the best words in the best order

—Coleridge

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.

—Shelley

Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life.

—Arnold

Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during a moment.

—Sandburg

- "The proper and immediate object of science," according to Coleridge, "is the acquirement, or communication, of truth; the proper and immediate object of poetry is the communication of pleasure." How does this statement relate to the "writer's craft"?

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