

Obama's versatile verses

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Obama, America's advertised exotic hero, stands proud and definite as our cultural icon of diversity. Obama, like all of history's leaders, is and has been processed through society's paradoxical machine, coming out religious saint, failed politician, communist, and terrorist. Needling through the world's diverging opinions of the indefinable man, one rarely thinks of nineteen year old, puffy-haired Obama, the disoriented freshman at Occidental College with literary ambitions. Presidential ardor loomed in nebulous of the young hybrid's contemplative mind. Enthusiasm for T. S Eliot, two publications in his college's literary magazine *Feast*, and a retrieved letter to old girlfriend Alex McNear are all evidence of Obama's early philosophical disposition, which serves as the underpinnings of a later, multifaceted man.

Alex McNear, now the co-founder of GreenLogic (a renewable energy company), was Obama's long-distance girlfriend, apparently attracted by his musings on modernist poets and his literary sophistication. Obama's letter regarding T. S Eliot, written in the 1980s at Columbia University, reveals a labyrinth of ideas; none that polarize his current political ideologies, but instead support. "There's a certain kind of conservatism which I respect more than bourgeois liberalism- Eliot is of this type," Obama proclaims, hinting at his early, relatively neutral political mindset. Obama's sharp rhetoric mirrors Eliot's sparse language and subtle insights. In the last paragraph of Obama's 2012 State of the Union Address, his line, "our destiny is stitched together like those fifty stars and those thirteen stripes" illustrates fate as something definite.

Eliot also defines time as something compact, and his poem "East Coker from Four Quarters" opens with a paradox, "In my beginning is my end."

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Eliot's personal political beliefs reek with anti-Semitism and with the virtues of an ethnically pure society. He writes, "The rats are underneath the piles. / The Jew is underneath the lot. / Money in furs," in his poem "Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar." Although a crude divergence from Eliot's poetical genius, I couldn't help but question Obama's idolization of a cringing racist.

How does Obama, the emblem of American diversity, a heterogeneous, Hawaiian native, so vibrantly sympathize with Eliot? Maybe, with today's wireless mindset and instant gratifications, we fail to notice the opposing, yet perhaps complementing sides of man. Not that Eliot's racism highlights his brilliant poetry, but instead delivers some dark depth into human vulnerability. We are often too rash in identifying men by punch lines and 500-word biographies. Therefore, criticizing Obama's empathy for Eliot would be wrong, for a man is made from many spheres of light, some brighter than others. Obama's interest in poetry alone proves he is a man of breadth and understanding, but can poetry also serve as political bait, reeling in and uniting Americans under a universal language of empathy? Aside from Obama's thundering voice and public grace, his words are intriguing and handsomely deceptive.

Hazardous is the linguistically talented potentate. "So let us mark this day with remembrance of who we are and how far we have traveled. In the year of America's birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by dying campfires on the shores of an icy river. The capital was abandoned. The enemy was advancing. The snow was stained with blood," Obama declared in his 2009 Inaugural address.

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As I researched Obama's policies and accomplishments, I instead found multitudes of beautiful promises. I then thought, maybe a president's job, similar to a poet's, is not necessarily to change the world. Instead, maybe it is to raise a country's moral and make it have faith in the paradox of the Earth, make it have faith in the ability to change. Aside from President Carter's emotionally void and critically rejected book of poems, *Always a Reckoning, and Other Poems*, poetic tendencies are rare among recent presidents. Of course our most celebrated presidents, Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, relished in linguistic enthusiasm and fervor, but rare is the poetically inclined American politician. The rugged, self-made American ideal belies the humble nature of poetry.

Poetry dives into the world's transience, rhythmically chanting cryptic lyrics at an often-disinterested society. Presidents, like all men who cradle power, often harbor unprecedented egos, and, like Icarus, fly upwards with a fatal ambition. A self-effacing president is rare, but the glory of complex language is not only the humanizing, modesty-inducing epitaphs that so often line posters and street corners, but its unifying qualities. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that 18-year-old Washington also wrote poetry. The beginning of a poem, "A Journal of my Journey Over the Mountains", lies ink-spotted in his surviving diary.

"From your bright sparkling Eyes, I was undone;/ Rays, you have, more transparent than the sun." Washington's refusal to run for a third time as president is perhaps a result of a humble spirit, kindled by the mighty flame of language. Obama's poem "Pop", published in 1981, manifests a self-conscious strain that is often concealed in the fearless politician. Written <https://assignbuster.com/obamas-versatile-verses/>

about his white grandfather, Stanley Dunham, young Obama appears unsure about his mosaic-identity. "What to do with me, a green young man," he asks himself, "Who fails to consider the/ Flim and flam of the world." As Obama describes his Grandfather as "unhappy" and clad in a "pale, Beige T-shirt", he sharply contrasts his own uneasiness with his "Pop's" steady drinking.

His shorter poem "Underground" illustrates ideas as figs and apes as oppressors. "Filled with apes/ That eat figs/ Stepping on the figs." Overall, Obama's poetry is devoid of genius but cuts through the public figure's opaque persona. 31 years after writing "Pop", President Obama's campaign embraced solidifying slogans, "Yes We Can" and "Vote For Change." As fluffy literary dreams dwindled away alongside his once-billowy hair, his personal artistic ardor paled and was overtaken by a political agenda.

Old, glittering dreams were expressed through one hundred million dollars in new funding for the arts, but through little else does he show the drive to extol artistic virtues on a new generation. Although his campaign promised programs like "Create an Artist Corps", a group of young artists trained to work in low-income communities, and supported the "Artist-Museum Partnership Act", giving artists the right to a fair market value; no policies have been passed as evidence of his commitment. A divided congress, clamoring over a withering economy, may possibly be responsible for the almost stagnate condition of the arts. As T. S. Eliot said, "Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/ And the act/ Falls the shadow." Perhaps if the 535 educated, well-dressed members of congress wrote

poetry instead of quibbling away, the conundrum of the world would drone out into dauntless epigrams.

Only then will our absurdities and quandaries be visible. And oh, how crass they will look in the simplicity of honest verse!