

The poetry of kahlil gibran flashcard

Profession, Poet



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Kahlil Gibran is said to be one of the world’s bestselling poets, and his life has inspired a play touring the UK and the Middle East. But many critics have been lukewarm about his merits. Why, then, has poetry struck such a chord with generations of readers? ” (Shoku and Hegarty) Explore this comment, focusing on the literary power of Gibran’s work, use of language, poetic devices etc. Kahlil Gibran is said to be one of the world’s bestselling poets, and his life has inspired a play touring the UK and the Middle East. But many critics have been lukewarm about his merits. Why, then, has poetry struck such a chord with generations of readers? ” (Shoku and Hegarty) Explore this comment, focusing on the literary power of Gibran’s work, use of language, poetic devices etc. Kahlil Gibran’s work has divided literary opinion worldwide. Hugely popular and said to have over 10 million copies sold globally, Gibran’s popularity is unquestionable.

However there are a large number of, particularly English, critics who are openly dismissive and negative about his work as a whole. “Even though his major works were in English after 1918, and though he is one of bestselling poets in American history, he was disdained by English professors. ” (Shoku and Hegarty) In this paper I aim to research the reasons for Gibran’s popularity and heavy criticism, especially in relation to the refusal of many Western critics to consider his work as a valued part of the Western literary canon.

I aim to focus specifically on his poetry, such as that found in the collection Sand and Foam, and extracts from other areas of his collected works.

Bushrui and Jenkins summarise the heavily weighted amount of academic

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and authorised literary criticism targeted towards Gibran's work: "One of the major difficulties in any scholarly attempt to study the life and works of Kahlil Gibran is the irreconcilable attitudes of those who have deified him and those who have dismissed him as a mere populist poet on the other.

Added to all this is the fact that critical opinions of his works swing violently from the eulogistic to the condemnatory. Gibran, however, defied every critical apparatus. His work has remained an inspiration to millions throughout the world, young and old alike, and the recent resurgence of interest in his life and works testifies to the permanence of his thought and the continuity of its influence throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. (287) The core philosophy and prophetic nature of Gibran's literature may be one reason for criticism. The tradition of utilising philosophical literature, especially pertaining to quotes from Asian or Indian origin, is one which is widely circulated and utilised in Western culture. These mantras and quotations can be seen in everyday diaries, and are widely quoted in public events. Furthermore it could be that the abstract nature of the spiritual messages which are not fully compatible with the Western psyche.

Robert Hillyer wrote in his 1949 article 'The Thoughts of a Mystic' that Gibran, born Lebanese, uses this sense of the orient to allow him to legitimately deal with somewhat abstract and common topics which Western writers cannot: "Gibran's writings have gained him a wide following among those sensitive, emotional readers who find their chief pleasure in moods, mysterious and indefinite, which bear them through a cosmic landscape

beyond the frets of everyday. No Western writer dealing with such large abstractions would sound natural.

But from an oriental source they seem as appropriate as they are exotic. It is an easy magic, too vague to be lasting, but not harmful. ” This popularity of these philosophical quotes is mirrored in Gibran’s popularity worldwide.

“What is irrefutable is that The Prophet is among the most widely read books of the century and that Gibran’s worldwide reputation is in the ascendancy as never before. Nevertheless The Prophet does indeed hold an ambiguous position in English and American literature, a position that has so far debarred it from serious critical attention in the West.

It is neither pure literature nor pure philosophy, and as an Arab work written in English it belongs exclusively to no particular tradition. ” (Bushrui 287) For Bushrui and Jenkins then Gibran’s work occupies the space between literature and philosophy. Furthermore it is difficult to classify the work as either Arab or English, and therefore Eastern and Western. The ambiguous reinterpretation of religion for Gibran included the use of Christian imagery in stories such as Jesus the Son of Man. “Religion in the book (The Prophet) is not confined to the limits of Christianity, Islam, or any other religion.

(Imangulieva 79) “As for his adopted language, he certainly enriched the English language with a stream of thought and style that is on reminiscent of certain books in the Bible. ” (El-Hage) This comment is proven by the sound of the shorter poems in Sand and Foam, which have a proverbial and biblical resonance. This is true also in the Prophet, where Gospel like stories of Jesus are told, for example Jesus the Son of Man. Irwin (26) links this style of

writing to Gibran's prophetic messages: "As latter-day Prophet, Gibran favoured a mock-Biblical delivery, larded with archaisms, and inversions of word-order for rhetorical effect. For Omri it is this biblical style of writing that creates universality and accessibility which adds to the success of the literature. " Part of the appeal is perhaps that this book could have been written by anybody and that is what we do with scripture. It just is. " (BBC News) Gibran also refashions some of the words of the gospels, as for instance in St. Matthew's remembrance of the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the serene in spirit. Blessed are they who are not held by possessions, for they shall be free. Blessed are they who remember their pain, and in their pain await their joy". Bushrui 264) This is clear evidence of Gibran deliberately using this style of language to add a resonance to his work. For O' Connor (Leb. net) however it was this unorthodox approach to religion which was the main influence for the antithetical statements in his work. Singer, in O' Connor (Leb. net), claims that: "He (Gibran) is inconsistent and makes, of course, no attempt whatsoever to deal systematically with his subject. " "Like all great authors, Gibran's writing characterises itself by a recognised style for which he is famous.

Gibran is known for the strange qualities which make the Gibranian style a synonym for originality and idiosyncrasy. (Hawi 82) The most noticeable style found in his writing is a series of constant parallelisms and antithetical statements (Hawi 77)". (O'Connor 2) This approach to religion may have had an unsettling effect on the Christian minded western and English critics. There is evidence that this rejection of Gibran was contributed to by to the

use of language, rhetoric and themes which do not fulfil or fit what is perceived to be the traditional criteria for poetry.

If this is the case then first certain questions must be asked – what is this criteria? – What is poetry? Writers such as James Joyce whose work reflects his fascination with language in that every word is carefully placed and language and tone transforms the nuance of the words, considers this issue in the context of his work. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the partly autobiographical Stephen Daedalus states: “Words, it was their colours? No, it was not their colours: it was the poise and balance of the period itself.

Did he then love the rhythmic rise and fall of words better than their associations of legend and colour? ” Wainwright believes that there are: “distinctly formal aspects of poetry: the different ‘voices’ of poetry, the poetic line both measured and ‘free’, rhyme and stanza. ” For many critics, it is these formal aspects which are the benchmark criteria for poetry. This focus on words as a medium as much as a message is an aspect of poetry that critics claim Gibran is lacking in his poetry. His philosophical musings are often articulated in simplified language which aims to mediate messages to the reader effectively.

However there are those who believe that poetry may be as much about the feelings generated and connections made with the reader in the themes explored as the linguistic devices used. For Henry David Thoreau great poetry can appear effortless: “Good poetry seems too simple and natural a thing that when we meet it we wonder that men are all poets. Poetry is

nothing but healthy speech. " Gibran himself said in *Sand and Foam*" (1926): " Half of what I say is meaningless, but I say it so that the other half may reach you. For Whitman, the poet "is not only a composer of verse but also a prophet, paving the ways into the future. " (Mendelsohn) Poetry therefore appears to be a concept so broad and varied that it may be difficult to define. Whilst Gibran's poetry may not appear to have the specific attention to detail attached to some definitions of poetry, poetry can provide insight and a search for the truth without the linguistic bells and tassels. Gibran states in *The Poet*: " Poetry is a deal of joy and pain and wonder, with a dash of the dictionary"; the imperative phrase here being the 'dash' of the dictionary in the recipe.

Other criticisms of Gibran's work include that of Walbridge, claims that "his English prose was pretentious his ideas were excessively mystical or just trite. " (3) Furthermore, with Gibran being primarily a painter, "it was painting that was to occupy the bulk of his time throughout his life", Walbridge claims that it is painting like imagery which is at the heart of this poetry. It would appear that Simonides would disagree with this criticism, claiming that painting and poetry are connected and harmonised: "Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting with the gift of speech. This focus on imagery, however, may be one of the reasons why Gibran's work fits the poetry classification. Examples of strong imagery is obvious and prominent within his work, including in *The Dying Man* and *The Vulture*, where the image of the Greek mythological figure Tityos being fed upon by a vulture is alluded to. The image of the poet calling upon the vulture freely sacrificing himself is one which is dramatic and unsettling: "Approach, my hungry

comrade; The board is made ready, And the fare, frugal and spare, Is given with love.

Come, and dig your beak in here, into the left side.. ” (III. 27 – 31) This poem is a strong example of where Gibran’s poetry is powerful and utilises many of the linguistic techniques defined by critics and poets alike. Traits of chiasmus can be found in *The Dying Man and the Vulture* in the lines “Stronger than all things Strong.. Feebler than all things feeble. ” (10 – 12). Repetition is utilised in the first line with the calling of the words wait, and the listing nature of the “A” in sentences 15- 19 is another example.

The poetic voice in Gibran’s work is one which is subtle, he probes and prompts the reader with ideas and allows them to make their own judgement and interpretation. O’Connor (3) sees this as a negative trait: “Throughout all of Gibran’s writings he only plays the moderator, the one able to see both sides of an issue, but never openly admitting his own. ” For Omri (BBC News) it is this sense of anonymousness which adds to the universal nature of the poetry:” I don’t know how many people who picked up *The Prophet*, read it or gifted it, would actually know about Gibran the man or even want to know. This is, I believe, a direct result of the way that Gibran writes, and his choice of language. Surely, then, poetry which appeals to the masses, however much it fails to fulfil literary convention, is effective poetry. Gibran’s contemporary Mikhail Naimy believed that Gibran’s *The Broken Wings* was an example of the universal language of literature. A Mitchell claims: “ Most people ignore poetry because most poetry ignores people”. It could be argued that Gibran a poet of the people then, unconcerned with high browed

literary criticism, and only concerned with the emotional and spiritual effect it generates with its readers. By making us stop for a moment, poetry gives us an opportunity to think about ourselves as human being on this planet and what we mean to each other. ” (R. Dove) If nothing else, Gibran’s poetry does make us stop and think. His poems, such as those in *Sand and Foam*, are probing and thought provoking, ambiguous and in a sense mystical. George Russel heaped praise on Gibran: “I do not think that East has spoken with so beautiful a voice since “ the *Gitanjali*” of Rabindranath Tagore as in the *Prophet of Kahlil Gibran*... I could quote from every page, and from every page I could find some beautiful and liberating thought”.

Bragdon too shared this sense of admiration, claiming “ His power came from some great reservoir of spiritual life else it could not have been so universal and so potent, but the majesty and beauty of the language with which he clothed it were all his own. ” Like McGahern, Gibran believes that his work is only fully completed with the reading and connection with the reader: “I repeated it with joy and delight because for the first time I recognised that other people are everything and that I with my separate self am nothing. (Letters to May) Poetry, it could be claimed, is essentially all what the reader makes of it. There are concrete examples of the masterful use of language and linguistic devices definitive to good literature in Gibran’s work. In general, the poetry of Gibran uses blank form, with irregular stanzas and poems varying greatly in length from the one line proverbs found in *Sand and Foam* to the extensive 48 lines and 9 stanzas of *Before the Throne of Beauty*. Usually there is no rhyme scheme, with inconsistent meter, and what is classed by Wainwright as ‘free rhythm’.

Whilst these criteria are not completely fulfilled, if only in the eyes of the English critics, there are many other poetic devices and rhetorical tropes which may be found in the work. There are clear aspects of this criterion of language displayed in Gibran's poetry. For example, the use of repetition in Song of Beauty, and in the poetry of a Tear and a Smile in overall: "I am the guide of love, I am the wine of the spirit, I am food to the heart. I am a rose; I open my heart.. " (l. 1 - 5)

This rhetorical trope, repeated in poems such as Defeat, where each of the six stanzas begin with the words "Defeat my Defeat", is very effective. Here the repetition provides a lament like feel to the poem, with the poet directly crying out to Defeat in a melancholic way. Chiasmus is used such as in the lines: "Only those beneath me can envy or hate me. I have never been envied nor hated; I am above no one. Only those above me can praise or belittle me. I have never been praised or belittled: I am now no one. " The word order and repetition provide a resonance and air of wisdom to the poem.

Strong contrasts between themes are utilised by the poet at times to great effect: "The method of contrast noted in "The palace and the Hut" appears most distinctly in the prose poem "A Smile and a Tear", in which it is less concerned with revealing social contrasts than in contrasting experiences and feelings,: happiness and calmness are juxtaposed with tragedy and hopelessness. " (Imanguilieva 67) The theme of death is dealt with in The Beauty of Death beginning with the scene of the poet lying with rose petals

around him, describing the process of embalment and rituals performed on the body after death.

The imagery of the individual “Parting” from this world from the mountaintop is evocative, as is the description of the burial from the dead’s perspective:

“Dig me a grave, Dig my grave deep, That the flood bear not my bones to the valley. ” (VIII. 14-16) Nature itself is in many ways personified, and in a pantheistic light worshipped by Gibran. “There is not one work which by Gibran that is not also a hymn to nature... nature does not serve in his works as a mere background but rather is invested with a persona of its own, as if to see, hear, and comprehend all things by itself. This sentimentality echoes the theme of nature found in the poetry Romanticism, with poets such as Wordsworth and Byron. In a Tear and a Smile nature gains a life of its own, with the sea singing, hillocks smiling, the ocean sighing and the poet rising from the lake’s heart and gliding upon the wings of air. (Song of the wave/ Song of the Rain) In Song of the Night the hushed tones and assonance creates a sensual backdrop to the theme of love. The alliteration of “Drouth of our desire” (Line 12), and terms such as “pour”, “soft”, and “embrace” generate a sexual aura, with the poet’s lust “quenched”.

This sensuality is mirrored in the use of language in Jonathan: “Dip your oar my love, And let me touch my strings. ” (II. Lines 13-14) The lines are repeated twice more in the final verse, linking, provocatively, the connection of Jesus in a spiritual manner to the woman’s lover in a sexual manner. W. H Auden’s definition of poetry states that the poem must meet two criteria: “Firstly it must be a well-made verbal object that does honour to the

language in which it is written. Secondly, it must say something significant about a reality common to us all, but perceived from a unique perspective. Whilst it is debatable as to whether or not Gibran neatly conforms to the first definition of Auden's in terms of the structured and refined use of language, it is unfair to claim that he does not use language, at times, in a masterful manner. Gibran did have a power over language, albeit perhaps without the intense focus on the measurements of metre, rhyme and structure. There are many examples of where rhetorical tropes and literary devices are used in his work, some of which have been highlighted in this essay.

Gibran's literature has a style which causes the reader to ponder the issues that Gibran explores in a way so subtle that the language becomes unimportant. It is however easier to argue that his work fits the second. Gibran's work is heavily meaningful, and often universal. Robert Frost reiterates this emphasis on the emotional impact of the poem as much as the aesthetics and sound. "There are three things after all that a poem must reach: the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart or the mind. It is most important of all to reach the heart of the reader. Gibran certainly has done the latter. Powerful and touching, Gibran's poetry has the power to strike a chord with audiences the world over. Works Cited Bushrui, S. and Jenkins, J. Kahlil Gibran Man and Poet. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998. Gibran, Kahlil. "The Madman". Kahlil Gibran The Collected Works. London: Everyman's Library, 2007. Gibran, Kahlil. "The Prophet". Kahlil Gibran The Collected Works. London: Everyman's Library, 2007. Gibran, Kahlil. "The Forerunner". Kahlil Gibran The Collected Works. London: Everyman's Library, 2007.

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