

Exploring three poems literature review

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



Part of the enjoyment of poetry is the acceptance that some poems or parts of poems cannot be pinned down to a single meaning. Explore this view of poetry, and the ways in which poets use of language and form invites different readings.

In this essay I will be exploring ‘Blackberry-Picking’ by Seamus Heaney, ‘Two Scavengers in a Truck’ by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ by Maya Angelou. In different ways they show that poems cannot be pinned down to a single meaning.

The structure of ‘Blackberry-Picking’ is essentially that of two, not-quite-equal halves. The first 16 lines describe the experience of blackberry picking with joy and enthusiasm. Heaney’s tone then changes completely in the final 8 lines. In the first 16 lines Heaney describes the taste of the first blackberry as sensual – referring to its “flesh” as “sweet”, likening it to “thickened wine” in a simile and “summer’s blood” is a metaphor which then promotes a “lust for picking”. The list of containers used – “milk-cans, pea-tins, jam-pots” – and of the places they searched for blackberries – “hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills” – suggests the enthusiasm of the collectors. Heaney makes these 16 lines very vivid by using a variety of different colors – “purple”, “red” (twice), “green” and even white (suggested by the grass that “bleached our boots”).

The tone changes in the final 8 lines. They soon rot and, in contrast to the vivid colors of the first 16 lines, Heaney discovers a “rat-grey fungus” covering the blackberries. “Rat” transforms this phrase into a metaphor and all our associations with rats are negative – they spread disease. Heaney’s

response is one of huge disappointment – “ I always felt like crying” and we realize (if we had not realized before) that Heaney is showing us his response as a child – “ It wasn’t fair”. The final line of the poem is the voice of the adult poet looking back with understanding – “ Each year I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not.”

This poem is written in iambic pentameters with occasional use of full-rhyme, but Heaney uses half-rhyme mostly – and this in itself suggests that something is wrong. This poem is not simply about picking fruit. The movement of the poem from hope to disappointment, from joy to sadness, from optimism to despair, suggests the way that we look forward to things in life, but they never quite live up to our expectations; or that all our pleasures are short-lived and will not last forever.

Heaney uses contrast in the two separate halves of his poem, but Ferlinghetti introduces contrasts in his very first stanza which introduces the “ two garbage men” and the “ elegant couple”. Throughout the poem Ferlinghetti expands on the differences between these two pairs. The garbagemen are both male; the couple are presumably lovers or married. The garbagemen are on a “ bright yellow garbage truck”, the couple in “ an elegant open Mercedes”. The garbagemen wear “ red plastic blazers”, but the man in the Mercedes wears “ a hip three-piece linen suit” and his companion “ a short skirt with colored stockings”. The two garbagemen have been working and are on their way home; the couple are on their way to work. The garbagemen are “ grungy” and the older one is a “ gargyle Quasimodo”, but the couple are “ elegant” and “ cool”. However, there is

one point of similarity: the younger of the two garbagemen looks like the man in the Mercedes with his “ sunglasses and long hair” and is “ about the same age”.

How are we to respond to this poem? Ferlinghetti seems to be pointing out the differences that exist in society between different classes. The garbagemen are poor, but the couple are rich. The garbagemen are manual workers; the couple are on their way to “ his architects office”. But the stoplight is democratic – it stops everyone. In the final stanza the garbagemen are “ gazing down” at the couple; the word “ down” suggest some sort of superiority, perhaps implying that manual labor has a dignity and integrity. I think Ferlinghetti likes the gabagemen – apart from the stoplight all the vivid color in the poem is associated with them; the couple are colorless. Ferlinghetti uses a simile to describe the garbagemen’s experience. They watch the couple “ as if they were watching some odorless TV ad” – this simile suggests that the couple are seen unreal, a fantasy to which the garbagemen cannot aspire. Ferlinghetti stresses that there is a “ great distance” between them. The final six lines are especially interesting. The red light holds “ all four close together/as if anything at all were possible” – but the key words there are “ as if” – it is not possible for the distance to be closed. The poor cannot become rich; it is merely a fantasy. Ferlinghetti’s phrase “ small gulf” is interesting. It is an oxymoron: gulfs are huge, so they cannot be small. The gulf seems small because they are physically close, but there is an enormous social gulf between them that can never be crossed.

The final two lines reveal that this poem is a political poem because Ferlinghetti refers to the “ high seas/of this democracy”. The “ high seas” is an interesting use of metaphor: “ high seas” literally means the sea during a storm with enormously high waves, so by writing “ the high seas of democracy” the poet suggesting that something has gone wrong with democracy. Is the American dream still a workable reality or can the garbagemen never achieve the material success of the couple in the Mercedes? Is society right to allow such huge disparities in pay? Society needs architects and needs garbagemen – but should we reward them so differently? Ferlinghetti carefully keeps the differences between the four people in the reader’s mind. When he does use simile, metaphor or oxymoron these techniques are only in the final stanza and then to great effect. Generally his language is very simple – it is as democratic as the stoplight.

Maya Angelou’s ‘ I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’ also uses contrast, but in her poem the contrasting birds appear in alternate stanzas. Angelou describes the birds, but whereas Heaney and Ferlinghetti set their poems in a recognizable real place, the birds that Angelou describes are not real – they are symbolic. Crucial to our understanding of this poem are the facts of Angelou’s African American background and her sexual orientation as a lesbian.

Throughout the poem the free bird is associated with life-enhancing imagery, but the caged bird is restricted and imprisoned. The first stanza describes the free bird who “ leaps”, “ floats downstream”, “ dips his wings” and “

dares to claim the sky”. The first word of the second stanza – “ But” – warns the reader of the contrast to come: the caged bird is in a “ narrow cage” which it can “ seldom see through” – and it is unable to move because “ his wings are clipped” and his feet are tied”. At the end of the stanza he opens his throat to sing, but the poet keeps us in suspense about what the song is about.

The third stanza tells us that the caged bird is “ fearful”, but sings of “ things unknown”, but “ longed for still” – that is “ freedom”. This final word of the third stanza stands out, not just because it is the final word, but also because lines 16, 18 and 20 all rhyme with each other and line 22 breaks the rhyming pattern established by the poet. This gives a special prominence to the word and suggests it – “ freedom” - has still not been achieved.

The fourth stanza tells us more about the free bird – it is described with positive imagery drawn from nature. In the next stanza the caged bird is associated with death – “ the grave of dreams” – and unpleasant experiences – “ a nightmare scream”. The final stanza repeats exactly the third stanza – by ending with the caged bird singing of freedom, Angelou is claiming that true freedom and equality still does not exist for African Americans and lesbians.

In their different ways, all three poems show how that poetry cannot be pinned down to a single meaning.

Ferlinghetti’s poem is, generally, is descriptive, but his final stanza raises concerns about our democracy and the gulf between rich and poor which cannot be reduced to a single question. Hi use of simile, metaphor and

oxymoron in the final stanza raise a multitude of questions and suggests merely that something is deeply wrong with American society. Angelou's poem seems the most straightforward, given her background. However, her use of symbolism could make her poem relevant to any situation in any country where minority groups are discriminated against: her use of symbolism gives it a wider appeal so it does not have to refer to the plight of African American lesbians. 'Blackberry-Picking' is even more universal and has multiple meanings: what is important in Heaney's poem is the emotional movement from hope and optimism to sadness and disappointment. The blackberries are not symbolic, but the emotional movement of the poem and its two part structure is a metaphor for the human condition.