

# How do poets convey the theme of power in their poems

Literature



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I am going to look at four poems; Hitcher (Simon Armitage); My Last Duchess (Robert Browning); Education For Leisure (Carol Ann Duffy) and The Laboratory as all these poems express the theme of power using language and interesting literary techniques to express the emotions they are trying to put across. The poem Hitcher is about power relationships. The speaker of this poem sees himself as a victim and powerless as his boss has power over him and he doesn't have the chance to release his personal need for power. In the poem My Last Duchess the Duke feels an opposing sense of powerlessness due to his ex-duchesses alleged flirtation. The Duke's self importance leads him to feel powerless and makes him feel that his authority is being undermined. Both speakers of the poems react to their feelings of powerlessness by using violence. Both Armitage and Browning use the structure of their poems to express the emotions of power and powerlessness they are trying to convey. In the poem Hitcher the first two stanzas of the poem are very rigid looking.

This shows that the speaker is feeling tightly controlled and powerless. Up until this point the speaker had been living his stress - filled and inhibited life. After hurting the hitchhiker the structure of the poem suddenly becomes loose and much less controlled. Armitage also uses enjambment which is when the beginning of a sentence begins in one stanza and ends in the next. The first use of enjambment is after the third stanza. This creates and emphasises the climax whilst also demonstrating the break in logic and normality.

However the second use of enjambment after the next stanza shows the sudden anticlimax in action which shows us that after that sudden release of pent up aggression and power that the speaker almost becomes relaxed.

The structure of the poem *My Last Duchess* is very different from the poem *Hitcher*. The structure of this poem has no breaks and flows nicely throughout. This shows us that the Duke doesn't have any undisciplined outbursts of violence but rather approaches the matter rather calmly as he believed a man of high status should. This contrasts *Hitcher* as the man releases his anger in probably the only way how.

Whilst the Duke in *My Last Duchess* is merely trying to regain the sense of power that he lost, the speaker in *Hitcher* never had any power to begin with. Another contrast between the two poems is the way that the speaker expresses himself. The speaker in *Hitcher* does not express himself eloquently and only the structure presents this as a poem which just emphasises the lack of power or rank the speaker has to begin with. In *My Last Duchess* the Duke speaks in rhyming couplets, showing his authority and status. The effect of this leads us to believe that the Duke could never have felt belittled by someone especially a woman.

However the crude way the speaker in *Hitcher* expresses himself leads us to believe that is nothing more than the violent reaction of a low ranking tug.

The poets also manage to express the theme of power through various literary techniques and the language used. In both poems you can feel the lack of communication the poet is trying to convey. In the poem *Hitcher* the boss communicates with his employee, the speaker, through the answer

phone which shows the lack of communication - it is indirect. Similarly, in the poem *My Last Duchess*, the Duke never actually talks to his Duchess about his problem with her "flirting" with other men. "This grew; I gave commands; then all smiles stopped together".

"This grew" referring to the friendly nature that led to the Duke giving "commands" and then "all smiles stopped". This shows that the Duke let the matter that was bothering him build and build until he could bear it no longer and rather than talk to his Duchess, his megalomaniac tendencies took over and he ordered her to be killed. This is Robert Browning's way of presenting the idea that miscommunication can lead to the misuse of power. The poet of *Hitcher* presents the idea of the not conforming to society and the fight against power.

This is done through carefully constructed phrases littered throughout both this poem and the other poems. For example, in the poem *Hitcher*, the speaker picks up a hitchhiker who was "following the sun from west to east". This shows that the Hitcher, whilst being of lower status than the speaker, is an easy-going, free person that has rejected the society that the speaker is conforming to. This contradiction demonstrates the idea in the quote, as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west and the Hitcher is going in the opposite direction, which shows how he is not in compliance with society or traditional ideas and behaviour.

The Hitcher seems to be a bit of an outsider and doesn't appear to have any companions. In contrast to this, in the poem *My Last Duchess*, Robert Browning presents the idea of being over-friendly. When the Duchess

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appears to be friendly and smiles at people and thanks then the Duke takes this to her having " her looks went everywhere". I think the poet is trying to show that insecurity is allied with power and also the lack of it. In both poems the speaker is insecure about his status and this leads him to react rashly against his chosen victim.

The poem Education for Leisure by Carol Ann Duffy presents similar themes and ideas about power to Hitcher and My Last Duchess. It is similar to Hitcher as the speaker is also someone of little importance although has a large amount of self-importance. This increases his sense of insecurity due to his lack of power over others. Also, similarly to Hitcher and My Last Duchess, the speaker resorts to various forms of violence to release his feeling of the lack of power he has over others.

However, in contrast to these two poems, we get the feeling that whilst the speaker likes the feeling of power over others he is not willing to actually kill to make himself feel better. We can see this as " I grab a bread-knife". A bread knife would not be good murder weapon as the blade is blunt and has a serrated edge. This hints that the speaker may just enjoy the look of fear on this victim's face rather than actually mortally injuring them. This is hinted earlier in the poem when the poet has used phrases like " the cat avoided me" and " the budgie is panicking". The structure of this poem is very controlled.

This shows us that the speaker feels a sense of entrapment. The speaker wants " to play god". This is the ultimate control over others. However, the speaker seems to have misinterpreted the idea of G-d which is mainly to

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create where he seems to have taken G-d to mean someone who kills. However, anyone can kill but only G-d can create. Duffy also uses various verbs to create the sense of anticipation in the poem. The adjective "stirring" is used at the end of the first stanza suggesting that something is going to happen - it creates a sense of expectancy.

This differs from the other poems as they all have male speakers. Likewise to the previous poems the speaker feels like she is being ignored. In Hitcher and My Last Duchess the lack of communication leads to the feeling of uselessness and in My Last Duchess it wasn't just this that upset the count but also the fact that the Duchess seemed to treat to everyone the same which lead to the Duke feeling ignored. In the poems Education for Leisure and My Last Duchess is disillusioned to his own importance. In The Laboratory the speaker creates the deception between appearance and reality by disguising a poisonous pill as a " mere lozenge".

This is similar to the poem Education for Leisure as the speaker sees himself as a " superstar" and a " genius" which shows the difference between appearance and reality as we know that no one else sees him as a superstar. This links back to the initial question " how do the poets convey the theme of power" as it shows that the feeling of powerlessness can lead to disillusioned behaviour and violence. In conclusion, the poets use different techniques to convey the theme of power such as the use of adjectives, phrasing, literary techniques and structure used in their poems Hitcher, The Laboratory, My Last Duchess and Education for Leisure.