Life Stages Through Poetry

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
May 1986

Spring 1986
Poetry is one of the most beautiful and telling forms of expression, in my mind. Therefore, when faced with the task of completing an extended project, I chose to express myself creatively through a series of poems. The overall design of the series I decided on was one covering the many "life stages" people pass through in the maturation process. I accordingly wrote on six stages: infancy, childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle age, and retirement. For greater depth, I divided each stage into two segments, one taking a positive or idealistic view (designated as an "A" poem) and the other taking a negative or realistic view (designated as a "B" poem). The resulting twelve poems would constitute the completed project.

My specific reasons for choosing to write poetry, and to write it in this form, were many. I have always enjoyed writing poems, but with a busy college schedule, many of my intentions went unfulfilled. I had only written a sprinkling of verse over the last four years. But this required project afforded me the chance to pin myself down to writing. In addition, researching different aspects of poetry would allow me to learn more about established poets and would act as a culmination of all
my study of literature—especially poetry—undertaken at the university. Also, writing a poetry series on life stages would enable me to focus on various ages and the situations people live with—situations of both joy and pain, tranquility and disturbance. My final reason for undertaking the project in this way was to try to improve my poetry-writing skills and develop what artistic talents I did have.

My main means to this last end was to expand my repertoire—to incorporate variety into my poetry writing. Previously, most of my poems had been free verse and of medium length. In this series of poems, I experimented much more widely. I included different forms of poetry, such as ode, lyric, and sonnet. A variety of meter was also covered in this series. I wrote in both iambic and trochaic feet; penned trimeter, tetrameter, and pentameter lines; and formed numerous kinds of stanza patterns and rhyme schemes, from the ababbccdcdee sonnet form of Middle Age Poem E to the abab ballad stanza of Retirement Poem A. I also experimented with length (Infancy Poem B as compared to Retirement Poem A), perfect rhyme versus approximate rhyme, end-stopped line and run-on line, person (either first or third), and sex of the subject (male or female). In addition, I consciously tried to vary the content, including the degree of optimism and pessimism contained within the poems. For instance, some
positive/idealistic poems were written with realism, but with a positive bent, while others were made highly idealistic (as with Adolescence Poem A compared to Retirement Poem A).

I began my writing with excitement and some trepidation, and I struggled along the way. But what I learned as I wrote and the honing of my creative skills were worth facing the obstacles. I discovered, for one, that working along stringent guidelines was difficult—more difficult than I'd expected. But I also found that an artist must work around the restrictions without compromising purity of expression. In other words, I had to conquer the imposed external form, such as rhyme scheme, rather than letting it conquer me. Working around the different forms also gave rise to new ideas, took me in directions that I never intended at the outset. As long as I did not let those new directions deteriorate into inferior lines of poetry, I was successful. Sometimes I was successful; sometimes I was not. The following poems will suggest which times were which.
Two infant blue globes
Peered from thick, framing lashes,
And blinked softly with credulity.
They spied the toast-brown kitten
Sunning in a patch of buttery light,
Her ear tips glowing, eyes half-closed.

Uncertain feet, spongy and round,
Padded toward the vision,
Teetering and lurching,
Gurgling and cooing
Tumbled from delicate pink lips
Which bubbled in delight.

A faint sweet scent
Pose from babypowdered skin,
Floating pure and clean.
A newly fastened diaper
Crinkled and rustled
With each toddled step.

One plump arm thrust out
And bobbed on the silky fur,
Working furiously, enchanted.
The kitten held for a moment,
But broke and scuttled off
To a safer, anonymous ledge.
Ignorance was bred,
Neglect was born,
And with it, so this child;
Apathy was wed,
All Hope was torn,
Blame fate that never smiled?
Slipping from the fettering house,
She tumbled to the grass;
Looked and saw her mother's face
Behind the hazy glass.
Donned in skirt with matching blouse,
She paid her dress no mind;
Quickly muddied frill and lace,
Left discipline behind.

Bubbling laughter to the sky,
She snatched a chicory;
Crouched to close admire a worm,
Gave ear to humming bee.
Starting, turning, looking high,
She watched a bluebird soar;
Celebrated, with a squirm,
The joy of being four.
"Come romp with me and be my friend,
And endless hours in play we'll spend,"
The child pled to stranger's face,
Which yielded not to smile replace.

The second taunted friendless first;
With childish words he meanly cursed
This outcast of the tight-knit group,
Who sat alone on stone-cold stoop.
I feel the music rise and swell within
Me, bringing passions to surface
That I never knew I possessed.
New worlds are opening to
Me, new capabilities
Rising with the tide of notes,
Which are pregnant with possibility.
Then a low, slow beat brings
Me back to earth and reality,
And a pleasant languor:
I rise and turn the record over.
When she advanced upon the lonely hill,
Her dark eyes laden with a grievous care,
She pondered close the plan she would fulfill
Unless a vein of hope should seize her there.
The cliff she faced engendered only fears,
As weight of deep depression bent her frame;
She struggled not to hold the flood of tears,
But bore the quick, hot torrent as it came.
She wished to cry, 'Somebody! Pull me back!'
But no one stood upon the hill to hear;
The threads of her restraint grew quickly slack,
The yawning drop seemed now intensely near.
And, feeling no last hope—no breath of life,
She stepped, and ended adolescent strife.
Anticipation rises in my stomach,
   Quivering a little,
Until it reaches my head
   And I flush with giddiness,
Feeling as young and excited
   As the first time we met.
Expectancy drives me to peek at the clock—
   Then peek again—
And then steal to the window
   For a quick look there, too.
You’re always late,
   And I always feign anger,
But any true annoyance
   Is quickly swept away
when I open the door
   And you reach out your arms,
Enfold me, press me close,
   Then give my ear a funny little tug.
These are the moments
   I love to capture and treasure
To take out carefully and unfold
   Whenever I’m missing you.
Early Adulthood--Poem B

The air lifted and carried the music.
Those far away heard a dull, plaintive moan,
But those who were there knew an insistent, throbbing beat.
Hundreds of students forced their way into the courtyard,
Funneling through the narrow open walkway
To be quickly sucked into the action on the other side.
An entire block-long apartment complex
Had released its grip on sober, mundane life
And given way to full-blown frenzy and frolic.
Underway was the biggest and wildest
Of any celebration there is -- a college party weekend.
Inside the enclosure, door after door was flung open,
Inviting people in and throwing music out into the night.
Light beams spilled from the doorways, too;
They were broken with shadows again and again
As figures drifted over the thresholds.
Glasses, cups, bottles, cans were gripped by every hand:
Michelob ripped from its plastic six-pack chain,
Miller filled to overflowing from a keg in someone's bathtub.
For each person retreating to an apartment couch
Or leaning drunkenly against a closet door,
Ten were gathered outside, talking, yelling,
Dancing to the bass that glutted the courtyard
From dozens of stereos blasting into the clusters of bodies,
Or just standing back, with a bemused, excited look,
And watching, watching, watching....
Ode On Contentment

He bent and struck a solitary match,
Which sparked and caught with fierce force
And grew under his paternal watch
To engulf the whole from a single source,
Until the embers, hot and vivid,
Glowed beneath the metal grate
At his command as head provider
To cook and crack and sizzle as he bid
And furnish each family member's plate
With juicy steaks to melt with icy cider.

As smoke lifted lazily from the grill,
This father watched his menage in assorted
Sorts of frolic; on a swelling hill
The youngest children blissfully cavorted,
While older siblings boldly
Made boast to untested skills at croquet
And malleted their way to sheepish retractions.
Evening's first fireflies blushed goldly
As distant dogs gave full-throated bay
And crickets chirruped with synchronous actions.

With satisfaction, he thought all well,
Focusing once again on the spitting meat,
A feeling of security, that whatever befell,
His command of events would be complete;
Then calling a gathering all around,
He generously doled out a portion to each,
According to size and known appetite,
And toasted the day with a short, jocund speech,
Then sat back to savor the life he had found,
Feeling contentment rise to its height.
She dragged her cart to join the teeming aisles, 
and slumped a little as she stood in line;
The buzz of people talking, and their smiles 
Seemed far away, and out of place and time.

Her face, unpowdered, showing every line, 
Was heavy etched with outline of a frown; 
Her skin was pallid, colorless, no sign 
Of animation entered eyes of brown.

At last, her turn to purchase came around—
The price revealed was seven fifty-three; 
She searched her purse, then quick, without a sound, 
Put back the last two packs of hosiery.

Her face was lively for the first in weeks: 
It was embarrassment that rouged her cheeks.
I climbed the steps to Grandpa's house, 
And knocked upon the door; 
A pair of twinkling eyes appeared, 
Beside them shone two more.

The corners of the eyes curled up, 
And then the door swung wide; 
And four warm arms were beckoning me 
To hurry on inside.

After hugging Grandpa tight, 
And kissing Grandma's cheek, 
I sank into a kitchen chair, 
Which gave a cozy squeak.

Grandpa settled too, and asked 
How things had been with me; 
Grandma brought me lemonade, 
And offered Grandpa tea.

An antique fan droned on and on, 
Rattling in its frame; 
The three of us sat happily back, 
And we did much the same.

The talk turned soon to out-of-doors, 
And Grandpa's gardening, 
The leafy green, deep-rooted plants 
That he'd been pampering.

I asked about the rose-filled patch 
That he was famous for; 
My Grandpa said, "Come look at them," 
And headed for the door.
I followed, noting his proud look,
Though Grandma stayed behind;
The noon sun was too warm for her,
But Grandpa didn't mind.

He showed me row on brilliant row
Of closely tended rose,
Explaining dryness, bugs, all that
Were his sweet flowers' foes.

I stood, admiring Grandpa's face,
And his dark brown tanned skin,
The eyes that yet were keen and blue,
His often happy grin.

I heard a distant whistle blow,
From tracks around the bend;
A dog's bark floated on the breeze,
He hailed a neighbor friend.

Then Grandma called us back inside
In lilting, cheerful voice,
And Grandpa's teasing look revealed
We didn't have a choice.

I heard the clock chime one bold time
As we entered through the door;
I knew I had to leave them then,
I couldn't linger more.

Hugs all around, and then I left
The swinging door behind,
And two stretched arms that waved me on,
Two faces soft and kind.
But, knowing I'd be back again
Next Sunday, yet to see,
My Grandma and my Grandpa
For the best of company.
Age-Old Darkness

She stood with one gnarled hand on the Venetian,
The other curled around the smooth end of a cane.
The slats of the shade were sharply angled:
Little light entered except that which escaped into the room
From the strip she held slightly higher.
The unaccustomed illumination played along the floor,
Dancing with the slight tremble of the hand allowing it entrance.
The light fell upon a carpet, worn with age and use,
And discovered stain and dust mingling in the threads.
It touched briefly on an unworn pair of slippers
Positioned at the edge of an unwarmed hearth,
And then the beam quickly danced away once more.
Her eyes peered into the brightness beyond,
Oblivious to the actions of the one ray of light
Which had pierced the inner darkness.