

Textual Hybrids

Q: *When is a play not a play?*

A: *When it's a poem!*

As jokes go that is pretty dismal but as a description of what can happen in literature it is actually quite accurate. The trouble is, literary critics like to classify texts. So if they come across something that is highly concentrated, written in a definite rhythm and sometimes in rhyme then they will call it a poem. Similarly, a piece of continuous writing is normally labelled prose and a text which almost solely consists of dialogue would be called a play.

In reality texts are not always as obedient as this and can contain features that make it difficult to classify them neatly. For example, the Victorian poet A. C. Swinburne called Christopher Marlowe's sixteenth century play *Dr Faustus*, 'a tragic poem', continuing, 'it has hardly the structure of a play - for the qualities of terror and splendour, for intensity of purpose and sublimity of note.' Clearly he saw something in Marlowe's text that resonated more with his own craft of poetry than that of the drama it claimed to be.

All the major examination boards now require candidates to compare texts from different genres at A2 and it is both interesting and relevant to see how these genre features cross over.

Let's go back to our *Dr Faustus* example and consider why Swinburne might have considered its qualities to be more poetic than dramatic. Swinburne would have known that Marlowe had also written poetry such as *Hero and Leander*, a long epic poem written in rhyming couplets, the popular lyric *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love* and that he had translated poems by the Roman poets Ovid and Lucan. Obviously Marlowe was comfortable with poetic conventions. There are parts of *Dr Faustus* that clearly follow these conventions. An obvious example is from the beginning of the play when the Chorus tells us what the play will *not* be about:

*Not marching now in fields of Trasimene,
Where Mars did mate the Carthaginians;
Nor sporting in the dalliance of love,
In courts of kings where state is overturned'd;
Nor in the pomp of proud audacious deeds,
Intends our Muse to vaunt his heavenly verse:*

(*Dr Faustus*: Opening Chorus lines 1-6)

The lines are written in regular iambic pentameter, just like Marlowe's poem *Hero and Leander* and the chorus even refers to the text as 'verse' (line 6). Later on in the play, when Dr Faustus sees the beautiful Helen of Troy, he declares:

*Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?*

(*Dr Faustus*: Act V scene 1 lines 90-1)

The imagery is powerful and poetic, intensified by the alliteration of 'topless towers'. Although it is a play, there are clearly features that make it seem like poetry.

The OCR A2 specification (unit F663 Drama and Poetry pre 1800) requires candidates to compare a play

with a selection of poems by a particular writer. *Dr Faustus* is amongst the choice of plays and John Donne's *Selected Poems* amongst the poetry. Although the classification is a perfectly valid one it is interesting to note how much these texts cross genres. *Dr Faustus*, as we have seen, is quite poetic and John Donne's poetry is also dramatic. Like drama, it often starts in the middle of a conversation, such as the poem *The Canonization* which begins, 'For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love'. The reader is almost assaulted by the strength of the poet's feeling, much like an audience being shocked by action on stage. Plays usually transport us vividly to a place - we know where we are, either from the set design or by the language a playwright uses to describe a scene to us. This is also true in Donne's poetry. For example in *The Sun Rising* where he admonishes the sun for disturbing him in bed:

*Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains, call on us?*

Or *A Valediction: of weeping* when he is standing in front of his wife, crying:

*Let me pour forth
My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here...*

There is also a strong sense of action in Donne, such as in his poem *The Flea*, where he points out an insect to his girlfriend in order to try to persuade her to sleep with him (*Mark but this flea, and mark in this/How little that which thou deniest me is*) then tells her off when she kills it (*Cruel and sudden, hast thou since/Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?*) Clearly there is some drama going on here!

Donne is also 'dramatic' in the conversations he has in his poems (although the listener barely gets a word in edgeways!) He refers to this, somewhat paradoxically, as, *this dialogue of one* (*The Exstasie* line 74). Dialogue is something we normally associate with plays, yet in Donne we often hear speakers, such as in the examples above. Similarly, just as in drama, Donne presents us in his poetry with a range of 'characters': the exultant lover (*The Sun Rising*); the rejected suitor (*Twickenham Garden*); the grieving admirer (*A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day*) and, in later life, the penitent Christian (*Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward.*) He has his own *dramatis personae* just like we find at the beginning of a play.

So we have seen that drama can be poetic and poetry dramatic but can other genres be crossed? Indeed they can. Let's take a text like T.S Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi*. This is laid out like a poem, and indeed that is its classification, but many of the lines read like prose. In fact if we were to change the layout it could be mistaken for an extract from a novel or even a letter:

But there was no information, and so we continued and arrived at evening, not a moment too soon finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory. (lines 29-31)

The matter of fact style, frequent enjambment and conversational tone give parts of the poem a prose-like feel. Eliot does this on purpose in order to give something out of the ordinary (the journey of the wise men to visit Jesus) an everyday feel in order to make the event more believable. In other words he consciously makes the poetic prosaic.

Plays too can sometimes sound a bit like prose. In 'Under Milk Wood' by Dylan Thomas one character, the 'voice of a guidebook,' speaks in deliberately dull language:

Less than five hundred souls inhabit the three quaint streets and the few narrow by-lanes and scattered farmsteads that constitute this small, decaying watering place which may, indeed, be called a 'backwater of life' without disrespect to its natives who possess, to this day, a salty individuality of their own.

The style is prosaic in order to provide a distinct contrast to the highly poetic (another cross genre)

feature) language elsewhere.

Finally, prose can also be poetic. Consider the beginning of Charles Dickens' novel, *Bleak House*:

Fog everywhere.

Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows;

fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city.

Fog on the Essex marshes,

fog on the Kentish heights.

When laid out like poem, rather than the prose that it is, the opening section seems to embody the succinctness, artful repetition and rhythm that we more readily associate with poetry.

So clearly all genres can display characteristics of others. This is not to baffle or confuse the reader but rather, I would suggest, because the very best writers refuse to be 'put into boxes' of neat classification, preferring instead to import all kinds of styles and language in order to make their writing as rich and satisfying as possible. And that's what makes them so memorable.