

# Why We Should Read Poetry

by Amy Lowell  
(1874-1925)

---

Why should one read Poetry? That seems to me a good deal like asking: Why should one eat? One eats because one has to, to support life, but every time one sits down to dinner one does not say, 'I must eat this meal so that I may not die.' On the contrary, we eat because we are hungry, and so eating appears to us as a pleasant and desirable thing to do.

The necessity for poetry is one of the most fundamental traits of the human race. But naturally we do not take that into account, any more than we take into account that dinner, and the next day again, dinner, is the condition of our remaining alive. Without poetry the soul and heart of man starves and dies. The only difference between them is that all men know, if they turn their minds to it, that without food they would die, and comparatively few people know that without poetry they would die.

When trying to explain anything, I usually find that the Bible, that great collection of magnificent and varied poetry, has said it before in the best possible way. Now the Bible says that 'man shall not live by bread alone.' Which, in modern words, means--cannot live on the purely material things. It is true, he cannot, and he never does. If he did, every bookshop would shut, every theatre would close its doors, every florist and picture dealer would go out of business, even the baseball grounds would close. For what is baseball but a superb epic of man's swiftness and sureness, and his putting forth the utmost of the sobriety and vigour that is in him in an ecstasy of vitality and movement? And the men who watch are carried away by this ecstasy, out of themselves and the routine of their daily lives, into a world romantic with physical force. But you object that they don't think of it in this way. Of course they don't; if they did they would be poets, and most men are not poets. But this is really what stirs them, for without it, throwing a little ball about a field, and trying to hit it with a stick, isn't really very interesting. A baseball game is a sort of moving picture of what Homer wrote in his Iliad. I do not believe there is a boy in America who would not like Butcher and Lang's translation of the Odyssey, if no one had ever told him it was a schoolbook.

That is what poetry really is. It is the height and quintessence of emotion, of every sort of emotion. But it is always somebody feeling something at white heat, and it is as vital as the description of a battle would be, told by a soldier who had been in it.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. I do not mean that every book, or every play, contains this true poetry. Many, most, alas! are poor imitations; some are merely sordid and vulgar. But books and plays exist because man is groping for a life beyond himself, for a beauty he needs, and is seeking to find. And the books and plays which live are those which satisfy this need.

Somebody once said to me that to make goodness dull was a great crime. In poetry, those men who have written without original and vital feeling, without a flaming imagination, have much to answer for. It is owing to them that poetry has come to mean a stupid and insipid sort of stuff, quite remote from people's lives, fit only for sentimental youth and nodding old age. That sort of poetry is what is technically called 'derivative,' which means that the author copies some one else's emotion often some one else's words, and commonplace verses are written about flowers, and moonlight, and love, and death, by people who would never be moved by any of these things if sincere poets had not been writing about them from the beginning of the world. People who like to hear the things they are used to repeated say, 'That is beautiful poetry'; simple, straightforward people say, 'Perhaps it is. But I don't care for poetry.' But once in a while there comes along a man with knowledge and courage enough to say, 'That is not poetry at all, but insincere bosh!'

Again I do not mean that all poetry can be enjoyed by everybody. People have different tastes and different training. A man at forty seldom cares for the books which delighted him as a boy. People stop developing at all ages. Some men never mature beyond their teens; others go on growing and changing until old age. Because B likes a book is no

reason why A should. And we are the inheritors of so splendid a literature that there are plenty of books for everybody. Many people enjoy Kipling's poems who would be confused by Keats; others delight in Burns who would be utterly without sympathy for Blake. The people who like Tennyson do not, as a rule, care much about Walt Whitman, and the admirers of Poe and Coleridge may find Wordsworth unattractive, and again his disciples might feel antagonized by Rossetti and Swinburne. It does not matter, so long as one finds one's own sustenance. Only, the happy men who can enjoy them all are the richest. The true test of poetry is sincerity and vitality. It is not rhyme, or metre, or subject. It is nothing in the world but the soul of man as it really is. Carlyle's 'French Revolution' is a great epic poem; so are Trevelyan's three volumes on 'Garibaldi and the Italian War of Independence.' That they are written in prose has nothing to do with the matter. That most poems are written rhythmically, and that rhythm has come to be the great technical fact of poetry, was, primarily, because men under stress of emotion tend to talk in a rhythmized speech. Read Lincoln's 'Address at Gettysburg' and 'Second Inaugural,' and you will see.

Nothing is more foolish than to say that only such and such forms are proper to poetry. Every form is proper to poetry, so long as it is the sincere expression of a man's thought. That insincere men try bizarre forms of verse to gain a personal notoriety is true, but it seems not very difficult to distinguish them from the real artists. And so long as men feel, and think, and have the need of expressing themselves, so long will their modes of expression change. For expression tends to become hackneyed and devitalized, and new methods must be found for keeping the sense of palpitant vigour.

There are signs that we are living at the beginning of a great poetic renaissance. Only three weeks ago the 'New York Times' printed some remarks of Mr. Brett, the head of The Macmillan Company, in which he said that poetry was pushing itself into the best-seller class. And the other day a London publisher, Mr. Heinemann, announced that he should not publish so many novels, as they were a drug on the market. England has several magazines devoted exclusively to poetry and poetic drama. Masfield is paid enormous sums for his work, and a little book entitled 'The Georgian Book of Poetry,' containing the work of some of the younger men, which has been out barely two years, is already in its ninth edition. Here, in America, we have 'The Poetry Journal,' published in Boston, and 'Poetry,' published in Chicago. England counts among her poets W. B. Yeats, Robert Bridges, John Masfield, Wilfred Wilson Gibson, D. H. Lawrence, F. L. Flint, James Stevens, Rudyard Kipling, and, although on a somewhat more popular level, Alfred Noyes. England also boasts, as partly her own, the Bengal poet, Rabindranath Tagore, who has just been awarded the Nobel Prize, and Ezra Pound, who, although an American by birth and happily therefore ours to claim, lives in London. In America we have Josephine Preston Peabody, Bliss Carman, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Anna Hempstead Branch, Hermann Hagedorn, Grace Fallow Norton, Fanny Stearns Davis, and Nicholas Vachel Lindsay. These lists represent poets with many differing thoughts and modes of thought, but they point to the great vitality of poetry at the moment.

Have I answered the question? I think I have. We should read poetry because only in that way can we know man in all his moods -- in the most beautiful thoughts of his heart, in his farthest reaches of imagination, in the tenderness of his love, in the nakedness and awe of his soul confronted with the terror and wonder of the Universe.

Poetry and history are the textbooks to the heart of man, and poetry is at once the most intimate and the most enduring.