



The Impossibility of Verse: Understanding Limited Research Engagement with Poetry

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Poetry isn't hard, it's impossible.

– Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016)

Lerner's assertion that poetry is 'impossible' resonates widely within academic circles, especially among learners. While many have acknowledged a hesitancy in engaging with verse, with respect to their academic research interests, poetry is seen as a form that is elusive and often not apt for conventional modes of analysis. This influences the degree to which emerging scholars choose to dedicate their efforts to studying poetry.

The disinclination towards research in poetry became apparent within my postgraduate class when out of 64 students, only two individuals had opted to go ahead with their dissertations on poetry. This was further corroborated by conversations with professors who noted less interest in research on poetry even among PhD scholars. These two observations raise questions about the larger landscape for the place of academic research on poetry within literary studies. With excessive focus in educational institutions on research with defined methodologies, clear research objectives, and tangible outcomes, this "impossibility" of poetry is bound to create challenges within this specific area of research if not addressed. While other literary forms benefit from inquiry, poetry will remain, as Byron would put it, a "society where none intrudes" (Byron, 1812–1818).

This paper aims to understand this lack of research on poetry within academic spaces by moving beyond observations to speak to learners at the postgraduate level pursuing literature and

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understanding their perception, experience, and interaction with poetry through their educational years. Understanding why research in poetry may be less prevalent is crucial simply because, as a form that holds cultural significance, a decline in its academic study could lead to diminished understanding, or even appreciation of the form. These implications hold for literary scholarship and pedagogy alike.

The study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to explore the lack of poetry research in academia. Five postgraduate literature students participated in individual interviews, providing insights into their academic and personal engagement with poetry. The semi-structured format allowed for flexible conversations. Interview data was transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis. This involved coding the transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns, allowing key findings regarding student perceptions, teaching methods, and motivations related to poetry to emerge directly from the data.

A sentiment emerging from the interviews is that engaging with poetry, particularly when it comes to comprehension or even interpretation, demands a greater effort than when reading prose. This perception is rooted in the inherent nature of the poetic form, which is often seen as more emotionally intense. Apoorva articulated this feeling, stating:

I think when it comes to poetry, it has been harder because I feel that the power of poetry is so impactful that the amount it takes from you as a reader is a little more. So it is a little bit intimidating to go in... As we get older, we understand more the consequences of things and more of the context of things (*sic*), and all of that gets so heightened in poetry that the experience is all the more immersive, but that also means it's all the more draining.

The emotional and mental energy poetry can exact from the reader, makes the prospect of engaging with it potentially difficult. Archana also concurs with this sentiment, stressing the intellectual effort required. She observed:

Poetry needs a lot of pondering upon whether it is academic or not. I feel like poetry needs a lot of thought. That is not to say that prose does not, but it's just something that I've observed when I read poetry. I feel like I need to sit and think about it. So, because of that, when I feel the need to read poetry, I feel like it's a very labour-intensive process because I know that I have to think so much.

Apoorva and Archana both reveal that deciphering meaning in poetry is a more active and demanding cognitive process than prose, requiring reflection and interpretation time. This "labour-intensive" nature of the interpretive process suggests that the initial act of reading poetry itself is more demanding in the first place. This could lead to engaging with poetry less frequently when compared to prose in their reading habits. This initial engagement might lead to a lower chance of developing an interest that would later translate, if at all, to pursuing poetry for academic research. The difficulty, as described by the interviewees, is a significant factor influencing the level of engagement with the form from the outset.

A significant theme that emerged from the interviews is the negative influence of definitive and often exam-oriented methods of teaching poetry, particularly during the formative years in school. The participants felt that an emphasis on identifying structural elements, literary devices, and focusing on arriving at a "correct" interpretation hindered their genuine engagement and a curiosity about poetry that would have otherwise naturally arrived among them. Vidya expressed this frustration clearly, noting:

In school, if there's a poem, they'll start with asking the students to identify the rhyme scheme, and then if the teacher wants to go a little further, they'll ask you to talk about the literary devices, metaphors, all of that, and I did not like it that much. Then you're sort of intimidated by it, and you become bored by poetry because you think that it doesn't leave room for further thinking. You're never going to want to engage with it again after that, and that's just a loss.

Vidya here refers to an almost mechanical breakdown of a poem, which can strip away its affective qualities and discourage students from seeking personal connections with the text. Archana similarly

linked her "complicated relationship with poetry" to this pedagogical approach. She states:

In school, you associate poems by memorising and then writing them in the exam paper and scoring based on that. It's a very predestined way of reading poetry [that] has sort of hindered my experience with poetry in general.

The pressure to conform to a pre-approved understanding for purposes of an impending examination on prescribed poems creates a barrier to genuine engagement. It is important to note that while the interviewees were critical of this narrow focus, they did acknowledge that a preliminary understanding of poetic devices is valuable as it provides tools for understanding the form. Their concern lay in poetry being relegated solely to these technical aspects. They call for allowing students to experiment with their understandings and interpretations, rather than dismissing alternative readings in favour of a single one that is often taught. This experience of being taught poetry in school stands in stark contrast, as Apoorva pointed out, to the experience in a university setting. According to Apoorva:

In university, there is a certain appreciation which the professors are able to communicate not only because they're doing it with people who have chosen to do this, but also because they are not bound by the same constraints that a CBSE system or an ICSE system would put on you. Appreciation for poetry specifically is only possible with a certain amount of time and with a certain amount of willingness to let students think for themselves.

The disparity between these two learning environments suggests that negative early experiences with pedagogy pertaining to poetry may lead to a lasting perception of it as a subject for rote learning and predetermined interpretation, which could reduce the inclination to pursue it for independent research later on.

Beyond pedagogical approaches, the very way poetry is sometimes presented within academic settings can contribute to a perception of the form as elite, mysterious, or inherently difficult, creating a sense of inaccessibility. This framing intimidates learners.

Apoorva articulates this feeling and the mystique surrounding poetry:

As a person who is engaging with poetry, it shouldn't be a form that is that mysterious and that is that untouchable. The fact that we all come into it by going, "I'm so intimidated by it," and that it requires you to use a little bit more of your brain. Maybe if you're going to keep thinking that you're stupid for not understanding it, because a lot of us also read a lot of poems and feel stupid for not understanding them. So then, how are you going to want to engage? If you're constantly made to feel intimidated by the form itself, you're going to feel like that is something that is not accessible.

The feeling of inadequacy when understanding poetry directly impacts their desire to engage with it. When poetry is presented in a way that emphasises its difficulty without equipping learners with the tools or confidence to navigate it, it can become a barrier to inquiry. Archana's experience further illustrated a consequence of this academic environment. She describes:

When I read something, I have this urge to go online to LitCharts or to CliffNotes and see if that is what they are also saying about it. I want someone to validate my interpretation of what I thought about this piece, only then I'm happy with it.

This need for confirmation directly results from how poetry has been taught, implying a system that necessitates a "correct" way of reading and interpreting a poem. Such a system can undermine a learner's confidence in their own interpretive abilities, making independent scholarly work on poetry feel terrifying or even invalid without external approval.

The effect of presenting poetry as mysterious or untouchable, along with pedagogical practices that create a dependence on external validation for interpretation, makes poetry inaccessible or reserved for those with a kernel to be able to "crack" it. If students perceive poetry as an elite domain where their own understanding is constantly in question unless validated by external sources, they may not be willing to conduct research on it, especially when said research is often an independent pursuit.

The interviews also revealed a sentiment that conducting academic research on poetry is itself perceived as challenging. This perception is linked to the problems mentioned before, creating a feedback loop that may contribute to the observed lack of research in the field. Some suggested that the very process of formulating research questions in poetry is less intuitive when compared to other areas of literary study. Apoorva commented on how research topics often arise from active engagement and discussion, stating:

The only reason you're coming up with questions about something is because you're thinking about it, and the only way that happens is when there are spaces from where these thoughts arise. What I did for my dissertation came from patterns that I recognised, which came from conversations I had with people. It was still a cultural phenomenon that I was able to identify. I think that maybe a lot of poetry doesn't become cultural conversation.

This suggests that if poetry is not a prevalent subject of discussion, the opportunities for identifying research questions or patterns for analysis are naturally fewer. This also connects to a potentially cyclical problem. If there is less general engagement with poetry and it features less in cultural conversations, there will be fewer questions leading to research interests. This, in turn, leads to less academic research conducted on poetry. With less research being published, less material is available for students to read about poetry, reducing exposure and inspiration for future research. The lack of existing research creates a void that, in turn, perpetuates the cycle for where there is less engagement with poetry.

The way poetry is utilised within academic coursework can also sideline it as a primary research focus. Vidya observes:

In classes, essays are given importance, and poetry is kind of sidelined because people are okay with it only when we do a postcolonial analysis or a feminist analysis. Only then are we encouraged to read poetry. But it does not need to be relevant to any discipline or field to be studied.

Poetry is often treated as a text to which theoretical tools are applied, rather than being the central subject of inquiry itself. Poetry's potential as a standalone research area may not come to

mind for a learner when research methodologies often use examples of other literary forms which reinforces the notion that researching poetry is less feasible.

The interviews with postgraduate literature students reveal multiple factors contributing to the lack of research on poetry. The themes that emerged, like the laboriousness of reading poetry, the negative impact of school-level teaching, and the sense of exclusivity surrounding the form in academia, are not isolated issues but are interconnected. The perception of poetry as a form requiring significant emotional and intellectual effort seems to be a barrier strong enough to discourage engagement. As the interviewees said, the interpretive demands can make engaging with poetry more trying compared to prose. This difficulty is often a result of early educational experiences. Here, the reliance is on mechanical teaching methods focused on identifying devices and adhering to single interpretations for examination purposes. This stifles genuine appreciation and curiosity. An approach that can create negative associations and feelings of inadequacy, leading students to believe that their personal understanding is less valid.

The pedagogical approach directly contributes to the perception of poetry as an elite or inaccessible domain within academia. The focus on deciphering a supposed "correct" meaning can lead to a lack of confidence in one's ability to engage with poetry, which can include undertaking independent research. The need for external validation when it comes to interpretations shows that educational conditioning can undermine a student's trust in their own readings of the form. These interconnected factors create a cycle that perpetuates the lack of research in poetry. People simply read it less for pleasure or exploration. Students reading less poetry are less likely to form questions, patterns, or themes, resulting in less academic research on poetry. So when there is less new scholarship about poetry, future students have less material to read about poetry, creating a never-ending cycle peddled by limited engagement and even less research work.

This cycle might hint at the risk of much contemporary work in poetry going largely overlooked by current academic criticism, or even the recording of patterns or current trends in poetry might go unnoticed. There is a clear need for pedagogical shifts in early

education towards fostering appreciation, encouraging personal responses, and validating multiple interpretations to address these issues. In university settings, it is important to show that poetry is not just a text for applying theory, but a research subject in its own right.

The lack of research on poetry is rooted in negative experiences, which can lead to reduced personal reading and engagement with poetry. In turn, it limits the research being conducted on poetry. Future research in this area could touch on the perspectives of academics actively researching and teaching poetry to explore models of poetry pedagogy at both school and university levels that aim at creating appreciation and research interests among learners. Without further pedagogical changes and reform, poetry risks becoming unread and by extension, unstudied, one that is preserved in textbooks for antiquity's sake yet lost to scholarship.

References

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