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How the Digital World Is Rejuvenating Poetry

Victoria Greene · Wednesday, May 30th, 2018

Culture is cyclical, and what fades out of fashion eventually rises from the grave and back into public affection. This certainly isn't a revelation, but the digital world is accelerating the process of resurrection and revitalisation. [Vinyl sales just hit an all-time high](#). With a potted history of the world at our fingertips on a daily basis, we can draw from any time period we wish.

So it goes with poetry. Once the choice form of expression for the discerning writer, it was saddled with a stigma as an ultra-niche pursuit for too long—until the expanded technological tool set of today's world gave it a new lease of life, fresh mainstream appeal, and the possibility of unprecedented virality.

At its heart, poetry has always been communal, just like the songs we sing or the stories we tell. The archetypal tortured Wordsworth-esque Romantic genius toiling away in isolation has never been a full reflection of artistic reality. Since Homeric poems captivated the masses, poetry has been entrenched in community life. The [people beyond](#) take many forms.

It makes sense, then, that the internet—a global virtual community complete with tribal forums of all shapes and sizes—served to breathe new life into it. The earliest days of the web were loose, playful, experimental, and while the main streets have since suffered majorly at the hands of digital gentrification, that playfulness still runs rich through the alleyways, bleeding through at every opportunity.

I wrote haikus as a child, dreadful by any objective measure but infused with joy and out-of-place Harry Potter references. Had Twitter been around, I would have shared them, and been delighted, confused, terrified, and finally motivated by the replies—I'm of the opinion that this social media trial of fire is ultimately a boon for creatives. It smokes out the indifferent and forces a doubling-down on the other-than-ordinary.

There are those who rail against the [influx of Instapoets](#) and the perceived degradation of what it means to be a poet, but it's the same story told thousands of times before. Times change, and carry tastes with them. The joy of poetry lies in the cracks between objective merits, and no amount of shaking fists at the world will make Instapoets' punchy and poignant posts any less popular with readers.

Oh, and don't think the derision isn't often tinged with envy, because that's a major consequence of accessibility. When there was a clear hierarchy topped by world-renowned poets of scholarly backgrounds, relative anonymity felt justified somehow, and the feeling of failure mollified by that

old chestnut of “I could have done that, but...”

Look to the online world now—look to YouTube, look to Instagram, look to Etsy, look anywhere—and you’ll see people younger than you succeeding with material that doesn’t match your personal sensibilities. Worse still, turning themselves into hot commodities! Selling out of all things, the cardinal sin of the artist.

We forget that bypassing the conventional route to success is entirely admirable, and that [fighting the corporate power exploiting the individual](#) is a romantic notion through and through. For reminding us that we have fallen short, and continue to fall short, of our hopes, and our potential, they receive our unwarranted ire.

It is incumbent on us all to take a step back from this negative comparison to consider the grand significance of living in a world that is increasingly coming to understand the value of honest self-expression as a matter of course as opposed to an occasional indulgence.

And in a time when an aspiring creative can reach out and find an audience, regardless of the conventionality or mass appeal of their output, remember that the totality of poetry is not sullied by the advent of a frivolous social media post or the prevalence of inane comment-section criticism.

If you want to write something, do it. If you want to record something, you can. The tools are there, cheap or free, and the distribution is a non-issue. Whatever your proclivities, there’s an online community out there waiting for you, full of perspectives from cultures and places you might not yet know exist. At the time of writing this, the [Poetry subreddit](#) has over 170k subscribers. When in human history was poetry ever so viable and visible?

So maybe poetry has undergone a seismic shift, and will never again be a domain dominated by those on the fringes of society, but look at everything it has gained in its passage back to public ownership. In a meaningful sense, the digital world has sparked creativity anew—the options available to us all are mind-boggling.

I’ll leave you with this talk from slam poet Clint Smith, because it is a stark reminder that we need conscientious voices to effect change—and only through the digital world we have now can those voices resound in the way we so desperately need them to as a civilisation.

Image: Via [Pexels](#).

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