



Exploring Word-Play And Poetic Techniques In Kay Ryan's 'Turtle'

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ABSTRACT

Poets create music by using different poetic techniques and word-play in poetry. Kay Ryan is one of them who has made a simple poem 'Turtle' magical by using appropriate words and techniques in describing a turtle's sluggish life journey, her stony appearance and her perseverance to overcome the hurdles on the way to success. This paper aims to explore her style in this metaphorical poem by focusing on the word-play and poetic techniques. Kay Ryan is an American poet who has published several volumes of poetry. From 2008-2010, she remained Poet Laureate of United States. She won the Pulitzer Prize for her book "The Best of It: New and Selected Poems" (2011, Grove Press 2010). It was described as a corpus stretching across forty-five years, humorous, defiant yet tender, literary output of a jovial mind. In 'Turtle', she uses the animal as a metaphor for human struggle. During one of her lectures, she admitted that she wrote 'Turtle' when she felt that her life was as sluggish and dreary as that of a turtle. She wanted things to happen fast in her life, but sadly, it did not happen. So, 'Turtle' becomes a metaphor for human struggle and perseverance. With the help of word play, she creates images to describe the animal as hard-shelled, slow moving and clumsy creature. However, in the end of the poem she acknowledges her perseverance in getting what she wants. This fifteen lined poem is written in free verse, making use of half-rhyme; there is repetition of vowel sounds like "graces" and "places" (lines 4-5) and consonant - sounds like "slope" and "hope" (lines 6-7). She delights in surprising readers by what she her-self calls "recombinant rhyme" where one word would rhyme with the back of another one. Her opinion is that words want to be together. Internal rhyme repeats itself three time: "four-oared" (line-2) "afford" (line-3), and "towards" (line-4). She makes use of alliteration, personification and enjambment. Alliteration involves the repetition of the same consonant sound at the beginning of closely connected words, enhancing musicality. For example, "hard" and "helmet" in lines (2-4) and "grasses" and "graceless" in lines(4-5) Poet's choice in referring 'Turtle' as "she" gives her human characteristics like becoming frustrated, tired, and patient. So, 'Turtle' and a human being become co-related. Continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line or stanza or phrase, forces the reader to shift glance quickly to the next line. This technique is known as enjambment and the poet has used it throughout the poem for example, transition between lines 3-4 and also in lines 5-6.

This poem leaves a powerful message that a person does not need to be fast paced to achieve the target; he just needs to keep moving slowly but consistently to achieve the goal. Slow and steady wins the race. The poet has successfully turned an ordinary poem into an enticing one where reader needs to move quickly to the next line to finish the poem. Her style has made the poem worth reading as it lends a charm to the persona of an ordinary creature.

Key Words:- Word-Play, Poetic Technique , Recombinant , Enjambment , Half-rhyme.

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“Words want to be together, actually we are just clearing house”

-Kay Ryan

Word-play enables the poets to weave magic with words. Employing various literary devices, they create music so that readers remain engrossed till the end of poem. Kay Ryan herself has certainly done so in her poem 'Turtle'. She wrote this poem when she felt her life was as sluggish and dreary as that of a Turtle. She wanted something to happen fast in her life but sadly, her wishes remained unfulfilled. So, 'Turtle' becomes a metaphor for human struggle and perseverance.

Through a series of word-pictures, the poet depicts the animal as hard-shelled, slow-moving and clumsy creature in a humorous manner. Her heavy shell makes her movement very slow; but it also acts as a “helmet” to save her from any sort of danger. Her small feet are referred to as “four-oars” on which she carries her body weight, passing through difficult terrains in search of food and shelter. In the end, however, the poet acknowledges her perseverance in overcoming hurdles by admitting that her only “levity” is patience.

Kay Ryan is an American poet who has published seven volumes of poetry. From 2008 to 2010, she remained Poet Laureate of United States. In 2011, she was named Mac Arthur Fellow and also won Pulitzer Prize for her book 'The Best of it : New and Selected Poems'. Her work was described as a “body of work spanning 45 years witty, rebellious and yet tender, a treasure trove of an iconoclast and joyful mind.”¹

'Turtle' is a compact, short, 15 – lined poem which starts with a question “Who would be turtle who could help it?” - bringing to mind an assumption that a slow moving and bad-looking animal would not be anybody's choice. 'Turtle' symbolizes enduring life's struggles, limitations and the need of patience and resilience to change the circumstances. Ryan published this poem at the age of 49. Till then, she had faced many ups and downs in her life. So, sentiment of personal trauma can't be denied. The poet's deft use of meaning-packed words creates an emotional connect in the minds of readers with this tiny creature's predicament. Before moving further, let us first read the poem:-

Turtle

Who would be a turtle who could help it?
 A barely mobile hard roll, a four-oared helmet,
 she can ill afford the changes she must take
 In rowing toward the grasses that she eats.
 Her track is graceless, like dragging
 a packing-case places, and almost any slope
 defeats her modest hopes. Even being practical,
 she's often stuck up to the axle on her way
 to something edible. With everything optimal,
 she skirts the ditch which would convert
 her shell into a serving dish. She lives
 below luck-level, never imagining some lottery
 will change her load of pottery to wings.
 Her only levity is patience,
 the sport of truly chastened things.

(Friday Post)

The poet knows how to be funny and serious simultaneously. In her own words: “with my work you have to always think there is smidgen of laughter in it however sad it might be however lonely or lost. If you feel worse after you have read it then I have failed”.² So, let the reader decide whether the image of a ‘Turtle’ as “four-oared”, with “helmet” “dragging a packing case places”, or “a load of pottery”; brings a frown on his forehead or smile on his lips. During a reading (Bryn Mawr College) she admitted that she wrote this poem when she felt like beleaguered animal in the poem... “this is a poem I have used to teach about the poetic devices I mentioned above-rhyme, alliteration and assonance. It is a wonder for those reasons and also without paying any attention to them whatsoever”. She named it recombinant “rhyme” e.g. “four-oared” “afford” and “towards”.³

When asked by an interviewer that how did she come up with what she has called “recombinant rhyme”, she answered that she could not take end rhymes seriously. “I slashed my rhymes at the wrong ends of lines and in the middles - the front of one word would rhyme with the back of another one or one might be identical to three words”. She further elaborated that there is a sense of air and ease in even the smallest of her poems”⁴.

Written in free verse the poet has experimented with half-rhyme also known as slant or partial rhyme where a vowel or consonant sound is reused with in one line or multiple lines of verse. For example, “graceless” and “places” in lines five and six and “slope” and “hope” in lines six and seven. Similarly, “axle”, “edible” and “optimal” are another examples of half-rhyme.⁵

She has used alliteration, enjambment and personification tools to create some humour in the poem. When words begin with same sound in succession it is known as alliteration. “Hard” and “Helmet” in line two, “grasses” and “graceless” in line four are some examples. The poet has used enjambment - a poetic device, where a sentence or a phrase or a clause continues across a line-break or stanza without a terminal punctuation to create an uninterrupted flow (AI). This technique forces the reader to move quickly to the next line to understand what is being stated by the poet. Transition between lines three and four and then ten and eleven indicates that poet has liberally made use of it in the poem. “She can ill afford the chances she must take in rowing toward the grasses that she eats.” (lines 3-4) “She skirts the ditch which could convert her shell into a serving dish.” (lines 10-11)

Readers can’t help appreciating the little creature’s exceptional strength concealed in these words. Ryan personified the little ‘Turtle’ by calling it “she” and giving “her” human features like alive, tired, frustrated, worried for food and safety. In one of the first essays on Key Ryan Dana Gioia wrote: Ryan reminds us of the suggestive power of poetry, how it elicits and rewards the reader’s intellect, imagination and emotions. I like to think that Ryan’s magnificently compressed poetry signals a return to concision and intensity, Ryan not using ‘I’ in poetry is a deliberate action not to make her poetry look personal, confessional”.⁶

She writes poems with a sprinkle of humour to introduce witty element in her poems, thereby making them more engaging and noticeable. The humour created by her language like “four-oared”, “helmet” and “packing-case dragging places” for describing her heavy shell but small feet for her slow movement, brings smile on the lips of the readers. There is also a feeling of sympathy in their minds as the ‘Turtle’ becomes a metaphor for struggle in many people’s lives. Her poems are the result of keen observation of everything around her-animals, humans as well as nature. She presents them packed in witty language exhibited by word-play so that an everyday thing looks charming like the ‘Turtle’. Dana is of the opinion that “Ryan’s style developed away from major literary centres, is characterized by independence, focus on craft and a unique ability to find large philosophical insights within small focused moments.”⁷

At the end of the poem she makes use of a particular word “levity” which by definition (Oxford Dictionary) means treating a serious matter with humour. But here the word is used as a sort of appreciation for her patience; a compliment, for her courage and determination with which she leads her life’s journey. It teaches

the readers a moral lesson: Don't run fast but take steady steps to achieve your goals. Slow and steady always wins the race.

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