

Lynda Hull & Susan Mitchell



Contemporary Poetry

Contemporary poetry took a drastic turn after the Modernists.

For instance, compare the works of William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and e. e. cummings; all of these writers influenced changes in approaches to poetical forms.

In particular, e.e. cummings' poetry influenced changes:

- His poems broke tradition of form and presentation.
- He deconstructed the manner a poem appears on the page almost in the same manner abstract-expressionist operates with oils and canvas.
- He deconstructs the pre-conceived notions of “what is art?” turning the definition on it’s head.
- His influences remain in some form even today.

Contemporary Poetry

The work by Mark Rothko is a good visual example of the revolutions which were going on in other art mediums.

- Rothko liked putting similar tones of dark blue and black on top of each other within large canvases creating surreal cloudy, dreamscape-like atmospheres.
- The newer the painting, the darker the paints, the darker the mood.
- At first glance the canvas appears as a solid tone of one color, but after a second for your eyes to adjust, you'll see secondary tones of a slightly darker value of colors running within the space.
- Rothko was one of the early experimenters with abstracted shapes as subjects for paintings.
- The more cameras and televisions integrate into our environment, the more diverse the notions of what is “art” become.

Contemporary Poetry

- Here in Houston we are lucky to have a small gallery of his work, at the Rothko Chapel, a non-denominational space reserved for meditation and spiritual connections.
- From the Chapel's website:

Mark Rothko, one of the most influential American artists of the mid-century was commissioned by the de Menils family and given the opportunity to shape and control a total environment to encompass a group of fourteen paintings he especially created for this meditative space.

Contemporary Poetry

Poetry went through wide experiments in the Seventies as well.

- Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton broke traditional notions of voice and subject with Confessional works.
- They both utilized frank, honest explorations of difficult existences.
- In general, the focus fell on the personal “I”; not necessarily confessional, but more elaborate opinionated, demanding themes.

The Eighties re-established some traditional forms.

- The sonnet for instance re-emerged for some writers, some rhyme and meter likewise were beginning to be used again.

Ornithology

Lynda Hull

- One of the more successful contemporary writers of our time.
- Rebellious tender personality.
- Loved hanging around the darker scenes of nightclubs, cigarettes, 40's *film noir* attitudes, drag queens and jazz bands.
- Hull grew up in Newark, New Jersey.
- She taught creative writing in the MFA in Writing Program at Vermont College of Fine Arts.
- Hull had published two collections of poetry when she died in a car accident in 1994. Her first book of poetry, *Ghost Money*, won the Juniper Prize in 1986.

Ornithology

The title has double meaning.

- The common definition of the word reads: a study of birds.
- In the poem her theme focuses on the saxophonist Charlie “Bird” Parker. He was one of the leading developers of bebop, a form of jazz characterized by fast tempos and improvisations.
- Hull loves using complex multi-syllabic words.
- Notice she even breaks the traditional format, shoving the stanza into a pattern imitating musical forms, a deconstruction of standard verse, mirroring the odes of John Keats’ line structures. An ode is a lyrical verse based upon Ancient Greek recitals: the initial model for English odes was the Roman lyric poet Horace, who used the form to write meditative lyrics on various themes.

Ornithology

- In Hull's case, she is not following a strict format of the tradition, but allowing the natural speaking rhythms to cause line breaks in the verse.
- She takes it to another level so to speak, utilizing spontaneous rhythms and elaborate wording.
- Like the intentions of Sixties' be-bop jazz. Free-form without intrusions. Intuitive.
- The ailanthus is a native eastern species of flowering trees; she ties this image into the method of creating her poetry, fracturing a phrase to see where it leads, like Bird himself would do with music. Hull makes a collage out of the present moment, the poet remembering her past as a young, restless, girl—mixed in with the story of Bird and with the story of her friend Eric, concluding with a message of live your life to the fullest, before you are left with nothing.

Havana Birth

Susan Mitchell

- This poem explains the process of how a poet is born.
- Shows the realization of creative power, of self identity.
- Celebration of the diversity of life and the music of everyday existence.
- At first this sounds like a confusion of different times and events, but like I said it is a birth of realization, an epiphany in itself in action.
- A collage of two simultaneous events, the mother being fitted for a dress and the persona in the park as a young girl suddenly aware of her individuality.
- Mitchell plays with the notions of birth, twisting the definitions of expected physical birth at a hospital to the poems's moment of her self creating spiritual ideal; putting them together as one meaning.

Havana Birth

She has written:

I imagine the speaker as someone who, on entering adolescence, detaches herself from the narrow interests of her own socioeconomic group to identify with the larger interests of humanity. So the poem found its own definitions of birth, not only freeing oneself from the mother, but more importantly, as the struggle to enter the world (1040).

Mitchell, Susan. "Havana Birth." *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*.
Ed. Charles Lehman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.

Havana Birth

- This is a moment moving from innocence into an experience.
The act displayed in real time.
- Mitchell metaphorically merges the persona into the poem just as the manner a bird becomes the branch.
- In this poem she uses a more traditional form, yet creates line breaks in unexpected phrases.
- She forces breaks outside of natural speaking rhythms, forcing verbs and subjects away from one another to “shock” the reader with the unexpected twist.
- In stanza 1, lines 1-2 for example:
“this morning/of my birth” is not the usual breaking point in the phrase.

Havana Birth

Notice the strategic placement of colors.

Green is important here. Symbol of fertility and growth, pops out every-so-often; in addition she isolates colors within key stanzas. Usually one vibrant tone stands out from the rest of the images.

- stanza 1 the ocean is green
- stanza 2 green sofa (of the 50's/avocado tone)
- stanza 3 the air / is chocolate (sweet-sour from a man's cigar)
- stanza 4 drinkable, dazzling, white
- stanza 5-6 multiple color tones:
 - bloody / sheets: red
 - sudden furious blue
 - the pigeon's eyes / are orange, unblinking