How much depends upon the red wheelbarrow? A computational analysis of poetic craft in contemporary poetry

Abstract

What makes a poem beautiful? How do standards of poetic beauty vary as a function of time and expertise? We used computational methods to compare the stylistic and content features of poems written by 19th century professional poets, contemporary professional poets, and contemporary amateur poets. Building upon techniques designed to analyze style and sentiment in texts, we examined elements of poetic craft such as diction, sound devices, emotive language, and imagery. Results showed that contemporary professional poets used significantly more concrete and imageable words than 19th century poets but fewer sound devices, marking a shift of focus from auditory to visual distinctiveness. Contemporary professional poets also used fewer explicitly emotional words. These differences point to the influence of the Imagism movement in early 20th century. On the other hand, further analyses showed that contemporary amateur poets resembled 19th century professional poets more than contemporary professionals on these dimensions. This suggests that elite standards of poetic beauty in the past “trickled down” across time to influence amateur works in the present, while contemporary professionals developed new standards of poetic beauty. These results highlight the influence of Imagism on the modern aesthetic and also reveal the dynamics between “high” and “low” art. We argue that methods from computational linguistics may provide important insights into the analysis of patterns and trends in poetic style.

Introduction

* What makes a poem beautiful? What do people do to produce good poetry?
* Aesthetic standards change with time. Describe some examples, including Imagism.
* Aesthetic standards vary between high and low art. Aesthetic standards may trickle down. Cite Simmel.

19th century poetry vs Imagism

* “The first tenet of the Imagist manifesto was “To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly-exact, nor the merely decorative word.” Imagism was a reaction against the flabby abstract language and “careless thinking” of Georgian Romanticism. Imagist poetry aimed to replace muddy abstractions with exactness of observed detail, apt metaphors, and economy of language.” (Academy of American poets)
* “I. Direct treatment of the “thing," whether subjective or objective.  
  II. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.  
  III. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.”

Elements of craft related to Imagism

* Concreteness/Imageability
* Abstractness
* Sound devices
* Emotion

Experiment 1: 19th century vs contemporary professionals

* Materials
* Results

Experiment 2: Contemporary amateurs

* Materials
* Results
* Figure showing summary of all features
* Figure showing analysis of readability such as type-token and word frequency

Discussion

* Summary of results
* Why computational analysis is useful – objective measures, separates different dimensions of style so one can compare aspects of amateur poetry to 19th century professional poetry without getting distracted by the differences in sophistication, subject matter, etc
* Implications for understanding the demarcations of different eras in literature
* Implications for understanding the dynamics between high and low art
* Implications for poetry education. The benefits of exposing students and aspiring poets to more contemporary styles