**Poetry** v.s. **Religion**

Humanity has always looked for universal truths about life. Most of the earliest uncovered writings are religious or philosophical. The ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia each inscribed tales of their gods and beliefs in stone. In fact, the majority of ancient writing was dedicated to writing about religion. As time progressed, writing spread; and those of high social status and wealth began writing about wars, dramas, and philosophy. By the time the Greek and Roman civilizations flourished, people were writing all sorts literature and producing some of the most astounding art in history. All of these forms of expression are, at their root, a representation of human thought and emotion. The ideas transmitted by masterful works of art can be profound and are many times life changing. Art is an outlet for humans to explore themselves and discover many truths about life. The ideas in religion are also meant to denote truths about life. Art and religion represent human conquest to achieve enlightenment.

There are several forms of art that have been created by men. One form of art is visual. This encompasses many different mediums, such a sculpting and painting. Throughout history, there have been many kinds paintings, each era ushering in new philosophies and new styles of painting. Some of the earliest paintings were religious, many times depicting Jesus’s birth, last supper, and walk to crucifixion, or depictions of the Egyptian judgment ritual by Anubis. Even the Aztec of the pre-Columbian world made various sculptures of their gods to ward off evil spirits and to guide the dead into the afterlife. Other paintings and sculptures invoke other kinds of emotion. The Scream by Edvard Munch is an interesting painting because of it’s ability to identify with most people due to the subjects human, but undistinguishing features. Hunters in the Snow by Pieter Bruegel is a scene about men treading back to their families without game; the large use of white creates a sense of emptiness. These examples do not cover eras of style such as Romanticism and Realism, each of which are starkly different. The visual arts are only one form of expression and is incredibly powerful on it’s own.

The auditory arts are a second form of art that stir the human soul. As of late, many new forms and styles of music have been created (some not so easy to listen to), most of which are true expressions of human emotion. Classical music holds some of the world’s most powerful movements in song. Slow or fast, pieces such as October by Eric Whitacre or Jupiter of The Planets by Gustav Holst can move people to tears or energize them. War cries can strike fear into the hearts of enemies and turn weak men into heroes. Contemporary music created in the last century can have much more of a dancing feeling to it. From Jazz to House to Rock to Hip-hop, there is a wide verity of ways to express oneself musically.

A third, and potentially the most powerful, form of art is poetry. It is a written form and traditionally has the parameter that it is written in lines. Unlike other art forms, poetry is not sensed directly, but is read and therefor incorporates the imagination of the reader as a factor into readers understanding of the poetry. Therefore, poetry is powerful because of it’s ability to describe specifically, and although readers’ interpretations may be different, they all come from the same base. Poetry can also implement more then just visual and sound description, but it’s usage of certain words with certain connotations to impact a reader more deeply or have a deeper message then many of the greatest works of other forms of art in history. Poetry can also tell active stories with evolving ideas and, if the poem is long enough, evolving characters. Poems can be extremely vivid, or purposefully not, and can use this to their advantage. This combination of description and active story telling is incredibly powerful when conveying deep messages. Poetry’s medium and potential make it powerful enough to create complex ideas about the world that would otherwise be incredibly difficult to match.

Religion has complex ideas as well.

There are many religions around the world. Some have ceased to exist, while others have taken their place. The four most prominent religions in the world are Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all believe in the same God, a one and almighty deity that spoke to the prophet Abraham. The three originate in the same place geographically and each stem from the same scriptures. The differences between them consist of augmentations to the beliefs of which prophets hold importance and legitimacy; with Christians accepting Jesus are their messiah and Muslims accepting Muhammad as a prophet after Jesus in order to restore balance to a lost world. Hinduism is built on a different set of texts. These four religions each have one main purpose: instill good ideals into those who follow. As vague as “good” may be, they are meant to give guidelines to live by.

Each of these religions uses texts in order to pass on their ideals. Within these texts, there are stories that both teach a reader lessons about life and rules on how to worship their gods properly. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam use stories in the Old Testament, New Testament, and Quran to show morals and ideals that should be followed in order to be a wholesome human being. Hinduism uses the Bhagavad Gita, a text that is told as on long dialogue by and embodiment Krishna, who is considered to be the energy that fills and created all things, and who is part of everything one and the same. The Bhagavad Gita also teaches the people how to organize themselves, treat each other, act, and what to expect in their afterlife. Hindu’s believe in reincarnation, and the better you behave in one life, the better you’ll be born into your next life.

The most basic similarity between religion and poetry is their medium of communication. They are both written, and therefor have the power to use that to their advantage. A reason that the Old Testament and New Testament are so successful as religious texts is the level of reading it takes to understand them. Those religious texts are incredibly easy to understand and require little reading capability to read them. This is what helped spread the scriptures as well and what helps teach Judaism and Christianity at young ages. In fact, many people learn to read using these religious texts. Poetry can be very hard to understand. The easier poetry is, the less serious the poems tend to be. Some nursing rhymes do have meaningful lessons to take away, but most are not. Also, the lessons in those nursing rhymes do match those of a religious text with the same difficulty of comprehension. Because both poetry and religious text are written, they can both use their language as an advantage. The rise in difficulty in poetry lets poetry create more complex ideas then is available in religious text. It is just less accessible.

People, then, would greatly benefit from reading poems of higher complexity. Poems hold messages that are sometimes only obtainable through chapters of prose writing in a length that usually spans no more then three to four pages.

The creation myths of the Old Testament demonstrate the simplicity that makes the text so accessible. The first creation myth, Genesis 1, is one of the most well known stories in all of history. Essentially, the story says that there is nothing before God, who creates the Earth in 6 days, and on the seventh day he rests. The details of this passage are not complex. Each day is described separately in a couple of sentences, describing the creation of light, then the waters, then the heavens, then Earth with it’s vegetation from the waters, then the moon and the sun, then the creatures of the oceans and skies, then the creatures on land, and then humans in his image. On each day, the scriptures describe everything that happens because of god as “good”. In multiple translated texts, the phrase that is generally used to describe God’s creation is “it was good”. The ideas in this passage are simple, and easy to follow, and above all, easily believable. An interesting part about this creation myth is all the material that precedes the creation of humans. God judges light as “good”. That sounds reasonable. God judges the creation of land and plants as good. That sounds reasonable as well. For people living in places on Earth where life is relatively simple and basic needs are ever present and constantly regarded, these judgments makes sense. Light helps us see and protects us from the dangers of darkness. Domestication was the first form of reliable sustenance, with crops first and animals later. Humans can easily relate to these scriptures. Then, as the last day is described, God gives humans rights and privileges, as he is creating them, saying that the Earth is theirs to reap and that “it was good”. It’s hard to say no to such a reasonable God, who has judged all else reasonably before hand. The important message that comes out from Genesis 1 isn’t how God created Earth, but the power that humans have on earth. They are now, in the judgment of he who is all powerful, rulers of the earth. The message is not hard to understand the way Genesis 1 is written, creating a high accessibility for those who wish for answers of greater meaning. This message is reassuring, and although has the possibility of being interpreted as free reign on the world, many take this as their grant to take control of their lives and work for themselves.

In the poetry that was studied in class, some of the poetry that seemed the most connected to religion was that of Louis Glück’s. In *The Wild Iris*, Glück’s poems have a focus on self-discovery. The poems that speak about flowers in her garden are complicated and leave room for interpretation, and the poems labeled Matins are her payers to God himself. They are two perspectives that display objective third person opinions, in the eyes of flowers, and a personal first person view by which Glück speaks. The greatest contrast between the texts in Glück’s poems and the religious text of the Old Testament is simplicity of how the messages are written and what they are trying to convey. The Old Testament sets a guideline that people should follow in order to live a proper life. The ideas discussed in *The Wild Iris* are spiritual, asking questions about human sorrow and emotion. One discusses livelihood while the other discusses livability. The essence of these two ideas seems to encompass the basic differences between religious texts and poetic texts as answers human questions. While religious texts help when guiding people in how to act and compose themselves around others, poetic texts aim to guide people in understand more about themselves and people around them. It is the difference between *what* and *why* that differentiates religious texts and poems. Because of this, the complexity of poems allows people to have a better understanding of *why*, which is much more beneficial to the human mind and soul then to just realize *what* it is that is expected of someone in this world.

One of the greatest questions that Glück asks in *The Wild Iris* is why is she so sad. Glück approaches this many different ways, displaying her sadness and questions in her Matins prayers and answering herself in the perspective of flower. In one of her Matins poems, Glück compares herself to the flowers in her garden. “I am the lowest of your creatures, following the thriving aphid and the trailing rose,” (Glück 26) Glück asks God why she feels isolated and detached from other people, and why others do not wish to be with her. She asks if wilted and sick flowers are still allowed to exist in the gardens with their healthy brethren, then does that make her less then the flowers. In Glück’s poem “April”, she addresses this very question. The poem begins with the phrase “No one’s despair is like my despair-“ (Glück 20), and fittingly so because of how tortured Glück portrayed herself. The flower responds to this abashed and addresses the anomaly that the flower sees between the woman and the man. The pair are not speaking to each other. The description of the man and woman, the man weeding constantly and the woman looking disheveled, indicated tiredness. The flower talks about how ridiculous it is that the two do not enjoy each other’s company because of their exhaustion. The flower says their exhaustion is not really their own, that the experience is not unique to them alone, and that maybe if they did try speaking to one another they would realize that and be happier. As humans with minds, the flower’s tone is scolding when she discusses their childish stubbornness. The connection between the Matins prayer and “April” is then that there is nothing stopping Glück from leaving her isolation but herself. The guilt and solitude Glück asks God to take away from her are not shackles that God has to remove, but rather are aspects of her life that she can to over come. Other people have the same problems but still manage to interact with one another. Glück is not sad because God is not helping her, but because she is not helping herself.

Poetry and religion are two forms of literature whose objectives are to explore human existence. Their biggest difference is their level of complexity, which then changes what each form of writing tend to discuss and how they discuss it. Religion addresses more rudimentary concerns about how to act in the world while poetry addresses explores deeper concerns about purpose and spiritual harmony. Religion is written at the most basic level possible, allow for maximum accessibility and comprehension. Poetry’s complexity allows for higher levels of interpretation, allow each person to find their own messages by thinking through the inspiration of the poems. The lessons taken away from poetry are more profound then religion. They warrant time and effort from people looking for elevated thinking.