Erin Belieu's "In the Red Dress I Wear to Your Funeral": Conveying Emotion by Manipulating Form

Commented [JS1]: This paper was submitted for a course assignment and was later presented at the 25th Annual Clement S. Stacy Undergraduate Research Conference

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Part of what differentiates poetry from prose is the obvious change in form with the use of metrics: stanzas and lines in, usually, a pattern or meter. There are recognized forms of poetry which must follow specific structures such as sonnets, sestinas, and the like. Free verse poetry, however, does not stick to a rigid, by-the-book structure or predetermined patterns. Though the stanzas of a free verse poem do not follow a specific metrical pattern, free verse poems typically keep some sort of resemblance to proper form, using stanzas, meter, line breaks, and such to convey tone and emotion, to tell the reader what parts to focus on, how fast to read, and so on, just as formal verse poetry with a regular meter and rhyme scheme would. Then, there are more experimental free verse poems which may appear unorganized, even sporadic, on the page. Erin Belieu's "In the Red Dress I Wear to Your Funeral" is a poem which at first follows the conventions of more standard free verse poetry and then tosses convention to the side, progressing from tidy verse to more chaotic verse. The poem relies heavily on this alteration of form as a technique to convey emotion, particularly the extreme emotions following the disintegration of a marriage. Originally published in Belieu's book *Black Box*, the poem epitomizes the general theme of the collection. The publisher notes that the poems within the collection were "written in the aftermath of a destroyed marriage" (Copper Canyon Press). With this in mind, Belieu plays with form by deconstructing and reconstructing the integrity of the poem, manipulating it beyond convention; in doing so, the poet reinforces the theme and tone of the poem to convey the strong emotions experienced in the aftermath of marital disloyalty.

A precedent for the use of structure to enhance the subject and tone of a poem can be seen with the work of E. E. Cummings. According to Isabelle Alfandary,

> Far from disregarding classical prosody, as some critics have argued, E.E. Cummings exploits the potentialities of poetic form and plays on linguistic differences, either maximalising or minimalizing them – always dramatizing ungrammaticality (111).

We see this technique in Belieu's work. Clearly she has familiarity with standard poetic form, as "In the Red Dress I Wear to Your Funeral" begins with conventional structure, but then manipulates it for effect, just as Cummings manipulated the structure of his poems.

In describing a set of notes written by Cummings, consisting of words scattered across a page, Richard S. Kennedy writes, "Cummings' notes indicate that he was speculating about the relationship between the visual appearance of the words on the page and the sounds of syllables as they would be placed on a sound-frequency scale" (29). Though Belieu does not follow exactly the same technique as Cummings in this regard, she recognizes the importance that the spacing of words on a page can have on the reader's interpretation of a poem, as witnessed especially in the later sections of her poem. Rather than spacing words for musical effect like Cummings, she spaces them to set the reader at unease as is appropriate for current tone; however, she still integrates the visual and verbal elements on the page to accomplish this.

Belieu's poem, which chronicles the narrator's emotions in the aftermath of a falling-out with a lover, apparently driven by infidelity, is divided by numbered sections. The poem begins with a typical form; the first section uses neat, tidy stanzas as is conventional. It consists of four stanzas that do not have a syllabic pattern but do fit to a line pattern: four lines in the first stanza, then two, five, and back to four. This first section marks the beginning of a rumination, when past memories first start to trickle into one's mind.

The rest of the sections of the poem leading up to the climax feature other variations on standard poetic form. Though the poem as a whole is free verse, there are still recognizable stanzas and line patterns in these beginning sections, even if the same line pattern is not maintained throughout each separate section; they all, however, serve to illustrate the patterns of memory or an emotional state. For example, in the second section, Belieu uses one large stanza with lines that grow and shrink in a rhythmic pattern with the waxing and waning of emotion; then, one small stanza follows with just two stark lines: "What electrified me / but your good doctor's hand alone?" This couplet, with its position in its own stanza separate from the only other stanza in the section, commands more attention from the reader, and therefore is reminiscent of the focus one might place on one particular instance in one's past. The fourth section also features a notable use of regular form: though enjambment at this point has made punctuation appear irregular, this section has perhaps the tidiest form of all sections in this poem as far as stanzas are concerned, with a regular pattern of six stanzas with two lines apiece and only one break from that pattern at the end; to illustrate, these are the last three stanzas of the section:

> as randomly as the thunderheads pass, and yet, how strange,
>
> how many of us loved you well. So tenderly, I'll return
>
> what you gave me—a bleached handkerchief, a Swiss army knife
>
> bristling with pointless blades. Tenderly, I return everything,

leaving my best evidence in your bloodless lap

The pattern of this section, choppy with its small stanzas but still in a regular, predictable pattern, illustrates a steady flow of memory and emotion, with the one line standing in its own stanza at the end to show a particular focus on it, mirroring the particular focus one might place on an especially unpleasant memory.

This method of playing with form continues until the poem's climax in section eight, where suddenly, the poem devolves, or rather explodes, into frantic, furious non-sequiturs and malapropisms scattered unevenly across the page, filled with bitter language and ominous imagery, as demonstrated in these lines:

EYE AM THE PROMISED VISITATION

PRIESTESS OF BLACK POPLARS

MY TREES R HUNG W/ BRAZEN BELLS

EYE HAVE AUGURED THE PREGNANT SOW'S INTESTINES

RORSCHACHED THE PICKLED WORM

GLUED TO THE BOTTOM OF YR SHOT GLASS

EYE BRING U NEWS OF THE UNIVERSE

AND THE NEWS AINT GOOD DEAD MAN

B-HOLD!

This chaotic arrangement of words on the page conveys pure, unbridled fury, the sort that accompanies an unpleasant memory wherein one feels wronged, combined with the desire for retaliation. Though certainly this sort of tone can be recognized from speech, there is also a literary precedent for the use of jumbled language to communicate strong negative emotion. The introduction to one particular edition of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* states of the character Leontes, "He is at times incoherent as a jealous man in a state of mad uncertainty must be. His speech is tangled because his mind and emotions are tangled" (Shakespeare and Pafford lxxxiv). We see a similar use of tangled language in this poem used to similar effect; however, the language alone is not what is particularly notable. The same introduction also notes, "Shakespeare's words are material always for the stage: they are used and complemented by the actor's art" (Shakespeare and Pafford lxxxv). Obviously, Belieu's words were not written for the stage and therefore lack the opportunity to be brought to life by an actor. Rather, it is the form, the arrangement of the language on the page alongside the pervasive capitalization of the letters and the lack of punctuation which, alongside this frantic language, works especially to underline the narrator's anger.

After the eighth section, the poem begins to rebuild itself. The worst of the narrator's fury is spent, but the residual anger and other emotions must run their course. The ninth section attempts to return to a neat and tidy poem as before, and indeed, stanzas are recognizable. However, there are awkward spaces in the text, making it feel jagged and unstable, as one might

shake, exhausted, after an outburst, still filled with emotion but having spent the majority of it, as in these lines:

> Turn your head and I'll kindly cut it off Yes Yes the best reason I am
>
> left only the mother of a great sun you would go blind and blinder to look
>
> upon its number and for finally I am not of your being being Queen
>
> of the flat kingdoms what crop your emptiness I do not admit these nor
>
> I lied nor I betrayed nor I am starving for you nor can you make me
>
> never Will I disappear

By the tenth and final stanza, the poem has reconstructed itself to a more stable form. Though the lines are short and jagged, the more standard, tidier form of a poem has returned. This marks the resignation after ruminating on a past conflict, wherein the wounds are still sore, still open, but have faded, for now, into the background, leaving only a lingering, seething anger. The regular stanzas return, with only the first stanza possessing any sort of irregularity—a dropped line—other than run-on sentences and copious enjambment:

> I peel myself
>
> and wherever these rubied
>
> feathers drop, a poppy unfurls
>
> in the graveyard, each head plush
>
> as a stitched lip.
>
> You're right,

it gets me high, how thin I am, my

love, the substance uncontrolled.

But this molting becomes me,

"In the Red Dress I Wear to Your Funeral" is an emotionally charged work, but the poem does not jump straight into the heaviest emotion; rather, the emotion slowly builds to a tumultuous climax. Writing for Bookslut, Jason B. Jones states, "It's possible to overstate the 'raw' elements of Belieu's poetry, especially given the attention to form evident here." Indeed, Belieu did give a great deal of attention to form while writing the poem. The rawness and the tangled language of the poem are not simply a product of the author's raw anger, but are carefully crafted by Belieu, who harnesses anger to compose poetry that imitates and conveys raw emotion. This is further evidenced by the careful use of language in even the most chaotic sections of the work. In section eight, Belieu replaces the pronoun "I" with its cognate, "EYE." At first glance this malapropism may seem intended simply to add to the chaos of the section—and it does add to the chaos—but the use of the word "EYE" has another function. It implies a sort of knowing on the part of the narrator, a watchful eye cast over the unfaithful husband. A malapropism with a double meaning can be seen in section nine with the phrase, "the mother of a great sun." This, again, does add to the disjointed feel of the section, but it also refers to the poet's child. Belieu has a child (Poetry Foundation), whom she invokes with this malapropism as not only her son, but her sun, the light that her unfaithful husband has elected to leave through his infidelity, as she writes: "I am / left only the mother of a great sun you would go blind and blinder to look / upon its number…"

Throughout the course of the poem, the disintegrating and reintegrating form allowed by the freedom of free verse mimics the emotions one may go through while caught in a memory, ruminating over a significant past interpersonal conflict: slowly, with a climax of fury, followed by a sort of seething resentment. It is this manipulation of form, this integration of verbal and visual elements, this progression from stable verse to chaos, which reinforces the subject matter and plays a major part in creating the jealous, bitter, furious tone of Belieu's poem.

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