

Comparing Poems

A Helpful Idea



Revisiting the local library after a long absence I was struck by the categorization we've all become used to: Fiction and Non-fiction and then all the sub-categories. (Isn't it interesting that we don't use Fiction and Fact – perhaps because a lot of Non-fiction is Opinion.

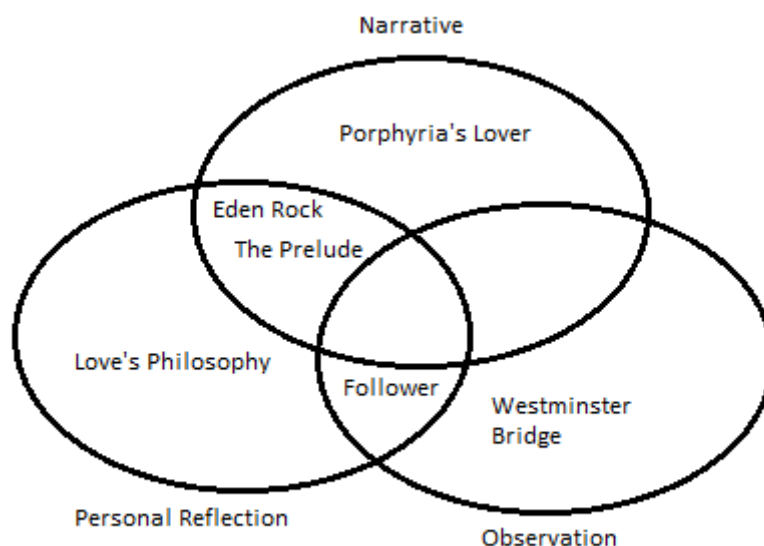
Poetry is usually in a separate little corner presumably because it's uncategorizable.

This made me wonder about poetry categories. If we aren't going to use historical periods, what would we use? I came up with a possible three-way answer: Narrative, Observation and Reflection. I wondered if it would work in practice and tried it out on one of the AQA clusters.

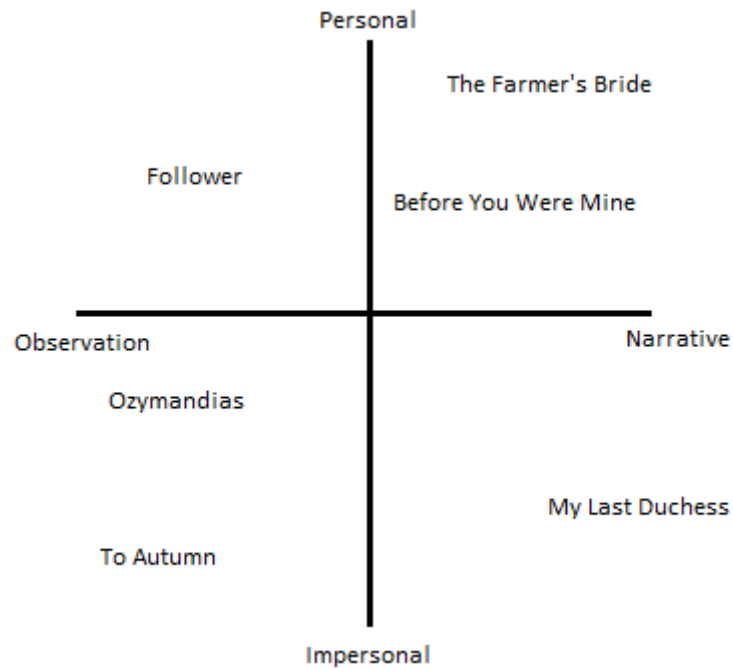
Narrative	Personal Reflection	Observation
Porphyria's Lover	When we two parted	Letters from Yorkshire
Neutral Tones	Love's Philosophy	Follower
The Farmer's Bride	I think of thee	Climbing my Grandfather
Eden Rock	Walking Away	
Mother, any distance	Before You Were Mine	
Singh Song		

I soon discovered that it worked to some extent, but that there was a lot of overlap because the poet's personal reflections often impinged on narrative or observational poems. I also noted that Love and Relationships cluster tended to divide between Reflection and Narrative with a few Observational poems whereas the Power and Conflict cluster majored on Narrative.

Not satisfied with a simple column structure, I wondered if a Venn diagram might work better.



The Venn diagram works well to show overlaps but perhaps an X Y Scattergram might be even better. Having played around with the descriptors, I felt it enabled me to show gradations better.



OK, you might say, so what? Do we really want to categorise poems rather than respond to them? Well, no, not if that is the main aim. But I did think this might be a tool for students to use, especially in small groups where they could argue, for example, about where that extract from *The Prelude* might be placed and why - and could be a way of engaging the more scientifically minded.

As I tried it myself, I did find I was having to think closely about each poem - and thinking is what we want to achieve, I hope. If you come across a poem that just won't fit anywhere - what joy! - surely that's a poem to be treasured.

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