

TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

TITLES

by Tamar Yoseloff

How do you choose a title for a poem? Does the title come before, or after, or somewhere in the middle of the writing process? Should a title be descriptive, or associative, or should it only make real sense to the reader once the poem is read and understood?

Don Paterson says that a title is integral to the poem, like the handle on a suitcase. So many poets tack a title on at the end, and it can feel like an afterthought, or an explanation. Sheenagh Pugh says you should put your titles through the 'contents page' test: if you were browsing the contents page of a collection, what title would grab you and make you want to turn immediately to that page to read the poem?

How about 'Depressed by a Book of Bad Poetry, I Walk Toward an Unused Pasture and Invite the Insects to Join Me'? Yes, that really is the title of a poem by James Wright (known for his incredibly long titles and often quite short poems!). It certainly grabs the reader's attention, but it also sets the scene for what will happen next, gives us a context for the poem to occur (the moment when the poet drops the book, closes his eyes, and hears the 'clear sounds' of grasshoppers and 'a dark cricket').

Some titles establish themes or events which are never directly stated in the poem. Paul Muldoon's poem 'Cuba' is about a time when his sister stayed out all night, and the consternation it caused his father; although Muldoon senior seems to be more obsessed with the headlines and the possibility of nuclear war. He instructs his daughter to 'make your peace with God' and in the last stanza, the poet overhears her Confession. Cuba remains a far country to the Irish protagonists, but looms as a symbol of the Cold War, although neither it, nor the Cuban Missile Crisis (which sets the poem in the early 60s), are actually mentioned.

'The Day Lady Died' is perhaps the most famous poem by Frank O'Hara. In it he recounts a day of running errands and buying presents, before catching the 4:19 to Easthampton. His references are mostly European, as are his gifts, as he races through that most cultural of cities, New York. It isn't until the last stanza that the death in the title is known, the shock forcing him to slow down 'while she whispered a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing'. The singer is never identified, only by her nickname 'Lady Day' (Billie Holiday) and only in the title. This is one day, a random Friday, which will become memorable for this incident.

A title can provide the answer to a riddle, like Sylvia Plath's poem 'Mirror', in which the mirror tells us about itself ('I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.') but never what it is. Or it can establish an extended metaphor, as in Richard Wilbur's poem 'Shame', in which the abstract concept in the title is made into 'a cramped little state with no foreign policy, / Save to be thought inoffensive.' Or it can give us a place, 'Anahorish' or 'Adlestrop' or 'A Disused Shed in County Wexford', which resonates for the poet and which the poem makes significant. Or it can simply describe an object, like 'The Black Lace Fan my Mother Gave me' or an incident or occasion, like 'In the Waiting Room'.

Just remember, the title is the reader's way into your poem, like opening a door to a room. You want the reader to keep reading, but you don't want to give away too much of what the poem is about to reveal. The title sets the tone. It may do what it says on the tin, or it may give a sideways glance or hint to something the poem barely mentions. And it may change as the poem develops over the drafting process (Elizabeth Bishop's poem, provisionally entitled 'The Gift of Losing Things', didn't become 'One Art' until the fifteenth draft).

But never, never think of it as window dressing or an afterthought!

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The Poetry School, 81 Lambeth Walk, London SE11 6DX, UK Tel: +44 (0)207 582 1679