

Themes in the Poetry of Wislawa Szymborska: A Brief Study

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Abstract

Wisawa Szymborska's poetry views humans holistically; everything in its duration and change, bloom and decay, the enigma of origins and unknowable final destinies. Her poetry anchor individuals in a variety of natural forms, tether them to evolution, and grant them a distinct place through the gift and curse of consciousness and they experience cosmic loneliness. Szymborska's compositions weave together admiration for a diverse universe with contemplation on emptiness. Existence is the polar opposite of nonexistence here, the triumph of the game of coincidences, a transient glimpse of reality, and a brief encounter with life.

The present article focuses on the themes in the poetry of Wislawa Szymborska bringing out her new ideas and a good dose of surprise.

Keywords: *Wislawa Szymborska, warfare, devastation, internal conflict, naturalism, good world.*

Introduction

Wislawa Szymborska was born in Kornik (now Bnin), near Poznan, Poland, on July 2, 1923, to Anna Rottermund and Wincenty Szymborski. Her family went to Krakow when she was eight years old, where she completed her elementary education and enrolled in a convent school. Szymborska began writing in elementary school. She defied government constraints and enrolled in a prohibited Polish Secondary School during the Nazi occupation of Poland during World War II. Szymborska began her job in 1943 as an official for a railroad company (to avoid transportation to a labour camp in Germany). She attended the Jagiellonian University in Krakow from 1945 to 1948, where she studied Polish Literature and Sociology. In contrast to other Polish writers who fled the country during the war, Szymborska remained. In 1948, she married Adam Wlodek, a poet and editor with whom she collaborated, but divorced him six years later, in 1954.

During her career, Szymborska published approximately twenty volumes of poetry, totaling slightly less than 400 poems. Her poetry are primarily on the splendour and wealth of nature; the human presence in the universe; and the human perspective on the natural world. Szymborska was the 1996 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Among her other notable honours are the 1954 City of Kraków Literature Prize, the 1963 Polish Ministry of Culture Prize, the 1991 Goethe Prize, the 1995 Herder Prize, the 1996 Polish PEN Club Prize, and the 2011 Order of the White Eagle.

To begin comprehending Wislawa Szymborska's poetry, one must first grasp her origins and numerous life experiences. Szymborska was a Polish poet born in 1923 who lived in Poland for the majority of her life. This, of course, indicates that she lived through WWII (which occurred between 1939 and 1945). This explains why she weaves several battle motifs throughout her poems, as evidenced in "*The End and the Beginning*" and numerous other pieces. Without her encounters with the impact World War II had on her life, readers would almost entirely miss her numerous sorrowful and beautifully written poems. Szymborska also writes from a variety of diverse perspectives, lending her poetry a sense of individuality and allowing her audience to experience multiple versions of a story she has delivered. The emotion is honest and well expressed in her poetry.

Theme of Warfare and Devastation

Beginning with "The End and the Beginning," readers gain an immediate sense of how WWII affected Szymborska, even if they have no prior knowledge of her as a person. This is harder to deduce, but with some basic research, it is evident that these were the events that inspired this poetry. The opening stanza clearly establishes the idea of battle.

“After every war
someone has to clean up.
Things won’t
straighten themselves up, after all.”

The opening stanza clearly establishes the idea of battle. Later in the poem, Szymborska continues:

“Someone has to drag in a girder
to prop up a wall.
Someone has to glaze a window,
rehang a door.”

Again, Szymborska's descriptions of post-war events are not only astonishingly detailed given the few words she employed, but also brimming with heartbreaking, regretful feeling. To briefly discuss point of view, it is uncertain whether Wislawa is writing *"The End and the Beginning"* from a perspective of her own, but it is unmistakably one of someone who is remorseful of the war's devastation, questioning whether all the carnage was worth it.

Continuing Szymborska's topic of perspective in her poetry, "Unexpected Meeting" is an enigmatic composition that leaves the reader wondering who the poem's narrator is. As an audience member, the reader would constantly switch between reading this piece through the eyes of an animal and a person. When Szymborska refers to animals as "ours," she communicates a sense of human ownership:

“Our tigers drink milk.
Our hawks walk on the ground.
Our sharks drown in the water.
Our wolves yawn in front of the open cage.”

This may have given readers the impression that these creatures are owned by humans, forcing them to read the poetry from a human perspective. However, the poem's concluding phrase is left open to interpretation:

“Our people
have nothing to say.”

The line "Our people" may imply an animal's ownership of the human race, causing audience members to ponder if Szymborska is implying that humans are in fact worse beings than those in the animal kingdom. It is an intriguing poetry because the narrator's perspective is shifted frequently, leaving readers to wonder who or what is intended to be narrating the story. Szymborska was a poet who frequently played with this feature, lending her poetry a greater depth and necessitating further study.

Theme of Internal Conflict

Returning to the topic of conflict that runs throughout Szymborska's writing, "Truth Demands" delves into the universal reality of difficulty that every human appears to encounter. Again, this poem almost certainly would not exist without Wislawa's WWII experiences (or, at least, to the same extent of how successful it is). The objective of this poem is to show that, despite continued pain and tragedy,

each individual must continue living his or her life, much like Szymborska did during the war. It is illustrative through the following lines.

“Letters fly back and forth
between Pearl Harbor and Hastings,
a moving van passes
beneath the eye of the lion at Chaeronea...”

This poem is intimately related to what occurred during WWII and the author's reaction to it. Again, this piece is filled with emotion, as Wislawa was able to depict the period's hardships in such a descriptive yet painful manner.

Szymborska, is a highly competent poet who is capable of portraying a variety of fascinating features throughout her writing, including point of view, emotion, and the recurring theme of conflict. To emphasize, it is critical to understand this author's situation, as it is with all authors, prior to reading her work.

Theme of Naturalism

Szymborska explores man's consciousness, perception, and its application to the natural world. Consciousness, as a mental state, enables man to see, reason, and direct his actions in order to better his chances of survival in comparison to the rest of nature.

Richard Norman adds to the above remark when he observes:

“...not only our intellectual capabilities, but also our broader mental life, including our ideas, beliefs, emotions, feelings, experiences, sensations, hopes, fears, aspirations, desires, and choices and decisions. We also value the fact that we have these mental states and experiences, not simply that we have them, but that they are conscious experiences.

Possessing consciousness, one could argue, is what distinguishes us as humans. (59)”

The poem "*Among the Multitudes*" reveals Szymborska's obvious satisfaction in being human. According to the poet, being human is a fortunate coincidence because evolution could have taken her down a different path: she could have been a "less fortunate" species developed for their fur or meat. According to Szymborska, human reason is limited to the human world, whereas nature exists in a material and autonomous sphere; nature's aesthetic and sensory values are totally human:

“The window has a wonderful view of a lake,
but the view doesn't view itself. It exists in this world
colorless, shapeless, soundless, odorless, and painless.”

Szymborska's literary oeuvre is replete with examinations of time. She believes that time plays a vital role in shaping men's perspectives and attitudes toward life. She frequently emphasizes the impermanence, impermanence, and unpredictable nature of man's life; as a result, she is continuously striving against time's irreversibility. Marian Stala observes that "Szymborska disregards any sense of time that has not been established in an individual's psyche."

The Holocaust and war experiences precipitated the abandonment of a religious worldview and belief in a personal God. In response to God's command to Abraham, the poet aligns herself with Isaac in the poem "*Night*." Szymborska inquires: "Where will I seek refuge if the biblical God's eye is fixed on me, as it was on Isaac?" From this point forward, God is merely a metaphor for her. The biblical God is proud of his "masterpiece": "heaven, seas, earth, and creatures".

However, Szymborska reacts sarcastically "God convinced Job of his faultlessness by a variety of arguments, most notably the two beasts: Behemoth and Leviathan ("Summary," 1962). This biblical metaphor encompasses not only the Holocaust, but also Stalinist and other atrocities. This world inspires fear; it is rife with crimes, fear, fright, despair, and unhappiness; it is difficult to regard it as God's "masterpiece." The protagonist of the poem is reminded of the world's cruelty through her

nightmares, which are fraught with worry and culminate in fearful awakenings. In the poem "*For my friends*," those who vanish abruptly - as they did during the war and under Stalin's reign - scream out in despair, "We are innocent!" The heroine of the poem "*Notes From a Nonexistent Himalayan Expedition*" persuades the Yeti that crimes are not the only reality in the human world and that not all words carry the death penalty.

Szyborska states plainly in the poem "*Rehabilitation*" that poetry's shortcoming is that its "words are incapable of reviving people." If you wish to survive, you should avoid any contact with the outside world, as the poem "*Midsummer Night's Dream*" suggests.

Szyborska frequently displays her awareness of wartime events in the poems under consideration through a somewhat sophisticated poetic syntax, through avant-garde formulae of great meaning compression. However, the proliferation of poetic figures is detrimental to generational programming. Explicit expressions are the only ones that create clarity and persuasive efficacy. In Szyborska's manifesto, the political and historical macroscale collides with the everyday concrete, resulting in a vision of a calm, secure existence. The generational "we" lends weight to the poetic notion of the beginning. Following the war, the following criteria are used to determine the objectives of collaborative endeavours:

for the smoke from red chimney
for the book used read
fear for a piece of a clear sky
we struggle ("O coś więcej;" For Something More; CP 25).

The landscape is unappealing, but that is beside the purpose. Smoke that does not obscure the "clean sky" signifies not danger, but the potential of habitation. A book that is publicly read demonstrates the freedom of choice of contents that were previously restricted by the occupier. A gesture of farewell to national martyrology is required for the concrete and symbolic restoration of the globe. It is worthwhile to restart, as this is what life's instinct dictates:

Our eyes are tired with fresh memory,
but hands know, believe. The hands with which we are
to lift the weight of the world they know: the world will be born again
without the specter's of war ("Krucjata dzieci;" Children's Crusade CP 27).

Szyborska occasionally abandons the grammatical plural in her early poetry. Acceptance of collective responsibilities is not the only and final attitude. As a result, the tone of poetry is distinct, emphasizing personal experience. Traumatic memory brings the recent past back to life. The sparse epitaph for "the memory of the slain," which is set apart from heroic poetry storytelling, reveals little about the hero, as a full lyrical confession is not a possibility. Anger and loathing are directed away from harsh history and into the natural order, the fresh green of trees, and the rebellious joy of sunlight, as in the much later poetry "*Parting with a View*" from the volume *The End and the Beginning*. One should give up on the disjunction between the torturous wait and the regenerative nature's rhythm. The oblique suggestion approach precludes more direct assurances.

Theme of the Dream of a Good World

Szyborska regards poetry and other artistic representations of reality as incomplete, confused, and open. The creative act reveals a consciousness of limitations: writing is a perpetual loss of other possibilities, a reduction of numerous dimensions of existence, an illusory ordering of things, and a sphere of doubtful knowledge.

The title "*I'm Working on the World*" seemed to indicate that we shall learn about self-created poetic laws. This is a literary credo that relates to the poet's function and outlines her creative responsibilities. Szyborska relativizes this issue in light of the real world in "*The Joy of Writing*" by

juxtaposing aesthetic creative gesture with the transience of human life. Finally, "*Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem*" provides a self-reflection from the perspective of critical reception tropes. Poems such as "*An Idea*" and "*In Fact Every Poem*" discuss the poetic workshop, creative impulses, and conditions necessary for the creation of a poem. Whereas "*Poetry Reading*," "*Stage Fright*," and "*Some People Like Poetry*" reflect on the social influence and purpose of poetry. The speaker of these poems respects his or her readers as if they were close friends, with consideration, kindness, and friendship. In Szymborska's poetry, high-level discussions about difficult and disagreeable subjects take place. The variety of tones and shifts from sarcasm to seriousness do not preclude the reader from being informed about the most critical subjects.

Szymborska employs utopian language in "*I'm Working on the World*." Her lyrical assertion alludes to cultural classics that discuss the genesis of the world and depict the ideal order of human existence and cohabitation.

Szymborska's poetry encapsulates a variety of unfathomable and seemingly contradictory states of our brains at work in each, even the most mundane, moment. Wislawa saw a world where nothing is certain, where everything is subject to interpretation, where today's truth may become tomorrow's untruth, a world where people live in a virtual world of technologies, where the wealthy are not the wealthy, where the good are no longer the great and vice versa, where parents are busy for their children but not with them, a world where "stupidity is not amusing," and "wisdom is not gay."

Conclusion

Szymborska's examination of the human environment established that man is a self-aware person. While his consciousness appears to distinguish him from the rest of the species, it also makes him aware of the brevity of his life and his isolation from the rest of the created universe, as demonstrated in "*Evaluation of an Unwritten Poem*."

Her poetry demonstrates that man does not have an advantage over nature due to human consciousness, reason, or language. Szymborska's poetry demonstrates that man, despite his consciousness, is incapable of comprehending nature and its system. Additionally, the poet demonstrates that in the human arena, unanswerable issues abound. Szymborska's poetry attests to the happy condition of self-awareness in which nature exists. This leads her to question whether nature is perfect. Though perfection is primarily a human ideal, Szymborska believes it is necessary to bring together the natural and human worlds in order to compare and contrast their perfection. Szymborska examines nature's perfection in accordance with the philosophical concept of perfection, which describes an object's completeness as being complete, self-sufficient, exclusive, and purposeful. In "*The Onion*," she is taken aback by nature's magnificent effort. "The Onion" exemplifies perfection in terms of physical symmetry and self-containment, and the poet refers to it as "nature's finest success story." On this occasion, the poet affirms nature's beauty but concludes that the "Onionoid" purity is irrelevant in the human world.

What is important in a human world are utility and dexterity, which can only be attained through possession of a human body. Human beings, animals, and plants all deteriorate and perish interminably in "*Nothing's a Gift*." This, the poet believes, is nature's failure and defeat in the war against time.

I move about the planet in a crush of other debtors.
Some saddled with the burden of paying off their wings.
Others must, willy-nilly, account for every leaf.

On the subject of nature's perfection, one may argue that nature is both the epitome and, inexplicably the opposite of perfection. However, Szymborska points out that perfection criterion are purely human inventions and that nature, while occasionally falling short, is still wiser in many ways

than man. As Bojanowska points out, it possesses a "internal order that makes considerably more sense than any order created by man" (210). Nature's flaws are dwarfed by its beauty and wealth, and the poet is clearly overcome with ecstasy when, in "Birthday," she experiences nature's plenitude and declares

so much world all at once—how it rustles and bustles!
Moraines and morays and morasses and mussels,
the flame, the flamingo, the flounder, the feather
how to line them all up, how to put them together?

Szyborska also criticizes evolution by characterizing natural selection as a loss of morphological appendages. Natural selection is a process of rejection rather than refining.

My siblings died the day I left for dry land
and only one small bone recall that anniversary in me.
I've shed my skin, squandered vertebrae and legs.

As Baranowska observes, Szyborska confronts central issues of reality in her poetry, such as life and death or man's place in the universe: "she takes an ex-centric position"(50) in addressing such issues, implying a peripheral vantage point, a selection of less travelled paths through which to approach these central issues.

Her perspective on nature and man elucidates the truth and untruth of both. Though human awareness is unique to man's universe, he would invariably become aware of nature through his conscious perception of it. Nature, despite its seeming flaws, would continue to astonish the poet. Although evolution's logic implies improvisation, the poet reveals certain flaws in the natural selection process; and death's inevitability is nothing more than nature's natural path.

To summarize, one could argue with Bojanowska that Szyborska's poetry "strikes a tone of qualified optimism, optimism filtered through doubt, scepticism, and reluctance." Her vision of man and his place in nature blends despair and rapture, abyss and miracle, and this complicated mixture is masked by acceptance and reverence in the face of life's mystery" (220).