

## **The Language of Paradox (1947) – Cleanth Brooks (1906–1904)**

### **Summary:**

Cleanth Brooks, an eminent, New Critic advocates the centrality of paradox as a way of understanding and interpreting poetry in his best-known works, *The Language of Paradox* from *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939). Brooks helped to formulate formalist criticism by emphasising “the interior life of a poem” and codifying the principles of close reading. *The Language of Paradox*, the first chapter of Cleanth Brooks’ *The Well Wrought Urn*, begins with the famous statement: ‘...the language of poetry is the language of paradox’. Paradox is the language of ‘sophistry, hard, bright’ and ‘witty’ and not the language of poetry. ‘Our prejudices force us to regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational’. The scientist may need freedom from paradox, but for the poet, truth can be ‘approached’ only through paradox.

In *The Language of Paradox*, Brooks establishes the crucial role of paradox by demonstrating that paradox is “the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry!” This is because referential language is incapable of representing the specific message of a poet and the poet must “make up his language as he goes,” since words are mutable and meaning shifts when words are placed in relation to one another.

In literature, the paradox is a literary device consisting of the anomalous juxtaposition of incongruous ideas for the sake of striking exposition or unexpected insight. It functions as a method of literary composition and analysis that involves examining apparently contradictory statements and drawing conclusions either to reconcile them or to explain their presence. Cleanth Brooks, an active member of the New Critical movement, outlines the use of reading poems through paradox as a method of critical interpretation.

Paradox in poetry means that tension at the surface of a verse can lead to apparent contradictions and hypocrisies. His seminal essay, *The Language of Paradox*, lays out Brooks’ argument for the centrality of paradox by demonstrating that paradox is “the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry.” The argument is based on the contention that referential language is too vague for the specific message a poet expresses; he must “make up his language as he goes.” This, Brooks argues, is because words are mutable and meaning shifts when words are placed in relation to one another.

In this essay *The Language of Paradox*, Cleanth Brooks emphasises how the language of poetry is different from that of the sciences, claiming that he is interested in our seeing that the paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poet's language: "it is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations. And I do not mean that the connotations are important as supplying some sort of frill or trimming, something external to the real matter in hand. I mean that the poet does not use a notation at all—as a scientist may properly be said to do so. The poet, within limits, has to make up his language as he goes."

In this passage, Brooks stresses that poetic language is inherently different from scientific language because the poet constructs his language as he goes and defines his own rules. The poet then has control over language and must take an active role in the shaping of what literature means. The poet then is not limited to the denotations of words but instead revels in the possible connotations of words. The individual poet is given a great deal of power then, in the process of knowledge-making and the reader is isolated from the production of meaning.

### **Paradox:**

In the writing of poems, paradox is used as a method by which unlikely comparisons can be drawn and meaning can be extracted from poems, both straightforward and enigmatic. Brooks points to William Wordsworth's poem "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free." He begins by outlining the initial and surface conflict, which is that the speaker is filled with worship while his female companion does not seem to be. The paradox, discovered by the poem's end, is that the girl is more full of worship than the speaker precisely because she is always consumed with sympathy for nature and not—as is the speaker—in tune with nature while immersed in it.

In his reading of Wordsworth's poem, *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*, Brooks contends that the poem offers paradox not in its details but in the situation that the speaker creates. Though London is a man-made marvel, and in many respects in opposition to nature, the speaker does not view London as a mechanical and artificial landscape but as a landscape comprised entirely of nature. Since London was created by man, and man is a part of nature, London is thus too a part of nature. It is this reason that gives the speaker the opportunity to remark upon the beauty of London as he would a natural phenomenon and as Brooks points

out, can call the houses “sleeping” rather than “dead,” because they too are vivified with the natural spark of life, granted to them by the men that built them.

### **The use of paradox by the Neo-Classicists:**

Though paradox is the basis of romanticism, the neo-classicists made much use of it. But there is a difference in their use of it. The romantics used paradox to arouse wonder and awaken the mind and make it conscious of a new light and beauty in things ignored as commonplace and trivial.

The neo-classic poets use paradox as ironical. We find such irony in the following lines of Pope from his *Essay on Man*. Man may be the lord of all the things created by him, but he is also prey to all the things. Man claims he is the soul judge of truth, but the irony is that he is always in error.

### **Poetry and Science:**

The language poetry is the language of paradox. It is not fixed and rigid as that of science. In science, the meaning of words is fixed. But the poet uses poetry in new combinations and in new arrangements to modify the meaning of words that are found in dictionaries. Thus, it enriches the language and increases its expressive power.

### **The nature of metaphor:**

The use of metaphor by a poet forces him to resort to the use of paradox. Even the simplest poets are forced to use paradox. Such is the nature of poetry. There are many who use paradox and irony consciously to gain compression and precision.

### **John Donne:**

Brooks ends his essay with a reading of John Donne’s poem *The Canonization*, which uses a paradox as its underlying metaphor. Using a charged religious term to describe the speaker’s physical love as saintly, Donne effectively argues that in rejecting the material world and withdrawing to a world of each other, the two lovers are appropriate candidates for canonization. This seems to parody both love and religion, but in fact it combines them, pairing unlikely circumstances and demonstrating their resulting complex meaning. Brooks points also to secondary paradoxes in the poem: the simultaneous duality and singleness of love and the double and contradictory meanings of “die” in Metaphysical poetry (used here as both sexual union and literal death). He contends that these several meanings are impossible to convey at the right depth and emotion in any language but that of paradox. A similar paradox

is used in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet says, "For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch and palm to palm is holy palmer's kiss." Brooks' contemporaries in the sciences were, in the 40s and 50s, reorganising university science curricula into codified disciplines. The study of English, however, remained less defined and it became a goal of the New Critical movement to justify literature in an age of science by separating the work from its author and reader and by examining it as a self-sufficient artifact. In Brooks's use of the paradox as a tool for analysis, however, he develops a logical case as a literary technique with strong emotional affect. His reading of *The Canonization* in *The Language of Paradox*, where paradox becomes central to expressing complicated ideas of sacred and secular love, provides an example of this development.

### **Shakespeare's views of paradox:**

In one of his poems, Shakespeare describes that reason and intellect separate and divide while imagination brings together and unities. A poet cannot do without paradox because the very nature of paradox is bringing together of opposites. In his poem *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, Shakespeare describes the magic power of the poetic imagination, which unites and has contrasted it with reason which divides.

### **Irony:**

Although paradox and irony as New Critical tools for reading poetry are often conflated, they are independent poetical devices. Irony for Brooks is "the obvious warping of a statement by the context", whereas paradox is later glossed as "a special kind of qualification which involves the resolution of opposites." Irony functions as a presence in the text— the overriding context of the surrounding words that make up the poem.

Paradox, however, is essential to the structure and being of the poem. In *The Language of Paradox* from *The Well Wrought Urn* Brooks shows that paradox was so essential to poetic meaning that paradox was almost identical to poetry. Brooks' use of paradox emphasised the indeterminate lines between form and content. "The form of the poem uniquely embodies its meaning" and the language of the poem "effects the reconciliation of opposites or contraries."

While irony functions within the poem, paradox often refers to the meaning and structure of the poem and is thus inclusive of irony. This existence of opposites or contraries and the reconciliation thereof is poetry and the meaning of the poem.

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