

Emperor Du Fu's Poetic Identity

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For this paper, the works selected for analysis have been written by a Chinese poet named Du Fu (712-770), also known as Tu Fu. He is considered an influential Chinese poet who was part of the Tang Dynasty. Intellectuals regard him as the greatest poet in the history of humanity. Du Fu's poems exhibit his ambitiousness to serve his nation by becoming an accomplished civil servant.

However, the poet's life experiences show that he was unable to achieve his goal as he was faced with difficult times throughout his life. The current paper attempts to analyze the poet's works in order to examine his poetic identity and his style of writing. The paper will also assess the role of Du Fu in addressing the historical events of his time period and how they impacted him and shaped his life. For the analysis portion of this paper, four poems by Du Fu will be scrutinized to find out the author's purpose in using poetry as a medium of expression.

If one looks at the works written by Du Fu, it becomes evident that morality and historical events are two main themes that the poet has utilized in his works. Du Fu has written both long poems and short poems, in which the longer poems have shown freer forms that reflect songs while the shorter poems have been written in constrained versions. Analyzing Du Fu's short poem *The View in Spring*, it can be seen that this literary work highlights the situation of China during the year 755. The poem is based on the rebellious event that was carried out by An Lu-shan against Emperor Xuanzong, who trusted him deeply, as An Lu-shan was a loyal subject. The entire court was entertained by An Lu-shan's behavior as he took it upon himself to act as a jester most of the time. He was short, chubby, and cunning, but the Emperor did not doubt his intentions for a moment until the rebellion took place, and the Emperor had to run to safety. The first stanza of the poem is significant as it foreshadows the situation in China when An Lu-shin dropped his act and brought forth his forces that destroyed the Eastern capital and then crushed the imperial army. The stanza is as follows,

*"A kingdom smashed, its hill and rivers still here,
Spring in the city, plants, and trees grow deep.
Moved by the moment, flowers splash with tears,
Alarmed at parting, birds startle the heart."* (p.

420)

The rebellion took place in the interior part of the Eastern Capital, and the above-mentioned stanzas reflect the situation in China, where the nation was suddenly put into a state of terror as its own people rebelled against the Emperor and the government. To understand why An Lu-shan would rebel against the Emperor, a brief overview of China's history will be given, specifically focusing on the eighteenth century. Around the eighteenth century, China was considered to be one of the most modernized civilizations present on Earth (Holyoak). The Tang Dynasty was known to have gained fame during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong, who was also known as the Brilliant Emperor by his people (Holyoak). The Emperor was known to have ruled for almost forty-three years, and for most of his era, there was peace and prosperity to be found in China. However, the later years of his reign were marked by ruin as the country was faced with corruption. During the first half of his reign, China had low taxes, and there were no reports of corruption (Holyoak). Peace and harmony were the two factors that could be found prevalent under the Emperor's rule. People enjoyed a simple life; the cities were safe, and foreigners could travel far and wide without worrying about any road bandits (Holyoak). Education was on the rise as the elites were highly specialized in their areas of expertise. A system was seen permeating China that selected Government ministers on the basis of their skills, such as poetry and calligraphy. Individuals who turned out to be highly efficient in their field of expertise were made into civil servants (Holyoak).

However, around 737, the Emperor's reign began to deteriorate as reports show that he killed three of his sons and employed someone else's wife as his mistress. The influence of the mistress leads the Emperor's rule further into decadence (Holyoak). The affairs of the nation were left into the hands of the mistress's relatives, who turned out to be corrupt and killed anyone who was honest and loyal to the nation (Holyoak). Around the year 750, the nation was faced with natural disasters such as typhoons, fires, and draughts, which made the people believe that the mandate of heaven had ended and people were being punished for their corruption (Holyoak). The appearance of the concubine led to the seeds of corruption being planted in China as the Emperor gave the affairs of the state to his mistress's relatives. A Lu-shan used it as an opportunity to gain the favor of the Emperor and set the trap. The Emperor did not pay any heed to the activities that were taking place on the court. The state's deterioration gave space for rebellious acts to take place as can be seen from the following stanzas,

*“ War’s beacon fires have gone on three months
Letters from home are worth thousands in gold.*

*Fingers run through white hair until it thins,
Cap-pins will almost no longer hold.” (p. 420)*

The above-mentioned stanza reflects the dire condition of China, in which war broke out between the two imperial armies and the rebels. The rebel force was able to crush the imperial army by unleashing havoc upon the civilians and the soldiers. The line ‘*letters from home are worth thousands in gold*’ highlights the author’s sufferings for being caught behind the rebel lines. Du Fu was unable to go home because of the situation in China, and the news of his family had been distressing him.

During the eighteenth century, Du Fu wrote a thousand poems that were the basis of his fame in not only Chinese literature but also Western literature. If one looks at his poetry, history is deeply embedded in his verses and covers the events that move beyond three thousand years. Du Fu is labeled as the poet of people; one reason for that can be seen from the themes in his poems that consider the historical contexts and the impact historical events left on people. Being a good Confucian, Du Fu expressed his despair for the deteriorating situation of China and the sufferings of the Chinese people through his poetry. Du Fu’s poetry can be regarded as modernist poetry as it provides the poet’s personal accounts and is filled with his concerns about the condition of China, his family and friends, and the failures that he has encountered throughout his lifetime. In the second poem, *Lament for Chen-tao*, the author shows concern for the imperial army that had to fight off the rebel group in the midst of utter confusion as An Lun-shan’s attack had taken the whole nation in its grip. The following lines show the brutality of the event that brought China to a state of complete ruin.

*“In winter’s first month, from ten provinces
Sons of good families –
Their blood became the water that stood
In the marshes of Chen-tao.” (p. 421)*

The above-mentioned lines point towards the tumult that had distressed everyone due to the rebellion of An Lu-shan. To defend the state, thousands of imperial soldiers put their lives on the line to defend the nation. So many families lost their sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers to keep the civilians safe from An Lu-shan’s army. Du Fu sympathizes with the soldiers who were killed because of An Lu-shan. He laments over their death and presents a heartrending picture of all the lives that were lost in the following line ‘*their blood became the water that stood in the marshes of Chen-tao*’. His works have influenced people of all ages, as generations after generations tend to praise him for his

humanitarian vision. The rebel group had access to the interior parts of China, which disabled the movement of people and blocked the passage home. Du Fu was one of those who could not reach his family or make contact with them except through letters. The civilians were stuck as the rebels had taken the Eastern part of the capital first and crushed it before moving on to the Southern part of the state. The following lines written by Du Fu show the problems of the civilians.

*“Citizens of the capital turned
To face the north and weep,
Day and night, they keep looking
For loyalist armies to come.”* (p. 421)

The mentioned lines provide evidence of the citizens’ hopelessness as they wept for the war to end and for the saviors to come to their rescue. However, it should be noted that thousands of the imperial soldiers had been slaughtered by the rebels by An Lu-shan. Similarly, in the poem *Lament for Greenslopes*, the author reflects on the condition of the soldiers who were in dire need of motivation as they had been facing defeat since the onset of the war. In the second stanza, the author writes,

*“The blond-haired tribes of Xi fold
Move farther west each day,
Several horsemen bent their bows
And dared to dash forth to attack.”* (p. 421)

These lines are reflective of the army’s situation after the war continued to crush their numbers over and over till the men were without motivation and hope. The imperial army was desperate at this point to attack the rebel group as they were out of strategy and wanted to end the war so that they could go back to their families. In the last stanza of the poem, the author writes,

*“If only I could send a letter
And let it reach our troops –
Hold on and wait until next year,
Don’t act rashly!” (p. 421)*

Du Fu desperately wanted to provide help to the imperial soldiers so that they could find a way out of this situation and end the rebellion. The author did present a strategy or two to the soldiers, as can be seen from the above lines, and his words were efficient enough to lift the spirit of the soldiers. The scenario of a once peaceful land had been turned upside down due to the corruption that had taken a grip over China and had put fear in the hearts of the people. Being a poet, Du Fu took it upon himself to help those in need, especially the soldiers who had lost hope after losing so many brothers in arms. The fourth poem to be analyzed is *The Officer at Tong Pass*, in which the author mentions the war scenario after the rebel army gained access to the Eastern capital towards Chang-an. The loyal army was under the control of General Ge-Shu Han, who had instructed the soldiers to hide behind the wall in order to ambush the rebel army. As the following stanza shows, one of the troops ensured that the walls were strong enough to keep the enemy at bay. Ge-Shu Han’s strategy was thought to be without flaw, as the troop says in the following lines,

*“If the Turks come, just hold this fast,
The Western Capital needs worry no more.
Just look, sir, at those strategic points! –
So narrow they just let one cart through.” (p. 425)*

However, after being pressured by the state, the loyal army left the safety of the walls and confronted An Lu-shan out in the open, which led to the massacre of the soldiers. In the poem, the author criticizes the strategy employed by Ge-Shu Han, which turned out to be an utter disaster. In the last stanza, the author laments at the failure of the plan, which led to the loyal army being crushed as they ran out in the open to face An Lu-shan head-on.

From the above analysis of the poems, it is evident that Du Fu was a representative of his time as he mentioned the situation in China, which deteriorated after the Emperor gave over urgent matters to

his mistress and her relatives. The change in the Emperor's behavior led the country towards its downfall, as can be seen in the poems that were written. Fu's written lures can also be seen to have influenced his work, as the tone that he employs in his work is that of distress and sorrow. Du Fu's poems, whether short or long, are centered on the history of China, and he reminisces about the glorious days alongside the bloodshed brought on by the rebels.

Works Cited

Holyoak, Keith. *Facing the Moon: Poems of Li Bai and Du Fu*. BookBaby, 2014.