

1/30/2001
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ENC 1102
Very Like A Whale
By Ogden Nash
Interpreting Poetry
Revision

Ogden Nash's (1902-1971) poem, "Very Like a Whale," is an honest reaction of a reader who has difficulties when trying to understand why some authors go to such lengths to write for the sake of writing—forgetting the most important thing: The reader should be able to understand what the author wanted to say.

I can relate to the way he feels. Sometimes, it's difficult to comprehend the writer's intent. It shouldn't be this way. Reading should be a pleasant experience—such as reading Ogden's poem. The first time I read "Very Like a Whale," I had no difficulties understanding his message.

To give an example of how confusing some poems can be, Ogden chooses one of Byron's poems. He wonders what Byron meant by, "Assyrians came down like a wolf on the fold" (473). If you think that Ogden would explain it right away, you would be wrong. He's doing a great job recreating the reader's confusion, while reading Byron's poem. By using this method, Ogden demonstrates that what he said was true. We'll figure out, eventually, that the wolves

dressed in gold were, actually, the Assyrians themselves. Therefore, not the wolves—but the Assyrians— have killed the “Hebrew host” (473).

After proving his point with such a great example, Ogden extends his example to other famous writers and poets:

“That’s the kind of thing that’s being done all the time by poets, from
Homer to Tennyson...”(473).

He points to the fact that some of their metaphors and similes are better left out:

“Wouldn’t anybody but a poet think twice
Before stating that his girl’s feet were mice?” (473).

Ogden ends his poem hoping that his examples were good enough for the reader to understand his message:

“And after that maybe you’ll begin to comprehend dimly
What I meant by too much metaphor and simile” (474).

The word comprehend is used with a clear purpose: The poet hopes that his message was understood exactly the way he wanted and not just partly.

Ogden’s poem brings great relief to the reader—who blames himself for not always getting the message of a poem, when reading it for the first time. It’s not always the reader’s fault, and I’ll surely remember that.

Works Cited

Nash, Ogden. "Very Like a Whale." *Angles of Vision: Reading, Writing, and the Study of Literature*. Eds. Arthur W. Biddle and Toby Fulwiler. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1992. 473-474.