

The Interplay of Memory and Time in Anna Akhmatova's poetry

Dr. Vidya M Joseph
Associate Professor of English,
GFGC, Birur, Karnataka

**Mary Magdalene beat her breasts and sobbed,
His dear disciple, stone-faced, stared.
His mother stood apart. No other looked
into her secret eyes. No one dared.**

Requiem, Anna Akhmatova

Anna Akhmatova is without doubt one of the foremost literary figures of 20th Century Russia with a profound body of work which impacted Russian literature and culture to a very great extent. Her pioneering poetic style played a very important role in the development of modernist poetry in Russia. Her style was the use of simple and clear language in contrast to the extravagant language of the Russian symbolists. At the same time her poetry was deeply emotional.

More importantly, she was seen as the voice of the ordinary people of Russia, with her ability to capture the everyday experiences, struggles and despair of ordinary Russians during Stalin's reign. Akhmatova's personal life was marked by tragedy and persecution. Her son Lev Gumilev was arrested multiple times, and she herself faced censorship, harassment, and official condemnation from the Soviet regime. Despite this, she refused to emigrate or compromise her principles, becoming a symbol of resistance to totalitarianism. Akhmatova's refusal to bend to the pressures of the Soviet regime and her commitment to her art earned her immense respect both within Russia and internationally. Her integrity as an artist in the face of political oppression is a testament to the power of literature and the strength of the human spirit. Her work has had a profound influence on subsequent generations of Russian poets and writers. Many contemporary authors continue to draw inspiration from her themes, style, and approach to poetry.

This paper will explore the theme of time and memory in her poetry. Akhmatova grappled extensively with the themes of time and memory in her works. These themes are central to her poetic expression and are woven into the fabric of her verse.

Akhmatova often contemplates the transient nature of time. Her verse frequently alludes to the impermanence of moments, the fleetingness of youth, and the inexorable march of days. This is evident in poems like "I Taught Myself to Live Simply" where she reflects on the passing seasons and the cyclical nature of life. The poem suggests that as one matures, there is a realization of the transience of life, leading to a shift in priorities and a newfound appreciation for simplicity.



The poem begins with the speaker declaring that she has learned to live simply which can be seen as a response to the complexities and distractions that life often presents. This simplicity is presented as a conscious choice indicating a deliberate effort to detach from unnecessary complications. As the poem progresses, the speaker acknowledges the passage of time and its impact on her perception of the world. The imagery of “the fading rose put in a glass” suggests the fragility and impermanence of beauty and youth. This is a powerful metaphor for the fleeting nature of time itself. The speaker’s mention of “the sun’s light grows slowly dim” further underscores the inevitability of change and the gradual shift from youth to a more mature perspective. This fading light can be viewed as a representation of the fading of youth and the increasing awareness of mortality.

The poem culminates in the speaker’s reflection on the passage of time : “and time is passing, time is passing on.” This repetition emphasizes the inexorable march of time, echoing the sentiment that life is transient and constantly evolving. The poem is not just a contemplation on the fluidity of time and the wisdom that comes with experience and age, but is also suggestive that as one grows older there is a natural inclination to seek simplicity and appreciate the present moment. Like time, memory for Akhmatova is a powerful force that can resurrect the past. She evokes a sense of nostalgia and longing for days gone by, a sentiment palpable in pieces such as “Lot’s Wife” where she mourns the loss of a beloved city and “Requiem” a poignant elegy for those persecuted under Stalin’s regime.

In “Requiem”, which is a powerful and deeply emotional poem that she wrote in response to the suffering and persecution experienced by the people during the infamous purges of Josef Stalin. The poem is a lament for the victims of the regime, including her son, who was arrested and imprisoned multiple times. The poem longs for a past that was more innocent, before the horrors of the purges took hold. The poem is filled with references to everyday life before the terror, evoking a sense of nostalgia for a time when life was more stable and secure. For instance, lines like “And the cry of the birds was far away” and “in the thunder of spring apples” evoke images of a tranquil, pre-purge existence which contrast sharply with the brutality and chaos of the present. The repetition of phrases such as “I remember” and “I said” in the poem emphasize the act of remembering and the nostalgia for a time when speech and memory were not under threat.

In “Lot’s Wife”, which is a poem that draws on the biblical story of Lot’s wife, who against divine command, looked back at the burning city of Sodom and was turned into a pillar of salt. The poem captures a sense of regret and longing for a lost homeland. It explores the idea that there is a natural impulse to look back at what has been lost, even if it leads to tragic consequences. The line “She looked and looked on her/As if she’d lost a homeland” encapsulates this sense of nostalgia. Lot’s wife looks back at the familiar, at what was once home, with a deep yearning, despite the impending disaster. The poem suggests that the act of looking back is not just an act of disobedience but a manifestation of the human instinct to hold on to what is known and cherished, even in the face of great danger.

The imagery used by the poet in both poems convey a profound sense of longing for a time and place that has been lost. Whether it is the lost innocence of pre-purge Russia in Requiem or the longing for a homeland in Lot’s wife, the poems evoke a powerful emotional response.



In Akhmatova's poetry, memory possesses a haunting quality. It lingers in the background, exerting a profound influence on the present. In "Echo," she personifies memory as a spectral presence, underscoring its persistent hold on the psyche. She portrays memory as a potent force that lingers in the background, exerting a profound influence on the present. This theme is palpable in several of her works, where she captures the enduring impact of past experiences and emotions

For example the poem "Echo" personifies memory as a spectral presence. It suggests that memory is not a passive recollection, but an active force that continues to resonate in the present. The poem conveys the idea that memories persist, shaping one's thoughts and emotions

"Echo, a pale and unshapely shadow, mysterious companion of the secret hour"

Similarly in the poem "The Muse," Akhmatova reflects on the impact of historical events on artistic creation. She acknowledges that the collective memory of a nation, marked by moments of triumph and tragedy, shapes the creative spirit. The poem underscores the profound connection between memory and art.

In the poem "I taught myself to live simply", the poet primarily explores the impermanence of time. However she also touches on the role of memory in shaping one's perspective on life. The poet suggests that memories of the past influence how individuals approach the present, emphasizing the lasting impact of experiences

For Akhmatova memory is not a passive repository of the past, but a living force that continues to shape the present. Her exploration of this theme resonates with readers, inviting them to reflect on the enduring power of recollection. Through vivid imagery and evocative language, Akhmatova captures the haunting quality of memory, reminding us of its profound influence

Anna Akhmatova's poetry is imbued with a profound meditation on time and memory. Her verse navigates the fluidity of time, delves into the power of remembrance, and grapples with the interplay between personal and collective memory. Through elegiac tones and temporal paradoxes, Akhmatova creates a rich tapestry of human experience, asserting the enduring presence of the past in the present. Her work serves as a testament to the indomitable nature of memory, even in the face of the inexorable march of time.



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