

Poetry and the Written Word

By Mary Smith



The introduction of the printing press in 1440 in Germany (based on an earlier version created by a Chinese inventor) arguably had more impact on the world than the steam engine, incandescent light bulb and Facebook combined. Never before had the written word been available to the masses, opening up their hearts and minds with the publishing of texts both religious (Gutenberg’s Bible) and secular. The written word could now “speak” to people as the Gothic cathedrals with their stained-glass pictorials had in the centuries before.

But the history of poetry and the written word started long before Gutenberg’s invention. Not only did the Sumerians, inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia, create the first known system of writing between 3300 and 3000 BCE, they also gave the world the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in about 1200 BCE. *Gilgamesh* would be the precursor of such great literary works as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

In China and much of East Asia, the written word was elevated to an actual “art” form in the practice of calligraphy, with some of the finest works executed during the fourth century. Rendering characters in dramatic brushstrokes on silk or paper, calligraphy was the most highly regarded form of artistic expression in China for nearly 2000 years.

In the Western world, Europe would dominate the literary canon from Dante and Shakespeare through Balzac and Goethe and culminating with the Romantic verse of Byron, Keats and Shelly. Then, in the 19th century, the American transcendentalists would prepare the way for first-person prose and free verse poetry, the latter of which was immortalized in the self-reflecting brilliance of Walt Whitman. His *Leaves of Grass* would set the standard for the next generation (or two) of American writers to follow, with Jack Kerouac and the Beat Generation gladly accepting the torch of literary freedom.

Sources

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