

“Verse on the Veld: The Integration of Anthropology into Literary Studies.”

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Engaging seriously with literature in an interdisciplinary way poses several distinct problems. Methodologically, distant disciplines cannot be mapped directly on to each other. I maintain that “outside” disciplines can be very useful in examining broader questions, but become increasingly less useful as the level of detail increases. While many disciplines and sub-disciplines are engaging in fascinating interdisciplinary research it is perhaps the work being done in anthropology that represents the most productive model for literary studies as it deals with human culture broadly, as well as with specific cultural artifacts.

As an example of this approach I would like to begin to examine an old question from a new perspective: What is poetry? Or more accurately: why did poetry arise and what did it originally do? Discussion of this topic tends to ignore the fact that this behavior has existed for far, far longer than the written word (or even agriculture), or it assumes that its beginnings are too shrouded in the mists of time to be productively examined. While poetry leaves no physical trace behind, the study of the origins of related behaviors such as music, narrative, art and religion have advanced to a degree where we can at least form educated hypotheses about the origins of the lyric.

Based on this triangulation I come to the conclusion that the lyric originally served the purposes of transmitting information from one generation to the next; of aiding group cohesion and identity; and of preserving values important, or even sacred, to the group. This stands in contrast to a certain trend in lyric studies that views poetry as inherently ahistorical, non-social or even simply useless. Lyric originated to serve an important social function, a function that needs to be taken into consideration in contemporary discussions of the genre.