Poetry for Students

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Just a Few Lines on a Page

I have often thought that poets have the easiest job in the world. A poem, after all, is just a few lines on a page, usually not even extending margin to margin—how long would that take to write, about five minutes? Maybe ten at the most, if you wanted it to rhyme or have a repeating meter. Why, I could start in the morning and produce a book of poetry by dinnertime. But we all know that it isn't that easy. Anyone can come up with enough words, but the poet's job is about writing the *right* ones. The right words will change lives, making people see the world somewhat differently than they saw it just a few minutes earlier. The right words can make a reader who relies on the dictionary for meanings take a greater responsibility for his or her own personal understanding. A poem that is put on the page correctly can bear any amount of analysis, probing, defining, explaining, and interrogating, and something about it will still feel new the next time you read it.

It would be fine with me if I could talk about poetry without using the word "magical," because that word is overused these days to imply "a really good time," often with a certain sweetness about it, and a lot of poetry is neither of these. But if you stop and think about magic—whether it brings to mind sorcery, witchcraft, or bunnies pulled from top hats—it always seems to involve stretching reality to produce a result greater than the sum of its parts and pulling unexpected results out of thin air. This book provides ample cases where a few simple words conjure up whole worlds. We do not actually travel to different times and different cultures, but the poems get into our minds, they find what little we know about the places they are talking about, and then they make that little bit blossom into a bouquet of someone else's life. Poets make us think we are following simple, specific events, but then they leave ideas in our heads that cannot be found on the printed page. Abracadabra.

Sometimes when you finish a poem it doesn't feel as if it has left any supernatural effect on you, like it did not have any more to say beyond the actual words that it used. This happens to everybody, but most often to inexperienced readers: regardless of what is often said about young people's infinite capacity to be amazed, you have to understand what usually does happen, and what could have happened instead, if you are going to be moved by what someone has accomplished. In those cases in which you finish a poem with a "So what?" attitude, the information provided in *Poetry for Students* comes in handy. Readers can feel assured that the poems included here actually are potent magic, not just because a few (or a hundred or ten thousand) professors of literature say they are: they're significant because they can withstand close inspection and still amaze the very same people who have just finished taking them apart and seeing how they work. Turn them inside out, and they will still be able to come alive, again and again. *Poetry for Students* gives readers of any age good practice in feeling the ways poems relate to both the reality of the time and place the poet lived in and the reality

of our emotions. Practice is just another word for being a student. The information given here helps you understand the way to read poetry; what to look for, what to expect.

With all of this in mind, I really don't think I would actually like to have a poet's job at all. There are too many skills involved, including precision, honesty, taste, courage, linguistics, passion, compassion, and the ability to keep all sorts of people entertained at once. And that is just what they do with one hand, while the other hand pulls some sort of trick that most of us will never fully understand. I can't even pack all that I need for a weekend into one suitcase, so what would be my chances of stuffing so much life into a few lines? With all that *Poetry for Students* tells us about each poem, I am impressed that any poet can finish three or four poems a year. Read the inside stories of these poems, and you won't be able to approach any poem in the same way you did before.

David J. Kelly
College of Lake County

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of *Poetry for Students* (*PfS*) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying poems by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, *PfS* is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific poems. While each volume contains entries on "classic" poems frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary poems, including works by multicultural, international, and women poets.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the poem and the poem's author; the actual poem text; a poem summary, to help readers unravel and understand the meaning of the poem; analysis of important themes in the poem; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the poem.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the poem itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the poem was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the poem, when available. A unique feature of *PfS* is a specially commissioned overview essay on each poem by an academic expert, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each poem, information on media adaptations is provided when available, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the poem.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of *PfS* were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; *Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges;* textbooks on teaching the poem; a College Board survey of poems commonly studied in high schools; and a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of poems commonly studied in high schools.

Input was also solicited from our expert advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" poems (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary poems for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in ex-

panding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—current high school and college teachers—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in *PfS* focuses on one poem. Each entry heading lists the full name of the poem, the author's name, and the date of the poem's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the poem which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the poet's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the poem in question.
- **Poem Text:** here, the poem is reprinted, allowing for quick reference when reading the explication of the following section.
- **Poem Summary:** a description of the major events in the poem, with interpretation of how these events help articulate the poem's themes. Summaries are broken down with subheads that indicate the lines being discussed.
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the poem. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the poem, such as form, meter, and rhyme scheme; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, and symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical and Cultural Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate *in which the author lived and the poem was created.* This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the poem is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the poem is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads. (Works written after the late 1970s may not have this section.)
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the poem, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the poem was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent poems, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Sources:** an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- **For Further Study:** an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by *PfS* which specifically deals with the poem and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work, when available.

In addition, most entries contains the following highlighted sections, set separately from the main text:

- **Media Adaptations:** a list of audio recordings as well as any film or television adaptations of the poem, including source information.
- **Compare and Contrast Box:** an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth-century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the poem was written, the time or place the poem was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after the mid-1970s may not have this box.
- **What Do I Read Next?:** a list of works that might complement the featured poem or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and

nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

- **Study Questions:** a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the poem. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.

Other Features

PfS includes a foreword by David J. Kelly, an instructor and cofounder of the creative writing periodical of Oakton Community College. This essay provides a straightforward, unpretentious explanation of why poetry should be marveled at and how *Poetry for Students* can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the *PfS* series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the *PfS* series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in **boldface.**

Illustrations are included with entries when available, including photos of the author and other graphics related to the poem.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of *Poetry for Students* may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed.

When citing text from *PfS* that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Angle of Geese." *Poetry for Students.* Eds. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 8–9.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from *PfS* (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Velie, Alan. Essay on "Angle of Geese."*Poetry for Students.* Eds. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 8–9.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of *PfS,* the following form may be used:

Luscher, Robert M. "An Emersonian Context of Dickinson's 'The Soul Selects Her Own Society.'" *ESQ: A Journal of American Renaissance* 30, No. 2 (Second Quarterl, 1984), 111–16; excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry for Students,* Vol. 2, eds. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 120–34.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of *PfS,* the following form may be used:

Mootry, Maria K. "'Tell It Slant': Disguise and Discovery as Revisionist Poetic Discourse in 'The Bean Eaters,'" in *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brroks, Her Poetry and Fiction,* edited by Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith (University of Illinois Press, 1987, 177–80; excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry for Students,* Vol. 1, Eds. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editors of *Poetry for Students* welcome your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest poems to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may write to the editors at:

Editors, *Poetry for Students*
Gale Research
835 Penobscot Bldg.
645 Griswold St.
Detroit, MI 48226-4094

Literary Chronology

700: *Beowulf* is composed at about this time.

1300–1699: Humanism as a philosophical view of the world is prevalent in this period.

1300–1699: The Renaissance begins in the 14th century and continues for the next 300 years.

1558–1603: The Elizabethan Age begins with the coronation in 1558 of Elizabeth I as Queen of England and continues until her death in 1603. Elizabethan literature is recognized as some of the finest in the English language.

1564: William Shakespeare is born.

1572: John Donne is born.

1575–1799: The literary style known as Baroque arises in the late 16th century and remains influential until the early 18th century.

1600–1799: The Enlightenment period in European social and cultural history begins in the 17th century and continues into the 18th century.

1600–1650: Metaphysical poetry becomes a prominent style of verse in the first half of the 17th century.

1603–1625: The Jacobean Age begins with the coronation in 1603 of James I of England and continues until his death in 1625.

1609: William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" (Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?) is published in his collection *Shake-speares Sonnets.*

1609: William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" (My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun) is published in his collection *Shake-speares Sonnets.*

1600–1625: The Tribe of Ben, followers of Ben Jonson, were active in the early part of the 17th century.

1616: William Shakespeare dies.

1616: Ben Jonson is named Poet Laureate of England.

1625–1649: The Cavalier Poets, a group of writers that includes Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, and John Suckling, are active during the reign of Charles I of England (1625–1649).

1631: John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 10" (Death be not proud) is written by this time, and published posthumously in his collection *Songs and Sonnets,* 1633.

1631: John Donne dies.

1638: William D'Avenant is named Poet Laureate of England.

1644: Matsuo Bashō is born.

1660–1688: The Restoration Period begins when Charles II regains the throne of England, and it continues through the reign of his successor, James II (1685–1688). Restoration literature includes the first well-developed English-language works in several forms of writing that would become widespread in the modern world, including the novel, biography, and travel literature.

1668: John Dryden is named Poet Laureate of England.

1675–1799: Neoclassicism as the prevailing approach to literature begins late in the 17th century and continues through much of the 18th century.

1694: Matsuo Bashō's "Falling upon Earth" is written by this time.

1694: Matsuo Bashō dies.

1700–1799: The English Augustan Age (the name is borrowed from a brilliant period of literary creativity in ancient Rome) flourishes throughout much of the 18th century.

1700–1725: The Scottish Enlightenment, a period of great literary and philosophical activity, occurs in the early part of the 18th century.

1718: Laurence Eusden is named Poet Laureate of England.

1730: Colley Cibber is named Poet Laureate of England.

1740–1775: Pre-Romanticism, a transitional literary movement between Neoclassicism and Romanticism, takes place in the middle part of the 18th century.

1740–1750: The Graveyard School, referring to poetry that focuses on death and grieving, emerges as a significant genre in the middle of the 18th century.

1750–1899: The Welsh Literary Renaissance, an effort to revive interest in Welsh language and literature, begins in the middle of the 18th century and continues into the following century.

1757: William Blake is born.

1757: William Whitehead is named Poet Laureate of England.

1770: William Wordsworth is born.

1775–1850: Romanticism as a literary movement arises in the latter part of the 18th century and continues until the middle of the 19th century.

1788: George Gordon, Lord Byron is born.

1792: Percy Bysshe Shelley is born.

1794: William Blake's "The Tyger" is published in his collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*

1795: John Keats is born.

1798: William Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" is published in the collection *Lyrical Ballads,* by Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

1800–1899: The Gaelic Revival, a renewal of interest in Irish literature and language, takes place throughout much of the 19th century.

1875–1950: Realism as an approach to literature gains importance in the 19th century and remains influential well into the 20th century.

1806: Elizabeth Barrett Browning is born.

1807: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is born.

1809: Edgar Allan Poe is born.

1809: Alfred, Lord Tennyson is born.

1809–1865: The Knickerbocker School, a group of American writers, flourishes between 1809 and 1865.

1812: Robert Browning is born.

1813: Robert Southey is named Poet Laureate of England.

1815: Lord Byron 's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" is published in his collection *Hebrew Melodies.*

1818: John Keats's "When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be" is written in this year, but not published until 1848, in *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats,* edited by Richard Moncton Milnes.

1819: Walt Whitman is born.

1820: John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is published in his collection *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems.*

1820: Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is published in his *Prometheus Unbound. A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts, With Other Poems.*

1821: John Keats dies.

1822: Matthew Arnold is born.

1822: Percy Bysshe Shelley dies.

1824: George Gordon, Lord Byron dies.

1800: The anonymous spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" is composed early in the 19th century.

1827: William Blake dies.

1830: Emily Dickinson is born.

1830–1860: The flowering of American literature known as the American Renaissance begins in the 1830s and continues through the Civil War period.

1830–1855: Transcendentalism, an American philosophical and literary movement, is at its height during this period.

1833: Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses" is written in this year, but not published until 1842, in his collection *Poems.*

1837–1901: The Victorian Age begins with the coronation of Victoria as Queen of England, and continues until her death in 1901. Victorian literature is recognized for its magnificent achievements in a variety of genres.

1842: Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" is published in his collection *Dramatic Lyrics.*

1843: William Wordsworth is named Poet Laureate of England.

1845: Edgar Allan Poe 's "The Raven" is published in his collection *The Raven and Other Poems.*

1848–1858: The Pre-Raphaelites, an influential group of English painters, forms in 1848 and remains together for about ten years, during which time it has a significant impact on literature as well as the visual arts.

1849: Edgar Allan Poe dies.

1850: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnet 43" (How do I love thee?) is published in her collection *Sonnets from the Portuguese.*

1850: William Wordsworth dies.

1850: Alfred, Lord Tennyson is named Poet Laureate of England.

1850: The poets of the so-called Spasmodic School are active in the 1850s.

1855: Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" is published in his collection *Maud, and Other Poems.*

1861: Elizabeth Barrett Browning dies.

1862: Emily Dickinson's "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" is written around this time (first published posthumously in her collection *Poems by Emily Dickinson,* edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, 1890).

1863: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow 's "Paul Revere's Ride" is published in his collection *Tales of a Wayside Inn.*

1863: Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" is written around this time (first published posthumously in her collection *Poems by Emily Dickinson,* edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, 1890).

1865: Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" is published in his collection *Sequel to Drum Taps;* later included in the 1867 edition of his collection *Leaves of Grass.*

1865: William Butler Yeats is born.

1867: Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is published in his collection *New Poems.*

1871: James Weldon Johnson is born.

1874: Robert Frost is born.

1875–1899: Aestheticism becomes a significant artistic and literary philosophy in the latter part of the 19th century.

1875–1899: Decadence becomes an important poetic force late in the 19th century.

1875–1925: Expressionism is a significant artistic and literary influence through the late 19th century and the early 20th century.

1875–1925: The Irish Literary Renaissance begins late in the 19th century and continues for the next several decades.

1875–1925: The Symbolist Movement flourishes in the closing decades of the 19th century and the opening years of the 20th century.

1882: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow dies.

1883: William Carlos Williams is born.

1885: Ezra Pound is born.

1886: Emily Dickinson dies.

1888: Matthew Arnold dies.

1888: T. S. Eliot is born.

1889: Robert Browning dies.

1890–1899: The decade of the 1890s, noted for the mood of weariness and pessimism in its art and literature, is known as the Fin de Siècle ("end of the century") period.

1892: Alfred, Lord Tennyson dies.

1892: Walt Whitman dies.

1894: e. e. cummings is born.

1900–1999: The philosophy of Existentialism and the literature it inspires are highly influential throughout much of the 20th century.

1900–1950: Modernism remains a dominant literary force from the early part to the middle years of the 20th century.

1902: Langston Hughes is born.

1907: W. H. Auden is born.

1907–1930: The Bloomsbury Group, a circle of English writers and artists, gathers regularly in the period from 1907 to around 1930.

1910–1920: Georgian poetry becomes a popular style of lyric verse during the reign of King George V of England.

1910–1930: New Humanism, a philosophy of literature, is influential for several decades, beginning around 1910.

1912–1925: The Chicago Literary Renaissance, a time of great literary activity, takes place from about 1912 to 1925.

1912–1922: Imagism as a philosophy of poetry is defined in 1912 and remains influential for the next decade.

1913: Robert E. Hayden is born.

1914: Randall Jarrell is born.

1914: William Stafford is born.

1914: Dylan Thomas is born.

1915: Margaret Walker is born.

1916: Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" is published in his collection *Lustra.*

1916: Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" is published in his collection *Mountain Interval.*

1917: T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is published in his collection *Prufrock and Other Observations.*

1917: Gwendolyn Brooks is born.

1919: William Butler Yeats's "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is published in his collection *The Wild Swans at Coole.*

1919–c.1960: The Scottish Renaissance in literature begins around 1919 and continues for about forty years.

1920: James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation" is published in the *Freeman;* later included in his collection *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse,* 1927.

1920: The Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of African American literary activity, takes place in the 1920s.

1920–1930: The label Lost Generation is applied to a group of American writers working in the decades following World War I.

1920–1930: The Montreal Group, a circle of Canadian poets, begins in the late 1920s and flourishes for the next decade.

1920–1970: New Criticism as a philosophy of literature arises in the 1920s and continues to be a significant approach to writing for over fifty years.

1920–1960: Surrealism, an artistic and literary technique, arises in the 1920s and remains influential for the next half century.

1923: William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" is published in his collection *Spring and All.*

1923: Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is published in his collection *New Hampshire.*

1923: Irish poet William Butler Yeats is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

1924: Robert Frost is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his collection *New Hampshire.*

1928: William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" is published in his collection *The Tower.*

1928: Maya Angelou is born.

1930–1965: Negritude emerges as a literary movement in the 1930s and continues until the early 1960s.

1930–1970: The New York Intellectuals, a group of literary critics, are active from the 1930s to the 1970s.

1931: Robert Frost is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his *Collected Poems.*

1932: Sylvia Plath is born.

1934: N. Scott Momaday is born.

1935–1943: The Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers' Project provides federally funded jobs for unemployed writers during the Great Depression.

1936: Lucille Clifton is born.

1937: Robert Frost is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his collection *A Further Range.*

1938: James Weldon Johnson dies.

1939: Seamus Heaney is born.

1939: William Butler Yeats dies.

1940: W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" is published in his collection *Another Time.*

1940: The New Apocalypse Movement takes place in England in the 1940s.

1940–1999: Postmodernism, referring to the various philosophies and practices of literature that challenge the dominance of Modernism, begins in the 1940s.

1943: Robert Frost is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his collection *A Witness Tree.*

1945: Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" is published in his collection *Little Friend, Little Friend.*

1946: Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is published in his collection *Deaths and Entrances.*

1948: W. H. Auden is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his collection *The Age of Anxiety.*

1948: Anglo-American poet T. S. Eliot is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

1949: Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Sonnet-Ballad" is published in her collection *Annie Allen.*

1950: The so-called Beat Movement writers begin publishing their work in the 1950s.

1950: The Black Mountain Poets become an influential force in American literature in the 1950s.

1950: Gwendolyn Brooks is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for her collection *Annie Allen.*

1950–1975: Structuralism emerges as an important movement in literary criticism in the middle of the 20th century.

1951: Langston Hughes's "Harlem" is published in his collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred.*

1952: Rita Dove is born.

1952: William Carlos Williams is appointed Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress but does not serve.

1953: Dylan Thomas dies.

1956–1958: Randall Jarrell serves as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.

1958: e. e. cummings's "l(a" is published in his collection *95 Poems.*

1958–1959: Robert Frost serves as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.

1960: Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Bean Eaters" is published in her collection *The Bean Eaters.*

1960–1970: The Black Aesthetic Movement, also known as the Black Arts Movement, takes place from the 1960s into the 1970s.

1960–1999: Poststructuralism arises as a theory of literary criticism in the 1960s.

1962: Robert E. Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" is published in his collection *A Ballad of Remembrance.*

1962: e. e. cummings dies.

1963: Sylvia Plath's "Mirror" is published in the *New Yorker;* later included in the posthumous collection *Crossing the Water,* 1971.

1963: Robert Frost dies.

1963: Sylvia Plath dies.

1963: William Carlos Williams dies.

1963: William Carlos Williams is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his collection *Pictures from Breughel.*

1965: T. S. Eliot dies.

1965: Randall Jarrell dies.

1966: William Stafford's "Fifteen" is published in his collection *The Rescued Year.*

1967: Langston Hughes dies.

1969: Maya Angelou's "Harlem Hopscotch" is published in her collection *The Poetry of Maya Angelou.*

1969: Lucille Clifton's "Miss Rosie" is published in her collection *Good Times: Poems.*

1970–1971: William Stafford serves as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.

1970–1999: New Historicism, a school of literary analysis, originates in the 1970s.

1972: Seamus Heaney's "Midnight" is published in his collection *Wintering Out.*

1972: Ezra Pound dies.

1973: W. H. Auden dies.

1974: N. Scott Momaday's "Angle of Geese" is published in his collection *Angle of Geese, and Other Poems.*

1976–1978: Robert Hayden serves as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.

1980: Rita Dove's "This Life" is published in her collection *The Yellow House on the Corner.*

1980: Robert E. Hayden dies.

1982: Sylvia Plath is posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for *The Collected Poems.*

1985–1986: Gwendolyn Brooks serves as Poet Laureate of the United States.

1987: Rita Dove is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for her collection *Thomas and Beulah.*

1993: William Stafford dies.

1993: Maya Angelou reads her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at the inauguration of President Clinton.

1993–1994: Rita Dove serves as Poet Laureate of the United States.

1995: Irish poet Seamus Heaney is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

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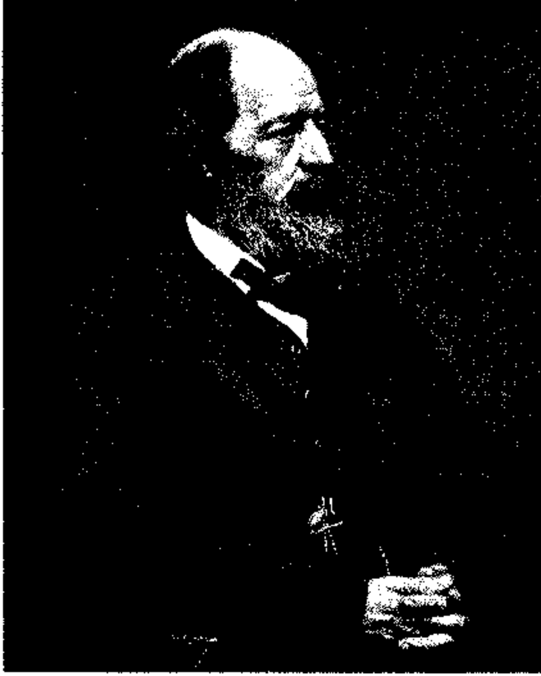
The Charge of the Light Brigade

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

1854

Tennyson wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade" in a few minutes on December 2, 1854, after reading an article in the London *Times* about the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War, which was fought from 1853 to 1856 between Russia on one side and England, France, Turkey, and Sardinia on the other. According to his son, Hallam Tennyson, it was the poet's method to catch phrases that attracted his interest, which he "rolled about, so to speak, in his head, before he wrote them down." In this case, the phrase from the newspaper article was "some hideous blunder," which appears in the poem as "someone had blundered": this might indicate that Tennyson was seeking to blame someone for the disastrous massacre that wiped out the Light Brigade, but the "someone" is never mentioned again. This poem is about courage, not about the bad luck or stupidity that put the men of the Light Brigade cavalry in a position to display that courage.

The Charge of the Light Brigade" was first published in the December 9, 1854, issue of the *London Examiner* and was later included in Tennyson's collection *Maud, and Other Poems,* in 1855. In 1850, Tennyson was appointed by Queen Victoria to succeed Wordsworth as poet laureate of England. Although Victoria's reign is associated with the Enlightenment, a time when logic and reason were the celebrated ideals, this poem celebrates the native dignity of the uneducated cavalrymen, of whom Tennyson says, "Theirs was not to reason why." Perhaps because it celebrates the com-



Alfred, Lord Tennyson

mon man at a time of social change that generally favored the intellectual, the poem was tremendously popular in its day, although generations that followed have remembered it, usually negatively, as a celebration of war's glory. In Tennyson's time, though, the poem had such all-around popularity that the poet was induced years later to return to the same battle, in a poem examining a much more successful assault by the British troops: "The Charge of the Heavy Brigade at Balaclava," published in 1885's *Tiresias and Other Poems.*

Author Biography

Tennyson was born in 1809 in Somersby, Lincolnshire, England. The fourth of twelve children, he was the son of a clergyman who maintained his office grudgingly after his younger brother had been named heir to their father's wealthy estate. According to biographers, Tennyson's father, a man of violent temper, responded to his virtual disinheritance by indulging in drugs and alcohol. Each of the Tennyson children later suffered through some period of drug addiction or mental and physical illness, prompting the family's grim speculation on the "black blood" of the Tennysons. Biographers surmise that the general melancholy expressed in much of Tennyson's verse is rooted in the unhappy environment at Somersby.

Tennyson enrolled at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1827. There he met Arthur Hallam, a brilliant undergraduate who became Tennyson's closest friend and ardent admirer of his poetry. Hallam's enthusiasm was welcomed by Tennyson, whose personal circumstances had led to a growing despondency: his father died in 1831, leaving Tennyson's family in debt and forcing his early departure from school; one of Tennyson's brothers suffered a mental breakdown and required institutionalization; and Tennyson himself was morbidly fearful of falling victim to epilepsy or madness. Hallam's untimely death in 1833, which prompted the series of elegies later comprising *In Memoriam,* contributed greatly to Tennyson's despair. In describing this period, he wrote: "I suffered what seemed to me to shatter all my life so that I desired to die rather than to live." For nearly a decade after Hallam's death Tennyson published no poetry. During this time he became engaged to Emily Sellwood, but financial difficulties and Tennyson's persistent anxiety over the condition of his health resulted in their separation. In 1842 an unsuccessful financial venture cost Tennyson nearly everything he owned, causing him to succumb to a deep depression that required medical treatment. Tennyson later resumed his courtship of Sellwood, and they were married in 1850. The timely success of *In Memoriam,* published that same year, ensured Tennyson's appointment as Poet Laureate, succeeding William Wordsworth. In 1883 Tennyson accepted a peerage, the first poet to be so honored strictly on the basis of literary achievement. Tennyson died in 1892 and was interred in Poet's Corner of Westminister Abbey.

Poem Text

I

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
    Rode the six hundred.
"Forward the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!" he said.
Into the valley of Death
    Rode the six hundred.

2

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldier knew
  Someone had blundered.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Death
  Rode the six hundred.

3

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
  Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of hell
  Rode the six hundred.

4

Flashed all their sabers bare,
Flashed as they turned in air
Sab'ring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
  All the world wondered.
Plunged in the battery smoke
Right through the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reeled from the saber stroke
  Shattered and sundered.
Then they rode back, but not,
  Not the six hundred.

5

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
  Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came through the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of hell,
All that was left of them,
  Left of six hundred.

6

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
  All the world wondered.
Honor the charge they made!
Honor the Light Brigade,
  Noble six hundred!

Poem Summary

Lines 1-4:

The beginning lines of the poem throw the reader into the center of action, with a rousing chant that drives the reader, both in its description and in its galloping rhythm, toward the battle. A "league" is approximately three miles long: charging horses could cover half a league in a few minutes. The audiences of the time of the poem would have been familiar with the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimean War, upon which the poem is based, and would have known from the beginning that they were charging to their own doom. (As the poem soon makes clear, the six hundred cavalrymen of the Light Brigade were aware of this themselves.) The poem suggests that it is these moments before the battle has begun that are the Brigade's greatest glory. The phrase "Valley of Death" refers to an episode of John Bunyon's *Pilgrim's Progress* and to Psalm 23 from the New Testament of the Bible: in both of these sources, faith makes people brave when they are faced with death.

Lines 5-8:

In the earliest published version of this poem, printed in the London *Examiner* on December 9, 1854, the command to charge forward was attributed to Lord Nolan, a well-known military figure of the time. In changing the speaker to an anonymous "he," the poet shifts the focus of the poem away from individual actions and decisions onto matters of record, and onto the roles played by followers and leaders in military situations everywhere. In addition to obscuring the identity of the speaker, this final version of the poem changes the command given from "Take the guns" to "Charge for the guns!" This heightens the sense of the danger of the charge, while leaving unstated the reason for charging into the blaring gunfire.

Lines 9-12:

No sooner does line 9 repeat the shouted command that sends the Light Brigade to their doom than line 10 makes the reader wonder whether any of the soldiers were stricken with fear upon hearing the command. Although we currently closely associate the word "dismay" with "shock," its actual meaning includes a loss of courage. By raising this issue as a question and then answering that no, there was no fear, Tennyson gives the reader a moment's pause to let the full extent of the soldiers' bravery sink in. Line 11 and line 12 tell the reader without question that every member of the

Media Adaptations

- *The Charge of the Light Brigade,* directed by Michael Curtiz and starring Errol Flynn, Olivia De Haveland, and Patric Knowles, was released by Warner Brothers in 1936.
- Another film version of *The Charge of the Light Brigade,* directed by Tony Richardson and starring Harry Andrews, Vanessa Redgrave, and Trevor Howard, was released by United Artists in 1968.

Brigade knew that this order was a mistake. This contradiction—the fact that the soldiers knew they were likely to die because of a "blunder" in military strategy, yet charged forward without fear anyway—gives the poem a psychological depth that would be lost if it merely celebrated the loyalty of soldiers who were unaware of the faulty command they were following.

Lines 13-17:

Lines 13 through 15 repeat each other, in the way they phrase the rules these soldiers live by. The style suggests the regimented, militaristic way the members of the Light Brigade think as they ride ahead, and the effect of the strong use of repetition is to drown out concerns about the blunder mentioned in the previous stanza. "Theirs but to do and die" says that the soldiers are actually *supposed* to die—this might seem contrary to the purpose of fighting, but Tennyson makes it clear that this is the belief of the charging soldiers, for whom such a fate would be the ultimate expression of loyalty. In lines 16 and 17, the perspective shifts from what the soldiers think of their mission to a view of the overall battle situation, again repeating the image of the "valley of Death."

Lines 18-21:

The first three lines of this stanza are virtually identical, changing only the location of the cannons, presenting the layout of the battlefield visually, instead of simply stating the fact that there were cannons all around. By repeating the phrase three times, the reader is not only given information about the tremendous odds against the Light Brigade, but the poem gives the feeling of being surrounded.

Lines 22-26:

"Stormed" in line 22 extends the image of "thundered" from the line before it, making the barrage of cannon fire aimed at the cavalrymen appear almost like a force of nature. Line 23 makes a point of mentioning that the soldiers of the Light Brigade were brave, but also that they rode their horses well. Their skill is mentioned almost as an afterthought, though, and this is the only place in the poem that it is brought up. The reason for this is that this poem makes its reader analyze the battle almost entirely in terms of attitude, not ability. In lines 24-26, Tennyson expands the phrase that was used to end the first two stanzas: instead of the geographic "Valley of Death," he uses the metaphor "jaws of Death" and extends this metaphor with "mouth of hell." Treating death as the same thing as hell, and making both as real as an animal's attack, the poem heightens the viciousness of death on the battlefield.

Lines 27-38:

This stanza celebrates the Light Brigade's control over the battle at its beginning. They ride into the enemy, using their sabres against opponents armed with cannons and pistols, and are able to break through the front line of defense. The pistols and rifles of the day would have been useless to the members of the Light Brigade because they required reloading with a very complicated procedure that involved measuring gunpowder and pellets, which would have been impossible for a man on horseback. Sending a cavalry unit into the confined space of a valley against guns was so obviously hopeless, that it may be this, and not the brigade's initial success, that is referred to when the line "all the world wondered" appears in the middle of a vivid battle scene. In this stanza, the Light Brigade takes such complete control of the situation that their opponents, the Cossacks and Russians, find their defensive line torn apart ("shattered and sundered") and have to retreat, while the six hundred cavalry members, who have by this time stared into the barrels of cannons and guns, continue to press forward bravely.

Lines 39-49:

The first five lines of this stanza override any optimism the reader may have gotten from the

Light Brigade's initial success. By using the same words as were used in stanza 3 (except that now the cannon are behind instead of in front of them), the poem takes the reader back to the same sense of hopelessness that was established before the battle began. The brief victory that was gained in the fourth stanza has made no difference in the overall scope of the battle. The first time these words were used (lines 18-22), though, they ended with a claim of the soldiers' boldness and skill: this time, they end with the soldiers (referred to directly as "heroes") being shot down. The path that the Light Brigade charged into—the jaws of death, the mouth of hell—is mentioned again as the survivors make their escape. Anthropologists and sociologists have observed that going into hell and then returning is a common motif in the mythology of many of the world's cultures, including one of the best-known myths of Western civilization, the labors of Hercules. The survivors of this battle are thus raised to heroic status by the words that this poem uses to describe the valley's entrance.

Lines 50-55:

The focus of the poem shifts in this stanza, from describing the battle scene to addressing the reader directly. In using the description "wild" to marvel at the charge, Line 51 implies that thoughtless bravery is to be admired in and of itself, regardless of concerns about strategy or success. Repeating the line "All the world wondered" in line 52 adds to the idea that what the soldiers have done goes beyond the average person's comprehension: the soldiers are following rules that those who rely on intellect over loyalty might not understand. Although a close reading of the tone of this poem can leave little question about how we are meant to feel about these cavalrymen, the poem does not rely upon a reader's understanding of the subtleties of tone, but directly tells the reader in line 53 and line 55 to honor these soldiers. That the poem is so straightforward about its intent is an indicator that it was written for a common, often uneducated, audience, to celebrate the actions of common soldiers who understood what they were being asked to do better than the blundering military strategists who planned the attack.

Topics for Further Study

- In this poem, Tennyson takes a famous defeat and stirs enthusiasm in the reader by focusing on the spirit of the soldiers, who rode into battle knowing they would be defeated. Write a poem about a similar situation, possibly involving a sports team or a politician, making defeat look like an opportunity to be noble and brave.
- Imagine that you are a member of the Russian Army, who the Light Brigade made their brave but hopeless charge against. Write a letter home, describing what you saw and why you think they ran right into the face of certain death.
- What do you think is the significance of having the Light Brigade temporarily victorious in stanza 4? Does it add to the story's tension? Does it make these brave soldiers more admirable? How?

Themes

Loyalty

The soldiers of the Light Brigade are not portrayed in this poem as having any illusions that their attack made sense: in the second stanza we see that they were aware of the fact that their charge was not the result of sound strategy, but of a blunder. But what is a soldier to do when commands do not seem correct? For officers, military training is about developing strategies, but the soldier is trained to follow the strategies that are given to him. Often, the actions that soldiers are required to perform will not seem to them to serve any useful function: soldiers do not have full intelligence about what is going on at other places at the same time, and they are not informed about what the army's overall intention is, or where one order might fit into the overall plan. Sometimes soldiers will be called upon to risk certain death, and they need to have faith that their action will be good for the overall cause in ways they cannot see. The ability to obey such commands blindly is the essence of military training. In this poem, though, that faith is lacking—the cavalrymen can see clearly that there is no hidden benefit to their charge. Tennyson does not say that they suspected a blunder, or felt sure of one, but only that they knew. With no benefit to the charge and certain death the price, it would make sense for the soldiers to disobey their command.

But Tennyson presents the obedient soldiers as heroes. To a society that values independent

thought, where reason is the ultimate guide, the heroism of these men can be hard to follow. There is no doubt that they are courageous, charging right into the face of danger, but absurd courage, on the level of stepping in front of an oncoming train, does not merit the sort of praise Tennyson showers on the Light Brigade. Military society, though, is not like the average society; it does not value reason and independence above all else. It values loyalty. For Tennyson to say that there is no reason for these soldiers to be loyal to their blundering commanders was actually a way of recognizing the nature of their heroism. They are loyal in spite of the presence or absence of reason. Their loyalty is pure and untainted by any other ideas.

Pride

When writing for a civilian audience about a great military victory, it is easy to make readers proud of their armed forces. In writing this poem, however, Tennyson stirs up those same feelings for an unmitigated, undisputed failure. One benefit he had in stirring the pride of a British audience of 1854 was the effect of nationalism, the tendency to blindly support one's own country, right or wrong. During a time of war, nationalism can grow almost without limit. The British citizens eagerly supported the Crimean War, on which this poem is based, and Tennyson could play on their pride for the troops with a statement like "Boldly they rode, and well." The fact that audiences at the time would have known of the futility of the Light Brigade's charge might have made them even more eager for the poem's gallant tone. This poem has been read for over a hundred years by civilizations across the globe, all of whom respond to the glory of the Light Brigade, and the work stirs up feelings of pride in generation after generation.

Much of the emotional response felt by readers who have had no stake in the Crimean War is because of the way Tennyson manipulates language. Victorian readers knew before the poem was written that the Light Brigade had been doomed: Tennyson reveals as much to everyone else in the second stanza. But this is just a case of a master magician revealing a trick he intends to perform and then deftly pulling it over on people anyway. No one who knows these soldiers were doomed could guess just how doomed the author was to portray them in this poem. Tennyson combines powerful actions with powerful imagery; he uses the words "vollied," "thundered," "plunged," "reeled," and "stormed." Little is made of the actual soldiers they faced, but the poet repeats the phrase "valley of Death" twice in the first stanza alone, followed later with the "jaws of Death" and the "mouth of Hell." He emphasizes the presence of cannons. There is a human tendency to identify with the underdog in conflicts—at least to the degree that the struggle of the underdog makes a conflict interesting—and Tennyson changes the reader's interest to pride by emphasizing the impossibility of their situation. Throughout the poem, the reader is moved to hope that this unavoidable defeat will somehow turn out to be worthwhile. In the final stanza, having fired up the reader's emotions, the speaker of the poem addresses the reader directly: "Honor the charge they made!"

Style

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" is divided into six stanzas that vary from six to twelve lines each. While the poem cannot be easily classified as far as its meter, or rhythm structure, the dominant rhythm in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" is dactylic. A dactyl is a metric unit (also called a "foot") consisting of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed. When Tennyson uses two dactyls to a line, the effect is that the poem thunders boldly like war drums or like hoofbeats, as in the following line :

Half a league, / **half** a league

The initial dactyl in each line is often combined with a trochee, which is a foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. It is used with a dactyl to bring a series of lines to a clipped halt, as in the lines:

Rode the six / **hundred** or

Someone had / **blundered**.

The rhythmic pattern of this poem is rousing, but it is not strictly adhered to: in the third stanza, for example, Tennyson slips an extra unstressed syllable into the first dactyl of "Cannons to the right of them," while several other times he adds an extra stressed syllable to the end of a line, as in "All in the valley of Death."

The rhyme scheme is uneven, sometimes strongly linking three lines in a row, skipping a line or two, then returning to the rhyme. Sometimes the rhymes are not perfect, such as the connection made between "hundred" and "blundered."

Compare & Contrast

- **Then:** Victoria's rule as Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, and Empress of India, influenced all aspects of economy and society.

  Now: The Royal Family of Great Britain holds only symbolic power and is as much a source for scandal as for inspiration.

- **Then:** William Russell of the London *Times* serves as the first real war correspondent, relaying information, including stories about the army's problems, to the English public.

  Now: All major U.S. television networks have correspondents stationed in Kuwait, allowing them to offer live coverage of the Persian Gulf War of 1991.

Historical Context

Throughout the 1700s and 1800s and starting with Peter the Great, Russia reached southward to annex countries in the Middle East, most notably Iran and Turkey. Three wars between the years 1804 and 1827 alone were fought between Russia and Iran, resulting in the addition of Georgia and Azerbaijan to the Russian empire. Attempts to take Turkey, under the guise of protecting it, were halted because the Turks, with British and French help, were able to defend their country. Turkey lies on the south shore of the Black Sea. Just over 100 miles north, across the water, is the Crimean Peninsula, a natural launching point for Russian ships to invade Turkey, if only Russia could maintain control of it. From October of 1853 to February of 1856, British, French, and Turkish troops fought the Crimean War for dominance of the peninsula. France and Britain wanted to keep Russia from progressing to their eastern and middle-eastern colonies, most notably Egypt and India, and consequently they sent more soldiers to Crimea than Turkey did. Losses were heavy, especially for the British, who were poorly equipped in both supplies and manpower. On October 25, 1854, the Battle of Balaclava provided the British with an especially humiliating defeat. The infantrymen of the Light Brigade charged against overwhelming odds, for no good strategic purpose, and were almost completely gunned down. They charged because their orders were passed from one officer to another and somewhere were misinterpreted. There had been "some hideous blunder," according to the report by William Howard Russell, *The Times*' Crimean War correspondent. When he read this report, Tennyson focused on that one phrase and built "The Charge of the Light Brigade" around it, thereby turning a national disgrace into an inspiring act of courage.

The military forces of Great Britain were unprepared to go off to war in 1853, but the population was eager for just that type of distraction. It had been almost forty years since Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, and after that victory the country had prospered in a cautious, conservative way under the reign of Queen Victoria. The Victorian Era is remembered in an oversimplified way as being a time of tame politeness bordering upon hypocrisy, of social image being fussed over at the expense of honesty. As negotiations between Russia and Turkey broke down in 1853 and war became more likely, Britains jumped at the chance. For the lower social classes it was a way of proving the country's strength, while some members of the upper class treated the invasion of Crimea as a game or diversion. Some noblemen, including Lord Cardigan, who eventually gave the disastrous order for the Light Brigade to charge, sailed off to the Black Sea on their yachts, bringing their wives and maids. Civilians canceled vacation plans so they could follow the army instead. They all assumed that Britain would win, but that assumption was based upon the might and experience of the army of 1815.

Diseases, especially cholera and dysentery, disabled thousands of fighting men; hunger, caused by food shortages, weakened the rest; and the com-

British light cavalry attacking the Russian guns at the Battle of Balaclava, a skirmish that preceded the infamous "Charge of the Light Brigade."

mander of the army, Fitzroy James Henry Somerset—Lord Raglan—had been a secretary at Waterloo, but had no experience in leading combat. (Old and confused, Raglan repeatedly referred to the Russians as "the French," who were actually Britain's allies this time).

In September of 1954, the war effort was on controlling the key Crimean city of Sevastopol, which the Russians occupied. To reach it, the British and their allies had to take the Alma high ground, which they actually did twice—the first time they did it, retreat was called just before their victory. When they had control of Alma, the next logical step would have been to march on to Sevastopol, which the retreating Russians had left unprotected: this was such an obvious next step that for a time it was believed back in London that the soldiers actually had taken the city. The military command, however, decided that in the future they would need a port to ship in supplies, and so they turned away from Sevastopol to a tiny harbor town of Balaclava. On October 25th, the Russian forces established themselves in the hills around Balaclava and tried to take it back. At first, they defeated a Turkish contingent, but they were unable to pierce two lines of defense, Campbell's Highlander's and the Heavy Infantry Brigade. (Tennyson was to publish a follow-up poem, "The Charge of the Heavy Brigade," twenty years later.) The strategic idea was for the Light Brigade to chase the retreating Russians and make it difficult for them to carry away any of their own or the Turks' armaments. By the time the order reached the front line, though, it was understood to mean that the Light Brigade should charge at the army that was entrenched with cannons in the hills—a hopeless, senseless maneuver.

Sevastopol finally fell on September 11, 1855, and on February 1, 1856, Russia signed a peace accord that ended the fighting. Lord Cardigan, who had ordered the Light Brigade's charge against all common and military sense, came home to a hero's welcome.

Critical Overview

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" is generally considered to be an only moderately successful work, at least from a critical standpoint, although it is one of the most well-known poems in the English language. In fact, the work proved so popular that it was adapted into a Hollywood movie in the 1930s. In an 1895 essay from his *Corrected Impressions:*

Essays on Victorian Writers, critic George Saintsbury notes that "at no time was Tennyson a perfect master of the quick and lively measures" or meters, and adds that "his difficulty in this respect has not improved 'The Charge of the Light Brigade.'" The theme of the poem has also come under criticism; following World War I, after the world had experienced the horror and destruction of war on a previously unheard of scale, critics abandoned this poem due to its glorification of heroic, senseless death.

Herbert Foltinek, however, in a 1985 essay from *A Yearbook of Studies in English Language and Literature*, asserts that the poem "cannot be all that easily dismissed as a collection of sabre-rattling sentiments." The critic explains that there are a number of reasons why the poet may have written this poem in praise of a battle that ended in senseless defeat. "As poet laureate, he might ... have felt called upon to compose a tribute to the Queen's troops who had fought so bravely for a good cause." Foltinek also mentions a tendency that the British have to "glory in defeat." Another possibility that he considers is that Tennyson may have started the poem to protest the "blunder" he had read about in the paper, which led to the Light Brigade's defeat, but in writing it found himself swept up in his own noble tone. Because the poem fails to fully address the responsibility for a "blunder" which led to hundreds of senseless deaths, Foltinek declares, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" "falls short of illustrating the human condition of our time."

Criticism

Arnold Markley

Arnold Markley is a freelance writer who has contributed essays and reviews to Approaches to Teaching D. H. Lawrence's Fiction *and* The Journal of the History of Sexuality. *He is currently an Assistant Professor in English at Penn State University, Media, PA. In the following essay, Markley surveys the historical events that inspired "The Charge of the Light Brigade," reviews its publication and initial reception, and discusses Tennyson's effective use of sound and imagery in the poem.*

One of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's best known poems, and indeed one of the most famous war poems of all times, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," immortalizes an important military incident in British history. In the mid-1850s, England became involved in the Crimean War, a struggle with Russia over control of the Crimean peninsula, a peninsula in the southwest Ukraine that extends into the Black Sea. On October 25, 1854, the famous charge occurred during a battle in which the Russians unsuccessfully attempted to take control of the port at Balaclava—an important supply port for the British, French, and Turkish forces who were fighting in league against Russia. British brigades managed to fend off two Russian cavalry advances on Balaclava, but the Russians were able to occupy the Fedyukhin and Vorontsov heights surrounding a valley near Balaclava. From a point high above Sebastopol, British leader Lord Raglan observed the Russians removing artillery from captured posts on the Vorontsov heights and sent an order to Lord Lucan that the Light Brigade was to attempt to stop the Russians on the Vorontsov heights and to recapture some of the stolen guns. Lord Lucan quarreled with messenger Captain Nolan, however, and as a result, the direction of the charge that Raglan had commanded was confused. Captain Nolan was killed before he could clear up the confusion and prevent Lord Cardigan from leading the Light Brigade into the valley toward the Russian cavalry, instead of up the heights in defense of the posts there. As a result of this critical mistake, an estimated 247 of 637 men were killed or wounded, or nearly 40 percent of the Light Brigade.

In November Tennyson read of the disastrous charge in the newspaper; he composed the poem on December 2, 1854. Tennyson determined the metrical plan of the poem from the line "Some one had blundered," which was inspired by an editorial he had read that referred to the incident as "some hideous blunder." First published in the *Examiner* on December 9, 1854, the poem underwent heavy alterations in subsequent printings, including, in some versions, the poet's removal of the line "Some one had blundered," at the advice of friends. Evidently, Tennyson later regretted this alteration and reinstated the line, feeling perhaps that the real cause of the disaster should be admitted and stated explicitly; the charge was, after all, someone's blunder. The many alterations to "The Charge of the Light Brigade" over the years suggest that Tennyson never seemed to be completely pleased with the poem, and indeed he never came to consider it among his finest works.

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" was an inspiration for British soldiers fighting in the Crimean War, however, and in August of 1855, Tennyson had 1,000 copies printed for them. In the soldiers'

What Do I Read Next?

- J.B. Priestley's *Victoria's Heyday* (1974) captures the spirit of Queen Victoria's reign in year-by-year chapters, including an in-depth discussion of the Crimean War. Priestley, a famous novelist, uses pictures, gossip, and a fun, lightly sarcastic voice to tell the tale.
- John D. Jump edited a 1967 volume called *Tennyson: the Critical Heritage* that almost every student of Tennyson eventually runs across. It contains critical essays dating from Tennyson's first publications up to today, showing how attitudes have altered during the past 150 years. Especially interesting is the way Tennyson was characterized by H.A. Taine in 1864 as the perfect symbol of stuffy Victorian England; poet A.C. Swinburne's touchy response to Taine, in 1868; and R.H. Hutton's 1888 reply to Swinburne.
- Tennyson's correspondences have been collected and published in three volumes. The volume that covers the Crimean War and the period of time when he wrote "The Charge of the Light Brigade" is *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson, volume II: 1851-1870,* edited by Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon. Published in 1987, this volume offers a fascinating look at the poet's inner thoughts.
- Hundreds of war stories have been written throughout the years. Some, such as "The Charge of the Light Brigade," praise heroic actions, while others draw attention to war's horrors. One of the best examples of the second kind is Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* about the American Civil War.
- Tennyson's career spanned the end of the Romantic age as it led into the Victorian age. He and Walt Whitman had great respect for each other's works, although it is hard to think of two poets whose techniques are more different. Whitman was an independent American who wrote in free verse and a pacifist who detested war. His *Leaves of Grass,* first published in 1855 and reprinted constantly since, gives readers an idea of the range of poetry written at the time.

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version of the poem, Tennyson took care to reinsert the line, "Some one had blundered." The aspect of the poem that the Victorians found most moving was its glorification of the noble soldiers who followed the orders that they were given, despite the fact that they knew full well that charging toward the Russian cavalry in the valley would be a disastrous and likely fatal move. The poem captures this noble sense of duty to one's superiors and honor in battle: "Their's not to make reply, / Their's not to reason why, / "Their's but to do and die!"

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" was popular among the Victorians and has remained a popular war poem. Nevertheless, like the poet himself, critics have never considered the poem to be one of Tennyson's greatest works. The main criticism of the poem from an artistic point of view has tended to involve its heavy— almost forced—meter and rhythm and its frequent use of repetition, which critics view as detractions from the overall success of the poem. Nevertheless the poet should be credited with his effective use of sound and imagery in the poem. In 1890, just two years before Tennyson's death, Thomas Edison sent a representative to England with his new recording device to capture the poet's voice as he read his own work. The manner in which Tennyson reads "The Charge of the Light Brigade" is a wonderful reminder of the richness of the sounds in this poem. As Tennyson reads them, the opening lines, "Half a league, half a league, / Half a league onward," sound like the galloping of the cavalry horses in the charge, and Tennyson's explosive pronunciation of the first syllable of the word "cannon" in the three lines at the beginning of stanza 3 echoes the explosion of cannonfire that surrounded the soldiers.

In addition to the realistic battle sounds re-created in "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the poem's imagery captures the visual aspects of the battle, particularly in stanza 4 with the flashing of

the soldiers' sabres and their plunging into the smoke from all the exploding artillery. Here the Russians are described as turning back from the fierce onslaught of the Light Brigade, but "Not the six hundred." Their return from the battle is postponed until stanza 5, after the Russians had fled; only then do Tennyson's noble but tattered remnants of the British Light Brigade stumble back out of the "jaws of Death" and the "mouth of Hell." Stanza 6 provides a final tribute to these brave heroes as the poet asks, "When can their glory fade?" and calls upon the reader to "Honour the charge they made!" Whether or not the critic finds the heavy metrical pattern or the frequent repetition in this poem to be worthy of a great work of art, most readers would agree that Tennyson's use of these poetic elements, and his mastery of word, sound, and image, make "The Charge of the Light Brigade" a moving and beautiful tribute to a disastrous historic event.

Source: Arnold Markley, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Jerome J. McGann

McGann recounts the tragedy at Balaclava in the following article. He discusses Tennyson's reaction to the event and his motives for writing "The Charge of the Light Brigade".

But of course this isn't war, it is magnificence, it is glory."

—General Bosquet

Some of Tennyson's contemporaries, and a large part of Tennyson himself, saw the charge at Balaclava as a kind of heroic tragedy—in the words of one correspondent, 'a grand national sacrifice'. But another part of the population, and another part of Tennyson, understood that it was only a kind of heroic tragedy, and that its blundered and failed aspects gave it a different quality altogether."

Source: Jerome J. McGann, "Interpretation and Critical History," in *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory,* Clarendon Press, 1985, pp. 191–202.

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Marshall, George O. *A Tennyson Handbook.* New York: Twayne, 1963.

Ricks, Christopher B., ed. *The Poems of Tennyson,* 3 vols. Essex: Longman, 1987.

Saintsbury, George, "Tennyson" and "Tennyson (Concluded)," in his *Corrected Impressions: Essays on Victorian Writers,* Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1895, pp. 21-30, 31-40.

For Further Study

Kissane, James, *Alfred Tennyson,* New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970.

Kissane's analysis of Tennyson's poems is very involved and clear: he looks at them as poems, not as outdated fragments of history, and he writes about them in a way that is easy to understand. This book is a perfect place to start for the reader who wishes to understand the author as a craftsman.

Tennyson, Charles, "Tennyson as Poet Laureate," in *Tennyson,* edited by D.J. Palmer, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1973, pp. 203-225.

Although this essay only mentions "The Charge of the Light Brigade" briefly, almost with embarrassment—as an example among others of "attempted popular poems"—the author gives a good sense of how social forces influenced Tennyson's subject choices in his later years.

The Creation

James Weldon Johnson

1920

"The Creation," which first appeared in the periodical *Freeman* in 1920, was published in 1927 as part of a volume of poetry entitled *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse,* and is widely regarded as the best piece in the collection. In *Slave Religion,* Albert Robateau says that "the symbols, myths and values of the Judeo-Christian tradition helped form the slave community's image of itself." In this poem, the author illustrates that idea, telling the Biblical story of Creation in the form of a sermon, with a Negro dialect, thereby treating the story as part of African-American tradition rather than as an account taken directly from Western culture. Johnson follows the structure of the standard version of the tale, using the same order of events and the same technique of repetition that is used in the Bible. But the language God uses, though He speaks only a few times, is easily recognized as southern, as Negro. The implication at the end of the poem is that, since God is Negro and made humans in His image, then Negroes are His chosen people. This would have been a striking lesson during Johnson's time, considering that in the United States blacks were often segregated from white society and treated as inferior.

Author Biography

Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871. Both his father James, a resort hotel headwaiter, and his mother Helen Dillet Johnson, a

James Weldon Johnson

schoolteacher, had lived in the North as free blacks. James and his brother John grew up in cultured and economically secure surroundings that were unusual among Southern black families at the time. Johnson's mother stimulated his early interests in reading, drawing, and music, and he attended the segregated Stanton School, where she taught, until the eighth grade. Since high schools were closed to blacks in Jacksonville, Johnson left home to attend both secondary school and college at Atlanta University, where he took his bachelor's degree in 1894. It was during his college years that he first became aware of the depth of the racial problem in the United States, and Johnson's experience teaching black schoolchildren in a poor district of rural Georgia during two summers left a deep impression on him. The struggles and aspirations of American blacks form a central theme in the thirty or so poems that Johnson wrote as a student.

In 1894 Johnson was appointed a teacher and principal of the Stanton School and expanded the curriculum to include high school-level classes. He also became an active local spokesman on black social and political issues and in 1895 founded the *Daily American*, the first black-oriented daily newspaper in the United States. During its brief life, the newspaper became a voice against racial injustice and encouraged black advancement through individual effort—a "self-help" position that echoed the more conservative civil rights leadership of the day. Although the newspaper folded the following year, Johnson's ambitious effort attracted the attention of such prominent black leaders as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Around this time Johnson also read law with the help of a local white lawyer, and in 1898 he became the first black lawyer admitted to the Florida Bar since Reconstruction. Johnson practiced law in Jacksonville for several years in partnership with a former Atlanta University classmate while continuing to serve as the principal of the Stanton School. He also continued to write poetry and discovered a talent for songwriting, which he pursued in collaboration with his brother.

In 1901 the Johnson brothers set out for New York City to seek their fortune writing songs for the musical theater. In five years they composed some two hundred songs for Broadway and other musical productions. During this time Johnson also studied creative writing at Columbia University and became active in Republican party politics, serving as treasurer of New York's Colored Republican Club in 1904. When the national black civil rights leadership split into conservative and radical factions—headed by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, respectively—Johnson backed Washington, who in turn played an important role in getting the Roosevelt Administration to appoint Johnson as United States consul in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, in 1906. With few official duties, Johnson was able to devote much of his time to writing poetry. He also completed his only novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, during his three years in Venezuela.

In 1909 Johnson was promoted to the consular post in Corinto, Nicaragua, a position that proved considerably more demanding than his Venezuelan job and left him little time for writing. In 1910 he took a leave from his duties in order to marry Grace Nail, the daughter of a prosperous New York tavern owner and real estate dealer. His three-year term of service in Nicaragua occurred during a period of intense political turmoil, which culminated in the landing of U.S. troops at Corinto in 1912. In 1913, after returning home from Nicaragua to settle his father's estate, Johnson attempted to secure a more desirable consular position. Failing that, and seeing little future for himself under President Woodrow Wilson's Democratic administration, Johnson resigned from the foreign service and returned to New York to become an editorial writer for the *New York Age*, the city's oldest and most

distinguished black newspaper. The articles Johnson produced over the next ten years tended to be conservative, combining a strong sense of racial pride with a deep-rooted belief that blacks could individually improve their lot by means of self-education and hard work even before discriminatory barriers had been removed.

In the summer of 1916, at the invitation of Joel E. Spingarn and with urging from Du Bois, Johnson attended the important Amenia Conference on racial issues. Shortly afterward, Spingard offered him the position of field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) which had been organized in 1910 by whites and blacks to provide a more militant vehicle for racial protest than Washington offered. Upon acceptance of the position, Johnson proved effective in organizing local branches throughout the country, greatly expanding the membership. After an investigative trip to Haiti, Johnson exposed the abuses of the American occupation there in a series of articles for the *Nation* magazine in 1920. Later that year he became general secretary of the NAACP. Emphasizing legal action, political pressure, and publicity, Johnson coordinated the most effective movement against racism of the time.

At the end of 1930, fatigued by the stresses of his job and wanting more time to write, Johnson resigned his position and accepted a part-time teaching post in creative writing at Fisk University. This move allowed him to pursue the literary life that had always competed with activism for his time. Johnson's distinguished career was brought to an abrupt end in June, 1938, when a train struck the car in which he was riding as he traveled to his summer home in Maine.

Poem Summary

Lines 1-4:

This version of the story of creation offers an image of God who is more like humans than traditional Old Testament portrayals of Him. God is sometimes referred to as "the uncaused cause" or "the prime mover," indicating that the actions of God cannot be traced to any previous reason, as part of the definition of God. But Johnson gives God human qualities—he speaks in a Southern dialect, He "steps" with feet, and He creates the universe because He is "lonely." To the reader not trained in theology, the study of religion, these humanistic qualities are familiar and make sense.

Lines 5-13:

Line 5 refers to the "eye of God," drawing attention to a physical characteristic that this God shares with humans. Cypress trees are trees with dense, hanging foliage that grow in the southern United States, which is also the geographic location of most swamps. The South is also where most Negroes lived in the early part of the century, having descended from slave families, and these references would have been familiar to them.

Lines 10-13 repeat the words "And the" at the beginning of each line. This stylistic trait mimics the Biblical story of creation, in which the phrase "And God said" is repeated consistently throughout the passage. This rhetorical technique is often used in oral text, in speeches and especially in sermons: the repetition helps those audience members whose attention has drifted off reconnect with that the speaker is saying.

Lines 14-25:

In the Old Testament, the separation of light from darkness occurs in a manner similar to the process described here, except that the language is of course more formal: God does not "roll" light into the form of a sun or "fling" the remaining light into the darkness to create the moon and stars. Adding this language is Johnson's contribution, making the story more active and therefore more interesting to the reader/listener. This sort of concrete imagery is also used in the Bible, to a lesser degree, turning philosophical concepts into experiences. In this section of the poem the technique of repetition is again brought into play, with the word "and" beginning five lines out of twelve, and God's refrain "that's good!" being repeated. This phrase expresses the same idea as the familiar phrase "It is good" that is said by God in the Bible, but while the biblical God makes a dispassionate observation, Johnson's God exclaims his approval with enthusiasm, perhaps even with a little surprise.

Line 17:

Using the vernacular "a-blazing" helps personalize the sermon.

Line 18:

Spangling is another word for sparkling

Lines 26-33:

This section details the body of God, placing the sun, moon and stars around His head and the earth beneath His feet. The shape of the earth's surface is formed by God's movements, and not simply because of His will, as the Old Testament version describes it.

Lines 34-41:

God creates the atmospheric conditions through the actions of His body—spitting, clapping, batting His eyes. As in the rest of the poem, God's physical presence is central to His power of creation. In Line 48, the author breaks from the story of the creation to linger for a moment on the significance of it, adding the idea of "cooling waters" to what Line 46 has already said about rain.

Lines 42-50:

In this section, nature is anthropomorphized, a term that means to give human characteristics to non-human entities. Pine trees are said to have fingers, oaks have arms, lakes cuddle, and the rivers run. The creation of humans is approaching and God approves of these human-like traits. His smile creates a rainbow, recognized as a sign of nature's beauty. The intimacy between God and nature is made clear as the rainbow curls like a pet about him.

Media Adaptations

- A video cassette titled *James Weldon Johnson*, part of the Poetry by Americans Series, was released in 1972 by AIMS Media.

Lines 51-60:

In the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament, God says, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let the birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens," and three lines later He says, "Let the earth bring forth creatures according to their kinds...." In shortening this to "Bring forth! Bring forth!" Johnson does away with some of the details of the creation, but he captures a sense of God's power and His excitement about what He is doing. The pace at which God has been creating things has accelerated to a point where He can hardly speak or move His hand quickly enough to keep up with His thoughts. For the third time, the phrase "That's good!" is uttered, completing a cycle: storytelling is often paced in thirds, representing a beginning, a middle, and an end. As the next stanza shows, God expected, upon saying "That's good!" a third time, to be finished with the task of creation.

Lines 61-69:

This is a tranquil passage in the poem, following a frenzy of creation, as God looks over the things He has made. The reader or listener knows that the creation is not complete until humans have arrived, and that the quiet passage here is a lull, not an end. This passage ends with God's observation that, "I'm lonely still," which negates the wonders of earth and sky that have just been presented, putting God back in the same predicament he had in the first line.

Lines 70-75:

God thinks in this stanza, and decides to make a man. In the first stanza, upon realizing himself lonely, God did not think, but decided without consideration to create the world. This structure emphasizes how special humans are: as the answer to a perplexing problem, mankind could almost be called the answer to God's prayer. It is significant that Line 72 is very specific about the fact that God sat beside a river, describing it as "deep" and "wide": in African–American mythology, the river is a central image, especially the deep, wide Mississippi river, which ran from the free states of the North to the slave states of the South. This idea is also referred to in Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

Lines 76-88:

As in the previous stanza, the river is emphasized. The reader is given a view of God being humble: in the dust, molding clay, bending "like a mammy" (an archaic African-American word for "mother"). At the same time, though, the author mixes in a reminder, in lines 80-84, of the overwhelming powers of God. Saying that God could create the universe effortlessly but that he takes such loving care in the creation of humans should be a source of pride for the human race. Man's self-esteem is raised by the close association to God. Line 88 stresses the relationship between God and humans more clearly. For an oppressed people, as the American Negroes were during segregation, the importance of this story would be that all people are God-like and were created to God's intent. Since God in this poem speaks with an African-American dialect, it is fair to assume that the person He made is African-American.

Lines 89-91:

The actual creation of life, mentioned briefly in lines 89-90, is given much less attention than the structuring of the human body. This poem makes no explicit points about what conclusions its readers should draw from all of this, but ends abruptly with the traditional words for closing a sermon.

Topics for Further Study

- Rewrite a story from the Bible or from some similar source, using the informal language that you use with your friends and objects that you yourself are familiar with.
- What words can you use to describe the tone of this poem? Think of at least ten descriptive words, and explain each one with examples from the work.
- Why do you think Johnson felt it necessary to rewrite this story? Discuss any poems or songs that you know of that do a similar thing—do you think they were done for the same reason Johnson had?

Themes

God and Religion

Every religion has a creation myth. If the principle function of religion is to explain mysteries to people who have not developed scientific explanations or who do not believe that the truth can be found by the scientific method, there could be no greater mystery to be explained than the creation of the universe—the origin of existence. As history has progressed, we have come to rely more and more upon carbon dating and astrological data that support scientific theories about how the universe came into existence. At various times in history, religious beliefs have come into conflict with scientific accounts. In 1633, for example, Galileo was forced by the Roman Catholic church to quit supporting Copernicus' theory that the earth revolves around the sun. To this day, some Christian religions reject the theory that humans are a product of a chain of evolution that traces back to single-celled organisms, noting that it contradicts the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament of the Bible, which is retold in this poem. The God depicted in "The Creation" created humans in His own image, with great, tender care, after His previous accomplishments had failed to satisfy Him. Many Biblical scholars warn that the stories told in the Bible are not meant to be taken literally, but are meant as symbolic indicators of how things are in relation to one another, pointing for example to the fact that the "first day" mentioned in Genesis could not be a day as we know it because the sun had not been invented yet. It is therefore symbolic. Given this looser interpretation, "The Creation" is not offering us a different story than the traditional Biblical telling, but is presenting an example of God's concern about the things of this world: all natural phenomena are found good, but man is made with tenderness and care "like a mammy bending over her baby." To the oppressed African Americans who were not allowed to participate as full citizens in America of the early twentieth century, God's concern was a reminder of each man's inherent dignity.

Identity

"Anthropomorphism" is the term used when someone ascribes human qualities to something that is not human. Gods are frequently anthropomorphized in stories, particularly stories that are meant to explain their behavior. Gods frequently are talked about as having motives that humans have, such as jealousy, disappointment, or pleasure. Greek mythology, for example, offers a long, intertwined story of gods acting the way humans do. Even religions that worship animals as gods often explain their behavior in terms of what human beings would do. "The Creation" gives us a God who thinks and talks in ways that would be familiar to the poem's target audience, African Americans of the early twentieth century. As early as the third line, He announces that He is lonely, a sentiment that is less like an all-powerful being than of the people in a preacher's audience. This God speaks in contractions ("I'm," "I'll") and uses verbal syntax that is specific to black American speech, such as "I'll make me a world." The landscape of this poem, too, contains details that Southern blacks would identify with: the "cypress swamp" that defines the darkness was a geographical fixture specific to the southern states, and the use of rivers, although universal, was especially significant to descendants of the slave culture because rivers defined slave territory and provided the most direct travel between slave and non-slave states. This connection between rivers and freedom was not just in the American south: for example, in the Book of Exodus the infant Moses is placed in the river as a slave and comes out a free man.

Both Genesis and Johnson's "The Creation" have their anthropomorphized God creating man "in His own image," and thus both stories create a

God who resembles man creating man to resemble Himself. In this, we can see the benefit of such a story on an oppressed people: God, the story says, is one of us. This makes the lack of political and economic might respectable, since God's lack of these same things is clearly by His own choice. With all of His power, this poem tells its listener or reader, God is someone with your concerns.

Style

The most striking aspect of "The Creation" is the stirring, oratorical style of the words. If the poem is read aloud, it sounds like a spirited sermon being recited in a church. Johnson achieves this quality by the way he constructs the lines of the poem. Like a skilled public speaker, he repeats certain words over and over. Many stanzas of the poem begin with the phrase "Then God," and Johnson also repeats "And" at the beginning of consecutive lines. These repeated words give the poem structure and rhythm, allowing the reader to feel how a preacher might stress the "And" in each line if the sermon were being read in church. The rhythm of the poem is also enhanced by the fact that Johnson arranges almost every line in the same way. First he presents the subject of the line, usually God, then he tells what the subject does. When repeated over and over, this construction, or syntax, makes an almost hypnotic sound and a type of rhythm, or beat, is created. Often, poetry creates its rhythms by arranging stressed syllables in a regular pattern and by making the lines of the poem a certain length. Johnson avoids this approach but creates rhythm through his careful use of syntax. This approach is also used in many books of the Holy Bible. That Johnson borrows a poetic technique from the Bible seems appropriate given that his poem is a type of religious sermon about the world's creation.

Historical Context

The story of "The Creation" is taken, of course, from the Book of Genesis in the Bible's Old Testament and, as the poem points out, is in the style of "A Negro Sermon." This style dates back to before the American Revolution, when, in spite of the traditions and laws that generally kept blacks and whites separated in cultural affairs, black preachers often addressed congregations of mixed ethnicity. When it was pushed out of the mainstream as slavery became more defensive in the early 1800s, and as segregation of races became more strict, the religious fervor of the preacher gave birth to Negro spiritual songs. The Negro preachers were among the most moving and popular orators of their day, known not only for being skilled and lively speakers, but also for their intelligence, which gave them the ability to speak of old familiar stories with verbal precision without reading from texts. They could appear to improvise as they went along, in the same way that the improvisations of jazz or rap music are possible only with extensive preparation, wit, and background knowledge. As with many cultural creations of African Americans, though, the social biases that were necessary to make slavery possible and that remained fixed in the popular thought for almost a hundred years after the Civil War ended in 1865 tainted white society's appreciation of the preachers. The black preacher became a comic figure: shouting threats about hellfire, repeating and rhyming, and using long, flowery phrases or complex jargon where a simple expression would suffice. To a white society that did not believe Negroes capable of the intelligence needed to consciously use these rhetorical devices, the black preacher sounded like a quick-talking confidence man, stirring up fear of the devil for his personal gain and straining to use "big" vocabulary words that he did not exactly understand. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the idea that Negro folk arts actually did have legitimacy and merit caught on among white intellectuals. Still, the years that the races had been separated from each other by both law and prejudice had made African-American dialect develop separately from the English that was considered to be the standard. Well-intentioned authors, both black and white, tried to capture the sound of black English on paper by writing in dialect. In his first book of poems, *Fifty Years* (1917), Johnson himself wrote a number of dialect poems, with lines such as "Been a-kind o' alin' all de day? / Didn't have no sperit fu' to play?" Representing black speech in this way was done with respect, as a way of recognizing the Negro's individuality, but unfortunately another tradition, the minstrel show, used the same exaggeration of sounds to portray blacks as lazy, ignorant buffoons.

In his introduction to *God's Trombones*, the poetry collection that "The Creation" was published in (although it was originally published

Compare & Contrast

- **1920:** Women were first given the right to vote: the Republican Party nominated Warren G. Harding, a lackluster but good-looking candidate expected to win women's votes. He was elected president by a 60 to 34 margin.

  1965: The Voting Rights Act of 1965 brought federal protection to African Americans, whose right to vote had been recognized in the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 but was undone by complex registration requirements in Southern states.

  1970: Recognizing the inconsistency in a system where eighteen-year-olds could be sent to war but could not vote for the representatives sending them, the voting age was lowered to eighteen.

  Today: America has had a female vice-presidential candidate (Geraldine Ferraro in 1984) but so far neither of the two major parties has run a person of color on the ticket.

- **1920:** Prohibition, ratified by the states in 1919, went into effect, making production and sale of liquor illegal.

  1925: Criminal activities centered around the high-profit business of selling illegal liquor. Al Capone created an empire in Chicago by waging war on other bootleggers for sole control.

  1934: The Eighteenth Amendment, which made Prohibition the law, was repealed.

  1984: In expanding the efforts to stop the production and distribution of illegal drugs in the United States, the Reagan administration coined the term "war on drugs."

  Today: In spite of unprecedented growth of the prison population, use of illegal drugs is on the rise.

- **1920:** Marcus Garvey, an African-American leader who supported the "back to Africa" movement in the United States, organized a convention of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, with 25,000 delegates from 25 nations attending.

  Today: Continuing differences in perception between members of different races have been highlighted by overwhelming black outrage at the verdict in the Rodney King trial in 1993 and white outrage at the verdict in the O.J. Simpson murder trial in 1995.

seven years earlier in the periodical *Freeman*), Johnson explained that he could not justify to himself writing the preacher's voice in dialect, because dialect had taken on only two meanings in the minds of readers: pathos and humor. Artists using dialect to portray the sorry conditions of Negroes had created as much of a stereotypical reaction in readers as minstrel shows had, so that one thought upon seeing dialect that the character must be either forlorn or goofy. Triggering preconceived ideas in this way works against poetry's intention of creating meaning with each word. When he first worked in dialect verse, Johnson was a songwriter in New York, and the big movement in popular music was dialect "coon songs." (Johnson had also been a grammar school principal, founded a small black newspaper, and had been admitted to the Florida bar.) By the time "The Creation" was published, he had also written for a major newspaper, *The New York Age;* been the Theodore Roosevelt administration's U.S. Consul in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela and Nicaragua; and was starting his term as the first black Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Johnson's choice to use the style of Negro speech for this poem but to not to try to write words out phonetically is clearly a result of his worldly understanding: he knew how blacks were patronized when attention was drawn to their speech patterns, but he appreciated the grace and rhetorical skills of the traditional Negro preacher.

Critical Overview

Jean Wagner, in his book *Black Poets of the United States*, comments on the sermons in *God's Trombones*, pointing out that what is effective "in giving these sermons their Negro character are the countless, more or less extensive echoes of actual spirituals with which they are studded." Ladell Payne, in *Themes and Cadences: James Weldon Johnson's Novel*, writes that in *God's Trombones*, "Johnson clearly suggests Southern Negro church speech ... he was as conscious of dialectical nuances as was Twain in writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or Faulkner in writing ... *The Sound and the Fury*. Johnson's ability to create the effect of dialect without using its typical spellings or illiteracies is one of his greatest skills as an artist."

Criticism

Brent Goodman

Brent Goodman is a freelance writer and has taught at Purdue University and mentored students in poetry. In the following essay, Goodman suggests that retelling the creation story from an African-American point of view was a way of reaffirming the value, place, and importance of the black race in American society at a time in which discrimination was overt.

During the Harlem Renaissance at the beginning of this century, Black Americans challenged the perception and condition of their people for the first time in American history. During this period, James Weldon Johnson established himself as a respected spokesman for Blacks, as well as a noted diplomat, novelist, lawyer, editor, songwriter and poet. In a time when a whole race of people in America were denied basic human rights, Johnson, through his speeches, songs, prose and poetry, helped give a voice back to those who were oppressed. In the poem "The Creation," he chooses to retell a fundamental story from the Bible's Book of Genesis, writing in a refreshing and distinct language unique to his cultural background. In this way, Johnson helps bring a traditional creation myth to a race of people often isolated by white society and helps give a new voice to an ancient story.

Judging from the subtitle of this poem, "A Negro Sermon," Johnson sets up clear distinctions between this telling of the story versus previous accounts. A sermon specifically told by and for the Black people, this poem doesn't mean to exclude others as much as it means to speak specifically to a people who at that time lacked a strong public voice. For white readers during that time, the title made no excuses and left no questions about the source of this powerful sermon.

In search for both a new voice as well as a new shape for this voice, Johnson lets the changing moods and expression of his subject matter determine the length and sound of each line, unlike traditional verse. "The Creation" is written in free verse, its form growing organically from its content rather than from predetermined rules of how many beats each line should have or where the rhymes should fall. For example, in parts of the poem where the mood is quiet and pensive, as in "Then god smiled, / And the light broke," Johnson keeps the lines short, less than four words long, to match the tone of the speakers voice. On the other hand, in sections of the poem where the voice builds momentum and power, the lines lengthen out like a train down hill, "He batted His eyes, and the lightning flashed; / He clapped His hands, and the thunders rolled." Johnson combines this fundamental poetic technique of relating a poem's form to its content with other techniques throughout in order to craft a distinct and charged piece.

In the original story of Genesis from the Old Testament, God creates man—after making the earth and seas and animals—so man can be a caretaker and name giver, a guardian of all lesser creatures. Johnson, born of a people oppressed by another race under the rationale that it was God's plan, decides to make the God of his creation story more compassionate, His reasons for creating the world born out of a need for company rather than control. The poem begins, "And God stepped out on space, / And He looked around and said *I'm lonely— / I'll make me a world*." In these opening lines, Johnson introduces not only a lonely God, but a God who speaks in a vernacular familiar to Blacks during that period. A vernacular is an offshoot of a language specific to people in a certain region or culture. A person from southern Indiana, for example, may say "I did my warsh" instead of "wash." Similarly, "Black English," or what some are now calling "Ebonics," is a vernacular of English no more or less correct than what others call "Proper English." In the third stanza, rather than God looking at what He's created and saying "It was Good," the God of this poem enthusiastically shouts "That's good!" like a preacher at the pulpit. Throughout his poem, Johnson chooses to give his

What Do I Read Next?

- Johnson's fascinating life is covered by the author himself in his 1973 autobiography from deCapo Publishers, *Along the Way.*
- Johnson also edited the two-volume *The Book of American Negro Spirituals,* published in 1977.
- Ralph Ellison's groundbreaking 1952 novel *Invisible Man* owes much to Johnson's earlier novel from 1912 entitled *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man.* Both works deal with African Americans looking for identity in a society that would rather forget them.
- The novels of Zora Neale Hurston, a contemporary of Johnson's, try in the same way he did to capture the dignity of African-American speech without mocking it. In particular, her novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain,* published in 1939 and again most recently in 1991, translates a familiar story from the Bible into black cadence.
- Langston Hughes is considered to be a poetic successor of Johnson's, a key figure from the Harlem Renaissance movement. His poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" from *The Weary Blues,* published in 1926 and reprinted in many anthologies, touches on the same imagery "The Creation" uses and gives the same sense of eternity. Hughes's later writings about the character Jesse B. Semple walked the thin line between recognizing and mocking uneducated African Americans.
- *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy,* by Michael G. Cooke and published in 1984, places Johnson in a chapter between the spoken customs of signifying and the blues and the Harlem Renaissance writers. This book gives an excellent critical analysis of many African-American works and designates where they fit into the overall history of literature.
- C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mimiya's 1990 study *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* is a sociological examination that gives scientific data explaining the ideas of the preacher's powers that Johnson sensed.
- Charles W. Hamilton gives an insightful view of the social authority and scope of influence black preachers held in his 1972 book *The Black Preacher in America.*

God a language a Black audience could better relate to than the language of the God in Genesis.

In a similar move, the imagery Johnson uses throughout is often familiar to his specific audience. Images are the descriptions poets and writers create using sensory details, or details we can smell, hear, taste, touch or see. While describing a lonely God looking around in empty space, Johnson writes, "Darkness covered everything, / Blacker than a hundred midnights / Down in a cypress swamp." This comparison to a cypress swamp is distinctly Southern, an image and landscape his readers could relate easily to. Later on in the poem, we see God kneeling on the river bank while making man, "Like a mammy bending over her baby." Here, too, Johnson uses a familiar language and imagery—"mammy," a vernacular for "mom"—to convey this previously exclusionary story to his audience.

Johnson elaborates specific details of how God created earth and man throughout, twisting, and in other places outright changing the storyline from the Book of Genesis. More than just making the language and imagery of the creation story his own, Johnson makes up some completely new details to ensure this retelling is more than a mere rehashing of old news. For example, in the fourth stanza, Johnson takes Genesis' version of how God created the sun and stars one step further, treating God like a character on a stage and giving him action and thought. God rolls "light around in his hands / until He made the sun" and with "what was left

from making the sun.... gathered up" the rest in a "shining ball / And flung [it] against the darkness," making the stars and moon. Two stanzas later, God is stomping around on earth making the valleys from his footsteps and the mountains from where the ground bulged.

As we continue to move forward in this poem, it's perhaps important to notice how the portrayal of God throughout is different than in this story's original version. In the Old Testament, God seems to be a rigid and all-powerful being, often pictured as an old man in long robes leaning on a cloud high above the earth; a God who is unapproachable and judgmental. The images Johnson uses throughout his work, however, accumulate to shape a different picture. One of the first things this poem's God says is "I'm lonely," showing a vulnerability many readers never considered. When Johnson zooms in on God's face in the third stanza, God is smiling, revealing a friendly and non-threatening being. These images help soften the typical image of God as a lofty, all-powerful, and angry being, thus allowing readers to feel closer to a previously distant image of the Lord. He actually "steps down" from space to walk around on earth while creating, and, when it comes to making man, kneels right down in the mud and cradles his first person like a mother with a newborn. This image also challenges our conventional perception of God as old man in a robe, replacing "great God Almighty" with a Black mother and her sleeping child.

All of this discussion of how Johnson changed or adapted the creation myth in order to make his own is not to say he completely abandoned all of its original elements. The basic order of creation is retained, although the day upon which each event occurred is not mentioned. Instead, it seems as if this God did everything in one sitting. In this poem, Johnson employs litany, or a listing of lines with the same starting points, such as in "Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky, / Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night, / Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand." This technique is also common in the Old Testament, and this type of repetition helps writers build a voice with momentum. In addition, the repetition of lines helps create a lulling effect, like the refrain of a child's song. Perhaps most effective, relating back to the subtitle of this poem, "Negro Sermon," is Johnson's use of litany to remind us of prayer, repeating something until not only do we believe it, but it becomes part of us. It is easy to imagine a preacher telling us the story "And the waters above the earth came down, / The cooling waters came down," and just as easy to imagine responding each time, "Amen. Amen."

Some readers may ask by the end of this poem, "why retell a story most people already know?" By retelling Genesis from the unique perspective of his cultural background, Johnson established a powerful story for his people during a time when they rarely had a public voice. Retelling a story informed by your own cultural background, in your own language, and with your own unique sense of imagery allows you to become part of a mythology from which you were previously excluded. And what better place to start from than the creation of man, neither black nor white yet, merely the first handfuls of mud from the earth in God's lonely hands.

Source: Brent Goodman, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Jean Wagner

In the following excerpt, Wagner reviews Johnson's poetry and the various influences which affected the poet.

"I recognized his genius, and in a measure regarded myself as his disciple." This avowal concerning [American poet Paul Laurence] Dunbar was made by Johnson in 1933 in his autobiography. But one could safely wager that those who read *Fifty Years and Other Poems* in 1917 had no need to await the author's admission before discovering the full dimensions of his debt to the younger man. There was, indeed, a striking resemblance between the two men, though Johnson rarely achieved the flights of genuine poetry so often incontestably attained by Dunbar in his best poems.

Johnson, like Dunbar, had the soul of an entertainer, at home in show business, eager to please, and always on the alert for a possible success. As a student at Atlanta University he already sang in a vocal quartet that toured New England to raise funds for the university. The repertoire consisted mainly of spirituals, but Johnson also appeared with the guitar and sometimes related a comic anecdote that, he relates, "proved to be a very popular one." But it was above all from 1897 on, when his brother Rosamond resumed to Jacksonville upon completing his musical education, that jointly with him James Weldon Johnson resolutely set out to provide songs and musical shows whose sole aim it was to conquer Broadway. For seven years his mind was centered upon show business, and a whole section of his first volume of poems is there to remind us that he spent longer as songwriter than as poet.

Poetry in Dialect

Under the collective title of "Jingles and Croons," the dialect poems make up one-third of the 1917 collection, some of them previously having been popular hits. Among these were "Sence You Went Away," "Ma Lady's Lips Am Like de Honey," and "Nobody's Lookin' but de Owl and de Moon." Though the first of these pieces had originally been published in *The Century,* they are all basically commercial pieces, put together with every necessary precaution to ensure monetary success. The following details given by Johnson on the origins of "The Maiden with the Dreamy Eyes" leave no doubt on that score:

> In those days the royalties of a writer depended largely upon the young fellow who would buy a copy of the song and take it along with him when he went to call on his girl.... In writing *The Maiden With The Dreamy Eyes* we gave particular consideration to these fundamentals. It needed little analysis to see that a song written in exclusive praise of blue eyes was cut off at once from about three-fourths of the possible chances for universal success; that it could make but faint appeal to the heart or pocketbook of a young man going to call on a girl with brown eyes or black eyes or gray eyes. So we worked on the chorus of our song until, without making it a catalogue, it was inclusive enough to enable any girl who sang it or to whom it was sung to fancy herself the maiden with the dreamy eyes.

In most of these poems Johnson rather unimaginatively follows Dunbar's themes and manner; he does not always even bother to change the title of the imitated poems or the names of the characters. Here to be found once again are all the types of song that had been in circulation twenty-five years earlier: the naive, sugary love song, the cradle song with which the black mammy lulls her picaninny to sleep, the story of the rival rural swains, the fable that pays homage to Brer Rabbit, and even, on occasion, a discreet hymning of the good old days and of good oldtime Georgia. Johnson's portrait of the Negro, in its main lines, still adheres to the minstrel tradition. He is carefree and optimistic, plays the banjo, eats watermelon and 'possum, and steals chickens and turkeys—all traits necessary to arouse an easy sense of superiority in the white public. Of all the poems in this section, only one can boast a certain originality. "Tank," with the subtitle "A Lecture on Modern Education," is at the opposite pole from Daniel Webster Davis's "Stick in' to de Hoe," since it tends to demonstrate, in an amusing way, that the race's social progress must depend to a great extent on progress in its education. When he was writing this poem, Johnson must certainly have recalled his experiences as a onetime teacher in an out-of-the-way Georgia village, where the Negro children attended school only during the summer months when Atlanta University students could earn a little pocket money by teaching school. Tank was the name of one of the dunces in Johnson's class, and his entirely comprehensible ignorance was of the kind that condemned to wretched poverty and a primitive existence all the black rural folk left destitute on the fringes of the white majority's culture:

> W'en you sees a darkey goin' to de fiel' as soon as light,
> Followin' a mule across it f'om de mawnin' tel de night,
> Wukin' all his life fu' vittles, hoein' 'tween de cott'n rows,
> W'en he knocks off ole an' tiah'd, ownin' nut'n but his clo'es,
> You kin put it down to ignunce, aftah all what's done an' said,
> You kin bet dat dat same darkey ain't got nut'n in his head.
> Ain't you seed dem w'ite men set'n in der awfice? Don't you know
> Dey goes der 'bout nine each mawnin'? Bless yo' soul, dey's out by fo'.
> Dey jes does a little writin'; does dat by some easy means;
> Gals jes set an' play piannah on dem printin' press muchines.
> Chile, dem men knows how to figgah, how to use dat little pen,
> And dey knows dat blue-back spellah f'om beginnin' to de en'.
> Dat's de 'fect of education; dat's de t'ing what's gwine to rule;
> Git dem books, you lazy rascal! Git back to yo' place in school!

In the domain of dialect poetry, it was hard to do better than, or even as well as, Dunbar, and in "Jingles and Croons" Johnson never attains the spontaneity of expression, the vivacious rhythm, or the melodiousness of his distinguished forerunner.

Moreover, Johnson would later repudiate, with as much vehemence as Dunbar had shown, this portion of his work which had enabled him, in the century's opening years, to win a somewhat superficial popularity on Broadway. Yet some of his poems in standard English are scarcely less conformist than his dialect poems.

Religious and Patriotic Conformism

Since the avowal made in his autobiography five years before his death, we know that all Johnson's religious poetry came from the pen of an unbeliever.

Under the influence of his maternal grandmother, who would have liked to see him become a minister, from the age of nine he had been forced into religious observances, inappropriate for a child, in the Methodist church which she attended. When she wanted him to be accepted as a full-fledged member, an argument broke out between her and her son-in-law; this aroused anxiety in the child. With it was blended his dislike for certain external religious practices common in the popular Negro churches:

> These combined factors at length produced reluctance, doubt, rebellion. I began to ask myself questions that frightened me. I groped within the narrow boundaries of my own knowledge and experience and between the covers of the Bible for answers, because I did not know to whom I could turn ... I was alone with my questionings and doubts.... At fourteen I was skeptical. By the time I reached my Freshman year at Atlanta University I had avowed myself an agnostic.

His openly proclaimed agnosticism led to some friction in Atlanta University, "a missionary-founded school, in which playing a game of cards and smoking a cigarette were grave offenses. This experience, in which his frankness was poorly rewarded, may have given rise to the reserve with which he would henceforth surround his metaphysical convictions. Not only did he reveal nothing of his agnosticism in his poetry; quite the contrary, he strewed left and right declarations of trust in God the Creator and in Providence, as though he were speaking on his own account.

One sole feeble echo of his doubts regarding life after death can be heard in the last two lines of the sonnet "Sleep":

> Man, why should thought of death cause thee to weep,
> Since death be but an endless, dreamless sleep?

But this is slight, compared to the numerous passages that could convince one of his religious orthodoxy.

Since he did not believe in God, why did he turn to him in prayer? Thus the envoi at the end of the 1917 collection begs the Almighty for inspiration and persuasive force:

> O God, give beauty and strength—truth to my words,

and if that other personal request, "Prayer at Sunrise," does not expressly invoke the Deity, there can be no doubt that Johnson is thinking of him when he addresses the "greater Maker of this Thy great sun." How could anyone guess he was an agnostic, hearing him proclaim:

> ... God's above, and God is love

or again, when he offers this assurance to Horace Bumstead, president of Atlanta University:

> ... sure as God on His eternal throne
> Sits, mindful of the sinful deeds of men,
> —The awful Sword of Justice in His hand,—
> You shall not, no, you shall not, fight alone.

While maintaining that the universe had no purpose, in "Fifty Years" he nevertheless twice utters the conviction that the Negro's destiny is a part of God's great design:

> A part of His unknown design,
> We've lived within a mighty age;
>
> . . . .
>
> Faith in your God-known destiny!
> We are a part of some great plan.

And in the celebrated poem "O Black and Unknown Bards," the principal merit he discerns in these bards who composed the spirituals is to have converted a race of idolators to Christ:

> ... the songs
> That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
> Still live, —but more than this to you belongs:
> You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.

Faced with such categorical declarations, one might feel tempted to conjecture that Johnson's agnosticism sometimes grew faint along the path, and that there were periods in his life when traditional religiosity gained the upper hand. But nothing authorizes such a supposition, and if we may trust his belated avowal in *Along This Way* (1933), his agnosticism remained unwavering to the very end.

> I have not felt the need of religion in the commonplace sense of the term. I have derived spiritual values in life from other sources than worship or prayer.... As far as I am able to peer into the inscrutable, I do not see that there is any evidence to refute those scientists and philosophers who hold that the universe is purposeless; that man, instead of being the special care of a Divine Providence, is a dependent upon fortuity and his own wits for survival in the midst of blind and insensate forces.

Thus Johnson's religious poetry does not express his personal feelings; it merely conforms—in a way whose precise meaning is, in our view, most clearly apparent in certain commemorative poems that are semi-official in nature. The first of these, written in 1900, is "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which Black America spontaneously adopted as a Negro national anthem, and which ends with a fervent prayer to a providential God:

> God of our weary years,
> God of our silent tears,
> Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
> Thou who hast by Thy might

Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray,
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God,
where we met Thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world,
we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand
True to our God,
True to our native.

The last two lines sum up the twin conformity of religion and patriotism that sounds the dominant note in *Fifty Years and Other Poems.* It is as though Johnson realized that, in a country where the inalienable rights of all men are officially derived from a gift made by their Creator, the Negro could hardly expect to be heard until he had at least formally professed his faith in the existence of this Creator and his loyalty to his country.

God and country are no less closely associated in "Fifty Years," the commemorative poem written for the fiftieth anniversary of Emancipation and published by the *New York Times* on that very date: January 1, 1913. In it the liberation of the slaves is presented as God's handiwork, with Lincoln acting as the instrument of the Divine will:

... God, through Lincoln's ready hand,
Struck off our bonds and made us men.

On the soil of America, Negroes have undergone a multiple transformation;

Far, far the way that we have trod,
From heathen kraals and jungle dens,
To freedmen, freemen, sons of God,
Americans and Citizens.

One may note, incidentally, the unflattering expressions used by Johnson in his references to Africa. Negroes had been living there in "heathen kraals" or even in dens like animals, from which God chose to remove them out of sheer mercy:

Then let us here erect a stone,
To mark the place, to mark the time;
A witness to God's *mercies* shown,
A pledge to hold this day sublime.

The word "mercies" was bound to serve as an unpleasant reminder of that line of Phillis Wheatley's:

'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land

—as Johnson probably realized, for in the 1935 edition he put in its place the word "purpose," and also dropped from the poem the two following stanzas whose humility and submissiveness, both to God and to White America, was absolutely not the right thing, after the swath cut in its stormy passage by the nationalism of the Negro Renaissance:

And let that stone an altar be,
Whereon thanksgivings we may lay,
Where we, in deep humility,
For faith and strength renewed may pray.

With open hearts ask from above
New zeal, new courage and new pow'rs,
That we may grow more worthy of
This country and this land of ours.

As was true of Dunbar, nothing in Johnson evokes rebellion or rebels. The heroes of whom he sings are all loyal, faithful national heroes, and not racial heroes. Most of them, too, are whites: the abolitionists Garrison, Phillips, and Lovejoy; John Brown, of course, and Lincoln the Emancipator. He praises only two blacks: Crispus Attucks, the first to fall in the struggle for the country's independence, and the humble standardbearer who, though despised by all, loyally gave his life for his country at the battle of San Juan Hill:

Black though his skin, yet his heart as true
As the steel of his blood-stained saber.

. . . .

Despised of men for his humble race,
Yet true, in death, to his duty.

His attitude toward the South is almost more submissive and sentimental than Dunbar's. "O Southland! is the humble appeal of a weakling who asks for charity, and one would seek in vain for even the most muted protest against the abominations to which, as Johnson well knew, Negroes were being subjected in his own country.

Must we then brand Johnson a hypocrite? His parade of religious orthodoxy is a paradoxical phenomenon, it must be confessed. Even Dunbar, though he seems to have been less grievously afflicted by doubt than Johnson, had bravely confided to his verses moving accounts of his problems with religious belief. But Johnson does not reveal himself, and speaks rather in the name of the racial or national community without allowing his own emotions to pour out. As for the avowal of his agnosticism, that will be judged opportune only in his declining years.

His behavior might appear to be dictated, in the first place, by a certain discretion, by the desire not to shock majority opinion and to respect its convictions. In any event, the following passage from his autobiography, in which he speaks of his lack of religion, would tend to convey that impression: "But make no boast of it; understanding, as do, how essential religion is to many, many people."

Nevertheless without making any display of his unbelief, he might have avoided affirming the antithesis of his real convictions and maintained a

discreet neutrality. The miming of strong religious feeling was not called for.

Thus the thought arises that he conformed, to a very large degree, for reasons of diplomacy. Like humor in the dialect poems, the facade of religious orthodoxy fulfills the function of dissimulation and self-defense. In either case, the individual hides his real feelings behind ramparts constructed *ad hoc,* and the outer world, whose hostility must be appeased, is allowed to see only a mask which, in every respect, corresponds to the mythical portrait that prejudice has put together. Since, in the eyes of the majority, the Negro is deemed especially religious, it is better to acquiesce and to put on the externals of religion, if necessary, rather than offend the majority by showing oneself as one is. This is a kind of moral camouflage, or mimicry. As we have already stated, it is in order to strengthen the Negro's claim to equal treatment that Johnson presents him as absolutely identical with the national ideal, which treats as indivisible belief in God and loyalty to one's country.

But Johnson's conformist behavior looks not only to the opinions of the white majority. In the tradition of his own race, too, the themes of religious orthodoxy have always been so closely intertwined with those of race that to separate them is almost unthinkable. Thus the religious themes survive and assert their authority, even after genuine religious feeling has practically evaporated. Involved here is a transfer of values, causing the religious theme to lose its sacral substance and to stand only for one racial theme among many others. The transfer seems to have occurred all the more easily because sacred and profane had been almost indistinguishable in the overall concept of Negro religion. This was true for both the ambivalent language of the spirituals and for the ambivalent figure of the Negro pastor, who was a racial as well as a spiritual leader.

Thus the poet, through the totality of signs constituted by the religious context of his poetry, no longer proclaims his adhesion to a metaphysical notion he had set aside long before. He announces his decision to remain one with a community that is at the same time national and racial. How this finds expression is determined, ultimately, by social constraints no less powerful than those Dunbar had known. As a consequence, the bulk of Johnson's 1917 volume of poems, constructed around a conventional outlook, appears to us sadly lacking in that "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" which, according to Wordsworth, is the distinctive mark of all good poetry....

Folklore and Race: Their Rehabilitation

No less paradoxical than the religious feeling he displays in his poetry is the strange attraction felt by Johnson the agnostic for the religious folklore of his race. One of the most remarkable poems in *Fifty Years* already expressed his admiration for the unknown authors of the spirituals, and his amazement that such noble songs could have sprung from the heart of a race so obscure and so despised:

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

Not that great German master in his dream
Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars
At the creation, ever heard a theme
Nobler than "Go down, Moses." Mark its bars,
How like a mighty trumpet-call they stir
The blood. Such are the notes that men have sung
Going to valorous deeds; such tones there were
That helped make history when Time was young.

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
That from degraded rest and servile toil
The fiery spirit of the seer should call
These simple children of the sun and soil.
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You—you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown,
unnamed,
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

Of course, the poet did not share the faith whose expression he admires in the spirituals, and if with evident sincerity he praises their authors for having raised their souls to God, despite their debased condition, this merely proves that he was not narrowly sectarian. But, basically, the religious content of these songs did not interest Johnson except to the extent that it might move the nation's white majority. If he undertook to make the beauty of Negro folklore better known and appreciated, and with this purpose in mind brought out his two collections of spirituals, it was because he expected that the artistic and religious emotions thus awakened in the public would create a favorable climate likely to shake the foundations of the nation's prejudices. Significant in this connection is one passage in the preface to *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals* (1926) where Johnson, speaking of the spirituals, states:

For more than a half century they have touched and stirred the hearts people and effected a softening down of some of the hard edges of prejudice against the Negro. Measured by lengths of years, they have wrought more in sociology than in art. Indeed, within the past decade and especially within the past two or three years they have been, perhaps, the main force in breaking down the immemorial stereotype that the Negro in America is nothing more than a beggar at the gate of the nation, waiting to be thrown the crumbs of civilization; that he is here only to receive; to be shaped into something new and unquestionably better.

This awakening to the truth that the Negro is an active and important force in American life; that he is a creator as well as a creature; that he has given as well as received ... is, think, due more to the present realization of the beauty and value of the Spirituals than to any other one cause.

He had said the same thing about Negro poetry four years earlier, in the preface to his anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* :

The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior.

The status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions. And nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art.

These remarks hold true not only for the spirituals and for written poetry, but also for the sermons in *God's Trombones.*

Just as his two volumes of *Negro Spirituals* were intended primarily to make these songs better known, so it was the main object of *God's Trombones* to reveal the existence of the Negro folk sermon to the wider public. "A good deal has been written on the folk creations of the American Negro: his music, sacred and secular; his plantation tales, and his dances; but that there are folk sermons, as well, is a fact that has passed unnoticed."

This is not the whole truth, however, for even before the earliest collections of slave songs, spirituals, and Negro sermons began to appear in the years following the Civil War, the general public had known of spirituals and Negro sermons, though in strange fashion, through the caricatures and parodies provided by the minstrels on the stage. We have also seen the Negro sermon find its way into popular poetry with Irwin Russell, his example followed by Dunbar and some of his contemporaries. But, like the minstrels, all these poets treated the sermon as funny, with the ill-intentioned stock jokes further underlined by the use of a degraded form of speech baptized "Negro dialect" for the occasion. Thus the Negro sermons in verse of *God's Trombones* cannot properly be classified as a revelation, but rather as a rehabilitation—in the first place, of the Negro preacher, who here for the first time is no longer presented as a comic figure, and whose historic role in the service of the black people is thus emphasized:

The old-time Negro preacher has not yet been given the niche in which he properly belongs. He has been portrayed only as a semi-comic figure. He had, it is true, his comic aspects, but on the whole he was an important figure, and at bottom a vital factor. It was through him that the people of diverse languages and customs who were brought here from diverse parts of Africa and thrown into slavery were given their first sense of unity and solidarity. He was the first shepherd of this bewildered flock.

But from the rehabilitation of the Negro preacher it was Johnson's intention to proceed to that of the whole race. With that in mind, he at once forbade himself the use of Negro dialect, so that the reader would not be induced to adopt any of the unkind mental attitudes that dialect traditionally served to convey. For this reason it is possible, to some extent, to look on the sermons in *God's Trombones* as pieces of evidence in the indictment that Johnson, after 1917, took it into his head to pursue against Negro dialect. This consideration had such an influence on the composition of *God's Trombones* that we must linger over it for a moment before dealing with the work itself.

The Condemnation of Dialect

Shortly after Johnson had published *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917)—a third of which, let it not be forgotten, was made up of poems in Negro dialect similar to Dunbar's—he became this idiom's principal detractor. His new stand seems to have been decided on by 1918, since "The Creation," which dates from this year and which he placed as the first sermon in God's Trombones, is not written in dialect. But not until 1922, in the preface to his anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry,* did he first formulate his reasons for having come to condemn the dialect. He blamed it especially for being "an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos," and asserted "that there are phases of Negro life in the United States which cannot be treated in the dialect either adequately or artistically." In these terms, the problem

is obviously very poorly stated, and Johnson, as if aware of this, took it up again on the following page, specifying: "This is no indictment against the dialect as dialect, but against the mold of convention in which Negro dialect in the United States has been set." But if the dialect was to be pronounced innocent the moment it had been accused, why was it brought into the case at all?

The real story behind this about-face may perhaps be found elsewhere. Much had changed since the days when Johnson reveled in his easily won successes on Tin Pan Alley, for now he was on the staff of a New York paper and was secretary general of the N.A.A.C.P, had an "in" with Congress and even the White House, and rubbed shoulders in New York and Washington, not with thespians any longer, but with people in society's loftiest circles. In a word he had become, as McKay put it, "the aristocrat of Negro Americans." By repudiating dialect, Johnson at the same time turned his back on a whole segment of his own past and voiced his desire for a respectability whose usefulness, in his new situation, became more apparent every day.

Yet the dialect was too ready an alibi. If he had sought to be entirely sincere with himself, would he not have had to tell himself that he felt far less guilty for having written in dialect than for having presented his fellow blacks as idlers and thieves? What, other than his own ambition, his eagerness to see his name displayed at the entrance of Broadway's music halls, had locked him into this "conventional mold"? If Dunbar had let himself be pulled in this direction, at least he had the excuse of financial need. But Johnson had never known hunger. He had a college degree, he had become a school principal and a lawyer at the Jacksonville bar, and he had abandoned all that for the vainglory and the royalties offered by the world of song and show business.

These are some personal aspects that must be borne in mind when evaluating Johnson's attitude toward dialect. He himself unintentionally revealed how inauthentic his attitude was, in the preface to the second edition of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, in a passage that discusses the dialect poetry of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown: "Several of the poets of the younger group, notably Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown, *do* use a dialect but it is not the dialect of the comic minstrel, tradition or of the sentimental plantation tradition; it is the common, racy, living, authentic speech of the Negro in certain phases of real life." The distinction is valid, of course, but why not say outright that what has changed is not so much the dialect as the writers' basic outlook, and that in this lies the whole difference between the minstrel tradition of former days and the Negro poetry of the rising generation? The important thing is not any changes that Langston Hughes or Sterling Brown may have made in spelling the dialect, but the fact that they no longer portray other blacks as ignoramuses, lazybones, and thieves; they no longer present them exclusively as clowns who pass their lives laughing and strumming the banjo, but as human beings confronted by life's many problems—who laugh, of course, but who also weep, struggle, suffer, and die, crushed beneath the weight of injustice and their color. This is what makes good the sin of omission of which the minstrel and plantation traditions were guilty, and which such poets as Dunbar and Johnson, often too lightheartedly, chose to assume. The dialect itself was not evil; instead, it too often was but the innocent vehicle for evil.

Thus Johnson's thesis can scarcely be defended. As it fumed out, it won him no disciples, and a poet like Sterling Brown briefly but energetically expressed his refusal to participate in any condemnation of dialect.

The Experiment of God's Trombones

The case thus adjudged, it remains nevertheless that Johnson's belated antipathy for dialect he'd noteworthy consequences in the free-verse sermons of *God's Trombones,* which he succeeded in making a typically Negro achievement while eschewing any use of dialect. Here is his own account of the origins of this experiment:

> What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish; he needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow of the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment.

We will not insist on the fact that the dialect itself could have met all these demands, since the work of Sterling Brown is there to prove it. Let us simply examine the means Johnson used to carry out the program he had set himself, and estimate

the extent to which his experiment may be considered a success.

His intent in writing *God's Trombones* is succinctly expressed in these two sentences from the preface: "The old-time Negro preacher is rapidly passing. I have here tried sincerely to fix something of him." The original idea was to begin the collection with a portrait of the preacher, "The Reverend Jasper Jones." Extant is a typewritten manuscript of this poem of twenty-four rhymed couplets with the author's annotations, but it is so poor a piece that Johnson's final decision not to use it is easily understood. Thus, but for the references made in the preface, we have no direct portrait of the preacher, and to get an adequate view of him we must turn to the oratorical skills he displays in the opening prayer "Listen, Lord," and in the following seven sermons.

The conventionality of these eight poems is already apparent from the fact that they are monologues, whereas in reality a part of the sermon, at least, would have consisted of a dialogue between preacher and congregation Here the presence of the latter is not even suggested, as it might have been by appropriate monologue technique—for example, by using the repeated question, as Irwin Russell and Page and Gordon had done. Nor is the monologue able to reproduce the oratorical gestures, always so important for the Negro preacher, who is equally actor and orator.

Thus Johnson, from the outset, imposed limits on his experiment. He had indicated what they were in the preface, and asked the reader to accept them.

In principle, the language of *God's Trombones* is normal English, not Negro dialect, but here and there it is possible to note a few minor deviations from the norm. True, the dialect or familiar forms that creep in are for the most part American rather than specifically Negro. They include, for example, the intermittent usage of the double negation and of the gerundive preceded by the preposition "a"—except, however, in these two lines of "Noah Built the Ark," in which "a-going" is not just typically Negro but directly borrowed from the first line of a spiritual:

God's a-going to rain down rain on rain.
God's a-going to loosen up the bottom of the deep.

Another Negro dialect form is the parasitical "a" often used by blacks to introduce a sort of syncopation into the English sentence:

Lord—ride by this morning—
Mount your milk-white horse,
And ride-a this morning—

or, again, in these lines:

And the old ark-a she begun to ride;
The old ark-a she begun to rock;

Yet another Negro dialect form is the redundant recourse to the auxiliary "done," as in this example:

And now, O Lord—
When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow—

But such forms are exceptional; no more than two or three dozen of them are to be noted in the more than 900 lines of *God's Trombones*, and their contribution to the effect Johnson was aiming at is but subsidiary.

Much more effective in giving these sermons their Negro character are the countless, more or less extensive echoes of actual spirituals with which they are studded. Sometimes a mere word or expression that has long been familiar crops up in the sermon and by its own power suddenly evokes in the reader's mind the whole naive imagery that makes up the religious context of the spirituals, to which the preacher untiringly returns to find subject matter for his sermon. There are the pearly gates and golden streets of the New Jerusalem, mentioned in Revelation, the custom of calling Jesus "Mary's Baby," and the warning words to sinners and backsliders that they should repent before it is too late. Elsewhere a line or two (or even an entire stanza) taken over bodily from a spiritual imperceptibly slips in at the end of a sermon. This is the signal awaited by the congregation for their voices to join in with the preacher's; preaching then yields to song. And, finally, some sermons are constructed from beginning to end upon spirituals, borrowing their arguments and paraphrasing their lines. Thus "The Crucifixion" relies for its details on the spirituals "Look-a How Dey Done My Lord" and "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord." "Let My People Go" is the account of Exodus, related on the lines of "Go Down, Moses," with its classical parallel between the people of Israel and the black people; whereas in "The Judgment Day," it is easy to pick out the very expressions used in the spirituals "In Dat Great Gittin' up Mornin'," "My Lord Says He's Gwineter Rain Down Fire," "My Lord, What a Mornin'," and "Too Late, Sinnah." These describe the Last Judgment, particularly the delicate mission of the Angel Gabriel who, with one foot on the mountaintop and the other in the middle of the sea, blows his trumpet gently at first and then "like seven peals of thunder" to awaken the dead and summon them before the Lord's throne.

Because of their somewhat immoderate resort to the texts of the spirituals, these last three sermons are the least original in the volume. Yet Johnson gives a correct idea of the preacher's technique, designed to move rather than convince his audience, alternately raising the congregation's hopes and filling them with terror, and arousing their pity by presenting scenes from Holy Writ as though these were taking place before their eyes. The preacher "sees" what he is describing, and his hearers "see" through his eyes:

Up Golgotha's rugged road
see my Jesus go.
see him sink beneath the load,
I see my drooping Jesus sink.

When Eve yields to the serpent's wiles, the preacher is a witness to the scene. Again, together with his parishioners, he relives the betrayal by Judas so vividly that one expects them at any moment to step in so as to change the course of events:

Oh, look at black-hearted Judas—
Sneaking through the dark of the Garden—
Leading his crucifying mob.
Oh, God!
Strike him down!
Why don't you strike him down,
Before he plants his traitor's kiss
Upon my Jesus' cheek?

He is present, too, "on that great gettin' up morning": he "feels" the earth shudder, "sees" the graves burst open, and "hears" how the bones of those awakened from the dead click together.

The most personal aspect of the preacher's art is what he creates out of his own fantasy with the aim of stirring the imaginations of his hearers. A ready fabulist, he constantly interpolates in order to supplement the bareness of the biblical narrative. Thus the creation of the world is unfolded before the eyes of the astounded congregation as though it were a fairy tale or a child's game:

Then God reached out and took the light in his hands,
And God rolled the light around in his hands
Until he made the sun;
And he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.

And the earth was under his feet.
And God walked, and where he trod
His footsteps hollowed the valleys out
and bulged the mountains up.

... God stepped over to the edge of the world
And he spat out the seven seas—

He batted his eyes, and the lightnings flashed—
He clapped his hands, and the thunders rolled—

His preaching ever relies on the concrete, with an anthropomorphism that brings down to the human level the Eternal Father, who is addressed as one would speak to a friendly neighbor:

O Lord—open up a window of heaven,
And lean out far over the battlements of glory,
And listen this morning.

Particularly remarkable are the images the preacher uses to make himself understood by all. Witness the reproof administered to the Prodigal Son who has revolted against his Father:

Young man—
Young man—
Your arm's too short to box with God.

... If allowance is made for his borrowings from the Bible, from the spirituals, and from the Negro sermons he had heard, what then is the poet's share in *God's Trombones*? Johnson was certainly not the creator of these sermons but, as Synge remarked of his own indebtedness to the Irish people, every work of art results from a collaboration. In *God's Trombones* the artist is clearly present on every page, and he gives even while he receives. The simplicity and clarity, so striking in these poems, are the fruits of his efforts. His musical sense is manifested in the choice of sonorities for the free-verse line which, in his hands, becomes docile and supple, and adjusts to the preacher's rhythm as well as to the rise and fall of his voice. Taking what were, after all, the heterogeneous elements of his raw materials, the poet has marked them with the unity and the stamp of his own genius, so that these sermons, as they come from his hands, have undeniably become his own to some degree.

If he deserves any reproach, it might be for his excessive zeal in idealizing and refining—or, in other words, for having thought it necessary to impose too much respectability on essentially popular material whose crudity is one of its charms as it is also a voucher for its authenticity. His sermons are still folklore, perhaps, but stylized folklore.

Johnson's experiment is not altogether comparable to Synge's, though this had been his source of inspiration. There was some desire in both cases, no doubt, to rehabilitate a racial community that had long been oppressed and mocked by a more powerful Anglo-Saxon people. Synge's work forms part of the Irish Renaissance, as Johnson's belongs to the Negro Renaissance. In each case the writer chose to produce a work that would be typ-

ically national or racial, while deliberately discarding the speech of the minority in favor of English. But even apart from the fact that, compared with Synge's lifework, *God's Trombones* is of modest dimensions, its themes were already set and its plots already mapped out, so that the role of inventiveness could only be negligible. Thus the poet's originality could hardly be exhibited except in his actual treatment of the material. While Synge did not overlook some opportunities for criticizing the Irish character, Johnson frankly aims at writing an apologia. Finally, even the linguistic experiment is not identical in the two writers. While Synge, utilizing the examples of folk speech which he had patiently collected, constructed for himself an extraordinary synthetic, artificial idiom, with intricate phrases and constructions that are his alone, Johnson relied much more widely on the English language's normal turn of phrase. Though making generous use, in his sermons, of fragments from the spirituals, he almost always provided them first with the respectable externals of standard English. What is Negro in *God's Trombones* is not the language as such, but the style and the outlook on life it reflects.

Successful as Johnson's experiment was, its success nevertheless remained limited and contingent, for it depended in large measure on forces lying outside the work itself and from which, in view of the nature of the theme, it profited. For any subject but this, it would have been hard to find so favorable a combination of circumstances.

This work, furthermore, was the offspring of an outdated mentality. Like its author, the work set out to have a Negro soul, but one garbed in the distinction and respectability of whiteness. Despite appearances, its tendency was at odds with that total coming to awareness marked by the Negro Renaissance, and no more is needed to explain why *God's Trombones* remained an isolated venture.

Source: Jean Wagner, "James Weldon Johnson," in *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*, translated by Kenneth Douglas, University of Illinois Press, 1973, pp. 356–384.

Source

Payne, Ladell, "Themes and Cadences: James Weldon Johnson's Novel," *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol XI, No. 2, Spring, 1979, p. 43-55.

For Further Study

Fleming, Robert E., *James Weldon Johnson and Arna Wendell Bontemps: A Reference Guide*, Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1978.

The introduction to this work gives a thorough, compact outline of Johnson's life and amazing accomplishments, which clearly reflect on the style used in "The Creation."

Fleming, Robert E., *James Weldon Johnson*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987.

In this book Fleming analyzes Johnson's works both individually and in relation to one another. Chapter Three ("Johnson's Poetry: The Two Voices") follows Johnson's progression from early dialect poems to the later free-form style.

Johnson, James Weldon, *God's Trombones*, New York: The Viking Press, 1969.

The best explanation of Johnson's strategy and of the history of the black preacher comes from the author himself, in the introduction to this book.

Levy, Eugene, *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

This is one of the most thoroughly researched biographies of Johnson available.

Locke, Alan, "The Negro Poet and His Tradition," in *The Survey*, Vol. LVIII, No. 9, August 1, 1927, p. 473-74.

In this early review of *God's Trombones*, Locke rightly sees the poems as "folk-pictures" and praises Johnson for his ability to apply epic themes to the previously unrecognized talents of the preacher.

The Destruction of Sennacherib

Lord Byron

1815

Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" was originally published in his 1815 book *Hebrew Melodies,* which included poems written to be set to adaptations of traditional Jewish tunes. The poem is based on a brief story in 2 Chronicles 32: 21 that records in one sentence the defeat of the Assyrians by God's Angel of Death. What details are missing in the biblical version, however, Byron provides: through metrical invention, description, powerful imagery, and parallelism the poet makes the dismal scene come to life. The destruction of the Assyrian invaders by the Angel of Death is not given any religious significance by Byron; instead, he concentrates on seeing the scene clearly, imagining it so specifically that the reader can see the foam coming from the dying horse's mouth, and the "withered," "distorted" bodies of the Assyrian army. Byron also uses similes based on natural processes—summer turning to fall, snow melting, armor rusting—to suggest the transitory nature of all life.

Author Biography

Byron was born in 1788 in London to John Byron and Catherine Gordon, a descendant of a Scottish noble family. He was born with a clubbed foot, with which he suffered throughout his life. Byron's father had married his mother for her money,

Lord Byron

which he soon squandered and fled to France, where he died in 1791. When Byron was a year old, he and his mother moved to Aberdeen, Scotland, and Byron spent his childhood there. Upon the death of his great uncle in 1798, Byron became the sixth Baron Byron of Rochdale and inherited the ancestral home, Newstead Abbey in Nottingham. He attended Harrow School from 1801 to 1805 and then Trinity College at Cambridge University until 1808, when he received a master's degree. Byron's first publication was a collection of poems, *Fugitive Pieces* (1807), which he himself paid to have printed, and which he revised and expanded twice within a year. When he turned twenty-one in 1809, Byron was entitled to a seat in the House of Lords, and he attended several sessions of Parliament that year. In July, however, he left England on a journey through Greece and Turkey. He recorded his experiences in poetic form in several works, most importantly in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-18). He returned to England in 1811 and once again took his seat in Parliament. The publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold* in 1812 met with great acclaim, and Byron was hailed in literarary circles. Around this time he engaged in a tempestuous affair with Lady Caroline Lamb, who characterized Byron as "mad—bad—and dangerous to know." Thoughout his life Byron conducted numerous affairs and fathered several illegitimate children. One of his most notorious liaisons was with his half-sister Augusta. Byron married Annabella Millbank in 1815, with whom he had a daughter, Augusta Ada. He was periodically abusive toward Annabella, and she left him in 1816. He never saw his wife and daughter again. Following his separation, which had caused something of a scandal, Byron left England for Europe. In Geneva, Switzerland, he met Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wife Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, with whom he became close friends. The three stayed in a villa rented by Byron. During this time Mary Shelley wrote her famous novel *Frankenstein,* and Byron worked on Canto III of *Childe Harold* (1816). In 1817 Byron moved on to Italy, where he worked on Canto IV, which was published the next year. For several years Byron lived in a variety of Italian cities, engaging in a series of affairs and composing large portions of his masterpiece *Don Juan* (1819-24) as well as other poems. In 1823 he left Italy for Greece to join a group of insurgents fighting for independence from the Turks. On April 9, 1824, after being soaked in the rain, Byron contracted a fever from which he died ten days later.

Poem Text

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the
sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is
green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath
blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the
blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and
chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew
still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his
pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

Poem Summary

Line 1:

The first line is arresting and immediately identifies the motif of good versus evil. Sennacherib is "The Assyrian," the King of Assyria, and he and his cohorts are descending on the Israelites. The people of Israel are mentioned nowhere else in the poem, so when they are compared to a "fold" or a flock of sheep—suggesting innocence—and Sennacherib is compared to a wolf, the line is drawn in the poetic sand between the evil, rapacious beast, Sennacherib, and the peaceful Israelites, the chosen of God, their shepherd.

Lines 2-4:

The rest of the opening quatrain is somewhat less negative in describing the remaining Assyrians. They are not as animalistic as their commander; in fact, the troops are seen in all their beauty. Their outfits "gleam" in the royal colors of purple and gold, and their spears shine so brightly they are like stars reflected on the sea of Galilee. Of course, this brilliance is a setup. Byron wants to establish a beautiful scene so that its eventual destruction will stand out more effectively.

Lines 5-8:

This is a perfect example of a quatrain being divided into two parts. The first two lines continue the pretty picture established in the first quatrain. The troops are again compared to nature, this time to summer leaves, as their banners are spread out against the evening sky. But the nature simile takes a quick turn in the closing couplet. Just as quickly as summer can change to autumn, so too these troops change from beautifully arrayed men to withered and strewn corpses. The simile of the green leaves is replaced by the simile of the withered and fallen autumn leaves.

Lines 9-12:

The reader need not wonder for long how these troops were transformed. The first half of this quatrain shows the Angel of Death at work. He spreads his wings, not to protect or embrace, but to kill; spreading his wings on the blast probably refers to the autumn winds of the last stanza, as in a blast or violent gust of wind. No spears or arrows are necessary, no clashing armies; the Angel of Death simply breathes on the hapless troops and they are gone. The concluding lines of the quatrain shift the camera-eye from the angel to the troops: the reader can see their eyes wax over and their chests stop heaving.

Lines 13-16:

In this quatrain a horse is the focus. The scene is gruesomely described by Byron. The horse lies on the ground with its nostrils wide open, but no breaths are taken. Byron provides another image of desperation and pain: the horse had been gasping for breath so hard before it died that it has produced foam around its mouth. He uses another natural simile, saying the foam is as cold as the "spray of the rock-beating surf." The reader needs to remember the opening quatrain here. Initially the army was associated with the rolling waves of the Sea of Galilee, a tranquil simile, but now the Assyrians, or at least their horses, are aligned with the chill of an ocean, and the violence of "rock-beating surf." By transforming rolling waves into rock-beating surf, Byron demonstrates the shift that has taken place because of the Angel of Death's visit.

Lines 17-20:

Again the quatrain is broken in two: the first section focuses on the rider, the second on the accoutrements of war—the tents, banners, lances and trumpet. The soldiers who at the start of the poem were gleaming are now pale, and the sheen of their spears has been replaced with rust on the armor or mail. The final lines of this quatrain are interesting because of their emptiness. Usually literature is filled with action, drama, music, and scenes; this moment is special because of what is absent. There are no sounds coming from the tents or the trumpets, there is no movement in the banners of the lances. The static scene effectively conveys the absence of life.

Lines 21-24:

The concluding stanza moves away from the battle scene. We see the Assyrian women, presumably back in Assyria, wailing. They are de-

Topics for Further Study

- Write a poem about a modern situation in which angels might intervene.
- This is not a very active poem: the destruction of the Assyrians occurs somewhere in the middle of the second stanza. To what extent is this an effective technique? Do you think more action would improve this poem? Why or why not?

scribed as "widows of Ashur" because Ashur was the god of war and the chief god of the Assyrians. Their gods were not a match for the god of Israel, so the idols or statues of Baal, a nature god, are destroyed. Byron concludes the poem with the last in a series of similes based on nature. The mighty Gentiles, the non-Jewish Assyrians, have not been defeated by the swords of Israelites, but simply by the glance of the Lord. Their power and might have disappeared, in the same way that snow melts in the sun. Everything in nature changes, everything is transitory, so by using these natural images and similes, Byron is emphasizing the temporary nature of human conflict and humanity itself.

Themes

Death

"The Destruction of Sennacherib" is most overtly a poem about death. The Assyrian king is killed by the first line of the third stanza, leaving more than half the poem devoted to the effects of his death. Foremost among the images of death is the description of the king's horse, who gasped so strenuously as he died that foam spewed from his mouth. Though death comes quickly for Sennacherib and his men—"their hearts but once heaved"—Byron takes a whole stanza to describe the horse's death. The horse is larger and more powerful than a man, and by describing the demise of a powerful animal that belongs to the king, Byron equates the horse's death with Sennacherib's and intends for the horse to be a symbol of the king's crushed power.

Death in Byron's poem is more than the simple cessation of life. Sennacherib's demise is called a "destruction," a word chosen by Byron to underscore the complete dissolution of the king's power. Normally, cities or large buildings are destroyed; men die or are killed. But Sennacherib is a feared king who appears "like a wolf on the fold," and the Angel of Death does not simply kill him but *destroys* him. His quick death is physical proof of the Hebrew belief that God is many times more powerful than the most powerful mortal. Furthermore, the king's death is more than just the loss of one life. It is a symbol of the destruction of the entire Assyrian culture, a society that worshipped Baal, the beleaguered pagan god of the Old Testament. The Old Testament verse that inspired Byron is 2 Chronicles 32:8, in which Hezekiah speaks to the people of Judah after Sennacherib has announced intentions to conquer their land: "With him an arm of flesh; but with us the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles." Using this verse, Byron created a scenario in which Sennacherib fights and loses the battle with God. However, Byron's poem is pure fiction; the Assyrian king almost was certainly killed by his own sons.

Heroism

It was a typical theme among the Romantic poets to depict the deaths of heroes and villains alike, just as long as scene involved a dramatic confrontation. Byron, in particular, was known for his strongly drawn heroes, dubbed "Byronic heroes" by critics. The most famous are the rogue adventurers Don Juan and Childe Harold, who were modeled on Byron himself. Other types of Byronic heroes are the "Gothic Hero-Villain" or the "Noble Outlaw" according to Peter K. Thorslev, Jr. in his book *The Byronic Hero.* Sennacherib has characteristics of these two, though he could more accurately be called an anti-hero. Because *Hebrew Melodies,* the collection in which "The Destruction of Sennacherib" was first published, was intended to exalt Jewish history—Byron had a strong religious leanings himself—Sennacherib appears as the foe and his death is not a tragedy but a moment of celebration. However, in his typical melancholy fashion Byron states that "widows of Ashur are loud in their wail," underlining the tragedy of the death, even though he is the anti-hero.

God and Religion

Hebrew Melodies was envisioned as an exaltation of the Old Testament, and "The Destruction of Sennacherib" describes the triumph of God over the pagan Assyrians who are struck down by an angel, a servant of God. Byron had high regard for the Bible and held Calvinist beliefs throughout his life. By writing tales of Jewish lore that could be set to music, Byron publicly affirmed his faith in religion. Sennacherib is struck down by an angel, a servant of God. Even though the Assyrians are presented as noble characters who wear the royal colors of purple and gold, Sennacherib appears "like a wolf on the fold," or rather, a predator to the peaceful Hebrews. That it takes nothing more than the breath of the Angel of Death to fell the mighty army shows how hollow their power is in the face of God. The poem's six stanzas dramatize a few verses in the Old Testament book of 2 Chronicles which depict the confrontation between the King of Assyria and Hezekiah, the King of Judah. By having the Angel of Death do the dirty work, the Jews have won the battle without so much as lifting a finger. In a Romantic explanation of religious power, "the might of the Gentile" is destroyed by the merest "glance of the lord." Once again, however, Byron has created fiction. According to history, Hezekiah was defeated by Sennacherib in 701 B.C.

Art and Experience

In evaluating the collection *Hebrew Melodies* as a whole, art itself becomes a major theme. The poems were originally set to traditional Jewish melodies by Isaac Nathan, a composer who was a contemporary of Byron's. Though Byron often strayed from the intended religious perspective of the collection—his famous poem "She Walks in Beauty" was also in the collection—a holistic theme becomes apparent. "The *Hebrew Melodies* are ... Byron's discourse on art, an examination of how poetry takes the materials of a transient world of process and lends them the grace of immortality," says Frederick W. Shilstone in an essay for *Concerning Poetry*. "As such," he continues, "these poems comprise an important experiment in genre, a true lyric *collection*.... This experiment is one of Byron's gifts to the history of literary form.... Byron realized he was engaged in the most unstinting celebration of art in his career."

Corroborating this view, John Spalding Gatton wrote in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* about Byron's motivation for writing the collection: "As a champion of freedom, he may also have responded instinctively to the oppression long suffered by the Jewish people." Besides being a "lyrical examination of the Old Testament, Gatton continues, the "love songs and reflective pieces, some written before the book's conception, though in their expressions of sadness, longing, and desolation, they voice sentiments found in the biblical poems bewailing the lost Jewish homeland."

Style

"The Destruction of Sennacherib" is written in quatrains—or four-line stanzas—that are very tightly constructed. They not only rhyme *aabb*, but the rhyming couplets also form grammatical units, so that each quatrain is made of two equal phrases. This doubleness is important to the poem's content because Byron demonstrates several motifs of duality—life/death, summer/fall, sheen/rust—to his readers, even in his poetic structure.

The metrical structure is also essential in this poem. Byron employs a meter of anapestic tetrameter, which means that each line is made up of four feet, or sets, of anapests ("tetra" is Greek for four). An anapest is made of three syllables, with the accent placed on the last syllable, forcing the reader to almost race along. While Byron sometimes substitutes an iambic foot, or pair of unstressed/stressed syllables, in his metrical pattern for variety and emphasis, most often he employs a perfectly regular anapestic line, such as the following:

> And the **sheen** / of their **spears** / was like **stars** /
> on the **sea**.

Notice how the words that are accented—sheen, spears, stars and sea—are linked grammatically (they are all nouns, not action words), but more importantly in their sound. Not only do they all carry the accent, they all begin with the "s" sound—what is known as alliteration. As a result, there is a soothing quality to the line which is certainly appropriate, since none of the violence of the poem brought on by the Angel of Death has taken place yet; everything seems serene, peaceful, and safe for the Assyrians.

Historical Context

Byron wrote "The Destruction of Sennacherib" at a time when Romanticism was flourishing in the arts. In painting, literature, and music, one of the great Romantic obsessions was the ancient past. By

Compare & Contrast

- **1815:** Napoleon is defeated at the Battle of Waterloo, the dictator abdicates the French throne on June 22 and lives in exile on the island of St. Helena for the rest of his life.

  Today: The sun set on the British Empire as control of Hong Kong, one of the wealthiest cities in the world, reverted to the Chinese on July 1, 1997, more than a hundred and fifty years after it was conquered by British military forces.

- **1815:** The ancient land of Assyria, once ruled by Sennacherib, is ruled by the Ottoman Turks, though British forces consider the area strategic.

  Today: The ancient land of Assyria is now Iraq, its capital Baghdad, and its ruler Saddam Hussein.

- **1815:** The first Jewish Reform Temple opens in Berlin. Members adopt more modern lifestyles, easing dress codes and dietary laws.

  Today: Many Orthodox Jews believe that the Reform movement has gone too far and the religion has lost much of its identity.

envisioning a battle scene from the Old Testament, Byron aligned himself with his contemporaries like the German composer Ludwig van Beethoven, whose 1808 *6th Symphony*, also known as *Pastoral*, evoked the bucolic country life of ancient Greece, and the French painter Eugene Delacroix, whose *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) depicted the demise the Assyrian King Sardanapalus, who ruled shortly after Sennacherib.

Writers and artists of the Romantic era may have also been influenced by the military exploits of Napoleon Bonaparte, the Corsican soldier who became the Emperor of France until he was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, the same year Byron's poem was published. This defeat was one of the century's most dramatic political events and meshed well with the Romantics' preoccupation with fallen heroes.

Prior to Napoleon's defeat, his army's exploits provided much fodder for the imaginations of artists and laypeople alike. During Napoleon's Egyptian campaign in 1798, his troops rediscovered the Pyramids at Giza and began excavation of the Great Sphinx, which had been buried by sand for over a millennium. Though the campaign was primarily a military conquest of Egypt, Napoleon enlisted scientists to evaluate the spoils of his victory. Their findings engendered the science of Egyptology and influenced the development of modern archeology. Across Europe and Great Britain, suddenly all things ancient became trendy; literature and art depicting ancient Egypt and other lost civilizations proliferated.

This trend was a continuation of the interest generated by the discovery of ancient Rome in the mid-seventeenth century. A century later in 1738 the ancient towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum, which had been buried by lava and ash in the 89 A.D. eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, were discovered. Excavation of the area continued to Byron's day and uncovered copious information about life in Roman times. Many motifs common to Greek and Roman art unearthed in the dig found their way into Romantic art and popular trends. For instance, the high-waisted Empire-style dresses favored by women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe were inspired by the feminine clothing of the Roman Empire. Wedgewood pottery, a style created by Josiah Wedgewood who became the official potter to the Queen of England in 1762, was inspired by ancient Greek artifacts and the paintings uncovered at Pompeii. Today, the famous white-on-blue designs still recall the frieze designs of Rome's ancient public buildings. Thus, Byron's allusions to ancient history in *Hebrew Melodies* and "The Destruction of Sennacherib" were intended for an audience which was likely well-versed in history.

Fellow Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote of similar themes in his work. In "Ozymandias," a traveler encounters an crumbling statue in a desert. Its inscription, once meant to invoke fear

in Ozymandias's subjects and foes, now seems ridiculous to the onlooker who can see no other trace of the once-great empire. In his collection *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) Shelley included many verses inspired by mythology and classical literature, just as his good friend Byron had been inspired by the Old Testament when compiling *Hebrew Melodies.*

Even though "The Destruction of Sennacherib" depicts the tragedy of war, Byron himself, along with many other Romantic artists, felt that fighting and dying on the battlefield was a noble endeavor. Taking his romantic feelings about war and ancient life to heart, he sailed to Greece in 1823 to fight in that country's war for independence from the Turks. This gesture was so in sync with the tenets of Romanticism that Delacroix depicted Byron's involvement in the Greek war in some of his paintings. When Byron lost his life after falling ill during the campaign, he was proclaimed a national hero of Greece. Romanticism valued instilling autobiographical material into one's art, and Byron's willingness to die in battle is foreshadowed in his graphic depiction of the felled Assyrian king in "The Destruction of Sennacherib."

Critical Overview

There have been a number of major criticisms of Byron's work by a number of famous writers. W. H. Auden, the Anglo-American poet, asserts that Byron needed to be "read very rapidly" because if one slows down the "poetry vanishes—the feeling seems superficial, the rhyme forced, the grammar all over the place," as he writes in 1962's *Dyer's Hand and Other Essays.* T. S. Eliot, the American expatriate poet, notes in his 1957 *On Poetry and Poets* that what some critics have considered as Byron's most ambitious works were "nothing but sonorous affirmations of the commonplace with no depth of significance." He even attacks Byron's ear for writing poetry, saying that he could "think of no other poet of his distinction who might so easily have been an accomplished foreigner writing in English." Eliot concludes that as a poet Byron "added nothing to the language ... and developed nothing in the meaning, of individual words." The nineteenth-century British poet Matthew Arnold shares a similar appraisal of Byron, although he considers Byron, along with Wordsworth, "first and pre-eminent in actual performance ... among the English poets of this century." Writing in a preface to *Poetry of Byron,* Arnold states: "As a poet, he has no fine and exact sense for word and structure and rhythm; he has not the artist's nature and gifts."

Other critics, however, disagree with these assessments. A British commentator writes in an 1815 *Augustan Review* critique of *Hebrew Melodies* that "there are traits of exquisite feeling and beauty" in the collection and adds that the poetry itself was of "superior excellence." Other critics in this century have likewise praised *Hebrew Melodies* and specifically "The Destruction of Sennacherib" L. C. Martin, in his 1948 *Byron's Lyrics,* claims this particular poem to be "the apex, the crown of Byron's lyrical writing.... Here, though not here alone, the anapestic measure which Byron so often employed with effects of triviality and bathos is marvelously effective." He concludes that the diction—or word choice—and the rhythm of the poem "drive home the concept of swift visitation and inevitable doom." Another critic, Frederick W. Shilstone, also applauds *Hebrew Melodies,* calling it "an important experiment in genre, a true lyric *collection*" that prepared the way for "more elaborate volumes like Robert Lowell's *Notebook* and John Berryman's *Dream Songs.*"

Criticism

Brent Goodman

Brent Goodman is a freelance writer and has taught at Purdue University and mentored students in poetry. In the following essay, Goodman argues that although "The Destruction of Sennacherib" retells an ancient story, it is firmly rooted in nineteenth-century Romanticism.

The Romantic poets, including such writers as Coleridge, Blake, Wordsworth, Shelly and Byron, believed strongly in a revolution of ideas—not only about how poets should write, but also about how poets should see and experience the world. William Blake, in his "Prophetic Books," defined this revolution as a recovery of the imagination, a rethinking of the way we see things "through and not with the eye." Similar, too, is Shelly's definition in his "Defence of Poetry." He wrote, "Poetry reproduces the common universe, but purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being." In other words, poems, by recreating the real in a new and refreshing way, allow us better access at "wonder,"

What Do I Read Next?

- "Ozymandias," by Byron's colleague Percy Bysshe Shelley, is a poem about the ruins of a colossal statue in the desert which depicts an ancient, once-feared king.
- *Sennacherib's Palace Without Rival at Ninevah,* by John Malcolm Russell, University of Chicago Press, 1991, is a nonfiction title providing more detail on the ancient king.
- *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is Byron's autobiographical epic poem describing his wanderings throughout Spain, Greece, and Albania.
- *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* is Mary Shelley's Gothic, Romantic novel about the limitations of humankind. The classic novel was conceived during the summer of 1816 in Geneva where Shelley, then the nineteen-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft, was vacationing with fellow poets Byron and Percy Shelley.
- *Lord Byron's Doctor* is Paul West's 1989 biographical novel about Dr. John Polidori, Byron's attending physician in Geneva. Polidori was a marginal writer who was eventually accused of plagiarizing one of Byron's unwanted works and passing it off as his own.

or that energetic curiosity that keeps children moving and smiling.

This new sense of discovery, combined with the approaching end of a millennium and the flaring of revolution in Europe, made the Apocalypse an attractive theme to the Romantics. Often, this theme surfaced in retellings of battles or biblical revelation. In the case of "The Destruction of Sennacherib," which describes the fall of the King of Assyria in 681 B.C., Lord Byron recounts the battle between the Christians and Assyrians that resulted in the overthrow of Paganism. In an historical period wrought with change, from rethinking the way literature was written to outright civil revolution on a national scale, this story probably carried much emotion with reader of that time. Some modern readers might ask why, if a Romantic poet such as Byron was obsessed with change and discovery, should he choose such ancient subject matter? Why retell such an old story? The answer, perhaps, is not necessarily only the subject matter itself, but also the way in which Byron describes the subject matter. In that sense, Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib" is an example of the Romantic philosophy in both its revolutionary subject matter and in how Byron, by using vivid details and descriptive language, purges the "film of familiarity" from a commonly told story.

Like the other Romantic poets, Byron often used highly structured and rigid, traditional forms to craft his poems. "The Destruction of Sennacherib," for example, is written in four-line stanzas called quatrains, with the first and second, as well and the third and fourth, lines rhyming. Similarly, there are four stresses, or beats, in each line (this is called tetrameter). A reader might wonder why a poet so concerned with finding new ways of imagining the world would still depend on such rigid rules for crafting his poems. Ironically, the form Byron chose to retell this apocalyptic story may help us experience the scene better than a less strict form would. In reading this poem— with its four stresses per line and four lines per stanza— aloud, our ear begins to recognize a marching beat, like a snare drum keeping time: "the asSYRian came DOWN like the WOLF on the FOLD, and his COhorts were GLEAMing in PURple and GOLD." A march, literally, is a song written in straight four beats per measure. Often poets use this unique relationship between the rhythm or sound of the poem and its subject matter to help bring a scene or experience to life. In this case, even the most structured and traditional form helps Byron find freedom of expression.

Another point of poetic structure Byron uses to help match the poem's form to its subject is the use of consonance and assonance or matching consonant sounds and vowel sounds in a line. This can have a variety of effects, depending on which sounds are repeated. In line where he is describing smashing false idols in the temple of Baal, Byron repeats the sharp consonant sounds—"d," "b," "k," and "t"—to match the sound of the line to the action, "the idols are broke in the temple of Baal." Whereas in the last line, he uses softer sounds like "th," "m" "l" and "n" to recreate the subtle image of snow melting "in the glance of the lord."

The poem itself is more narrative than lyric, meaning it tells a story in a chronological order,

describing a scene and characters working their way through a situation. Because our understanding of any poem first depends on our ability to figure out what is happening at the literal or narrative level, it is useful to walk through a close reading of the poem. Byron opens the narrative with a panoramic description of the Assyrian King along with his army that is dressed in purple and gold, with spears shining "like stars on the sea." Sennacherib is the powerful Pagan King of Assyria, a non Judeo-Christian civilization, and purple and gold are colors usually associated with royalty or nobility. In the first line, Byron compares Sennacherib to a wolf sneaking into a "fold," or sheep pen, which, by analogy, also paints the King as a dangerous and deceitful man. His "host," or army, could be seen at sunset with banners waving like "leaves of the forest when summer is green." Here, within the first five lines, Byron introduces yet another color, green, that usually reminds us of vitality, freshness, and life.

But no sooner does he establish this scene does Byron begin to paint a darker picture: suddenly the seasons change from summer to autumn, as the bodies of the Assyrian army "withern and strown" across the field like leaves. We learn in the beginning of stanza three this is because the "Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast, / And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed." The angel of death is a character out of the Judeo-Christian bible, and here he enters the scene to wipe out an entire army with a spread of his wings and one breath. What remains is an apocalyptic landscape completely devoid of any of its previous inhabitants. It is a scene perhaps symbolic of the revolutionary change the Romantic poets such as Byron strove for.

By the time the reader gets only two stanzas into the retelling of the Sennacherib's destruction, the war is already over. In the remaining four stanzas of the poem, Byron uses vividly descriptive language and images to zoom in on the scene, recreating the aftermath in such a precise way that readers are forced to look at a familiar story in a fresh way and with a new sense of wonder. He points out the multiple "eyes of sleepers waxed deadly and still," and the sound of their hearts heaving a last few beats before death. He focuses on the horse's breathless nostril and the foam from its mouth that lay on the grass "cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf." By using this comparison, or simile, to re-create a scene, Byron is drawing the reader in by asking us to participate with him in the act of imagining by seeing (and feeling) the cold foam from the horse's gasping mouth in a way we probably never have before—like sea-spray pounding the shore. Byron is a master in his craft, and his comparison is accurate in both its literal description and its source of violent action; the horse is struggling on the ground like a "rock beating surf."

After describing the multitudes of dead and their fallen horses, Byron focuses the fifth stanza on who we can guess to be King Sennacherib himself, dead on the ground in rusting armor, amid an empty group of tents and banners. The actual battle, so quickly over with early on in the poem, is diminished even further when Byron tells us the Assyrians' swords remained "unlifted, the trumpet unblown." In the next and last stanza he similarly describes the army as "unsmote by the sword," implying they were not killed by man-made weapons. The actual destruction and revolution, Byron seems to say, is caused by a much more powerful source that can kill whole armies in one sweeping gesture, much like that described in stories from the Bible's "Book of Revelations." Here again is the reoccurring vision of apocalypse.

The final stanza pans the camera back again, until we can hear the "widows of Ashur" crying loudly and see the false pagan idols broken in the temple of Baal. Ashur, it is important to note, is both the name of the god of war, as well as the original capital city of Assyria. In the closing lines, the entire might of the Gentiles, or non-Christians, dissolves like snow under a hot sun; a whole civilization is brought down under "the glance of the lord." Bringing things full circle, Byron ends this poem, which began using images of summer, then autumn, with winter ending and the melting of snow. And although he never mentions the next and final season specifically, we instinctively know that this poem ends as spring begins and new growth emerges from a frozen and dead landscape.

Source: Brent Goodman, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

David Kelly

David Kelly is a freelance writer and instructor at Oakton Community College, Des Plaines, IL, as well as the faculty advisor and cofounder of the creative writing periodical of Oakton Community College. He is currently writing a novel. In the following essay, Kelly explains that the perceived weaknesses in "The Destruction of Sennecherib" seem less so when considering Byron's goals for the poem and acknowledging his unique approach of providing readers with a visual—rather than purely emotional—image of its events.

It would be easy to write Lord Byron off as a minor poet who has wrangled himself a seat at the great historic banquet of poets by living a life of fame, scandal and sex, reasoning that bookish literary historians are overly friendly to his reputation because they want to be more like him. There is enough critical support to defend such an idea, and "The Destruction of Sennecherib" can seem, to the contemporary reader, a catalog of tricks that a poet might use to make his verse seem more clever and important than it really is. The rollicking anapestic meter, charging along line after line with the *dah-dah-DUM, dah-dah-DUM* rhythm of charging horses, has a rousing battle-ready beat, but that is exactly what makes it inappropriate when the focus shifts to the after-slaughter stillness—we have to wonder if poets shouldn't have some sort of valve to control the flow of their heroic booming. The rhyming couplets also are not very clever, displaying a competent craftsmanship when they are working and even blowing one sour note on twelve couplets, with the use of the word "strown" where any number of legitimate words—stone, thrown, throne, bone, moan and alone come to mind without bothering to think—would have worked. Even his heroic subject matter is taken from the Old Testament and is therefore pre-tested, purchased like a paint-by-numbers kit, isn't it? It is at this point that literary historians generally try to prop up his poetry with biographical facts, first telling us about Byron's great luck at having his title delivered to him unexpectedly one day when he was fifteen, his early success and witty put-downs of critics, his drinking and up-and-down finances and chasing every woman in sight, including his half-sister. After this, historians will mention his fantastic public success during his lifetime and then rank him in a place within the Romantic movement (there is no consensus: he places "marginal" to "forefront," depending on the critic).

But lovers of poetry are often better than literary historians at separating the poet's life from his or her work and getting down to the crucial question: Will I like reading this poem? Implied in this statement, secretly hidden in the genetic code of the words "lovers of" and "like," is a second question: Will I learn from it? After all, in this age of infinite distractions and sensory stimulation, it is pretty safe to guess that anyone reading at all has some element of learning built into their sense of entertainment. By nature of their indirect structure, poems always require a little think-work, which the reader accepts as part of the fun. With just two background ideas to consider, and absolutely no condescending to Lord Byron because he was such a fascinating person in life, "The Destruction of Sennecherib" offers today's readers an amusing and worthwhile reading experience.

The first consideration that we should take into account, to be fair, stems from the fact that this poem was written to be put to music, as part of a series called *Hebrew Melodies* that he worked on with his friend, composer Isaac Nathan. Keeping this in mind helps us understand the author's intention, repositioning our opinions about the stubbornness of the rhythm and the weak obviousness of the rhymes from uninteresting artistic decisions to shrewd commercial choices. Verse that is written to be sung and followed with the ear, not the eye, must by basic necessity avoid being too complex, so that the singer and the listener can follow it. Writing for music required Byron to be smoother and less challenging than writing for the page, and in these terms this work was a great success with his public, as most of Byron's works were during his lifetime. We can blame a contemporary poet for trying to be light and bouncy and sing-songy, especially if, like this piece, the subject is massive deaths. Byron was not trying to just write likeable verse, he was writing to interlock his words with Nathan's melodies in order to be popular and make money. He was working, quite well, within a predetermined form, and so the contemporary reader should not blame him for the lack of creativity in the structure.

The only other consideration that we should give him, to be fair readers, is the recognition of how few poets up to Byron's time really valued giving the reader a physical description, and how nobody seemed to enjoy plunging readers into the scene the way Byron did. Poets before him used their art of image-conjuring, when they used it at all, to make their point about God or human nature, not to take the reader with them on a journey to a place. Shakespeare showed in sonnets such as "My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like The Sun" that he understood the impact that physicality gave the written word, but the practice was not common. Even Byron's immediate predecessor, Wordsworth, used adjectives in "Daffodils" that were more reflective of what the speaker felt than what he saw, giving us only "golden" to help us picture what a daffodil is like. Byron was a sensualist—it is here that his lack of morals, his sexual appetite and mood swings can usually be worked into a critical analysis, but they can just as well be left out. To the audience of 1815, his writing was like being shown color television for the first time, and

they lapped it up. Today, we have had the benefit of the twentieth century's descriptive works, which in one way or another, consciously or not, have been influenced by T.S. Eliot's theory of the "objective correlative," which encourages writers to use objects that all people feel the same about, eliminating the need for the poet to announce his or her own feelings. Byron's narration approaches its subject matter like a camera, a technique so contemporary that readers tend to overlook it.

And so, excusing his form because it was chosen to fit into a melody and appreciating the originality of his style, we are ready to examine what "The Destruction of Sennecherib" has to offer to readers today. The poem is based on a story from the Second Book of Kings, chapter 19, where Hezekiah, ruler of Judah, implores God, through the prophet Isaiah, to stop the attacking Assyrians: God promises coming hardship for the unfaithful people of Judah, but because Hezekiah has always been faithful and obedient He sends an angel to kill all 180,000 Assyrians in their camp overnight. Interestingly, Byron leaves out the prophet's long lecture about the wickedness in Jerusalem, which takes up most of the chapter, and he concentrates on the destruction of enemies which is represented in the chapter's last two lines, making this a traditional victory hymn.

The whole story is told in an abbreviated form in the poem's first two stanzas. The first simile used, "like a wolf to the fold," is as much a cliche now as when people actually tended sheep, but it is effective in establishing the carnivorous, predatory nature of the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib and the innocent helplessness of the Judeans. The colors that the attacking army wore is a detail that probably could have been done without, except that it helps establish the visual base of Byron's style. Likewise, the forced reference to the sea of Galilee could be vaguely significant for those who had no clue of the story's Biblical origin, but it is just as confusing, because this story takes place in Jerusalem, seventy miles away from the sea. The second stanza's comparison of the invading army to summer leaves and then to autumn leaves is a fair summary of what actually did happen to the Assyrians, and the language is nicely balanced between the first couplet and the second, but if this were the extent of Byron's poetic powers the poem would hardly be worth remembering.

The third, fourth and fifth stanzas, though, turn the story into a physical experience that would have been beyond the imagination of most poets to this day. Death is an event, an occurrence, and at least since Biblical times it has been put into the form of an angel, but it takes a poet with a fully developed reality in his mind to focus on Death's wings (which would of course be the thing we would all look at if Death flew by) and to give Death's power to kill a physical presence—the angel's breath seems the obvious means of destruction, now that Byron has mentioned it. We are not simply told that the soldiers died, but our attention is focused on the coldness of their eyes and the stopping of their hearts. Almost a hundred years before the invention of the motion picture camera, Byron uses the methods that movies use to make simple facts imply more than they have to. We know that the Assyrians' destruction was complete because our attention is drawn to a dead horse lying in the middle of their camp; we know that the horse is dead because its nostrils are still and foam pours from its mouth onto the ground. The poem does not merely tell us that the dead lay on the ground, we get evidence that they are cold and dead from the rust and the dew that settles on skin. Just how this defeat affected Assyria is not explained: the widows' wail tells it all.

These are the traits of any good poem, of any time: to imply a hundred times more than it says, to stuff a small briefcase with a trunkload of ideas. By concentrating on Byron's colorful life story, we can possibly come to understand a few small points better, but the risk is that the poem then begins to look like a decrepit old beggar that has lost the ability to stand by itself. "The Destruction of Sennacherib" has its own greatness: recognizing that greatness begins with seeing its many weaknesses and accepting its modest goals. It helps to know how strange this kind of sensory writing was to Byron's audience, but it is not necessary to study the poem as a fad. Students who take a little time to consider how much each detail tells them will find the investment amply repaid.

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Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night

Dylan Thomas

c. 1946

The first poem that Dylan Thomas ever published, when he was only eighteen, was an early version of "And Death Shall Have No Dominion." The cycle of life and death formed a constant underlying theme throughout his poetry since that earliest effort. In "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," a moving plea to his dying father, death takes on a new and intensely personal meaning for Thomas.

David John Thomas was an important influence throughout his son Dylan's life. A grammar school English teacher, he had a deep love for language and literature which he passed on to his son. In a 1933 letter to a friend, Dylan Thomas describes the library he shared with his father in their home. His father's section held the classics, while his included modern poetry. It had, according to Thomas, everything needed in a library.

"Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" was in all likelihood composed in 1945 when D. J. Thomas was seriously ill; however, it was not published until after his death on December 16, 1952. Thomas sent the poem to a friend, Princess Caetani, in the spring of 1951, telling her that the "only person I can't show the little enclosed poem to is, of course, my father who doesn't know he's dying." After his father's death, the poem was included in the collection *In Country Sleep*. Ironically Dylan Thomas himself died just a year later. The poem discusses various ways to approach death in old age. It advocates affirming life up until the last breath, rather than learning to accept death quietly.

Dylan Thomas

Author Biography

Thomas was born at home in the Uplands district of Swansea, Wales, on October 27, 1914, the second child and only son of middle-class parents. His sister Nancy was nearly nine years older than he. His father was a schoolmaster in English at the local grammar school. Though considered a cold and bitter man who resented his position as a teacher, the elder Thomas's love for literature encouraged a similar devotion in his son. Thomas feared, respected, and deepy loved his father, and in some sense his life appeared to be an attempt to realize his father's frustrated dream of being a great poet. In contrast to his father, Thomas's mother was loving, overly protective, and inclined to overindulge her son. Even at the end of his life, she found no fault in his public behavior and the drinking habits which ultimately led to his death.

Thomas enjoyed his childhood in Wales, and his work in later years would reflect a desire to recapture the relatively carefree years of his youth. A generally undistinguished student, Thomas entered the Swansea Grammar School in 1925. In 1931 he left school to work for the *South Wales Daily Post* in Swansea. He would later say that his real education came from the freedom he was given to read anything in his father's suprisingly well-stocked library of modern and nineteenth-century poetry and other works. Following his resignation from the paper early in 1933, poetry became Thomas's primary occupation. By all accounts, he was not a successful news reporter: he got facts wrong, and he failed to show up to cover events, preferring instead to loiter at the pool hall or the Kardomah Cafe. During the early 1930s Thomas began to develop the serious drinking problem that plagued him throughout the remainder of his life. He also began to develop a public persona as a jokester and storyteller. However, his notebooks reveal that many of his most highly regarded poems were either written or drafted during this period and that he had also begun to experiment with short prose pieces. In May of 1933 his poem "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" was published in the *New English Weekly*, marking the first appearance of his work in a London journal, and in December of the following year his first poetry collection, *18 Poems* (1934), was issued. During this period he established a lifelong pattern of travel between London and some rural retreat, usually in Wales. As the decade progressed he gained increasing recognition for both his poetry and his prose.

In the summer of 1937 Thomas married Caitlin Macnamara, a young dancer of Irish descent whose Bohemian lifestyle and behavior rivaled Thomas's own. For the next twelve years the couple led a nomadic and financially difficult existence, staying with friends, relatives, and a series of benefactors. The stories later collected in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940) were written primarily during the couple's stay in the Welsh coastal village of Laugharne in late 1938 and early 1939. Too frail for active military service, and needing to support himself and his wife, Thomas took work writing scripts for propaganda films during World War II, at which time he also began to participate in radio dramas and readings for the BBC. His financial burdens increased during this time. In January, 1939 Thomas's first child, a son named Llewelyn, was born. Daughter Aeron followed in March, 1943. Thomas emerged from the war years a respected literary figure and popular performer; however, his gregarious social life and the excessive drinking it encouraged seriously interfered with his writing. Seeking an environment more conducive to poetic production, Thomas and his family returned to Laugharne in 1949.

During the early 1950s Thomas wrote several of his most poignant poems, including "Lament." Nevertheless, fearing that his creative powers were rapidly waning and seeking to avoid the pressures

of writing, he embarked on a speaking tour of the United States in the spring of 1950. During the final years of his life, he traveled to the United States four times, each time engaging in parties and readings in and around New York City, followed by readings and more celebrations at numerous universities throughout the country. Thomas's personal charisma and self-described public reputation as a drunkard, a Welshman, and a lover of women seemed to serve only to enhance his standing in literary circles. His fourth and final American tour began on October 19, 1953 and ended with his death from a massive overdose of alcohol on November 9.

Media Adaptations

- An audio cassette read by Thomas and others called "In Country Heaven—Evolution" is available from Harper Collins Audio.
- "Return Journey to Swansea," and audio cassette read by Thomas, is available from Harper Collins Audio.
- *Dylan Thomas: A Portrait,* is a video cassette from Films for the Humanities and Sciences.
- A video cassette narrated by Thomas titled *A Dylan Thomas Memoir* was released by Pyramid Film and Video in 1972.
- *Dylan Thomas: Return Journey* was released on video cassette by Direct Cinema Limited in 1991.
- *Dylan Thomas: Under Milk Wood* is available on video cassette from Films for the Humanities and Sciences.
- *The Wales of Dylan Thomas* is available on video cassette from Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

Poem Summary

Lines 1-3:

The first tercet introduces the poem's theme; it also introduces the two recurring refrains that end alternate stanzas. Although these two lines, the first and the third, both state Thomas's basic theme about resisting death, they contrast in several ways. Each of the predominant words in line one finds its opposite in line three. "Gentle" is paired with "rage," "good" with "dying," and "night" with "light." The tone of the two lines also is quite different. Line one is subdued; the verbs are deliberately simple, vague. Thomas uses the predicate adjective "gentle," making it describe the personality of the individual, rather than the more obvious choice "gently," an adverb which would only refer to the action of the verb. "Good night" when it refers to dying becomes a paradox for Thomas, meaning a good death. Although this line may be an exhortation to resist death, its entire tone is gentle. Compare this to the beginning of line 3 where "rage" is repeated twice. Here the poet urges a furious resistance to death.

The second line introduces Thomas's advice to those who near death. The idea of burning is frequently associated with the passion of youth; however, Thomas wants the elderly to cling as passionately to their lives as anyone would. The phrase "close of day" establishes a connection with the

"good night" of the previous line, while the words "burn" and "rave" move the reader into the third line of the stanza.

Line 4:

The next four stanzas describe four different types of old men and examine their attitudes and feelings as they realize that death is approaching. The first type Thomas mentions are the wise men. They may be considered scholars or philosophers. Perhaps because of this, intellectually they accept the inevitability of death. Thomas begins the line with the word "though," however, to indicate that their knowledge has not prepared them to accept the reality of death.

Line 5:

This line explains why the wise men are unable to act in accordance with their knowledge. Scholars are known and measured by their words. These men have many words still left unwritten or unspoken, so their goals have not been accomplished. Thomas ends this line in mid-thought, leaving the rest of the idea to the next line. This parallels the unfulfilled lives of the wise men, with their messages only partially delivered.

Line 6:

In many villanelles, the refrains simply serve as a chorus. Here, Thomas makes it an integral part of the meaning of the stanza.

Lines 7-8:

"Good" seems to be used in a moral sense here, describing men who have lived worthy, acceptable lives. The phrase "last wave" presents readers with a dual image. The men themselves are a last wave, the last to approach death; they also seem to be giving a final wave to those who they are leaving behind. "Crying," as well, has two meanings here. In one sense, it simply means speaking out, but it also carries the sense of weeping and mourning. Like the wise men, the good men have not accomplished what they wished to in life. Their actions failed to stand out.

Thomas uses rhyme for different purposes here. Rhyming "bright" at the end of line 7 with "might" in line 8 serves to emphasize both words and link the two stanzas. Also, the rhyming of "by," "crying," and "dying" unites this stanza , while the use of "deeds" and "danced" is an example of alliteration.

Line 9:

The intensity of the refrain contrasts with the nature of the good men as Thomas has presented them. They seem passive, their actions weak. Now at the end of life, they must finally behave passionately, finally be noticed.

Lines 10-12:

Thomas's wild men are very different from the good, quiet men in the previous stanzas. The image, "caught and sang the sun," is joyous and powerful when compared to frail deeds. These men have lived live fully, not realizing that they, too, will age and die. Since Thomas himself cultivated an image as a wild Celtic bard, this stanza seems ironically prophetic about his own death.

Line 13:

The word "grave" carries two meanings here: seriousness and death. These are the men of understanding; paradoxically, although they are blind, they are able to see more clearly than those with sight.

Lines 14-15:

The mentions of blindness are references to his father. Thomas spoke of this blindness again in the unfinished elegy he wrote after his father's death, describing him as:

> Too proud to die, broken and blind he died ... An old kind man brave in his burning pride.

In this stanza, Thomas contrasts light and dark imagery; for instance, the term "grave" is countered by "gay," just as "blind" is contrasted with "sight."

Lines 16-17:

While the last stanza referred to Thomas's father only obliquely, this stanza is addressed to him. The "sad height" refers to his closeness to death. There are Biblical overtones to Thomas's request in line 17, as he asks for a final blessing or curse; the patriarchs delivered such parting messages to their sons. As in many Bible verses, with their parallel structure, blessings and curses are paired together. If this line is read as iambic pentameter, however, the emphasis will fall on the words, "bless" and "now." The image of "fierce tears" shows contrast: the tears acknowledging the inevitability of death, while the use of "fierce" indicates resistance until the end. "I pray" reinforces the Biblical imagery; however, the prayer is addressed to his father, the agnostic, rather than God.

Lines 18-19:

The refrains are repeated for the last time, now specifically requests to D. J. Thomas from his son.

Themes

Anger

The poem tells its reader to "rage" against dying, and it offers several examples of men who feel their lives unfulfilled, but it does not offer any reason why raging might be more appropriate than despair or peaceful acceptance of the absurdity of death. Anger is a heated, unreasoning emotion, and Thomas is too clever to try reasoning about it. By giving us the models of wise men, good men, wild men, and grave men, Thomas populates this poem with men who have all been in vigorous pursuit of something in their lives, and their anger would therefore result from frustration and disappointment. Although it could be said that these are admirable types of men, and that if they all reach the same conclusion having traveled there on different roads then it must be the correct one, they still do not achieve any comfort or satisfaction from raging—from not going gentle. The poem is expressed as advice, "choose rage," but these men do not find their rage by choice.

So why does "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" advocate rage, if the details of the poem do not lead naturally to it? Anger is much more of a young man's emotion than an old man's, and anger's value is that it can create a powerful feeling, even if it cannot beat death. In the final stanza, the speaker addresses his father "on that sad height." Perhaps this poem is not meant to offer sound advice, but to show us a young man's unreasonable, almost hysterical refusal to cope with the sad weakness of his father by evoking rage. Another possibility is that anger, though not completely satisfying, is considered here to be better than sadness.

Human Condition

As it is shown in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," the human condition—the situation we all find ourselves presented with—is as simple as the contrast between light and dark. Life, the light, can be filled with any number of activities, but even the most noble of these turn out to be distractions that are easily forgotten as death approaches. The poem implies that the only adequate response to death is an emotional one, that humans cannot do anything with their lives that would make death a peaceful transition.

Still, in offering the four models for living that Thomas does in stanzas 2 through 5, he does give a sense that he has priorities as to how life can be lived. The poem examines the specific cases of good men, wise men, wild men, and grave men: in examining these and ignoring other ways of life, the poem seems to have selected them out of dozens of possibilities as being the only lifestyles that are worth serious consideration. Men who acquire great wealth, for example, are not mentioned, nor are holy men. Lives filled with humor or love are left out. It could be said that each of these unmentioned lives can be fit into one of the main categories, that for the purposes of this compact, tightly structured verse all people of the earth can be categorized as wise, good, wild or grave. If this is so, then the poem is only recognizing a narrow way to live. The question is whether these four types are meant to be the only way we can live or are the only ways of life that are important enough to consider.

Identity

This poem is addressed to the speaker's father, which helps us put the poem's stance in perspective. The angry attitude that the speaker tells his father to take is not necessarily suggested for all people, but is instead an emotional reaction to the

Topics for Further Study

- Is there another group, beside the old and dying, that you think should "rage"? Write a poem to stir up their emotions.
- Try writing a villanelle about advice you would like to give to your parents. Start with two lines that express your main idea independently of one another and then follow Thomas' structure.
- Give some examples of public figures who are wise men, good men, wild men, and brave men. Give examples of wise women, good women, wild women, and brave women. Explain how they fit into what the poem has to say.

imminent death of a figure of power. Thomas uses the formalized villanelle style to make a comment, not about death, but about standing by when a loved one faces death. The tight structure suggests an attempt to hold on to emotions.

The fact that sons identify with the circumstances of their fathers has been a constant throughout history, and the son of a father who projects a strong, controlling presence can be understandably disturbed at the prospect of watching the father's power diminish. Thomas is on record as having written poems in response to his father's death, and we know from interviews that his father was the sort of boisterous, lively man who was himself likely to rage against unfairness when he was in the best of health. In wishing to see the same indignation against death, the speaker of this poem is balancing fear of death against a primal, almost Freudian belief in the power of the father.

The examples of the wise, good, wild, and grave men extend this beyond a self-analytical poem about Thomas's family and into the realm of an exploration of identity. By all accounts, Thomas's father was not the sort of man one would instinctively use these words to describe. In examining these four categories, the speaker of this poem is identifying the kind of man he would like his father to be and, by extension, the kind of man he would like to be himself. The reference in line 5, to wise men experiencing disappointment because "their words had forked no light," is particularly more appropriate to the poet than to his father. Likewise, the metaphor of sight and blindness in stanza 5 reflects Thomas's understanding of poetic knowledge and its limitations, not necessarily his description of his father or anyone else. By using these examples, the poem's speaker reveals ideals of what he would like to be before death.

Style

Dylan Thomas, partly because of his legendary status as a hard-drinking, wild-living Welshman, is often considered to be a primitive poet, one for whom poems somehow appeared on the page, almost miraculously springing up fully developed out of his passionate nature. In actuality, the contrary is true. Thomas's poetry is very carefully crafted, and he often uses complicated structures.

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" is an intricately structured villanelle, made up of five tercets, a unit of three lines of verse, followed by a quatrain, a unit of four lines of verse. The opening line of the poem, the first line in the first stanza, also ends the second and fourth tercets. The third and final line of the first tercet serves as the last line in the third and fifth stanzas. They will also become the last two lines of the quatrain.

The entire rhyme scheme of the poem is built around the words that end the first two lines, "night" and "day." The first and third lines in every stanza rhyme with "night," while every second line rhymes with "day." These words serve as more than just a simple rhyme however; they provide the contrasting images that serve as the poem's core. Thomas also uses internal rhyme to make his poetry flow smoothly, giving it a melodic quality. The poet's use of alliteration, with its repeated initial sounds, can be seen in the words "go" and "good" in the first line, and "blind" and "blaze" in line 14. The words "caught" and "sang" in line 10 illustrate assonance, or the repetition of similarly located vowel sounds. In line 17, the words "curse" and "bless" are examples of half-rhyme, another convention Thomas frequently employs.

The meter in the poem is described by some critics as basically iambic pentameter, a line of verse featuring segments of two syllables where the first syllables is unstressed and the second is stressed, as in the word "above." Pentameter means that there are five such segments in each line—"penta" meaning "five." But Thomas's poetry seldom fits neatly into conventional metric analysis. Therefore many critics choose to view his poetry in terms of the number of syllables in each lines, rather than by metric feet. Thus "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" may also be described as decasyllabic, having ten syllables in a line.

Historical Context

Dylan Thomas wrote in such a fiercely personal style about such narrowly personal themes that there is hardly any relationship at all to be found between his poetry and the times in which he lived. Critic Jacob Korg noted in a 1965 study of Thomas's work that "he was occupied with introspections that lie outside of time and place … his style owes comparatively little to tradition or example." Thomas grew up in a middle-class family, in a seaside town in the south of Wales; his father was the senior English master in the local grammar school; he lived in London during the Second

Compare & Contrast

- **1946:** The postwar demand for consumer goods gave workers the edge in bargaining for wages: 4.6 million workers held strikes against the manufacturers they worked for, including Westinghouse, General Motors, the meat packers, and the railroads.

  1981: 13,000 air traffic controllers went on strike and were fired by President Ronald Reagan, marking the start of a new era of pro-employer "union-busting."

  Today: Labor unions have the lowest membership since the 1940s and, in many cases, have little effect on wages and benefits being offered.

- **1947:** The first casino was built in Las Vegas, Nevada—the only state to allow legalized gambling.

  1978: Atlantic City, New Jersey, legalized casino gambling in order to bring in tax revenues.

  Today: Most states have some form of legalized casino gambling

World War; he was a chronic alcoholic, who stole from his friends and lied to them, was loud and offensive in public, and died of poisoning from drinking too much too fast one day. These facts of his life are well known and often repeated, but they can only be found in his poetry—if one looks for them—with a loose imagination.

Welsh Tradition: Like the traditional poetry of Wales, Thomas's work displays two tendencies that might seem to the casual reader to contradict each other: an intuitive, mystical religious sense and a strong controlling hand. Wales, along England's western border, has a traditional poetic form known as the *eisteddfod,* which was used by druidic cults and in religious worship of nature. It has a strong structure and, like any prose written primarily for recitation and not reading, has a strong, elaborate meter. These facets are not directly noticeable in Thomas's work, but a reader can find in his work a deep strain of very personal religious beliefs, often attributing mystic powers to natural objects; also, Thomas frequently wrote in regular rhythm and meter and often employed recognized forms, as evinced by the use of the villanelle in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

World War II: In the years immediately following Great Britain's entry into the World War in 1939, Germany bombed strategic points of England, particularly London, on a regular basis. Wales was under constant watch from a naval invasion from Germany or its allies. During those years, Thomas lived in several places around Wales, mostly settling around the quiet fishing village of Laughame, and in 1941, when he landed a job writing scripts and reciting poetry on the British Broadcasting Company's Program 3, he and his wife moved to London. When the United States entered the war in 1941, German resources were diverted somewhat, but infrequent air raids continued until the end of the war in 1945. Living through the dangers of war helped define the sensibilities of a whole generation of poets, who recognized the wastefulness of mass destruction and saw the shame of demolishing sites across Europe that had stood for centuries. Still other British poets acknowledged how the war reduced the United Kingdom to a second-class power, and the pity and frustration is reflected in their poetry. It only very rarely shows itself in Thomas's work.

Critical Overview

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" was first published in a collection of six poems, *In Country Sleep.* In *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas,* William York Tindall points out that the "ritualistic repetition" of the refrain in the villanelle is the ideal expression for Thomas's theme. Tindall discusses each of the four types of men who face death in the stanzas, identifying the wise men as philosophers, the good men as moralists, and the wild men

as hedonists. Grave men, he believe, are "the most important of all—the climax toward which the poet has been working." They represent poets, and ultimately Thomas's own father, who was blind in his last years. Tindall ends his comments with an ironic comparison between the sentiments expressed in the poem and Thomas's own death shortly after it was published.

Rushworth Kidder, in his *Dylan Thomas: The Country of the Spirit*, describes the work as Thomas's attempt to come to an understanding of death, as each of the poems revolves around an individual "confronting either the fact of or the threat of death...." Kidder states that the poet plays with the "metaphor of light as life" in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." Since D. J. Thomas was an agnostic, Kidder stresses that religious imagery is left out of the poem. He argues instead that the actions of the men suggest pagan attitudes; for instance, the grave men could be seen as astrologers or seers.

Criticism

Jhan Hochman

Jhan Hochman is a freelance writer and currently teaches at Portland Community College, Portland, OR. In the following essay, Hochman suggests that the contradiction inherent in Thomas's instructions to "rage against" a death that he terms a "good night" serves as a plea to the dying to show their love for those whom they leave behind.

While Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" could be addressed to anyone, by the end of the last stanza, the reader realizes that the specific addressee is Thomas's sick father. In this poem he never sent, the son entreats his father not to accept death quietly, but instead, to fight it. While the more usual sentiment counsels accepting death peacefully and gracefully, something more provocative is at work here: that is, though death is a "good night" in its romantic or hopeful sense of restful bedtime and peaceful darkness, one should not accept it, and instead "rage" against this "dying of the light." Perhaps it is this contradiction, unreconciled, that gives this poem its power, its ability to paralyze rational overcoming and obstruct the desire to make polarities meet at some middle ground. This poem says that death is good *and* that one should rage against it. Perhaps we should be skeptical and ask: Why rage against what is, what is good, what cannot be avoided, in other words, why fight death?

In "Do Not Go Gentle," every first and third line of the five three-lined "tercets" and first, third, and fourth lines of the final four-lined "quatrain" end-rhyme with "night" or "light" (aba or abaa). This scheme characterizes the *villanelle* (derived from the Italian *villan*, meaning "peasant"), a form that comes from sixteenth century peasant songs. Poets usually employed the villanelle for light or bucolic subjects, a kind of peacefully rural poem or "pastoral." "Do Not Go Gentle" is one of the most famous examples of this rather uncommon form and for at least the following reason: the poem does not preach calm, as might be expected, but rage, rage against death, that event often equated with Nature as an ultimate physical force. This is not a villanelle expressing the pleasure of nature's cycles and seasons, a balanced acceptance of births and deaths, but a raging against what is, an acknowledgment that a life within nature—as all lives subject to life and death must be—is not just harmoniously repetitive but also full of sudden pain and occasional grieving. Perhaps this is one reason for Thomas's euphemism, "good night," an expression minimizing death, that event which apparently is too painful for Thomas to mention.

Day and night or light and dark are long-standing metaphors for life and death, and while Thomas merely adopts the tradition, he also breathes new life into it. The four middle tercets describe the acts of four kinds of men—"wise," "good," "wild," and "grave"—employing words associated with light and dark. In the second tercet, the words of wise men "forked no lightning," presumably in the darkness of the foolish. In the third tercet, the deeds of the last tide of good men were not "bright" enough to "dance" (sparkle) on the "green bay," or what might here be thought of here—since the water is green instead of blue—as the darker, more dangerous world. The wild men of the fourth tercet "who caught and sang the sun in flight," only "grieved it on its way," that is, made matters worse, perhaps by being partially blind to the *darker* side of human wildness. Finally, in the fifth tercet, grave men near death, despite their "blinding sight," that is, their presumed ability to see more clearly because they are dying, can "blaze like meteors and be gay," being gay or happy as itself as a state of lightness.

Though, while living, these four types of enlightened men or people—the wise, good, wild, and grave—failed to lighten the dark world they lived

in, at times even unwittingly darkened it with their brave and clear vision, or obscured its misery with their overly bright outlook, they must not fail to blaze and rage against the darkness of death. They must rebel against "the dying of the light" and "close of day" no matter what the role light played in their life. In this sense, Thomas asks us to see rage as a kind of beam of light shooting through the darkness of death, light which refuses death's pacification or darkening. Such a light yields a vision which exposes death in the way Thomas comprehends it: the ultimate horror. Therefore, Thomas counsels his father to make the ultimate refusal by refusing the ultimate, urges his father toward futile rebellion against what is and cannot be stopped. One may ask themselves whether or not the horror attached to death is primarily natural and therefore unavoidable (as Thomas seems to believe), or whether the horror of death arises from particular cultural viewpoints of death as horrible.

Thomas called his poems "statements on the way to the grave" and "two sides of an unresolved argument," both comments relevant to "Do Not Go Gentle." Compare his "I See the Boys of Summer" where an older father figure condemns young boys as possessing that kind of death in life known as destructive energy, and the boys defend themselves with, "But seasons must be challenged or they totter." In "Do Not Go Gentle," however, the son internalizes the father, counseling him to take hold of youth's destructive energy and turn it against the ultimate destroyer, death. See also the dialogue in Thomas's "'Find Meat on Bones'" between father and son where this time, in reverse direction from "Do Not Go Gentle," the father urges the son to "'Rebel against the ... Autocracy of night and day / Dictatorship of sun / ... against the flesh and bone." Far more obvious here is the coupling of Death and Nature already mentioned in the second paragraph above. In "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London," Thomas maintains that saying nothing (eloquently) is the only thing which can be said in the aftermath of death. While silence must succeed death in "Refusal," raging must precede it in "Do Not Go Gentle." In "Fern Hill," Thomas remarks on the death resting latent within youthful invulnerability, the opposite of a kind of immature raging or tantrum in the face of "Do Not Go Gentle's" "dying of the light." And finally refer to his "Elegy," an unfinished poem by Thomas written after his father's death and completed after his own death from notes he left behind. Unlike what Thomas had pleaded that his father do in the face of imminent death, in "Elegy," Thomas's father remained what he always was: "kind" and "brave" and "too proud to cry."

If "kind," "brave" and "proud" describe Thomas's father in "Elegy," was the man also "wise," "good," "wild," and "grave," adjectives used for men in "Do Not Go Gentle"? Was the father all of these? None of them? While this cannot be accurately answered with evidence found in the poem, it might be that adjectives found in "Elegy," coupled with some theorizing on the word, "gentle," of "Do Not Go Gentle," can provide a clue. Notice that Thomas substitutes the less grammatically correct part of speech, the adjective, "gentle," in place of the more correct and usual adverbial form, "gently." Why? Perhaps because as an adjective, "gentle" can be used to describe Thomas's "kind" father, could even be an epithet for him. So when Thomas says, "Do not go gentle into that good night," a translation might be, "Do not go, gentle father, into that final goodbye," or "Do not die father, do not accept death." In the end, if wise, good, wild, and grave men rage against death, so should gentle men.

What Do I Read Next?

- The best of Thomas's poetic works can be found in his *Collected Poems,* published in 1971.
- *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* and *Adventures in the Skin Trade and Other Stories* are Thomas's two works of fiction, which draw more from his chaotic life than does his poetry.
- Ralph Maud, a very keen-eyed and easy to read literary critic, published *Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry* in 1963. The book gives the general reader a good start at understanding the poems, stories, and plays as well as Thomas himself, focusing on the creative works.
- In *The Denial of Death,* psychologist Ernest Becker explains human behavior in terms of fear of death. The narrator of this poem would be seen in Becker's analysis as being panicked when faced with a death so close to his life.

Within this structure ... Thomas creates a poem of great force, beauty, and tenderness, in which sound and sense are exquisitely blended."

But for whose benefit is this advice given? Is it for Dylan Thomas's father or Thomas himself, the latter who seems unable to tolerate the idea of his father dying? If we answer that the advice is offered more for the benefit of Thomas himself than for his father, this being part of the reason Thomas never sent the poem to his father, then "Do Not Go Gentle" becomes less a poem of defiance than a poem of paralysis and pain. With this in mind, perhaps an answer to the question that began our discussion of "Do Not Go Gentle" can now be ventured. The question was, Why rage against what is, is good, what cannot be avoided, in other words, death? The answer, Thomas seems to imply with the words, "bless me" in the final stanza, is that raging against death, while also, as Thomas says, a "curse" for friends and relatives to endure, is more importantly a blessing on those left behind, on those not wanting the dying to leave them. For this reason: by raging "against the dying of the light," by struggling against death, the dying demonstrate—or so the living would like to believe—their love of those who will be left behind. Perhaps more than anything, this is the kind of demonstration Thomas wanted so desperately from his father.

Source: Jhan Hochman, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Louise Baughn Murdy

In the following excerpt, Burdy explores the structure and depth of "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

"Do not go gentle into that good night" is perhaps too often considered lightly as only simple iteration. Cid Corman even believes that "the set form of the villanelle treads Thomas's feet." By definition the villanelle *is* restrictive, because it demands nineteen lines on two rhymes in six stanzas, the first and third lines of the opening tercet recurring alternately at the end of the other tercets, both being repeated at the end of the concluding quatrain. Within this structure, however, Thomas creates a poem of great force, beauty, and tenderness, in which sound and sense are exquisitely blended.

Thomas's villanelle is a plea to his ill and aging father to die as wise men, good men, wild men, grave men die and as the father himself has lived —struggling, "[raging] against the dying of the light". The structure of the poem involves two uses of the repeated lines with some functional change. In the opening stanza, "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" are imperatives directed to an unidentified person. In the next four stanzas one or the other of these repeated phrases forms the predicate to statements about, respectively, wise men, good men, wild men, and grave men. In the concluding stanza, the poet directly addresses his father, and the repeated lines thus become significant imperatives—first the negative command to his father, "Do not go gentle into that good night"; then the positive command to him to assert his individuality, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light".

Numerous other devices contribute to the subtle variations within the pattern of the villanelle. Although the meter is generally iambic pentameter and the vocabulary contains seven times as many monosyllables as polysyllables, the speech stresses in a line vary from five (the "Rage, rage" line) to eight (the "Do not go gentle" line) and help save the poem from a monotonous, "singsong" rhythm. The full, resonant effect of the poem is intensified by the fact that the two rhyme-bases involve long vowels (*e* and *ai*). Especially in stanzas III and V, the rhymes are emphasized by a concentration of internal assonance of *e* and *ai:*

> Good men, the last w*a*ve by, cr*y*ing how br*i*ght
> Their fr*ai*l deeds m*i*ght have d*a*nced in a green b*a*y,
> R*a*ge, r*a*ge against the d*y*ing of the l*i*ght.
> Gr*a*ve men, near death, who see with bl*i*nding s*i*ght
> Bl*i*nd *e*yes could bl*a*ze like meteors and be g*a*y,
> R*a*ge, r*a*ge against the d*y*ing of the l*i*ght.

Both stanzas have at least four uses of each of the rhyme vowels, excluding the rhyme words themselves. The repetition of vowel sounds focuses attention upon the meaningful words of these stanzas; it helps to indicate an important theme underlying the poem—the discrepancy between what the good and grave men have done in life (frail deeds) and what they *might* have done (blazing, meteoric deeds).

Part of the powerfulness of the poem results from the intensity of striking power of the words used. One out of every eight syllables is of very high striking power (ten syllables have a striking power of 39, thirteen have a striking power of 40 to 44). Thus Thomas's language is exhortative in both sound and sense; the words rage as he desires his father to rage.

In the final stanza lies the core of the meaning of the poem. More quiet, calm, and tender than the preceding lines, this stanza directly addresses the poet's father on his precipice of death—i.e., "on the sad height". Then in the second line Thomas urges his father to

> Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

This line of ten monosyllables is strong, deliberate, and slow in tempo. Closely juxtaposed repetitions of the same sound usually produce an effect of retarding the rhythm. Such is the case here, where the *s* sound, introduced by the word "sad" in the first line of the stanza, is repeated. The three most important words end in the sound *s*—"curse", "bless", and "fierce"—and "tears" ends in the closely related *z* sound. Thomas's use of punctuation also retards the rhythm, in particular the nongrammatical use in "curse, bless, me now". Indeed, the oxymoron effect of "curse, bless" reflects the dichotomy and poignancy of Thomas's plea to his father. The poet prays that his father will, with fierce tears, curse and bless him—as his final and ultimate protest against death.

Source: Louise Baughn Murdy, *Sound and Sense in Dylan Thomas's Poetry*, Mouton & Co., 1966, pp. 96-7.

Charles I. Knauber

Knauber explores the theme of light versus darkness in Thomas's poetry.

Dylan Thomas' definition of poetry as a record of the "individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light" suggests an interest that can be traced through at least three thematic levels of his work. The conditions of *light* and *dark* represent particular aspects of experimental faith. In the first dramatic phase of his existence, Thomas inhabits a primitive world whose realms are simply day and night:

> A weather in the quarter of the veins
> Turns night to day; blood in their suns
> Lights up the living worm.

Vitiated by the seasons' cycle and, on a lesser scale, by the rhythmic tides of sun and moon, he dwells alternately in the light and dark:

> A darkness in the weather of the eye
> Is half its light; the fathomed sea
> Breaks on unangled land.

The initial senory perception—either of man in the womb or of man in a cultural dawn—indicates an effort towards understanding the forces which conflicting powers exert upon the poet's being. In the role of myth's philosopher, Thomas attempts to comprehend the mystery of life's reality in order that his world might be made more acceptable. He is incapable of creating an escape from reality, for, on this level, the real world is his only sphere. What he requires is that an intelligible conciliation be made between the threatening dark and the benefic light. Attending a first confused idea of reality, Thomas is able to postulate that "A process blows the moon into the sun," without defining what that "process" is. He expresses the myth of light in terms of the rhythms that his eye perceives. In a general way, light and dark are symbols of man's life and death, and the poet sees in them evidence of a spiritual concern. Man's primordial need is for that first degree of trust which intuition bestows upon his mind.

But as his mental capacities increase, man begins to live imaginatively. Desiring to penetrate deeper into life's mysteries, or to transcend its commonplace realities, he envisages a superior realm. On this intermediate cognitive plane, the "process" of the blown moon is described as "the man in the wind and the west moon." Acquainted with reality and blessed with the ability to create new images, he attempts to express what he knows (in sensory manner of knowing) in terms of what he hopes to realize. From the essence of the sensible dark he abstracts an idea of the darkness of a yonder place, interpreting it as a spatial and temporal dimension that can be physically traversed. Man, motivated by the dream of vision and the restless passion of desire, is promoted to a heroic role. Thus it is that he prepares to

> Sail on the level, the departing adventure,
> To the sea-blown arrival—a passage that will
> carry him
> From the kangaroo foot of the earth,
> From the chill, silent centre to the spaces of a
> world beyond the world.

Employing Thomas' terms, the hero's adventure is essentially an attempt to journey across a "fathomed [i.e., a known] sea" to an "unangled [i.e., an unmeasured] land." It is the striving to bring that which is unknown into measurable being. Darkness, the ever-threatening shadow of death, is synonymous with inferior knowledge. Thus, in *Vision and Prayer*, Thomas tells of

... Thomas attempts to comprehend the mystery of life's reality in order that his world might be made more acceptable. He is incapable of creating an escape from reality, for, on this level, the real world is his only sphere."

the interpreted evening
And the known dark of the earth...

Light, by contrast, is symbolic of the hero's effort towards an illumination of the image of a supernatural sphere and its divinity:

I dreamed my genesis in sweat of death, fallen
Twice in the feeding sea, grown
Stale of Adam's brine until, vision
Of new man strength, I seek the sun.

Movement in the direction of light represents the beginning of faith:

"For men were in the darkness of ignorance: God indeed destroyed this darkness, sending light into the world that men might recognize the truth"... Not to believe is to be in darkness; not to be in the light is to be unborn.

The final development, then, is found in Thomas' use of revelation as a means of translating fundamental knowledge, or, more properly, of defining the eternal light made manifest in temporal experience. Hence, the symbol of the Savior is a bewildering, life-penerating light whose nearest image is "the sudden / Sun." In attempting to express the nature of this light, St. Augustine says: "What is that, which so brightly shoots through me, and strikes my heart without hurting it? And I shudder, and I catch fire; I shudder inasmuch as I am unlike it, I catch fire inasmuch as I am like unto it." Experimentally, and in a similar mystic mode, Thomas narrates the experience that can neither be adequately returned nor clearly communicated outside itself:

O let him
Scald me and drown
Me in his world's wound
His lightning answers my
Cry. My voice burns in his hand.
Now I am lost in the blinding
One.

The soul, first in Thomas' words and then in Augustine's, is "taken by light" and "made by it." Man rejoices in the light but suffers in the knowledge of his material being. We describe the light as love because it is the gift of the participating experience that results from faith's experiment. Thomas is guided to his vision by God's answer to his cry—"the message which we have heard from him ... that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (I *John:* 3,5). The evolutionary manifestation of God, the progressive revelation of life, is defined by this poet as man's growth in Him.

Source: Charles I. Knauber "Imagery of Light in Dylan Thomas" in *Renasence*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring, 1954 pp. 95–96, 116.

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For Further Study

Cox, C.B., editor, *Dylan Thomas: A Collection of Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 1966.

Contains several critical essays written while Thomas was still alive or soon after his death, including poet Karl Shapiro's reflections on Thomas's place in our culture from a perspective of a peer who knew him. Also particularly significant is John Ackerman's "The Welsh Background," which highlights some thin social strains that can be found in Thomas's work.

Moynihan, William, *The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966.

A very detailed analysis focused closely on Thomas's writing in the order that it was published and the theoretical basis behind each work.

Tindall, William York, *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas*, New York: Octagon Books, 1962.

Considered by critics to be a key study of Thomas, redefining the poet's reputation by giving serious consideration to his technical ability and the tremendous effort Thomas put into making his poems sound spontaneous.

Harlem

Langston Hughes

1951

The brief poem "Harlem" introduces themes that run throughout Langston Hughes's volume *Montage of a Dream Deferred* and throughout his career as a poet. This volume, published in 1951, focuses on the conditions of a people whose dreams have been limited, put off, or lost in post-World War II Harlem. Hughes claimed that ninety percent of his work attempted "to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America." As a result of this focus, Hughes was dubbed "the poet laureate of Harlem." The poem "Harlem" questions the social consequences of so many deferred dreams, hinting at the resentment and racial strife that eventually erupted with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and continues today. Asking "what happens to a dream deferred?" the poem sketches a series of images of decay and waste, representing the dream (or the dreamer's) fate. While many of the potential consequences affect only the individual dreamer, the ending of the poem suggests that, when despair is epidemic, it may "explode" and cause broad social and political damage.

Before Hughes wrote, many African-American artists avoided portraying lower-class black life because they believed such images fed racist stereotypes and attitudes. Hughes believed that realistic portraits of actual people would counter negative caricatures of African Americans more effectively and so wrote about and for the common person. Spoken by a variety of personas, the poems in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* capture the

Langston Hughes

distinct patterns and rhythms of African American folk idiom. Hughes integrated the rhythms and structures of jazz, blues, and bebop into his poetry as well, working to create a poetry which was African-American in its rhythms, techniques, images, allusions, and diction.

Author Biography

Hughes was born in in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, to James Nathaniel and Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes, who separated shortly after their son's birth. Hughes's mother had attended college, while his father, who wanted to become a lawyer, took correspondence courses in law. Denied a chance to take the Oklahoma bar exam, Hughes's father went first to Missouri and then, still unable to become a lawyer, left his wife and son to move first to Cuba and then to Mexico. In Mexico, he became a wealthy landowner and lawyer. Because of financial difficulties, Hughes's mother moved frequently in search of steady work, often leaving him with her parents. His grandmother Mary Leary Langston was the first black woman to attend Oberlin College. She inspired the boy to read books and value an education. When his grandmother died in 1910, Hughes lived with family friends and various relatives in Kansas. In 1915 he joined his mother and new stepfather in Lincoln, Illinois, where he attended grammar school. The following year, the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. There he attended Central High School, excelling in both academics and sports. Hughes also wrote poetry and short fiction for the *Belfry Owl*, the high school literary magazine, and edited the school yearbook. In 1920 Hughes left to visit his father in Mexico, staying in that country for a year. Returning home in 1921, he attended Columbia University for a year before dropping out. For a time he worked as a cabin boy on a merchant ship, visited Africa, and wrote poems for a number of American magazines. In 1923 and 1924 Hughes lived in Paris. He returned to the United States in 1925 and resettled with his mother and half-brother in Washington, D.C. He continued writing poetry while working menial jobs. In May and August of 1925 Hughes's verse earned him literary prizes from both *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines. In December Hughes, then a busboy at a Washington, D.C., hotel, attracted the attention of poet Vachel Lindsay by placing three of his poems on Lindsay's dinner table. Later that evening Lindsay read Hughes's poems to an audience and announced his discovery of a "Negro busboy poet." The next day reporters and photographers eagerly greeted Hughes at work to hear more of his compositions. He published his first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. Around this time Hughes became active in the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of creativity among a group of African-American artists and writers. Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and other writers founded *Fire!*, a literary journal devoted to African-American culture. The venture was unsuccessful, however, and ironically a fire eventually destroyed the editorial offices. In 1932 Hughes traveled with other black writers to the Soviet Union on an ill-fated film project. His infatuation with Soviet Communism and Joseph Stalin led Hughes to write on politics throughout the 1930s. He also became involved in drama, founding several theaters. In 1938 he founded the Suitcase Theater in Harlem, in 1939 the Negro Art Theater in Los Angeles, and in 1941 the Skyloft Players in Chicago. In 1943 Hughes received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Lincoln University, and in 1946 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He continued to write poetry throughout the rest of his life, and by the 1960s he was known as the "Dean of Negro Writers." Hughes died in New York on May 22, 1967.

Media Adaptations

- An audio cassette titled *Langston Hughes Reads* is available from Audiobooks.

Poem Summary

Line 1:

The speaker of this poem, who may represent Hughes, poses a large, open question that the following sub-questions both answer and extend. This poem, and the volume in which it appears, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, explore what happens to people and society when millions of individuals' dreams get deferred, or put off indefinitely.

Lines 2-3:

The first image in the poem proposes that the dream dries up like a raisin. This simile likens the original dream to a grape, which is round, juicy, green and fresh. Once the dream has lain neglected for too long, it dries up. Though the dream is still sweet and edible, it has shrunken from its former state and turned black. The famous 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*, by African–American playwright Lorraine Hansberry, takes its title from this poem. The play also explores the risks and consequences for African Americans of losing sight of dreams and hope.

Lines 4-5:

Where the raisin image invokes the senses of taste and sight, the simile of the sore conveys a sense of touch and bodily impact. Sores reside on one's skin, and are seen, felt, and carried around. By comparing the dream to a sore on the body, the poet suggests that unfulfilled dreams become part of us, like scars. Even if we ignore a sore, it is palpable, visible, and needs attention to heal. Neglected sores may lead to infection, even death. Hughes thus suggests that unattended dreams may not only nag one from outside, they may infect the body and the psyche and slowly kill their host. The word "fester" connotes seething decay and "run" literally refers to pus. Hughes may be punning on the word "run," suggesting that the dream may flee or may run rampant with one's sanity. With the simile of a sore, Hughes raises the stakes of ignoring dreams.

Line 6:

Appealing to all of the reader's senses, the speaker suggests that a dream deferred may also stink. Unlike a sore, a stink cannot be ignored. Smells do not vanish until one gets rid of their source. With the smell of rotten meat, Hughes suggests that dreams deferred will pester one continually, making one sick until they are addressed. Like the raisin image, rotten meat stinks when it is no longer fresh. This image reinforces the idea of decay and waste. Rotten meat is also deadly to eat. Some critics suggest that Hughes uses this image because blacks were often sold rotten meat in ghetto groceries and so were familiar with this stench, as well as the waste and injustice the stench represents.

Lines 7-8:

With these lines, the poet de-escalates the disastrous results of ignoring or blocking one's dreams. A crusted, syrupy sweet will not kill people as meat or sores may, but the image again connotes waste, neglect, and decay. A sweet treat, like a dream, begins as something one yearns for and anticipates eagerly. If it sits unused too long, however, it spoils and leaves a bad taste in the mouth. As Onwuchekwa Jemie notes, the "sweet" may represent American dreams of equality and success that are denied to most African Americans. The American dream itself may have gone bad from disuse and false promises.

Lines 9-10:

Lines 9-10 form the only sentence that is not a question. Hughes implies that although neglecting dreams may yield varied and unforeseeable horrors, one thing is certain: deferred dreams weigh one down physically and emotionally as heavily as a load of bricks.

Line 11:

Hughes sets off and italicizes this line to emphasize the larger consequences of mass dissatisfaction. Though this line is a question like those above, here the poet implies that an explosion may occur, hurting or killing those in the vicinity of the explosion as well as the afflicted individual. Hughes is implying that whereas the dream deferred primarily weighs on, infects, bothers, and saddens the frustrated dreamer, eventually the epidemic of frustration will hurt everyone.

- In this poem, Hughes asks what happens to a dream is put on hold, giving a series of possibilities. Write a poem in which you tell readers what does happen to such a dream. Use concrete imagery, as Hughes does, to speak of the dream as a real, tangible object.
- Do research on one of the race riots of the mid-1960s, such as the one in Watts (Los Angeles), Chicago and Atlanta. What was the immediate cause? What social conditions led up to the violence? Write a report that explains the situation to your class.
- Why is this poem named "Harlem"? What other locations would have had a similar meaning? Name the social events that have occurred since the poem's publication in 1951 that you feel help prove that Hughes's fears were realistic.

Themes

American Dream

Since America has a capitalist economic system, "the American dream" often refers to acquiring wealth and to the items that wealth can purchase: houses, cars, exotic foods, and servants to relieve one of the mundane and unpleasant chores of life. This list of physical items expresses the goals of a society that sees acquisition as unlimited and a people who feel that they can earn unlimited wealth with hard work. People often immigrate to America from countries with closed social systems where their ability to earn or keep property had been limited, where a lifetime of hard work could never buy one a house in a certain neighborhood, where hard work leaves one as poor as they started: to these people, the American Dream represents freedom. The poem "Harlem" is a response to dreams of freedom from an American who did not see this as a country where dreams could come true, but rather as where people of African descent were denied freedom every hour. Throughout his career, Langston Hughes frequently used the idea of "dreams" to express the idea of social equality, possibly because the power of the word cut across racial lines and because phrasing aspirations as "dreams" made them sound less real and thus less menacing. In 1924, when the South was tightly segregated and hate groups killed blacks regularly, Hughes was surrounded by black intellectuals, and he expressed his dream as one of physical motion: "To fling my arms wide / In the face of the sun, / Dance! Whirl! Whirl! / Till the quick day is done." The 1932 poem "Dreams" is not a personal expression of his own dream but a caution to other African Americans to hold onto their dreams, warning that when dreams die "Life is a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly" and also "Life is a barren field / Frozen with snow." The growing frustration that we can see in comparing these two visions was multiplied many times over by 1951's "Harlem." The right to move freely that looked wistful in 1924 had been put off, or deferred, for so long that Hughes could no longer, as in "Dreams," internalize his frustration as a problem for African Americans. The poem implies that the "opportunity" promised in the American Dream can only fail so often.

Anger and Hatred

"Harlem" carefully measures out the amount of anger it reveals: although it is about the author's circumstances and its title is the place where the author lived, the emotion explained is looked at objectively, as something that is bound to happen in

these sort of cases, not just as Hughes's own feelings. Literature by oppressed people has always walked the narrow line between self-expression and a threatening call to rebellion: the same piece could be interpreted in either way, depending upon the circumstances, depending upon how vulnerable the oppressors feel. Treating blacks differently from whites was an idea that always stood on shaky ground throughout the country's history, being directly at odds with the Declaration of Independence's credo that "all men are created equal," and so the supporters of racial segregation could never rest securely and always had to beware that someday liberty would come to the people they were oppressing. Works of literature—especially those written by African Americans—that openly discussed the frustration felt by African Americans were seen as containing an implied threat. At the time Hughes wrote this poem, blacks had made some gains, most notably in the fields of entertainment and in the integrated army of World War II. Hughes no longer had to suppress or ignore the frustration African Americans were feeling, but, exactly because of those gains, segregationists felt threatened. The prospect of violence is often used to justify laws that are even more oppressive, in the name of maintaining social order. Hughes approached the growing anger of blacks carefully, stopping short of stating directly that it would lead to violence. First, he suggested options to anger, although to the people dealing with frustration, these were not very appealing—rather than turning to anger, frustration could dry up, fester, stink, crust, and sugar over. Second, his tightly controlled objective tone made it clear that this poem is not supporting violence: he could always deny that his intent was to invite people to "explode."

Civil Rights

The "dream deferred" mentioned in the poem could refer to anything, but the title's mention of the Harlem area of New York City, famous for its African-American population, narrows the focus of this poem to racial issues. In the 1950s, the Civil Rights movement made tremendous gains against laws that had forced blacks to endure worse conditions than whites. Most of these gains were made without violence, especially after 1955, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. became a national figure by supporting peaceful ways of achieving social change. There had been supporters of civil rights as long as the country had existed, and organizations fighting to end unequal treatment had existed since the first slaves were brought from Africa. "Harlem" gives us a measure of African-American frustration at this critical time in the country's history, just prior to the Civil Rights movement's most crucial gains. The "explosion" that Hughes mentions actually did happen, but only after the gains made in the 1950s proved to be insufficient, and they happened all over the country in crowded urban areas just like Harlem. If this poem were a prophesy, it was proven false by the peaceful advances made in civil rights during the following decade (although a cynic could see peaceful means as "crusting and sugaring over" or "sagging"). Eventually, though, the road to civil rights did lead to an explosion of violence, just as "Harlem" foretold.

Style

Hughes uses an irregular meter in the lines of "Harlem" That is, he stresses different syllables in each line and varies the length of each line. Together, the varied line lengths and meter create a sense of jagged, nervous energy that reinforces the poem's themes of increasing frustration. In the introduction to *Montage,* Hughes notes that he models his poetry's rhythms on musical forms such as "jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and bebop." Like these musical genres, he explains, "[the volume] is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and imprudent interjections, broken rhythms and passages … in the manner of a jam session."

Several lines rhyme, but there is not a consistent pattern of rhyme. Rhymes occur in lines 3 and 5 (sun, run), 6 and 8 (meat, sweet), and 10 and 11 (load, explode). Hughes may use these rhymes to emphasize the irregular rhythm of the poem or to draw attention to the connections between different ideas, such as "load" and "explode."

The first and last lines are offset from the poem. In line 1, this separation introduces and emphasizes the poem's central question, which is also the volume's central question. The space between this line and the following stanza implies that the answer is unpredictable and perhaps threatening. The second stanza poses four questions in four sentences. By firing one question after another, Hughes builds tension within the poem. The final line is offset and italicized to emphasize the potentially explosive social consequences of widespread dissatisfaction.

Historical Context

Harlem, of this poem's title, is a famous area of New York City that has had one of the country's largest African-American populations since the First World War. In the 1920s it was the setting of a gathering of artists and intellectuals, later known as the Harlem Renaissance because it resembled the European Renaissance's surge in artistic productivity. Key figures in the Harlem Renaissance were Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Arna Bontemps, Dr. Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes. Since then, Harlem has been a focal point for African-American culture.

In 1951, when "Harlem" was first published, race relations were much different in the United States than they are today. Racism still exists, but there are now laws that can be used to fight against discrimination. Most of these laws were enacted during a period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, when blacks became impatient with deferring their dreams and whites, especially in the Southern states, resisted the social forces that were pushing for equality. The Civil War ended in 1865, and with its end, slavery became extinct in the United States, but the freed blacks did not receive full citizenship status. In the late 1800s, former slave states passed a series of laws known as Jim Crow laws (after a foolish, childlike Negro character in an 1832 minstrel comedy). These laws made it illegal for blacks to vote, ride public transportation, attend schools with whites, and other functions that would have enabled African Americans to become equal members of society. Although many citizens opposed these laws, especially in the North where there had been no slavery, the Supreme Court ruled in 1886 that they were constitutional so long as blacks had facilities similar to those of whites. In that case, *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, the court ruled that the legality of Jim Crow laws rested upon there being "separate but equal" accommodations for both races: in reality, though, blacks were given the worst of everything. To keep blacks from gaining political power, there were other laws that made it difficult to register to vote, requiring land ownership and passage of bogus I.Q. tests that were seldom administered to caucasians. Many African Americans moved North, where laws did not discriminate, even though people still did. Opportunities for advancement were still scarce in the North, mainly because of the economic/educational circle (undereducated people cannot get well-paying jobs, and people with poor incomes cannot afford higher education). In the South in the first half of this century, blacks were lynched by white supremacist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan.

During World War II, from 1941 to 1945, the armed forces became the most integrated organization that the United States had ever had. Although it would still be decades until blacks were admitted to the higher ranks of officers, opportunity was, to a wide extent, equal among enlisted men. This meant that returning veterans came home with a greater sense of how racial equality was possible, raising hopes for integration in whites as well as in blacks. These hopes sometimes twisted into anger when black veterans found civilian society a step backwards from their life in the army: full scale riots broke out in 1946 in Columbia, Tennessee, and Athens, Alabama, as well as lesser racial confrontations in dozens of other cities.

As the call for a new racial openness in the United States grew, though, another social force was also growing: fear of the threat of Communism. World War II had weakened or destroyed most of the powerful European nations and left the Soviet Union as the only other world power with might that could compare to the United States. The two counties had different social philosophies and each was afraid that the other would plant spies in its government or its media to cause its collapse. These techniques were tried by both sides, but not nearly to the degree that citizens feared them. In the South, the public's fear of Communism was used by some whites to oppose integration. In the Presidential election of 1948, for example, Democrat Harry Truman and Republican Thomas Dewey were opposed by southern Senator Strom Thurmond, with the newly formed States Rights Democratic party. Thurmond claimed that regular Democrats supported civil rights due to their "Communist ideology," arguing that Democrats intended to "excite race and class hatred" and "create chaos and confusion which leads to communism." Truman just barely won the election. In 1948, by an Executive Order from the President, a commission was established to study equal treatment in the armed forces. Historians believe that the committee's recommendations would have pushed integration further if the country had not become involved in the Korean Conflict to stop the spread of Communism. As it was, proposals made in 1949 by the Truman administration regarding racial issues like lynchings and voter registration were held up in Congress until the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

Compare & Contrast

- **1951:** The United States was involved in the Korean Conflict to help keep communist North Korea out of South Korea. Fighting ended in a truce in 1953 that established a De-Militarized Zone, but tensions between the two counties continue to this day.

  1964-1973: U.S. troops were active in combat in South Vietnam, in an attempt to keep Communist-backed North Vietnam from overtaking the country. In 1973 the U.S. withdrew military support, and South Vietnam was conquered in 1975.

  1990: Straining under the weight of an unproductive economy, the Soviet Union, the world's largest Communist country, dissolved.

  Today: Communism is not considered a threat to America, with the most stable Communist countries existing being tiny Cuba and isolationist China.

- **1951:** The first nuclear fusion reactor for providing power was built by the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission.

  1979: An accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, raised public fear about the safety of nuclear energy.

  1986: A radiation leak at a nuclear plant in Chernobyl in the Soviet Union killed an unspecified number of workers (the number is unknown because of the government's secrecy) and made nearby land and houses uninhabitable for years.

  Today: Despite the fact that no new nuclear plants have been built since 1978, America gets one fifth of its electrical energy from nuclear power.

Many of the legal inequalities that existed when Hughes wrote this poem were addressed in the 1950s and 1960s, often to avoid the sort of violent conflict that this poem predicts. In 1954 the Supreme Court ruled, in *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka,* that it was impossible to make schools "separate but equal," so they would have to integrate: as a result, segregation could no longer be shielded by the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* verdict of the 1890s. In 1955, Dr. Martin Luther King gained national fame by leading a yearlong boycott of the bus system of Montgomery, Alabama, which eventually changed the policy of blacks only riding in the back seats of the busses. In 1957 the President had to send U.S. troops to guard black children who had been admitted to a white school because the governor of Arkansas tried to have the children stopped by armed National Guardsmen. In 1961 black and white "Freedom Riders" rode busses across the South to make sure that rest areas on interstate highways were desegregated. Civil Rights Acts passed the legislature in 1957 and 1964, making federal laws out of the nation's growing desire for integration.

Critical Overview

Langston Hughes is considered one of the most influential and prolific African-American poets of the twentieth century. He published poetry from the Harlem Renaissance, a period during the 1920s when African-American artists and their works flourished in Harlem, to the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements. Following the Civil Rights movement, the Black Arts movement of the 1970s combined militant black nationalism with outspoken art and literature. Onwuchekwa Jemie, in his book *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry,* interprets the poem as a militant outcry against racial injustice. Jemie argues that the images in the poem build in intensity until "the violent crescendo at the end." Jemie writes, "rotten meat is a lynched

Street scene of Harlem in 1950, near the time Hughes's poem "Harlem" was written.

black man rotting on the tree. A sweet gone bad is all of the broken promises of Emancipation and Reconstruction, ... integration ... and Equal Opportunity. It might even be possible to identify each of the key images with a generation or historical period ..." These interpretations are not shared by many critics, but Jemie's reading is notable for its departure from the widespread black opinion that Hughes's writing was not militant enough to remain relevant in the wake of the Black Arts movement. By finding radical implications in Hughes's earlier poetry, Jemie revives poems such as "Harlem" for politicized contemporary readers.

Commenting on the innovative musical structure of the volume in which "Harlem" is a keynote poem, many critics, including Walter Farrell and Patricia Johnson, writing in the journal *MELUS*, note that Hughes "breaks down the barrier between the beginning of one poem and the end of another. [The volume may be described] as a series of short poems or phrases that contribute to the making of one long poem. Each poem maintains some individual identity as a separate unit while contributing to the composite poetic message. Movement between passages is achieved by thematic or topical congruency or by interior dialogue." "Harlem" is placed toward the end of *Montage* and comments on the widespread despair and frustration expressed by the personas in preceding poems. Thus "Harlem" may be read as both a distinct individual poem and an outstanding note in much larger symphony.

Criticism

Harry Phillips

Harry Phillips is a freelance writer and is currently teaching in the Department of English and Foreing Languages at Central Piedmont Community College. In the following essay, Phillips examines how the negative imagery of "Harlem" and the poem's structure of unanswered questions lead the reader to "consider the various psychological and emotional circumstances black individuals might experience in a society that continues to struggle with putting into practice its egalitarian ideals."

Legendary blues musician W. C. Handy once remarked of one of Langston Hughes's shorter poems that the poet had accomplished in four lines "what it would have taken Shakespeare two acts and three scenes to say." Handy's pithy observation hits at a central feature of much twentieth-cen-

tury poetry—the poet's ability to create a mountain of meaning from the studied arrangement of a very few words. Published in 1951, "Harlem" manages to evoke nearly a century of African-American history through a series of brief, bluesy, thought-provoking questions that aim to immerse the reader in the imagery of despair and disappointment. The spatial configuration of lines on the page suggests a way into the poem—a way to organize it and make meaning of it. Hughes begins with a central question that we might use to frame the remainder of the poem; and if we feel compelled to make an informed answer to this question at poem's end, then the poem, and reader, will have succeeded in generating thought about what continues to be our most pressing national problem: race relations. Note that the one-and two-line questions in the next section of the poem contain earthy images of disease and spoliation. The conspicuous absence of life-affirming images in this section is the poem's way of pushing us toward a disturbing answer to the opening question. The next section continues the "heavy," hopeless tone, or feeling, of the poem and effectively sets up the shocking conclusion. Because the reader is encouraged to respond to the questions the poem asks, the poem adheres to "call and response" patterning; that is, the tradition in African-American culture in which the "call" of the preacher or civic leader meets with a ready "response" from an attentive congregation or community.

Nearly all critics of "Harlem" interpret the "dream" in the poem's opening section as a symbol of African Americans' desire for equality—social, economic, and educational—in American society. That this desire is "deferred" means that African Americans continue to endure the difficult realities of racism and limited opportunity in a presumably free society. Critic Onwuchekwa Jemie, for example, wrote that the "dream deferred" represents "all of the broken promises of Emancipation and Reconstruction, of the Great Migration, integration and voter registration, of Black Studies and Equal Opportunity." The events the critic cites here begin at the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865 and actually extend beyond the poem's 1951 publication date into the 1970s and 1980s when many Black Studies programs at American universities were eliminated and when reaction against Affirmative Action programs began to escalate. By inviting the reader to answer the poem's first question, Hughes asks one to sit in the role of social commentator and critic of culture and to consider the various psychological and emotional circumstances black individuals might experience in a society that continues to struggle with putting into practice its egalitarian ideals.

The next, longest section of "Harlem" urges us to answer "yes" to the four questions asked. Here, the poet guides us, through his use of images and similes, to a deeper acknowledgment of African Americans' disillusionment with the American

What Do I Read Next?

- Hughes published several volumes of autobiography in his lifetime: *The Big Sea*, published in 1963, covers the period in which this poem was written and the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s.
- Hughes was also the author, along with Milton Meltzer and C. Eric Lincoln, of a 1956 book titled *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* that was reprinted in 1983 as *A Pictorial History of Black Americans*. The photos in this book give a vivid sense of the times. For instance, the reader can see separate "Colored" facilities at places such as restaurants, movie balconies, and parking lots. Hughes's text reads like a moderate intellectual whose patience is wearing thin.
- The title of Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 award-winning play *A Raisin in the Sun* is of course taken from this poem. The play, which was the first by a black woman to appear on Broadway, dramatizes almost every concern of African Americans in the 1950s.
- Aldron Morris's 1984 study *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for a Change* is one of the most comprehensive and thoroughly documented works about the grassroots organizations that brought black citizens together to defeat institutionalized segregation.
- *The Shaping of Black America* by Lerone Bennett, Jr., first published in 1975 and revised in 1991, has proven to be of lasting value as a quick yet insightful overview.

dreams of seizing opportunity, working hard, and enjoying success. A well-constructed image creates a mental picture in our imaginations and appeals to one or more of our physical senses. Often, its function is to carry or reinforce an important idea in a poem. In the first question, for example, Hughes uses the image of a dried raisin to convey the idea of shriveling and devaluation. The raisin was once a plump, moisture-laden fruit full with the promise of flavor and enjoyment. However, when the fruit, like the dream of equality, remains unharvested, it metamorphoses into something shrunken and less appealing. Interestingly, this image became the title of an award-winning play, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, which dramatizes the deferred dream of a black family's efforts to integrate a white urban neighborhood. Also helping to carry the idea in this question is a simile, or a comparison of unlike things using words such as "like" or "as" (or "than" or "seems"). The simile here compares "it," the deferred dream of equality, with the disfigured grape drying in the harsh rays of a paralyzing sun. In the next question, the image of a sore that will not heal reminds readers that the sting of discrimination and the pain of repeatedly having the dream dashed continues to drain one of the energy needed to keep hope alive. Like the perpetual sore, the stench of inedible, diseased meat speaks to the status of a dream gone bad. The "meal" Hughes serves concludes with candy, a course that potentially might have sweetened a satisfying experience, but instead the candy, like the meat, is spoiled and indigestible. It too has lost its original character and now, it would seem, is served up as ironic counterpoint to the expectations we hold for after-dinner confectionery and, symbolically, for the bitter taste of thwarted opportunity.

The figurative language and questions of this section prepare the reader for the declarative statement that makes up the poem's next section. Images are piled into "a heavy load," and the weight of keeping one's eyes on the prize of genuine emancipation after repeated defeats causes the dream to sag and puts the prize seemingly out of reach. But before taking up the challenge of the final question, additional investigation into how Hughes creates such a heavy mood may prove helpful in our efforts both to recognize additional structural elements in the poem and to begin providing some cultural context for its construction. Hughes's biographer, Arnold Rampersad, wrote in volume one of *The Life of Langston Hughes,* that blues music deeply influenced the poet throughout his literary career because it "alerted him to a power and privacy of language residing in the despised race to which he belonged." Blues elements apparent in "Harlem" include the everyday language of common people and repetition, perhaps the most recognizeable feature of blues compositions. Indeed, one question after another and repetition of the phrase "Does it," the word "like," and "d" and "s" sounds throughout the poem tie it to this blues convention. Hughes's stated intention of writing in order "to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America" also connects with a thematic dimension of blues songs—the need to articulate the sometimes dreary realities of spoiled hopes and sagging spirits. The need to name and rename the traits associated with perennial disasppointment using the language of his people, as Hughes does in his creation of these powerful images, reflects the poet's deep pride in his folk heritage and his commitment to social change.

The poem's final line contrasts mightily with the tone of earlier questions. It is designed both to shock and enlighten readers as to the explosive spirit and drive fueling an American dream and a determined people. A raisin, a festering sore, rotten meat, and spoiled candy now become incendiary devices in the service of this dream that will not die. Yet for those familiar with blues tradition and the perservering spirit of a resisting people, Hughes's explosive conclusion may come as no surprise at all. As novelist and critic Ralph Ellison observed: the blues "at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit." The fact that this final question is underlined suggests that the poet is drawing our attention to "possibility" and "toughness" as qualities born from the need to survive under an oppressive social, political, judicial, and economic order and the decay-ridden conditions it brings. It also underscores, emphatically, that the repressed, but still throbbing, dream of equal treatment will indeed be realized, but in unpredictable and potentially furious forms.

Historically, "Harlem" can be looked upon as a literary harbinger of the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements that took place during the two decades after its publication. Additionally, when we compare "Harlem" with earlier, frequently anthologized Hughes poems, such as "Dream Variations" (1924) and "I, Too" (1925), we note a shift from the confident, optimistic tones of the earlier verse to the defiant warning that may be construed from the final line of "Harlem." Literature, as many scholars suggest, is a good way to read history, and if we use these earlier and later

Hughes poems as a way of assessing race relations during this quarter century, then we come to the inescapable conclusion that few gains have been achieved during this period. As we know from our study of history, social movements are often characterized by explosive, unpredictable events fueled by long years of disappointment and frustration. Indeed, as this dream continues—in the eyes of many Americans—to be deferred, we might link the final line of "Harlem" with reactions to assassinations, controversial court decisions, and to the institutional kinds of discrimination that persist in our society. And when we recall W. C. Handy's reference to Hughes's wherewithal to be brief, we note in this eleven-line poem the poet's ability to skillfully blend history and art with the politics of resistance.

Source: Harry Phillips, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Onwuchekwa Jemie

This essay discusses the uses of theme and language of Hughes poem "A Dream Deferred," as well as the imagery and connotation of the words he chooses.

In short, a dream deferred can be a terrifying thing. Its greatest threat is its unpredictability, and for this reason the question format is especially fitting. Questions demand the reader's participation, corner and sweep him headlong to the final, inescapable conclusion."

Source: Jemie, Onwuchekwa, *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry,* Columbia University Press, 1976 pp. 63–5, 78–80.

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For Further Study

Berry, Faith, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem,* Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1983.

A meticulously researched biography by a founding member of the Langston Hughes Society, this book is full of fascinating anecdotes.

Cashman, Sean Dennis, *African-Americans and the Quest for Civil Rights 1900-1990,* New York: New York University Press, 1991.

A very thorough and readable account of the growth of the Civil Rights movement.

Meier, August, and Elliot Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto,* third edition, New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.

This book gives too little attention to the period of the late 1940s and early 1950s, but it has a large, informative section about Hughes's part in the Harlem Renaissance.

Truman, Harry S., "Civil Rights Message," in *The Negro in American History,* Mortimer J. Adler, gen. ed., Charles Van Doran, ed. Encyclopedia Britannica Corp., 1969.

This is the text of Truman's address to Congress on February 2, 1948, outlining the actions that the President thought should be taken in response to a report issued by the President's Committee on Civil Rights. A good indicator of the times, Truman's speech calls for the government to uphold rights that we take for granted, such as "protecting more adequately the right to vote" and "providing federal protection against lynching."

An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

William Butler Yeats

1919

First published in the collection *The Wild Swans at Coole* in 1919, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" was written to commemorate the death of Robert Gregory, the son of Yeats's patron, Lady Gregory. Yeats wrote two other poems about Robert Gregory, which are also included in *The Wild Swans at Coole.* These are "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," and "Shepherd and Goatherd." Throughout the poem, the speaker contemplates his fate and attempts to balance his conflict, that is whether to accept life or death. In doing so, he methodically notes that he feels separated from his country and from the reasons most men go to war. The speaker might be considered indifferent to both life and death, but toward the end of the poem the reader realizes how important the theme of balance is. The speaker reveals that for him, life and death are balanced, or equal, and in choosing one he has, in a sense, chosen both. An interesting aspect of this poem is its lack of figurative language. Why would Yeats chose to use so little imagery in this poem? Perhaps it adds to the tone of the poem. Notice that the subject of the poem is solemn. Vivid images might detract from the solemnity of the subject. Also consider that the language of the poem contributes to the characterization of the speaker. Yeats does not wish the airman to be dreamy or melodramatic, instead he wishes to portray him as a man who has considered all his options and has chosen the one best suited to him.

Author Biography

Yeats was born in Dublin on June 13, 1865, the eldest of four children. His father, John Butler Yeats, was the son of a once-affluent family whom Oscar Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde, described as "the cleverest, most spirited people I ever met." Yeats's parents had an important influence on the young artist's life. His father had trained as a lawyer, but instead decided to fulfill his life long ambition of becoming a painter. Unfortunately, while good at painting, he was not very successful at exploiting his talent, and the family often suffered from financial hardship. Yeats's mother Susan Pollexfen Yeats, the daughter of a successful merchant from Sligo in western Ireland, was descended from a line of intense, eccentric people interested in faeries and astrology. From his mother Yeats inherited a love of Ireland, particularly the region surrounding Sligo, and an interest in the folklore of the local peasantry.

Not until he was eleven years old, when he began attending the Godolphin Grammar School in Hammersmith, England, did Yeats receive any type of formal schooling. From there he went on to the Erasmus Smith High School in Dublin, where he a generally disappointing student—erratic in his studies, prone to daydreaming, shy, and poor at sports. In 1884 Yeats enrolled in the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, where he met the poet George Russell. With Russell, Yeats founded the Dublin Hermetic Society for the purposes of conducting magical experiments and promoting their belief that "whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion and that their mythology and their spirits of water and wind were but literal truth." This organization marked Yeats's first serious activity in occult studies, a fascination which he would continue for the rest of his life, and the extent of which was revealed only when his unpublished notebooks were examined after his death. Yeats joined the Rosicrucians, the Theosophical Society, and MacGregor Mathers's Order of the Golden Dawn. Frequently consulting spiritualists and engaging in the ritual conjuring of Irish gods, Yeats used his knowlegde of the occult as a source of images for his poetry, and traces of his esoteric interests appear everywhere in his poems.

In 1885 Yeats met Irish nationalist John O'Leary, who helped turn his attention to Celtic nationalism and who was instrumental in arranging for the publication of Yeats's first poems in *The Dublin University Review*. Under the influence of

William Butler Yeats

O'Leary, Yeats took up the cause of Gaelic writers at a time when much native Irish literature was in danger of being lost as the result of England's attempts to anglicize Ireland through a ban on the Gaelic language. On January 30, 1889 Yeats met Maud Gonne, an actress whose great beauty would haunt him for the rest of his life. Gonne, a passionate agitator for the nationalist cause in Ireland, intrigued and dismayed Yeats with her reckless destructiveness in pursuit of her political goals. They were united in their common desire to see Ireland freed from English domination. During this period Yeats focused his attention on drama, hoping to spark a renewed interest in Irish literature and culture. Despite her many rejections of his offers of marriage, Yeats and Gonne remained close personal friends and their relationship endured through many estrangements, including her brief marriage to Major John MacBride. In his love poetry Yeats compared her to Helen of Troy, whose capriciousness led to the destruction of a civilization. To Yeats Gonne represented an ideal, and throughout his life he found the tension between them, as well as their friendship, a source of poetic inspiration.

In 1917, when he was fifty-two years old, Yeats finally married. While they were on their honeymoon, his young wife, Georgiana Hyde-Lees, discovered that she had abilities as a medium

and could communicate with the supernatural world through the technique of automatic writing. Late in his life, when decades of struggle by the Irish nationalists had finally culminated in the passage of the Home Rule Bill, Yeats was chosen as one of the sixty members of the new Irish Senate. Leaving the senate in 1928 because of failing health, Yeats devoted his remaining years to poetry. He died on January 28, 1939.

Poem Text

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

Poem Summary

Lines 1-2:

In the opening lines of "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" the speaker introduces the idea of death and that he will die "among the clouds above." This phrase introduces the idea of "air" in relation to death in the poem. What is interesting about this is that air is often associated with life and breath, but in this instance the clouds, which are composed of air, suggest death as well as the idea of heaven.

Lines 3-4:

These lines establish the fact that the speaker feels separated from his role in the war. It seems as though he feels nothing, since he neither hates nor loves. At this point the reader notices the tone of indifference in the speaker's language.

Lines 5-6:

Here the speaker identifies his place of birth and the reader notices that the alliteration in these lines emphasizes a sense of pride in the tone of the speaker.

Media Adaptations

- "The Poetry of William Butler Yeats" is available on audio cassette from Audiobooks.

Lines 7-8:

These lines immediately halt the tone in the former two lines by stating that either outcome of the war will have little effect on the poor of Kiltartan Cross. The speaker seems to have an extremely rational view of the world.

Lines 9-12:

The speaker states that the usual attraction of war did not entice him, and that he chose to become a soldier because of "a lonely impulse of delight." This is the first irrational note to the speaker. The word "tumult" is used to describe the speaker's occupation in the line immediately following. This is in sharp contrast to the extremely rational view of the speaker earlier in the poem, and since it is juxtaposed with the clouds it brings to mind the subject of heaven that was introduced at the beginning of the poem.

Lines 13-16:

These last four lines "balance" the rational and irrational aspects in the poem. The speaker reveals that the rational world he comes from offers irrational answers to problems, such as war, while the irrational world of the clouds offers both an "impulse of delight" and death. The speaker balances life and death by comparing them both to a "waste of breath." This brings back the idea of air as life, but it is labelled a waste. By equating life and death, the speaker enables himself to accept his death.

Themes

Patriotism

It is clear that the pilot, serving in Britain's Royal Air Force, does not feel patriotism in the tra-

ditional sense of the word: he neither loves the ones he protects nor hates those he fights. He does feel a sense of identity, but it is with the people of Ireland, specifically those of Kiltartan. The reason this does not seem to make sense to the reader is that the political situation he lives under has split the word patriotism into two meanings. Usually, we think of a patriot as fighting for his or her own country. In this case, though, because Ireland is under British control, the country that the airman is fighting for is one country, while *his* country is a completely different one to him. One imagines that much in colonial life must have created this sort of dilemma, with citizens owing their loyalty to both the government over their heads and also a distant government across the sea. Yeats has dramatized this situation to its fullest by putting the airman in a life-or-death situation. The poem also makes the situation as pathetic as it could be by having the airman lay down his life for the country in which he does not believe. It is arguable whether this approach would be as effective in stirring Irish patriotism as well as a straightforward, pro-Irish poem would, but Yeats was writing about an actual occurrence, and this issue of dual loyalty (or loyalty versus affection) certainly is worth being examined.

Fate

The power of this poem lies in its first line: the speaker is not trying to beat his fate, nor is he trying to make things work out to his advantage. He is so certain that he will die that he uses the term "meet my fate" to mean the same thing as "die," accepting the fact that he has no other possible fate except dying. The reader is meant to see this sort of fatalism as depressing; it should shock us and give us a sense of waste to find out that a young, healthy man feels that he has nothing left to live for or look forward to. For the poem's speaker, though, knowing his fate is actually a blessing. Freed of his responsibility to make the world better in the future or preserve the life he has known, he is able to act spontaneously—to follow "a lonely impulse of delight" by flying off into the clouds.

Yeats is bending the rules of reality by making the speaker so absolutely certain of his fate: the ability to predict the future is always flawed by the fact that something unexpected could come up. On the other hand, the poet does support the speaker's certainty by telling us that he has thought this through completely, "brought all to mind." We are not told exactly why his past and future are so pointless, but we are given a pretty good guess in lines 3 and 4 and also in lines 7 and 8. It was the political situation that made an Irishman fight for Britain that made his life worthless and left him ready to die.

Obedience

Given how strongly this poem makes the point that its speaker does not hate those that he fights, love those he protects, or hope to benefit those that he does love, readers justifiably wonder why this man is in the air force. The most obvious answer would be that he is flying a plane because it is fun, which would be another way of stating what the poem calls an "impulse of delight." This makes more sense when we consider how new flight was

Topics for Further Study

- This poem is about a pilot who joined the war, not to fight, but for the sheer exhilaration of flying a plane at a time when flight was new. Yeats concentrates on war and politics, but he does not give any in-depth description of what the speaker must feel like when flying. Try to capture that feeling in a poem.
- Randall Jarrell's poem "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," published during World War II uses more concrete imagery to shock the reader about the senselessness of war. What is the same in the ideas these two poems have about war? What is different? Explain why you think the two poets chose to write about aviators. What does Yeats's pilot say about flying that Jarrell's gunner would disagree with?
- During the First World War, many Irish citizens were reluctant to participate in a war that they felt was chiefly England's concern, and many Irishmen who enlisted in the Royal Air Force had to explain themselves to hostile relatives and friends. Do you think many young men, like the one in this poem, joined the Air Force in spite of their political beliefs? Do you think people join the Armed Services today for similar reasons? explain.

in 1918: while we take flight for granted as a mode of transportation today, it seemed like a metaphor for unattached freedom to the first people to witness airplanes above them in the sky. If Yeats's point was to associate being Irish with flying free in the sky, though, it proves to be a bit naive. First, the speaker's lack of love for Britain does not change the fact that he is being just as obedient as any Londoner who is in the service out of a sense of patriotic duty. The poet seems to feel that the lack of commitment an Irishman feels is the important thing, but to the British Royal Air Force, the important thing is that he follows commands. Also, saying that an "impulse" led the speaker to this moment oversimplifies the process of military training and flight training. Knowledge of the real world tells us that this speaker has been much more obedient to the British cause than the poem cares to discuss.

Style

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is composed of four quatrains in a continuous sixteen-line stanza. Each quatrain has an *abab* rhyme scheme. The poem uses the iambic tetrameter form of meter and employs alliteration.

A quatrain is a stanza composed of four lines of verse which may or may not have a set length. In this poem the quatrains are not separated.

When a stanza in a poem has a pattern of rhymes it is called a rhyme scheme. "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" utilizes end rhyme and has an *abab* rhyme scheme. This means that the end of the first line of a stanza rhymes with the end of the third line, and the end of the second line of a stanza rhymes with the end of the fourth line.

Iambic means that the poem is arranged in iambs which are composed of one unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable. Examine the following line from "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death:"

I know that I shall meet my fate ...

When the iambs are identified and the stresses indicated, the line appears this way:

I **know** / that **I** / shall **meet** / my **fate** ...

Read the line aloud and notice the emphasis on the stressed syllables.

Tetrameter means that there are four metric units to each line, "tetra" meaning four. Since "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" mainly uses iambic tetrameter, there are four iambs in each line of the poem.

Alliteration is the repetition of certain consonants in a poem, which is often used in order to create a musical sound. Notice the use of consonant sounds in the following line:

My country is Kiltartan Cross

Read the line aloud and notice the repetition of the "hard-C" sounds in the words "country," "Kiltartan," and "Cross."

Historical Context

Yeats was not interested in being a war poet: he was much more concerned with the Irish struggle for independence from Britain than with international conflicts. In 1915, when American novelist Edith Wharton asked him for a war poem for a book she was editing, Yeats wrote "A Reason For Keeping Silent," which was later renamed "On Being Asked For A War Poem." It starts out with the lines "I think it better at times like these / We poets keep our mouths shut; for in truth / We have no gift to set a statesman right." There is record of his having mentioned in a letter later that year to the novelist Henry James that this was the only thing he would ever write about war. His attitude changed in 1918, though, when Robert Gregory, the son of Yeats's close friend Lady Gregory, was shot down over Italy while fighting for the British in World War I. Yeats wrote three poems about Gregory's death: "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," "Elegy," and this one.

Predominantly Catholic Ireland had been under the control of predominantly Protestant England since the 1160s, when the Normans invaded under the protection of England's King Henry II. Throughout the centuries, Ireland was treated as an English resource. England felt free to extract whatever useable resources could be found; they took over land, relocated Irish citizens, and arrested and executed dissenters. From 1845 to 1848, Ireland suffered one of that country's most destructive periods—the potato crops were ruined by blight for four consecutive years. During the Great Famine, a million Irish citizens died of starvation and epidemics of typhus and cholera, and two million more emigrated to England or North America. In the face of this poverty, disease and starvation, the ruling British government did little to make life easier.

Compare & Contrast

- **1919:** As a result of the end of World War I, the Versailles Peace Conference was convened, producing the League of Nations to assure world peace.

  1939-1945: The nations of Europe were involved in World War II, aligned approximately as they had been for the previous war.

  1991: An international coalition of armed forces was assembled to successfully halt Iraq's expansion into Kuwait.

  Today: The United Nations (successor to the League of Nations) sends peace-keeping forces around the globe. Opponents object to risking their lives for the safety of foreign nations.

- **1917:** Sinn Fein party members in Parliament proclaimed an independent Irish republic, organizing their own Parliament.

  1920: The Government of Ireland Act established two separate Irelands: Northern Ireland, which was a part of the United Kingdom but with its own home-rule Parliament, and the free state of Ireland, which in 1922 became an independent dominion within the British Commonwealth.

  1938: The constitution of Ireland was revised to sever all ties with Britain.

  Today: Britain and Northern Ireland are attempting to conduct peace talks that would end the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.

This lack of concern raised Irish anger against British control: after all, they reasoned, what is a government for, if not to save lives and respond to end catastrophes? A bitterness grew so deep between the two countries that Irish historians to this day sometimes refer to the famine as a British genocide, or a plan to systematically kill off an entire ethnic population.

The outrage over British inaction during the famine led to new demands for Irish home rule in the late 1800s. Yeats grew up in a family where politics and art were discussed openly, and he and his friends were well aware of the activities of Irish nationalists. One of the most significant of these was Charles Stewart Parnell, who led the campaign to end Ireland's extreme poverty by fighting against the (mostly English) landlords who oppressed citizens in the 1880s. Parnell became a hero of the Irish and a symbol of their fight for independence. In 1891, when Parnell died, Yeats quickly wrote an elegy titled "Mourn—And Then Onward!" for the pro-Parnell paper *United Ireland*. The work was popular, but Yeats considered it a badly written poem and never included it in any books. There are, however, several homages to Parnell that he wrote that are frequently included in collections of Yeats's works.

On Easter Monday of 1916, two years before Yeats wrote "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," an event happened that turned relations between England and Ireland into the war of terrorism and repression that it has been for most of this century. Two independence organizations, the Republican Brotherhood led by Padraic Pearse and the Citizens' Army, led by James Connelly, staged a revolt in Dublin. They took control of several points around the city, and Pearse had time to give a speech on the steps of the main post office before the British Army came in firing weapons. In the end, 60 rebels, 130 British troops, and 300 citizens died. The British then imposed martial law over the country and had thousands of Irish leaders arrested and taken to Britain, where fifteen of them, including Pearse and Connelly, were executed. This outraged the Irish so much that Sinn Fein, the Irish nationalistic party that had been established in 1899, won 73 of the 105 Irish seats in the British House of Commons that December. The Irish Republican Army, which had been formed in 1919, began using guerrilla tactics—such as placing bombs in commuter buses and shopping centers—against the British. Parliament responded to the violence by outlawing Sinn Fein. In 1921 the country was divided into two separate entities: the free

state of Ireland was allowed to govern itself, while Northern Ireland remained under British control. The North's quest for independence continues to this day.

Critical Overview

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is one of the three poems written on the occasion of the death of Yeats's friend Robert Gregory. Critic John Lucas, in his book *Modern English Poetry—Hardy to Hughes: A Critical Survey,* mentions that this poem was not only used to mourn the loss of Gregory but also to "affirm his commitment to values that are, so it seems, to become time's victims." According to Lucas, Yeats wished to show that Gregory chose death in order to escape the waste of age. He explains, "Yeats implies that Gregory knew his work to be finished in one brief flaring of creative intensity and that he therefore chose death rather than wasting into unprofitable old age." Lucas goes on to mention that the poem is essentially concerned with the balance between life and death. "Yeats presents Gregory in the act of balancing all, seeing himself poised between 'this life, this death.'"

Criticism

Jhan Hochman

Jhan Hochman is a freelance writer and currently teaches at Portland Community College, Portland, OR. In the following essay, Hochman debates two central questions: the identity—specific or general—of the airman, and if the poem serves as a eulogy for a hero or is a statement on the pointlessness of war.

Only one thing brings the Irish airman of Yeats's poem to war: "A lonely impulse of delight." Absent are the usual reasons for fighting—for one's nation, people, or family. But what exactly is this "lonely impulse of delight?" Is it the thought of defeating boredom? Self-challenge? Adventure and excitement? Does the poem mourn and memorialize the loss of an independent hero following his own call, unmoved by law, pressure, propaganda, or public fever? Or is the poem a reverie or reflection on the airman's wasted life and wasted death?

The anonymous airman of Yeats's "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" is Robert Gregory (1881-1918), only son of Yeats's close friend and collaborator, the playwright and translator Lady Gregory (1852-1932). In all, there are four poems devoted to Robert Gregory, the other three being: "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," "Shepherd and Goatherd," and "Reprisals." All except "Reprisals" were published in the collection *The Wild Swans at Coole.* "Reprisals" was held from publication because Yeats was afraid the poem might offend Lady Gregory because it questioned whether her son had wasted his life fighting for the British. Most scholars maintain that Yeats was not close with Robert Gregory, and if so, one may wonder if the Gregory quartet was written less as a tribute to the major than as a consolation to his mother, Lady Gregory. In the quartet, Major Gregory was praised by Yeats as a renaissance man, or as he is called in "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," "soldier, scholar, horseman." In this same, poem Gregory is praised (some say overpraised) as a lover of nature, a painter, and as someone who understood work in metal, wood, stone, and plaster. In "Shepherd and Goatherd," the person mourned was a gentle shepherd who played a stone flute and "was best in every country sport / And every country craft." And in "Reprisals," Gregory is a crack fighter pilot who shoots down 19 planes before dying himself. In fact, Gregory was a decorated pilot for the British Air Force in World War I who, unbeknownst to Yeats or Lady Gregory, crashed over Italy most likely as the result of "friendly fire." Italy seems an interesting place for Gregory to die: he and Yeats had been taken with Castiglione's *The Courtyer,* (1561) as had English poets Thomas Wyatt and Edmund Spenser before them. The ideal courtier, according to the symposium in *The Courtyer,* should unite ethical and intellectual excellence with military and sporting prowess, but display such talents only with graceful ease and nonchalance. It is then no surprise that Yeats also compares Gregory—"In Memory of Major Robert Gregory"—with Sir Philip Sydney, another poet and legendary military hero influenced by Castiglione. Sydney not only died in action, but supposedly in an act of heroism. Gregory died an unheroic and uncanny death in Italy—uncanny since Italy was the home of Castiglione. The focus on Gregory as the airman in the poem should, however, be met with caution. Because Gregory is not named in this poem and is in two of the others, the effect is to render the airman more of an everyman or "everysoldier" or an "every Irish soldier" fighting

in the British military. This, perhaps, warrants a transition from a discussion of the man, Gregory, to the Irish airman in "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" and finally to the other three poems devoted to Gregory.

"An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" primarily employs four pairs of eight-syllable lines. Each line pair generally contains one accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable; this rhythmic pattern is called "iambic tetrameter." The rhyme scheme follows abab format. The poem's rather common rhythm hardly appears formal enough for an elegy. Instead it seems to almost undercut the seriousness of the poem's subject, as if this common form mocked or remarked on the commonality of content. In this way, Yeats might well have been positing a romantic tradition of Castiglione's courtier—which had a long history in English literature before Yeats and Gregory—as rather tiresome or common.

The poem is a soliloquy or dramatic monologue in which a World War I Irish airman appears to display fearless equanimity and cold-sober honesty before his imminent death. Resigned to his fate, the airman begins a series of balancing acts: he neither hates those he fights (the Germans), nor loves those for whom he fights (the British). Ireland's long history of explosive separatism with Britain is a well-known story. Since the late 19th century, Ireland has sought complete independence from British rule. And though the airman fights on the side of the British, he asserts himself as an Irishman, specifically from a region with a distinctive history and dialect: Kiltartan Cross(roads), a barony in County Galway whose specific history and folklore Lady Gregory extensively researched and recorded. Further, if, as the pilot asserts, he aligns himself with the poor, he also understands that neither his actions nor the outcome of the war will make any appreciable difference for the class with whom he feels aligned. (Gregory, by the way, was not poor.) So why did the Irishman enlist? Not because of law, duty, or public pressure, but because of a "lonely impulse of delight." This kernel of free will—of individualism—is what several critics believe Yeats was not only praising, but was singling out as the thrust of the poem. Apparently, Gregory himself was indeed happy to have joined up. In "Reprisals," Yeats shares what appears to be a snippet of one of Gregory's letters from the front: "I have had more happiness in one year than in all other years." Gregory's risky happiness in "An Irish Airman," while short-lived, has been worth the wasted past and what looks up ahead like a wasted future. This short period of warfare—a kind of suspended death or death-in-life that Gregory nonetheless experiences as more intensely alive—has been worth his wasted life before the war and the wasted life that, apparently, he thought would most assuredly have followed.

Despite the airman's happiness, bravery, and assertion of independent will, or specifically, his "lonely impulse of delight," it is difficult to conclude what, in fact, Yeats is praising. The poem's last line, "In balance with this life, this death," is not clear. There are at least two interpretations possible of "this life": one could be the airman's life

What Do I Read Next?

- Peter de Rosa tells the full story of Ireland's struggle for identity at the time of the First World War in his 1990 historical analysis *Rebels: The Irish Rising of 1916.*
- Ten years after Yeats's death, A. Norman Jefferies wrote what many consider to be the definitive biography of the poet. As the years passed, new information came out, and so he rewrote his book forty years later as *W.B. Yeats: A New Biography.*
- Though Yeats did not consider himself a war poet, this poem is usually included with poetry from World War I. One of the best World War I poets, whose writing was more adventurous and less philosophical, was Wilfred Owen. His poems are all available in one 1963 edition, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen.*
- Douglas Archibald's book *Yeats,* published in 1983, has more literary criticism than Jefferies's aforementioned biography.
- Any student of Yeats should go to the most definitive source of explanation of his poems. Organized as a series of footnotes, *A New Commentary on William Butler Yeats* by A. Norman Jefferies, published in 1984, makes good reading in itself, but it is a wealth of information when used to help interpret particular poems.

as a fighter pilot, and the other could be his wasted time away from war, including his projected wasted future as a live man. If the former reading seems plausible, the airman's "delightful" life as a fighter has equal worth with his death, and thus a positive spin can be imposed on the airman's death—that it was worth the excitement and triumphs. But if "this life" refers to a wasteland, then death seems, on balance, every bit a waste as the airman's life. Because the airman is not praised in this poem as the renaissance man of "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," readers may be hard put, without knowing anything about Gregory, to object to the pilot's own assertion that his life was a "waste of breath." Staying within the poem— especially keeping knowledge of Gregory outside of its interpretation—makes it difficult to sort out whether the poem is an encomium to the independent will of the soldier who fought the good fight against the evil enemy, or a sub-genre of the anti-war poem focusing on war's utter meaninglessness.

Looking beyond "An Irish Airman," that is, now reading and synthesizing all four poems of the Gregory quartet, the balance is tipped to the weightier side of "An Irish Airman" as an anti-war poem. First, Robert Gregory is depicted in "Shepherd and Goatherd" (not by name) and "In Memory" as a man whose incredibly productive life seems everything but a waste. Second, Yeats and Gregory were both Irish nationalists, or Republicans, who wanted the British out of Ireland. Their dreams of Irish independence were postponed by British participation in World War I. While Gregory and Yeats were both sympathetic to the British as the lesser—when put beside Germany— of two evils, neither were fond of fighting and dying for a British cause. Nowhere is this more clear than in "Reprisals," in which Yeats describes the British, especially the British Black and Tan soldiers of 1920, in Ireland: "Half-drunk or whole mad soldiery / Are murdering your tenants there" (the Gregorys owned land in Ireland). And at the end of "Reprisals" Major Gregory is not depicted as a hero of independent will, but as one of the "cheated dead" whose fighting and dying was a tragic waste, since all the Irish gained from helping the British was more of the same: British occupation. Commentators on "An Irish Airman" have perhaps mistaken Yeats's praise of Robert Gregory—the eulogy of his accomplishments or the mourning for his loss in all of the quartet's poems except for "Reprisals"—for praise of the Irish airman's "lonely impulse of delight." But even without reading the other three poems in the Gregory quartet—poems written at different times and perhaps with different mindsets—the poem thuds too deeply at the end to be a flattering eulogy for a death resulting from the exciting exertion of an independent will. It is far more likely that this Irish airman is not just Robert Gregory, but every Irish soldier who fell while fighting a British cause or, for that matter, every minority soldier who has fought abroad for the freedom of a country that cheated him of his freedoms at home.

Source: Jhan Hochman, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

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For Further Study

Ardagh, John, *Ireland and the Irish: Portrait of a Changing Society*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994.

This source tries a bit too much to soften the violence and oppression that are a fact of recent Irish history. As the dust jacket describes, the book is "upbeat." The facts are here, but the tone is more pro-British than a nationalist like Yeats would accept.

Crawford, Fred D., *British Poets of the Great War*, Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1988.

Yeats is, of course, the exception to the other poets in this book: he would deny that he was either a British poet or a war poet. Still, readers can get a good sense of the time and the situation from this work.

O'Broin, Leon, *Protestant Nationalists in Revolutionary Ireland: The Stopford Connection,* Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1995.

This book looks at the movement for independence in the late 1800s and early 1900s, concentrating on one family, the Stopfords, and their acquaintances. Yeats, of course, is one of those acquaintances.

Tuohy, Frank, *Yeats,* New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1976.

A much more complex and comprehensive biography than it first seems, this book contains much information about Yeats's family, especially his father, and puts the poet's amazing works into the perspective of his life.

l(a

e. e. cummings

1958

Published in 1958, when cummings was 64 years old, "l(a" was among the last new poems published in the poet's lifetime. At first glance, the poem appears to be either deceptively simple or maddeningly opaque; a more detailed examination reveals it to be a fine example of cummings playful experimentation with words on the page, resulting in a successful merging of form and meaning. In a mere four words, stretched across nine lines, the poet presents us with an entire world in a single, simple leaf—revealing both his esthetic and philosophical sympathy with the Transcendentalists.

Author Biography

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1894, cummings spent his childhood in that city, where his father, Edward Cummings, was a sociology professor at Harvard and a Unitarian clergyman. From an early age cummings showed a strong interest in poetry and art, which was encouraged by his mother Rebecca. Cummings attended Harvard University from 1911 to 1915 and joined the editorial board of the *Harvard Monthly,* a college literary magazine. While in college he became fascinated by avant-garde art, modernism, and cubism, and he began incorporating elements of these styles into his own poetry and paintings. He received a bachelor's degree in 1915 and a master's the following year.

His first published poems appeared in the anthology *Eight Harvard Poets* in 1917. These eight pieces feature the experimental verse forms and the lower-case personal pronoun "i" that were to become his trademark. The copyeditor of the book, however, mistook cummings's intentions as typographical errors and made "corrections."

During World War I cummings volunteered for the French-based Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service. As a result of his disregard of regulations and his attempts to outwit the wartime censors in his letters home, cummings spent four months in an internment camp in Normandy on suspicion of treason. Although he found his detention amusing and even enjoyable, his father made use of his contacts in government to secure his son's release.

Cummings returned to New York and pursued painting but was drafted in 1918. He spent about a year at Camp Danvers, Massachusetts, during which time he wrote prolifically. Beginning around this time, cummings, with the knowledge and approval of his friend Schofield Thayer, had an affair with Schofield's wife Elaine. Cummings's daughter Nancy was born in 1919, but she was given Thayer's name. Cummings and Elaine Thayer married in 1924, at which time cummings legally adopted Nancy.

During the 1920s and 1930s he traveled widely in Europe, alternately living in Paris and New York, and developing parallel careers as a poet and a painter. He published his first poetry collection, *Tulips and Chimneys,* in 1923.

Politically liberal with leftist leanings, cummings visited the Soviet Union in 1931 to learn about that government's system of art subsidies. He was very disillusioned, however, by the regimentation and lack of personal and artistic freedom he encountered there. As a result, he abandoned his liberal views and became deeply conservative on social and political issues.

Cummings continued to write steadily throughout the 1940s and 1950s, reaching his greatest popularity during this period and winning a number of honors, including the Shelley Memorial Award for poetry in 1944, the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship at Harvard for the academic year 1952-53, and the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1958.

Despite such successes, however, he never achieved a steady income. Cummings continued to give poetry readings to college audiences across the United States until his death in 1962.

e.e. cummings

Poem Summary

Line 1:

Immediately, the poet asks us, perhaps forces us, to pay close attention—and prepares us for what is to come. This is clearly not standard or proper English; and while the reader may not know it yet, he or she may have to get through to the end of the poem before the meaning and function of this first line becomes clear.

Lines 2-6:

These lines don't offer us much more than the opening line, although when we get to the close-parenthesis, we at least know that what is inside is

Media Adaptations

- A video cassette titled *E.E. Cummings: The Making of a Poet* was released in 1971 by Films for the Humanities.
- An audio cassette titled "E.E. Cummings Reads" is available from Audiobooks.

of an entire piece. Once that is extracted, the rest of the poem falls into place. So perhaps we might return to the open-parenthesis before we even finish the poem. In this way, our reading method mimics the "fluttering" nature of the leaf within the poem, as if our eyes are caught in a gust of wind from the page.

Lines 7-9:

At first glance, line 7 appears to be a complete word, the only complete word on a line in the entire poem. In fact, it is merely a part of the larger word ("loneliness") that opens and closes the poem. By giving it an entire line to itself, the poet emphasizes both the "alone-ness" and the "one-ness" of one person and one leaf, and possibly of one poet. Reading these three lines as a piece to themselves, they could be heard, or rather seen, to be "one-liness." Again, this is perhaps intended to emphasize the solitary nature of man, of a leaf, or possibly the voice of this poem. Taking a clue from cummings's own word games, the adventurous reader might note that in the pre-computer typewriter type of the time, the numeral one was also denoted by the lowercase "l," the same "l" that opens the poem and that follows line 7.

By employing such multiple interpretations, the adventurous reader quickly realizes that there is an entire world of meaning and language in this brief yet complex poem—just as there is in a leaf itself. As cummings himself said of his own work, "DO NOT TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT. LET IT UNDERSTAND YOU." It might be a mistake to take this admonition too literally, since it could be argued that, in this particular poem as in much of the poet's later work, the reader's act of deciphering the poem (or it deciphering the reader) may actually be cummings's desired purpose: he seeks to engage us, as much as to convey a single, concrete idea. In other words, a poem is only alive while it is being read or thought about. As soon as the reader knows what the poem says or means, he or she moves on to a new experience, leaving the poem itself to flutter to the ground.

Themes

Language and Meaning

Neither of the ideas expressed in this poem—"loneliness" and "a leaf falls"—is particularly powerful in and of itself, and even when they are put together side-by-side, they would only draw a quick nod of appreciation that is over as soon as the reader feels she or he has seen the obvious connection. Breaking the words into small units slows readers down and makes them drink in the poem's idea fully, but that is the least of its effects. The individual parts of the words also express ideas that expand upon the poem's main theme. For example, old typewriters did not even have a key for the numeral "1", but left it to the typist to use a lowercase "L" to represent it. Reading "l" to mean "one," this poem has a fifth line that says "one-one" and an eighth line that says "one," in addition to the l's that start the first two lines and the seventh line that directly says "one". Taking this a step further, the last line can be read as saying "I-ness," as in a self, alone. These accidents of language, where the very letters used in the words correspond to the idea being conveyed, help to strengthen the author's point. Cummings also used the narrowness of the lines to simulate what is being discussed. Of course, the long narrow shape (beside once again resembling the number "1") brings us as close to the idea of "loneliness" as can be evoked without isolating each individual letter on its own line–which would make the author's intent too obvious and draw too much attention to the page layout, instead of the idea. Including the parentheses, the two-letter lines of the second stanza alternate consonant/vowel/vowel and consonant/consonant/vowel, spinning slowly but evenly, the way a leaf falling to the ground spins. This poem uses the layout of the letters on the page both to draw attention to subunits that reinforce the meaning of the words and also to, in some way, act out the words' message.

Death

The intellectual connection between a falling leaf and the human emotion of loneliness is not clear unless we bear in mind that the leaf is falling because it has died and also consider that it is very rare to see two leaves becoming detached from a tree at the same time. The falling leaf is, in itself, no more of an appropriate symbol for loneliness than a lone snowflake or a bird gliding across the sky would be, but the leaf's recent death—its disconnection from the source of its nutrition—is more accurate at bringing to mind the unhappiness we feel when we are lonely. The power of loneliness does not come from the realization that we are all independent organisms (an idea that is recognized and emphasized in our culture), but from the idea that we will be permanently separated from others with no hope of uniting. Death carries this permanence. Any solitary object can be made to represent loneliness, but the connection between a falling leaf and death brings readers to the core of loneliness's power, and it is therefore appropriate that this image is parenthetically planted like a seed within the word.

Order and Disorder

One look at this poem conveys a sense of order, since all lines have two or three letters (or characters, if you include parentheses) and the lines are clustered into stanzas in a neat one-three-one-three-one pattern. This is how we know that a human consciousness is in charge, imposing this order upon the letters for some reason. We assume, from the overall shape of the poem, that cummings has some special significance that he wants us to get from the way he has put these four words together, and our faith in that significance makes us a little more patient as we try to determine exactly what it is. On the other hand, the poet's overall design is not evident throughout every little aspect of the poem. Before recognizing individual words, for example, readers will often feel frustration about seemingly nonsense lines such as "af" and "l(a." This sense of disorder is actually a reassurance that the words were not chosen only for their ability to be manipulated, that they have an inherent meaning that cannot be twisted into a tidy design.

Topics for Further Study

- Think of another event that could be inserted between the parentheses of this poem to bring out the idea of loneliness. Try to divide your event into lines and stanzas that make sense.
- Explain the title. In what way does it give you a lens through which you can look at the poem? How is your understanding of the poem changed by it? How would your experience be changed if there were no title at all?

Style

As with the majority of cummings's work, "l(a" is immediately identifiable as his. Before we actually read a word, we recognize his unique visual style—a style that reflects cummings's lesser-known work as a painter, where he was drawn to Cubist and other Modernist forms. Cummings pays little attention to traditional rhyme or meter here. Instead, the layout of the words mimics what they describe: the letters themselves appear to float down the page just as a leaf gently floats to the ground.

Note that no line contains a complete word, and the work itself is not even a grammatical sentence, a technique which invites—or forces—the reader to enter into the poem to decipher it. If we were to "translate" the poem into a single line, it would read as follows:

l(a leaf falls)oneliness

Without cummings's "visual construction," the words lose their weight and emotion, and the parenthetical interruption of "loneliness" seems merely capricious. However, in its final form—which we can assume that cummings slaved over as much as another poet slaves over matching rhymes—the same words of the above line become a poem, a poem that opens the willing reader to a deeper understanding of the natural and human worlds.

Historical Context

The history of American poetry, at least since Walt Whitman, has shifted like the swinging of a pendulum, going first to the side of form-free expression and inevitably swinging to the opposite side, which

Compare & Contrast

- **1950s:** Millions of Americans watched the televised Army-McCarthy Hearings, during which Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose investigation of Communism in public figures had ruined careers and bullied people into testifying against friends, was condemned by the Senate for misconduct.

  1973: The Senate Watergate Hearings were broadcast to the country, with high-ranking government officials testifying to their part in burglary and wiretapping charges; this lead to a Senate vote the next year to impeach President Nixon.

  1988: The televised Iran-Contra hearings found that members of President Reagan's administration had sold weapons illegally to Iran in order to illegally give money to the Nicaraguan Contras.

  Today: With the greater number of television stations made available by cable television, political hearings seldom capture the entire nation's attention by being broadcast on one of the larger networks.

- **1958:** The first integrated circuit was invented.

  1969: CompuServe, the first commercial online service, was started.

  Today: More than 40 percent of U.S. households own personal computers, and the number is still growing.

- **1958:** The federal deficit was $2,790,000,000.

  1968: The federal deficit was $25,161,000,000.

  1978: The federal deficit was $59,161,000,000.

  1988: The federal deficit was $155,151,000,000.

  Today: After reaching a high of nearly 300 billion dollars, the deficit is being reduced.

appreciates formal structure as being necessary to the imitation of life, and then swinging back again with the next generation. Before Whitman, American poetry had no character that was uniquely its own, and instead used forms that were inherited from Europe. Even the most innovative early–American poets, including Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) were more known for their ideas and for working within existing techniques than they were for improvising with form; Whitman's contemporary, Emily Dickinson, wrote in the 1860s in a form that owed little to tradition, but she wrote in the same form consistently. Walt Whitman's collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855 and revised in subsequent editions throughout his lifetime, is as lively in its structure as it is in its insights. He touched upon themes that had not been covered in poetry before (including an unheard of degree of sensuality and homosexuality that shocked readers and made him lose his government job), and he matched his original content with a style that continually adjusted itself, line by line. He seldom used a regular, repeating rhyme scheme, but then it would not be unusual for a Whitman poem to break into a stretch of rhyming pattern and then break out; he repeated when he found it necessary for emphasis (as in the lines "Lisped to me the low and delicious word death / And again death, death, death, death."); he alternated stanzas that had over twenty lines with stanzas that had two and poems that ran for twelve pages with poems that consisted of just a few lines. In short, Whitman defined American poetry by throwing out all of the old rules and assumptions and using whatever techniques he felt necessary for describing what life in this country was like.

The key to Whitman's genius was that, free-form as his poetry was, he did in fact apply technique, without which it would be difficult to distinguish his artistry from common rumblings. The question that faced poets who followed him concerned how much freedom could be allowed and how much technique could be left out to still have something defined as poetry. To capture a democ-

ratic society such as the United States, which has no strict social order, it would not be appropriate to use a strict traditional poetic structure: such poetry tries to show form and tradition to be myths. In the twentieth century we have seen a great parade of artistic movements whose work does not look like traditional poetry because it is defying tradition and trying to create new ways of expression.

At the end of the 1800s and early in the 1900s, society became disillusioned with hoping that rational, orderly thought could truly understand the world, and the forms and techniques that artists had at their disposal were seen as meaningless. The general term that is used to cover this artistic stance is Modernism, although this term is not very meaningful in general discussions because it covers a wide span of artistic practices across a number of years. Some examples of Modernism are Absurdism, which purposely offends audiences' sense of character development and motive in order to provoke thought, and Imagist poetry, which focuses on conveying a specific image to the audience but does not provide the image with meaning or significance. We can see the influence of Modernism's belief in freedom of artistic style in the form of "l(a". But this poem also uses its radically unique form to address the poet's personal emotion. To the extent that it is more concerned with the message than with its own uniqueness, it can be seen as a response to the way Modernism stresses style for style's sake. In this sense the poem fits into the next phase of artistic development, Postmodernism. During the 1930s when the country was in the middle of the Great Depression, Americans found the mad-artistic-genius syndrome of the previous cycle to be too self-indulgent, and poets started to once again write about what they believed in. Compassion and making a better world could not be expressed by poetry that had purely private meanings, but reusing the same old forms in the same old ways would lead to an approval of old social orders that Americans did not believe in anymore. Postmodernism merges the artistic freedom that Modernists took to an extreme with a greater concern for the artist's function in society.

By the 1950s, when this poem was published, there was no real dominant school of poetry, but the freedom that the Modern age stressed had led to a number of styles and sensibilities operating at once. Confessionalist poets drew from personal experience, and in order to convey their experiences to a wide audience, they used traditional techniques of rhyme, rhythm, and symbolism—but certainly not as rigidly as those techniques had been used before Whitman. Beat poets, on the other hand, emphasized spontaneous expression, and therefore sacrificed consciousness of poetic style in an attempt to capture life's uncertainty. In this environment, cummings offended many as belonging to the "other side"—both too original *and* too deliberate. Although cummings's style owes some to the writers who came before him, his greatness was that he created new ways to be unique and still be meaningful.

Critical Overview

There is little, if any, specific criticism of "l(a." However, much of the general critical response to cummings's work, both positive and negative, is applicable to this piece.

More than one critic has disapproved of cummings's stylistic inventions, considering them a major flaw in his otherwise interesting work, because they allowed the poet's own personality to intrude on, and sometimes overwhelm, the individual poem itself. To these critics, the fact that a cummings poem is identifiable as his simply through the look of the words on the page is not a commendable trait.

In response, Rushworth M. Kidder, in his book *e. e. cummings: An Introduction*, reminds us that "the spatial arrangements ... are the work neither of whimsical fancy, nor of a lust for novelty. Poetry and visual art grew, in cummings' minds, from one root." In critiquing cummings's penchant for natural objects—leaves, stones, stars—in other poems of the same period, Kidder finds the implication in cummings' poems that inanimate objects have no expressive qualities of their own, and that they only gain meaning when "given them by the user of language...."

In an essay from 1959, James Dickey, himself a renowned poet, called cummings "daringly original." To pick out flaws in his work, Dickey felt, was no different than pointing out defects in a rose, an act that would seem to miss the overall meaning and importance of the thing itself. Dickey considered cummings' greatest gift to be that "he has helped to give life to the language," not simply by "tinkering with typography," but by combining "right words with other right words."

Criticism

Chris Semansky

Chris Semansky is a freelance writer and has written extensively on modern and postmodern lit-

- In 1991, all of cummings's poetry was collected in *Complete Poems: 1904-1962.*
- Richard S. Kennedy's *Dreams in the Mirror,* published in 1980, is considered to be the definitive biography of e.e. cummings. The poet led an interesting life and knew most of the most important literary figures of his time. Much has been written about him, but no source tells his story as clearly as this. Kennedy also wrote a shorter book in 1994 called *E.E. Cummings Revisited,* which gives a much more intellectual look at how cummings's work developed as his life progressed.
- For those who think cummings's unique styles were a way of avoiding direct communication, the *Selected Letters of E.E. Cummings,* edited by F.W. Dupee and George Stade, give a more personal look at the author. It is clear from his letters that cummings's verbal gymnastics were a part of his life, present whenever he picked up a pen.

erature. In the following essay, Semansky explains how cummings used not only words but also their visual presentation on the page to shape the meaning of his work.

A painter and a poet, e.e. cummings was as interested in how a poem looked on the page as in how it sounded or what it meant. He consistently draws our attention to the fact that writing, in its material form, basically exists as ink in the shape of letters. These letters are then combined into units, or words, and the words are organized into phrases or sentences which give them meaning. A relentless experimenter, cummings played with how words and sentences are assembled and arranged on the page to create new ways of expressing meaning. In so doing, he blurs the boundaries between reading and viewing, forcing his readers to *visualize* language—to recognize that writing dramatically illustrates the suturing of the visual and verbal. He would break words apart, coin new words by altering parts of speech, and be deliberately ungrammatical with syntax and punctuation in order to achieve these desired effects. For cummings, such tactics were poetic devices, much the same way that line, color, and lighting are painterly devices. In "l(a", one of his most popular poems, cummings employs many of these innovations to visually enact the subject of the poem.

Cummings's technique of spacing characters and words is partially drawn from Cubist painting, a popular artistic movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque would analyze an image or object, break it down into its formal properties and then reconstruct it. For example, in Braque's *Man with a Guitar* we see many straight lines, a very narrow range of color, and what looks like a figure sliced into geometric shapes. We learn nothing about the age, personality, or character of the "man" himself. Indeed, we can barely make out any such figure. Cubist poets such as cummings, Gertrude Stein, and Kenneth Rexroth tried to create in verse what Cubist painters such as Picasso and Braque were creating on canvas. They would take the elements of an image (or rather, the word or words which represented that image), divide them into parts, then reorganize them. This new synthesis was often claimed to represent, by enacting, the increasing fragmentation of the modern world and the alienation from it that human beings experience.

"l(a" vividly exemplifies this visual and poetic technique. Consisting of only four words, three of them in parentheses, "l(a" is not so much "about" something as much as it is *doing* the thing it is about. Instead of writing "a leaf falls: loneliness," the poet snaps the words into smaller units and vertically spaces these units on the page. This spacing, a form of typography, allows the poem itself to metaphorically take on the shape and action of a falling leaf. Cummings illustrates the action of the leaf falling by fragmenting the words into units of one consonant and one vowel for the first four "lines." The middle "line," consisting of a double "ll," suggests a pause in the leaf's downward trajectory.

The second half of the poem provides us with an inverse structure. While the first part consists of a one-line stanza and then a three-line stanza, the second consists of a three-line stanza and then a one-line stanza. Compared to the first half of the poem, however, the second half is relatively less ordered in the way the words are broken. Just as

the leaf begins its fall in an almost deliberate manner, we as readers cautiously attempt to uncode—to make sense of—the strange, but uniform grouping of letters on the page. But as we approach the second half of the poem that uniformity of grouping disappears; we now have a two, three, one, then five character line. This pattern-steadiness, a lull, then a relatively uneven finish-graphically illustrates the floating fall of a leaf. We *see* the leaf falling at the same time we read about it. In this sense the poem is more of a picture than a poem.

When writing possesses this quality it is often called an ideogram. Ideograms combine image and idea into a single mark or group of marks by embodying the object or image they represent. Many Eastern languages such as Chinese, Korean, and Japanese inherently contain this quality. "l(a" can be said to be an ideogram in at least two ways. First, it assumes the shape of the image or idea being expressed. Second, it juxtaposes an idea (loneliness) with an image (a falling leaf).

Apart from the falling leaf, however, we have the word outside of the parentheses: "loneliness." Grammatically, parentheses are a typographical device used to enclose words that add information or identification (for example, these words). The body of the sentence, so to speak, exists outside of them. The true subject of cummings' poem, then, is the idea or the fact of loneliness itself. He emphasizes this point by literally breaking the word into pieces. In the last three "lines" we receive the rest of the letters for "loneliness" in piecemeal, so we can also discern the words "one" and "oneliness." Even the small "l," appearing on a line by itself, resembles the Arabic numeral one. These words and letter themselves echo the solitary nature of a leaf falling. It is interesting to note that "l(a," which appeared in 1958 in cummings' last volume, *95 Poems*, was later published in *The Collected Poems* (1991) as "l(a)." Enclosing the indefinite article in parenthesis further emphasizes the theme of loneliness. The fragmentation of the word, its interruption by parenthetical information, its visual spacing on the page, and the very brevity of the work itself (only 22 characters) all contribute to the idea and the feeling of separation, of being apart from whatever it is that provides "one" with a sense of belonging.

We are most likely to encounter a falling leaf, of course, in the fall, a season often associated with death and dying, of a world slowly and gradually emptying itself of itself. The poet cummings captures the melancholy and wistfulness of this season through showing, not telling, us the epilogue of the life of one leaf. He also enacts, with his focus on the loneliness embodied in a falling, solitary leaf, the metaphysical condition of modern alienation. This is not to say, however, that cummings's poetry embraces alienation as its principal theme. As much a poet of spontaneity and childlike wonder, cummings often explored more optimistic themes in his poetry such as love and courtship, the processes of nature, and the celebration of simply being alive. In this way his poems are perhaps more accurately seen as belonging to the tradition of Romantic poetry, which prized the expression of an individual's intense emotion and the celebration of the natural world. Cummings, in fact, used the image of the falling leaf in other poems before "l(a." Indeed, nature imagery provided him with his primary metaphors for describing the human condition. In this sense, cummings aligns his poetry with highly traditional subject matter, since poets long before cummings, including Homer, focused on nature in much the same way.

It is his use of language, however, his treatment of it as a physical thing, that marks cummings as an innovator and a truly modern poet. While critics praised modern masters such as Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Robert Frost for their use of verbal ambiguity, myth, metaphysical wit, and a tragic vision of the modern world, they did not quite know what language to use to write about cummings, whose playfulness and often childlike vision of the world belied the serious and solemn proclamations of his contemporaries. When *95 Poems* appeared (which includes "l(a") in 1958, however, critics were almost unanimous in their praise, frequently commenting on the complexity and fullness of this volume, which contains poems for every phase of the human life cycle—including sonnets about the birth of cummings's grandchild, poems about growing old, and poems about dying and death. In retrospect it is almost fitting that *95 Poems* was the last volume of original work he published.

Critical reception of "l(a," though, has been mixed. While some, such as Norman Friedman, consider it a fine example of how cummings employs his typographic techniques to squeeze every last drop of meaning from the poem, others see the poem as little more than a gimmick, a worn-out—even juvenile—technique that does not quite fit in with the other poems in the volume and that proves that cummings's poetry never really matured. The truth is probably somewhere in between. Frequently anthologized poems are chosen not only because they supposedly represent a poet's body of

work and constitute a part of literary history but also because they have a quality about them that editors believe readers continue to find significant. For "l(a" that quality is to be found in its simplicity, a simplicity that simultaneously embraces trickiness while also partially transcending it.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Thomas Dilworth

This discussion details the use of the syllables and letters, their seperation throughout the poem and the use of imagery and their interwoven ties.

Initially puzzling, the separated syllables and letters of this much-anthologized poem resolve for the reader into the statement "(a leaf falls)" within the word "loneliness." As written, the statement exists within the concept. The statement is an image of a single falling leaf departing a company of fellow leaves (unless it is the last to go). Stanza gaps suggest the rhythm of its fall. The alternation of consonants with vowels in the second stanza suggests drifting to and fro on the air. (Because consonants linguistically weigh more than vowels, the heavier, consonantal side indicates the direction of drift.)

The image of the falling leaf gives narrative definition to the concept loneliness, which is, as a conceptualization of emotion, every bit as compelling and evocative as the image of the leaf. The juxtaposition of image and concept powerfully focuses the poem from imaginatively different directions: the image implying the end of a botanical life story; the concept being an emotional absolute. There is more here, however, than this imaginative juxtaposition or convergence. The poem exists initially in a deconstructed state, with syllables and letters resisting absorption into the word "loneliness" and the statement that it includes. In their presynthesized tumble, the letters and syllables imply meanings that vary and enrich interpretation in ways that seem to mitigate, but ultimately emphasize, sadness.

Richard Kennedy points out that the first letter in the first line is identical to the Roman numeral one, so that the poem can be read as "one (a leaf falls) oneliness. The initial "one" here seems a near homonym for "when." Without reading this "1" as a numeral, the letters of the first line—which are not separated by a space or, as at the end of the parenthesis, a line break—spell the French definite article, which vocally combines with the noun to make "la leaf," a light-hearted, silly expression. Of course, this reading is confounded by the intrusive opening parenthesis, which is not, however, pronounced, so that the ghost of *la* may sonically survive punctuation, though only barely, because in this poem, sight dominates sound. The effect of any of these readings is to endorse the initial line break in separating the initial "l" before the parentheses from "one /1/ iness" afterward and consequently to liberate the other elements of the word.

Given any of these readings of the first line, what immediately follows the closing parenthesis in the fourth stanza is not necessarily the continuous syllabic (syllable-and-a-half) "one/1" but "one" and "1"—the latter, again, indistinguishable from the Roman numeral I. As a number, it reads as a merely factual clarification of its immediate predecessor, as in "one, i.e. 1, leaf falls."

To the degree that any or all of these letters and syllables are separable from "loneliness," the final line/stanza may be read as one or two possible neologisms: "iness" may be read as "i-ness," which emphasizes the neutrality of the preceding singling "1," "one," and "1." The suggestion might then be that a person with an i-dentity inevitably experiences loneliness, or that loneliness intensifies identity. As "i-ness," "iness" is the visually predominant possibility, because it is orthographically correct. It is not, however, aurally plausible because the initial "i" would not normally be pronounced as a long vowel. The aurally plausible pronunciation would be "in-ess" or "in-ness." The implication of this reading, which the single "n" orthographically obscures, is that "in-ness," introversion, or inward-directed thought is, if not inevitable, at least an option for those who find themselves alone. Furthermore, "iness" is homonymous with, and therefore evocative of, the Gaelic *innis*, for island, and at this admittedly evocative distance from the denotative immediacy of the poem, may contradict John Donne's famous statement that "No man is an island." The lonely are islands. The connotations of the Gaelic word seem positive, however, because it also means "choice pasture" or "choice place" and therefore suggests that meditative interiority is a good place to graze.

From behind the edges of loneliness, which is the primary subject of this poem, peek happier experiences of solitude. These are vastly outweighed, however, by the words that the letters ultimately make up and by the gravitational teleology of the letters in the pictograph. In the picture made by the letters, the fall of the leaf concludes horizontally in the poem's longest connected string of letters, sug-

gesting the leaf at rest. What has fallen, then, is "iness" with its positive connotations of identity ("i-ness") and interiority ("in-ness"). If the denotative subject of this poem is loneliness, an important implication of its image of the falling leaf, and the primary intimation of its pictograph, is mortality.

Source: Thomas Dilworth, *"cummings l(a'"* in The Explicator, Vol. 54, No. 3, Spring, 1996, pp. 171–173.

James Dickey

Here, the work of cummings is analyzed and discussed with a focus on the poem "l(a."

In their pre-synthesized tumble, the letters and syllables imply meanings that vary and enrich interpretation in ways that seem to mitigate, but ultimately emphasize, sadness."

Immediacy and intensity are Cummings's twin gods, and he has served them with a zeal and single-mindedness which we should learn to appreciate ..."

Source: James Dickey, *Babel to Byzantium*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968 pp.100–106.

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For Further Study

Baum, S.V., "E. E. Cummings: The Technique of Immediacy," in *E. E. Cummings*, edited by Norman Friedman, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972, pp. 104-20.

This look at how cummings's unique style enabled him to get closer to the truth is just one of the useful essays in this interesting and readable collection.

Folsom, Ed, "Recirculating the American Past," *A Profile of Twentieth Century American Poetry*, edited by Jack Myers and David Wajahn, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, pp. 1-25.

Astonishingly, most of the essays in this book seem to pass over cummings, whose career spanned the first half of the century. This introductory essay, however, lays a strong foundation for understanding the world of poetry that cummings grew up in.

Gray, Richard, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, New York: Longman, 1990.

Gray's discussion of Modernism is one of the clearest and available and is very useful in the difficult task of distinguishing it from literary movements that came before or after.

Marks, Barry A., *E.E. Cummings*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964.

This book was published two years after the poet's death and shows a little more reverence for cummings' artistry than many critics have. It opens with a long analysis of "l(a".

Mazzaro, Jerome, *Postmodern American Poetry*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990.

This book gives a good sense of the wide range of styles and sensibilities that fall under the broad category of Postmodernism.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

T. S. Eliot

1915

Segments of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," often called "the first Modernist poem," appeared in the *Harvard Advocate* in 1906 while Eliot was an undergraduate. He later read the poem to Ezra Pound in England and Pound arranged to have it published in the prestigious American journal *Poetry* in June 1915. It was included in *Prufrock and Other Observations,* Eliot's first book of poetry, in 1917.

Eliot's interest in music is made evident in the title, but the term "love song" is used loosely here. The poem centers on the feelings and thoughts of the persona, J. Alfred Prufrock, as he walks to meet a woman for tea and considers a question he feels compelled to ask her (something along the lines of "Will you marry me?"). In fact, in this poem he never arrives at tea, let alone sings to the woman. The poem is composed of Prufrock's own neurotic—if lyrical—associations. Indeed, over the course of the poem, he sets up analogies between himself and various familiar cultural figures, among them Hamlet. This establishes a connection with Hamlet's famous soliloquy ("To be or not to be?—That is the question"). Prufrock's doubt that he deserves the answer he desires from this woman transforms the poem into a kind of interior monologue or soliloquy in which "To be or not to be?" is for Prufrock "To be what?" and "What or who am I to ask this woman to marry me?"

Seen as simply the romantic agonizing of a young man (Eliot was eighteen when he began the poem) over a woman he loves, "The Love Song of

J. Alfred Prufrock" would have a distinctly limited appeal. However, the poem moves from this specific situation to explore the peculiarly Modernist alienation of the individual in society to a point where internal emotional alienation occurs and a soliloquy in which a man speaks *as if alone* can begin, "Let us go then, you and I...."

Author Biography

Eliot was born in 1888 in St. Louis, Missouri, a member of a distinguished family that included Puritan ancestors who had been original settlers of Massachusetts. In 1906 Eliot entered Harvard University. He served on the staff of the *Harvard Advocate,* the university's literary journal, in which he first published parts of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." He completed his undergraduate studies in 1909 and his master's degree in English literature the following year. Over the next six years Eliot pursued graduate studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne, Harvard, Marburg, and Oxford, completing his dissertation in 1916. During this time Eliot met Ezra Pound, who became his lifelong friend and an important literary influence. In 1915, while studying in England, Eliot met and later married an Englishwoman named Vivien Haigh-Wood. Their marriage has generally been characterized as unhappy, troubled by Vivien's neurotic illnesses and Eliot's sexual apprehensions. The couple settled in London, and Eliot began teaching at a boy's school while writing reviews for various periodicals and composing poetry. In 1917 Eliot left teaching and began working at Lloyd's Bank; however, he continued to follow his literary pursuits, publishing *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917 and becoming an assistant editor for the journal the *Egoist.* The combined strain of his failing marriage and the pressures from his banking and writing careers resulted in Eliot's emotional breakdown in 1921. He sought treatment at a sanitorium in Switzerland, where he completed *The Waste Land* in 1922. Returning to London, Eliot became the founding editor of a new literary journal, the *Criterion,* in which he published *The Waste Land.* The *Criterion* is now recognized as one of the most distinguished periodicals in the twentieth century.

After having lived in England for over a decade, in 1927 Eliot became a British subject and a member of the Anglican Church. Five years later, he received a one-year appointment to the Charles

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Eliot Norton professorship at Harvard and subsequently lectured at major universities throughout the United States. Also during the 1930s Eliot began devoting much of his time to writing verse dramas. During World War II Eliot wrote his last major poetic works, *East Coker* (1940), *Burnt Norton* (1941), *The Dry Salvages* (1941), and *Little Gidding* (1942, together published as *Four Quartets*). Eliot experienced marked changes in his personal life beginning in 1947, when Vivien died after having spent several years in an institution. He subsequently met Valerie Fletcher, who became his secretary and later his wife, and with whom he enjoyed a stable and happy relationship for the rest of his life. In 1948 Eliot received both the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Order of Merit by George VI, both honors—along with his newfound popularity as a dramatist—augmenting his stature as a celebrated literary figure which he maintained until his death in 1965. Eliot is buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Poem Text

S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.

Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes.
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
[They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"]
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
[They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"]
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:—
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all–
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

. . . . .

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

. . . . .

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,

Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and
me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the
sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts
that trail along the
floor—
And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in
patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all."

. . . . .

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a
peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon
the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

Poem Summary

Lines 1-6:

This epigraph is taken from Dante's Divine Comedy. It reads: "If I thought my answer were to one who could ever return to the world, this flame would move no more; but since no one has ever returned alive from this depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer you." The words are spoken by a lost soul, damned to Hell for the attempt to buy absolution in advance of committing a crime. This correlates with Prufrock's need to know the answer to the question he wants to ask as a condition of asking it. Or perhaps in order for Prufrock to be able to ask the question he would have to not care what the answer would be; in that case, the answer wouldn't matter.

Lines 7-9:

Prufrock, the persona of the poem, issues his invitation to an unspecified "you" to go with him to an as yet unspecified place. To establish when they will be going, he introduces the disconcerting simile "like a patient etherised upon a table." This peculiar use of simile reflects immediately back on the persona, for the sky itself would probably never be *like* this; however, Prufrock, looking up at the sky, might indeed perceive it pressing back down upon him in such a way that he would feel like he was "spread out" "upon a table." The word "etherised" indicates a sense of helplessness.

Lines 10-13:

The route he and the "you" will be taking is through a tawdry part of the city where "cheap hotels" predominate, along with lower-class dining establishments. "Muttering retreats" suggests places where people who go to be alone speak in low voices so their private conversations will not

Media Adaptations

- "The Caedmon Treasury of Modern Poets Reading Their Own Poetry." Audio cassette. Audiobooks, order #4322.
- "More T.S. Eliot Reads." Audio cassette. Audiobooks, order #4388.
- "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats, by T.S. Eliot." Audio cassette. Audiobooks, Order #4393.

be heard. The phrase "one-night" refers to hotels where lovers meet in secret, and the reference to "oyster-shells" carries with it the connotation of sexuality, as these are a food said to improve sexual stamina.

Lines 14-18:

"Streets" are further described by a simile that indicates that even once you pass through them, the things you have seen there continue to affect you, specifically the idea of people engaged in the romantic or sexual encounters in the hotels and restaurants. This then affects Prufrock's thoughts about where he is going, causing him to consider what he characterizes as an "overwhelming" question. The use of the ellipsis indicates that the "you" who accompanies Prufrock has asked what that question would be.

The rhymed couplets of "I-sky," "streets-retreats," "hotels-oyster-shells," "argument-intent," and "'What is it?'-visit," along with repetition of the word "streets," create an emotional music in keeping with the idea of a song, and thus serve to carry the reader into Prufrock's emotional state.

Lines 19-20:

The reference to the visit presented in the preceding stanza causes Prufrock to look forward in his mind's eye to the room he is walking toward, where he imagines women preparing the tea and talking of some intellectual or artistic subject quite at odds with the thoughts he has been having.

Lines 21-28:

The near repetition in lines 21 and 22 signals that Prufrock's attention has returned from the imagined room to his actual surroundings. It is evening, foggy, and his attention focuses on the fog mixed with chimney smoke, and then takes off in a metaphorical process that equates the movement of the fog with the movement of some seemingly cat-like creature around the structure of the city at evening. Prufrock's lyrical musing here reflects the dream-like emotional state evoked by the fog.

The lines in this stanza are very close in length, so that along with the rhyme pattern of *a a b a c d e d a,* and the alliteration of "[l]icked," "[l]ingered," and "leap," a kind of trancelike state is established.

Lines 29-40:

Prufrock's reverie on the smoke or fog reminds him that dreamed or imagined activity has no correlation to actions or events in real time, so he determines that just as there is time for the fog and smoke, there is time to get himself adjusted to what he is about to do. However, at the fourth repetition of "There will be time" he is once more focusing on where he is going and what he is about to do there, and he is overwhelmed once again. Eliot exaggerates Prufrock's emotional state by paralleling it to those associated with acts of murder and creation. At this point the phrase "there will be time" transmutes into repetitions of the word "time" like a clock ticking the seconds of the present into Prufrock's past.

The reference to "works and days" is to an eighth century B.C. poem by Hesiod about a Greek farmer who urges his brother to work as hard as he himself does. Prufrock imagines other hands working harder than his, that will ultimately somehow necessitate his asking the "overwhelming question." However, he maintains he has time yet for a hundred dream-visions of cat-like fogs, for a hundred corrections to his thought process, before he arrives for tea.

Lines 41-42:

The reference above to having tea presents him with the repeated image in the rhymed couplet.

Lines 43-50:

Here Prufrock's thought process becomes infused with a sense of the ridiculous, as he pictures himself losing his resolve, turning and walking back down the stairs before even knocking on the door. The irony is that, seeing himself as silly, he begins to be aware of how others might see him, even to the point of including in the stream of his own thought (bracketed in the poem) disparaging comments that he imagines these others might make about him, comments that are in direct contradiction of how he sees himself.

Lines 51-54:

Prufrock's third repetition of "Do I dare?" is exaggerated to reflect the depth of his own dread. He repeats that while there *is* time for all these thoughts, the situation is still hopeless: as long as it takes to make a decision is as long as it takes to reverse that decision.

Lines 55-60:

Prufrock tries to explain *why* he is indecisive about his feelings toward the woman he is meeting for tea. It is because he knows the kind of social life he is moving toward. He knows how people who live together and have social obligations toward one another act—or are supposed to act. The

visual image of the coffee spoons indicates that he himself has had innumerable cups of coffee in unbearable social situations. The aural image of the "voices dying" refers to difficult and embarrassing social conversations that falter while those involved pretend to be listening to music. And so, Prufrock asks himself, how can such a socially inept individual as he is ever hope to assume a part in real human life with this woman?

Lines 61-67:

Prufrock indicates that he is familiar with people who appraise him according to some set of standards that have nothing to do with who he considers himself to be. Eliot uses metaphor here to illustrate that such appraisals make Prufrock incapable of human response because he feels as if he is as insignificant and helpless as a bug stuck by a pin for collection and examination. The image of the "butt-ends" are what he thinks his "days and ways" must be reduced to in order to explain what he does, as the "butt-ends" of cigarettes are what remains after the pleasure of smoking.

Lines 68-75:

The tone softens here as Prufrock recalls a third thing that he has "known" as a result of social situations, symbolized by the image of feminine arms. These arms have a hint of the sensual in the bracketed information he provides that is suggestive of the earlier animal image of the fog as well as of the sexual associations of the hotels and restaurants. Prufrock realizes that this image of what he has "known" is at variance with those of the two preceding stanzas, and wonders what has shifted his thoughts. That it was the feminine appeal of a perfume he caught scent of continues the visual image of these arms, however, transforming the question asked at the end of each of those preceding stanzas. Now he asks, "Should I presume?" This implies that his desire for the female embrace is overriding his doubts. Indeed, the final line assumes he *will* "presume" by allowing him to consider "how" to begin.

Line 76:

This ellipsis acts to divide the first two sections of the poem; it also indicates that there were thoughts resulting from the final question of the preceding stanza that neither Prufrock nor Eliot wants to consider further.

Lines 77-79:

Eliot brings Prufrock and the reader back to the idea of how Prufrock might begin to talk to the woman he is going to meet. The image of "lonely men" symbolizes the loneliness of Prufrock. The use of an ellipsis within the sentence structure at the close of the stanza indicates further consideration, perhaps, of this loneliness, which is enhanced by the fact that these are the only two consecutive unrhymed lines in the poem.

Lines 80-81:

Prufrock acknowledges what he feels to be the utter hopelessness of his situation. The image of the "ragged claws" in the "silent seas" suggests that, as a creature of a "higher order" Prufrock's brain is doing him no good at all. In fact, it is clear that Prufrock feels that his ability to speak—which supposedly establishes his superiority over all other animals—is so inferior that he should be relegated to a world of silence.

Line 82:

The ellipsis here might mark further hopeless thoughts which have not been included, but more likely indicates the enormity of the realization Prufrock has just come to: his human life will be wasted as a result of his inability to participate fully in human relationships.

Lines 83-94:

There is a definite shift in tone here, in keeping with the image of evening made peaceful by "long fingers" caressing it into sleep. The internal ellipses indicate reconsiderations, so that perhaps the evening and (by metaphorical process) Prufrock's emotions are not so much "peacefully" at rest, perhaps they are "tired," or worse, shirking their duty. In any case, it is the evening now which is cat-like "beside you and me." And here it seems as if "you" might be hopefully referring to the woman with whom Prufrock has presumably had tea. But this peacefulness is disrupted as Prufrock wonders if he "has the strength" to ask this woman the "overwhelming question."

Despite the fact that Prufrock has agonized over the situation, he does not know whether he will be able to ask his question or not. His association of this behavior with the weeping and fasting that Biblical prophets were said to engage in establishes the basis for an analogy with the prophet John the Baptist. The irony is that it shouldn't take a prophet to tell you whether or not you yourself are going to do something. Eliot nicely accents this

ironical stance by using the particular prophet John the Baptist, a proponent of chastity who was beheaded at the request of Herod's wife. Prufrock's sense of the ridiculousness of the situation once again asserts itself in the satiric inserted comment in the presentation of the image of his own head on the platter in place of John the Baptist's. Ultimately, though, it is clear to him that he is exaggerating, to no good effect, for the really important thing to consider is that he is no longer sure of himself as a human being. Accordingly, he is truly frightened at the image of the derision of the "eternal Footman"—which is, perhaps, death as a doorman holding Prufrock's coat and ushering him out of a life that he never had the courage to truly live.

Lines 95-106:

Another question sets the tone for this stanza, as Prufrock considers whether he could ask his "overwhelming question" within the context of the social trivialities of having tea. The use here of the Egyptian religious symbol of the scarab beetle, which rolls its excrement into a ball, is an intricate image compounded of the vulgar and the divine. It precisely expresses Prufrock's view of his situation.

He also imagines himself, incongruously, as a kind of Lazarus (whom Jesus raised from the dead) at this tea, who comes back from the dead place inside himself to tell this woman everything he learned there. But his imaginings carry him off to the point where he sees her casually asserting that his "overwhelming question" has nothing to do with anything that she said.

Lines 107-119:

Prufrock's thinking begins to fragment as a result of his frustration and dread. The stanza begins with an echo of the first line of the preceding stanza, then repeats a variation that leads into a series of recollections in two lines beginning with "After" as Prufrock recites a series of events. In line 113 he acknowledges that he cannot say what he means.

It becomes clear with line 114 that Prufrock believes that he must adequately and specifically communicate the scope, the depth, the magnitude of what he thinks and feels about this woman so that the "meaning" he communicates will correspond with the "meaning" of something she has previously said or done. But he is so convinced that this will not happen that he can almost see her turning away from him. Eliot presents this with an image of his nerves projecting the picture of her failure to understand onto the screen of his imagination.

Line 120:

Here the ellipsis again emphasizes the full weight of what happens in this section, the sense of futility Prufrock experiences in the face of the impossibility of saying "just what I mean!" It further marks the transition into the state of mind that occurs after the full realization of this impossibility.

Lines 121-129:

Prufrock emphatically answers the question he has asked in the preceding two stanzas. His reference to Hamlet, and the phrase in the same line, "nor was meant to be," calls up an association with Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be or not to be?— That is the question." Clearly there is a play on words here. On one level, the asking of the question and the establishing of the relationship with the woman is "not to be." On another level, Prufrock is suggesting that he is not "meant *to be*," implying that he is meant, perhaps, merely to exist and never to really participate in life. On an existential level, the line could indicate that Prufrock is "meant" " *not to be,*" that he might as well be dead for not being able to live as people live.

Prufrock describes himself in a self-satiric way in lines 123-129, noting that his unimportant presence will help to fill out a crowd scene, and finally referring to himself as "obtuse," which means "ignorant" as well as "insensitive." Clearly, Prufrock is not "insensitive"; rather, he is far too sensitive. But he is ignorant of how social relationships provide structure for emotional life. Prufrock determines that he will never be the main character in his own play, although he might have a function as "the Fool," or court jester, who can provide light entertainment. The word "Fool" also alludes to how foolish he is in his inaction.

Lines 130-131:

The ellipses indicate the passage of time, as Prufrock feels himself growing older. Line 131 has been variously interpreted as having to do with some kind of fashion of the times, as well as pertaining to how people roll up their pant legs to keep from getting them wet as they walk on the shore. It could also be read as reference to getting shorter as one gets older, so that the trousers would need to be rolled up.

Lines 132-134:

The questions Prufrock asks here are satiric versions of the serious question he tried to ask of the woman, and of the useless questions he has

asked of himself. The satire is intensified with his image of himself as an old man who parts his hair "behind" in order to comb it forward over a receding hairline. The use of the rhymed couplet here is particularly interesting because elsewhere the absurdity of the rhymed couplets had ironic effect. Here the rhyme seems merely silly, as if to reflect the lack of thought Prufrock intends to put into the things he does as an old man.

There are stories of mermaids falling in love with human men. This reference also echoes the emotional frustration expressed by the earlier sea image of the "pair of ragged claws."

Line 135:

Eliot uses this image of the mermaids to signal that Prufrock has come close to experiencing something wonderful and magical and strange, but that Prufrock ultimately fails to believe that the singing he has heard will ever be for him.

Lines 136-138:

The image in these three lines of Prufrock remaining distant and apart from the emotional life he desires adds meaning to the preceding lines. Prufrock as an old man walking along the beach and remembering that he had actually at one time seen the mermaids, as well as heard their singing, is especially poignant, and helps us see him as someone in crisis.

The words "seen" and "seaward" echo the earlier "silent seas" of line 81.

Lines 139-141:

The use of the first person plural might be convincing confirmation of the reading of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock " as a soliloquy or interior monologue of a divided self. Eliot uses the image of the sea and "sea-girls," and the repetition of "singing," as well as the associations now accumulated around the word "overwhelming" (with its meanings of "submerging" and "engulfing") to symbolize the deeply emotional place which Prufrock could not reconcile with human life in the real world, thus necessitating the division in himself.

It is another of Eliot's ironic touches that Prufrock's "lovesong" could only be sung to him by human voices that would wake his divided self to drown in the sea of his own emotions.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

In this poem, the speaker's poor ability to relate to other people, especially women, has him playing out a long dialogue in his mind, consisting of fragments of his past that are so intensely personal that he does not bother to connect them into a logical flow. The "us" he refers to in the first stanza is himself, which tells us that he is a person who is accustomed to being alone, to addressing another part of his mind in the way a more social person would talk to a friend. One of the strongest indications of his loneliness is the repeated use of questions to himself: he is so desperately alone in his thought that he examines every little aspect about his behavior, so curious about what people will think of him that he asks the only person he can talk to about it, the one person who knows no more than himself. This is a sign of social inexperience. In the eighth stanza, he imagines that the stares of others will pin him to the wall for inspection, the way an insect is held in place, "pinned and wiggling." He is so deeply immersed in his loneliness, so tragically alienated, that he fears even the first basic action that would bridge the gap between another person and himself: eye contact.

The main cause of his alienation is his low self-esteem, causing him to shrink in embarrassment from other people at the same time that he is wondering if he might not deserve better, if he is not setting his aims too low. Critics have pointed to the lines "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of the silent seas" as an indication of Prufrock's attitude toward women, exploring it in dozens of ways, from literary allusions to the sexual practices of crayfish in Eliot's native St. Louis. Regardless of the lines' origins, it is clearly an image that isolates the speaker, and the use the words "ragged" and "scuttling" define a fantasy in which the speaker clearly does not think well of himself.

Time

Balanced against Prufrock's morbid introversion—his fear that entering a relation with the woman he is on his way to meet will entangle him too deeply in the drab, mundane things of the world—is the fear that time is slipping away from him and making him old. He worries about losing his hair and losing the youthful muscle in his arms and legs, which drives him forward to do what he set out to do, and yet he hesitates because of the suspicion that the situation is not entirely drastic

Topics for Further Study

- Rewrite this poem as a short story, covering one night in the life of Prufrock. Where does he go? What does he see that makes him bring up the subjects that he does? In your story, who will you have Prufrock talking to?
- Read Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "Ulysses," also included in *Poetry for Students*. What does Prufrock have in common with Ulysses? What similarity can you draw between the two poems' styles?
- Do you think Prufrock has a good sense of who he is, or do you think he is deluded? Give evidence to support your answer.

yet. After the third stanza establishes for us the fact that Prufrock is familiar with the dark, seamy side of life, the fourth stanza contains his constant self-reassurances that "there will be time ...," indicating that he is worried that all of life's mysteries (the fog, murder, creation) will be over once he has made it to his destination. There will be "time yet for a hundred indecisions" he tells himself, afraid that he is going to lose the luxury of infinite possibility. He knows, though, that time will narrow his possibilities down one by one, systematically making each possibility real or not real: having already seen the eternal Footman, Death, he is familiar that there will not be time for everything. Although Prufrock is not sure that he wants to commit to comfort, a world of "sunsets and teacups and sprinkled streets," he knows that the time he has for indecision is not limitless, and he fears that waiting too long will leave him a lonely old man, sitting in the window, smoking.

Doubt and Ambiguity

Near the end of the poem Prufrock declares, "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was I meant to be." To many, the defining characteristic of Shakespeare's Hamlet is his inability to conquer or accept his doubts and settle upon one course of action to follow. Having seen Prufrock's thought process twist throughout stanza after stanza, and having seen him fret over whether the life he is committing to is the one he really wants, or if he has chosen unwisely because of social pressure, or if his body is so worn out that he has no choice left at all, the reader could rightly disagree with him and say "Yes," he is too Hamlet. The indecisiveness of Hamlet is clearly there: what he seems to be denying is the "Prince" part of the identity, as if the title of royalty is too glamorous for a humble fool like himself. Ironically, it is this self-consciousness, this constant reminder that he is a lowly being, that conflicts with his rebellious nature and causes Prufrock the most indecisiveness. Near the middle of the poem his constant questioning of himself takes on a brief pattern: "how should I presume?" he asks, and after another stanza he asks again, followed at the end of the following stanza with "should I presume?" In this sequence we see that his self-questioning, his long one-man dialogue that is meant to think things through and settle some issues, is actually working backward, taking him further from decision. In this poem the speaker's doubts do not reach an answer, they just multiply, so when he finally decides to take action it is not with comfort or certainty but with regret; he sees his move from contemplation to action as a drowning.

Style

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" begins with an epigraph, a quote that sets the tone for the poem to follow. This epigraph, included in the poem in the original Italian, is from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Its use here emphasizes Eliot's belief in the instructive function of poetry, as well as his conviction that it was a poet's responsibility to be aware of and build on the established tradition of poetry.

This poem (exclusive of the epigraph) is structured into four sections, with each section separated by an ellipsis, a mark used in conventional punctuation to indicate an omission, but used here to signal either time passing between thoughts relevant to the subject under consideration, or information considered too obvious to be included.

Eliot's belief that "No verse is free for the serious poet" is apparent in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." This poem is written in free verse with varying line lengths, but Eliot employs rhyme as a major structural component in its composition.

In fact, in the 131 lines of the main poem structure, only 12 lines are unrhymed. Note the pattern of the rhyme in the first stanza, beginning "Let us go then, you and I....": a couplet—an unrhymed line—a series of three couplets—an unrhymed line—a couplet. Such a pattern serves to establish coherence in the stanza, as well as to create a distinctive music.

Eliot also found repetition useful to establish rhythms of ideas as well as sound rhythms. Note the repetition of the word "time" in the two stanzas beginning "And indeed there will be time...." in the first section.

Conventional punctuation and sentence structure are used in this poem, but capital letters at the beginnings of lines stress lineation, thus balancing the importance of the sentence with the importance of the line. While Eliot maintained that poetry should conform to current conversational speech, he emphasized the musical qualities of speech, as well as the imagistic and symbolic possibilities of words, by his use of lineation.

The varying line lengths and stanza lengths of this poem are indicative of Eliot's refusal to impose a form on the thoughts and emotions at the center of the composition. It was not his purpose to discover or create a new form for poetry, but to free the poet from set forms in order to allow each poem to create its own form—in this case a "love song" which Eliot sings onto the page for the reader.

Historical Context

In a review of *Catholic Anthology 1914-15,* edited by the poet Ezra Pound and containing "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," critic Arthur Waugh noted that if "the unmetrical, incoherent banalities of these literary 'Cubists' were to triumph, the State of Poetry would be threatened with anarchy." His remarks are clearly intended to frighten lovers of poetry and to dismiss the authors as bungling amateurs. Little could Waugh have guessed that he was identifying the very effects that the poets intended, and that his criticism is only of interest to us today because it signifies that, by the time he was writing, the Modern Age had arrived. Modernism is a blanket term that we use for a great number of artistic and philosophical movements (including Cubism in painting) that were intent on throwing away the old standards and replacing them with work that is closer to the way the people really live and think.

This struggle between life and theory has always gone on and continues to this day. In music, for example, rap has been embraced by its listeners as an authentic expression of how people feel, but it is scoffed at by music connoisseurs for its lack of melodic complexity—"incoherent banalities," as Waugh would say. After years of being underground and rejected, rap has now reached a level of acceptance that makes it a prime target to be dismantled by the next new upstarts. Similarly, the rise of Modernism was a reaction to Victorianism, which was a reaction to Romanticism, and on throughout history. Since the chain is unbroken, there is no clear place to start tracing Modernism's roots, but one good place might be in 1798, with the publication of William Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads.* In response to the formal, strict poetry that had come before him, Wordsworth wrote that poetry should drawn from "a selection of language really used by man." Poetry, he felt, was too far out of touch with reality, and he encouraged writers to change the way they thought about their job. Out of this grew the Romantic movement, which included such great early-nineteenth century writers as Keats, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, Emerson, Melville, Poe, and Dickinson. Romanticism was a spirit of intellectual freedom that affected all areas of society. The individual, especially the artistic individual, was held to be of the highest importance to Romanticism: creativity was worshipped.

The last half of the nineteenth century saw the triumph of industry and capitalism, and is considered a less humanistic time. Novels concerned themselves with social structure, and poetry became more formal, more stylized, emphasizing how things were said over what was said. The Industrial Revolution brought trains and eventually automobiles, stepping up the pace of life: reading became less and less relevant, a luxury to be enjoyed by those who were socially comfortable. Throughout the period, though, there were scattered elements that would eventually make it impossible for the forces of social order to hold: Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848; Darwin published *Origins of the Species* in 1859; Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* came out in 1900. Each of these created a revolution in its own intellectual area and lead to the Modernist suspicion of all previously accepted beliefs.

There is no particular philosophy of Modernism, but instead we measure its growth by looking at various revolutionary movements in the arts. In 1909, for instance, the Futurist movement in

Compare & Contrast

- **1915:** The first long-distance telephone call from New York to San Francisco was made. Alexander Graham Bell repeated the words he spoke in 1868 over the first working model ("Mr. Watson, come here ... ") to Thomas Watson in San Francisco. The call took 23 minutes to go through.

  Today: International telephone calls, as well as cellular communications and public phones on airplanes, all are transmitted by having their signals bounced off of satellites orbiting the earth.

- **1916:** The new Ku Klux Klan was organized, taking its name from a 1860s group and receiving an official charter from the state of Georgia. Throughout the following fifty years, the Klan was responsible for a reign of terror against non-whites and non-Catholics, committing lynchings and firebombings across the south with little interference from the law.

  1957: The first Civil Rights Act to be passed by Congress since the 1870s made it a federal crime to discriminate against people because of race.

  Today: The Ku Klux Klan is still in operation, despite strong public opposition.

Italy released its "Foundation Manifesto of Futurism" (bold artistic movements often announce themselves with manifestoes), praising "aggressive action, the mutual leap, the punch and slap." At the same time, Pound fell in with a group of poets in London and discussed principles that eventually became known as Imagism, known for its rejection of poetic conventions. Pound was also instrumental in founding Vorticism, which was based on change and motion and was supposed, Pound said, to "sweep out the past century as surely as Attila swept across Europe." These three examples of literary movements at the time give us a sense of the new values that came with Modernism: embracing instead of avoiding the industrial world; an emphasis on powerful, not pretty, poetry; a willingness to use any tools and break any rules in order to capture what the world was really like; in general, a devotion to a higher social cause (think of all of those manifestoes) and an unwillingness to simply create art for its own sake.

Critical Overview

According to Vincent Miller, "By 1914 the age of the heroic achiever was over. That was ... the truth [this] love song pinned down in a startlingly new and creative way for an entire generation." Indeed, American poet John Berryman declares that "Modernist poetry begins" in the simile "like a patient etherised upon a table." He recognizes, however, that even the title manifests a decidedly Modernist "split" in its juxtaposition of the full romance of the term "love song" against such a highly formalized name as J. Alfred Prufrock. This is a technique Eliot discovered in reading the French Symbolist poets Jules Laforgue and Charles Baudelaire. He declared that his early free verse was "more 'verse' than 'free,'" adopting Laforgue's practice of "regularly rhyming lines of irregular length, with the rhyme coming in irregular places." This creates the music of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and inspired American poet Delmore Schwartz to theorize that "[t]here is [a mode of] poetry whose chief aim is that of incantation, of inducing a certain state of emotion." It is clearly the intent of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to involve the reader at an emotional level, and Eliot's use of the second person "you" in the opening line is an expert strategy toward this. But whether the "you" Prufrock is speaking to begins as the poet Eliot or as some imaginary companion, it is evident that, as Northrop Frye maintains, Prufrock ultimately is talking to himself, and that "[i]n addressing a 'you'

who is also himself" the pattern is set for a division between Prufrock and the world he contemplates—until he stands irrevocably separated from that world.

M. L. Rosenthal contends that "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock Prufrock" projects "an actual inner state ... of one type of cultivated American psyche of Eliot's generation." He further notes "a strongly adolescent flavor," asserting that the poem "positively sweats panic at the challenge of adult sexuality and of living up to one's ideal of what it is to be manly in any sort of heroic model." Ann P. Brady says that Eliot was aware of this, maintaining that the poem reflects Prufrock back "from the world in which he moves" in a "clinically hard" way, and that this contrast with romantic aspirations—the "juxtaposition of lyricism with the tone of satire"—creates the Modernist tension. She finds the satire unusually effective in Eliot's coupling of rhyme words that "are absurd," particularly "ices-crisis, platter-matter, flicker-snicker," producing what she calls "deflation by association."

English novelist May Sinclair notes Eliot's concern with reality, with his careful presentation "of the street and the drawing-room as they are," as well as "[w]ith ideas ... that are realities and not abstractions...." Thus "Prufrock" presents not only a man in the world but, as James F. Knapp says, "a mind shaped along the lines of [Modernist] depth psychology...." He sees this reflected in the poem by the abandonment of "logical continuity" necessitated by Eliot's material. The radicalness of "Prufrock," according to Knapp, is not simply in its break with poetic tradition, but in its use of old conventions and new ones to keep poetry "in touch with a changing world."

What Do I Read Next?

- Eliot's works were collected in 1950 in *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950.* Since "Prufrock" was one of his earliest published works, readers can follow the poet's development: almost everything he wrote was noteworthy.
- A good literary biography of Eliot is Ronald Bush's *T.S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style,* published in 1983. The book portrays Eliot's artistic struggles with himself and ambition to always take art further than it had ever gone before.
- A fascinating way to understand what was going on in the author's mind when he created this poem, and what he thought about it when it was done, is to read *The Letters of T.S. Eliot,* edited by Valerie Eliot, his widow, and published in 1988. Volume I covers 1898-1922, years when Eliot was an artistic revolutionary while working as a banker.

Criticism

Marisa Pagnattaro

Marisa Pagnattaro is a freelance writer and is the Book Review Editor and an Editorial Board Member of the Georgia Bar Journal. *She is a teaching assistant at the University of Georgia, Athens. In the following essay, Pagnattaro provides a close reading of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," emphasizing its comic elements.*

It is a mistake to approach T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" with the same seriousness as for *The Waste Land.* To enjoy this poem and get the most out of the verse, readers should have a wry sense of humor. Prufrock is an anxiety-filled, insecure, middle-aged bachelor who fears that his expressions of love will be rebuffed. First published in *Poetry* in 1915, and then collected in *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917, Eliot used the traditional form of the dramatic monologue for the speaker, Prufrock, to express his romantic dilemma. The dramatic monologue is generally associated with nineteenth-century poets such as Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and is characterized by the voice of a single speaker who reveals something personal to the reader.

The memorable title of this poem may have been derived from an advertisement in Eliot's hometown. In *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot,* Hugh Kenner revealed that the "name of Prufrock-Littau, furniture wholesalers, appeared in advertisements in St. Louis, Missouri" at the beginning of this century. Although Eliot claimed that any approbation

of the "now-famous German surname must have been 'quite unconscious,'" Kenner suggested that this is an early example of the "rich mischief" of Eliot's mind. By adding "J. Alfred" to the name, Eliot combines a sense of mysterious dignity to the ridiculousness of "Prufrock." Compound this with the title's claim that the work is a love song, and readers are on their way to appreciate the dry humor underlying this very famous work.

The poem opens with an epigram from Dante's *Inferno* in which Guido de Montefeltro, who is consumed in flames as punishment for giving false counsel, confesses his shame because he believes that it cannot be reported back on earth. In context, this excerpt is essentially Prufrock's assurance that he can confide in his reader without fear of shame for what he is about to disclose. And so the poem opens: "Let us go then, you and I," which is to say, "come along and hear my story because I can trust you." The speaker then entreats his reader to join him on an evening stroll, presumably through Boston (where there are "sawdust restaurants with oyster shells"), but not to ask "What is it?" just yet. Instead of just laying bare his quandary, the "overwhelming question," Prufrock says, "Let us go and make our visit"; he takes his reader along on a social call to reveal his inadequacies. As the poem progresses, however, it becomes apparent that the "you-and-I" format begins to collapse and Prufrock is merely talking to himself.

Prufrock first travels through the grunge of the city, filled with yellow fog and smoke (not unlike the industrial waste of Eliot's native St. Louis). Eliot imbues the scene with catlike characteristics, giving the evening a somewhat seductive feline tone: "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes"; "Licked its tongue"; "Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap" "Curled once about the house, and fell asleep." Prufrock next enters into a world of butlers and tea. Here, in an arena of vacuous social chatter, "the women come and go / talking of Michelangelo." This is the world of writer Henry James, in which proper etiquette and social grace must prevail. By opening the fourth stanza with "And indeed there will be time," Eliot echoes the memorable line "Had we but world enough and time," from Andrew Marvell's seduction poem, "To His Coy Mistress." Ironically, Prufrock does not feel compelled to seize the day. There is plenty of time for indecision as Prufrock pictures his mind racing through "a hundred visions and revisions" in the short span of time between the serving and "the taking of a toast and tea."

Prufrock repeats his conviction that "indeed there will be time" to wonder "'Do I dare?' and 'Do I dare?'"—that is, first, does he dare to make a declaration of love, and, if not, does he then dare to flee down the stairs after he rang the doorbell, knowing that the subject of his affections may spot the "bald spot in the middle" of his hair. Prufrock makes a desperate attempt to attire himself accordingly and not to overdo it with his "necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin." Yet, in his mind, Prufrock envisions his contemporaries commenting on his deteriorating appearance, imagining the remarks, "How his hair is growing thin!" and "But how his arms and legs are thin!" Balding and scrawny, the self-deprecating Prufrock again wonders, "Do I dare / disturb the universe?" In other words, does he dare to shake up the stasis of his social universe by expressing his love?

Prufrock falls into a state of melancholy by lamenting that his life may actually be nearly over: "For I have known them all already, known them all— / Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, / I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." Far from living a life of adventure, Prufrock has played it safe, passing his days sipping coffee. He then attempts to lay himself bare: "And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall...." Picturing himself like an insect mounted in an entomologist's collection, Prufrock wonders where he would begin his story, to tell about "all the butt-ends" of his "days and ways."

After posing the rhetorical question "And how shall I begin?" Prufrock digresses in the five lines that are bracketed off from the rest of the poem by a series of dots. He reveals his walks in the working-class part of the city, where "lonely men in shirt-sleeves" are "leaning out of windows." Prufrock seems to fear becoming like those forlorn men, isolated from love and left to spend their evenings "watching the smoke that rises from the pipes." The dejected Prufrock then declares "I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" as if to say that he would be better off as a carefree crustacean instead of the lovelorn man he has become.

When he returns to his monologue, Prufrock flirts with the notion of himself as a heroic character, but dismisses each comparison. First he invokes the image of the prophet John the Baptist who was murdered and his head brought in on a platter to Princess Salome who had requested his death. Prufrock laments that he has seen his "head [grown slightly bald] brought in on a platter," but

acknowledges "I am no prophet." He has been slain at the behest of a woman, yet lacks the heroic quality of John the Baptist. In fact, he has seen the "moment of [his] greatness flicker" when "the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker"; the hopelessly intimidated Prufrock has been snubbed by arrogant servants at the homes of genteel society where he visits.

Next, once again drawing on imagery from Marvell's poem ("To have bitten off the matter with a smile, / To have squeezed the universe into a ball"), Prufrock envisions himself as Lazarus, who rose from the dead. He imagines himself returning to the social scene saying, "'I am Lazarus, come from the dead, / Come back to tell you all'" (presumably to tell them about his romantic affections for one in particular, perhaps even of a marriage proposal). Instead of being met with great enthusiasm, Prufrock pictures the woman he adores as "settling a pillow by her head" coolly saying, "That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all." In this scenario, she flatly rejects him, suggesting that he has misunderstood her social politeness for romantic interest. Prufrock again repeats her curt and cruel response in the next stanza to further underscore his horror at receiving such a social death sentence that leaves him looking foolish before his acquaintances.

Lastly, he acknowledges that he is "not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." Like Hamlet, Prufrock wrestles with a paradigm of indecision ("To be or not to be...."), but Prufrock lacks the ability to act. "Deferential, glad to be of use, / Politic, cautious, and meticulous," Prufrock is much more a Polonious than a Hamlet. Aging and silly, Prufrock is left only able to dream of romance.

Several of the most memorable lines in the poem follow this anti-heroic sequence. Prufrock muses: "I grow old ... I grow old ... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled. / Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? / I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach."

With this he creates yet another ridiculous image of himself with his hair slicked to cover his bald spot, trousers cuffed in youthful fashion, considering the act of high daring of eating a peach in easily stained white slacks. The "Do I dare?" of romance is reduced to an act of ingesting a notoriously juicy piece of fruit. Prufrock is defeated in love by his own inaction.

As the poem draws to a close, Prufrock admits, "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each // I do not think that they will sing to me." These mythical sea creatures believed to coax sailors out to sea with their seductive songs sing to each other in Prufrock's world; they will not enchant him into action. He sees the mermaids at a distance "riding seaward on the waves / Combing the white hair of the waves blown back." Prufrock will never enter their world or the realm of love and romance in his own world.

In the last stanza of the poem, Prufrock lingers on the dream-like periphery of the sea of desire by "sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown." Even though Prufrock uses the pronoun "we"—as if he is referring to the reader who apparently accompanied him at the beginning of his narrative—he seems to have slipped into a dream-like state, waiting for the human voices of reality to alert him to the pitiful fact that he will be unable to sustain himself with his dreams.

When "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was first published, it was met with a wide range of criticism. In a 1916 assessment in *Quarterly Review,* English critic Arthur Waugh dismissed the poem as mere "cleverness." The author of an unsigned article in *Literary Review* denounced Prufrock as "neither witty nor amusing" and suggested that "Mr. Eliot could do finer work on traditional lines." In sharp contrast, American poet Ezra Pound praised Eliot's work and defended him against his critics' attacks. Since those initial reviews, Prufrock has baffled many critics who have sought to uncover some deep, dark meaning of "Prufrock." Biographer Peter Ackroyd reported that Eliot's own commentary was essentially limited to his remark, "I'm afraid that J. Alfred Prufrock didn't have much of a love life." This simple explanation should be taken seriously and the poem should be enjoyed.

Source: Marisa Pagnattaro, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Donald R. Fryxell

In the following excerpt, Fryxelll characterizes Eliot's character J. Alfred Prufrock as a trimmer (a term from Dante's Inferno)—a "lifeless, spiritless, mindless" person.

T.S. Eliot is one of the best known poets in the twentieth century. And yet, when "The Waste Land," which is Eliot's longest, his most difficult, and certainly his most controversial poem, was first published in the year 1922, T.S. Eliot was comparatively unknown, despite a volume of poetry he

Prufrock is a trimmer .... trimmers were those souls in Dante's Inferno who were condemned to the vestibule of hell because they had never really lived, although they were supposedly alive ...."

had written entitled *Prufrock and Other Observations,* which appeared in 1917, and which contained, among other poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."...

Eliot's poems certainly are complex poems; they're never simple ones, and Eliot himself justified their complexity by arguing that the poet, who is to serve as the interpreter and critic of a complex age, must write complex poetry; and certainly, I think, we would all agree that our age is a complex age. Eliot's constant use of allusions in his poems is based upon his theory that the poet of today should write as if all the poets of the past were looking over his shoulder. The modern poet, then, must be conscious of the tradition which he has inherited, and he must carry on that tradition himself. "The Waste Land" is a cluttered mass of altered quotations: Eliot alters these quotations deliberately in order to suggest the loss of the vitality of the traditions of the past: poetic, moral, aesthetic, religious, social. It is the debasement of that tradition which has brought about the spiritual and the intellectual sterility of the modern age. And it is this wasteland of the twentieth century, this intellectual, spiritual, moral, aesthetic sterility which is the theme of the poem.

Allusion-jammed, though Eliot's poetry is, and dealing with complex emotions and complex ideas as he does, the language of his poems is still conrete; the images which he uses are fresh; they are striking and never completely decorative. And so, for instance, in the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the evening is described as being spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table. This image is fresh and striking; it is a most unusual kind of image, and the image is also functional: that image describes the passivity of the evening as Prufrock sees it. Of course, everything in the poem is seen through Prufrock's eyes. The image also describes something of the half-dead condition of Prufrock himself, who is helpless, finally, as is a patient who is etherized upon a table. Or take the description of the yellow fog as if it were a cat. That description is a striking, vivid image, describing the slow settling of the fog over the city, and it suggests possibly also Prufrock's renunciation of his decision to disturb his universe of dilettante ladies by bringing a breath of real life to them. "The fog," we are told, "curled once about the house, and fell asleep." And so, too, in the course of the poem, Prufrock allows his decision to fall asleep. The cat image, here, also suggests sex. This is another desire of Prufrock which ends finally in inertia. Prufrock's failure in love is synonomous, you see, with the whole failure of society; his hopeless isolation is synonymous with the isolation of each trimmer from his fellow trimmers in Eliot's "Waste Land."...

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" concerns one of Eliot's Wastelanders. Prufrock is a member of the decadent aristocracy, just as Sweeney, in "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," is representative of Eliot's proletariats in the *Prufrock* volume of poetry. The various characters that Eliot depicts in this, his first volume of poetry, are almost below the level, really, of animals and human beings. These characters seem to feel no real passions and they have no real thoughts; they are machines without the gas or oil that keeps a machine going. They run on momentum without a genuine spark of life within them. Prufrock himself is something of an exception, but not much of a one.

Prufrock lives in a world in which art and music have become the idle conversation of dilettante women, who are spiritually, sexually, and intellectually dead, who spend their lives in an eternal round of afternoon tea parties, who may talk of art because it is expected that the class to which they belong should know something about it, but for whom the meaning and the vitality of art have long since been drained in the cycle of their teacups. Prufrock is one of this group. Prufrock is a dilettante like "the women who come and go—talking of Michaelangelo." Prufrock, we come to see, is as fastidious about his dress as they are, is as spiritually, sexually, and intellectually dead as they are. Like them, Prufrock has measured out his life "in

coffee spoons," and his life has been as empty, as meaningless as theirs has been.

Prufrock is a trimmer. I trust that many of you, at least, know that trimmers were those souls in Dante's *Inferno* who were condemned to the vestibule of hell because they had never really lived, although they were supposedly alive; but they never really did enough evil to be sentenced to hell, and they never did enough good while they were alive to get to purgatory to start their way up to heaven. The Trimmers were lifeless, spiritless, mindless people....

Eliot uses Dante's trimmers in order to characterize the twentieth century. For Eliot, the vast majority of men and women of the twentieth century are trimmers: they are intellectually and spiritually dead, afraid of life, afraid of living, afraid of facing either good or evil and of experiencing really either, afraid of taking sides either for or against God, living in a sterile land; breeding spiritually and intellectually sterile children, slaves to the machine and conventions of the age, fearful of speaking out against either, fearful of taking either the way which leads to spiritual regeneration or the way which leads to damnation....

J. Alfred Prufrock is no Hamlet who will disturb and rectify the evil of his world, the evil which consists for Prufrock in its decadence, its spiritual, moral, intellectual, sexual, aesthetic sterility. Hamlet can cleanse the rottenness of Denmark; Prufrock can get only a glimpse of the sterility of this world, but he is helpless to do anything about it. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is thus his swan song to life, but it's also a song that he himself sings, for the poem is a dramatic monologue. He sings it in an effort to justify himself for not following the impulses, the suppressed desires of his alter-ego. And the effort damns him. But because the poem also shows that he has come to know his own inadequacies, to know that he is a trimmer, I think finally we do pity J. Alfred Prufrock. I always have....

Eliot builds his poem around the repetition of three central themes or motifs. The first of these is the time theme. This is given in the refrain, "And indeed there will be time." The time theme serves as an excuse for Prufrock for not disturbing his universe, for there is always time to put things off, as talking to his alter-ego—the "you" in the "Let us go now, you and I"—he shows that he will put off telling these women, and he will put off revealing his suppressed desires, apparently, for one of these women. There is always a tomorrow, there is always time.... And there will be time for Prufrock to change his mind about disturbing his universe; there will be time for Prufrock to put off doing it forever; there will be time to say farewell to the glimpse of real life he has had. There will be time for Prufrock to sink back eternally among the rounds of teacups.

The second theme of Prufrock is the "Do I dare" theme, in which Prufrock questions his ability to disturb his universe. This theme, allied as it is with the first theme and with the third theme as all three are allied one with the other, underscores the essential spiritual and moral cowardice of this man. Deliberately, Eliot has Prufrock begin this theme with a grandiose question when Prufrock asks, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" But before the end of the poem, this question degenerates into "Do I dare to eat a peach?" This symbolizes in its degeneration not only Prufrock's moral cowardice but also his essential concern with himself, from the outgoing desire to aid others in the question "Do I dare disturb the universe?" to the ingoing concern with his digestion.

The third theme is one of world weariness, which is begun in the line "For I have known them all already, known them all." This theme underscores Prufrock's weariness with the life that he leads, which is shown most effectively in the line "For I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." As Eliot develops this theme, he shows also Prufrock's bondage to the life which he is so weary of and his inability to bring any life to the half-alive world in which he lives. This theme is modified to stress Prufrock's renunciation of his plan. Prufrock must find some excuse for not doing what he, or rather, I should say, what his alter-ego, had hoped to do; and so he finds it by rationalizing that it would not have been worthwhile after all to bring his breath of life into the sterile world, that he would have been misunderstood, that to bring life into this world he would have had to be like Lazarus come to life, "Come back to tell you all." But he is not a John the Baptist, not a Hamlet. He is only, finally, a pathetic trimmer, J. Alfred Prufrock....

And finally,... let me comment on Eliot's use of just one rhyme within the poem, found in these lines: "Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" The two words which rhyme, of course, are "ices" and "crisis," and the rhyming of these two words is deliberately ridiculous, as ridiculous as Prufrock is himself at times, as ridiculous as Prufrock certainly

The poem pretends to be a love song. It is something much more practical. It is a study—a debate by Prufrock with himself—over the business of proposing marriage. . . ."

is here: he's a sexually repressed man, growing old, with a bald spot in the middle of his hair, who can't you see, even rise to any kind of passion. Thus, his love song can never be anything but a song of frustration, of despair; it can never be sung to anyone except the "you," and the wishes and the desires of that "you" lose to the "I," who has revealed why the "you" in Prufrock's monologue can never dominate the man's actions.

Source: Donald R. Fryxell, "Understanding 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'" in *Robert Frost's Chicken Feather; And Other Lectures,* from the 1968 Augustana College NDEA English Institute, edited by Arthur R. Huseboe, Augustana College Press, November, 1969, pp. 33-44.

John Berryman

In the following excerpt, Berryman focuses on Prufrock's struggle and ultimate inability to propose marriage.

Source: John Berryman, "Prufrock's Dilemma," in *The Freedom of the Poet, Farrar, Straus & Giroux,* 1940 pp. 270–276.

Sources

Ackroyd, Peter, *T.S. Eliot: A Life,* Simon & Schuster, 1984.

Berryman, John, "Prufrock's Dilemma," in *The Freedom of the Poet,* Farrar, Straus, 1976, pp. 270-78.

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Frye, Northrop, *T. S. Eliot,* Oliver and Boyd, 1963.

Grant, Michael, ed., *T.S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage,* Routledge, 1982.

Kenner, Hugh, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot,* McDowell, Oblinsky, 1959.

Knapp, James F., "Eliot's 'Prufrock' and the Form of Modern Poetry," in *Arizona Quarterly,* Vol. 30, No. 1, Spring, 1974, pp. 5-14.

Miller, Vincent, "Eliot's Submission to Time," in *Sewanee Review,* Summer, 1976, pp. 448-64.

Rosenthal, M. L., "Adolescents Singing, Each to Each—When We and Eliot Were Young," in *The New York Times Book Review,* October 20, 1985, pp. 3, 37.

Sinclair, May, "'Prufrock and Other Observations': A Criticism," in *The Little Review,* Volume IV, December, 1917, pp. 8-14.

Schwartz, Delmore, "The Literary Dictatorship of T. S. Eliot," in *Partisan Review,* Vol. XVI, No. 2, February, 1949, pp. 119-37.

For Further Study

Blythe, Hal, and Charlie Sweet. "Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.'" *The Explicator* Volume 52, number 3, Spring 1994, p. 170.

It would have seemed that by the time this was written all that needed to be said about the poem would have been covered, but these authors bring to light new information about different interpretations and possible sources for the "ragged claws" line.

Bradbury, Malcom. *The Modern World: Ten Great Writers.* New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1988.

Eliot is one of the great writers given his own chapter in this book, of course, but just as interesting is the introduction, which puts these ten writers (including Ibsen, Proust, Pirendello and Kafka) into perspective of one another like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Symons, Julian. *Makers of the New: The Revolution in Literature 1912-1939.* New York: Random House, 1987.

The author is a well-known biographer and critic who knew several of the important artistic figures discussed in this book, and who therefore sketches out the rise of Modernism as an interesting, personal story.

Mirror

Sylvia Plath

1963

First appearing in the *New Yorker* in 1963 and then the posthumously published collection *Crossing the Water: Transitional Poems* (1971), Plath's poem "Mirror" exhibits many of the thematic and stylistic qualities which made her one of the best known poets of her generation. "Mirror" was written in 1961, just two years before Plath's suicide—a two-year period which, ironically, was among the most productive of her literary career. Her poems from this time, many of which are collected in her most widely acclaimed book *Ariel*, are often dark, at times full of despair and anger at life, and many contain violent images and unsettling metaphors.

"Mirror" is written from a mirror's perspective, and the poem presents, at first, what seems to be a light-hearted observation on the unfailing honesty and accuracy of its reflection. In its second stanza, however, the tone of the poem darkens, and the theme of honesty undergoes a dramatic change, as a woman finds her reflection in the mirror to be a unwanted reminder of her age and her mortality—and ultimately, a source of terror.

Author Biography

Plath was born in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, the daughter of Otto Emil Plath, a German immigrant and professor, and Aurelia Schober Plath, a former student of his, twenty-one years his junior. Plath's father died suddenly from diabetes mellitus in 1940

Sylvia Plath

when she was only eight years old, an experience that would have a significant impact on her poetry. In 1950 Plath received a scholarship to attend Smith College, where she studied furiously, determined to achieve academic and social success. Suffering from recurrent depression, which would plague her throughout her life, Plath's anxieties over succeeding and excelling eventually led her to electroshock therapy. The therapy, however, increased her anxieties, and in August of 1953 Plath hid herself in the basement of her home and attempted suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. She was found two days later and was subsequently admitted to Massachusetts General Hospital and placed under the care of a psychiatrist.

Plath returned to college in 1954, graduated in 1955, and received a Fulbright grant to study at Newnham College in Cambridge, England, where she met her future husband Ted Hughes. Upon returning to America, Plath began teaching at Smith, and while her husband's career began to take off, hers did not. In 1959 Plath and Hughes returned to England and had two children. In July, 1962, Plath learned of her husband's infidelities, and after the two failed to reconcile, she moved with her children to London. The failure of her marriage led to further struggles with severe depression, and she committed suicide on February 11, 1963. Only a single volume of her poetry was published during her lifetime. Hughes edited many of the posthumous publications of Plath's works, including *The Collected Poems*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982.

Poem Text

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful—
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the
moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of
hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the
darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an
old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Poem Summary

Line 1:

Were it not for its title, the opening lines of "Mirror" might seem to be clues to a child's riddle. Such clues quickly make it evident that the first person speaker of the poem ("I") is the mirror referred to in the title. The terse, chopped phrasing of the first line, along with language such as "exact" and "no preconceptions," help to establish the mirror's persona as blunt, honest, and unemotional.

Lines 2-5:

Here, Plath presents the first of several unexpectedly violent images, as she depicts the mirror immediately swallowing all it comes into contact with—without regard to the emotional concerns of "love and dislike." The mirror's denial of its cruelty in line 4 seems based on the proposition that truth cannot be equated with cruelty—a proposition which will come under closer scrutiny in the poem's final lines. This section of the poem also

seems to call into question the nature of God; when the mirror calls itself "the eye of a little god," Plath seems to be using the cold and unemotional reflection of the mirror as a metaphor for a distant and uncaring God.

Lines 6-9:

Plath 's characteristically dry humor is present in these lines, as the mirror describes how it spends its days staring at the wall it faces. But in this humorous observation is also a further hint of the mirror's meticulous and unforgiving nature, as it notes not only the wall's color, but also its minor imperfections. Despite these "speckles," however, the mirror seems to have formed an attachment to the wall whose image it so often reflects—an image that "flickers" because of the passing of days and nights. Plath's choice of the word "flickers"—a word which most people would associate with a very short-lived source of light (such as a candle or a match)—to describe how the mirror views the passing of entire days, indicates how very differently the mirror views time and mortality in comparison to humans.

Line 10:

With the beginning of the second stanza, the poem takes on a much darker tone. The change is abruptly signaled by the presentation of a different type of mirror: the reflective surface of a lake. This recalls the mythological figure Narcissus, who fell in love with his own refection in a lake and died as a result of this impossible infatuation. Plath has good reason to use water imagery in these final lines, since it provides the same reflective qualities as the mirror, but also suggests depth, coldness, the unknown, and the threat of death by drowning.

Lines 11-12:

These lines seem to suggest a yearning for truth, on the part of the unnamed woman, who ponders her reflection, in search of "what she really is." But paired with this yearning for truth is a willingness to reject it. Not finding the reality of her reflection to her liking, the woman turns her gaze away—toward the softer, more forgiving, light of "candles or the moon." Here, Plath seems to contrast the starkly accurate image of the mirror with the more romantic and less realistic (but perhaps more comforting) world of illusion.

Lines 13-16:

Despite the woman's apparent rejection of the mirror, it continues its work of reflecting her image "faithfully," even when her back is turned. Her distress at being continually drawn to her own image in the mirror, and yet being repelled by what she sees there, is made increasingly evident by her "tears" and "agitation of hands." As the mirror understands, however, the reflected image is "important to her," and each morning she is compelled to return to it.

Lines 17-18:

The closure to "Mirror" presents an example of the type of sudden, unexpectedly violent, imagery for which Plath's poetry is famous. The lake imagery is developed, as the mirror becomes a grim reminder of the woman's own lost youth; it is she, the poem suggests, who had been the "young girl" who was "drowned" in the lake. Here the lake seems to represent time: it is time that has "killed" the young girl and turned her into an "old woman." Plath then employs a rather shocking metaphor, comparing the woman's reflection to "a terrible fish" rising from the depths of a lake: her face has been made grotesque by the passage of time.

Looking back to lines 8–9, we can see that the mirror on the wall similarly represents the passage of time, marking the progression of "faces and darkness." (In line 16, "face" and "darkness" are used again, in an image that suggests morning "replaces" the darkness—another marker of time passing.) This poem, then, is like a mirror: seemingly

Media Adaptations

- *Sylvia Plath.* Videocassette. Voices and Visions Series, volume 9. Santa Barbara: Intellimation, 1988.
- Sylvia Plath: Personal Influences on Sylvia Plath's Writing. Website. Http://www2.en.utexas.edu/slatin/sexton/plath.html.
- Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) Bibliography—Articles and Dissertations. Website. Http://www.informatik.uni-leipzig.de/pri ... /beckmann/public_html/plath/bibliob.html.

Topics for Further Study

- From the same mirror's point of view, record in a poem the comings and goings of one or two other people. How does each of them feel about what he or she sees? How does each of them change day after day?
- Explain what you think the mirror feels for the woman. How well does it understand her?

a static picture, it actually progresses. The silvered glass on a wall changes to the reflective surface of a lake, time passes, a young girl grows old. And it moves from apparent objectivity—the mirror is presented as "truthful" and unaffected by emotion ("unmisted by love or dislike")—to the subjective experience of the woman's distress at the sight of her reflection.

Themes

Identity/Search for Self

The individual's search for self is represented in this poem on several levels, most obviously, by the woman who peers into the lake attempting to determine "what she really is." The woman's quest for self-discovery is genuine and the lake is "important to her," but she cannot accept what is "faithfully" reflected in its depths and she returns morning after morning, hoping for better results. The young girl that she once was has been drowned, by the woman herself, and is now replaced, to her horror, by an old woman who rises from the depths "like a terrible fish." Little wonder, then, that the woman prefers to delude herself with the more flattering representations provided by candlelight and moonlight.

Meanwhile, the identity of the narrator as mirror/lake is also in question. In the first stanza, the mirror takes on the qualities of a person, insisting that it is a disinterested observer that neither distorts nor evaluates what stands before it. Yet the reliability of this self-assessment is undermined by the mirror's belief that the pink speckled wall it gazes at all day is a part of its own heart. The mirror's association and identification with the wall become so complete that when people use the mirror for its intended purpose, their faces are considered intrusions that "separate" the mirror from a part of itself, its heart.

In the second stanza, the identity of the poem's narrator is even more problematic, since it claims that it is now a lake. Its voice, though, is remarkably like that of the mirror. Although the surface of the calmest lake could hardly reflect images with the same clarity as a mirror, the narrator still insists that its renderings are true (as opposed to what's offered by "those liars, the candles or the moon"). Its reference to the faces and the darkness, mentioned in the first stanza, provides further evidence that the mirror and the lake are one and the same. Again, though, the narrator's knowledge of self is less than accurate. Cruelty is not its intention, but the result—measured by the woman's reaction—suggests that the narrator is not the best judge of its own intentions.

Since most critics agree that the mirror/lake in the poem is a metaphor for poets and poetry, the disparity between the narrator's stated motives and the obvious consequences of its representations suggest that Plath may be questioning her own identity as a poet who deludes herself about her own objectivity.

Death

A well-documented preoccupation with death runs throughout much of Plath's work and appears in "Mirror" as well. The idea that everyday objects, while seemingly benign, actually harbor the specter of death is a recurring theme in Plath's poems. Here the mirror, in theory at least, maintains a passive and nonjudgmental demeanor, but then turns into a malevolent lake from whose depths an image of the woman's own mortality rises "like a terrible fish." This transformation is signaled even in the first stanza, by the mirror's admission that it "swallows" whatever it sees, suggesting that it is not so benign after all. The lake, too, has swallowed the young girl who has been drowned in its depths by the old woman who replaces her.

Sex Roles

The woman who peers into the lake, hoping to get back a flattering image of herself is disappointed again and again. Her response to the brutal honesty of the reflection she sees each morning consists of "tears and an agitation of hands." Since

the woman believes that "what she really is" is determined by her physical appearance, she apparently accepts the stereotypical female role assigned to her by her culture. If she has no function but to reflect, like a mirror, the achievements of her husband and children; if she is not considered functional at all, but merely decorative; if her value as a person is dependent upon youth, beauty, and sexual allure; then she is right to be horrified by the image that rises up to her "like a terrible fish." Although she bends over the lake in the manner of Narcissus, the woman does not fall in love with her own image as he did; rather, she is filled with self-loathing at what she sees.

Language and Meaning

"Mirror" is not only about reflection, it is also a self-reflective or self-reflexive text—that is, it is a poem about poetry. The narrator/mirror that boasts of its adherence to the literal, but then quickly switches to metaphor by "swallowing" everything it sees, is itself a metaphor for the poet, for poetry, or for representational art in general. The mirror's claim of neutrality repeats the stance long taken by art and artists claiming to be realistic—they don't invent, they merely reflect what's out there. Thus, like the mirror/lake, they can disavow responsibility for the images and representations they produce.

Style

Written in free verse, the poem's lines vary in length from nine to fifteen syllables and use no pattern of rhyme. All but two of the poem's lines are end-stopped, ending in either a period, comma, or dash. Whereas enjambed lines (phrases which carry over, without punctuation, from one line to the next) serve to increase the pace of a poem, end-stopped lines, such as the ones Plath uses here, tend to slow the reading of the poem, and in this case, add to its dramatic effect.

"Mirror" is composed of two stanzas, each containing nine lines; in this way, the form of the poem may be viewed as representation of a mirror's image—with each stanza reflecting the other. In the first stanza, the voice of the mirror might be seen as playful, and the opening lines almost seem like clues to a child's riddle. But there is a dramatic turn at the beginning of the second stanza, and the poem's last nine lines, while nearly identical in form to the first stanza, present a far darker message.

Historical Context

The early 1960s, the period during which Plath wrote "Mirror" and many of her other most famous poems, marked the beginning of women's attempts to achieve equality with men. In 1963, the year of Plath's suicide, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan was published, launching the modern women's rights movement and a wide range of feminist influences that still resonate throughout American culture. Friedan's book outlined various forms of discrimination and victimization experienced by women as a group, and also exposed the cultural ideals by which women were encouraged to sacrifice their own identity in order to find happiness and fulfillment in the nurturing of husbands and children. Many women accepted the constraints imposed by the culture of that period, much like the woman in Plath's poem who seems to buy into the notion that her value as a person lasts only as long as her ability to appeal to men. But for others, the search for identity and independence that characterizes "Mirror" and other Plath poems became a major concern. Plath's work was thought to speak directly to that concern and became a staple in women's literature courses throughout America.

Originating in this same period was the national obsession with image, appearance, and weight, particularly for women, that continues today. The quest for an unrealistically thin body, which has preoccupied a significant proportion of American women for the past three decades, had its origins in the early 1960s. In 1962, Royal Crown introduced its Diet-Rite Cola, which was followed a year later by Tab, Coca-Cola's entry into the sugar-free soft drink market. In that same year (1963), Jean Neditch, a Queens, New York, housewife, founded Weight Watchers, a self-help organization that combined a diet program with a form of group therapy, that was designed to convince overweight individuals (mostly women) all over America and eventually all over the world that they could achieve and maintain an ideal body through will power and mutual affirmation.

Accompanying the desire to be thin was the desire to be young—another cultural obsession that began in the 1960s as the first of the baby-boomers entered adolescence. The young, by virtue of their sheer numbers within the population, could dominate American culture as a whole with the music and fashions of their choice, choices often inspired early in the decade by The Beatles.

This obsession with image and with youth is articulated in "Mirror" through the woman's re-

Compare & Contrast

- **February 11, 1963:** Plath killed herself with cooking gas at the age of 30. Most of her poems were published posthumously and exhibited Plath's preoccupation with death. She continues to be read and studied three decades after her death, to the point that some critics have referred to her following as a "cult."

  April 8, 1994: Kurt Cobain, lead singer and creative genius behind the group Nirvana, killed himself at the age of 27. Cobain's songs of youthful angst made him, according to many critics, the spokesman for his generation, a label he accepted with reluctance.

- **1959:** The first Barbie doll was introduced at the New York Toy Fair. By the early 1960s, the doll was given a variety of fashionable hairstyles and clothing, and in 1961, Barbie's boyfriend Ken was introduced.

  Today: Although feminists have long denounced Barbie as a sexist representation that contributes to a poor self-image in girls, the doll remains one of the most popular toys in America. Women's groups have pointed out that the doll's hourglass figure idealizes a body type impossible for girls and women to achieve without resorting to starvation diets and surgical implants. The constant introduction of new Barbie clothes and fashion accessories has drawn criticism as well, as has the fact that Barbie for many years had no apparent occupation beyond acquiring consumer goods and being Ken's girlfriend. Barbie was, feminists claimed, a poor role model for young girls because she was defined solely by her physical appearance and her relationship to a man. In response to this criticism, Barbie, in recent years, has been given a variety of careers, such as flight attendant and teacher. In the 1990s Barbie dolls, their friends, and their many accessory items have turned into high-priced collectibles for adult women.

- **Late 1950s-Early 1960s:** London designer Mary Quant consciously began designing for the growing youth market, populated by the early baby boomers just entering adolescence. Quant's success inspired imitation, and the look, consisting of youthful "fun" styles including the miniskirt, was exported from England to America. Soon so-called "mod" clothing was being worn not just by teens, but by women of all ages, lured by advertisers' promises that they would look young if they dressed the part.

  Today: Adult women complain of the lack of fashion choices available for mature women and for those whose body types are not flattered by styles created for young, very slim girls. The youth market, it is charged, has taken over the entire fashion industry, setting impossible standards that real women cannot hope to achieve.

- **1960:** While over one-third of American women worked outside the home, they were almost all employed in low-paying clerical, retail, or teaching positions. By the end of the decade women's median income was still less than sixty percent of the median income for men, and employed women were generally responsible for housework and child care too.

  Today: Although women have been admitted to more and more occupational groups formerly reserved for men, the earnings gap has improved only slightly. In 1996, women earned seventy-five cents for every dollar earned by men. *The Second Shift,* a 1989 book by Arlie Russell Hochschild, maintains that women are still responsible for the majority of household and child care tasks even though most work outside the home full time.

current visits to the lake, hoping each time that a more flattering version of herself will be reflected on its surface. When those hopes are unrealized, she cries and wrings her hands and eventually seeks comfort and self-delusion in "those liars, the candles or the moon." The horror of growing old is brutally driven home by the image of youth being not just *replaced* by age, but *destroyed* by it.

Critical Overview

"Mirror" has seen little discussion among critics, many of whom chose to focus, instead, on the poems contained in *Ariel*, which were written in the final months before the poet's death. Still, students of Plath's work will find these discussions of her later work useful. Critic Caroline King Barnard, in her study entitled *Sylvia Plath*, finds works such as "Mirror" to be part of a "transitional period" in the poet's career—a period in which Plath's poems not only lack the humor and honesty of her early work, but also fail to measure up to the dark power of her final poems.

Jon Rosenblatt, in "Sylvia Plath: The Drama of Initiation," finds an ever-present struggle with death at the center of much of Plath 's writing. He writes that in Plath's poetry "each encounter between beings and the world is a ritual confrontation with death that is repeated on all levels of existence and in all activities. For Plath, death is a kind of spirit or god who incarnates in the objects and forms of the world...."

What Do I Read Next?

- The poems Sylvia Plath composed in the two-year period immediately preceding her suicide can be found in reading reading *Ariel* (1965) and *Crossing the Water* (1971). *The Bell Jar* (1963) is an autobiographical novel published just before her death under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas.
- In Plath's writing, mirrors and other reflecting surfaces, such as water, crystal ball, mirage, moon, eye, bell jar, are an important and recurring image, through which the poet explores her central themes. *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* by Pamela J. Annas (1988) is a thorough study of Plath's use of mirror imagery.
- Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were friends and fellow students in Robert Lowell's poetry class. Sexton is another confessional poet whose work is often compared to Plath's. See *The Complete Poems* by Anne Sexton (1981).
- Kate Chopin was a writer who struggled with issues of female identity, creativity, and suicide at the turn of the century. Her work, long neglected after her death, has been rediscovered by feminists and republished in *The Awakening and Other Stories* (1970).

Criticism

Jeannine Johnson

Jeannine Johnson is a freelance writer who has taught at Yale University. In the following essay, Johnson asserts that Plath uses the image of the mirror as a metaphor for poetry.

The title of Sylvia Plath's "Mirror" reveals the speaker's identity, yet the poem still forces us to ask what precisely is being described. Plath uses the technique of personification to give an inanimate object—in this case a glass mirror—the human capacity for speech. From this unexpected first-person perspective, we learn a great deal about an everyday object that we might otherwise take for granted. We gather this information from the ordinary meaning of the words, or the literal level of the poem. But the poet also uses her discussion of the mirror to refer to another subject at the same time. The characteristics that the poet assigns to the mirror are indirectly applicable to poetry as well. In other words, while the poem literally describes a mirror, it figuratively or symbolically describes poetry itself.

Since the figurative meaning of a poem is not directly stated, we might ask, "how do we know that what the speaker says symbolically refers to poetry? A general answer to that question is that poetry often makes use of symbolism, and many (if not most) poems are in some sense "about" poetry, considering what a poem does, what it says, how it is constructed, why it is written, and other related issues. An answer specific to Plath's poem

is found in certain clues the poet gives us. We know that her poem is about a mirror and about poetry from the clues that reside in the poet's word choices, in her metaphors, and in the formal structure of the poem. But before we can understand what Plath says about poetry, we must first understand what she says about the mirror.

Although it is personified, the mirror claims for itself a kind of nonjudgmental and unemotional character that human beings lack. It announces in the first line of the poem, "I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions." Thus the mirror possesses both human and non-human attributes. It has no hidden motives and it does not delay in reflecting whoever faces it: "Whatever I see I swallow immediately / Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike." The poet plays on the word "unmisted" to show that the mirror's reflection is visually clear to one who looks into it, and also to reiterate that it offers a reflection that is truthful, even if the truth is painful. The looking-glass is not affected by feelings that might cloud (or "mist") its judgment and compel it to change, for better or for worse, the view it provides.

The mirror not only passively reflects an image but actively sees with "The eye of a little god, four-cornered." Its "eye" differs from a human eye in that it is god-like and square or rectangular. The glass also does not require the presence of a person in order to act. It tells us, "I meditate on the opposite wall" and furthermore that "I have looked at it so long / I think it is a part of my heart." It appears that, for the moment, the mirror is no longer an unfeeling instrument of reflection, but a being with the capacity to "meditate" and one that possesses a vital organ, a heart. However, we should note that behind the word "meditate" is a pun on "reflect." We would ordinarily associate a mirror with the word "reflect" in the sense of a visual phenomenon: a mirror's reflection is something we see with our eyes. In order to have the looking-glass assert that it "meditates" on the opposite wall, the poet subtly calls up the sense of "reflect" as an intellectual activity or mental reflectiveness. A play on words makes it unclear whether or not we are to believe the mirror meditates as a human mind would.

These ambiguous associations between the mirror and human emotions prepares us for the transition to the second section, in which the mirror interacts with a specific person. The poem is divided into two sections, or stanzas, of nine lines each. A line break separates the two stanzas. To reinforce the distinction between them and to signal a new beginning, the second stanza begins with the word "Now." The voice of the mirror announces that "Now I am a lake." The change is important because it creates a metaphor or symbol for the mirror. A lake resembles a mirror in so far as they can both reflect images before them, but there are real differences between these two objects. A lake, unlike a mirror, has depth, and because its material is literally fluid, a lake's reflection is potentially less stable than that of an immobile looking-glass. Also, a body of water, unlike a piece of glass, is penetrable. Furthermore, the reflective surface of a lake lies horizontally, while a mirror, generally speaking, hangs vertically. Finally, a lake is a natural object, while a mirror is not. These distinctions complicate our understanding of what the poet says about the mirror, but the poet emphasizes the similarities rather than differences between a mirror and a lake. By use of a metaphor, she can speak about these two things simultaneously.

The change from one kind of reflector to another parallels an even greater change in tone from one stanza to the next. In contrast with the mirror's precise dispassion in the first stanza, the woman who appears in the second stanza displays a great deal of emotion. When the woman sees her reflection, the mirror ironically states that "She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands." The mirror reports that she acts with intensity, "Searching my reaches for what she really is." The woman is not simply looking into the mirror to check her appearance: she is pursuing more profound information about her basic identity. She is particularly concerned with growing older, studying her face for evidence of aging. Her agitated responses show that, to her, a deteriorating physical appearance takes away from her sense of self-worth. Given that the woman seeks an affirmation of her fundamental selfhood in her reflection, the mirror understates the case when it declares that "I am important to her."

Though the woman is dissatisfied with what she sees, it is clear that she returns again and again to peer into the mirror. When she turns away from her reflection, the mirror says "I see her back, and reflect it faithfully." She momentarily appeals instead to "those liars, the candles or the moon." The candles and moon are "liars" because the partial light they provide may obscure some of the woman's signs of aging. By contrast, the mirror is fully "truthful" and its view well-lit. Yet, the woman repeatedly approaches the mirror as if its truth might change.

Given the attitude of the woman, it makes sense to imagine the mirror as a lake, since it seems she hopes it holds deeper knowledge than it actually does. The tears that she cries over the mirror also provide the water to fill this "lake." This metaphor allows the poet to offer two rather startling images in the last two lines. The mirror concludes, "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish." The young girl and old woman represent the woman in the poem at different stages of her life. Over the course of her life, she has watched her face change from youth to her present middle age, and she foresees her face as it will be when she is an older woman. The poet's use of the word "drowned" suggests that the woman has not passively observed herself aging, but instead that she is responsible for having killed off a part of herself. Perhaps the woman's concern with aging prevented her from enjoying her youth. Her tears of lament for what she sees in the mirror have "drowned" the person she once was. Those tears are also threatening to submerge her present self and to give way to the "terrible fish" of old age that is steadily nearing the surface.

The lake really stands for a mirror, and we have already proposed that the mirror, in part, stands for poetry. The mirror is "The eye of a little god," just as poetry can provide the privileged view of the poet. This looking-glass is "four-cornered" like the nearly square shape of the poem we see on the page. (We might also say that the poem has two corners in each stanza, one at the top on the left end, and one at the bottom left, for a total of four corners.) The poem is even constructed so that each of the two, nine-line stanzas is a kind of mirror image of the other. We encounter this self-reflection visually, as we see the lines on the page separated into equal parts. Thus, the poem presents itself not only as the voice of a mirror but also as the imaginative shape of a mirror into which we, as readers, peer. Most important, in understanding this mirror, we must take into account both its literal significance and its figurative or metaphorical meanings. Reading a poem requires this same attentiveness.

Thus far we have been referring to "the mirror" as a specific object, but we should recall that the title of the poem is simply "Mirror." Neither an article, such as "the" or "a," nor an adjective, such as "that" or "this," precedes the word "mirror." This style is typical of Plath's titles for her poems, which include "Cut," "Edge," "Stings," "Rhyme," "Contusion," "Event," "Kindness," "Words," "Totem," "Child," "Tulips," "Stillborn," and "Departure." One of the advantages of omitting an article or adjective before a word like "Cut," for instance, is that it suggests more than one part of speech. That is to say, "a cut" is a noun, but "to cut" is a verb. Therefore the word "cut" by itself represents both an object (noun) and an action (verb) at the same time. Plath takes advantage of this type of ambiguity with her title "Mirror." The title refers both to "a mirror" (in this sense a noun) and to the verb, "to mirror." This mirror then is not simply a stationary object which we can look at and hold in our hands: it is also an action that works on us, as the poem in some sense mirrors our gaze.

In this way, the reader looking at the poem is like the woman peering into her mirror-lake. Certainly, the poem (along with the mirror) has no preconceptions like those of the reader (or the woman) who approaches that object with specific expectations of what he or she will find there. And our surprise at the sudden appearance of a "terrible fish" at the end of the poem matches that of the woman in anticipating herself as an unattractive older person. With this subtle parallel between the reader and this woman, the poet may be warning us that if we come to the poem for comfort rather than for the truth, we risk being disappointed. The poet may also imply that it is inappropriate or ill-advised for the reader to look too deeply into the veiled meanings of the poem, just as is the case with the woman who searches too strenuously in the mirror for something it cannot provide. For no matter what ideas or aims we bring before the poem, it will only reflect back to us what is truthful about them.

Source: Jeannine Johnson, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

William Freedman

The self-destructive qualities and flawed imagery presented by the use of the mirror in the work of Sylvia Plath is examined here.

For many women writers, the search in the mirror is ultimately a search for the self, often for the self as artist. So it is in Plath's poem "Mirror." Here, the figure gazing at and reflected in the mirror is neither the child nor the man the woman-as-mirror habitually reflects, but a woman. In this poem, the mirror is in effect looking into itself, for the image in the mirror is woman, the object that is itself more mirror than person. A woman will see herself both *in* and *as* a mirror. To look into the glass is to look for oneself inside or as reflected on the surface of the

mirror and to seek or discover oneself in the person (or nonperson) of the mirror.

The "She" who seeks in the reflecting lake a flattering distortion of herself is an image of one aspect of the mirror into which she gazes. She is the woman as male-defined ideal or as the ideal *manqué*, the woman who desires to remain forever the "young girl" and who "turns to those liars, the candles or the moon" for confirmation of the man-pleasing myth of perpetual youth, docility, and sexual allure. As such, she is the personification—or reflection—of the mirror as passive servant, the preconditionless object whose perception is a form of helpless swallowing or absorption. The image that finally appears in the mirror, the old woman as "terrible fish," is the opposite or "dark" side of the mirror. She is the mirror who takes a kind of fierce pleasure in her uncompromising veracity and who, by rejecting the role of passive reflector for a more creative autonomy, becomes, in that same male-inscribed view, a devouring monster. The woman/mirror, then, seeks her reflection in the mirror/woman, and the result is a human replication of the linguistic phenomenon the poem becomes. Violating its implicit claim, the poem becomes a mirror not of the world, but of other mirrors and of the process of mirroring. When living mirrors gaze into mirrors, as when language stares only at itself, only mirrors and mirroring will be visible.

This parallel between person and poem suggests that the glass (and lake) in "Mirror" is woman—and more particularly the woman writer or artist for whom the question of mimetic reflection or creative transformation is definitive. For the woman—and especially for the mother—per se, the crucial choice is between the affirmation and effacement of the self: will she reflect the child or more generalized "other" as it presents itself for obliging reflection, or will she insist on her own autonomous identity and perception. To do the latter is to risk looking into the mirror and seeing, not the pleasing young girl, but the terrible fish....

A passage from Jung's "The Development of Personality," which Plath transcribed, describes the phenomenon of crushing maternal self-annihilation that Plath experienced and transformed into poetry. "Parents," wrote Jung,

> set themselves the fanatical task of always "doing their best" for the children and "living only for them." This claimant ideal effectively prevents the parents from doing anything about their own development and allows them to thrust their "best" down their children's throats. This so-called "best" turns out to be the very things the parents have most badly engaged in themselves. In this way the children are goaded on to achieve their parents' most dismal failures, and are loaded with ambitions that are never fulfilled.

The parents Jung describes assume contradictory roles, just as Plath's image of the mother-woman-mirror as terrible fish assumes contradictory or at least contrary forms. On the one hand, it is an image of a monstrous autonomy that cannot perform the self-effacing function of infant-confirming mother. Instead, "reflecting its own mood or, worse still, the rigidity of her own defenses", it generates in the child the threat of chaos that produces the disturbed obsession with distorting mirrors in Plath's poetry. Conversely, this terrible fish or medusa may be the image of maternal self-annihilation, the mother's guilt-inducing refusal of autonomy. The required self-denial of new motherhood, if perpetuated or exaggerated, may, as Jung suggests, be as threatening as its opposite. As virtually exclusive nurturer of the infant and small child, the mother cannot win. Caught between annihilation of self and annihilation of other, and lanced on the sacrifice of self that may efface the other, her denigration, rejection, and perceived monstrosity are all but insured.

The same near-identity of assertive autonomy with an at least seemingly contradictory self-annihilation characterizes the language of "Mirror" and colors the poem's implicit treatment of the woman as writer. The poem is finally about language and imitation, about poetry and its relation to what it describes. As such, it is a poem that assumes a central place in the literature of female authorship, the literature that takes as its subject the woman as writer and her obligation to create for woman and herself a resistant and resilient language of her own. The popularity of Plath's relatively few poems of aggressive threat and power, poems such as "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy," misleads us. Far more of her poetry presents protagonists or personae who are basically passive and depersonalized, victimized and helpless. Like the mirror, the speakers in these poems—dolls, mannequins, stones, patients—are typically confined, often inanimate, absorbently passive, and devoid of personal initiative or will. They are, in short, images of the woman who ... inanimately animate the "mirror of the male-inscribed literary text".

Much of Plath's poetry, in other words, is a mirror of the male text as mirror, a replication of the passive images caught on its surface. Just as the mirror can only *reflect* reality, the woman writer can only reflect male ideals and desires. Devoid of subjectivity and the power of narrative, the woman

in many of Plath's poems "speaks" not only to the plight of woman generally, but, more particularly, to the woman as writer....

The image of woman as reflector functions in several ways. As mother or woman, the mirror's principal and imposed obligation is to reflect infant and other—that is, she must present herself as the image mirrored in man's eyes. But as speaking mirror, the woman becomes a narrating reflector of herself as mirror and of whatever passes before it. She becomes the writer who writes of the mirror in which she perceives herself and of the mirror she is. She becomes the text in which that recording occurs. Through these lenses, the question of the object of perception gives place to the now central question of the nature of the narrator. The mirror as woman or mother reflects the other to itself. The mirror as text or writer reflects self and world in language that becomes a kind of mirror itself. But in both forms the principal conflict is between a self-suppressing recapitulation of male expression and an autonomous resistance to the conventional truths and methods of his inscriptions. The connections are further entangled by the fact that a selection of a narrative technique inevitably determines the treatment of content. To let the mirror speak in self-defining ways that resist prior definition or restriction is to alter the image in the glass. That resistance is what is represented by the substitution of the "terrible fish" for the more attractive young girl in "Mirror."

The mirror's opening announcement of its identity calls that identity into question and begins to transform the mirror from a passive reflector into an active speaker. The poem mirrors language's resistance to simple representation and reflects the resistance of the woman writer and the feminine text to the roles assigned them. It is this rebellion, this presumptuous arrogation of autonomy, that accounts for the shocking image of the terrible fish in the poem's concluding line. The terrible fish is not just a symbol of approaching old age: it is the image of "monstrous autonomy" that stares back at the literary woman in so many of her texts, often out of the mirror of that text into which she gazes in embittered self-search....

There is, of course, a biographical dimension to this poem and its governing images, which intensifies the purely literary force of the work. Plath had a dual image of herself: she was a brightly silvered surface concealing a demonic form that threatened to tear the fragile membrane—in other words, both a mirror and a fish. The mirror, of course, is the brilliant surface Plath presented to the world, as both woman and poet. As poet, Plath the mirror is the precise measurer and recorder of minutiae, the four-cornered goddess of aesthetic control. As woman, Plath the mirror is the strict and tightly disciplined achiever who glitteringly fulfilled all expectations, a perfect mirror of acquired parental and social standards of elegance, beauty and achievement—the persona that emitted what Lowell called "the checks and courtesies," her "air of maddening docility," and what Alvarez called an "air of anxious pleasantness". It is the persona that, as Plath herself described it, "Adher[ed] to rule, to rules, to rules," that, seemingly untroubled by her numbered submission, "Stay[ed] put," like the mirror fixed on the wall, "according to habit." It is the side George Stade labeled the "social cast of her personality, aesthetic, frozen in a cover girl smile...." It is the ambitious but distinctly anti-feminist cook and housekeeper whose accents "are those of the American girl as we want her".

This Plath, in short, is the mirror that reflects back what others wish to see and that is itself a perfect reflection of the feminine ideal in male eyes. But this Plath—it has become a commonplace—was only a facade, a fragile surface laid thickly over an inner turmoil Plath herself perceived as a slouching beast struggling for release. "There are two of me now," Plath writes grittily in "In Plaster": "This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one." The white person, like the mirror, "had no personality ... she had a slave mentality." But the old yellow one, "ugly and hairy," is one of a profusion of monstrous forms threatening the placid surface from below....

In an autobiographical essay, "Ocean 1212-W" Plath recounts a crucial memory: "When I was learning to creep, my mother set me down on the beach to see what I thought of it. I crawled straight for the coming wave and was just through the walls of green when she caught my heels. What would have happened," Plath wonders, "if I had managed to pierce that looking-glass?" The sea is a looking glass in which she claims to have discovered, at two and a half, the "awful birthday of otherness," "the separateness of everything" and ultimately therefore of herself. The sea is the terrible country of the void, of the "darkness [that] is leaking from the cracks." The true habitat of the horrific buried self, it is also the environ of her father. As Plath confessed in a BBC interview, "I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him." In a number of her poems, her father is the victim of

Violating its implicit claim, the poem becomes a mirror not of the world, but of other mirrors and of the process of mirroring."

suicide or murder, usually by drowning, for the sea is her father's element, and it is there she takes her revenge....

That the appearance of the demonic in Plath's poetry is typically associated with the imagery of sea and water helps explain, in biographical terms, the substitution of lake for mirror in the poem. The terrible fish is implicit from the outset. It is contained in the rebellious rejection of the mirroring role in the opening lines of "Mirror" that ostensibly accept and define it. It is implicit, too, in the barely concealed harshness of the relentless veracity of the mirror's reflection, whose cruelty she unconvincingly denies. And it *is* explicit in the mirror's urge to "swallow immediately" whatever it sees. But the image of the fish's emergence requires that the mirror be transformed into water, Plath's symbol of the hideous depths in which the monster lives....

Inside the woman-as-mirror, in other words, behind this physically restricted, passive, depersonalized reflector of the external world, lurks the minatory force that will emerge with full power and vengeance in some of the *Ariel* poems. To escape the obligations of literal truthfulness is not to escape the mirror of male texts that identify her as the obedient angel, but the opposite. It is to evade the monstrous truth the angel herself knows best and fears no less than does the male who protectively angelicizes her in order to prevent her transformation into monster. It is to look into the mirror and pretend one does not see the monster.

Because it recognizes the danger both of reflecting and ignoring the world, "Mirror" can be seen as the turning point in Plath's development.... "Mirror" represents a kind of middle-ground between the extremes of passivity and action, numbing self-cancellation and aggressive self-assertion. It achieves its special position and effect by adopting the former guise in ways that renounce it for the latter. To assume the mirror's role is implicitly to accept the male-proscribed image of woman and mother. But the poem's method and equations situate the terrible fish within the lake and mirror and quietly establish an identity between them. The poem's implicit rejection of the mirror's claim to literal reflection is what generates the image of threatening female autonomy that the poem ostensibly disavows. The fish that is in effect in the mirror from the outset charges towards the mirroring surface at the end, its identity and import disguised by a subject that deflects our attention to figures apparently external to the speaking mirror.... "Mirror," in other words, lends to the monster in the attic (or basement) the face of the angel in the house.

The dread fish is identified with the passive mirror by its presence within or behind it. But their identification with one another may have another source as well. The speaker sees herself "in" the mirror or lake in two senses: She *is* the fearful image in the depths beyond the glass and she is the mirror itself. The implication here is that Plath found her defenses hardly less repulsive than the assault they were erected to ward off. The terrible fish observed in the lake's depths and rising toward its surface is identifiable with the mirror that reflects, neutrally and passively, whatever swims before it. The monster in the depths, in other words, is also the monster on the surface, perhaps more accurately the monstrosity of mere surface or lack of depth. The identification of the mirror with the terrible fish, then, erases the separation the dual identity was constructed to sustain. It suggests on the one hand that the mirror contains the fish, that beneath the angel in the house lurks the monster in the depths. But it may propose as well that a two-dimensional image of the angel is also is a form of monstrosity....

The monster is seen not only in the mirroring self, but "in" that self as surface reflector. The woman as the passive, selfless reflector is inscribed in psychoanalysis, motherhood, and the male text and is submissively adopted by the woman as her own identity. But Plath shows it to be a monstrous evasion of reality and suppression of self. A woman who adopts the reflecting role is cruel primarily to herself. It is therefore inevitable that the last image the reflector swallows is that of the terrible fish, which is at once its concealed opposite and its concealing self.

The mirror is an image of the woman writer in her two conflicting roles as wife/mother and as author. In the first she is the selfless reflector of man

and infant, in the second the self-conscious, self-centering reflector of herself and of the world as she willfully perceives it. Traditionally the roles were seen, by women as well as men, as not merely conflicting but mutually exclusive. It was, in fact, the collective view of psychoanalytic theory that the woman who has "created" a child required no other creative exercise or outlet, and women felt the power, if not always the validity, of that argument in their lives. Some women writers have so internalized this argument that they have felt the fear Susan Suleiman describes: "With every word I write, with every metaphor, with every act of genuine creation, I hurt my child." The guilt this idea elicits necessarily produces feelings of aggression. In Plath's "Mirror," and in many more of her poems on motherhood and entrapment, this aggression wins out over any feelings of tenderness....

The fish is the woman as autonomous person and author. It is the role-rejecting woman/mother who, even as she proclaims her acceptance of the task, refuses passively to mirror man, infant, or whatever else is set before it. And it is the woman-as-writer who, even as she proclaims her obedient adherence to the mimetic model, adopts that model only to tease and overturn it. "She accepts the woman's role as accurate reflecting mirror in order to transcend it, to show how that very role inevitably thwarts and transcends itself." The mirror as woman and as writer takes on the figure of the four-cornered glass in order to shatter it against the non-mirroring language with which she affirms the comfort of the fit—to shatter it, too, by focusing on herself, making herself the subject of her own attention and the poem. It is the nature and occupation of the mirror self-effacingly to reflect the other. In "Mirror," however, the glass is both subject and speaker at once. The poem begins with "I," a pronoun that appears five times in the first four lines and, together with "me" or "my," seventeen times in this poem of only eighteen lines. The mirror/woman, who is by definition without identity, defines and identifies herself. The persona that has no story, tells it, and in the defiant mirror-breaking act of doing so, she becomes the terrible fish of assertive selfhood. To tell one's own story, even if it is, as it must be, the story of absence and effacement, is to establish a presence and to display, perhaps for the first time, the face behind the angelic silver mask.

Plath's emergent monster, then, is not an imagined other, a beckoning fulfillment of hopeless ambition. It is the reconstruction of the speechless woman whose language deconstructs her verbal confession of mere reflective silence. This reconstructed self still bears the conscience of the compliant, and therefore the image of autonomy is not a thoroughly positive figure of assertive strength. The woman continues to subscribe to the male dread of female sexuality and to the male identification of female defiance or aggression with bestiality. The monster, then, does not so much dwell on the other side of the mirror; she *is* the other side of the mirror, the perpetuation of the mirror's male-inscribed ideal in a form that otherwise rejects it. The contradictions travel in both directions. The announcement of a mirroring silence or self-effacement implicitly rejects the identity it affirms. Yet the monstrous shape this autonomy assumes attests to the persistence of the woman's sense of self as dependent and faceless.

The woman achieves autonomy in Plath's "Mirror" and comparable works by rejecting the phallocentric language whose fixed truth fixes woman as the mirroring or speechless other. The rejection of the false and insulting "truth" of woman's identity is effected in a language that undermines the very possibility of definable identity and truth. Woman achieves freedom from male definition at the price of all definition, freedom from the name with which the masculine text identifies her in the affirmation of unnamablitity. Yet, as in [Joseph] Conrad['s short story "Heart of Darkness"], the unnamed, too, may be a form of monstrosity or horror: the chilling truth at the heart of the darkness may be an unnamed evil or the evil of unnamablitity itself, the fearful prospect of truth as mere illusion. The stakes are perhaps lower in "Mirror," the curse a mixed blessing of menacing independence and creativity. But the merging dichotomy is present here as well. In these terms, the terrible fish is not only the monstrous autonomy of woman as personally or artistically creative self. It is also the impossibility of all autonomy or self-definition. Defining herself in and as that which cannot be defined, the woman writer comes perilously close to her previous condition of subjectlessness. That is the price of creative autonomy viewed in terms of resistance and dissociation.

Source: William Freedman, "The Monster in Plath's 'Mirror,'" in *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Spring, 1993 pp.152–66.

William Freedman

This essay examines the use of mirrors in the work of Sylvia Plath, especially in "Mirror," and the use of it as an instrument of self-examination and destruction.

Not surprisingly, given the intense self-reflective quality of her work, mirrors figure prominently in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. What Dan Jacobson observes in his review of *Winter Trees* [in *Listener*, vol. 86, 1971] is hardly less applicable to her writing in general. In more than half of the poems in the collection, as Jacobson remarks, "there appears the image of a mirror, or of water as a mirror. In some of the poems it is the central image; in others it is relatively marginal, but it is almost obsessively present."...

No poem of Plath's is so much a funhouse maze of destabilizing self-entrapment as "Mirror"; ironically, since it is also the poem that insists most vigorously on the unaltering precision of the mirror's reflections. The self that is mirrored here is this poem, perhaps all poetry, and the language of which it is made. Nearly inevitably, for we may define the poem as a "self entrapped," not unreal, but owing to the enclosing nature of language, "unable to reach towards anything other than its own image." The mirroring that occurs in and constitutes this poem is not primarily of the physical world or of the self (for self too is a feature of that world), but of mirroring itself, of the act and nature of the perceptual relation that "never offer[s] a stabilizable image," but shuttles between percipient and percept, poem and world, language and its putative referents. What is reflected here are mirrors and mirroring, often of themselves or other mirrors, and the reflected image assumes the form of a cancelling transfiguration, a violation of the familiar codes of mirroring, a mirror that will not mirror. In the end, as we'll see, it becomes, in effect, a metaphor for metaphor and the broad range of confusing relations the metaphoric interplay entails.

The poem begins with the defining announcement, "I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions." Since the title of the poem is "Mirror," we assume it is the mirror speaking. But since we are accustomed to the belief that mirrors do not speak, we begin immediately to consider metaphoric possibilities. Perhaps the speaker as honest woman, more likely the speaker as candid, even brutally candid ("I am not cruel, only truthful") poet, for did not Plath perceive herself so, and did she not feel the need to defend herself against assaults on her seeming negativity and assaultiveness? And the mirror, of course, may also be the poem such a poet writes, or language, the seemingly innocent medium of poetic and all other verbal communication....

Whatever hypotheses we have tentatively formulated about the mirror's identity, its claim is mortally shaken in the succeeding lines. "Whatever I see I swallow immediately / Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike." The continuation of speech is the undoing of prior speech. For the words "swallow" and "unmisted" vitiate the claims to unvitiated silvery exactitude of reflection. The mirror, defining itself as a perfectly passive instrument of precise reflection, the ultimate literalist, begins to speak figuratively, transformatively, metaphorically. The mirror, of course, however we construe it, does not literally swallow. Nor do love or dislike physically mist these sudden victims of active incorporation.

The effect is immediate. The poetry that asserts its perfect literality, the language that affirms its capacity for simple reference, cannot sustain the charge....

By the time we arrive at the mirror's aggressive swallowing of its world, the subject has already been metaphorized. What is added here is the destabilization of our figurative substitutions: it is their claim to objective exactitude that is undone by their own assertiveness, their own forceful activity. That too is what we mean by metaphor or the act of figuration. It is a way of seeing that is a mode of incorporation, the enveloping of one thing or concept by another. But metaphor, of course, has preconceptions, the preconceived title that makes the "I" a mirror, the preconceived "I" that makes it something else. And it can never swallow its object "just as it is," for neither this poem nor metaphor has a way of speaking of anything with such indifference. Both swallow immediately what they see and make it not merely theirs, but them. "Mirror," in other words, by failing to be a mirror, becomes a mirror of metaphor, a precise reflection of what by definition does not precisely reflect.

When we read, therefore, the defensive affirmation of the fourth line, "I am not cruel, only truthful—", we sustain its credibility only by denying what it seems to maintain. Only by rejecting the pretense to literal truthfulness that seems to motivate the claim can we accept its truthfulness....

From this point on, even the pretense of literality seems to collapse, and figures break onto the surface. The "I" becomes "the eye of a little god, four-cornered," where the pun blurs the distinction between perceiver and the organ or instrument of perception. Metaphor, the poem, the language—all are both the I and the eye of a little god. All are

apparently that which is looked through; but that which is looked through, as we have seen, assumes a formative role. The seeming instrument, whether it be poem, metaphor, or language, becomes creative determinant, becomes a little god, four-cornered like the material mirror, but also like the poem upon the page for which the mirror is metaphor. By calling itself the eye of a little god, the mirror, already implicitly other than it is, confesses its own otherness....

The remaining lines of the opening stanza intensify the metaphoric transformation that has occurred, pulling us farther and farther from the abandoned opening affirmation of passive literalism. The opening "I" of the poem undoes the claim it initiates, but by this point the undoing has become an unravelling. Already transformed from mirror to little god, from seeming literalism to overt metaphor, and from mere reflection or reference to a kind of restrained omnipotence ("little god, four-cornered"), all semblance of silvery exactitude devoid of preconception is absorbed into metaphoric extension and intensification. "Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall. / It is pink with speckles. I have looked at it so long / I think it is a part of my heart." The mirror that is no longer a mirror, but that is in so far as it mirrors certain non-mirroring relations, begins to hypothesize, to transform the wall into an organ that is part of itself, the source of its own life. The transformation of wall to heart is the internalization of the external, the integration into the self as the self's own lifeblood of what is passive, unpassable, and dumb....

The silver mirror cannot be depended on to reflect exactly and without preconceptions; it cannot even be relied on to remain a mirror past the first effort to define itself. But the relations between poem and world, the metaphoric and the literal, and the nature of metaphoric re-formation are likewise unstable. Is the wall absorbed into the heart, or is the heart part wall? Is this a fixed condition that has been discovered, or a transformation that takes place under the pressure of prolonged concentration? Even as we ask these questions about wall and heart, the two parts of this metaphor, we realize that we are caught entirely in the realm of metaphor, for we have already construed wall as other than wall, heart as other than heart, and we know that while an "I" may have a heart, in any even quasi-literal sense a mirror and an eye may not. So we have a metaphor that is made of metaphors, but one part of it at least, the wall, is a metaphor for what the poem has established as the non-metaphoric. It is a metaphor for the inert, the external, for what the mirror claims to be and to reflect yet is not and does not....

The self that is mirrored here is this poem, perhaps all poetry, and the language of which it is made."

Nothing will hold still for us, not even the nature of transformation or of metaphor itself, surely not tenor and vehicle as we have called them. "But it flickers. / Faces and darkness separate us over and over." I will return to these sentences further along; the point at the moment is that the "it" that flickers is no longer the wall alone. It is everything that makes and is this poem, all poetry perhaps, perhaps all discourse, all things that presume to mirror in any way.

In the second stanza, where the speaker is suddenly a lake, Plath enacts a characteristic transformation from mirror to water and expresses a habitual identification between them. The association is frequent in her work, almost predictable. Where one appears, it drags the other after....

"Now I am a lake," begins the second and last stanza, distorted mirror image of the first, and the questions begin again with the claim. Now who is a lake? The mirror or what the mirror speaks and stands for? Is this to be read as a fantastic metamorphosis of a mirror into a lake, the mirror's assumption of a new metaphorical identity as a body of reflecting water, or merely the substitution of one figurative identity for another, both masks for the unrevealed face of poet, poem, poetry, language, or whatever else may be both mirror and lake? The answer is all, the question unresolvable, the only certainty that we continue to inhabit a world of uncertain and perpetual transformation, of sliding identities, of that which *is* by not being, of that which mirrors only its own melting reflections of itself.

"A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is" generates another apparent contradiction. We know by now that one cannot find in this mirror anything that "really is," if by that we mean some stable identity or referent. And we have always known that a lake is at all

events an unlikely vehicle of such precise discovery. The lake as we know it, bring it to the poem, is what the mirror as we did not know it has become: an inexact reflector of images. The world beyond the poem, it seems, is a reflection, even a mirror image of the world of the poem, but only because the world of the poem, the mirror as it undoes its own mirroring in the first stanza, refuses to mirror what we think we know of the world, of the physical mirrors in that exterior world. Again, the poem reflects by not reflecting, mirrors by not mirroring, and in still another sense as well....

Like the woman who bends over the lake, the mirror sees itself reflected there for what, within this poem, it really is: that which generates its own identity and meaning within the four corners of the little god upon the page, and that which in large part does so not by reflecting a world outside it, but by refusing to do so, by being 'other' in terms of both correspondence and interior coherence or consistency. The writer or reader, then, who bends over the poem in search of what she really is will discover herself in these swirling depths as both mirror and woman discover themselves in the lake: as that which cannot precisely mirror and as that which can be mirrored only as one distorting or transfiguring mirror in another. When, at the end, the woman who is said to have "drowned a young girl in me" now perceives an old woman rising toward her "like a terrible fish," the lake's claim to faithful reflection, like the mirror's, is shattered by the metaphor that all speech is revealed to be. As in metaphor most obviously, all relations in this poem are mere resemblances, all seeming references and reflections forms of transformation or approximation.

The poem's final inquiry into the nature of reflection, or the poetic nature of reflection, is conducted through the special relationship between the two major images or figures: the mirror and the lake. I have already dealt to some extent with the reflective interactions between them. But there is more, and what remains holds us—as everything does, though still more tenaciously—inside the poem as an enclosing system of mirrors and mirrorings. It is a challenge to the very point and value of metaphor in poetry.

The development of the poem from the first to the second stanza is from the narration of the mirror to that of the lake, from "I am silver and exact" to "Now I am a lake." Now a convention of metaphoric substitution, indeed of all pointed substitution, is that it introduces substantive change. If the change has been made, if one focal metaphor has been abandoned for another, it is for a reason discoverable in the differences between them. Apparently there is such a distinction here, for we are told at the end of stanza 2 that "in me an old woman rises toward" the poem's searcher "like a terrible fish." Such an occurrence is more readily appropriate to a vision in a lake than in a mirror. But the difference, as the poem absorbs it, is quite negligible, even on the face, or in the depth of it. For we have been told by the mirror speaking in the first stanza that it swallows immediately whatever it sees. The mirror, then, has a depth, even a devouring or absorptive depth, even a predatory depth accordant not only with a body of water but with the "terrible fish" that rises to the poem's climactic ending....

What we expect of a mirror we do not look for in a lake. If a mirror is assumed passively and perfectly to reflect the passing world, the lake, we know, distorts. And yet this one does not. Indeed, the very point of the poem as we at first understand it is carried by the persistence of unflinchingly faithful reflection into the capabilities of the lake. The poem works not by contrast but by complementary or incremental repetition, a repetition of repetitions. Yet that replication is achieved first by undercutting the poetic convention that change implies difference, replacement signifies augmentation, and second by violating the received character of the lake as initial stanza violates the received and proclaimed nature of the mirror. The aging woman turns from the lake dismayed by her reading of its revelations precisely because, we are told, it does *not* distort. On the contrary, as the lake reports, "I see her back, and reflect it faithfully." Once more an expectable difference has become, or proven, sameness. As the two-dimensional mirror "swallows" into a third dimension and thereby begins the incorporation of the lake and the potential increment of its substitution, the lake turns its own back on what we believe of the physical world and "reflects faithfully." The lake that should be in only metaphoric or resembling relation to the mirror is instead mirrored in it—both in its claim to perfect rectitude of reflection and in the ultimate falsity of that claim. Mirror and lake, opening and closing stanza, reflect each other dervishly, drawing attention from shores of reference and statement into whirlpool of their interplay....

As we have understood it, metaphor is the assertion, in a broad sense, of difference as sameness. But "Mirror" makes that almost platitudinous point by violating or ignoring the received distinctions

between the literal and the metaphoric which stabilize the resemblance. We do not really know if mirror and lake are both literal images, both figures, or whether the latter is a figurative transformation of the former, of the actual mirror who allegedly speaks the poem. However we read it, the point about the sameness of seeming difference that seems to rise out of the utterances of mirror and lake is the product of a series of violations of the poetic language, norms, and conventions that provide a context in which such a definition of metaphor makes sense. Lake and mirror have crossed the border of conventional substitution and comparison. The lake *is* the mirror to such an extent that it seems to make little sense to say so. And yet of course we "know" they are different, or believed we did until the poem brought everything into question, until every seeming certainty rose to devour us like a terrible fish.

Perhaps not every certainty is eroded, for a nearly certifiable truth—a truth of poetry and expression—may emerge from these cancelling depths. Physical reality as we believe we know it—the reality and nature of mirrors and lakes—is violated. In that flurry, our expectations about the nature of reflectors and reflection are likewise abrogated. Similarly, the rules of ordinary, logical, and poetic discourse are ignored or overturned by a substitution that does not fulfill the conventional requirements of pertinent substitution. And the result of these swervings is the convergence of difference into sameness, a sameness beyond mere resemblance, beyond the achievement of metaphor simplistically understood, yet not quite an identity. Perhaps, "Mirror" ultimately suggests, this is the quality of mirroring which the lake/ mirror that is/is not poetry/language achieves in relation to the reality we read "on the opposite wall," a reality that seems when long gazed upon, but which may or may not be, the heart of the mirror that reflects and meditates upon and swallows it. With the only trace of certainty it has somehow managed to preserve for itself, the poem affirms through all its ringing changes that mirrors are radically less stable or reliable than we have imagined, and that such mirrors encompass and demarcate our world.

Source: William Freedman, "Sylvia Plath's 'Mirror' of Mirrors," in *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter, 1987, pp. 56–69.

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Examines the "I" in Plath's poems, including *Mirror*.

Miss Rosie

Lucille Clifton

1969

Published in Clifton 's first poetry collection *Good Times* in 1969, "Miss Rosie" is one of many powerful portrait poems of urban black experience Clifton is well known for. Using a conversational and often bluesy tone, these poems focus on characters from Clifton's childhood who, although often poor and wracked with hardship, somehow rise above their problems and prevail. By using vivid images, this poem paints a dim picture of Miss Rosie, an old woman sitting alone near the end of her life, cast aside by an uncaring society. The speaker describes her through comparisons to other "cast aside" items: garbage, rotting potato peels, an old grocery bag. Later in the poem, though, we learn Miss Rosie wasn't always like this; in fact she once was "the best looking gal in Georgia." Clifton ends the poem pledging not to let this same tragedy happen to herself, a lesson learned though close observation of the older woman. This personal example also relates to other situations of human suffering, encouraging anyone in a similar situation to "stand up" and fight against those forces holding you down.

Author Biography

Clifton was born in Depew, New York, in 1936, where her father, Samuel Louis Sayles, Sr., worked in the steel mills, and her mother, Thelma Moore Sayles, was employed in a laundry. Although nei-

Lucille Clifton

oppression. She has remained a highly productive poet and children's author, winning numerous awards and serving as the Poet Laureate of the State of Maryland from 1979 to 1982. In addition, Clifton has had a distinguished career as a humanities and literature professor at several universities.

ther parent had much education, Clifton's mother wrote poems, which she read to her four children, and her father often told stories about his ancestors, particularly his grandmother Caroline, who was abducted from her home in the Dahomey Republic of West Africa and brought to New Orleans, Louisiana, as a slave. The image of her great-grandmother appears in a number of Clifton's poems, and her story is fully told in Clifton's memoir *Generations* (1976). In 1953 Clifton attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she met such writers as LeRoi Jones, A. B. (Amiri Baraka), Spellman, Owen Dodson, and Sterling Brown. A drama major, she acted in the first performance of James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner*. Clifton left Howard after two years and attended Fredonia State Teachers College, where she often read and performed plays with a small group of black intellectuals and developed her craft as a writer. Her submission of poems to Robert Hayden resulted in her receipt of the YW-YMHA Poetry Center Discovery Award in 1969—an event that was followed by the publication of her first collection, *Good Times: Poems*. The work was cited by the *New York Times* as one of the best books of the year. Clifton has often been associated with the Black Aesthetic Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which promoted African-American arts as tools to overcome racial

Poem Summary

Line 1:

In this first line Clifton introduces a speaker talking directly to Miss Rosie, placing them in the same scene together. This line also establishes the refrain, which is repeated several times throughout.

Lines 2-4:

Here, the poet begins describing the older woman, using a simile to compare Miss Rosie to garbage and the awful smell of decaying food in order to emphasize her poverty and isolation. She's "wrapped up," "sitting" and "surrounded," all three descriptions helping create a sense of non-movement, of being stuck the way she is.

Line 5:

Using a one word line almost like a hinge or fulcrum, the poet separates the descriptions earlier from those to follow

Lines 6-8:

These lines continue to describe the woman, this time focusing on her shoes. Not only are they so worn-out the poet can glimpse a little toe (con-

Media Adaptations

- An audio cassette titled "Gwendolyn Brooks and Lucille Clifton" was released in 1983 by the American Academy of Poets.

tinuing to suggest poverty), they're also men's shoes. This portrays Miss Rosie as more masculine than feminine in her old age, any romantic appeal long past. It is important to note as well how the repeated vowel sounds, "you," "old," "shoe," "toe" and "out" help slow down the rhythm of these lines, reinforcing the sense of stillness and old age. This use of repeated vowel sounds is a type of alliteration, specifically called assonance.

Lines 9-10:

Here, we're reminded again of the woman's stagnancy, motionless; and the poet also introduces a possibility of Rosie's senility. The grocery simile continues the domestic theme throughout.

Lines 11-13:

As if Miss Rosie wasn't listening to anything said earlier, the poet takes on an even more forceful voice, repeating herself a third time. This "wet brown bag" image also suggests the dark color of the woman's skin.

Lines 14-15:

Whereas all the descriptions up to this point are in present tense, focusing on the aged woman sitting before her, here the poet introduces the fact that as a younger woman growing up in Georgia, Miss Rosie was quite good looking. This contrasts the present against the past, the beauty of youth against old age and the effects of a hard life in the South. Note, too, that in a poem packed with so much garbage, worn-out shoes and stale smells, suddenly a rose appears. On a literal level she was once called "the Georgia Rose" because of her beauty and probably a pun on her name; also the fragrant, bright flower perhaps works as a metaphor for the youth she once possessed.

Lines 16-18:

In these last lines the speaker makes a decision: I will not let this happen to me. Contrasting the repeated descriptions of Miss Rosie as a woman sitting in place, burdened in old age and unable to move or take control of her situation, the poet declares "I stand up," still young herself, able yet to make a change. It's only after the poet looks long and hard at Miss Rosie's life, though, does she make the declaration, a lesson learned through this other woman's experience, "through your destruction," as she says. Ending the poem this way leaves the reader with a sense of hope, and reinforcing this feeling, the three single syllable words repeated in lines 16 and 18 perhaps sound like an enthusiastic fist pounded on a table.

Themes

Appearance and Reality

A person running into Miss Rosie on the street would see a woman with little to be proud of, to say the least: Clifton uses starkly unflattering imagery such as "garbage," "potato peels" and "wet brown bag" to describe her. We are told that she dresses oddly and that she is "waiting for" her mind, implying that the things she presently does are done mindlessly. She fits the profile of a mental illness so severe that she is just barely able to function in public and will only be able to sustain herself if next week's groceries arrive. Just when the reader's feelings of pity are almost complete, though, the poem reveals another side to Miss Rosie, her glamorous past. In the present she is pitied, but back then she was admired so much that, judging from the nickname Georgia Rose, she was a source of pride for her whole community.

The poem raises the question regarding which one is the real Miss Rosie. The most obvious answer would be the one spoken of in the present tense, an idea supported by the words "I watch you" being repeated twice, driving home the reality of the woman who lives in filth. But there is nothing admirable about Miss Rosie as described, and it is clear from the final lines of the poem that the speaker admires her. There is no reason to believe that what is being described to be happening is not real, but in the emotions felt for Miss Rosie the speaker is responding to what remains of who she once was, and in this way the poem is redefined in terms of a moral reality that is not generally noticed or acknowledged. The first part of the poem gives us reality as we generally experience it

through our senses, and even makes that reality particularly grim, but the last five lines of the poem allow for our ability as humans, with memories and imaginations, to cherish a reality that goes beyond the here and now.

Strength and Weakness

The speaker who says "I stand up / Through your destruction" is responding to Miss Rosie's strength, her ability to survive in the streets in spite of absolute poverty. The poem portrays Miss Rosie's survival as being an especially admirable feat by contrasting it with her earlier life. We can assume that "The best looking gal in Georgia" would have led a somewhat pampered life, being cushioned from life's harshness by the recognition she received from her admirers. Similarly, it does not take a great stretch of the imagination to guess that the woman nicknamed "the Georgia Rose" was known more for tenderness and gentleness than for strength. In these few short lines late in the poem Clifton paints for us a portrait of someone who had every right to expect an easy life, one in which she would be admired and be the center of attention. Miss Rosie's current suffering is therefore twice painful: not only is there her physical desperation, but there is also the pain of seeing how her life did not, in fact, turn out. Either of these would be enough to defeat a weak woman. This poem does not show Miss Rosie as doing anything grand—she cannot even pull herself together enough to improve her situation for the sake of self-preservation. For this poem's speaker, though, just having the strength to survive day-by-day under these conditions, "through your destruction," is enough to win admiration.

Identity

This poem is not only about Miss Rosie, it is also about the person who is telling it, the "I" that speaks for the author. This speaker's story is a simple one: she watches Miss Rosie and, as a direct result of what she sees, she stands up. The poem does not make clear exactly what standing up is meant to signify, and there are a number of different interpretations that the reader could assign to it. The gesture could be an attempt to draw Miss Rosie's attention, or it could be an act of defiance against the forces that have caused Miss Rosie's situation, but if either of these was the case we could expect to include a response with the action. Since standing is meant to be significant in and of itself, it must have a personal meaning for the speaker. It is an act of pride, of self-affirmation. Accepting this interpretation, the question then becomes how watching Miss Rosie could make the speaker feel proud of herself. The key is in the final three lines, where the symbolic gesture is wrapped around the phrase "through your destruction." The speaker sees within herself the possibility for a similar destruction (if it could happen to someone who was once the Georgia Rose, it could happen to anyone) and has learned from Miss Rosie that she can survive through whatever is to come. If this speaker feels uplifted by Miss Rosie's victorious perseverance, it is because she would like to think she has that kind of uncrushable spirit herself.

Topics for Further Study

- Write a poem to some older person whom you do not understand, describing what that person looks like to you and what you are going to do as a result.
- Give a few different explanations for the phrase "I stand up." How will this change the speaker's life? How will it change Miss Rosie's?

Style

"Miss Rosie" is written in free verse, utilizing the varying rhythms and music of conversational speech to carry each line. "Free" doesn't mean without any form; rather every line's length and rhythm changes depending on the mood of its subject matter. In this poem, Clifton uses a refrain "When I watch you" three times throughout to perhaps reflect a speaker talking to a person who might not be listening, or in this case, an older woman who might even be hard of hearing. Repeating a line stresses its importance, as if saying it only once is not enough. It also creates a musical pattern throughout, in this case much like a chorus of a blues song.

Generally, the shorter the line in free verse, the more emphasis each word of the line holds. Clifton uses several very short lines throughout—one or

two words each—perhaps to indicate and reflect important pivots, or moments of turn, in the poem.

Historical Context

Poverty has always been part of civilization, and at various times in history it has been seen in different lights: as a breakdown of the political system; as a welcome measure of the wealth of those who are fortunate; as a religious issue; as a sign of weak character; as tough luck. Economist Karl Marx, whose philosophy inspired Communism, said that poverty is necessary to Capitalist society. In twentieth-century America, the issue of poverty has been ignored, stigmatized, celebrated in song, and denied. By the 1960s it was viewed as a major social concern across the nation; Presidents Kennedy and Johnson made poverty a central concern of their domestic policy programs. Published in 1969, "Miss Rosie" reflects Lucille Clifton's humane concerns and her great ability to recognize dignity even in those at the bottom of the social ladder, but the poem also shows us an attitude about the poor that had evolved over time.

The largest single event to affect our nation's idea of poverty occurred on October 29, 1929, when the stock market crashed. Investors who had counted on stock earnings were unable to pay on loans, causing a chain reaction that almost immediately drove the country into the Great Depression. During the Depression, which lasted through the 1930s right up to America's entry into World War II in 1941, unemployment reached as high as twenty-five percent of the population. As a result, poverty became more socially acceptable: the poor, who had been pitied in the past for their weakness of character, became so commonplace that poverty was no longer looked upon as the fault of the impoverished. It was common during the Depression to lose one's job or house, or at least to know someone who had, and as a result most people came to understand poverty as being beyond the power of individuals. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected in 1933 at the height of the Depression, and, whether because of true compassion for the poor or to win votes (which he certainly did: he was to become the only U.S. president elected four times), he established a number of government programs to hire unemployed workers and monitor fair employment practices. These programs are collectively referred to as The New Deal. During the New Deal, Americans started to view poverty as a governmental concern.

The economy expanded during World War II, as industries manufactured items needed for the war. After the war ended, America emerged as the world's leading industrial power, the one large economy that had not suffered from bombings. Unemployment was low throughout the 1950s and 1960s, but there were still areas of the country, mostly in inner cities and in rural areas, that were poor. Resting comfortably on a strong economy, Americans began looking at poverty as a social problem, and started asking why a country with so much economic success could not defeat poverty once and for all. One key element in making middle-class Americans aware of the problems of the poor was Michael Harrington's best-seller, *The Other America*, which showed how vast the problem was and made readers see that there were people in this country with no houses or food. In 1963, President Kennedy announced his program to provide for the poor, but he was assassinated before the program could be implemented. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, carried on with many of Kennedy's popular social programs: in his first State of the Union address in January of 1964, Johnson announced, "This Administration, today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty." This war, and the "Great Society" program that Johnson proposed the following year, led to such actions on the behalf of the poor as the establishment of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, The Food Stamp Act, and Medicare and Medicaid. These programs helped provide food, housing, and medical attention to those lowest on the economic scale. The concern for those who are less fortunate that helped make these programs possible is reflected in "Miss Rosie".

Of course, the War on Poverty did not put an end to hunger and homelessness, and in the years since 1969 public opinion has shifted several times. Sociologists agree that a record number of homeless people ended up on the streets during the 1980s, for a variety of reasons: a shortage of cheap housing occurred when Single Residence Occupancy hotels—"flop houses" of legend—were torn down during the 1980s condominium boom; median rent had increased twice as fast as income during the 1970s; and three fourths of the patients at state mental facilities were "deinstitutionalized," or put out on the street to fend for themselves, which many proved unable to do. Due to improvements in telecommunications and transportation, unskilled jobs are now being handled in other countries, driving unskilled laborers into poverty. Budget-balancing proposals are putting limits on the government aid available.

Compare & Contrast

- **1969:** 43 percent of all women over the age 16 were part of the labor force, up from 38 percent in 1960.

  1980: 51 percent of all women over 16 were in the labor force.

  Today: The rate of women entering the labor force has come to a stop, hovering around 57 to 58 percent.

- **1969:** The cost of the Medicare program enacted in 1965 shot upward as physicians began submitting patients to hospitals for even minor complaints: at the time, Medicare, a health insurance program for the aged and disabled, paid all hospital costs.

  1975: The average annual benefit paid by Medicare was $326.

  1980: The average annual benefit paid was $863.

  1985: The average annual benefit paid was $1587.

  1990: The average annual benefit paid was $1987.

  Today: Medical costs have slowed somewhat but are still the fastest-growing expense in the American economy.

The lowest 2/10ths of the population is making a lower proportion of income, while the highest 1/10th is making more. Despite these social trends, there is still a growing portion of the American population that holds impoverished individuals personally responsible for their situation.

Critical Overview

"Miss Rosie" has been cited as an example of the way Clifton, from very early on in her career, uses portrait poems to highlight those inner city people forgotten by society. Critic Audrey T. McCluskey, writing in her essay "Tell the Good News: A View of the Works of Lucille Clifton," calls Miss Rosie one of "the unsung, the unvindicated for whom the poet speaks." Pointing out Clifton's use often "highly charged sensory images" in the poem, McCluskey writes "the theme of human waste and uselessness is suggested throughout—by the placement of key words and phrases like "sitting" "Waiting for your mind" and metaphors like "too old potato peels" and "wet brown bag of a woman." Although the poem focuses on the "commanding presence" of Miss Rosie, Clifton doesn't dwell on destruction; rather the poem's closing lines convey "the speaker's resolve to fight the forces that caused that human waste and suffering." Similarly, Haki Madhuduti, in the essay "Lucille Clifton: Warm Water, Greased Legs, and Dangerous Poetry," agrees that Clifton learns from Miss Rosie's example, taking "experiences and observations and squeez[ing] the knowledge from them." Writing for *The Southern Review*, Hank Lazer terms the speaker's declaration made at the end of the poem a "form of solidarity, celebration, and witness ... [an] act of commemoration and community.

Clifton's first collection, *Good Times*, from which "Miss Rosie" appeared in 1969, was praised by the *New York Times* as one of that year's ten best books. Madhuduti, referring to the last lines of the poem, relates the lesson learned to the theme of the entire collection, insisting "standing up is what *Good Times* is about.

Criticism

Ted Humphrey

Ted Humphrey is a freelance writer whose essays frequently appear in Magill's Literary Annuals. *He currently teaches in the Department of Eng-*

- *Written by Herself: Literary Productions of African American Women, 1746-1892,* was written by Frances Smith Foster and published in 1993. The point of examining a distant historical period like this is to draw strength from these writers' ability to live through adversity, in the same way that Clifton's speaker learns about her own strength by watching Miss Rosie.
- Published in 1981, *Shopping Bag Ladies* is a book of photos and text by Ann Marie Rousseau that brings Miss Rosie's situation to life. The text is not too academic—usually consisting of interviews with urban homeless women—and the black-and-white photos are fascinating.
- Clifton has cited poet Robert Hayden as a strong influence, a mentor in her early career. There was much mutual admiration between the two. The poems in *Kaleidoscope,* a collection of poetry by African-American writers, bear some resemblance to Clifton's works, although the book was published in 1967, too early to include any of Clifton's poetry.
- Gloria Naylor's 1987 best-seller *The Women of Brewster Place* examines women in a certain city block, representing different ages and economic backgrounds, coming together to understand each other.

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lish and Foreign Languages at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, CA. In the following essay, Humphrey analyzes how Clifton "render[s] big ideas in a simple way" and argues that, in this 18-line poem, the poet reminds her audience of the humanity and worthiness of an "overlooked" woman.

Lucille Clifton has said, "I am interested in trying to render big ideas in a simple way." Reading the poems in the volume *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir 1969-1980,* which contains "Miss Rosie," one is immediately struck by Clifton's success in reaching her goal. Her ideas are big: love, respect, race relations, sacrifice, religion, loss, and childhood, to name a few. These ideas and more are present in her short poems, which are characterized by their short lines, their unambiguous syntax, and a tone—tough sometimes, tender others—that is always under control. On an Internet site devoted to poets, Toi Derricotte writes that "in the end, our connection to the past is more than a personal connection; it places us within a lifeline that extends before and beyond us, it places and holds us between the wings of something vast and eternal. Lucille Clifton in 'Greens' finds, in this simple ritual of preparing a traditional African American food, that 'the greens roll black under the knife/ and the kitchen twists dark on its spine/ and i taste in my natural appetite/ the bond of live things everywhere.'" Derricotte captures an essential aspect of Clifton's poetry, "the bond of live things everywhere," that is revealed clearly in "Miss Rosie." In this eighteen-line poem, Clifton connects with and celebrates the life of a "wet brown bag of a woman / who used to be the best looking gal in georgia / used to be called the Georgia Rose" by "standing up" for her, by standing up in respect for this human life, "wrapped up like garbage" and "sitting, surrounded by the smell / of too old potato peels," wearing her "old man's shoes / with the little toe cut out / sitting, waiting for [her] mind / like next week's grocery."

These phrases reveal just how Clifton renders "big ideas in a simple way." Sharp but sympathetic observation is the first quality one notices—the particular detail that stands for the "big" idea and the responses one must feel to those like Miss Rosie, whose life has taken turns that no one anticipated, and who has made the journey from beautiful youth to a homeless old woman bereft of mind and memory, of health and resources. Clifton establishes the narrator's voice and point of view with the first line, "when I watch you." At first, the narrator's point of view invites the rest of the world to share her view of Miss Rosie, and the suggestion seems to be that a sight such as Miss Rosie will elicit at best a shrug, a turning away, and a refusal to acknowledge Miss Rosie's humanity or her sisterhood. But as the phrase "when I watch you" is repeated twice more, the narrator initiates a serious shift of attitude—from one of probable disdain to one of sharp and articulate celebration of Miss Rosie's survival and her dignity despite her "destruction." With each repetition of the phrase "when I watch you," it's as if the emphasis and the vision shift from "when" to "I" to "watch you." This shift requires a move from an egocentric per-

spective to a communal one that really sees the homeless woman as ironically heroic in her survival because of her humanness. And here, of course, we approach what is at the center of most of Clifton's poetry—Christian love, or, if that is unfashionable, then a spiritual connectedness and toughness that permits, or perhaps requires, that we remember how connected we are or should be with each other.

Does Clifton's poetry, and in particular this poem, have a political agenda? Is it possible that this apparently simple poem describing a "bag lady," a "homeless person," a "derelict" might have a moral and political purpose behind its surface simplicity? Consider the suggestion above about the shift in focus created by the repetition of the refrain "when I watch you." Consider how necessary it is to see a problem before one may see a solution. Consider how necessary it is for one person to have such a vision before a "political" solution can be dreamed, articulated, shared, and enacted. What is the solution to the "problem" of the homeless, the derelicts, the abandoned, the "brown bag" of this particular woman and the thousands like her? Clifton suggests that the solution is, first, to see her, to acknowledge her, and then to "stand up / through your destruction" as the speaker emphatically does in the last line.

Critic and poet Alicia Ostriker has analyzed the effect Clifton's minimalist poetry has on her. Clifton employs simple, short sentences with between one and four beats per line; there are no rhymes, capitalization, or punctuation. Also characteristic of Clifton's poetry is the adroit use of space and placement and (though not the case in the poem at hand) the frequent lack of titles. Her poetry has a sculptural quality, not abstract but figurative, in which the negative spaces have as much to do with defining and interpreting the form as do the filled spaces, the spaces we tend to think of when we first perceive the sculpture. When we study the sculpture (and its spaces) and begin to respond to it emotionally and intellectually, then we begin to understand how totally we must "see" both sorts of statements to do justice to the artist's clarity and totality of vision. Ostriker suggests that the contemporary poet Clifton most resembles is Robert Creeley—"in cadence, quality of ellipsis, and syntactic ambiguity." Ostriker also comments that "Miss Rosie" structurally resembles a Shakespearean sonnet with the line "when i watch you" functioning as does the triple refrain ("When I have seen … ") in "Sonnet 64." In addition to the structural and ideational functions of this refrain, the poem is formed by subtle and adroit sound patterns that are fully within the American idiom and thus ring true and natural to the American ear. There is subtle assonance in the broad, open sounds of the "a's" of "wrapped," "garbage," "watch," "man's," and "waiting." Likewise, there are soft sibilants such as "peels," "shoes," "sitting," "week's," "say," "destruction," and "stand." These are the tools of a poet who pays attention to the music and power of language truthfully heard and powerfully sung.

In her reading of "Miss Rosie," Ostriker points out that the speaker does not touch Miss Rosie; she watches her and stands up "through" her destruction, but remains separate and apart from this "wet brown bag of a woman." The speaker does not reach out for Miss Rosie or enfold her in her arms. But, as suggested above, clearly seeing the object of one's gaze is a necessary first step toward engagement and toward religious and political action. We cannot "save" or even acknowledge what we do not see, and if we cannot "see" such a one as Miss Rosie, how can we see even ourselves? Yet it is true that the lines "i stand up / through your destruction / i stand up" reflect the ambiguity of one's thoughts about seeing the decay of beauty and promise, of being in the presence of talents, of worth, of humanity reduced at last to a woman "in … old man's shoes /with the little toe cut out / sitting, waiting for [her] mind." It is certainly possible to utter the age-old prayer of thanksgiving, "There but for the grace of God go I," but it is also possible to connect, through the agency of one poet's vision with the humanity, the human-ness of the objects of gaze and be made better by it—especially by taking action. And it is action that, in my view, Clifton calls for with the repeated phrase, "i stand up." She seems to say, "I bless you with my attention, with my seeing, with my mind" (even when yours has left you). "Perhaps I cannot physically save you" (the final fact that all religious persons who hold to the principle of "agency" cannot avoid), but I can 'stand up' and acknowledge and accept and celebrate your divinity." Reading Clifton's poems leaves no doubt that the concept of agency, of responsibility for oneself and for doing what one can for one's fellow creatures, strongly informs her work and worldview. But her poems also insist on community—on connections of person to person and of generations past with generations present and future. We are connected to each other whether we like it or not, and whether by success or by failure, our memories, collective and individual, frame and define that connection. Our actions when we acknowledge that fact mea-

I like to think I write from my knowledge not my lack, from my strength not my weakness. I am not interested if anyone knows whether or not I am familiar with big words, I am interested in trying to render big ideas in a simple way."

—Lucille Clifton

sure our worth. Thus, are the largest ideas embodied and enacted in this "simple" poem, this simple yet subtle pattern of sounds and syllables and words.

Source: Ted Humphrey, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Hank Lazer

A discussion of the works of Lucille Clifton is presented here.

Lucille Clifton's name is fairly well known, but perhaps her writing is not. With each new book she receives consideration for a Pulitzer Prize, and, up to a point, her poems are widely anthologized. But due to the deceptive simplicity of Clifton's work—a function of its conciseness, compression, and reliance on an oral tradition—her poetry is undervalued. When written about, her poems are described and praised but rarely given a reading that grants their depth and complexity. As readers, we fail to appreciate Lucille Clifton's full accomplishment if we exclude from the scope of our attention her twenty-one children's books. For they too, as fully as the poetry, establish the ethical and artistic dimensions of her work as a writer. With the publication of *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir 1969–1980* and *Next: New Poems,* all of Clifton's previously published poetry is back in print, and we can begin to see the magnitude of her accomplishment.

Beginning with her first book of poems, Clifton attends to the enigma of pain fused with grace:

running across to the lot
in the middle of the cement days
to watch the big boys trembling
as the dice made poets of them
if we remembered to despair
i forget
i forget
while the streetlights were blooming
and the sharp birdcall
of the iceman and his son
and the ointment of the ragman's horse
sang spring
our fathers were dead and
our brothers were dying

Usually the ethic of the poetry, unlike the children's stories, is subdued or indirect. Wonder and suggestion often replace didacticism, as in the example of the scissors man and his sharpening wheel:

still
it was nice
in the light of maizie's store
to watch the wheel
and catch the wheel—
fire spinning in the air
and our edges
and our points
sharpening good as anybody's

When the ethical imperative of the poetry gets stated, it takes the form of solidarity, celebration, and witness, as in the act of commemoration and community which concludes "miss rosie," one of Clifton's most often anthologized poems:

when i watch you
you wet brown bag of a woman
who used to be the best looking gal in georgia
used to be called the Georgia Rose
i stand up
through your destruction
i stand up

As in the first poem in her first book of poems, the physical setting is usually urban, with a mixture of death and joy. That place or setting—"the inner city"—gets defined by someone else (who holds the power of definition), but it is also given another name by its actual inhabitants:

in the inner city
or
like we call it
home
we think a lot about uptown
and the silent nights
and the houses straight as
dead men
and the pastel lights

and we hang on to our no place
happy to be alive
and in the inner city or
like we call it
home

That "or" by itself on a line typifies the care of Clifton's writing: it is the pivot upon which the names "inner city" and "home," the opposed definitions of place, turn to face each other.

But the primary task of Clifton's writing is for "us" "to learn ourselves," which in the context of "album" (the first poem in Clifton's volume of new poems) means resisting the desire (in 1939) to turn young black children into images of Shirley Temple. Instead, to gain self-possession, or at least the dignity of fashioning and naming themselves in and by a history of their own devising, "we had to learn ourselves / back across 2 oceans / into bound feet and nappy hair." As Houston Baker has made abundantly clear, African-American literature constitutes "an expressive tradition grounded in the economics of slavery." For Baker and for Clifton that fact leads to a refiguring of American history, where, as Baker describes it, "the transportable stock on American vessels is no longer figured as a body of courageous Pilgrims but as 'black gold.'" For Clifton, who early in her poetry asks what "if the sea should break / and crash against the decks / and below decks break the cargo" and what "if the seas of cities / should crash against each other / and break the chains / and break the walls holding down the cargo," this refiguring of history takes several forms: her own familial history as recounted in *Generations: A Memoir* (included in *Good Woman*), her twenty-one children's books (especially *The Black BC's* and *All Us Come Cross the Water*), and her employment of and insistence upon the richness and beauty of vernacular expression. The latter strategy matters precisely for the reasons developed by Baker, who concludes "that writing the culturally specific is coextensive with discovering vernacular inscriptions in American culture. What must be summoned to view are not Grecian urns, but ancestral faces." And thus for Clifton, the last poem in *Two Headed Woman* asserts

in populated air
our ancestors continue.
i have seen them.
i have heard
their shimmering voices
singing.

The story of Clifton's ancestral lineage goes back to Caroline Donald, born in Dahomey in 1822, seized and taken to America, but who as a child of seven walked all the way from New Orleans to Virginia. A portion of that history appears in *Good News*, juxtaposed to Clifton's own shorter walk:

walked twelve miles into buffalo and
bought a dining room suit

mammy ca'line
walked from new orleans
to virginia
in 1830
seven years old

always said
get what you want
you from dahomey women.

Caroline's child Lucille shoots and kills the white father of her only son. Out of respect for the much admired Caroline, the mob that seizes Lucille does not lynch her; instead, they try her and accord her the "dignity" of being the first black woman legally hanged in Virginia. Lucille's son Genie was the father of Samuel, who married Thelma Moore, and they are Thelma Lucille Sayles Clifton's parents. Beginning with this accounting—"Who remembers the names of the slaves? Only the children of the slaves. The names are Caroline, and Lucy and Samuel, I say. Slave names"—Clifton tells and re-tells her history in *Generations*. After her first recording of that history, Clifton writes, "I look at my husband and our six children and I feel the Dahomey women gathering in my bones."

The history that Clifton records and affirms, as relayed to her by her father, is one of a community of strong women: "and she [Caroline Donald] used to always say, 'Get what you want, you from Dahomey women.' And she used to tell us about how they had a whole army of nothing but women back there and how they was the best soldiers in the world." *Generations* tells and re-tells Clifton's lineage, clarifying and verifying as it goes. Clifton's father's version of it begins, "The generations of Caroline Donald, born free among Dahomey people in 1822 and died free in Bedford Virginia in 1910 ... and Sam Louis Sale, born a slave in America in 1777 and died a slave in the same place in around 1860." His account ends with his daughter Lucille, the poet, to whom he says, "We fooled em, Lue, slavery was terrible but we fooled them old people. We come out of it better than they did."

In her poetry a telling of these events, an account which reveals the great compression of her poetry, is

light
on my mother's tongue
breaks through her soft
extravagant hip
into life.

lucille
she calls the light,
which was the name
of the grandmother
who waited by the crossroads
in virginia
and shot the whiteman off his horse,
killing the killer of sons.
light breaks from her life
to her lives ...

mine already is
an afrikan name.

In "A Simple Language," Clifton explains:

I use simple language. I have never believed that for anything to be valid or true or intellectual or "deep" it had to first be complex. I deliberately use the language that I use. Sometimes people have asked me when I was going to try something hard or difficult, as if my work sprang from my ignorance. I like to think I write from my knowledge not my lack, from my strength not my weakness. I am not interested if anyone knows whether or not I am familiar with big words, I am interested in trying to render big ideas in a simple way.

Such a poem as "light," depending as it does on the Latin root *lux,* meaning light, at the heart of Lucille, begins to demonstrate how much Clifton accomplishes with a few simple words. Besides explaining why Clifton did not change her name to an Afrikan name—her name was already figured into an Afrikan-based history—the poem offers a motivation for her grandmother's deed, as well as establishing her own lineage as one based on light. So that in subsequent poems, when Clifton declares "the light that came to lucille clifton / came in a shift of knowing," or in the impressive sequence of poems entitled "the light that came to lucille clifton" when she asks "who are these strangers peopleing this light?," we know that that light is a history, a narrative refiguring of an otherwise often ahistorical image of inward illumination. The strength of Clifton's mysticism is that it is grounded in history and in a familial mother tongue:

someone calling itself Light
has opened my inside.
i am flooded with brilliance
mother,

someone of it is answering to
your name.

Clifton answers back with her poetry and prose. In the poetry, one other definition of that light occurs in "roots":

call it our wildness then,
we are lost from the field
of flowers, we become
a field of flowers.
call it our craziness
our wildness
call it our roots,
it is the light in us
it is the light of us....

The other equally effective affirmation in Clifton's poetry is akin to a power of the blues, what Houston Baker hears as the blues' "powers at the junctures of American experience—its power to wed quotidian rituals of everyday American experience to the lusters of a distinctively American expressive firmament." For Clifton, that wedding is accomplished in poems such as "homage to my hips," "homage to my hair," and "what the mirror said," but nowhere as effectively as in "cutting greens":

curling them around
i hold their bodies in obscene embrace
thinking of everything but kinship.
collards and kale
strain against each strange other
away from my kissmaking hand and
the iron bedpot.
the pot is black,
the cutting board is black,
my hand,
and just for a minute
the greens roll black under the knife,
and the kitchen twists dark on its spine
and i taste in my natural appetite
the bond of live things everywhere.

If, as many readers and writers of poetry are aware, a dominant feature of poetry in our time is its diversity, the absolute fragmentation of audience and the decentralization of its production and distribution, then many important consequences ensue from Ron Silliman's conclusion that "the result has been a decentralization in which any pretense, whether from the 'center' or elsewhere, of a coherent sense as to the nature of the whole of American poetry is now patently obvious as just so much aggressive fakery." It especially matters that white male readers, writers, and professors reach out and resist the drawing of xenophobic boundaries so that they can begin to live in the fullness of the present moment, so that we might have, as Gertrude Stein had wished, "all of our contemporaries for our contemporaries." In so doing, we can begin to undo one of the most damaging, lingering, and conservative goals of high modernist poetry. Instead of seeking to "purify the language of the tribe," we can begin to acknowledge with and through Lucille Clifton's writing, and the poetry of many other African-American poets, that "there are / too many languages for / one mortal tongue." What we need is not a purification of the language of the tribe, but an attentiveness to the languages of the many tribes constituting American expression.

Source: Hank Lazer, "Blackness Blessed: The Writings of Lucille Clifton," in *The Southern Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3, July, 1989, pp. 142–48.

Audrey T. McCloskey

In the following excerpt, McCloskey provides a discussion of Clifton's works and her use of various techniques, images and themes.

The optimism that permeates all of Clifton's work is fueled by her Christian faith. The tenets of Christianity are a natural vehicle for the espousal of her belief in the ultimate triumph and deliverance of an oppressed people."

Source: Audrey T. McCloskey, "Tell the Good News: A View of the Works of Lucille Clifton," in *Black Woman Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984, pp. 760–70

Sources

The American Poetry Review, Vol. 22, November/December, 1993, pp. 41-48.

Clifton, Lucille, *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir 1969-1980*, Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 1987.

Derricotte, Toi, "The Bond of Living Things: Poems of Ancestry, Blackness Blessed: The Writings of Lucille Clifton," http: www.poets.org/poets/lit/exhex002fst.htm, June 6, 1996.

Lazer, Hank, "Blackness Blessed: The Writings of Lucille Clifton," in *The Southern Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3, July, 1989, pp. 139-49.

Madhubuti, Haki, "Lucille Clifton: Warm Water, Greased Legs, and Dangerous Poetry," in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980); A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1924, pp. 150-60.

McCluskey, Audrey T., "Tell the Good News: A view of the Works of Lucille Clifton," in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980); A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984, pp. 760-70.

For Further Study

Johnson, Paul, *Modern Times: The World From the Twenties to the Eighties*, New York: Harper and Row, 1983.

The author takes a conservative, disapproving view of the social spending increases started by President Lyndon Johnson in his attempt to eliminate poverty.

Madhubuti, Haki, "Lucille Clifton: Warm Water, Greased Legs, and Dangerous Poetry," in *Black Woman Writers (1950-1980)*, edited by Mari Evans, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1984.

Madhubuti, a famous poet himself (formerly known under the name Don L. Lee), is very familiar with Clifton's works and appreciates her for her strength and humanity.

Miller, S. M., and Martin Rein, "Will the War on Poverty Change America?" in *How We Lost the War on Poverty*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1976, pp. 187-203.

Written just ten years after President Johnson announced the War on Poverty, the authors of this article (and of the book in general) portray the heightened concern for the poor in the 1960s as a passing phase.

Stern, Mark J., "The Emergence of the Homeless as a Public Problem," in *Housing and the Homeless*, edited by Jon Erickson and Charles Wilhelm, New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, 1986, pp. 113-23.

This essay was written in the 1980s, when the problem of people living on the street gained renewed attention.

Musée des Beaux Arts

W. H. Auden

1940

First published in 1940 in a collected volume of verse entitled, *Another Time*, "Musée des Beaux Arts" explores the enduring human response to tragedy and challenges the accepted categorization of "ordinary" life experiences. The poem's title refers to the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, an institution Auden visited in 1938. While there he viewed the Brueghel alcove which contains a number of works including *Icarus,* the canvas the poem refers to in detail. Drawing on this and other paintings, Auden articulates a notion of human nature which the poem indicates transcends time and space. Opening with generalizations and moving to specifics, the poem argues that the image presented by the "Old Masters" of the Renaissance period, that individual human suffering is viewed with apathy by others, is an accurate one. Juxtaposing images of suffering and tragedy with the banal actions of everyday life suggests that individual tragedies are individual burdens as humankind responds with indifference. Auden wrote that "In so far as poetry, or any of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate." Auden's poem seeks to disenchant or deromanticize death, martyrdom and suffering and achieves this through the juxtaposition of "ordinary" events with universally recognized "extraordinary" ones. This comparison, however, forces a reconsideration of these accepted categories, and the poem appears to suggest that those events worthy of celebration are the ordinary, everyday occurrences.

W. H. Auden

Author Biography

Auden was born in 1907 and was raised in northern England, the son of a doctor and a nurse. He received his primary education at St. Edmund's School in Surrey and Gresham's School in Kent. Auden's early interest in science and engineering earned him a scholarship to Oxford University; however, his interest in poetry led him to switch his field of study to English. While at Oxford, Auden became familiar with modernist poetry, particularly that of T. S. Eliot , and he became a central member of a group of writers that included Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice, a collective variously labeled the "Oxford Group" or the "Auden Generation." In 1928 Auden's first book, *Poems,* was privately printed by Spender. During the same year, Eliot accepted Auden's verse play *Paid on Both Sides: A Charade* for publication in his magazine *Criterion.* After graduating from Oxford Auden lived for over a year in Berlin before returning to England to become a teacher.

During the 1930s Auden traveled to Spain and China, became involved in political causes, and wrote prolifically. In this period he composed *The Orators: An English Study* (1932), an experimental satire that mixes poetry and prose; three plays in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood; two travel books—one of which was written with Louis MacNeice; and the poetry collection *Look, Stranger!* (1936; published in the United States as *On This Island*). Auden left England in 1939 and became a citizen of the United States. His first book as an emigrant, *Another Time* (1940), contains some of his best-known poems, among them "September 1, 1939," and "Musée des Beaux Arts ." His 1945 volume *The Collected Poetry,* in which he revised, retitled, or excluded many of his earlier poems, helped solidify his reputation as a major poet. Throughout his career Auden won numerous honors and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (1947) and the National Book Award for *The Shield of Achilles* (1955). In his later years, Auden continued to teach, to deliver lectures, and to edit and review books. He wrote several more volumes of poetry, including *City without Walls and Many Other Poems* (1969), *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems* (1972), and the posthumously published *Thank You, Fog: Last Poems* (1974). He died while on a trip to Vienna in 1973. He is buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Poem Summary

Lines 1-2:

The poem opens with a very general statement which establishes the distinguishing quality of the first section of the poem (that is, generalization). Auden does this by categorizing all artists of the Renaissance period into one group, "Old Masters." By disregarding their country of origin, Flemish artist versus Italian painters for instance, and their pictorial depiction, the "common" or "everyday" scenes of many Flemish artists as opposed to the human suffering (or, the suffering of Christ) popular with Italian painters, the poet establishes a broad historical perspective. In doing so, the poem implies a universal truth—that all artists agree upon the significance and understanding of suffering, and as the opening line states, that their perspective is "never wrong."

Lines 3-4:

Here the poet elaborates on the Old Masters' perspective regarding suffering. The details outlined in these two lines indicate that human suffering is understood chiefly as an individual burden, a burden the rest of the world is oblivious or indifferent to. The actions noted in line 3, of an individual opening a window, or "just walking dully along," are deliberately banal, trivial, and commonplace. They underscore the indifference society exhibits toward human suffering. The daily side-by-side existence of both extraordinary events of suffering and common experiences is the universal truth the Old Masters recognize and capture in their work.

Lines 5-8:

Elaborating on the previous two lines, the poet notes how an extraordinary event, such as the "miraculous birth" of Christ is visually displaced by the seemingly less significant image of children skating on a pond. This perspective is ironic and implies that the poet, like the painters, recognizes that great historic or prophetic events which are often the focus of humanity are less important than those which mark the recurring rhythms of life.

Lines 9-13:

These five lines like the previous four, treat an extraordinary event contextually. That is, the "dreadful martyrdom" is placed within the human context of ordinariness. Thus, as a martyrdom occurs, dogs live our their "doggy life." This juxtaposition of the ordinary and extraordinary suggests a condemnation of humankind's indifference to human suffering. However, it also forces the viewer/reader to question the accepted distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary. The poet, like the "Old Master" Brueghel, engages us to recognize the details of daily life, for it is here that extraordinary events of suffering and miracles occur. The extraordinary events, then, are the children skating, or the animal stirring.

The flat, colloquial language the poet employs, for instance such phrase as "anyhow in a corner," and "dogs go on with their doggy life," is deliberately unpoetic and suggests that the speaker is discussing a well-known notion. Recalling a familiar idea links back to the opening lines of the poem and the poet's assertion that a universally recognized and accepted "truth" regarding human suffering exists.

Lines 14-15:

At this point in the poem, Auden moves from the general to the specific. In the second section, the poet dwells upon a particular canvas, Brueghel's *Icarus*, a work which hangs in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Brussels. This painting, as suggested in these two lines, contains a visual representation of the blasé or detached attitude of humankind discussed in the previous lines. Note how the indifference of humankind is expressed by their actions as "everything turns away" in a "leisurely" fashion from the disaster. Thus, in this section the implied indifference noted in the first section of the poem is made explicit.

Despite their seeming differences, the extraordinary events alluded to in each section are linked. In the first section, the poet alludes to Christian

Media Adaptations

- "The Caedman Treasury of Modern Poets Reading Their Own Poetry." Audio cassette. Audiobooks, order #4322.
- "Tell Me The Truth About Love." Audio cassette. Audiobooks, order #4430.

Topics for Further Study

- Write a poem in free verse about the little details that might be in the corners of your painting of a visual event: the animals, the people looking in another direction, the people too preoccupied to notice what is happening close to them. Try to place minor actions at the ends of lines, the way Auden does, to give them more importance than they actually deserve.
- In what ways are the decisions a poet makes the same as those made by a painter? In what ways are they different?

events, the Nativity and the Crucifixion. In the second section, the Greek myth of Icarus, a boy whose overwhelming aspirations proved to be his downfall, is depicted. While the events spring from disparate cultures and times, humankind's response to the events is the same for in all instances the fated implications are ignored.

Lines 16-19:

In these four lines, the poem mirrors the painting. Both depict the ploughman and his work in the foreground while the human tragedy of Icarus plunging to his death in regulated to the background. The painting is literally composed in this manner, and the poetic composition is equally as clearly as Icarus is depicted as simply a splash, a cry, a pair of "white legs." Despite being regulated to the background of the text, the disaster, the martyrdom, the death and suffering are part of the landscape even if those occupying the landscape are oblivious to it. Life fails to romanticize and celebrate such events, and this awareness further suggests that the extraordinary exists within the daily activities of one's life.

Lines 20-21:

The closing lines of the poem continue to meticulously describe Brueghel's painting. The attention to detail, for instance the ship is defined as both "expensive" and "delicate," underscores the insignificance of personal tragedy within the scheme of life, and thus implies that the extraordinary exists within ordinary experience. This is the image the poem concludes with for despite the death of Icarus, the sun continues to shine and the ship sails "calmly on" to its preordained destination.

Themes

Art and Experience

One of the most interesting things about "Musee des Beaux Arts" is that it gives credit to artists, or at least to a particular school of artists, for understanding the experience of suffering better than people ordinarily do. Art is often accused of being out of touch with the realities of the world, of portraying life in a way that is either simplified or idealized. Transforming reality is the nature of art. Some artists feel that it is also the job of the artist to make the world appear better than it actually is or to show how it could be better. Here, Auden is standing beside the Renaissance painters who believed in showing one of the worst, most unpleasant aspects of the human condition: the fact that the problems of one person do not actually affect anyone else in a significant way. The poem tells us by implication that the artist who tries to depict humans as understanding the importance of another's failures is cheating.

Near the end of the poem, the style changes slightly, using more adjectives, becoming more specific about what is contained in "The Fall of Icarus": "white legs," "green water, and "delicate ship" do not give readers the actual vivid experience of viewing Brueghel's painting, but they are more specific about the details than the earlier part of the poem had been. The poem moves from general concepts (such as "suffering") to examples (the skating children, the dog and horse) to details. In doing this, Auden is covering all of the artist's concerns, from social philosophy down to particular shades and hues. He is also following the movement of a museum tour, from general categories down to focal points on specific works.

Morals and Morality

The question that this poem implies is at the very core of any moral system: Why should any being care about what happens to another? At first, the issue seems innocent enough, since it makes sense that somebody must be walking, eating or opening windows while suffering occurs. The

world does not stop. As the poem goes on, though, Auden gives us more serious examples of events which should affect people, and the lack of effect that these events have. If "the miraculous birth" or "the dreadful martyrdom" (references to the birth and death of Christ, a common theme in Renaissance paintings) could be so easily ignored, then it would follow that there would be no reward or punishment for good or evil. The lack of morality in the human condition is most clearly implied in lines 12 and 13, where the impassive observers are a dog and a horse but their disinterest is no different than the humans'. The specific example of Icarus allows Auden the opportunity to go further with this relationship between humanity and inhumanity. He personifies the sun, saying that it "shone / As it had to," and also the ship that "must have seen" what happened but "sailed calmly on." We are accustomed to thinking of these items as performing their duties mechanically, without the capacity for thinking about what is right or wrong. By discussing them in the same tone that is used for the ploughman, the poem removes the whole aspect of morality from the range of human ability.

Public vs. Private

The noteworthy events discussed in the poem are public events that people could observe and react to, but the people in the poem do not react. We know from popular culture, however, that people are very interested in finding out what other, more famous people are doing: whole newspapers, magazines and television shows are devoted to reporting what celebrities are up to. The difference between celebrity worship today and scenes painted by the Old Masters is that the poem specifies the painters' area of expertise to be "suffering." We cannot say whether the witnesses in the paintings would be any more involved in the events around them if those events were pleasant, because all of the events Auden describes are about suffering. Even though the "miraculous birth" should be an occasion for joy, the focus of the pictures, as Auden tells it, is "the aged ... reverently, passionately waiting," so it may be that the skating children are avoiding the seriousness, not the situation. The use of the word "important" tells us that some things that are available for public interaction will make an impression, but that suffering does not make the leap from one person's life to another's. According to the poem, suffering will even make us turn in toward our own private thoughts when "something amazing" happens, overpowering natural curiosity.

Style

"Musée des Beaux Arts" is written in free verse, meaning that the poem is essentially "free" of meter, regular rhythm, or a rhyme scheme. Unlike, a Petrarchan sonnet, for instance, which is written in iambic pentameter (each line contains five divisions or feet, and each foot consists of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable), and is divided into two parts, an octave and a sestet, the octave rhyming abbaabba and the sestet usually rhyming cdecde, free verse employs varying line lengths and an irregular rhyme pattern, often shunning a rhyme scheme altogether.

Like the specific structural considerations of the sonnet form, the seeming lack of structure which free verse offers is purposely employed and works to illuminate the poem's meaning. In Auden's lyric, the long irregular lines, subtly enforced by the irregular end rhyme pattern, create a casual, conversational air more prosaic than poetic, and a somewhat blase tone which is reflective of the benign world illustrated in Brueghel's art. The casual, easygoing argument the tone suggests is ironic for the topic of discussion, the human position and its seeming indifference to suffering, is anything but light and easygoing.

Appearing to be the antithesis of the sonnet, the poem does reflect the Petrarchan sonnet form in one way: Auden's poem is distinguished by two parts which relate to one another much like the octave and sestet of a sonnet. Thus, like a sonnet, the poem is marked by a definite break or turn in thought. The first thirteen lines of the poem introduce the poem's theme and discuss it in general term, while the second half of the poem develops and illustrates the general idea with a specific example.

Historical Context

In 1940, two years after this poem was written, Auden wrote that he had actually been hoping when he wrote it that the war we have come to know as World War II would begin: first, because Germany was threatening neighboring countries and needed to be stopped, but also because of the "personal problem which in 1938 was still unsolved and which in 1938 I was looking for some world event to solve for me." His biographer tells us that the personal problem was romantic, but the important thing to see is how the attitude in his personal life,

Compare & Contrast

- **1940:** Germany took control of Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Norway and Romania. The United States provided England with weapons, but was not yet officially in the war against Germany. Italy and Japan were united with Germany in the "Axis".

  1945: After being defeated in World War II, Germany was divided into four sections by the conquering powers—England, Russia and America.

  1949: Two separate countries were formed out of Germany: one Communist and the other democratic.

  1989: So many people were leaving Communist East Germany that the government tore down the stone wall which split the city of Berlin into east and west parts.

  Today: Germany is reunited and is a strong force in the European Economic Community.

- **1940:** The Olympics scheduled for Tokyo and Helsinki were canceled because of the war.

  1944: The Olympics scheduled for London were canceled because of the war.

  1980: The United States did not participate in the Olympic games held in Moscow because of political differences with the Soviet Union.

- **1940:** The Jeep was designed by Karl K. Pabst to be a lightweight, 4-wheel drive general purpose vehicle. During the next five years the U.S. Army purchased 649,000 Jeeps for rugged travel during military operations.

  Today: The name "Jeep" is owned by American Motors and is used on an all-terrain vehicle that is a status symbol for urban and suburban drivers.

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of looking to a large-scale event for distraction, was the opposite of the attitude of the poem. In 1938 there were certainly enough political events around the world to keep Auden's mind occupied, and his frequent travelling brought him into contact with many of them. That year, Adolph Hitler, having rebuilt the German Army that had been dismantled after the First World War, aggressively showed his might by engineering a union between Austria and Germany and then claiming rights to the German-speaking area of Czechoslovakia, the Sudentenland. Britain and France watched, aware that his actions violated the boundaries set up by the Treaty of Versailles when the first war ended, but nothing was done to stop him. England put up no resistance until the next year, 1939, when Germany's invasion of Poland proved that Hitler could not be trusted. The political pressure on Czechoslovakia to give up the Sudentenland was news when Auden was in Brussels, which was where the Musee des Beaux Arts was located. Brussels is the capital of Belgium, the country situated between France and Germany, and was overrun by the Germans two years later.

Before he ended up in Brussels, Auden had been travelling with a friend, fellow poet Christopher Isherwood, as war correspondents in China. The country was suffering from internal turmoil, as Communist and nationalist forces struggled for control, while at the same time both sides were working together without much success to hold off invasions from Japan. This struggle also had its roots in the international arrangement that came out of the settlement of World War I. The Treaty of Versailles gave Japan the right to parts of China that had been held by the German empire. As Chinese anger over this plan rose, two distinct factions came to power: the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong, and the Kuomintang (KMT) led by Chaing Kai-Shek. From 1927 to 1929 KMT forces marched across the country, enlisting warlords of the provinces as their allies; in 1936, Chaing was kidnapped by the Communists and forced at gunpoint to sign an agreement to fight with the Communists against Japan. Japan invaded in 1937, and by the time Auden and Isherwood arrived in China the major cities were under Japanese control. As foreign correspondents, they were

treated like royalty, being driven to parties in the American ambassador's car and meeting with the people in power, such as the Governor, the British ambassador, Chaing Kai-Shek, and Chou En-lai. The Japanese policy of expansion that led to invading China eventually ed to the invasion of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in December of 1941, which brought America into both the Pacific and the European arenas of war.

After China and Brussels, Auden moved to America in late 1938, changing to American citizenship after having been raised in England. One of the reasons was, of course, the growing war in Europe: by 1940 German planes bombed England almost every day. Another reason was that he was paid incredible sums as a lecturer here, amounts that he had never dreamed of where he came from. One of the strongest reasons, though, was that he was just tired of being part of the British literary establishment, which was very tight, like a family. He felt comfortable, but he felt that such social closeness stifled his creativity: "If (the artist) is not content with his knowledge," he had written in a letter in 1937, "he can only change his life, so as to give him the knowledge he would like to have." After the time he had spent involved in world events, he found the problem to be with his private life.

Critical Overview

Another Time is the first book Auden published as an emigrant to the United States, and the collection is viewed by critics as a pivotal one that marks Auden's turn from secular political concerns toward ethical concerns, concerns often addressed by Christianity. "Musée des Beaux Arts" is one poem which captures Auden's increased awareness of Christianity. The poem hints at Auden's involvement in the conflict between meaningful events and an oblivious world. In *W. H. Auden* Dennis Davidson argues that this involvement is suggested by the use of adjectives that indicate certain values, for instance, a "miraculous birth," or an "important failure." These words hint at an emotional sensitivity which recognizes and feels human suffering within a cold and indifferent world. Davidson calls such a response, as captured in the closing lines of the poem, a "sensitive acceptance." "Sensitive acceptance" means taking a stance midpoint between hardened stoicism and ardent sensibility. While such a response recalls the individual who reads of human tragedy in the newspaper as he/she engages in a mundane activity such as consuming breakfast, this approach, according to Davidson, "points also in the direction of a religious acceptance of suffering." Religious acceptance means coming to terms with the ways of the world. Thus, the poem hints at Auden's increased interest in ethical concerns and his eventual reconversion to Christianity.

Richard Johnson, in *Man's Place: An Essay on Auden,* also states that the poem insinuates a Christian awareness, particularly in its construction of time. Johnson notes that the poem shifts one's perspective of reality. It does this by layering time and events. For instance, the poem places the reader in front of a painting in a museum, challenging the reader to develop the analogy between the world within the painting and the world outside the museum. By leading the reader through various periods of time (through the images in the poem), a continuity of events is implied. Thus, events such as the birth and death of Christ become relevant to the time and place of the reader. Johnson states, "the perspective shifts constantly to put the reader into the position of being able to see," to see things in a way one normally would not see. Such shifts make the reader "aware of his 'human position.'" Addressing one's "human position" means determining one's response to and place in the world, and this is achieved through the individual consideration of issues such as those presented in the poem.

Criticism

Jhan Hochman

Jhan Hochman is a freelance writer and currently teaches at Portland Community College, Portland, OR. In the following essay, Hochman categorizes "Musée des Beaux Arts" as a reflection on suffering and suggests that the poem challenges our ability to halt suffering as a question of ignorance versus will.

It is a cliche that we are born and die alone. Others have noticed we suffer alone. While strictly true—no one lives, dies, or feels *our* pain along with us—this is not, in precise terms, tragic. Tragedy is more about the painful event that need not have happened but did just the same: the earthquake and volcanic eruption as not so much themselves a tragedy as the feeling their destructive impact might have been avoided. This brings up the subjects of comedy and tragedy, less in their usual senses of humorous or serious, but more about

What Do I Read Next?

- Though best known as one of this century's finest poets, the young Auden had a keen eye for the world in general, as is obvious in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse, Volume I, 1926-1938.* Edited by Edward Mendelson.
- John Fuller's 1970 book *A Reader's Guide to W.H. Auden* gives a brief critical look at just about every poem Auden published. Not very deep, but a good starting point for any researcher.
- The last section of Justin Replogle's book *Auden's Poetry,* regarding "Comedy," makes the whole book worth reading. This is a close and personal look at the poet by Replogle, and it seems to take him some time to establish his critical bearings before making his strong, original points.
- Pieter Bruegel's 1558 painting *The Fall of Icarus* can be found in many anthologies of Renaissance painting. One good source is Robert Donlevoy's *Bruegel,* which provides an abundance of commentary about the artist's life and clear reproductions of his work. Published in France in 1959, translated by Stuart Gilbert for the 1990 U.S. edition.

comedy as acceptance—even of suffering—with the potential for humor, and, on the other hand, tragedy as intolerance of suffering and misfortune, with little or no potential for humor. Keeping these specific senses of comedy and tragedy in mind, we might ask the question, Is Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" comic or tragic? Or better, is this poem about accepting (comedy) or denouncing (tragedy) the privacy of suffering?

The poem has two parts or stanzas, each ending with a period, the first after the word tree. The first stanza, having 13 lines, makes a generalization about the normalcy and privacy of suffering: "it takes place / while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along" or it takes place "Anyhow in some corner," "Anyhow" probably meaning "no matter what" or "in whatever fashion." It is usually reported by critics that in the first stanza Auden was concerned with two other canvasses by Pieter Bruegel (1528?-1629) besides the *Icarus* interpreted in stanza two: *The Slaughter of the Innocents* (1564?) and *The Census at Bethlehem* (1566) from which the imagery of the "aged" "reverently, passionately waiting," the skating children, the dogs and torturer's horse was taken. Much of this information, however, seems mistaken: while dogs and horses, and skating children are present in these canvasses, no one waits for the "miraculous birth" of Christ nor does Christ suffer his "dreadful martyrdom." And though *The Census at Bethlehem*—like *The Fall of Icarus*—does underplay its main event—the entrance of the pregnant Virgin and Joseph into Bethlehem where Jesus will be born—*The Slaughter of the Innocents* depicts Herod's massacre of children not off to the side but over most of the canvas. A better candidate for a painting fitting Auden's description of suffering "off to the side" is Breugel's *The Procession to Calvary* (1564), where though Jesus drags his cross at the center of the canvas, he is hard to find amongst the overwhelming abundance of detail and larger foreground events.

Following the discussion of private suffering in the first stanza, Auden's second stanza of eight lines *appears* to furnish an example: the "Old Master's" (Breugel's) painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1558?). This painting depicts the end of the story of Daedulus and Icarus probably as told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses.* Daedulus, in order to escape the anger of the Cretan king, Minos, fashions for himself and his son, Icarus, feathered wings held together with wax. While the wings allow Daedulus a successful flight, his young son, despite Daedulus's warning, flies too close to the sun. When the wax melts, Icarus falls and drowns in the Aegean Sea. The myth is often interpreted as a warning against human arrogance, against believing oneself divine and invulnerable especially when it comes to human creation or invention. Ovid says that "Some fisher, perhaps, plying his quivering rod, some shepherd leaning on his staff, or a peasant bent over his plough handle caught sight of them as they flew past and stood stock still in astonishment, believing that these creatures who could fly through the air must be gods." Breugel, however, paints the story quite differently. First, the fisherman, shepherd, and farmer are on the scene at the time of Icarus's fall, not as he and

Daedulus simply soar overhead like gods. Second, the shepherd is the only one of the three laborers who notices Daedulus. The third important aspect of Breugel's painting is that Icarus is shown as only a pair of tiny struggling legs sticking out of the water in the far lower right corner of the canvas next to the "expensive delicate ship" as it "sailed calmly on." Bruegel's point, says Auden, is that the "failure" of Icarus is of little importance to those living and laboring, that, as a German proverb states, "No plough is stopped for the sake of a dying man." In other words, the oft-heard words, "life goes on." Whether or not this interpretation is on target, it is enough that Auden seems to have found the theme of unshared suffering in this and other paintings by the "Old Masters."

Critics, and apparently Auden himself, understand the first stanza as a statement of generality and the second as an example of that generality—Auden writes, "for instance." But Auden's interpretation of *The Fall of Icarus* illustrates a different sort of unshared suffering than the kind discussed in the first stanza. In the first stanza, the suffering at issue is either unknown or unseen by people opening a window, walking dully along or skating, or by dogs and horses presumably ignorant of human suffering. The privacy of suffering in the first stanza is, therefore, a matter of ignorance, complete or partial. But in the second stanza concerning Breugel's *Icarus*, consistency runs aground: Auden interprets the farmer, fisherman, shepherd, and ship as turned away, as *forsaking* Icarus. Looking at the painting, it is just as plausible to conclude that none of these aforementioned laborers, or those on the ship, even see Icarus. This then would have been completely consistent with Auden's point in the first stanza: that suffering must take place alone while others ignorantly go on with their lives. This situation, again, would be less a tragedy than just "a fact of life," something one must simply accept, in other words, a comedy. But Auden is after something more moralistic than that. Placid acceptance is not what Auden seems to be after. No, there is something wrong with having to suffer alone, something tragic, and that something is not being ignorant of another's pain but having knowledge of it. The tragedy in the final stanza that Auden teases from Breugel's *Icarus* is that people knew, that the ploughman might have heard, the ship must have seen and that the fisherman, whom Auden doesn't mention, was close enough to Icarus to perhaps even save him and still none of them did anything to try and save Icarus, nor did they even acknowledge his fall.

To return to the question asked at the beginning of this commentary: Is this poem about acceptance (comedy) or rejection (tragedy) of the privacy of suffering? Now it can be said that the poem is about both. The first stanza is about accepting an unavoidable ignorance of others' suffering that comes from not being God, from not being able to see, understand, or save everything that suffers: "... the dreadful martyrdom *must* run its course." But the second stanza appears unsatisfied with the acceptance, or comedy, of the first, seems compelled to "make a statement," to do more than just counsel acceptance and passivity which is, after all, already part of what it means to be a dog, human, or horse. Thus Auden must shift the ground of private suffering from that which is unwitnessed to that which is. In this way a stand can be taken.

If Auden had written only the first stanza, "Musée des Beaux Arts" would say little more than "Accept that you can do nothing about the unseen, unheard suffering of others because we are no different than the 'innocent' (ignorant) horse and the dogs going about their doggy life." Critics, however, have remarked that "Musée" was written on the occasion of the fascist takeover of the Spanish Republic by Francisco Franco in 1939. Auden drove an ambulance for three months as part of the International Brigades which tried to save Spain from the fascism which had already taken over Germany (Hitler) and Italy (Mussolini). In this context, the poem would refer to the way so-called "free" European nations stood by and watched Spain (Icarus) fall, watched as the fascist Franco, funded and supplied by Hitler and Mussolini, took over Spain. Whether or not the paintings Auden saw can be said to illustrate his message, they came close enough; in the paintings by the Old Masters Auden saw what he wanted or needed to see: that one could not turn away from suffering off in the corner of the canvas or the world.

The story of Icarus's fall, as of Adam and Eve's, is about how humanity suffers from knowing divine things, pays a price for knowledge of good and evil. Auden's poem takes a different tack: it shows how *others* suffer from our refusal to know or acknowledge their suffering. Suffering one sees and knows about must not, says Auden, be tolerated, must in some way be eased or stopped. We cannot, as that expensive ship did, ignore or deny Icarus and go sailing "calmly on."

Source: Jhan Hochman, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

James Scully

In the following essay, Scully compares the message implied in Brueghel's painting Landscape with the Fall of Icarus *with that of Auden's poem.*

Though the homely goings-on may beguile us, this homily on a 16th-century painting is framed as effectively as a slide of skin tissue in a lab. Auden's report on the significance of a 400 year-old painting is not a report, really, but the reappropriation of a dehistoricized structural configuration. The poem's 'painting' is Auden's, not Brueghel's. Even when painting and poem details seem the same, they are not. They are coded differently. They depend on different exclusions. What in the painting bespeaks a positive relationship to daily life, in the poem promotes disengagement. Brueghel's painting may be a document of intellectual history, or the symptom of a phase in that history. But in the poem any and all history, including the poem's own contemporaneity, is blotted out. Or almost blotted out. To enter the *Musée* one must undergo a desperately selective amnesia....

In the logic of the *Musée*, the marginal that is central should be central, and the momentous that is pushed into the background should be put there. Everything gets the significance it deserves. Children skating on a pond "at the edge of the wood" have true human perspective. Their indifference occupies the foreground of the poem and substantiates the understanding of the Old Masters. The Old Masters, who make nothing happen, report what does, and what does is a lot of coming and going, mostly going. The *Musée* is not unlike a railway station or an apartment building fallen into anomie. It is a site of leaving, of turning away and getting away.

The emblem of this 'vision of reality' is Brueghel's "Landscape With The Fall of Icarus" (1558). In it the legendary Icarus plunging into the sea becomes an anonymous boy, or less—a pair of splayed, discombobulated legs about to follow their body crashing into the water. (The poem, less lighthearted, transforms these into aestheticized "white legs" disappearing into "green / Water.") The centerpiece of the painting, its declaration of perspective and value, is the ploughman doing contour ploughing. He, the ship and the rest confirm that life goes on. Missing from the poem are the fisherman sitting on the bank, evidently not noticing, and the shepherd with his dog and sheep. The shepherd is as much the butt of Brueghel's humor as Icarus is. He's standing, peering up into the sky—but in the wrong direction. What he may be looking for, what has already dropped out of the sky, is splashing into the harbor behind him. Brueghel's benignly critical realism cuts both ways: in its wry, cracker-barrel perspective, the legendary and the mundane are equally amusing. Yet that evenhandedness may not be the only reason why the shepherd and the fisherman were banished from the *Musée*. It's not simply that the painting is less than reverent toward the mundane, which in the poem is fetishized as the measure of human truth and value, but that the very categories "shepherd" and "fisherman" raise *social* implications that the poem must put out of mind. It's one thing to raise the spectre of "miraculous birth" or "dreadful martyrdom," but quite another to evoke the shepherd, whose job is to care for his flock—or even, though this is more tenuous, the fisher of men. Why this is so should become clear as we spend time in and around the *Musée*. Suffice it to say that Brueghel's painting is affirmative as the poem is not. The ploughman may be ploughing up ground, but the brightly colored painting, with its yellow sun on the horizon of its bay, shrugs off myth as if it were old dead skin. In the painting it's *Spring!* with a vengeance. The awkward legs of Icarus might be those of a kid hurling himself, with spring-time abandon, headfirst into the water. The painting is a tad whacky.

But that's Brueghel's painting. In the *Musée* the turning away is deliberate, a denial rather than an affirmation. Brueghel's painting is a landscape with figures, whereas Auden's work disposes figures in a social void. There is no ground, no 'glue.' The absence of connections corresponds to the denial of interaction, a denial that anything effectively happens. Significantly, the *Musée*'s children do not specially want 'it' or anything to happen. The superiority of the Old Masters is their understanding that nothing *does* happen—nothing alters, in any way whatever, the given order. What does not happen, which is to say what is not unnatural, prevails. At the same time this ahistorical tableau features a compensatory array of empirical, pseudo-concrete movements. Everyday is preoccupied with the hum and humdrum of life—eating, opening a window, walking, skating, going on, scratching, turning away, sailing on. With so much referenced activity we may not notice that nothing happens in the *Musée*....

The Old Masters, who see and know, are set over against Icarus, who is seen and known. Perspective is not centered in the ploughman or in someone just eating, or in any one or thing whose

indifference or ignorance constitute the Old Masters' understanding, but in the Old Masters themselves, who preside over these simple incorporators of wisdom, the plain folk, the way an eagle sits at the top of a food chain. It is one of the many curious dislocations of the *Musée* that in it the bearers and producers of understanding do not *have* that understanding. The ploughman, the skating children and the rest only produce the understanding that gives substance to the Old Masters, who appropriate and *realize* that understanding—who make it their own, as Auden makes the 'understanding' of the Old Masters *his* own....

The subject position of the *Musée* has apparently been framed by the Old Masters, who (like Auden) see but are not seen. But the Old Masters, whoever they may be, have framed nothing. Brueghel notwithstanding, they remain anonymous and invisible. They are functionaries. Having no identity, and therefore no opportunity for expression or initiative, they must be what Auden/*Musée* makes them be. The strategy of the poem demands it. That established, the *Musée* invests the Old Masters with all authority, including the tone of authority. To have named them, or to have said outright that the Old Masters understood the human position of suffering and *never* made a mistake about it, might have invited demurral. But to intone almost with resignation, as if passing on a truism, that "About suffering they were never wrong..." is something else again. Who were never wrong? O, the Old Masters. The point is not whether they understood—a disallowed question—but how *well* they did. The *Musée* is a kind of box. Its terms define the available space, and then proceed to fill it in. What they fill it with is us.

We need not, in a fit of anti-intellectualism, abandon hope and submit to the subject position that has been constructed for us. We may introduce critical difference into this site, this *Musée*. But to do that we have to ask what is *not* the subject position. Not generally, but specifically what is not the subject position. It is not that of suffering, nor of martyrdom, nor of the aged who hope for a future, an intervention, for something to happen (which is what the "miraculous birth" signifies, as opposed to the changeless present of the Old Masters "[who] were never wrong"). The subject position is not that of the tortured, who do not exist even as a noun. And it is not that of Icarus, who is no longer Icarus but white legs disappearing into green water.

If the subject position of the Old Masters is not that of suffering, what is the "human position of

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suffering" that they understand so well? The human position of suffering—the position of suffering they know to be humanly appropriate—is that it is remote. Even when near it is remote, distanced by sensory immediacy and self-absorption, which is the self-absorption of those who are not suffering. The Old Masters understand that the human position of suffering is that it does not touch the human; it is the suffering of *the other*. Not that the *Musée*'s Old Masters understand that suffering, they don't, but they do understand it is human to be preoccupied with the immediate and the mundane. What is not the human position, in the view of the *Musée*, is concern for the suffering....

Icarus falling, and the ship sailing on, are images of flight and destination. But one fails, one goes on. The crisis flight comes to disaster, the jaunty business-as-usual leaves all that behind. Turning away and getting away become the human thing to do. The poem masks this equation, however, presenting the getting away as a 'getting on' with it (life). What had seemed to be the horns of a dilemma—the demands of ordinary life versus the passing attraction of the critical or the spectacular—turns out to be no dilemma at all. The problematic has been dissolved....

Auden's poem condenses, incorporates, a decision. This is not obvious, however. The structure puts us in the position not only of not choosing but of not having to choose, as though there were no decision to be made anyway. We are funneled into the perspective of everyday, self-absorbed, ignorant (ignoring) life. At the same time we must be persuaded to accept, as though it were our very ordinary own, the position we have been structured into. Auden wastes no time in trotting out the village elders, the Old Masters. Through them the poem imposes another distinction—not between

the ordinary and the extraordinary but between the intensities of life, including moral intensities, and an imperturbable art. Having begun with the Old Masters, who know what they know, we are brought to a conclusion with the expensive delicate ship—a vehicle that, unlike the wings of Icarus, promises safe conduct. Yet this conclusion too rests on a false bottom. It is less a conclusion than a dissolution, or short-circuiting, of the social/aesthetic problematic.

The *Musée* is performative. It confers humanly superior status on the refusal of grand, social, 'other' concern. And it naturalizes that refusal. What had seemed an appeal to the perspective of ordinary life turns out to be an argument for the transcendent perspective, the ultimate *human* value, of art. 'Ordinary life' sanctions qualm-free self-absorption, which is hypostatized in the art of the Old Masters. What's puzzling, at first, is that although 'ordinary life' is the court and standard appealed to, there is little respect for ordinary life as such, which is presented in a perfunctory, at times deprecatory, manner. Like most demagogic appeals this bears little affection for the *demos.* There's a trace of contempt for the life that is the ostensible basis of the Old Masters' authority and the source of their 'understanding' of the "human position."...

The *Musée* is supported, even as it is undermined by logical impasses. As has been noted, the ordinary is privileged over the extraordinary, self-absorption over 'other' consciousness, indifference over concern. The authority of the work depends upon that privileging. Yet the privileged 'ordinary' is also ordinary in a negative sense. It is mundane, banal, hovering at the level of bodily functions, of scratching or eating. The norm is conceived indifferently in human and non-human terms. Or the positive value of the ordinary is intoned with a negative, world-weary accent. "Dully" or "doggy" are less descriptions than valuations. "Doggy" is not redundant, because it is not an epithet for dogs. It is metaphorical, not literal. Structural logic determines that the dogs who "go on with their doggy life" *are* ordinary life, but ordinary life viewed from a superior vantage point. In the structuration of the poem, and the values generated through it, doggy life is life on the plane of the skating children. On a par, willy nilly, with the horse's behind and the ploughman. The only prized or enhanced life, that of the ship, transcends the ordinary by virtue of being "expensive" and "delicate." The ship goes about its business just as the dogs go on with their doggy life. In this there is equivalence. There is no equivalence, however, in their respective significances.

The opposition between ordinary and extraordinary, an opposition *at first* privileging the former, should lead to a subject position sited with the ordinary. Structural and narrative logic demand that we identify with the ploughman as surely as the logic of *Rambo* and *Rocky* demand that we see and value as they see and value. But the *Musée* presumes to transcend itself, to stand outside the structuration of its own values. It justifies the privileging of ignorance over knowledge, of indifference over concern, only to claim that the ignorance and indifference constitute a metahistorical knowledge—that of the Old Masters who were never wrong. The Old Masters understand this world because they are not of it. Those who live that understanding, doing what comes 'naturally' in a time warp where nothing happens, live in ignorance of it. Knowledge is reserved for their superiors, the Old Masters in *their* timeless warp....

There is another twist to this. Although the Old Masters are equated with authority, they are not identified with it. That status is reserved for indifferent people. Strictly speaking, the poem's conclusion does not follow from the Old Masters' authority (which has been produced by, and incorporated in the behavior of, ordinary people, dogs, a horse, etc.). Rather, the *Musée* envelops them with authority. The determined conclusion of the work presumes the authority it needs to realize its project, which is correlative to Auden's own historical project—to justify the decision to turn away from "the disaster") and move on.

The *Musée* is sustained by ideological inertia. Because it begins *in medias res,* the tone may be low-keyed, the syntax laid back. "About suffering they were never wrong..." The measure of understanding becomes the ability to perceive that in "human" terms suffering is peripheral. The *Musée* fetishizes that 'understanding,' appropriating it for the Old Masters and making it substantiate the superiority of art to 'life,' or of the aesthetic to the social and the ethical. The *Musée* constructs a highground for itself. But though the raw materials of that highground are uniformly commonplace—the self-preoccupation and inattention of the populace, which is indistinguishable from that of its domestic animals—the highground exists only as a superior vantage point identified with art and the masters of art. Artistic wisdom is acceptance of the 'fact' that indifference and ignorance are quintessentially human. The *Musée* assumes, then, that there *is* a human nature. Consequently the human

may be presented as interchangeable with the animal. Human life comes to the same thing as "doggy life." Nature is their common denominator. The *Musée* posits a transcendental subject, the "human," which is as irreducibly itself as the torturer's horse's behind is irreducibly *itself.* The ultimate transcendental subject is not then the human, but so-called nature itself. If indifference to suffering is the indiference of people as people, rather than the indifference of certain people under certain conditions, then such indifference must be characteristically human. It may be noted, but not questioned. So the human, interpreted as the 'naturally' human, is treated as a given rather than as a problematic (as an answer rather than as a complex of historically conditioned questions)....

So much for "the human position of suffering." What began as a demagogic appeal to people (meaning ordinary people) in terms of what they do (meaning what they ordinarily do) gives the last word, actually a dehistoricized image, to the "expensive delicate" subject position leaving the scene of the disaster. But the "human" has already been defined as uncaring. According to the *Musée,* to turn away is the "human" thing to do. Art is making this natural, casting suffering and catastrophe in Arcadian tones. Had this work occupied the subject position of the suffering, or had the suffering been obviously political, we might have called it propaganda. But as it does not, we need not. We may take the *Musée* for what it is: a real belles lettres poem, a work that masters history and logic, including its own.

Source: James Scully, "Demagogy in the Musée," in *The Massachusetts Review,* Vol. 28, No. 2, Summer, 1987 pp. 198–220.

To pass over the horror of the moment and focus instead on a horse, which can in fact nowhere be seen scratching its "innocent behind," characterizes the persona as a man unable to experience the pain of others. Where is the sensibility, the empathetic response, which we might naturally expect?"

Robert F. Willson, Jr.

A thorough discussion of the use of irony in "Musée des Beaux Arts" is presented.

Source: Robert F. Willson, Jr., "The Person and the Poem: Irony in Auden's Musée des Beaux Arts" in *Studies in Contemporary Satire,* Vol. 3, 1976 pp. 1–7.

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My Last Duchess

Robert Browning

1842

First published in the collection *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842, "My Last Duchess" is an excellent example of Browning's use of dramatic monologue. Browning's psychological portrait of a powerful Renaissance aristocrat is presented to the reader as if he or she were simply "eavesdropping" on a slice of casual conversation. As the poem unfolds, the reader learns the speaker of the poem, Duke Ferrara, is talking to a representative of his fiancee's family. Standing in front of a portrait of the Duke's last wife, now dead, the Duke talks about the woman's failings and imperfections. The irony of the poem surfaces as the reader discovers that the young woman's "faults" were qualities like compassion, modesty, humility, delight in simple pleasures, and courtesy to those who served her.

Using abundant detail, Browning leads the reader to conclude that the Duke found fault with his former wife because she did not reserve her attentions for him, his rank, and his power. More importantly, the Duke's long list of complaints presents a thinly veiled threat about the behavior he will and will not tolerate in his new wife. The lines "I gave commands; / smiles stopped together" suggest that the Duke somehow, directly or indirectly, brought about the death of the last Duchess. In this dramatic monologue, Browning has not only depicted the inner workings of his speaker, but has in fact allowed the speaker to reveal his own failings and imperfections to the reader.

Author Biography

Browning was born in 1812 in Camberwell, a suburb of London, to middle-class parents. His father Robert Browning, Sr., a clerk for the Bank of England, possessed cultivated artistic and literary tastes; his mother, Sarah Anne Wiedemann, was a devout Christian who pursued interests in music and nature. Browning was an intellectually precocious child who read at the age of five and composed his first poetry at six. He read widely from his father's extensive rare book collection, acquiring an abundant, if unsystematic, knowledge of a broad range of different literatures. At ten Browning began Peckam School, where he remained for four years. In 1828 he entered London University but quit school after less than a year, determined to pursue a career as a poet. Browning lived with his parents until 1846 and so was able to devote his entire energies to his art.

Robert Browning

His literary career began in 1833 with the anonymous publication of the long poem *Pauline: A Fragment of a Confession.* This was followed by *Paracelsus* (1835) and *Sordello* (1840). All three of these early works met with mostly negative reviews. Beginning in 1841 Browning published a series of eight pamphlets collectively titled *Bells and Pomegranates* (1841-45). The series contains narrative poems, including *Pippa Passes* (1841); verse dramas; and two collections of shorter pieces, *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845). Although Browning had to this point failed to win either popular or critical esteem, his work did gain the admiration of Elizabeth Barrett, who was a respected and popular poet in her own right. In 1844 she praised Browning in one of her works and received a grateful letter from him in response. They met the following year, fell in love, and in 1846, ignoring the disapproval of her father, eloped to Italy, where they spent the remainder of their life together. Their son Robert Wiedemann Barrett Browning was born in 1849.

In Italy Browning continued to write, and though public success still eluded him, his works attracted increasing respect from critics. Following Elizabeth's death in 1861, he and his son returned to England. The appearance in 1864 of the collection *Dramatis Personae* finally brought Browning his first significant critical and popular acclaim. In 1868-69 he published *The Ring and the Book,* a series of dramatic monologues in which various speakers relate different perspectives on an actual seventeenth-century Italian murder case. Tremendously popular, *The Ring and the Book* firmly established Browning's reputation. From 1868 on, Browning was generally regarded as one of England's greatest living poets. He remained highly productive, and the publication of his *Dramatic Idyls* (1879-80) and other works brought him worldwide fame. In 1881 the Browning Society was established in London for the purpose of studying his poems. Near the end of his life he was the recipient of various honors, including a degree from Oxford University and an audience with Queen Victoria. Following his death in 1889 during a stay in Venice, he was buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Poem Text

Ferrara

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,

How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed: she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Poem Summary

Lines 1-2:

The beginning note is meant to explain to that the speaker of the poem is the Duke of Ferrara; this provides the reader with location (Italy) and class environment (aristocratic). In the opening lines Browning sets the scene for the poem, focusing the reader's imagination on the painting on the wall. The central premise of the poem is put in place: the dead wife will appear to come back to life only through the artistry of the picture. Through this, Browning allows the reader to begin to think of the woman as a real person, once very much alive, and initiates a "relationship" between the dead woman and the reader. Once the reader begins to feel sympathy for the woman, then the subsequent "reasons" given by the Duke concerning her "imperfections" will seem all the more outrageous.

Lines 3-4:

Here, Browning accomplishes two things: a) an emphasis on the mastery of the artist, "Fra Pandolf," who created a work of art that makes the dead woman seem so animated; and b) an introduction to the Duke's subtle, mocking tone with the phrases "piece of wonder" and "busily a day". These words seem to be heavy with ridicule and scorn for both woman and artist. At this point the reader might begin to think the Duke was jealous of the man who "fussed" over his wife but who, ultimately created—not a masterpiece—but just a portion of one. It should be noted that, unlike some other figures in Browning's work, Fra Pandolf—and later, Claus of Innsbruck—is an imaginary, not historical, figure.

Line 5:

The use of the word "you" informs the reader that there is an immediate addressee within the fiction of the poem; the speaker is not addressing the reader, but another character. More specifically, it indicates that the speaker of the poem, the Duke, is now addressing the emissary directly, asking him to sit and gaze upon picture of the dead woman. The reader may imagine the emissary sitting in a chair while the Duke stands and delivers his speech. In effect, the emissary is now in a subordinate position.

Lines 6-9:

The words "by design" imply that the artist is well-known and has some prestige attached to his name. The Duke may want to advertise that it was his own talent for hiring the right artist that was responsible for the "life-like quality" of the picture. The Duke also stresses that all of the painting's viewers— "strangers like you"—remark upon the painting's lifelike look. In addition, the Duke appears more taken with the painting than with the real woman the picture represents. The image of emotion—the "passion" in the "glance"—seems more valuable to him than genuine emotion. The use of the word "its" instead of "her" suggests that the Duke has more of a relationship with the painting than he did with his dead wife. With these details, Browning begins to interject the notion of the Duke's jealousy. That "passionate glance" might

have been placed there by the painter, whom the Duke probably sees as a rival for his dead wife's affection.

Lines 10-13:

These lines suggest just how striking the depth and passion of the image are, since apparently all previous viewers have wanted to know what excited the Duchess enough to inspire that look in her eyes. The Duke also betrays his possessiveness and desire for control when he comments that "none puts by / The curtain ... but I."

Lines 14-15:

At this point, Browning suggests more of the Duke's possessiveness, as he tells the emissary that it wasn't his presence alone that made his wife happy or caused the "spot of joy," which may literally have been a blush. The Duke insinuates that this blush must have come to her face from either being in the company of a lover or from her far too impressionable and undiscriminating nature.

Lines 16-21:

The Duke begins to offer his guesses at what, aside from some illicit pleasure, might have caused the Duchess to blush. Two readings are possible, turning on the reader's sense of how seriously the Duke believes in the monk's vows of celibacy. If the painter was not the Duchess' lover, then her nature was simply too susceptible to flattery for the Duke's liking.

Lines 22-34:

This section of the poem begins the Duke's long list of complaints against the Duchess. First and foremost, she was innocent, too easily pleased and impressed. He blames her for not seeing any difference between being the wife of a "great man" and: being able to see the sunset; receiving a bouquet from someone of status below the Duke's; or riding a white mule. While he thinks it's fine to be courteous ("She thanked men,—good!"), she gave all men the kind of respect that only a man with his family's rank and distinction deserves.

Lines 35-43:

Having recounted the Duchess's imperfections, the Duke announces that, even though her faults were many, he would not lower himself—"stoop"—by telling her what bothered him. Note how the Duke tries to paint himself as a "plain-spoken" man, one who has no "skill" in "speech." At this point in the poem, the reader may realize the Duke is well-skilled in the uses of language. The Duke explains that, even if he had the skill to tell the Duchess just how much she disgusted him, he would not have explained to her how and why her actions bothered him. On one hand, he betrays a fear that she would have argued with him: "plainly set / Her wits to yours." On the other hand, he explains that the very process of having to explain his feelings to her would have constituted a compromise (or "stoop") to his authority.

Lines 44-48:

These lines contain the speaker's final judgement on the Duchess. The Duke recalls his dead wife's smile, and how she never reserved her smile for him. The lines "gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" tell us that the Duke used his power to curb his wife's friendliness, but the words also leave the details ambiguous. At best, he may have restricted her behavior in a way that dampened her ardor for life; at worst, he may have ordered her assassination. The next lines, with the emphasis on "as if alive," underscore her death.

Lines 49-53:

As the poem draws to a close, the Duke redirects his attention to his upcoming marriage. He tells the emissary that he is certain his future bride's father will give him a generous dowry. The Duke, however, wants to be seen as a man who is more interested in his fiancee than in any money she might bring to their union. At this point, the reader is unlikely to trust these declarations and is likely to fear for this young woman's welfare.

Lines 54-56:

The poem concludes with the final image of a god, "Neptune ," taming a sea-horse. The image of the powerful god taking control over a creature like a sea-horse demonstrates the relationship between the Duke (Neptune) and the last Duchess (sea-horse). It is as if, by pointing out this sculpture to the emissary, the Duke is restating his power over his future bride, as well as his more general power in the world. The final lines emphasize another aspect of that power, showing not just the Duke's desire to possess rare objects of beauty, but also his ability to do so.

Themes

Pride

The speaker's overbearing pride—or in moral terms, his hubris—is incorporated into the very situation of Browning's monologue. In it, the Duke

Topics for Further Study

- Much has been said about the Duke's account of his former wife's fate: "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together." What precisely does the Duke mean by these lines? How can we tell? Why do you think Browning lets the Duke express the most dramatic part of his story in such brief and cryptic terms?
- The Duke reproaches the late Duchess' character, but the reader might come away from the poem with an entirely different view of her. What can we tell about the Duchess from the Duke's own account of her? What does his description of her "shortcomings" tell us about her, and what do they tell us about the Duke?
- Part of the poem's impact comes from the Duke's certainty that he has behaved properly. As an exercise, write a two-page monologue in which someone confesses to a crime for which he feels no remorse. Before you begin, consider your approach. What tone will your speaker adopt? What words will he choose to describe the crime itself? What justification can he offer for what he has done?

addresses an inferior, the emissary of a nobleman ("the Count, your master") whose daughter he intends to make his second wife. There are financial negotiations at stake—the matter of a dowry that the Duke intends to collect from the Count. In fact, the Duke seems in the process of acquiring in the next Duchess an "object," to use his own word. But the actual amount of money is not the real issue. The Duke suggests that among noblemen, whose behaviors are governed by "just pretense," no reasonable monetary request would be denied; the negotiations, then, are in one sense a mere formality. In a second sense, however, money functions symbolically, both in the Duke's mind and for the reader trying to understand the Duke's motives. In his world, after all, people can be bought and sold, and the terms of their existence can determined by those like the Duke who possess all the power in a hierarchical society. Thus, the negotiations are really about the conditions under which the Count's daughter will become the Duke's wife—conditions that amount to, the Duke suggests, absolute submission to his pride.

To stress this point, the Duke describes the fate of his former wife, his "last duchess." It is here that we see the juxtaposition of the Duke's corrupt pride and the Duchess' pureness. Though he describes her affronts to his arrogant nature, she comes across as a warm and lively woman, one loved by everybody for her ability to enjoy life. Yet her pleasant demeanor evoked jealousy in the Duke: she was "too soon made glad, / too easily impressed: she liked whate'er / she looked on, and her looks went everywhere." He found it insulting that she equated his "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name" with "anybody's gift." Clinging to his pride, however, he considered it a form of "trifling" to display his resentment or to discuss his feelings with the Duchess—it would have amounted to "stooping," and the Duke "chose never to stoop." Instead, he "gave commands," and the Duchess' "looks stopped altogether." Thus, the Duke felt it was better to dispense with the Duchess altogether than to live with a woman whose devotion was not—he believed—focused entirely upon him.

Art and Experience

The Duke's monologue both begins and concludes with the Duke drawing his listener's attention to works of art: first, the painting of the "last Duchess," his former wife; in the final lines, a sculpture of the sea-god Neptune taming a "seahorse." Because of this, the entire monologue—ostensibly about the failings of the late Duchess—is actually couched in the aesthetic terms the Duke applies to human relationships. But precisely what are those terms? On one level, they seem wrapped in the same corrupt arrogance that led to the demise of his first wife. As he exhibits the painting and sculpture, it is clear he wants the listener to admire not so much the works themselves as him. If they are beautiful, such beauty exists as proof of the Duke's excellent taste and his connections with the best artists of his day. His aesthetic sense, then, is equal to his ambition: he is obsessed with the ownership and control of beauty itself. This is evident in the way he describes the shortcomings of the former Duchess, who was beautiful but refused to be "owned" in such a way, and in his commentary on the Neptune sculpture, which he admires less for its intrinsic value than for the fact it is "thought a

rarity" and has been cast by a famous artist "for me."

On a second level, it becomes clear the Duke's refined taste as a collector bears no relation to the humanistic qualities of the art itself. In the sculpture, he misses the irony we perceive: that Neptune, "taming" a creature of natural beauty and freedom, is in fact symbolic of the Duke himself. He also fails to understand that his appreciation for the skill with which the Duchess has been rendered on canvas is incongruous with his lack of appreciation for the painting's real-life subject. In this way, he has not only assigned art a higher place than life—he has also credited to art the qualities it draws from life. Thus, he is able to replace a living wife with a portrait of one: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall," he says, "looking as if she were alive." While he reproaches the woman herself, he deems the painting "a wonder"—a form of perfection that, in his opinion at least, life itself cannot approach.

Style

"My Last Duchess" is written in rhymed iambic pentameter, which maintains an even beat throughout the poem.

Iambic pentameter has been said to be the most natural cadence of the English language. It consists of an iamb, which is two syllables: an unstressed followed by a stressed. An example of an iamb might be the words "a heart," drawn from the lines: "A heart—how shall I say? too soon made glad." The rhythm of the first two words can be scanned with emphasis indicating a stressed syllable, and an unstressed syllable:

a **heart**.

Pentameter means that there are five groups of iambs in a line of poetry; each group is called a foot.

"My Last Duchess" also uses rhymed couplets, meaning that every two lines end with a rhyme. For example, the first two lines of the poem end with the words "wall" and "call." The poetic device of the rhymed couplet, however, is balanced by the use of enjambment, which creates the more natural cadence of a conversation. This technique also helps to keep the even rhythm of iambic pentameter from sounding too monotonous. The poem interrupts itself—much as the speaker of the poem interrupts himself—by inserting a question here ("how shall I say?") or a parenthetical comment there "(since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)". This device also helps to illustrate how the Duke's true motivations are breaking through the surface of his everyday language.

Historical Context

Browning's poem, which is set in Renaissance Italy, may tell us less about the Renaissance itself than about Victorian views toward the period. The incident the poem dramatizes comes from the life of Alfonso II, a nobleman of Spanish origin who was Duke of Ferrara in Italy during the sixteenth century. Alfonso's first wife was Lucrezia, a member of the Italian Borgia family and the daughter of a man who later became pope. Although she died only three years into the marriage—to be replaced, as the poem suggests, by the daughter of the Count of Tyrol—Lucrezia transformed the court of Ferrara into a gathering place for Renaissance artists, including the famous Venetian painter Titian. As a result, Ferrara became exemplary of the aesthetic awakening that was taking place throughout Italy.

The term Renaissance, from the French word, actually means "rebirth," and the time to which it refers is characterized by cultural and intellectual developments as much as by political events. During the Renaissance, which is generally defined as the period 1350 to 1700, Europeans experienced the resurrection of classical Greek and Roman ideals that had remained dormant since the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century. Artists and thinkers of the Renaissance believed that classical art, science, philosophy, and literature had been lost during the "dark ages" that followed the fall of Rome. They held that these ideals waited to be rediscovered, and Italians in particular believed themselves to be the true heirs to Roman achievement. For this reason, it was natural that the Renaissance should begin in Italy, where the ruins of ancient civilization provided a continual reminder of the classical past and where other artistic movements—the Gothic, for instance—had never taken firm hold.

Especially in Italy, the artistic achievement of the Renaissance was facilitated by a system of patronage: wealthy individuals commissioned paintings, sculptures, and buildings to glorify their own achievements. The works of such artists as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Donatello come to us as a direct result of such patronage, and their visions reflect the ideals of the period. Foremost among Renaissance ideals was

Compare & Contrast

- **1842:** English social reformer Edwin Chadwick publishes "Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain." The report, which exposes the poor conditions and high disease rate among England's factory workers, shocks the public and raises the need for reform.

  Today: While the living conditions of workers in advanced nations remain acceptable, annual United Nations reports on conditions in Third World countries show workers experience ongoing poverty, disease, and occupational danger.

- **1843:** A British force of 2,800 men under Sir Charles Napier defeats a 30,000-man Baluch Army, forcing India's Muslim emirs of Sind to surrender their independence to the East India Company.

  Today: Great Britain relinquishes Hong Kong, the jewel of its remaining Asian colonial possessions, to the Republic of China. To many, the event symbolizes the increasing transfer of European power to other parts of the world.

- **1846:** After a series of crop failures, Parliament repeals the Corn Laws, reducing tariff duties on imported goods and opening the door to free trade.

  Today: Britain's political debate centers on whether the country should relinquish the pound in favor of the Euro. The single multinational currency is favored by the European Union, which proposes to make Europe a single economic entity.

that of humanism. Like the ancient Greeks and Romans, Renaissance artists and thinkers valued the condition of earthly life, glorified man's nature, and celebrated individual achievement. These attitudes combined to form a new spirit of optimism—the belief that man was capable of accomplishing great things.

But there was a dark side to the Renaissance, and people of Browning's era often took a dim view toward the era as a whole. In some ways, this view was a subtle acknowledgment of the Victorians' own shortcomings and fears. For instance, just as Renaissance humanism seemed to elevate man at the expense of God, the Victorians found themselves puzzling over God's existence in light of Darwinism. Similarly, the Victorians' own experience demonstrated that the high points of civilization and progress do not necessarily coincide with moral virtues. As England was fighting colonial wars and grappling with mass poverty in its factory towns, Victorians looked at the Renaissance for a sense of moral superiority. And they had certain justification to do so. For all its cultural achievement, the Renaissance was rife with corruption, perversity, and violence. The same power that allowed wealthy families to commission great art also enabled them to crush rival individuals or even cities, and nearly all the noble art patrons—including the Borgia family, of whom the historical "last Duchess" was a member—had murders to answer for.

Critical Overview

In general, critics have agreed on many basic interpretive issues about "My Last Duchess." William DeVane appears to voice common opinion when he characterizes the last Duchess as an obvious victim—as "outraged innocence" trapped in an age when "no god came to the rescue." Readers also easily agree that the dramatic monologue works ironically, presenting a meaning at odds with the speaker's intention: that is, the more the Duke says, the more he loses the reader's sympathy. Critics also concur that "My Last Duchess" exemplifies two important elements of Browning's talent for dramatic monologue: his ability to evoke the unconstrained reaction of a person in a particular situation or crisis and his use of history to provide the appropriate historical context.

In support of the first element, William O. Raymond, writing for *Studies in Philology* suggests that "My Last Duchess" is a "masterpiece" because it "fuses character and incident, thought and emotion." Raymond, as other critics have also argued, suggests that the poet uses dramatic monologue to create or isolate a single moment in which the character reveals himself most starkly. In 1982 Clyde de L. Ryals extended this assertion a little further, arguing that the Duke not only "tells all" in this unguarded moment, but further that he "attempts to justify it," revealing even more of himself in the process.

Many readers have also noted that the poet creates an important historical context for the Duke, and the values he reveals, by setting the poem in Renaissance Italy. Values that might strike us today and may even have struck Browning's nineteenth-century readers as unacceptable—possessiveness, haughtiness, love of power—could have been expected in a Renaissance aristocrat, thus accounting for at least some of the Duke's self-importance. Along these lines, several critics have praised the poem for its historical accuracy. Robert Langbaum, in his 1957 book *The Poetry of Experience; The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, contends that "we accept the combination of villainy with taste and manners as a phenomenon of the Renaissance and of the old aristocratic order generally."

Langbaum introduces a less evident point when he asserts that Browning's poem takes the reader beyond acceptance to actual sympathy with or admiration for the Duke. Langbaum acknowledges that the Duchess is the first object of reader sympathy—"no summary or paraphrase would indicate that condemnation is not our principle response"—but also proposes that the form of dramatic monologue disposes the reader to suspend moral judgement and possibly to identify with the Duke. Not only do we admire the Duke's power and taste, according to Langbaum, but we also have no choice but to be "overwhelmed" by his speech, just as the envoy is. Ryals echoes this reading in 1982 when he contends that, because the Duke "is a fascinating character, bigger than life," the reader must hold "two conflicting views of the same individual."

What Do I Read Next?

- *Robert Browning:* Robert Brainard Pearsall gives a substantive look at Browning's life and ideas, with continual reference to the poems themselves.
- Maisie Ward presents a colorful and readable account of Browning's life and times in *Robert Browning and His World.*

Criticism

Arnold Markley

Arnold Markley is a freelance writer who has contributed essays and reviews to Approaches to Teaching D. H. Lawrence's Fiction *and* The Journal of the History of Sexuality. *He is currently an Assistant Professor in English at Penn State University, Media, PA. In the following essay, Markley describes how Browning uses the form of the dramatic monologue to let the poem's subject tell a story while, at the same time, unintentionally revealing some unflattering personality traits.*

Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess" is a splendid example of the irony that a poet can achieve within the format of the dramatic monologue, a poetic form in which there is only one speaker. When there is only one speaker, we necessarily have to weigh carefully what he or she is telling us, and we often have to "read between the lines" in keeping an objective perspective on the story or incidents that the speaker describes to us. We can gather from this poem's setting, "Ferrara," a town in Italy, as well as from the speaker's reference to his "last Duchess," that the speaker in this poem is the Duke of Ferrara. Twentieth-century scholars have found a viable prototype upon whom Browning may have based this characterization in the figure of Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the sixteenth century, and whose first wife died under mysterious circumstances. But what kind of person is this Duke, and what exactly is the story of his last duchess? To find out, let's take a closer look at what he tells us.

First of all, it is evident that the Duke is speaking to someone, and that he is showing his auditor a painting. "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall," he says, and then explains that the painter, Fra Pandolf, "worked busily a day, and there she

stands." The Duke then describes the usual reaction that people have to viewing this painting—a reaction specifically to the Duchess' "earnest glance." He says that strangers often turn to him as if to ask "How such a glance came there," and then tells his auditor, "so, not the first / Are you to turn and ask thus." But has his auditor actually asked the Duke a question, or is the Duke simply making an assumption, based upon a look on his guest's face, that he is reacting to the painting as every other viewer has reacted to it? If he is jumping to a conclusion in the case of this latest viewer, then how do we know that he is right about other people's reactions to the painting? Perhaps he sees in other people's looks what he wants to see. We will need to remember this possible aspect of the Duke's character as we continue to listen to his story.

Next the Duke elaborates on his last Duchess' glance in the portrait, and calls it a "spot of joy." But it was not his presence only that caused her to smile in such a way, he says. The painter, Fra Pandolf, may have said anything from the simple "'Her mantle laps / Over my lady's wrist too much,'" to the much more flattering "'Paint / Must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat,'" and the lady's reaction would be this same, blushing "spot of joy." The Duke then tells us more about his lady's likes. She had a heart "too soon made glad," he says, and she was too easily pleased by everything she looked on. "Sir, 'twas all one!" he says to his listener, listing the things that pleased her: the Duke's own favor, a beautiful sunset in the west, a bough of ripe cherries from the orchard, a white mule she loved to ride—each of these things she enjoyed to the same degree, and each brought the same blush of pleasure to her cheek.

Finally we get to the heart of the Duke's problem with his former wife. She thanked people who pleased her, which was all well and good in theory, but she thanked them all with equal affection, "as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift." The Duke seems to have been offended that she did not single him out among the others who pleased her, and underrated his gift of a well-established name and proud family heritage. She smiled, he says, whenever he passed her, "but who passed without / Much the same smile?" And how did the Duke react to this? "Who'd stoop to blame / This sort of trifling?" he asks his auditor. The whole business is beneath him. Even if he had "skill / In speech," it would be stooping to address such a situation, and he tells his listener that he indeed does not have skill in speech. This statement is ironic, for the Duke actually seems to be quite a polished speaker, although he may be telling us a great deal about his personality and history that he may not have intended to reveal. So what became of this seemingly kind and happy lady, who evidently enjoyed whatever she experienced? "I gave commands," the Duke says, "Then all smiles stopped together." He says for a second time, "There she stands / As if alive," suggesting that the lady is no more. And yet, strangely, he shows no compunction for his actions.

As we make this discovery about the fate of his last wife, the Duke changes the direction of his speech to his auditor. "Will't please you rise?" he asks, and suggests that they go below to meet other guests, dismissing the difference in his and his guest's ranks by stating generously, "Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir." The Duke then provides us with a hint as to the identity of his auditor. He speaks to the man of "the Count your master," and hints that this Count's reputed wealth will surely provide the Duke with an ample dowry, a sum of money given by a bride's father to her new husband. These details indicate, ironically, that the Duke's guest is a messenger from a Count, and that his mission is to arrange a marriage between the Duke and the Count's daughter. At this point, do we believe the Duke when he assures us that it is not the money, but the Count's "fair daughter's self" that is his "object?" Or perhaps it is both, for the word "object" seems to be an important one in making a final assessment of the Duke's character. He is a collector of art objects, after all, and he seems to enjoy showing off his rich collection. After all, the whole occasion of his speech has been an explanation of the origin of a portrait of his former wife. Moreover, on the way out of his art gallery, he takes the time to point out one final art object to his guest: "Notice Neptune, though / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!" Once again the Duke takes the opportunity to show off a piece of art that he is proud of and to drop the name of the artist, hoping to impress his guest. The subject of the sculpture adds to our reaction to the Duke's story; here a powerful god subdues a wild sea-horse, much as the Duke has subdued his former Duchess. And as Claus of Innsbruck has caught this image for him in bronze, he has had Fra Pandolf catch his wife's "spot of joy" in a painting which can handily be hidden behind a curtain, at last giving the Duke complete control over whom his wife smiles at ("since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I"). The final two words seem

to say it all in summing up what the Duke values: after all, the sculpture of Neptune was cast "for me!"

Ironically, despite the fact that the Duke simply tells us the story of his first wife and how her portrait came to be painted, he manages to tell us a great deal more about his own personality. We can judge that he is a vain man who is quite proud of his heritage and his "nine-hundred-years-old name," and that he is quite proud of his art collection. As Neptune tames the sea-horse, he has tamed a former wife, transforming her uncontrollable spirit into an object of art and preserving her loveliness—"as if she were alive"—into a medium over which he can exert complete control. He is no longer subject to the "trifling" situation of her constant smiling, and he can now control whom she smiles at and who is exposed to her beauty. Much of the dramatic irony in the poem, however, lies in the identity of the auditor. The Duke has given all of this information about his personality and the history of his former marriage to an envoy who has been sent to arrange a new marriage. Some critics have even suggested that in this speech made to the man sent to negotiate his second marriage, the Duke is cleverly indicating what kind of behavior he will expect in his new wife. Nevertheless, knowing what we now know about this Duke, who would lead another unsuspecting young girl into such a situation?

Despite his wish to impress us with himself and to detract from his last Duchess' qualities, Browning's self-satisfied Duke ironically manages instead to paint her as a gentle and lovely person and himself as somewhat of a monster. He is truly a paradoxical, yet not entirely unappealing, character despite one's reaction to his morality by the end of the poem. It is hard not to be drawn into his skillful speech, which is carefully designed to impress his guest with his name and possessions and flatter the envoy into representing him favorably with his potential father-in-law. His pride in his painting, his willingness to dwell on the loveliness and virtues of his earlier wife despite his feelings about her, his generosity toward his guest, and his enthusiasm for his collection—stopping to comment on one last object before going down to "collect" one more wife—keep the reader guessing throughout the poem and constantly caught off guard by the revelation of one surprising personality trait after another.

Source: Arnold Markley, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Michael G. Miller

In the following excerpt, Miller discusses how the Duke reveals his enormous ego as he describes the painting of his last Duchess.

Few teachers of Browning's "My Last Duchess" fail to encounter a common undergraduate assessment of the Duchess as at best a flirt, at worst a faithless wife. Usually unaccompanied by evidence, this assessment is easily dismissed by a practiced reader, especially inasmuch as received opinion enshrines the Duchess as a model of spontaneity and innocent joy and a victim of her egomaniacal husband. While I believe the Duchess's character to be almost precisely what received opinion holds it to be, I would like to assert that the vague appraisal of the Duchess as flirtatious or unfaithful is a misappraisal only because incomplete. In fact, because the Duke is the source of this misrepresentation, ignoring it robs us of another example of his cunningly disavowed skill in speech and obscures Browning's art.

The misrepresentation of the Duchess begins when the Duke, anticipating the emissary's question of how the "spot of joy" in Fra Pandolf's portrait of the Duchess came to be on her cheek, readily explains its presence. Quickly he admits "'t was not / Her husband's presence only" that caused the blush, a statement superficially correct but whose negative phrasing forces a misconception. When he later reveals that a white mule or a calm sunset are presences that could stir his lady, one can see that "not her husband's presence only" has as its positive statement "The presence of many delightful things." But the positive rendering can also be understood as "The presence of men *other than* her husband," an implication accentuated when the Duke in the next line attributes the blush to Fra Pandolf's remarks. And it is these remarks—the way now prepared for them—that do most to taint the Duchess. While the first of these comments appears innocent enough—merely posing instructions to the lady—its syntax, as will be seen shortly, provides a telling complication. But the next remark from Fra Pandolf, that "'Paint must never hope to reproduce the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat,'" is an utterance no man could make directly to a woman without clear intention; if made directly, it can hardly be characterized as "courtesy," as the Duke quickly does. In fact, given the poem's social milieu, such verbal liberties with a Duke's wife would be unthinkable unless some encouragement prompted them. Thus artfully informed—and misguided—the emissary (and the

All in all, the Duke's account of the presence of the spot of joy in the portrait does not condemn his Duchess to a moral position tending to excuse his actions toward her, but instead reinforces the poem's greatest achievement: the delineation of an ego sustained by use of language both subtle and audacious."

naive reader) can respond in only one way to later remarks by the Duke that "she liked what'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" or that she ranked the gift of a cherry bough from some officious fool with her lord's "favour at her breast."

The truth of the situation is apparent when the portrait-painting scene is properly visualized. It contains not Fra Pandolf and his subject alone, but is presided over by the Duke, keeping a close watch over his Duchess as well as a sharp eye on the manufacture by a hireling artist of yet another object for his collection.

The Duke's presence there, fully in keeping with his character as revealed throughout the poem, accounts for the ambiguous syntax of his direct quotation of Fra Pandolf. In the first comment the Duke attributes to him, Fra Pandolf apparently speaks to the Duchess in the third person ("Her mantle laps / Over my lady's wrist too much"), a familiar convention of formality by which nobility is often addressed. This convention prepares the emissary to assume the recipient of the second comment also to be the Duchess, and to do so because of the continued employment of the third person. Moreover, because the Duke is relating Fra Pandolf's comment to the emissary, his words may be taken not as direct quotation, which they are, but as paraphrase, whereby the "her" is understood to be reportorial substitution for an original "your." Through such verbal legerdemain the emissary is doubly misled and, carried onward by the Duke's eloquence, is left with the uneasy, half-apprehended sense that Fra Pandolf's second remark was, as previously argued, a seductive compliment, likely welcomed and perhaps even encouraged.

But with the Duke present at the portrait painting, the compliment on the Duchess's appearance is addressed by Fra Pandolf to him and becomes a sycophant's flattery of his patron's choice in women. As such, it is flattery emptied of the sexual implications that the Duke supplies in his reporting. In fact, returning to the utterance, "Sir, 't was not / Her husband's presence only," one sees that the artistry of the Duke's admission stems from its being larded with innuendo and at the same time accurate: his presence *at the painting of the portrait* was not the sole cause of the Duchess's spot of joy, but even Fra Pandolf's fawning remarks contributed.

There is no need to think that the Duke is conscious of his implications: given his excessive pride, his refusal ever to stoop, he could hardly tolerate allowing another to believe his Duchess unfaithful to him, especially through his own revelation, however subtle. Yet the implications are not entirely accidental on his part and can be seen as one of the poem's great strengths. What are the snares of language in the service of the thwarted human will? As he believes is only his right, the Duke attempts to acquire another Duchess who will respond solely to him, and to that end he tells his last Duchess's story. In so doing he reveals a colossal ego. But through his very skill in speech he betrays that ego, for his subtle and unconscious slander of his last victim exposes at bottom an instinctive self-justifier, or at least a man predictably insecure behind a tyrant's swagger. All in all, the Duke's account of the presence of the spot of joy in the portrait does not condemn his Duchess to a moral position tending to excuse his actions toward her, but instead reinforces the poem's greatest achievement: the delineation of an ego sustained by use of language both subtle and audacious. Paradoxically, it is an ego exposed and undercut by the medium with which it seeks to dominate its world.

Source: Michael G. Miller "Browning's My Last Duchess'" in *The Explicator,* Vol. 47, No. 4, Summer, 1989 pp. 32–34.

Stanton Millet

Millet discusses the reality of the Duke's description of his Duchess.

As Browning explained to a literary group, the Duke's "design" in mentioning Frà Pandolf at the beginning of "My Last Duchess" is "To have some occasion for telling the story, and illustrating part of it." Although accurate when fully understood, his explanation is subtly misleading in that it permits commentators to dismiss the Duke's reference to the painter as an unimportant conversational gambit. A typical example is B. R. Jerman's recent suggestion that the "first mention of the artist is, as it were, bait. The envoy may have exclaimed, 'What a beautiful portrait! Who on earth did it?' 'Picasso, of course!' the Duke replies. The bait is out, and the Duke knows, from having stalked other prey, what questions such a man as the envoy would ask."

I contend that the Duke's reference to the painter is part of his answer to a definite aesthetic question with which he is directly concerned in all but the last few lines of his monologue, and that if one simply dismisses it, he fails to appreciate (1) the Duke's ironic misunderstanding of the proper relationship between reality and art, (2) the rationale of his attack on the Duchess, and (3) the degree to which, as W. C. DeVane says, he "reduces his Duchess to an object of art."

In the first place, whether he actually states it or simply implies it by his reaction, the envoy apparently poses his question after the Duke's first mention of Frà Pandolf, not before. The Duke and his visitor, on a tour of the palace, pause in one of the upper galleries while the Duke draws a curtain to reveal the fresco portrait of a woman. Identifying it as his "last Duchess," he remarks that he considers it "a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands / Worked busily a day, and there she stands." Either at this point or immediately after he has been invited to "sit and look at her," the envoy asks "How such a glance came there." If he questions the glance before the Duke begins to speak, the first four lines of the poem would be almost garrulously beside the point, but if he does so after the brief introductory remarks, the Duke's next sentence is perfectly apposite. "I mentioned Frà Pandolf on purpose," he says, "because every stranger who has been permitted to see this portrait has asked me (at least by the implications of his attitude) precisely the same question which you have just asked." What Mr. Jerman calls "the bait," then, would seem to be the portrait itself, and the identification of the painter a part of the Duke's answer to a question

Sexual jealousy and fierce, even psychotic possessiveness may well be his fundamental motivation, but his primary, conscious motive is to explain the contrast between the portrait and the living model."

which he has fully anticipated and is perhaps eager to discuss.

But the question is not "Who painted it?" It is "What accounts for this expression?" We must recognize that no matter what our conception of the living Duchess may be, the Duchess of the portrait is not laughing or even smiling. Her expression is specifically described as an "earnest" (i.e., serious) look revealing "depth and passion" set off by only a "spot / Of joy" in the "cheek." And it is as the Duke describes it. Phelps' argument that his description is "intense irony, in ridicule of the conventional remarks made by previous visitors" is clearly contradicted by the evidence. Every stranger who had seen the portrait was moved not merely to comment on it, but to question it, and always in the same way. If they were all merely uttering conventional praise or inquiring about the painter, why should they be afraid to speak, as the Duke says they were? There must be something in the Duchess' glance which infallibly calls forth a question about its sources, and it seems doubtful that a simple smile, or indeed anything less than the complex expression which the Duke describes, would be sufficient to do so in every instance. Even if one were to argue that the question is a strategic one manufactured by the Duke and imputed by him to the strangers and the envoy, the fact remains that he, at least, considers the glance remarkable enough to justify explanation.

As the Duke fully understands, the question stimulated by this intriguing glance involves not only the relationship between the portrait and the living woman, but certain conscious or unconscious

assumptions about that relationship. In asking "How such a glance came there," the strangers and the envoy show that they take the portrait to be a reflection of the Duchess' total personality, of her reaction to some specific circumstance, or of both at once. They further reveal that they do not consider the portrait an end in itself: they assume (since they are, significantly, strangers who did not know her) that the living Duchess was more interesting and perhaps even more complex than her portrait suggests. Having anticipated this question, the Duke had begun in his first remarks to the envoy to expound what he apparently considers a remarkable irony: there was nothing in the situation nor in the living Duchess' personality to correspond to the complexity of her painted expression. He mentioned Frà Pandolf because the painter was solely responsible for whatever is of interest in the Duchess' expression. That is why he considers the portrait "a wonder."

What has heretofore escaped notice is that his entire indictment of the Duchess is not a gratuitous attack, but the logical, fully developed continuation of this answer. Sexual jealousy and fierce, even psychotic possessiveness may well be his fundamental motivation, but his primary, conscious motive is to explain the contrast between the portrait and the living model. To argue that he denounces the Duchess *because* of "the depth and passion of her earnest glance" is to obscure the richest irony of his lecture. He is able to maintain his tone of chillingly casual objectivity because he is convinced that the living Duchess was quite unlike the portrait. The situation to which she was reacting was no more than a few trivial compliments ("stuff") uttered by the painter. She was not "deep" but excessively shallow and undiscriminating: "She had / A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed: she liked whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere. / Sir, 'twas all one!" This is proved to his satisfaction by her ranking of art, "My favour at her breast," with what he considers trivial natural delights—sunset, a "bough of cherries," a ride on a white mule. And he is perhaps more contemptuous of her taste than jealous of her person when he remarks that "she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift." As for her "earnest glance" in the portrait, that too was Frà Pandolf's work: the living Duchess, he insists, was a fatuously good natured woman who smiled at everyone who passed. She missed and exceeded "the mark" in so many ways that the Duke found her, as he says, disgusting.

It is needless to comment on the more obvious irony of this indictment. For most readers, the Duchess emerges as an innocent, admirable woman while the Duke unconsciously reveals his own shocking arrogance, cruelty, and emptiness. Not so obvious is the bearing of his answer on the problem of possessiveness itself—the degree to which he is successful in reducing the Duchess (or as he seems to think, elevating her) to the level of a work of art. The key to this question, kept by Frà Pandolf opens up two alternative answers. While we cannot know the portrait except in the Duke's description of it, we can legitimately ask whether it is a "good" or a "bad" likeness on the same grounds that we ask about the true nature of the Duchess. That is, has Fra Pandolf given the admirably ingenuous Duchess a conventional "depth and passion"? Or has he perceived in her a depth which was really there but which the Duke was unaware of?

If we accept the first hypothesis, arguing that the work is a typical court painting cynically calculated to please the Duke and perhaps flatter the Duchess, then the Duke's possession of her is more complete than anyone has realized. Since he has given "commands" which apparently led to her death, she continues to exist only as an artifact which he controls with a curtain. But most important, he (or at least his agent Frà Pandolf) has altered her nature to make her conform to the characteristics which the Duke values. In this, his taste is less than admirable: he places a higher valuation on an essentially unrealistic court painting than he does on living reality, and he regards a painting as "a wonder" simply because it flatters his prejudices. The other alternative, that Frà Pandolf perceived and caught the Duchess' true "depth and passion," may have equal support in the poem. In the course of the Duke's remarks, we become convinced that the Duchess was not really shallow and fatuous, and it is not difficult to believe her capable of the depth which the portrait reveals. At least one "officious fool" admired her, and it may be that Frà Pandolf also admired and meant it when he said that art could never hope to do justice to her beauty. Above all, the painting is apparently good enough to call forth an intense reaction from everyone who sees it. If it is indeed a true likeness in this sense, the Duchess escapes the Duke in the painting as she escapes the charges of his indictment. Her real depth of soul, caught in the portrait, is revealed to everyone but the Duke, and he, admiring the painting for its expression but failing to see that art in

this instance truly reflects reality, is again convicted of tastelessness and lack of discrimination.

In "My Last Duchess," then, the Duke's reference to Frà Pandolf is "an occasion for telling the story" in that it introduces a topic which the Duke wants to expound, and it is a means of "illustrating" his thesis that reality, the living Duchess, was infinitely less admirable and less complicated than the Duchess "painted on the wall." Others, particularly Hiram Corson, have noticed that "the Duke values his wife's picture wholly as a picture, not as the ... reminder of a sweet and lovely woman," but they have failed to perceive either the full implications and rationale of this choice or the extent of its contribution to the characterization and structure of the poem. Whatever else the monologue may reveal about character, motive, and action, it is presented as the Duke's fluent answer to an aesthetic question involving the relationship between art and reality.

Source: Stanton Millet "Art and Reality in 'My Last Duchess'" in *The Victorian Newsletter*, No. 17, Spring, 1960, pp. 25–27.

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Ode on a Grecian Urn

John Keats

1819

In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the speaker observes a relic of ancient Greek civilization, an urn painted with two scenes from Greek life. The first scene depicts musicians and lovers in a setting of rustic beauty. The speaker attempts to identify with the characters because to him they represent the timeless perfection only art can capture. Unlike life, which in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is characterized by "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" brought on by humans' awareness of their own passing, the urn's characters are frozen in time. The lovers will always love, though they will never consummate their desire. The musicians will always play beneath trees that will never lose their leaves.

The speaker admires this state of existence, but in the end it leaves his "heart high-sorrowful." This is because the urn, while beautiful and seemingly eternal, is not life. The lovers, while forever young and happy in the chase, can never engage in the act of fertility that is the basis of life, and the tunes, while beautiful in the abstract, do not play to the "sensual ear" and are in fact "of no tone." Filled with dualities—time and timelessness, silence and sound, the static and the eternal—the urn in the end is a riddle that has "teased" the speaker into believing that beauty is truth. In life, however, beauty is not necessarily truth, and the urn's message is one appropriate only in the rarefied, timeless world of art.

John Keats

Author Biography

Born in 1795, Keats, the son of a stablekeeper, was raised in Moorfields, London, and attended the Clarke School in Enfield. The death of his mother in 1810 left Keats and his three younger siblings in the care of a guardian, Richard Abbey. Although Keats was apprenticed to an apothecary, he soon realized that writing was his true talent, and he decided to become a poet. Forced to hide his ambition from Abbey, who would not have sanctioned it, Keats instead entered Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospitals in London, becoming an apothecary in 1816 and continuing his studies to become a surgeon.

When he reached the age of twenty-one, Keats was free of Abbey's jurisdiction. Supported by his small inheritance, he devoted himself to writing. Keats also began associating with artists and writers, among them Leigh Hunt, who published Keats's first poems in his journal, the *Examiner*. But within a few years the poet experienced the first symptoms of tuberculosis, the disease that had killed his mother and brother. He continued writing and reading the great works of literature. He also fell in love with Fanny Brawne, a neighbor's daughter, though his poor health and financial difficulties made marriage impossible. He published a final work, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems,* which included his famous odes and the unfinished narrative, *Hyperion: A Fragment.* Keats travelled to Italy in 1820 in an effort to improve his health but died in Rome the following year at the age of 26.

Poem Text

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and forever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Poem Summary

Lines 1-4:

The poem opens with three consecutive metaphors: the implied, rather than directly stated, comparisons between the urn the speaker is viewing and, respectively, a "bride of quietness," a "foster-child of silence and slow time," and a "Sylvan historian." Of these, the last is perhaps easiest for the reader to immediately comprehend. Ancient Grecian urns were commonly illustrated with scenes or subjects that varied depending on the era and style in which a given urn was created. While more ancient vessels featured paintings of war and heroic deeds, the one Keats had in mind probably came from the early free-style period. Urns of this era are characterized by scenes from religious and musical ceremonies similar to the ones described throughout "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Because of its subject matter, Keats's urn must date to before the fourth century B.C., yet the bucolic scenes it depicts have been preserved through the millennia. For this reason, the urn reveals to the viewer a "leaf-fring'd" bit of history: it is a "Sylvan historian."

More puzzling to readers are the first two metaphors. Each involves the idea of "quietness" or "silence" because the urn relates its story in pictures rather than words. But why is it a "bride of quietness" and a "foster-child of silence and slow time"? The latter may be because while the urn's creation was the result of a fertile union between an ancient artist and some experience that informed his work, the same artist is now long-forgotten and the experience long-ended. Thus the urn, his "child," has fallen into the custody of the ages—"slow time." People who look at the urn can imagine but cannot actually hear the musical sounds and the story it depicts. Moreover, while in its own day the urn was used by people in their everyday lives, it has since become an artifact, perhaps in a museum, that viewers inspect reverentially—in "silence."

The most cryptic meaning in these lines is of the word "still." Is it an adjective, suggesting the urn is "unmoving," or an adverb, meaning "not yet" deflowered or "ravished"? A dual intent seems to fit the poem best. While "unmoving" suggests the urn's static condition as an artifact, "not yet defiled" suggests that its beauty, though still present after thousands of years, will one day be destroyed. This points directly to a major theme of the poem: the painful knowledge that all things must pass, including (and perhaps especially) beauty. Though the urn is ancient and might seem eternal, in fact it remains subject to decay and destruction—subject to time, even if, in the case of an antiquity, it seems to be "slow time." The urn's perishability is made apparent by a simple understanding: one of beauty's qualities is that it is rare. Though many urns were created, only few survive, and while this contributes to the speaker's conception that the urn is uncommon and therefore more striking, it is also evidence that even ancient relics are not immune to time.

Lines 5-10:

The poem's dualities are further expressed in the sestet. First, while the urn seems both unchanging and perishable, the questions its pictures raise suggest both the eternal and the mortal. Though the urn expresses "a flowery tale" (line 4), the tale itself is unclear in many ways. Observing the figures painted on the urn's surface, the speaker cannot tell whether they are "deities or mortals," whether they exist in Apollo's valley of Tempe or the heaven-like but mortally inhabited region of Arcady. The characters may be "men or gods"—they cannot be both—yet the speaker's repeated question demonstrates he is unsure in his interpretation. Further, though the urn is marked by its stillness and silence, the activities it depicts are filled with motion and sound: a "mad pursuit," "pipes and timbrels," "wild ecstasy." Though the speaker cannot hear the music, he can see the instruments; though he cannot see the motion, the still representations force him to imagine it. Thus the urn possesses a dual nature. On the one hand, it is itself a symbol of the static quality of art. On the other hand, however, its painted figures represent the dynamic process of life, which art distills in "slow time" and often in "silence." This is the puzzling nature of all art: its viewer responds to it both as a work, which seems eternal, and as an experience, which he knows to be fleeting. Though he pursues meaning the way the males in the painting pursue the females, the meaning is "loth" to yield itself. In such a way, the urn has a "teasing" nature that brings about more questions than answers, for if the answers were easily available then art itself would have little reason to exist.

Lines 11-14:

In the second stanza the speaker turns wholly to the sounds and activities depicted on the urn.

Here he makes the distinction between ideal nature of art and the flawed, fleeting nature of life. Though he cannot physically hear the "melodies" the urn's characters play, "those unheard are sweeter" because they exist in the Platonic world of abstract forms. They are perfect precisely because they are unheard, because the "spirit" to which they appeal can grant them an imagined flawlessness impossible in songs perceived by the "sensual ear." If life forces imperfection on all things, art retains the ability to make—as Keats wrote in one of his letters—"all disagreeables evaporate." One such disagreeable is time. In life, where chronology is the rule, even the sweetest tunes must be brief. In art, however, the "soft pipes" can "play on" forever. Yet there is a paradox. What makes music both recognizable and beautiful is its tonal quality. The urn's musicians, however, play "ditties of no tone." While these songs may be ideal in their abstraction, they cannot possess the beauty of the real songs whose tones, however flawed, have at some point pleased the speaker's "sensual ear" and instilled in him the idea of musical perfection.

Lines 15-20:

By the sestet of the second stanza, the ode's treatment of time—the tension between the perishable and the eternal ("men or gods"), the static and the dynamic (the urn's stillness, the characters' "struggle" and "pursuit")—has resolved itself into the three central symbols of the poem: "the trees," which represent nature, "thy song," which represents art, and the "Bold Lover," who represents the most basic process of human existence, fertility. In life, time takes its toll in each of these areas. Nature changes, going through its seasonal cycles of death and regeneration. Art stems from both nature and the experience of life, but it does so in a way that, while more lasting, is actually neither. Finally, life, in all its splendor, is dictated by time: it is chronological, and its moments—such as those of love and desire—are transient, mutable, and therefore less perfect than either art or nature. On the urn, however, time is stilled. The melodist "canst not leave / Thy song," the trees can never be bare, and the lovers are fated to remain eternally as they are depicted, midway in the process of the chase, filled with "wild ecstasy" but never able to consummate their desires. But again, there is a paradox. Though the lovers are captured forever in a moment of supreme beauty—the moment before they are apt to be disappointed—they are also abstracted from the process of life. While life depends on fertility (the reason for the chase in which they are engaged), the lovers are in fact infertile. Through apostrophe, or the direct addressing of the inanimate "Bold Lover," the speaker hints at the paradox: "Do not grieve," he says. Yet the lover, because abstract and not alive, is as incapable of grief as he is of ever "winning near the goal." Grief is the negative side life's process: the painful result of love. Only living, fertile lovers can feel the weariness, fever and fret brought on by time, and while the speaker tries to imagine that the timeless world of the urn is the perfection of life, his observations suggest it is in fact the opposite of life and that his attempt must in the end be doomed.

Media Adaptations

- Both an audio cassette and a compact disc titled "Great Poets of the Romantic Age" is available from Audiobooks.
- An audio cassette titled "The Poetry of John Keats" is available from Audiobooks.

Lines 21-30:

While the second stanza establishes the three central symbols of the poem, there is as yet no order to them: they exist together in the same type of "wild ecstasy" as the lovers' chase. In the third stanza, however, the speaker clearly delineates a hierarchy among nature, art and life. This order is expressed in the first three couplets of the stanza, each addressing one of the three symbols. First is nature: if it is "happy," then art (here, "songs") must also be happy, since art reflects nature. If art is happy, then life (here, "love") is happy, since art also expresses experience. But what is meant by "happy"? Some readers might think the repetition of the word to be excessive—a sign that the speaker is trying too hard to believe in what he is saying. But we must turn to "Ode to a Nightingale," which similarly addresses the tension between time and experience, to understand the way in which Keats uses the word. In that poem, the speaker's heart "aches" for the nightingale's "happiness," expressed in its song. The bird's happiness is not of

the human variety, however: it is the happiness that comes from lacking the ability to "think" and therefore to be aware of time, change and death. It is the happiness of nature, which the speaker, possessing human consciousness, cannot share. This is what creates his ache. Though he wishes to fully identify with the nightingale, to fade with it into nature, he is incapable of feeling the bird's sense of "immortality," the real meaning of "happiness." We must suspect the word bears the same sense in "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Like the nightingale, the urn's abstract beings, their natural world and their artistic expression exist outside of time and are therefore immortal. The speaker comes closest to identifying with their "happiness" in the third stanza—thus, his repetition of the word. Yet the identification is fleeting. As in "Ode to a Nightingale," the experience overtakes him, he realizes he is detached from the urn's world he longs to be a part of, and the poem's tone shifts from ecstasy to alienation. Thus, the lovers' passion exists "far above," in the world of ideas rather than of life. The speaker's heart aches as it does in the presence of the nightingale: it is "high-sorrowful and cloy'd." His physical presence, the reminder that he is not abstract but real, enters the poem for the first time: a "burning forehead, and a parching tongue." After approaching the world of the urn, therefore, he quickly drops away from it and is left to reflect on the significance of the experience.

Lines 31-40:

In the fourth stanza the scene on the urn changes, perhaps implying that the speaker has moved to the other side of the vessel. The shift in subject matter suggests the poem's urn may in fact be a composite of different artifacts the poet observed: free-style urns of the type Keats seems to describe generally depict only one scene, running continuously around the circumference. The new scene shows a priest leading a heifer to sacrifice at some "green altar" not portrayed. Having come to the end of his attempt to identify with the secular, bucolic bliss of the lovers in the first three stanzas—having been left, in fact, "high-sorrowful" in the process—the speaker searches the urn for a different kind of immortality. Beyond the fleeting passions of life and the abstract perfection of art exists religion, which attempts to synthesize nature, symbol, and experience within a single overriding principle. Yet the urn's religious significance offers no more comfort than its eternal lovers. Represented by a "mysterious priest" of a spiritual practice long dead, the urn's religion has itself become art, eternal but eternally abstract. Lacking the proper context to understand the meaning of the priest's sacrifice, the speaker feels as desolate as the town "emptied of this folk." Thus, the predominant mood of the poem has become melancholic, its shift embodied by the emptiness and silence of the town. This silence is really the silence of the universe when religion becomes an antique artifact rather than a means of understanding the "high romance" Keats talks about in "When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be."

Lines 41-45:

By the final stanza, the urn has lost much of its vitality for the speaker. It is reverted from a "bride," "foster-child," and "historian"—all human personifications—to its objective identity: an "Attic shape." The characters are transformed from living beings to artistic renderings. As such, they are "overwrought"—either by the artist, who has portrayed them as larger than life, or by the speaker, who has elevated them to a significance they cannot possess. This term recalls the first stanza, where the characters were overwrought in a different way: with desire and ecstasy. This duality is part of the overall riddle the urn has become. Instead of granting meaning, it instead serves to "tease us out of thought"—thought being what divides us from nature and "eternity," what gives us the sense of our own mortality and dooms us to the world of weariness, fever and fret. But, the speaker suggests, we can be teased only briefly, and even then our deception is the product of our imaginations rather than of a "cold" piece of pottery. When the deception is ended, we return to reality disillusioned. As the speaker of "Ode to a Nightingale" concludes, "the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do, deceiving elf."

Lines 46-50:

If the urn has become a riddle to the speaker, the final two lines are equally puzzling to the reader. The urn says to man, "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty," which makes sense in terms of the urn's world. For the lovers and for the urn itself, beauty is the only measure of existence: they cannot conceive, as humans do, that in life beauty is often deceptive and truth often ugly. But for the speaker, the first five lines of the stanza seem to confirm his understanding that beauty has its false side. The "truths" of life—the sufferings of men, the atrocities of history—certainly demonstrate that what we know to be real can only occasionally be called beautiful. So what do we make of the last

line-and-a-half? Some commentators insist that the words after the dash are part of the urn's message: that punctuation has been omitted, leading to easy misinterpretation. However, it seems unlikely that in a poem as controlled as "Ode on a Grecian Urn" Keats would have left such a glaring flaw in such a crucial point. Other readers suggest the last words are the speaker's and that he is addressing the reader. Thus, the urn's message comprises "all that people needs to know on earth, and all they need to know." Yet this reading seems to contradict the entire rest of the poem. The speaker recognizes, after all, that he has only been "teased" into believing that the urn's beauty is truth and that what passes for truth in the urn's rarefied world can hold also true in life. The most likely answer seems to lie in the ode's consistent use of apostrophe—its manner of directly addressing the urn, its characters and its images. "Ye," then, must be the urn itself. Though originally plural, the pronoun had come to denote the singular "you" by Keats's time, and though the urn has been addressed as "thou" previously in the poem, the use of the word here would create an unnecessary awkwardness of sound: "all thou need'st to know on earth, and all thou need'st to know." Most importantly, if the speaker in the final lines is addressing the urn, then the ending retains a meaning consistent with the rest of the ode. For the urn and its characters, beauty is truth because they do not exist beyond the unthinking state of nature. Not only is the urn "on earth," it is made of earth: it is, like the nightingale, a part of nature. But for humans, truth is not limited to beauty—it is not all we need to know. Because of human consciousness we do not exist solely on earth. We perceive the abstract—the ideas drawn from the urn by the speaker—and we perceive the greater mystery, the "high romance," which places us beyond earth. Further, our awareness of time and of death forces us to search for truth beyond beauty, which can exist as truth only in the timeless world of the urn. Thus, the tone of the final lines seems one of mild remonstration—similar to "Cold Pastoral!"—for the urn's having attempted to "tease" the speaker into believing a truth only appropriate to the urn itself.

Topics for Further Study

- Consider a painting that you know, and write a list of questions about what is going on in the scene. What do your questions tell you about the artist? What do they tell you about the nature of art?
- Compare Keats's ideas about the scene painted on the vase with the ideas in W. H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," also included in *Poetry for Students*. What might Auden's speaker have to say about the person who painted the vase?
- Give an example of an instance in which you think Beauty and Truth are not the same. Write what you think might be Keats's response to your example.

Themes

Time

The main thing that captures the speaker's attention about this urn is that the figures on it are frozen in time in the middle of what they were doing and they will remain there, unchanged, for eternity. The "bold lover" will never kiss the girl he is pursuing, but then, she will never age either. The boughs will never lose their leaves. The piper will be "For ever piping songs for ever new," and the ceremonial procession will always be on its way to the sacrifice. Of course, these claims are only true in the imaginary sense, since there are no real lovers, trees, musicians, or procession but only a picture of them; so it is not that they will always be doing what they are but that they never have. In asking us to take the leap of imagination that would let us pretend that these pictures have real lives, Keats is skipping over one of the basic facts about time: time is motion. Another way to say the same thing is to point out that time is change. Age is not just a product of time, it is time. Time passes for people because their bodies wear down, but if that did not happen, time would still pass because they have done different things today than they did yesterday. When Keats presents the figures on the vase as having had life but being frozen in eternity, he is casually getting the reader to accept a bigger contradiction than it seems at first, because the figures actually do have some pull of time if they exist at all.

In stanza 4 Keats extends one half of his contradiction by speaking of a little town that is not even shown on the urn. If the ceremonial procession had moved, it would have come from this place, and if it could move, it would go home to it. The members of the procession, however, have never really existed anywhere except right where the poet sees them. By imagining another place in their world, he is imagining a change of time in their world, while also saying that everyone in their world is frozen in place.

Art and Experience

For almost two hundred years, critics have wondered what to make of this poem's last two lines. These lines sound convincing, but the ideas of "truth" and "beauty" do not really have anything to do with this frozen slice of life. In fact, Keats makes it sound a far cry from beautiful when he calls it "Cold Pastoral" in the middle of the last stanza. But the poem is not claiming that "beauty is truth" is all that *we* know in this world. Throughout the poem—from the very first word—, the speaker is talking to the urn. This form of poetry is known as an apostrophe. There is no reason to believe that the "ye" of the last line is any different. The crucial phrase is even introduced with "to whom thou sayest" and is put in quotation marks, indicating that this is all that the urn knows or needs to know. So "truth is beauty, beauty truth" only applies in the place where all activity is stuck in one moment. We can certainly see the beauty: the lovers are in love, the music of the pipe is sweet, the trees are always full, and the people attending the sacrifice have the joy of anticipation. But where is the truth in all of this? It is a limited truth. The poem draws attention to how many questions this urn cannot answer, and those answers are therefore not part of these people's world. The urn has no answer for questions about the people and place it shows or what the sacrifice is all about. These are facts that will be no more real a thousand years from now than they were a thousand years before Keats's time. One way of looking at the "truth and beauty" statement is to consider that the scene on the urn is true and beautiful because it is self-contained: it has no need for answers, and so it will always have found its truth, unlike real life, where new details always rise up and make truth and beauty elusive. This fits with the usual idea of beauty being at least partly a mystery, but we do not usually think of truth as only being true within a sealed, narrow context. The common factor to both truth and beauty in this poem is that they both occur when you know all that you need to know, regardless of what is happening around you. What Keats does not answer in this poem is whether such fulfillment is possible for a human being or if it can only happen to an inanimate object.

Love

The vision of love that this poem presents is not one of lovers coming together, as if love is all anticipation and is only ruined when lovers have a chance to stop anticipating and reach their goal. According to this poem, then, love is never a happy circumstance: either the lover is struggling to get what she or he wants, or else love is reached and therefore becomes less interesting. It is either untouchable or unwanted. Neither option seems very desirable, although the poem tells us that, if we were able to choose one, the eternal chase would be a "happy" state of affairs. The poem's premise that unrealized relations are the best is consistent with the idea that "unheard melodies are sweeter," making the imagination more responsible for happiness than anything that occurs outside of it. We cannot be certain, though, that this is what Keats meant, or if he was being ironic about the way society emphasized the pursuit too much. An artist with his extraordinary verbal ability might use a simple word such as "happy" once to express what is in the lovers' hearts, but there seems to be a little sarcasm involved when the same voice that has the agility to say "She cannot fade, though thou hast thy bliss" goes on to repeat with insipid insistent cheer, "More happy love! more happy, happy love! Either the speaker is chanting this way because he is caught up in the joy of the urn-people's love or he is mocking the over-simplicity of their situation. If his tone is actually mocking, and if he actually does believe that happiness and togetherness cannot exist at the same time, then the poem's message appears to be that both youth and pursuit are overrated.

Style

The ode is an ancient form originally written for musical accompaniment. The word itself is of Greek origin, meaning "sung." While ode-writers from antiquity adhered to rigid patterns of strophe, antistrophe, and epode, the form by Keats's time had undergone enough transformation that it really represented a manner—rather than a set method—for writing a certain type of lyric poetry. In gen-

eral, the ode of the Romantic era is a poem of 30 to 200 lines that meditates progressively upon or directly addresses a single object or condition. In addition to "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats wrote odes about the season of autumn and the song of a nightingale as well as about indolence, melancholy, and even the poet John Milton's hair. Keats's odes are characterized by an exalted and highly lyrical tone, and while they employ specific stanza forms and rhyme schemes, these can vary from ode to ode.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" consists of eight, ten-line stanzas, each following a single rhyme scheme that combines the quatrain of a Shakespearean sonnet with the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet. Thus, the first four lines of each stanza rhyme *abab* while the predominant rhyme scheme of the last six lines is *cdecde*. The reader will notice that the sestet's rhyme scheme varies in each of the first two stanzas: in the first, it is *cdedce;* in the second, it is *cdeced*. In these stanzas, however, the poem's order—the hierarchy of its three principle symbols—has yet to be resolved. In the third stanza, "wild ecstasy" yields to a controlled interpretation of the urn's representations, and from that point the sestets assume the traditional Petrarchan order.

Thematically, Keats attempts to compose the stanzas in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" are just as their hybrid rhyme scheme would suggest. In a Shakespearean sonnet, the three quatrains present some problem or question to be reconciled in the final couplet. In a Petrarchan sonnet, a similar concept is reconciled in the last six lines. Thus, in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the quatrain tends to present a problem or condition that is addressed, explained or elaborated in the sestet. Consider, for instance, the first stanza. While the quatrain tells us that the poet cannot adequately express the "flowery tale" depicted on the urn, the sestet reveals why: the urn's pictures raise a string of questions that language alone cannot answer.

Historical Context

John Keats is recognized by all as a central figure in the Romantic literary movement, and "Ode On A Grecian Urn" is considered one of his greatest works, although some of its elements are pre-Romantic. This brings up one of the biggest problems modern readers have in discussing the Romantic age. We cannot avoid talking about it and using the term to put historical literary figures in context with one another, especially not when we are discussing works of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, but the traits that we use to recognize Romanticism can appear and then disappear within any author's collected works—even within any given poem. There have been qualities of Romanticism existent since poetry was first written, and there are poets today whom we would call mainly Romantic due to their view of the world.

The period that we consider the Age of Romanticism was the time in history when most of the significant artists created works displaying these traits. If there could be a starting date put on this idea, it would have to be 1798, when *Lyrical Ballads,* a volume of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was published. These poems solidified a way of thought that had already existed in the atmosphere; it placed a high value on spirituality and nature. The works in this volume, the majority of them being Wordsworth's, made the artist the main focus of a poem. They also showing a renewed interest in human individualism, after poets of the Enlightenment of the 1700s had instead valued abstract, esoteric ideas such as reason and ancient history. Historically, we can see the ascent of the individual rising as an international concern in the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789, which both promoted the idea of democracy and respect for people regardless of their social position. The French Revolution led to anarchy, which might have made the general public around the world think twice about supporting the Romantic ideal of liberty, except that the anarchy led to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799. Napoleon named himself emperor and started expanding his empire in the early 1800s, which gave defenders of liberty an enemy to unite against. The fact that the Napoleonic Wars altered the balance of power between the three superpowers of the time—France, England, and Russia—and disrupted lives across Europe also helped the revolution in ideas proceed, since new ideas always flourish in times of turmoil. In 1819, when Romanticism and democracy were promoting ideals of freedom throughout Western culture, Keats wrote "Ode On A Grecian Urn."

Romanticism is a movement that we generally associate with literature, although traces of it exist in all arts and, to some degree, in all manners of thought. The Romantic frame of mind is chiefly emotional, not intellectual. In this poem, for instance, the interest in the urn is not expressed in an intellectual way, such as trying to determine its date

Compare & Contrast

- **1819:** Parliament passed a series of repressive laws known as the Six Acts to stop angry farmers who had been staging violent protests against the Corn Laws. The Six Acts put limits on public meetings and on journalistic reporting and gave police greater authority to search people and seize their property.

  1846: The Corn Laws were repealed: they had kept corn prices low, which impoverished many farmers and made them move to the city. As a result of this surplus of labor, England became a main force on the Industrial Revolution.

  1854: Charles Dickens's book *Hard Times* was published. The novel exposed inhumane treatment of employees in London factories, including child labor, and new labor guidelines were passed because of the book's impact.

  1945: Destitute because of the damage incurred during World War II, Britain elected a Labor Party government, which nationalized banks, utilities, and industries and implemented a welfare state.

  1979: Margaret Thatcher was elected English Prime Minister. In the next 11 years she cut inflation by 20 percent and privatized many of the industries that the government had owned since 1945.

  Today: England's healthy economy has made it a central force in the European Economic Community.

- **1819:** The first paddle-wheel steamship, the *Savannah*, crossed the Atlantic Ocean in only 39 days. The ship carried no passengers because people were afraid that the pressurized steam engine would explode.

  1825: An English inventor developed the first steam-powered locomotive.

  1843: The first propeller-driven, iron-hulled ship crossed the Atlantic.

  1903: Orville and Wilbur Wright flew the first successful airplane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

  1939: The first helicopter designed for mass production was invented

  1957: The first satellite, *Sputnik I*, was launched into space.

  1969: The first man walked on the moon.

  Today: NASA's Pathfinder Mission is successful as the rover Sojourner explores the surface of Mars and sends live video back to Earth.

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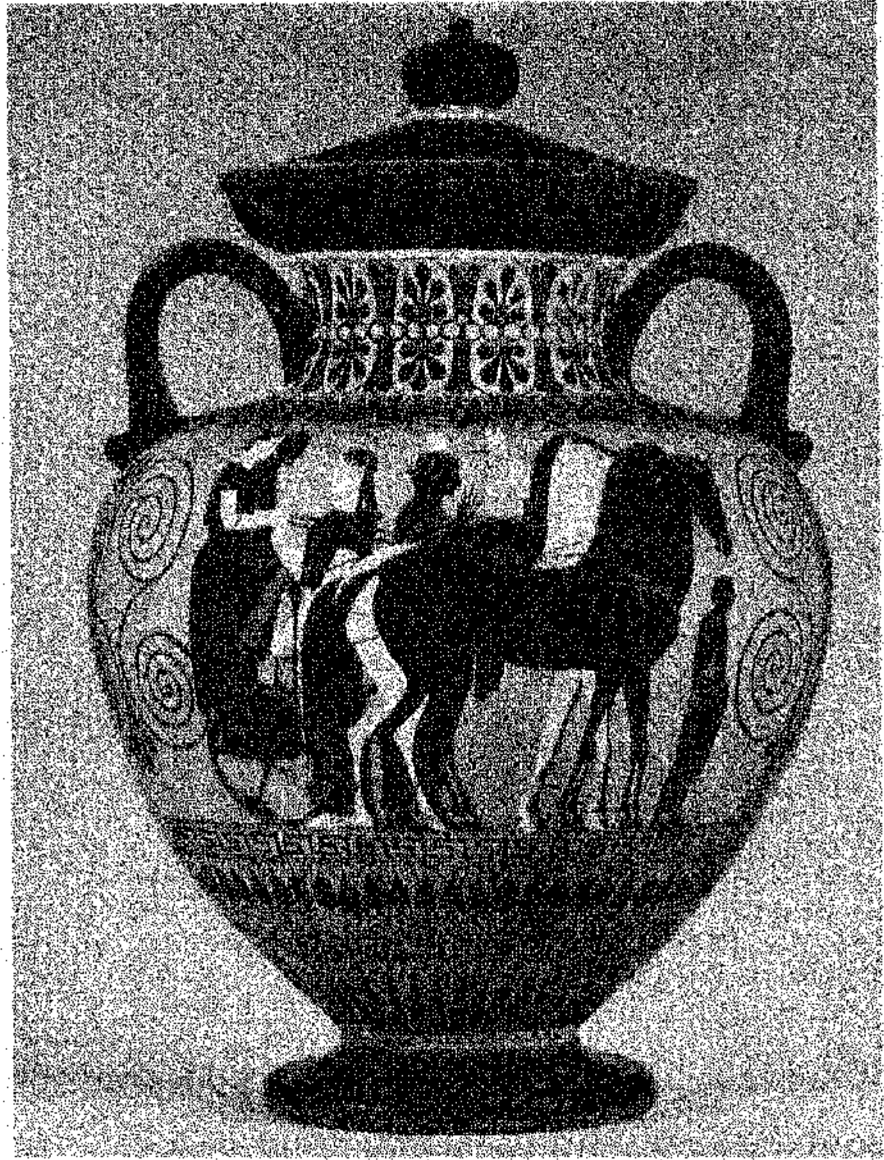
or history, but the speaker is writing about his direct experience concerning the vase. Concerns of Romantics included love, of course, since it is one of the most personal emotions the individual can have, and nature, since it is nature that individuals actually experience in the world. The abstract idea of God is not the direct focus of most Romantic works, but it is related to what Nature tells us about the spirit that runs through all things. One more theme that occurs often in Romanticism is the retelling of ancient tales, such as Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, which is presented through a mist of heroism and emotion, or Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shallott," which includes Sir Lancelot of the Arthurian legends. Most often, Romantic stories draw on their own country's history for sources. Focusing on subject matter from ancient Greece is a trait that we generally associate with the intellectual concerns of the Enlightenment, although it could be argued that this poem is about something that existed in Keats's modern time—that even though the urn was made in ancient Greece, the poem is not antiquity.

Writers that are included in the Romantic age include, of course, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats. Also included are Walter Scott, Lord Byron, Tennyson, and both Percy and Mary Shelley. In America, traits identified as Romantic show up in



A neck-amphora with lid (c. 540 B.C., attributed to Exekias); this is likely similar to the urn imagined by Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

the works of Washington Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allen Poe, and Emily Dickinson. Worldwide, we consider Victor Hugo, Henri Stendahl, Goethe, and Alexandre Dumas to be Romantics.

Romanticism did not die, but after Queen Victoria ascended to the throne of England in 1836, the mood of the country gradually shifted from individual self-expression to social formality. American Romanticism lived slightly longer, probably because formal society was not yet established well enough in the early 1800s to overtake it, and because the Transcendental movement, a subcategory of Romanticism, gained popularity with writers here, and the catastrophe of the Civil War in 1861-1865 distracted the nation away from lofty Romantic thoughts.

Critical Overview

Because of its many oscillations and dualities, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has produced a wealth of commentary, and it is probably safe to say that the final couplet of the poem has given rise to as many interpretations as any two lines in English litera-

ture. Of these, of course, we can provide but a sampling, and so to demonstrate the range of possible readings we shall offer summaries of three interpretations that run contrary to our explication. Cleanth Brooks, Jr., the most prominent of the American "New Critics," argues in a 1944 essay that the speaker in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is in agreement with the urn's truth-beauty statement at end of the ode. The urn's "flowery tale," its history "has the validity of myth," Brooks writes, "—not myth as a pretty but irrelevant make-believe, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception of reality." Thus, its message of beauty is also one of truth, "the only kind of truth we are likely to get on this earth, and, furthermore, the only kind we *have* to have." In an essay written six years later, Leonard Unger asserts that the truth-beauty statement is in keeping with Keats's view toward a higher truth through art. "Art takes its truth from life, and then returns it to life as beauty," Unger writes. "The paradox that 'teases us out of thought' is that in a work of art there is a kind of life which is both dead and immortal. But, a melancholy truth, *only* the dead are immortal." Referring to the famous watering hole of literati where Keats liked to debate just such issues, Unger guesses that "if there is a Heaven, Keats wanted it to be much like earth, with a Mermaid Tavern where poets could bowse 'with contented smack.'" Finally, Graham Hough, an English poet and opponent of the "New Criticism," writes in a 1953 commentary that while the truth-beauty message "is not all that we need to know on earth, and certainly not all that we need to know," the line-and-a-half that follows must be judged as "the expression of a moment of rapturous recognition of a beautiful object." He maintains that in Keats's parlance, "truth" applies to "that which has lasting value." Thus, the poet—through the urn—is saying that "beauty is 'truer' than love, pleasure and other forms of value, because they pass away while beauty can be embodied in a lasting quasi-permanent from." Hough argues that the pronoun "ye" in the final lines refers to Keats himself and other poets. Therefore, "that beauty is truth and truth beauty is all that the artist, as artist, knows, and all he needs to know for the practice of his art."

Criticism

Bruce King

Bruce King is the author of several books relating to literature and is a freelance writer and poetry critic. In the following essay, King considers and draws conclusions based upon the words in Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn," much like Keats himself meditated on the urn to explore his own emotions.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" was written in May of 1819 when Keats was 23 years old and his life was in emotional turmoil. In the previous six months his brother Tom had died, and he had met and fallen in love with Fanny Brawne who, at the time the poem was written, lived next door to him in Hamstead. It was a period of intense creativity during which Keats wrote his great odes; in them, he explored his emotions by addressing, describing and questioning some idea or symbol that he celebrated. Keats's odes are a form of meditative poetry. In meditation, a person thinks intensely upon and draws conclusions from a subject. The subject may be imagined in detail as if it were actually present. During a time when ancient Greece was being rediscovered through archeological excavations and travel, as well as in books and exhibitions of Greek cultural artifacts, Keats projected his concerns about living fully, love, art, religion, death and eternity upon a Grecian urn.

Because the urn Keats describes has been shown by scholars including Claude Lee Finney to be a composite of details from various sources, the poem is a commentary upon an imagined work of art. By writing an ode, originally a Greek poetic form, Keats is making his own claim to permanence. The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is Keats's own "silent form" meant to perform a similar function—"tease us out of thought"—as that of the original Greek urn, that, ironically, does not exist (unlike Keats's poem about it).

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" concludes with the urn saying "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and the poet commenting "—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." In themselves, such statements are close to nonsense. Truth and beauty belong to radically different realms, and there is nothing especially true about, say, a beautiful automobile or dog. We can test a scientific truth, but there is little to make us agree about the beauty of a car or animal. We say beauty is in the eye of beholder. Keats is using paradoxical language to make a claim for an alternative kind of truth. This claim makes sense within the logic of the poem, but it is also meant to have a wider application to how we view reality. The poem makes claims about the value and uses of art (and poetry) as represented by the urn, in contrast to other kinds of truth. These

other kinds of truth might be scientific, religious, or philosophical, but the poem says clearly that "on earth" we can not know anything more true than what we will learn from art and that such knowledge is sufficient. There might be other forms of knowledge after death or in some "other" realm, but they do not concern us and we are unlikely to know much about them while "on earth."

These are large claims for art, but what has been claimed? Stanza five says the urn "dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity." "Tease," with its variety of meanings ranging from tempt to mock, suggests that, like thinking about eternity, the seductiveness of the topic and impossibility of coming to any conclusion mean we shouldn't worry about it. The urn itself, however, has its own kind of eternity. It remains after "old age shall this generation waste." A concern of the poem then is aging, the passing of time, and death. "Waste" is a powerful word made even more powerful by being in rhyme position at the end of a line and being the last word of an introductory clause. The basic meaning of waste is consume, finish, or use up, but the range extends from ruin to turn into refuse or trash. Our lives not only pass, but at the end we become waste. The urn, however, remains—a work of art that speaks to others "in midst of other woe." As each life and generation suffers from pain and fears, the urn is "a friend to man" by offering its religion of art, its own kind of truth, and its own permanent portrait of human desires and activities.

We might say that the poem shows how in the nineteenth century some people were losing faith in Christian revelation. These people had become agnostic toward any "truth" and were seeking in art a substitute for the comforts of religion. It is significant that the work of art that offers such comfort is a painted Grecian urn. The vase (like a poem) has a shape or form, and it has a narrative (like a poem) that needs interpretation. The end result is the knowledge that art gives permanence to our feelings and desires. That the subject is a Grecian urn might well remind us that the early nineteenth century was a time of archeology, the collecting of the past, the rediscovering of Greece and the Mediterranean, and the high evaluation of Greece, along with Egypt, Rome and Israel as the origins of Western civilization.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is itself a well-formed work of art. It consists of five rhymed stanzas; each stanza has ten lines, and each line consists of ten syllables, usually of iambic pentameter. The feel of the rhythm is established in the first line: Thou still / unrav / ish'd bride / of qui / etness. The unusual stanzaic form seems to be derived from the structure of the sonnet that Keats had used earlier in such poems as "When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be." Instead of fourteen lines divided into a octave of two quatrains and a sestet of two tercets, each stanza of the ode consists of one quatrain of alternate rhymes (*abab*) and two tercets, printed as a single stanza. This speeds up the move-

What Do I Read Next?

- Keats's poetry is collected in a definitive edition printed by the Oxford University Press called *The Poetry of John Keats.* The first edition was published in 1939 and it was updated for the 1958 second edition (minor corrections are noted in the preface by H.W. Garrod).
- Well-known British critic John D. Jump published a short volume in 1974 called *The Ode,* which traces the history of the poetic form from ancient Greece to the twentieth century, telling readers just about everything anyone would want to know about odes.
- Another famous critic, this one American, is Cleanth Brooks, who published a book about poetic forms in 1947 called *The Well-Wrought Urn.* The title, of course, refers to this poem, although the author's study of Keats is only one out of eleven chapters. This book is invaluable to any student of formal poetry.
- For readers who are interested in both Greek mythology and modern literature, Lilian Feder's 1971 *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* looks mostly at twentieth-century authors, starting with Freud and Jung, and at how ancient stories are probably more "alive" now than they were for Keats. Poets studied include Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Auden.
- *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism,* a 1933 collection of essays by brilliant modern poet T.S. Eliot, has a chapter about Shelley and Keats that gives a smart contemporary perspective to the two Romantic writers.

ment, in comparison to the sonnet, from the exposition of theme during the quatrain of each stanza to its exploration and development in the tercets. The quatrain is balanced by the tercets, the first of which introduces rhymes *cde* followed by a tercet that closes the *cde* rhymes in an unpredictable order. The structure can be seen clearly in stanza one where the quatrain concludes with the idea that the urn expresses "A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:", a statement clearly concluded by a full colon. This is followed by two tercets beginning "What leaf-fring'd" and "What men," in which "what" is used as a short refrain. The tercets here describe what is depicted on the vase. If Keats wanted structural contrasts, he also wanted the stanza to have unity and to flow without the thought and rhythm being halted—except at the end of stanzas where the space between stanzas allows for the next stanza to start on a new note. Within each stanza, excitement builds up as certain words or phrases are repeated and develop an accumulative force.

The following stanzas are less obviously divided into contrasting sections, but stanza two has a colon after the quatrain, stanza three a semicolon, and stanza four a question mark. Artists work within, against, or adapt previous artistic conventions, forms and styles. English poets have often tried to find some equivalent of the mixture of passion, seeming freedom, and control found in the classical Greek ode. Keats's stanzas may be read as single sentences, with various clauses, exclamations and interjections, and the entire poem may be read as five sentences.

In the first stanza, Keats addresses the silent urn and asks it the significance of its decorations. In the second stanza, Keats addresses the decorations; their actions remain incomplete but, unlike those of flesh and blood, are permanent. The third stanza celebrates such permanence as a continual time of youth, strength, enjoyment, passion, happiness and love, unlike the unfulfilled and passing desires and pleasures of the flesh. The center of the poem brings to a climax this celebration of an idealized life: "More happy love! more happy, happy love! / For ever panting, and for ever young." An unusual intensity is created by the repetition of such words as "more," "happy," and "for ever" and by the suggestion of a continuing activity in "piping," "panting," "Breathing," "burning," and even "parching." There is a change in mood in stanza four, as the past is found to include disturbingly strange rituals, blood sacrifices, and ways of life we do not understand. The town is desolate in being empty, but it also seems dismally silent after the activity and joys of the previous stanzas. Keats does not indicate what we are think of this, but our thoughts might range from interest in other customs, frustration at not knowing more, to feeling that the past is no more a source of constant pleasure than the present.

No reading of a poem is complete; there is always something more to be said. Because the appreciation of beauty is subjective (in the eyes of the beholder) and shaped by conventions (what others teach us to recognize as beautiful), the criticism of works of art changes as a result of kinds of awareness, information, or assumptions. There is an old problem about the concluding two lines. Does the urn speak the two lines or, as is usually accepted, only "Truth is Beauty, beauty truth." If the urn also said "that is all / Ye know on earth, all ye need to know," it would not necessarily mean the poet agreed with what the urn said. Indeed, he could be ironic in giving the urn such a limited vision in which the only truth was artistic beauty. In his book *John Keats*, Walter Jackson Bate claims that the final two lines are similar to inscriptions addressed to passersby on Greek monuments.

While the ode celebrates the survival of the past it may also remind us of the limitations of the aesthetic in contrast to actual sensual experience. Many critics see the poem as filled with ironies (suggesting the opposite of what is said). How can Keats or the urn so praise beauty when desire on the urn is unsatisfied by sexual pleasure and when the world it depicts reminds us of death and destruction. Moreover the language of the poem seems excessive: "Ah, happy, happy boughs!.... More happy love! more happy, happy love!" If Keats indicates a distance between the serene, silent beauty of art and the pains, anguish, passions, and pleasures of the world in which we live, are the former necessarily superior as thinking about the art on the urn might at first suggest? As we read with more sensitivity and with more familiarity, we wonder whether Keats might possibly be suggesting that his poetry is superior to the urn which, remember, is also a product of his own imagination.

Opinion has surprisingly varied among critics concerning "Ode on A Grecian Urn." T. S. Eliot, Allen Tate, and others have argued that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" does not make sense. *John Keats: Odes*, edited by G.S. Fraser, offers a useful, brief introduction concerning the place of this poem among Keats's other odes and addresses problems of interpretation. One problem concerns

who says what in the final two lines. Critics now usually agree that the 1820 version of the poem is correct; here the urn only says "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," and the rest of the two lines is Keats's commentary. Does Keats agree with the urn, or might he be ironically implying a limitation to the urn's vision of the world? Is it enough to turn the acts and passions of life into permanence through art? Is it enough that "she can not fade, though thou hast not thy bliss"? Even the "still unravish'd bride of quietness" in line one raises questions. Might it eventually be ravished, might Keats's poem about it be a kind of ravishing of quietness and silence?

Source: Bruce King, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

To accept the urn's beauty alone, to use it as an escape from the real world and its sorrows and suffering, is to be drawn into the urn's marble coldness and left there without a soul."

James Shokoff

In this essay, Shokoff offers his views on understanding Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

Interpreting the beauty-truth identification in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has become virtually an industry unto itself in the past century and a half; yet, with all of the sensitive, brilliant, and sometimes ingeniously inventive readings the poem has received, the equation that has been its most attractive problem remains an unresolved mystery. Some have seen the closing epigram as an artistic blemish in an otherwise masterful poem; others have modified that stand by calling the last lines a "brilliant failure" that is a statement of faith in an ideal, made against persistent doubts from the real world. More recently, critics have tended to agree that the identification is not a weakness of the poem, but have differed in explaining its significance. Is the poem ultimately a poetic expression of Keats's idea that the happiness we know on earth will be "repeated in a finer tone" in a spiritual life hereafter, or is it a rejection of too exclusive a trust in the permanence of the visionary or spiritual world and a consequent affirmation of process in the actual world? Certainly, no commentator can hope to settle the question once and for all, but perhaps a fresh look will add some useful complexity to our understanding of the poem.

In this essay, I shall join with those who agree that the beauty-truth identification is a consistent, meaningful conclusion to the poem and with those who believe that Keats is, in his greatest poetry, less yearning after an ideal than recognizing and affirming the value of the real world in which he and we all live. The poet's progress toward this conclusion can be described as an attempt to penetrate the hard surface of the urn and to reach and understand its essence. The urn is clearly more than a marble vase: the poet is, at first, concerned mainly with its legend, and the essence he seeks is spiritual rather than substantial. The urn is to him a supernatural object, because it is removed from time and its tale is immutable and imperishable. It is, moreover, a "foster-child" rather than a natural one, and its haunting, leaf-fringed legend is "All breathing human passion far above." Its figures are deities or mortals, but, even if they are only mortals, their residence in Tempe or Arcady gives them a mythological status that is reinforced by their inclusion in the urn's "legend." The absence of a comma where one might be expected—and, indeed, where one appears in the *Annals of the Fine Arts* version of the poem—offers another suggestion that the urn, for the poet, is removed from a natural context. In the first line, "still," not followed by a comma, can function as an adverb as well as an adjective, and adverbial "still" underscores the unnatural state of the bride whose marriage has never been consummated.

"Unnatural" is not, of course, generally taken as synonymous with "supernatural," but in this poem the two are deliberately brought together. The apprehension of the timeless urn is couched in natural terms. In his mind, the poet animates the figures and tries to understand their existence by relating it to real life and the natural world. But, in so doing, he uses repeatedly the language of negation. The bride is "unravish'd"; the music of the urn is "unheard" and has "no tone"; the "Fair youth" can never leave his song, nor can the trees ever be bare. The "Bold Lover" can never kiss his beloved, and she, in turn, can never fade. There-

Some have seen the closing epigram as an artistic blemish in an otherwise masterful poem; others have modified that stand by calling the last lines a "brilliant failure" that is a statement of faith in an ideal, made against persistent doubts from the real world."

fore, the lover, who has not his bliss, should not grieve. The "happy, happy boughs ... cannot shed / [their] leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu," and the "happy melodist" is "unwearied" of piping his songs. Other negations of sorts are the paradoxes, observed by Cleanth Brooks, of the "Sylvan historian" who tells a "tale" rather than records history and the silent urn that can express itself "more sweetly than our rhyme." The supernatural and the natural are, thus, brought together of necessity. The poet's best expression—perhaps his only comprehension—of the world of supernature is to attempt to naturalize it, and, when he does, he finds that it is unnatural and something apart from the actual world in which he lives.

At the same time, the supernatural world of the urn is attractive. Its tale is "flowery" and sweeter than the poet's rhyme; the figures' lives are lived in a "wild ecstasy"; and their music is sweeter than any known to the sensual ear. Love and the fairness of beauty are everlasting, and the second and third stanzas of the poem ring with words of joy: "fair," "kiss," "bliss," "love" (three times), "happy" (six times), "new," and "warm." Despite the poet's awareness of the unnaturalness of supernature, he sees its beauty and feels its lure.

At this point, one might jump ahead to the beauty-truth equation and conclude that Keats is expressing the same thoughts he had related in a letter to Benjamin Bailey: "What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not.... We shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated.... Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human Life and its spiritual repetition." In perceiving the beauty of the urn, the poet, according to this interpretation, is also perceiving truth, and the truth is that the ideal, permanent world he sees in the urn is a preview of a better world in the afterlife. But one should not fail to note that in his letter Keats calls these thoughts "favorite Speculation[s]" and, in looking back some three years later, likened his state of mind in 1817 to "a pack of scattered cards." As Jack Stillinger warns persistently in his writings on Keats, neither the poet's theory of life nor his theory of art was fixed in 1817. More to the point, if only because closer in time, is the "vale of Soul-making" letter to George and Georgiana Keats written between February and May 1819 and completed possibly just weeks or days before the composition of the "Ode." There Keats says:

> The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is "a vale of tears" from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscribe[d] straightened notion! Call the world if you Please "The vale of Soul-making" Then you will find out the use of the world ... how then are Souls to be made?... How, but by the medium of a world like this?... Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?

To be sure, Keats also says, "I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive," but these are, nevertheless, his working thoughts at the time he was writing the "Ode." The point is that in this letter Keats is turning to the natural world as the essential reality of life, as the only place wherein his basic intelligence can be fulfilled and grow into a soul.

Returning to the poem, one can see as it develops the same leaning that Keats describes in the Soul-making letter, away from the empyreal world and toward the natural world. Despite the poem's negations and ambivalence, the emphasis of the first three stanzas is on the joy and beauty of the supernatural world of the urn. At the end of the third stanza, however, there is a sharp turn. From the ideal world's lover "For ever panting, and for ever young," the poet takes a further and firmer step toward the natural world than simply the negations applied to his earlier images of supernature. Although the love displayed on the urn is

> All breathing human passion far above,
> That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
> A burning forehead, and a parching tongue,

these painful sensations are the undeniable and inescapable conditions that follow the experience of human love, and the man who would avoid them must perforce forego human love. Abstinence would, of course, be desirable if one could share in the love of the ideal world, but, as the poet implies with his negative descriptions of supernature, the ideal world is unnatural and, therefore, beyond human achievement.

In the fourth stanza, while the attempted naturalization of supernature continues, the emphasis clearly shifts from the beauty of the urn's world to the truth of the real world. The poet is still lured by the legend: he now sees a "green altar" and a lowing heifer with its "silken flanks" dressed in "garlands." But the priest who is leading the procession is "mysterious," and the lowing becomes ominous when one realizes that the procession is part of a sacrificial ritual and that the animal is doomed. The poet's focus is moving from the urn's ideal world and its joy and beauty to the ironic implications of the legend and the pain and truth of reality. And his next vision is not on the urn at all. Rather, it imaginatively extends the marble legend to include the unseen town from which the figures on the urn have come. The town is "emptied," "silent," and, finally, "desolate." But it is also a necessary addition to the supernatural world naturalized, for, in referring the ideal to real life, the poet must recognize the town's existence. Its desolation is the inescapable, painful price for the happiness and "wild ecstasy" of the legend.

Like "forlorn" in "Ode to a Nightingale," "desolate" rings through the poet's visionary flight to toll him back to his earthly humanness, and his return is marked by an altered perception of the urn. No longer personified as a "bride," "foster-child," and "historian," the urn that reveals only the joy of an idyllic world becomes an "Attic shape," a "Fair attitude," and a "silent form." The world of the urn is beautiful, certainly, as these last three adjectives suggest. But the nouns that they modify are lifeless, and the legend becomes a "Cold Pastoral" for those who allow its beauty to "tease [them] out of thought." To accept the urn's beauty alone, to use it as an escape from the real world and its sorrows and suffering, is to be drawn into the urn's marble coldness and left there without a soul. "Thought" here is consciousness of the "World of Pains and troubles," attention to what Keats called "the Minds Bible." And, indeed, the last sentence in the poem begins with a reminder that the human condition, unlike the urn's, is bound to time and comes at last to waste and woe.

In what sense then, one must ask, is this lifeless and ultimately deceitful urn "a friend to man"? The answer lies in what the urn says to man at the end of the poem. Various readers have given differing interpretations of who says what to whom in these final two lines, and the textual evidence is strong for several views. The present reading of the poem, however, takes the lines as a unified statement, interpreted by the poet, made to man by the urn. As a "silent form," the urn can, after all, speak only through the poet's imagination. The message, therefore, draws its meaning and value from what the poet has learned in his attempts to penetrate the urn's hard surface or, to put it another way, to naturalize supernature.

And the poet has learned much from his efforts. To begin with, he recognizes that the urn is an alluring thing of beauty. Its happy pastoral scene is rich and inviting. But the poet's attempts to enter this idyllic, supernatural world are frustrated by his humanness and his unbreakable ties to the natural world. He can try to understand the urn's legend only by relating it to the world of his experience, and, when he does, he discovers that the atmosphere of the ideal world is too rare for him and finally too cold. This is not to say that the poet rejects the urn and its beauty. Rather, he rejects them as an absolute that can exist in isolation. Set in the context of real life, the idea of beauty demands the completion provided by a contrary, and, in this case, the contrary is desolation, waste, and woe. The urn is a friend to man, then, because of its totality—not its beauty alone, but also its implicit truth that a human being cannot live by beauty alone and still develop a soul. The beauty-truth equation is not mathematically exact. It is an equation of completion. Beauty does not *equal* truth, but the one cannot exist on earth without the other. Where there is beauty, there is also truth; where there is warmth, there is also cold; where there is joy, there is also pain and sorrow.

It is significant that the poet reverses the equation as well, and the repetition is not wasted. If beauty is truth, if joy requires pain, then so is truth beauty and so does pain require joy. If passion in real life "leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd," it is because the earthly lover has known a joy of fulfillment, or at least its possibility, that the figures on the urn will never know. The poem, therefore, does not end with equivocation or with mere longing after an unattainable ideal. The meaning of

Art is not life but can give meaning to life, provided we remember that it has no meaning apart from life, provided we do not attempt to turn it into some transcendental absolute."

the beauty-truth equation goes much deeper. Ultimately, the urn's message is a validation of the miseries of human life and an assertion that these miseries are necessary for attaining what Keats called "Soul." The equation may not be all that man needs to know on earth, but, properly understood, it is a great deal, and perhaps all that is necessary to make inevitable the process of Soul-making.

Source: James Shokoff "Soul-Making in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" in *Keats-Shelley Journal,* Vol. XXIV, 1975, pp. 102–7

Jean-Claude Salle

In the following excerpt, Salle contends that "the Ode presents a retrospective of Keats's thought, submitting early beliefs to the test of mature reflections."

A poem of symbolic debate which ends on an explicit abstract statement, the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" raises a special critical problem. The poem is at once too limited and too rich a context to define what Keats meant by "beauty" and "truth," abstractions with a wide range of possible references. Scrupulous readers, who take care not to view the final aphorism in the light of their own preconceptions, who decline—in the interest of austere critical purity—the help which they might receive from Keats's other writings, run the risk of finding the Urn's message "meaningless," as T. S. Eliot illustrates by his famous throwing up of hands. A recent example may be found in John Jones's admirable book where the close of the poem is described as an "opaque and almost featureless assertion," "gummed hopefully on to an alien substance." In view of these difficulties, the only way of restoring the integrity of the Ode is to place its concluding statement within the broader context of Keats's poems and letters.... The present reading is proposed in the hope that it help to elucidate the complex meaning of a stanza whose obscurity is largely due to the extreme condensation of Keats's thought.

There are three main difficulties in stanza V. Who says what to whom in the last two lines? What do "beauty" and "truth" mean? What connections should be established between the final statement and the rest of the poem? In the absence of autograph evidence, and since none of the various readings can be conclusively proved to be Keats's own, the punctuation of lines 49–50 can only result from an interpretive decision based on a critical analysis of the poem's overall meaning. The view adopted here is that the two lines are addressed to "man" by the Urn, an opinion which has been steadily gaining ground in recent years. Additional arguments in its favor will be found in the answers offered here to the last two questions.

This essay would contend that the Ode presents a retrospective of Keats's thought, submitting early beliefs to the test of mature reflections. The figures depicted on the Urn at first suggest to the poet that man's ability to idealize earthly beauty is the intimation of a form of immortality consonant with the heart's desires. In stanzas II and III, Keats's imagination rediscovers, with mounting enthusiasm, the possibility of believing in its own secret dream of an "immortality of passion." While the imaginative trance lasts, beauty and truth appear to be no farther apart than the temporal and eternal aspects of the same ultimate reality. Stanza IV then reveals that this belief, on which Keats based his most ambitious conception of art, will not stand the test of human logic. Stanza V first acknowledges the impossibility of asserting the absolute equivalence of beauty and truth, then controls the anguish resulting from this admission by turning to a greatly enriched form of Keats's creed in *Endymion.* Imaginative experience, more openly than in the "Ode to a Nightingale," is recognized as an illusion devoid of metaphysical validity. But, in an abrupt turn, balancing the wish to believe against an awareness of the limitations of belief, the poet finds grounds for accepting the "pious frauds" of art in the very unknowableness of truth.

Thus the final stanza of the Ode brings together two of Keats's early justifications of art: the conception, which may have been part of Keats's Wordsworthian heritage, that beauty is the sensu-

ous form of truth, and the notion that beauty is a consolation for life's sufferings. By presenting, in the Ode, the former as the point of view of art, whose validity is limited to the aesthetic realm, Keats turns it into a poetic faith in favor of which the Urn begs us to suspend our disbelief. The aestheticism of *Endymion* is thus placed on a basis compatible with Keats's mature skepticism and acquires seriousness from its being confronted with a lucid realism. But the transcendental vindication of art is renounced with melancholy reluctance.

It has often been remarked that the very ambiguity of the Urn makes it peculiarly appropriate to serve as a focus for Keats's reflections on the meaning of imaginative experience. Indeed it would seem that its ambiguity is that of the poetic trance, leaving the mind in doubt whether it has been moved by a meaningless emotion or granted a glimpse of heaven. A temporal object which in a way is independent of time, the Urn objectifies the ambiguity of Keats's "sensations." In stanza I it is seen as a messenger from eternity, as an "ethereal thing," to borrow Keats's paradoxical phrase, that is, a thing impregnated by spirit. Because the spiritual is engraved in its flanks, the Urn is one of the objects which mysteriously transcend earthly limits, and which, in the language of *Endymion*, "Can make a ladder of the eternal wind." It hovers, that is, between heaven and earth, moving from the sensual to the spiritual with the nimble ease of angels on Jacob's ladder. At the time of *Endymion*, the existence of such mediators was one of the tenets of Keats's religion of beauty; in May 1819, his faith was shaken by doubts....

The initial question in stanza I is an invocation to the "Cherub Contemplation," an incantation designed to induce the trance-like mood which will enable the poet to hear the music in the Urn's silence. Keats is creating in himself the imaginative receptiveness ... as the first step on the way to "happiness." Since imaginary scenes can be visualized with the vividness of actuality, the mind can extend its scope to embrace experiences which bodily limitations would preclude it from knowing; its condition then becomes that of a "floating spirit". The first stanza of the Ode moves toward the depersonalization of imaginative ecstasy.... Keats was both aware of the psychological nature of this momentary transcendence and tempted to grant it metaphysical validity. Analysis reveals that such phrases as "our state / Is like a floating spirit's" can be read in a psychological, as distinguished from a metaphysical, sense. But their value for Keats was that they left the matter....

In the Ode, as in the letter to Bailey of 22 November 1817, the praise of "essential Beauty" is what allows Keats to elaborate the representation of eternity which lies at the center of the Ode and indeed of his whole poetic universe. The recurrence of this mental process is not fortuitous: the meaning of the beauty-truth equation can best be approached by bringing to light the relation which it bears to Keats's eternity myth....

The implicit starting-point of Keats's reflections in the letter is that the human mind uses natural beauty "as materials to form greater things—that is to say ethereal things." Out of the raw material of sensation, the imagination creates a quintessential abstract, purified from its grosser material aspects, comparatively independent of space and time, and refined into greater intensity. Keats, as we have seen, uses the adjective "ethereal" to qualify these productions of man's spirit, creations which combine the actual and the ideal. Indeed it seems that in Keats's usage the "ethereal" often refers to what we can know of the ideal here and now. The spiritual nature of the human mind is proved by this mental alchemy which is an "intimation of immortality." Since the imagination is able to subtilize sensation, to put it "into etherial existence," since it can endow sensuous delights with a degree of permanence, earthly life must be the reflection of a finer world which we shall know in the hereafter. This first hypothesis is used to support "another favorite Speculation" of the poet's: eternal bliss will be the repetition of our earthly joys "in a finer tone."...

As far as it can be reconstructed, Keats's argument in the letter runs briefly like this: if "essential Beauty" is a transient apprehension of heavenly bliss, logic has it, it seems, that eternal life must be "the redigestion of our most ethereal Musings on Earth"; one cannot turn beauty into a spiritual principle without postulating at the same time that eternal life is the quintessential continuation of natural existence. With such premises in mind, truth, that is, the ultimate meaning of life, cannot be essentially different from beauty; it is rather the transposition of earthly beauty into "a finer tone." In November 1817 Keats rejoiced to find that each of his "favorite Speculation[s]" seemed to be complementary to the other; moreover, their reciprocal fitness justified his conception of a paradoxical reconciliation of time and eternity. In the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" the poet's analogical imagination attempts to conceive images of such a nature as would substantiate his eternity myth. The last two stanzas express the disenchantment of a mind dis-

One of the ironies of literary fame is that the Ode should so often have been read as a manifesto of unqualified Aestheticism: for it does not say that beauty is the refuge of those who do not think, but the comfort of those whom thought has bruised."

covering that it had enclosed itself within the magic circle of a paralogism.

As it contemplates the figures on the Urn, Keats's imagination gradually conjures up a vision of eternity which is consistent with his speculations of 1817, of whose validity the Urn seems to afford objective proof. The artist's skill has included poised motion within the fixity of marble; the Urn has reconciled changelessness with life. The figures on its flanks appear to know the "eternal Happiness" of sensuous delights etherealized into suspended imminence. "For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd," their sensations unite the full-blooded feel of life with freedom from change and satiety. Intensity knows no decay in this timeless world. "An immortality of passion," Keats's most cherished dream in *Endymion,* seems no illusion within the limits of stanza III.

This is a "fine isolated verismilitude," one of the "halfseeing[s]" which Keats was ready to accept in his "negative capability" mood. But at the end of stanza III, as every reader knows, the "disagreeables" of human experience claim to be taken into account. The explicit opposition between "human passion" and its artistic representation breaks the spell of imaginative reverie.

Stanza IV is the result of a lapse into "consequitive reasoning." As in the preceding stanzas, the poet's imagination conceives an act eternally about to happen, thus miraculously poised between eternity and time. The figures are seen "*coming* to the sacrifice," but then the imagination leaps from arrival to departure in an act which seems to repeat the process of stanza II. To create a past for the pictured scene at first appears to animate the figures, to infuse temporal blood into their arteries. In fact, the imagination has broken the isolation of the timeless moment and, in doing so, has subjected the mind to the processes of temporal logic. The implications of arrested motion are then followed to their logical conclusion: if the flow of time is suspended at any given instant, moments of desolation must co-exist side by side with moments of plenitude for all eternity. Eternal fullness forces upon the mind the possibility of an eternal void. Discursive logic forbids the poet to suspend the townsfolk for ever in the "happy pieties" of sacrificial rites without freezing the "little town" they have left in an eternity of death. The realization of this inescapable necessity destroys the vision which the Urn for a while had seemed able to substantiate, and the Urn's value for the poet suffers a sudden reversal. The "undertone of depreciation" of the "jarring apostrophe 'Cold Pastoral'" which H. W. Garrod was the first to analyze is by no means "accidental." The implications of this change of heart in the poet must be explored to guard against the risk of misinterpreting the close of the Ode.

This depreciatory tone is perceptible not only in the punning alliteration of "Attic ... attitude" but even in the noun's suggestion of attitudinizing, which makes of "Fair attitude!" a melancholy sigh: fair as you are, nonetheless a fraud....

A similar disenchantment prevails in the first half of stanza V. The Urn had allowed the poet to imagine a world where earthly beauty would find absolute existence, a form of eternity giving meaning to life; the intrusion of logic into this dream has destroyed it by exposing the ambivalence of the Urn, able to symbolize an eternity of death as well as an immortality of passion. The Urn, which has both suggested and denied the possibility of life out of time, like the "fogborn elf" of *Endymion* has cheated the poet "Into the bosom of a hated thing." Like the idea of eternity, the Urn has aroused, and then defeated the wish to believe; it has teased the mind into activity only to lead it into the swamp of contradiction: the shadows of imagination can give the mind no help in elucidating the meaning of life:

> Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
> As doth eternity.

These lines, which resignedly acknowledge the failure of imagination, express just the reverse of

Keats's creed in the letter to Bailey: what the imagination seizes as beauty is *not* truth.

The meaning of stanza V rests on two antitheses: that which distinguishes the realm of art from the world of human experience, and that which balances the avowal of a radical agnosticism by the affirmation of the consolatory value of art. In the first half of the stanza, Keats relinquishes what had been the major tenet of his early poetic creed; that part of it which can meet the demands of his mature thinking is preserved in the second half....

The first half of stanza V shows, we have seen, that Keats finds it difficult to suspend his disbelief in the myths of imagination; beauty cannot be, after all, the earthly promise of "an immortality of passion":

> Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought As
> doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

With their tone of cool summation, these words veil the poet's intense disappointment and control the "Agony ... of ignorance" by understating it. The Ode, we remember, was written just a few weeks after the sonnet "Why did I laugh tonight?" which records a moment of despair at the eternal silence of Heaven and Hell. Though he has also questioned the Urn in vain, Keats makes its silence bearable by turning to the "pious frauds" of art.

The economy and skill of Keats's transition from line 45 to 46 has perhaps not been properly recognized. The exclamation "Cold Pastoral!" springs from the poet's realization that he has been led into an impasse: beauty is not truth; poetry cannot serve the one without betraying the other. In reaffirming the reality of human transience and suffering, line 46 both emphasizes the illusory character of the world of the Urn, thus explicitly dissociating human experience from art, and, thanks to this overt severance, releases the poet from the deadlock of lines 44–45. The final resolution thus arises from a dialectical opposition between two justifications of art which Keats is trying to reconcile. The Ode has shown that to demand absolute truth from art is to crush it under a responsibility which it cannot bear; to regard art as a beautiful semblance of truth is at once to recognize the limitations which it shares with other forms of human knowledge and to re-establish its dignity, though admittedly on a less exalted footing.

The figurative exchange between lyric speaker and Urn is no verbal jugglery but what makes the final resolution possible. The poem has established that the Urn is objectively a "silent form," that the "wondrous lesson" which the poet had hoped to read "in [its] silent face" was a subjective dream. There should then be no doubt that the Urn's final "message" is nothing but a figurative device used by the poet to present what the Urn teases the beholder into thinking. The device finds its justification in that it enables the poet to blend two voices: that of the Urn expressing what the imaginative experience, within its own limits, allows man to believe, and that of the lyric speaker stating what can be believed in the world of ordinary human experience.

In their figurative guise of a mute dialogue between the poet and the Urn, the two views are not merely juxtaposed but brought into a relationship in which each sustains the other. Keats's early conception of poetry as a form of transcendental knowledge is saved from skeptical rejection by being presented as a consolatory illusion; his other, less ambitious, justification of poetry as a "soothing" compensation for life's sufferings derives seriousness from its presentation, not as an escape from life, but as the creation of admittedly relative values. Art is not life but can give meaning to life, provided we remember that it has no meaning apart from life, provided we do not attempt to turn it into some transcendental absolute. Such is the complex reconciliation attempted in the close of the Ode.

Art, or imaginative activity, cannot lead to absolute knowledge in the world of experience where truth and beauty are distinct; but it can offer to man the consoling image of a world where truth and beauty would be one. The Urn, a product of human art, owes its existence to the attitude of aesthetic detachment which is able to perceive beauty even in the midst of pain. In the imaginary world whose spokesman it becomes, "the sense of Beauty... obliterates all consideration." What it offers to man, to help him to accept his woe suffered "in the midst of a great darkness," is the contemplation of beauty—beauty which contains a measure of truth provided one does not stray out of the magic circle of aesthetic detachment. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty": the circular form of the aphorism recalls the pattern of Keats's reasonings in the letter to Bailey; but now this circularity has a restrictive value. The equation is valid only within the limits of the imaginary world of art. That is why the aphorism is qualified by a fresh restriction: "that is all / Ye know on earth." This clause would of course be meaningless if Keats had regarded the Urn's message as a final lightening of "the burthen of the mystery." "All / Ye know" refers back to lines

44–45: the poet tried to reach truth through beauty, and was led, in the attempt, to confess the incapacity of thought to discover the meaning of life, its inability to conceive a satisfactory connection between time and eternity. The only truth we may hope to reach on earth is that which is offered by the Urn, the truth in beauty, the beauty which may yet be a substitute for truth.

"All ye need to know" is Keats's answer to his own anxiety, the resignation of an agnostic taking refuge in time to silence his yearning for eternity....

But though beauty and art have kept their consolatory function, they no longer provide an answer to the mystery of life. What the Urn expresses is rather the position of the "negative capability" letter: let us accept, since we must, the limitations of human knowledge. One of the ironies of literary fame is that the Ode should so often have been read as a manifesto of unqualified Aestheticism: for it does not say that beauty is the refuge of those who do not think, but the comfort of those whom thought has bruised.

The Ode, then, criticizes the "pious frauds" of art, but the illusion is killed with kindness. Though he subordinates "sensation" to "thought," Keats tries to transcend the contradiction which he always found so teasing. Beauty is not truth; truth we shall never know on earth; let the partial truth of art reconcile us to our ignorance.

Source: Jean-Claude Salle "The Pious Frauds of Art: A Reading of The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" in *Studies in Romanticism,* Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring, 1972, pp. 79–92.

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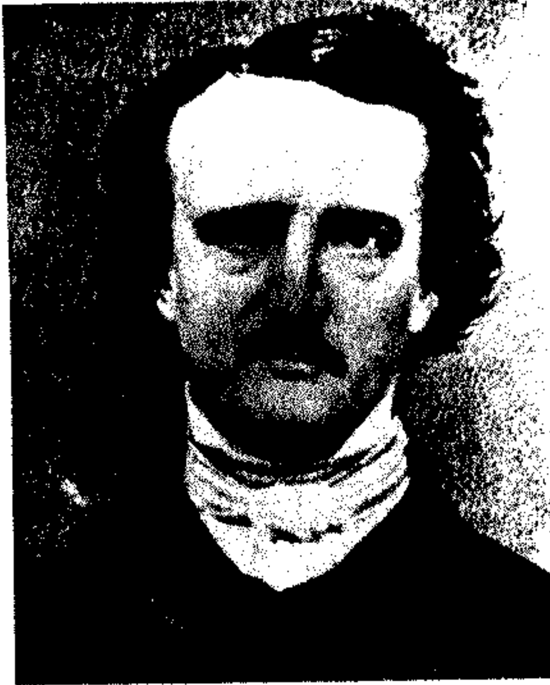
The Raven

Edgar Allan Poe

1845

"The Raven" was first published in the New York *Evening Mirror* on January 29, 1845, and received popular and critical praise. Sources of "The Raven" have been suggested, such as "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Barnaby Rudge* by Charles Dickens, and two poems, "To Allegra Florence" and "Isadore" by Thomas Holly Chivers. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "The Raven" has become one of America's most famous poems, partly as a result, of its easily remembered refrain, "Nevermore." The speaker, a man who pines for his deceased love, Lenore, has been visited by a talking bird who knows only the word, "Nevermore." The narrator feels so grieved over the loss of his love that he allows his imagination to transform the bird into a prophet bringing news that the lovers will "Nevermore" be reunited, not even in heaven. In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe's own essay about "The Raven," he describes the poem as one that reveals the human penchant for "self-torture" as evidenced by the speaker's tendency to weigh himself down with grief.

In the essay Poe also discusses his method of composing "The Raven." He claims to have given much thought to his selection of the refrain, recognizing in it the "pivot upon which the whole structure might turn." His selection of the word "Nevermore" came after considering his need for a single, easily remembered word that would allow him to vary the meaning of the lines leading up to it. The poem uses this refrain, or variations of it,



Edgar Allen Poe

as the closing word for each stanza. The stanzas become increasingly dramatic as the speaker makes observations or asks questions that reveal his growing tension and diminishing reason. The narrator begins with innocent and amusing remarks that build in a steady crescendo to intense expressions of grief, all of which conclude with "Nevermore" or one of its variants.

Author Biography

Poe was born in Boston in 1809, the son of Elizabeth Arnold Poe and David Poe, both minor professional actors. Both his parents died before he was three years old, and he was subsequently raised in the home of Frances Keeling Valentine Allan and her husband John Allan, a prosperous exporter from Richmond, Virginia. As a youth, Poe attended the finest academies in Richmond, his step-father overseeing his education, and he entered the University of Virginia at Charlottesville in 1825. He distinguished himself academically at the University but was forced to leave due to inadequate financial support from his step-father. Poe returned to Richmond in 1827 but soon left for Boston. There he enlisted in the army and published his first collection of poetry, *Tamerlane, and Other Poems*. Poe was discharged from the army in 1829, the same year he published a second volume of verse. Neither of his first two collections attracted much attention. After briefly attending West Point, Poe went to New York City and soon after to Baltimore. He married his cousin Virginia Clemm in 1836 after receiving an editorship at *The Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond. Poe thereafter received a degree of recognition, not only for his poetry and fiction, but as an exceptional literary critic. He also occasionally achieved popular success, especially following the publication of his poem "The Raven."

Poe's wife Virginia died from tuberculosis in 1847. After a period in which he was involved in various romantic affairs, Poe planned to remarry, but in late September, 1849 he arrived in Baltimore for reasons unknown. In early October he was discovered nearly unconscious; he died on October 7, never regaining sufficient consciousness to relate the details of the final days of his life. Since his death Poe's work has been variously, assessed, with critics disagreeing on its value. Today, however, Poe is acknowledged as a major literary figure, a master of Gothic atmosphere and interior monologue. His poems and stories have influenced the literary schools of Symbolism and Surrealism as well as the popular genres of detective and horror fiction.

Poem Text

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered,
weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of
forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there
came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my
chamber door—
"Tis some visiter," I muttered, "tapping at my
chamber door—
Only this and nothing more."

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak
December;
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost
upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought
to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for
the lost Lenore—
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels
name Lenore—
Nameless *here* for evermore.

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each
purple curtain
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never
felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I
stood repeating
"'Tis some visiter entreating entrance at my
chamber door—
Some late visiter entreating entrance at my
chamber door;—
This it is and nothing more."

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no
longer,
"Sir," said I, "or Madam, truly your forgiveness I
implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you
came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my
chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you"—here I
opened wide the door;—
Darkness there and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there
wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared
to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness
gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered
word, "Lenore!"
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the
word, "Lenore!"
Merely this and nothing more.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within
me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than
before.
"Surely," said I, "surely that is something at my
window lattice;
Let me see, then, what thereat is and this mystery
explore—
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery
explore;—
'Tis the wind and nothing more!"

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a
flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days
of yore;
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute
stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my
chamber door—
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my
chamber door—
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into
smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance
it wore,
"Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou," I
said, "art sure no craven,
Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from
the Nightly shore—
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's
Plutonian shore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear
discourse so plainly,
Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy
bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human
being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his
chamber door—
Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his
chamber door,
With such name as "Nevermore."

But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust,
spoke only
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he
did outpour.
Nothing farther then he uttered—not a feather then
he fluttered—
Till I scarcely more than muttered "Other friends
have flown before—
On the morrow *he* will leave me, as my Hopes
have flown before."
Then the bird said "Nevermore."

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly
spoken,
"Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock
and store
Caught from some unhappy master whom
unmerciful Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one
burden bore—
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden
bore
Of 'Never—nevermore.'"

But the Raven still beguiling my sad fancy into
smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird,
and bust and door;
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to
linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird
of yore—
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and
ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking "Nevermore."

Thus I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable
expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my
bosom's core;

This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease
reclining
On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light
gloated o'er,
But whose velvet-violet lining with the lamp-light
gloating o'er,
She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed
from an unseen censer
Swung by seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the
tufted floor.
"Wretch," I cried, "thy God hath lent thee—by
these angels he hath sent thee
Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories
of Lenore;
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this
lost Lenore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if
bird or devil!—
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed
thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land
enchanted—
On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I
implore—
Is there—*is* there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell
me, I implore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if
bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God
we both adore—
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the
distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels
name Lenore—
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels
name Lenore."
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

"Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!" I
shrieked, upstarting—
"Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's
Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy
soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust
above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy
form from off my door!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is
sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber
door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's
that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his
shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies
floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore!

Poem Summary

Lines 1-2:

The opening lines identify the speaker as someone who feels tired and weak but is still awake in the middle of a gloomy night. He passes the time by reading a strange book of ancient knowledge. The first line of the poem contains alliteration of *w* in "while," "weak," and "weary" to produce the effect of unsteadiness. This line also sets the poem's rhythmical pattern and provides the first example of the use of internal rhyme in "dreary" and "weary."

Lines 3-6:

The speaker tells of becoming more tired and beginning to doze but being wakened by a sound that he assumes is a quiet knock. Internal rhymes of "napping," "tapping," and "rapping" along with repetition of these last two words, create a musical effect. This effect is also produced by alliteration of *n*. These sound devices and the steady rhythm of these lines are almost hypnotic. The use of "nothing more" is the first example of what will evolve into the refrain "Nevermore." In this first instance, the speaker presents the phrase in a low key, attached to his bland explanation that the tapping sound is "nothing more" than a late visitor knocking at his door.

Lines 7-12:

In this second stanza the narrator tells what he remembers about the setting and action at the time of the Raven's visit. It was December, the first month of winter and a time when the nights are longest, creating a mood of mystery. A fireplace had been lit, but now the fire was going out, and it cast an eerie glow. To set the mood, Poe uses mysterious and depressing words in these descriptions: "bleak," "dying," and "ghost." To escape his heavy mood, the speaker has been reading; he says it was a vain attempt to "borrow / From my books surcease of sorrow," that is, to find something in his books that would take his mind off the sadness he feels about his lost love, Lenore. He reveals that Lenore has died when he says that the angels call

her by name. This time the word "evermore" is used in the refrain.

Lines 13-18:

The speaker tells that he was in a state of heightened sensibility because of his mood, the late hour, and the eerie setting. Reading ancient folklore, possibly of a supernatural nature, may also have added to his emotional state. The sound of the curtains as they move strikes his imagination wildly. Poe creates this sound by using onomatopoeia, or words that sound like what they describe ("rustling"), and alliteration, repeating *s* in line 13 and *f* in line 14. The speaker tries to calm down by telling himself twice that the tapping noise (introduced in stanza one) is only the sound of a visitor knocking on his door and "nothing more." The refrain works here as it did in the first stanza, but now it has been attached to a more emotionally charged situation.

Lines 19-24:

The speaker overcomes his emotional state and rationally calls out to the supposed visitor. But when he opens the door he finds only "darkness there and nothing more." The refrain this time has been employed to create a sense of mystery that follows a moment of rational behavior, overshadowing it.

Lines 25-30:

The lover tells that he stood looking out of his door, transfixed by the "darkness," the "silence," and the "stillness" while his imagination increased. Finally he whispered the name of his deceased lover, "Lenore," and he heard it echoed in the night. An abundance of words that use the sound *d* produces an alliteration that suggests the strong, rhythmical heartbeat of an excited person. The refrain has now been used after a mysterious and also slightly frightening experience, the "nothing more" contradicting the speaker's agitated state.

Lines 31-36:

At this point the speaker has not completely regained his composure, as shown by the image of his "soul ... burning." He returns to his room, but the tapping sound resumes, even louder, and the speaker determines this time to investigate the window as its source. The "nothing more" of the refrain again sounds of note of false confidence.

Media Adaptations

- An audio cassette titled "The Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe" was released in 1996 by Dove Audio.
- "The Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe" is available from Audiobooks on both an audio cassette and compact disc.

Lines 37-42:

The speaker finally reveals the source of the mysterious tapping noise—a bird. Upon opening the window, the speaker discovers a Raven who flies in and sits on top of the speaker's "bust of Pallas." Alliteration of *fl* creates the sound of wings flapping. The description of the Raven is of first importance in this stanza. The bird is "stately," reminding the speaker of ancient times, perhaps seeming to fly out of the books that the speaker tells of reading in stanza one. The Raven seems very purposeful, flying directly to perch on the high statue without regarding the narrator at all. Symbolism occurs in Poe's choice of "Pallas" as the Raven's perch. "Pallas" represents the Greek Goddess of Wisdom, sometimes known as "Pallas Athene," and so by placing the Raven above this bust Poe creates a situation in which wisdom has been placed underneath the Raven, a bird associated with death.

Lines 43-48:

The bird's dramatic presence strikes the lover so that he begins to forget his sadness. He finds humor in the situation, and in jest, begins to speak out loud, expressing his wonder about the Raven. He compares the bird to a lord whose "crest" (royal emblem) is missing. This comparison allows the reader to visualize the bird's sleek head and also to associate the bird with a character of dignity. In the suggestion that the bird has come from the "Plutonian shore," Poe calls upon the myth of Pluto, the God of the Underworld, the land of the dead in Greek mythology. The Raven, therefore, may be thought of as a creature from the land of the dead.

In this stanza the refrain reaches its permanent form of "Nevermore," the answer given by the bird when spoken to regardless of what the narrator says. The predictability of this answer allows the reader to note the narrator's course of self-torture with each question that he asks, leading to a more distressing response as the poem progresses.

Lines 49-60:

The speaker tells of his amazement at the bird's appearance, its position on the bust, and its ability to speak. There is no indication that the lover truly believes the suggestions he made concerning the bird's origins (the "Plutonian shore" referred to in line 47); on the contrary, the speaker notes that the bird's reply was irrelevant, meaning it did not make sense. In the closing lines of the tenth stanza (lines 55-60) the speaker again makes an audible comment about the bird, and again the bird replies with the refrain. This time, though, as if the speaker had planned it, he has made a statement to which the response "Nevermore" makes sense. He has predicted the Raven's departure, and the Raven's response indicates that he will never depart.

Lines 61-72:

This time the speaker is "startled" in reaction to the Raven's answer because the speaker thinks it makes sense. Still using his reason rather than his emotions, the speaker rationalizes that the bird knows only this one word and has learned it by living with a person who himself used the word repeatedly in response to his own bad luck. With this explanation, the speaker feels amused, and he settles down on a comfortable chair to contemplate the Raven.

Lines 73-78:

In this, the thirteenth stanza, the speaker and the bird remain silent. A frightening image of the bird presents it with "fiery eyes" that "burned into" the speaker's heart. This description allows the reader to picture the Raven's red eyes and also associate the bird with evil. Poe reveals the narrator's silence in the phrase "no syllable expressing," a phrase that calls to mind the poem and its use of syllables and meter. The speaker's silence is a brooding time during which his mind wanders away from the Raven and back to the sorrows of lost love. The speaker thinks of Lenore as he sits on a "violet" colored "velvet" chair on which the "lamp-light" flickers. Because Lenore used to sit in that romantic spot, the speaker now begins to think of her again.

Lines 79-84:

Once the thought of Lenore re-enters the speaker's mind, his imagination and emotions again became active. He imagines that he smells the incense of angels. Quite likely, the couch on which he sits has the lingering scent of Lenore's perfume from the times she sat there before her death, but this rational explanation does not occur to the speaker. He prefers to think of the scent as a gift from God, noticing it provides a soothing experience that may help him forget his sadness. He cries out to himself, calling himself "Wretch." By this he means that he has sunk to a wretched state of grief. But now he hopes that with the angels' help—a potion of forgetfulness known as nepenthe—he has a chance to rest from the grief, to forget Lenore. When he suggests this out loud, the Raven who has also almost been forgotten, reasserts his presence with his one word, "Nevermore." In the context of the lover's thoughts, the bird's statement means that the speaker will never have a moment's rest from the sadness he feels over Lenore's death.

Lines 85-90:

In reaction to the Raven's response in the preceding line (line 84) the speaker calls the bird a "Prophet," and because the prophecy foretells of more suffering for the speaker, he calls the bird "evil" and suggests that it may be a "devil." He does not know if the Raven is merely a bird seeking refuge after a "tempest" (storm) or if it is an evil being "sent" by the "Tempter," that is, the devil. The speaker notes that the bird remains "undaunted" even though it is "desolate" and it seems "enchanted" even though it is in this sad house referred to as a "desert land," a "home by Horror haunted." This manner of referring to the bird and the speaker's home reveals that the speaker is becoming more distraught and less reasonable. After making these statements about the Raven, the speaker continues speaking out loud by asking "is there balm in Gilead?" (Gilead was known in Biblical times for its healing plants), meaning will he ever find a remedy for his sorrow. As expected, the Raven answers "Nevermore," and the speaker will be thrown into a deeper frenzy of despair.

Lines 91-96:

Setting himself up for more disappointment, the speaker continues to address the bird. He repeats the first line of the previous stanza, an indication that more of the same type of exchange will continue. This time the speaker asks if he will be

Still from The Raven *(Universal, 1935), a film inspired by Poe's famous poem.*

reunited with Lenore after he himself dies, in an afterlife he refers to as "the distant Aidenn." In Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" he identifies the speaker as one who has a penchant for self-torture, and this question with its anticipated answer of "Nevermore" provides proof of the speaker's character. In addition to the question itself, the speaker's description of himself as a "soul with sorrow laden" and his description of Lenore as a "sainted" and "rare and radiant maiden" reveal how low he places himself and how inaccessible and high he places Lenore in his memories of her.

Lines 97-102:

The speaker has lost his composure, as shown in the use of the word "shrieked." He yells to the Raven that it should leave and that it has spoken a lie. Note that the speaker's command for the Raven to depart—"leave loneliness unbroken"—could be interpreted to mean that he wishes to preserve his miserable state, another indication of his tendency to indulge in grief. The imagery used to describe the Raven continues to suggest its association with evil; the words, "fiend," "tempest," "night's Plutonian shore," "black plume," "lie," and the image of the Raven's "beak" in the narrator's "heart" re-

Topics for Further Study

- Write a short story in which a person who is under some emotional stress—grief, depression, heartache, etc.—cannot get rid of a bird or animal. How does this bird or animal come to be identified with the person's problem?
- Do you think this bird really said "Nevermore," or was it the speaker's imagination?

veal how scornful the narrator feels toward the bird. The bird does not literally have his beak in the lover's heart, for the Raven still remains on its perch above the door, but its utterance of "Nevermore" has wounded the lover emotionally.

Lines 103-108:

In this last stanza, the speaker describes his present situation. Until now, the poem has been a retelling of events that lead up to this stanza. Now the speaker reveals that the Raven remains in his room and that he, himself, remains despondent. Final associations of the bird with evil occur in the words "demon" and "shadow." The connection between the Raven's "shadow" and the speaker's "soul" in the last line of the poem suggests that the speaker believes himself to be cursed by the bird's presence. The symbolism of the physical location of the Raven, on top of the "pallid bust of Pallas" and above the "chamber door" must be noted. Since the bird has been associated with death and evil in the poem, his location suggests that these forces have overpowered wisdom, as represented by Pallas. The speaker can not escape his condition because his wisdom and its ability to produce rational behavior have been overpowered by his emotional response to Lenore's death. Since the symbolic Raven and bust of Pallas preside over the door, the entrance and exit to the speaker's "chamber" or residence, the speaker has no escape from the situation. One may note that the word "chamber" calls to mind the chambers of the heart, the legendary residence of emotional love. So the speaker, it seems, will never emerge above his depression over the loss of his love, Lenore; his ability to be reasonable will always be overshadowed by his thoughts of Lenore's death. His "soul" will "nevermore" feel happiness.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Near the end of this poem, when the fear of the poem's speaker has reached a level of near hysteria, he shouts "Leave my loneliness unbroken!" In one sense, this could just be an emotional outburst, like the lines that lead up to it, but the interesting thing about this particular line is that the speaker, in his terror, is for once reflecting upon himself. This, and the line's location at the climax of the poem, indicates to us that "my loneliness" is not just another expression that he shrieks: it is the key, the secret that he has been trying to guard all along. Throughout the poem, we see the speaker being drawn out of his isolation by the raven and the one word that it speaks. Once the bird enters his chambers, nothing really changes in the scene except the speaker's attitude, which grows increasingly nervous. And what is it that he fears? He says he fears that the bird is a messenger from hell and that it knows secrets of the afterlife that it will not give up, but the reader can see that these increasingly wild ideas are the result, not the cause, of his panic. It is just after he says that he wants to retain his loneliness that the pressure that had been mounting is finally relieved. The following stanza is mournful and eerie, but it lacks the fevered pitch that had been growing throughout the poem.

Usually, loneliness is considered such an unpleasant feeling that we could not expect someone to panic over the thought of losing it. In this case, we can assume that the speaker had such great love for Lenore that he prefers loneliness to the pain of being reminded of her. We can see this in the way her memory increases throughout the poem at the same time that the speaker is losing his composure, as if it takes concentration and control to suppress the thought of her. The strongest indication that he would rather be lonely than think of her comes in the second stanza, before the raven has arrived, when the speaker still has control of his thoughts (as best as he ever does): he introduces Lenore as "Nameless *here* for evermore."

Death

This poem is not a meditation on death or a philosophical examination of how death affects the lives of those left behind in this world, but death is a crucial part of its existence. In order to establish the proper extreme of grief in the poem's speaker, he needs to be absolutely drained of any hope of seeing her again. Only death could provide such an absolute. As a plot device, this works fine, because the reader is assured that there is no way they could ever be reunited. The poem's weakness, though, is that the bald fact of death is not used to generate any new understanding. Grief is an honest, basic response to death, but Poe does not take it anywhere. The speaker does not think about his own death or life, nor about what his time with Lenore was like or whether her life was full and significant in the short time she did have: he just grieves and grieves and grieves. The reader would be right to question whether this is a realistic response to death, and whether in real life people do respond to death with such perpetual and chronic sorrow. It is a characteristic of Romanticism, the literary movement that Poe is associated with, to stretch a human emotion beyond the shape that we are familiar with in real life: beauties are stunning and unforgettable beauties, suffering is agony, and grief is uncontrollable. Death is one of the few things that cannot be fixed or reversed, and the enormity of it is therefore entirely appropriate for the exaggerated emotions in Poe's work.

Supernatural

Literally, the supernatural world is not just the collection of strange things that we usually associate with it. It is a part of the world we live in that goes unrecognized by the five senses and is beyond the natural world that we experience (the prefix "super-" means "beyond"). This sense of the word is particular significant while analyzing this poem because it is based on the mixture of mind, nature, and supernatural. The raven is a dark, scary bird, but it is, after all, a natural object, and its behavior is completely natural: it beats against the shutters, and then, when it enters the room, flies up to perch on the highest object in the room, as birds usually do. The one place where the raven crosses the line between natural and supernatural is in being able to speak a word that a human is able to understand. "Nevermore" is so close to the raven's natural cry, though, and so close to what was in the mind of the poem's speaker just before he heard it, that it seems likely that his mind twisted the bird's natural sound into a word. From this beginning, we can examine all of the supernatural elements in this poem and question whether they are the cause of the speaker's terror or are caused by it, and in each case we find that devils, phantom fragrances, and soul-sucking shadows are only supernatural because he calls them supernatural. The question of the supernatural does not end here, however; this just broadens the scope. Poe clearly intends us to believe that the supernatural is fueled by the mind of the speaker, but that does not necessarily make it unreal. If the speaker's terror is real, does it matter whether the Tempter that caused it takes up physical space or exists only in his mind? To us who live in the real world, it might be a comfort to know that the demons live only in his mind, but in this poem, with its subjective point of view and no evidence except what one man sees, there is no difference between the natural and the supernatural.

Style

The poem is comprised of eighteen stanzas of six lines each, and most frequently employs a meter known as trochaic octameter, which refers to a line containing eight trochees—pairs of stressed and unstressed syllables. The first five lines of each stanza are all in trochaic octameter, with the final unstressed syllable missing in lines two, four, and five of each stanza. The sixth line of each stanza consists of three trochees and an extra final stressed syllable. An example of the fifth and sixth lines from the last stanza shows this pattern:

> **And** my / **soul** from / **out** that / **shadow** / **that** lies /
> **floating** / **on** the / **floor**
> **Shall** be / **lifted**— / **never** / **more**!

Poe achieves variety in this rhythm by adding pauses, and he keeps the sound from becoming monotonous by making much use of consonance and assonance, or repetition of consonant and vowel sounds, respectively. In addition, Poe's use of a regular rhyme scheme in which every stanza uses words that rhyme with "more" to conclude the second, fourth, fifth and sixth lines creates a very strong unifying effect for the poem. In his "The Philosophy of Composition, "Poe states that he consciously chose the *or* sound because of its "sonorous" quality. He also uses internal rhyme in lines one and three, rhyming the fourth and last trochees of the lines, and repeating the rhyme of the third line in the fourth trochee of line four. Thus the final word of every line has either an end rhyme or an internal rhyme.

Compare & Contrast

- **1845:** Henry David Thoreau took up residence at Walden Pond outside of Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau's book about the experience has become a classic of American literature, urging people to look at nature to understand the universe.

  Today: Most of what students know about the American philosophical movement known as "Transcendentalism" comes from reading Thoreau's *Walden.*

- **1845:** Margaret Fuller published *Women in the Nineteenth Century.* A former editor of the *Dial,* Fuller urged women to be more independent: "That her hand may be given with dignity, she must be able to stand alone."

  1920: After more than 50 years of struggle, women won the right to vote with the passage of the 19th amendment.

  1982: The Equal Rights Amendment, which passed the Senate ten years earlier, failed to be ratified by enough states to make it law. The Amendment would have prevented the restriction of any citizen's rights on account of their gender.

  Today: Women's average salaries are significantly smaller than men's.

- **1845:** The telegraph was first put into use between Washington and Baltimore. Once its success was established, the problem was financing the system of wires that could transport messages.

  1876: Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone.

  1895: Gugliemo Marconi invented the "wireless telegraph," which led to the radio.

  1924: The first iconoscope was developed, using principles that were developed into the television.

  Today: A growing number of U.S. households transmit ideas through the Internet.

Historical Context

It is always profitable to read about Poe's life while reading his works because a clear line can be drawn from the events in his life, through his particular phobias and obsessions, and straight to the disturbing, supernatural poems and tales that he wrote. Some of the facts of his life are obscure to us today because the man he chose to be his literary executor and biographer, Rufus Griswold, is known to have hated Poe, and he made up malicious facts in his "official" biography after he died. We do know that Poe's parents were actors; his mother was quite famous and his father a law student who joined the acting troupe when he married her. Poe was born in 1809 when they were playing the Boston Theatre. Some sources say that his parents had two more children and some say that his father deserted the family a year after Edgar's birth, but it is agreed that by the time he was three, his father had left and his mother, coughing up blood, died before the child's eyes. He was taken in by a wealthy couple in Virginia, John and Frances Allan, who raised him like a son. In 1824 he and Mr. Allan had a falling out: some sources portray Mr. Allan as stingy and others accept him as being rightly fed up with the huge amounts of money Poe had wasted drinking and gambling while away at the University of Virginia. Poe went away to the army, disowned and written out of Allan's will, and soon after his discharge, Mrs. Allan died of consumption, the same disease that had killed his natural mother. He had been rejected by both of his fathers, and both of his mothers had died the same way.

Living in Baltimore with his blood relatives, the Poes, he fell in love with his first cousin, Virginia Clemm. He was twenty-six, and she was at least a decade younger. He began a series of jobs and literary attempts, travelling from city to city

with his bride and aunt/mother-in-law. In Richmond he edited the *Southern Literary Messenger* for two years, but was fired for excessive drunkenness; in New York in 1837 and Philadelphia in 1838 he sold some fiction to make ends meet. In 1839 he co-edited *Burton's Gentlemen's Magazine,* was fired for drinking, then was hired for *Graham's* by the same publisher who had just fired him. In 1842 Virginia suffered a burst blood vessel in her throat, and was incapacitated for five years before she died. Although it was not the same disease that had killed his mother and stepmother, the similarity was still there. Poe continued to get and lose jobs. In 1845, publication of "The Raven" in *The American Review* made him an instant sensation, and, with his profits from speaking engagements and his next book, he was able to buy the magazine that he worked for, *The Broadway Journal.* True to Poe's luck, it went bankrupt the next year. Virginia's death was two years after "The Raven" was published, but that didn't stop some critics from guessing that she was the model for Lenore. After she died, Poe quit drinking but continued moving from place to place, possibly affected by a brain lesion. He became paranoid and worried that assassins were following him. On Election Day, October 3rd, 1849, he was found in a gutter in Baltimore, muttering deliriously. Different accounts say that he was drunk, on drugs, or had suffered a stroke. One of the most charming versions of his death comes from the *American Catholic Quarterly Review* of October 1891: "[S]ome political agents who were on the lookout for voters perceived him, and in a spirit of thorough ruffianism seized and drugged the unfortunate poet. They then made him record his vote in several different polling booths, treating him with such violence that he died from its effects ..."

Critical Overview

"The Raven" met with high critical acclaim upon its first appearance and subsequent publications during Poe's life. Between 1845 and 1849 several critics called it the best American poem ever written. One overwhelmingly positive commentary by John Moncure Daniel appeared in an 1849 *Richmond Examiner* article a month before Poe's death. Daniel praises the poem's "strange, beautiful and fantastic imagery, "its "grave and supernatural tone," and its "musicality" with the verses "winding convoluted about like the mazes of some complicated overture by Beethoven"; he calls it a "superior ... work of *pure art.*"

For all his genius, Poe made a major error in naming Rufus Wilmot Griswold as the executor of his literary estate. In his biographical analyses of Poe's work, Griswold created the image of the author as a victim of opium and alcohol abuse and of extreme personal sorrow. A onetime friend of Poe, Griswold published reviews—sometimes under a pseudonym—after the poet's death when he could not defend himself. Certainly this presentation of Poe captured the interest of a public thirsty for sensationalism, but it tainted his character and made him more interesting to the public as a tragic figure than as a writer. Of "The Raven," Griswold wrote in 1849, almost immediately after Poe's death, that it is "a reflection and an echo of his own history. He was that bird's 'unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster / Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore— / Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore / Of Never—never more'."

Griswold's statement led, over the years, to the misconception that the poem tells of Poe's own sorrows, of his own grief at the loss of his young wife, Virginia Clemm Poe. Virginia, however, died in 1847, two years after the first publication of "The Raven."

Modern critics focus more on the poem's construction than did Griswold. Poet W. H. Auden, for instance, observes in his 1950 work *Forewords and Afterwords* that while the form of "The Raven" is excellent, it does not necessarily complement Poe's subject; he concludes that the poem is "faulty" because "the thematic interest and the prosodic interest, both of which are considerable, do not combine and are even often at odds." Floyd Stovall, in *Edgar Poe the Poet,* states that "The Raven" reveals a tragic "certainty as the poem progresses [to reveal] that there is no life after death." He values the poem for its poetic technique but does not see in it an ability to deeply move the reader: "Its composition was the performance of a virtuoso," he states; "its appeal is therefore more to the intellect than to the feelings." The irony here is that in "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe states that the aim of a poem is the "elevation of *soul* not of intellect."

Criticism

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What Do I Read Next?

- The most complete and authoritative collection of Poe's works is the one put out by the Library of America. Their *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales* was published in 1984.
- Because Poe's life was so fascinating and so telling about his work, students often are interested in reading more about him. The 1992 biography *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy* by Jeffrey Myers tells as much as anybody knows about Poe today.
- Shirley Jackson is an American author best known for her short story "The Lottery," but many critics believe that her best work was *The Haunting,* a novel that, like this poem, explores the line between the imagination and the supernatural.

Black Literature and Ideas *at Chicago State University and the author of* Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945–1960. *In the following essay, Bolden analyzes how "The Raven" showcases Poe's talent "as both storyteller and poet."*

Edgar Allen Poe was virtually ignored by his contemporaries until the publication of "The Raven" in 1845. The poem enjoyed the status of being an overnight sensation for its popular appeal, while simultaneously stirring the simmering caldron of critical controversy. Interestingly, Poe's early reputation in America rested on his bitingly aggressive and self-serving critical reviews and his gruesome fictional tales, while his reputation abroad was built almost entirely on his poetry. Although "The Raven" won Poe instant celebrity status from a broad audience, many of Poe's critical peers did not judge the poem solely on its textual merits. Instead they elected to assess "The Raven" on the basis of Poe's reputation for public drunkenness and literary feuds, in addition to his contrived craftsmanship and the thematic and structural resemblances in the poem to earlier works, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," Charles Dickens's "Barnaby Rudge," and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

"The Raven" combines Poe's literary talents as both storyteller and poet. The narrator of the poem is a young male student who is grieving over the death of his beloved Lenore but who wrestles with the thought of divesting himself of her precious memory, even at the expense of his own sanity. Thus, immediately, sadness and sorrow emerge as the ruling motifs of the chilling and chaotic tale, fashioned into a 108-line, 18-verse poem. The poem is comprised of a two-part structure. In the first half of the poem, stanzas one through nine, the young lover wrestles with his anguish by immersing himself in studious pursuits. But by stanza ten, and throughout the remainder of the poem, he yields to the emotional trauma of his loss and slips into the abyss of madness.

The poem opens with an overwhelming sense of melancholy as the morose young man and first-person narrator is poised at the threshold of memory. As he sits before a fireplace of "dying ember[s] on "a midnight dreary" in "bleak December," the young man's ambivalence fills the air with the tension of past and present. In a half stupor, napping and dreaming, he pores "Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore," while longing for his lost and beloved companion Lenore.

The landscape of the tale quickly broadens with fear and uncertainty as the young man's sad reverie is abruptly interrupted by what he believes to be someone insistently tapping at his chamber door. Though he assumes "Tis some visitor" at the door, he is thrilled at the thought that his beloved Lenore might have returned to him. The sound of "the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain," amplifies his anticipation as he decides to explore the mysterious tapping, but to no avail. No one is at the door. Momentarily he settles himself by claiming "'Tis the wind and nothing more!"

However, fueled by desperation, he continues to explore the mysterious sound. He flings open the window shutter to find a magnificent bird of ill-omen, "a stately raven of the saintly days of yore" who, uncharacteristically, steps into his room and with an air of condescension, symbolically perches up high on a bust of Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Lured by the serious demeanor of the mysterious ebony bird, the young man decides to play along with what he deems to be the raven's mischievous tactics and asks his "lordly name." Unpre-

pared for an articulate response, the young man is stunned when the raven responds: "Nevermore." A dramatic turn occurs at this point as the raven, rather than the young man, assumes a command position.

Though logic tells the young man that the raven's "Nevermore" is merely a rote response, he is beyond reason. Having experienced a turbulent shift in his emotions, from dreamy melancholy to irrational hope, by the second half of the poem, the young man is precariously perched on the brink of insanity. As though the raven can divine the source of the young man's grief over the lost Lenore and the desperate hope that he will once again "clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—," the raven continues to utter only the solitary word "Nevermore." The young man's spirit sags over the finality of Lenore's death, yet he proceeds to indulge in sweet torture by his rhetorical interrogation of the stoic raven, as if his desperate questioning keeps her precious memories alive.

Ironically the raven continues to hold a position of prominence over the young man. It is empowered physically by the lofty perch it assumes on the bust above the young man's head and psychologically by the power of its senseless response, which sends the emotionally worn, weak, and weary young man from a delicate state of sanity, spinning toward the realms of madness. Because he needs to cling to the memories of his lost Lenore, the young man experiences inner turmoil as he tries to face the thought of life without her. Finally, he chooses the torture of past memories over the pain of present emptiness.

Edgar Allen Poe succeeded in his goal of writing a poetic tale that would win popular approval from a broad audience and critical acclaim from his literary peers. Not only is his theme of love and loss emotionally engaging in the empathy it illicits from readers, it also produces a chilling fascination in the self-knowledge the young man gains as he enters a world reordered by the profound terror of his mind. Though Poe was not original in his theme, he was quite unique in the way he structured the poem and cunning in the way he calculated its effects. His distinction is that he achieved stunning originality by fashioning rhyme, meter, and rhythm into a unique stanzaic combination and poetic structure. Although several of his critics accused him of plagiarism, Poe actually used the traditional tenets of prosody, the same theory and principles of versification that define rhythm, meter, and stanza, and rhyme of poets like Barrett Browning, Dickens, and Coleridge.

William Butler Yeats was a poet and literary peer who denounced Poe's achievement and wrote: "Analyse 'The Raven' and you find that its subject is a commonplace and its execution a rhythmical trick. Its rhythm never lives for a moment, never once moves with an emotional life. The whole thing seems to me insincere and vulgar." And T. S. Eliot commented in a November 1948 lecture: "An irresponsibility towards the meaning of words is not infrequent with Poe.... Several words in the poem seem to be inserted either merely to fill out the line to the required measure or for the sake of rhyme." But more favorable critical assessments of "The Raven" have continued to lift to poem beyond the grasp of critical strangulation. In his 1992 work, biographer Jeffrey Meyers recalled the sensation the poem created in 1848: "Surpassing the popularity of any previous American poem, 'The Raven' was reprinted throughout the country and inspired a great number of imitations and parodies."

In "The Raven," Poe displays technical craftsmanship as he creates a contrived ambiguity amid highly visible rhetorical strategies, such as alliteration, playful internal rhyme, varied meter, and inconsistent medial caesuras. Given the probing quality of Poe's mind and his penchant for analytical assessments of literature, he needed to explain his own poetic vision and prosodic methodology. In his 1846 essay "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe eagerly discusses the origins of "The Raven" and readily acknowledges that the poem was a contrived experiment. His goal was to achieve "novel effects," and he succeeded in that goal.

In the first and third lines of each stanza, Poe often employs internal rhyme, like the "parting," "upstarting," "token," "spoken," "flitting," "sitting," "seeming," and "dreaming" in the final two stanzas of the poem, and he often inserts a break in the line (a caesura), to gain diversity of rhythmical effect and connect what could be two separate lines. End rhyme is also a consistent feature in the poem and is visible in lines two and four, like "shore," "door," and "floor" above. In his end rhyme, Poe captures the rhythmic quality and richness of "the long "O" and rolling "R" that contribute to the hypnotic effects of the refrain "Nevermore," which is subtly varied in each verse. As a complement to these strategies, Poe intensifies the novel effects of language by employing rhetorical strategies like the repetition of initial consonants and similar vowel sounds in the alliteration of "weak and weary" in stanza one and the "flirt and flutter" of stanza seven. The repetition of polyptoton, or words in close proximity that stem

from the same root, is evident in "dreaming dreams ... dream" of stanza five and "Tempter ... tempest" of stanza fifteen.

In addition to the rhetorical strategies evident in "The Raven," and to his goals related to tone, symbol, beauty, and suspense, Poe had specific intentions regarding the metrical structure or prosody of the poem. In "The Philosophy of Composition," he defines his calculated approach for ingenious versification:

> Of course, I pretend to no originality in either the rhythm or metre of the "Raven." The former is trochaic—the latter is octameter acatalectic, alternating with heptameter catalectic repeated in the refrain of the fifth verse, and terminating with tetrameter catalectic. Less pedantically the feet employed throughout (trochees) consist of a long syllable followed by a short: the first line of the stanza consists of eight of these feet—the second of seven and a half (in effect two-thirds)—the third of eight—the fourth of seven and a half—the fifth the same—the sixth three and a half.

Simply put, the sing-song, rocking horse rhythms produced by the trochaic meter can be seen in the opening line where each of the eight feet (octameter) contains an accented and an unaccented syllable: "Once up / on a / midnight/ dreary, / while I / pondered / weak and / weary."

It is clear that Poe accomplished both his dramatic and metrical goals in composing a highly original stanzaic arrangement in "The Raven." Counter to the charges of triviality leveled at him by his contemporaries, Poe emerged as the strongest single poetic influence born out of pre-Civil War America. He not only addressed the central question of nineteenth-century romantic symbolism, that of reality over illusion or the power of the imagination, he transported Romantic symbolism to new heights. The reality of Edgar Allan Poe as poet is that the critical recognition of the poem's technical merits has increased over time, and the poem has outlived its most harsh critics.

Source: B. J. Bolden, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Dana Gioia

Dana Gioia is a poet and critic. His books include The Gods of Winter, *1991, and* Can Poetry Matter? *Gioia notes that "The Raven," at one time deemed "the most popular lyric poem in the work," has nonetheless been repeatedly maligned by leading critics. In the following essay, Gioia attempts to explain the poem's universal and timeless appeal.*

From the moment of its first publication in the New York *Evening Mirror* on January 29, 1845, "The Raven" has been a famous poem. It caused an immediate national sensation and was widely reprinted, discussed, parodied, and performed—catapulting its penurious and dejected thirty-six-year-old author into celebrity. The poem was soon translated into many European languages, most notably by the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who insisted on using prose because French could not recreate the original's verbal magic. By 1885 one American critic could plausibly call Poe's work "the most popular lyric poem in the world." Even today, "The Raven" still remains one of the few poems millions of Americans can quote from memory. Despite the poem's enduring fame and extraordinary influence, however, leading critics have rarely found much to say in its favor. They have objected to its gothic atmosphere, ornate musicality, horror-tale narrative, and even its meter. And yet, a century and a half after its first appearance, the poem survives with its popularity undiminished.

What is the secret of "The Raven's" uniquely powerful appeal? The question may be unanswerable in any final sense, but we can begin to understand the poem's strange authority by isolating at least four key elements: its compelling narrative structure, darkly evocative atmosphere, hypnotic verbal music, and archetypal symbolism. Although none of these elements was original to "The Raven," their masterful combination created a strikingly original and singularly arresting poem.

The key to understanding "The Raven" is to read it as a narrative poem. It is a narrative of haunting lyricality, to be sure, but its central impulse is to tell a memorable story. The hypnotic swing of the trochaic meter, the insistent chime of the internal rhymes, and its unforgettable refrain of "Nevermore" provide each stanza with a song-like intensity, but the poem's structure remains undeviatingly narrative. Stanza by stanza, "The Raven" moves sequentially through the situation it describes. Any reader familiar with short stories like "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Fall of the House of Usher" will recognize Poe's innovative narrative method. By imbuing a simple, linear story with brooding atmosphere of intricately arranged details, Poe perfected a style that allowed every moment to reinforce the tale's ultimate effect.

The time and setting of "The Raven" are as much a part of the story as the actions that take place. (In Poe's work the physical setting often re-

flects the inner personality or emotion of the central character.) The poem begins at midnight in December—the last moment of a spent day in the final month of the year. Internally and externally, it is a time of death and decay. Even the "dying" fireplace embers reflect the moribund atmosphere. The setting is contained and claustrophobic—a single room. The narrator himself mirrors the time and locale. "Weak and weary," he seems trapped in his richly furnished prison. He hopes for the morning—the return of light and life—but tonight all he can do is brood on his dead love, "the lost Lenore," and feel the tangible horror of his current situation.

The story that now unfolds is simple, terrifying, and tragic. The narrator hears a mysterious tapping at his chamber door. He thinks at first it is a late night visitor, but opening the door, he finds only "Darkness there, and nothing more." (This initial glimpse into black nothingness will prove prophetic of his ultimate fate.) Half afraid, half wishful, the speaker whispers the name of his dead lover. Irrationally he hopes the visitor is her ghost. There comes no reply, however, except the echo of his own voice. Soon the tapping resumes—now at his window. Opening the shutter, he finds a Raven. (Poe capitalizes the bird to suggest it is no ordinary raven.) The bird flutters in and immediately perches on the bust of Pallas Athena, the classical goddess of wisdom.

By now Poe has already established the basic symbolic framework of the poem, which—characteristically for him—is both structurally simple and elaborately detailed. "The Raven" divides its characters and imagery into two conflicting worlds of light and darkness. Virtually every detail in the poem reflects one world or the other. Lenore, who is repeatedly described as "radiant" epitomizes the world of light—along with angels she has now joined. Other images of light include the white bust of Pallas and the lamplight that illumines the speaker's chamber, his haven from the outer darkness. The Raven, however, represents the seemingly larger and more powerful forces of darkness on this black December midnight. His shadow, the final image of the poem, demonstrates his power to darken the weak and dying light of the speaker's refuge. The ebony bird's ironic perch on the bust of Pallas also underscores the inability of reason and learning (further symbolized by the narrator's unconsoling books) to combat the powers of blackness and despair. The contrasting worlds of light and darkness gradually acquire additional symbolic resonances: they also represent life and death—the speaker's vain hope of an afterlife with Lenore and the terrifying vision of eternal nothingness.

The movement of "The Raven's" plot reinforces the poem's essentially symbolic nature, and all of Poe's idiosyncratic linguistic genius endows the story with supernatural significance. The narrative situation is, of course, not implausible in strictly naturalistic terms. The speaker may simply have encountered an escaped pet whose previous owner had taught the bird to repeat the word "nevermore." Poe's language, however, gradually convinces us that a purely rational explanation will not suffice, however neatly it fits the external facts. The conflicting worlds of light and darkness suggest their transcendent counterparts—heaven and hell. In contrast to the heavenly and angelic Lenore, the Raven is repeatedly and explicitly characterized in demonic terms. This imperious and implacable visitor has come from the land of death, "the Night's Plutonian shore." He seems—at least to the agitated narrator—a devil sent to claim the speaker for the underworld. The speaker's dawning awareness of his hellish doom is reflected in the poem's changing refrain, which begins as "nothing more" and "evermore," but darkens once the bird speaks his prophetic "nevermore." By the poem's last line, the narrator has accepted the bird's dire prophecy. Echoing his shadowy tormentor, he declares his soul "Shall be lifted—nevermore!"

Indeed, the conclusion of "The Raven" stands as one of the most harrowing moments in American poetry—a vision of psychological, emotional, and spiritual paralysis and despair. The gothic decor and high rhetoric do not disguise the emotional authenticity of the final tableau. As Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and the other Symbolists understood, "The Raven" is the signature work of *un poéte maudit,* "a cursed poet." They honored Poe as a brilliant artist who was destroyed by his very gifts of heightened perception. Like its author, the poem's protagonist is an aesthete and intellectual whose mental gifts provide no protection against tragedy. The depth of his love for the lost Lenore only makes his suffering more intense and enduring.

"The Raven" has a singular claim in nineteenth-century American literary history. Poe left a detailed (if also often unconvincing) account of the poem's genesis. Elated by its trans-Atlantic acclaim, Poe published "The Philosophy of Composition" in April of 1846, which purports to "explain step by step" the process by which he wrote "The Raven." Inspiration or chance, Poe claimed, played

no part in the poem's composition. "The Raven" emerged from a deliberate and conscious process that progressed "with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem." Hardly anyone has taken Poe's rational view of poetic composition at face value, but psychological critics have justifiably viewed its arguments as a classic case of compensation. An obsessive and emotionally wounded poet, Poe preferred to present himself as controlled, deliberate, and logical. Even if we accept the basic premise of Poe's claim that he created the poem systematically from abstract goals, we are entitled to comment that only an author full of raging emotions would insist on the necessity for such complete artistic control.

"The Raven" is not a tragedy in the conventional sense, but the drama of the poem possesses a genuinely tragic element. The speaker does not turn away from the horrifying void. He tries to act reasonably in a situation where reason provides no defense. Even if the protagonist does not rise fully to the heroic demands of tragedy by struggling against his fate, neither does he try to escape it. He steadfastly faces his tormentor, a demonic emblem (to quote Poe's own italicized description from "The Philosophy of Composition") of "*Mournful and Neverending Remembrance.*" Trapped and doomed, the protagonist nonetheless articulates what it is like to endure the limits of psychological suffering. Whether Poe himself fully shared those agonies we cannot say, but however rational the composition of "The Raven" truly was, the wellsprings of human pain and loss feeding it were vastly deep and authentic. As Walt Whitman wrote of his own work, "Who touches this touches a man." Few poems have touched so many readers so deeply as "The Raven."

Source: Dana Gioia, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Dave Smith

In the following excerpt, Smith credits the popularity of what he terms a bad poem to its universal message concerning the alienation of the individual in American society.

"The Raven," unequivocally the most famous of Poe's small body of poetry, may be among our most famous *bad* poems. Americans are fond of saying we do not read and do not care for poetry. It may be so. Yet Americans commonly recognize Poe's bird as subject of a poem by a weird guy who drank himself to death. Written and published in 1845, in print steadily for 148 years, the stanzas of "The Raven" are sonic flashcards. We may not know Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, or Eliot. But we do know Poe. We know "The Raven."

A poem that might have been designed by Benjamin Franklin, "The Raven" purports to be explained by Poe's "Philosophy of Composition." Poe wrote his essay for crowds smitten by his bird. Interestingly, he does not justify poetry with morality, as Emerson and Whitman would. He pretends to expose the poet's trade. Some recent criticism has seen "The Raven" as a parody of Romantic poems of personal discovery. Perhaps, What Poe leaves unsaid peels, layer by layer, toward two questions answerable only by speculation. The first asks why "The Raven" has for fifteen generations commanded the imaginations of people who have often enough known it to be a bad poem. The second question asks if Poe is a Southern writer. They are related questions.

That "The Raven" is a bad poem is unacceptable to many readers, and Poe people are not swayed much by rational argument. Were they, the plot alone would convict Poe. A man sits late in a storm; he laments a lost lady love; a bird not ordinarily abroad at night, and especially not in severe weather, seeks entrance to the human dwelling; admitted, the bird betrays no fright, no panic, its attitude entirely focused on its host—an invited guest; the bird, then, enters into a ventriloquial dialectic with the host and is domesticated to become an inner voice; we might say it is the voice of the *innerground* as opposed to *underground*, which word means much to the American spirit with its reasons to run, to hide, to contain itself. Action then ceases.

Poe knew this one-man backlot production for the smoker it was. His embrace of gothic machinery includes a terrified, obsessed man, an inhospitable, allegorical midnight in December, a "gifted" animal, extreme emotional states, heavy breathing of both cadence and melodramatic signifers (*grim, gaunt*), the supernatural presence of inexplicables (perfume, Pallas, bird), all to portray a psychic battle in the mind. Poe assembles a version of saloon theater for the mind's ear. But his poem's form emerges from the unbuckled ways of the ode, the loosened metrics of which Poe knew in the work of Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. Poe's editorial slush pile was full of their imitators. Odes attracted people because, as Gilbert Highet has said, they "soar and dive and veer as the wind catches their wing." The capacity for passion, personal experience, ambitious public utterance, and a celebrative finish defines the ode.

The boosterism, self-infatuation, and lyceum podiums of nineteenth-century America made Poe and the ode a natural match....

Poe was attracted to the ode because, as English Romantics had used it, a classical rigor was maintained while a daring shift had begun which would result in lyric, singular, interior expression....

That the language strategies Poe employs, largely yoked under the braided tropes of reiteration and interrogation, are distantly related to the Pindaric tradition of triadic movement which desires aesthetic completion as well as to the Horatian tradition of monody seems obvious enough....

Poe wanted a rhythmic trance he felt was conducive to an impression of beauty but wanted the trance to dispossess the reader from tranquil stability. He relies on the catalectic, or broken pattern, a missing syllable that "bumps" our progression. Poe exploits a ballad half-line, with its comfortable lyric expectations, its mnemonic power, and its narrative momentum to tell a virtually plotless story, a story entirely interior and psychological. He has telescoped the ballad line into the ode's stanzaic regularity, controlling tropes, public address, and mixed dictions to accomplish what appears a personal complaint, not the ode's meditational tone for imponderables such as art, beauty, life, and death. The tale served by his machinery is the dispossessing myth of lost love, which Poe routinely furnishes with classical allusions to establish eternal resonance.

Our affection for Poe's bird must be, in some measure, due to his adaptations, clunky and juryrigged as they appear. Poe thought his work daring, and it is, in the presentation of the nightmare of absent consolation, or belonging-to. "The Raven" reverberates not with the usual flight-to-vision, return-enlightened celebration, but with the pyschic thrill of confronting despair, isolation, and the utter futility of lovely words. The nightmare vision made the poem an allegory of the darkest self in terror....

Poe finds himself alone in the time and season of human intercourse at its lowest ebb; a time, indeed, when we remind ourselves that we had better change our ways, or else—as Dickens' Scrooge learns. A knock at his door should bring Poe a human visitor, if any, an emissary from the community; yet there is darkness, and then the Raven, the predator. And a predator who seems to know Poe is doomed to an absence of civil intercourse, a silence, and words which echo without effect. Poe understands and declares that even the bird will leave him, as all others have done, as hope has done. With this, Poe's poem has arrived at nightmare, the living isolation from fellowship that popular horror movies have turned into the ghoulish marches of the living dead. If Poe's bird seems deadly, the incantatory rhythms which evoked the birdspell are the forbidding stanzas which clank forth and enchant us as if the bird were enacting some chthonic ritual. The bird, in fact, makes no move after arrival. It does not threaten, seems entirely content, is a creature not unfamiliar to odes. Yet how different from, say, a nightingale so sweetly caged by a form which for Poe permits the witness to come close to his creature and yet keep safe, a glimpsed but not engaged threat. Still, having summoned the raven, Poe cannot so easily deny or repress it: he tells us the bird sits in the forever of that last stanza, a curse neither expiated nor escaped....

'The Raven' reverberates not with the usual flight-to-vision, return-enlightened celebration, but with the pyschic thrill of confronting despair, isolation, and the utter futility of lovely words."

This is a basic country-western song and it sells more than we may want to think about. Yet few country-western songs last in admiration or consciousness as "The Raven" does. Poe's addition of the nearly voiceless but intimidating bird employs Gothic machinery to touch unresolved fears of what's under the bed or behind the door. But Poe's bird has the power of knowledge—it knows *us*—and this makes the world a more slippery place than we had thought. It exposes our inside. That is a problem for Poe, and for all of us, because he knows that the inside without connection to an outside is an emptiness, a desert. No self can supply love's support, community sustenance, or the hope we once

drew from an outside system. Poe's terrible fable sticks with us because no matter what our intellects conceive, our hearts believe we are alien, each of us, and there is a god-bird that knows it, too....

Poe loved women who died, often violently, diseased. His mother went first; he was two and an orphan. He was taken in and raised as ward of John Allan and his wife Frances, a sickly woman who would die on him, but first there would be Jane Stanard, on whom he had a fourteen-year-old's crush. She was thirty-one when she died insane. Poe suffered the death of three women before he finished being a moody teenaged boy....

Poe felt he had second-class treatment from his foster family. He felt himself orphaned. At eighteen he went to the University of Virginia, where he was undercapitalized and made to feel his inferior circumstance. He was pushed outside that society, too. Returned to Richmond, he found himself an outsider, and he embarked on one of his secret journeys. Wandering, turning up, writing, editing, trying to establish a domestic community, then wandering off—this was the pattern of Poe's life. In every relationship and in every circumstance, he was the outsider, the orphan....

He was an artist, a truth-teller—nothing is more obsessive in his tales than that need. His truth was a nightmare.

If we read "The Raven," despite its absence of specific local details, as an "awareness" of the life of America in 1845, we see that Poe has conjectured the nightmare of the individual cut off from history, abandoned by family, place, and community love....

This story is still the nightmare. Having seen it, Poe celebrates the sensibility or imagination that suffers and knows simultaneously, ultimately the figure of the artist. This figure will sit in the lost garden, knowing its lostness, without explanation, but aware that the change is hopeless and continuous. This poem will, in its late variations, become our outlaw song of the renegade, the cowboy in black, the rebel without a cause. "The Raven" is the drama of nightmare awakening in the American poetic consciousness where there is no history which is not dispossession, little reality to the American promise, and nothing of consequence to place trust in except the song, the ode of celebration.... "The Raven" is the croaking and anguished nightmare ode of allegiance, and we have been finding ourselves in it ever since Poe began hearing "Nevermore."

Source: Dave Smith, "Edgar Allan Poe and the Nightmare Ode," in *Southern Humanities Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Winter, 1995, pp. 4–10.

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For Further Study

"Edgar Allan Poe," in *American Catholic Quarterly Review,* Vol. 16, No. 64, October 1891, pp. 818-33.

The version of Poe's life that is related in this source appears to be tainted by the misinformation that was spread by Poe's biographer Rufus Griswold. It is es-

pecially unusual that this source portrays Poe's step-father, John Allan, as a patient, suffering benefactor, although most other sources paint Allan as a grim tyrant.

Suchard, Alan, *American Poetry: The Puritans Through Walt Whitman*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988.

Suchard devotes an entire chapter of his book to Poe, giving an in-depth analysis of the man and comparing his style to other poets of the time.

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Applying the standards of what a poem can teach its readers, Waggoner determines that Poe was a "minor poet." With that established, he goes on to examine a small handful of poems by Poe that he thinks will be effective throughout time. "The Raven" is not one of them.

The Red Wheelbarrow

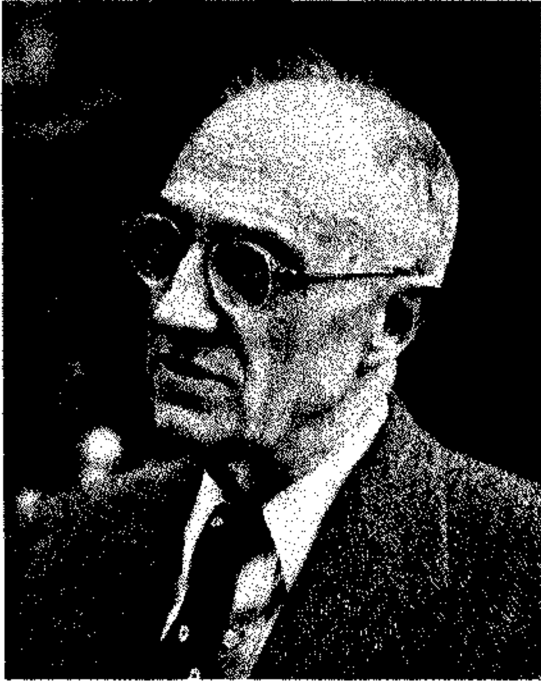
William Carlos Williams

1923

William Carlos Williams's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" was first published in the collection *Spring and All* in 1923. The poem is a good example of Williams's statement, "No ideas, but in things." As an unusually broken up sentence, the poem presents the reader with a seemingly ordinary object (the wheelbarrow) as the exclusive image. The poem focuses so deeply upon this image that the reader discovers the wheelbarrow is not an ordinary object, but is the poem itself. Such close scrutiny of an image reminds one of certain aspects of art. As in painting, the poem uses line and color to form the image of the wheelbarrow. Notice the painterly language. The colors red and white contrast sharply with one another, while the word "glazed" works to transform the image into its new, poetic form.

Author Biography

Williams was born September 17, 1883 in Rutherford, New Jersey, to middle-class parents who were lovers of literature and visual art. But Williams showed little interest in art until he attended the University of Pennsylvania's medical school. It was there that he became enamored with poetry and was for some time torn between his parents' wishes that he become a doctor and his own, less conventional aspirations. While in Pennsylvania, Williams befriended the poet Ezra Pound, a relationship that he later termed a watershed event in his literary ca-



William Carlos Williams

reer. Pound not only helped Williams develop his aesthetic of Imagism—a poetic approach that emphasized the concrete over abstractions—but also introduced him to a literary circle that included the flamboyant poet Hilda Doolittle (H. D.). By the time Williams completed his studies, he was committed to his writing; yet he still pursued a medical career and maintained a private practice in Rutherford for over forty years. From his medical practice Williams gained not only the financial freedom to write what he wished, but also a rare and intimate insight into the lives of common people.

Williams's immersion in and attachment to the lives of Rutherford's townsfolk was mirrored in the aesthetic principles he developed over the years. He consistently advocated and wrote literature that took its themes from ordinary life and its voice from the patterns of common speech. During much of his poetic career, however, these values ran counter to those of the critically acclaimed poetry of the day—namely, the classicist, academic, and formal poetry exemplified by T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore. During the 1920s and 1930s Williams labored largely in obscurity; with the publication of the first *Paterson* volumes in the 1940s, however, he gained wider recognition, and the emerging Beat Movement poets of the 1950s venerated him for his rejection of formalism. Shortly after receiving a Pulitzer Prize, Williams died on March 4, 1963.

Poem Text

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Poem Summary

Lines 1-2:

The opening lines set the tone for the rest of the poem. Since the poem is composed of one sentence broken up at various intervals, it is truthful to say that "so much depends upon" each line of the poem. This is so because the form of the poem is also its meaning. This may seem confusing, but by the end of the poem the image of the wheelbarrow is seen as the actual poem, as in a painting when one sees an image of an apple, the apple represents an actual object in reality, but since it is part of a painting the apple also becomes the actual piece of art. These lines are also important because they introduce the idea that "so much depends upon" the wheelbarrow.

Lines 3-4:

Here the image of the wheelbarrow is introduced starkly. The vivid word "red" lights up the scene. Notice that the monosyllable words in line 3 elongates the line, putting an unusual pause between the word "wheel" and "barrow." This has the effect of breaking the image down to its most basic parts. The reader feels as though he or she were scrutinizing each part of the scene. Using the sentence as a painter uses line and color, Williams breaks up the words in order to see the object more closely.

Lines 5-6:

Again, the monosyllable words elongate the lines with the help of the literary device assonance. Here the word "glazed" evokes another painterly image. Just as the reader is beginning to notice the

Media Adaptations

- An audio cassette titled "William Carlos Williams Reads His Poetry" is available from Caedmon.
- The video *William Carlos Williams,* part of the Voices and Visions series, Volume I, is available from Mystic Fire Video.

wheelbarrow through a closer perspective, the rain transforms it as well, giving it a newer, fresher look. This new vision of the image is what Williams is aiming for.

Lines 7-8:

The last lines offer up the final brushstroke to this "still life" poem. Another color, "white" is used to contrast the earlier "red," and the unusual view of the ordinary wheelbarrow is complete. Williams, in dissecting the image of the wheelbarrow, has also transformed the common definition of a poem. With careful word choice, attention to language, and unusual stanza breaks Williams has turned an ordinary sentence into poetry.

Themes

Order and Disorder

The spirit of this poem lies in the concept that even such random objects as those mentioned are not as randomly situated at they might appear to the casual observer. There are three objects here, each highlighted by standing alone on its own line in this poem—(wheel)barrow, water, and chickens. The second two are defined in terms of their relationship to the first, as the water glazes the wheelbarrow and the chickens stand beside it. In life, we know, chickens move about more or less randomly, and rain glazes everything it falls on. It is by leaving out all other things that this poem makes the wheelbarrow the center of this tiny universe. The poet's task here is to reproduce a human experience, and in real life the biggest, brightest object in the yard would catch the viewer's attention; he or she would see all other objects as they relate to it. This relationship is even clear in the articles of speech that Williams uses. Early in the poem he describes "a" red wheelbarrow, showing that it is unfamiliar, as if it is just at that moment being noticed; when "the" chickens are mentioned, they already have a context, a background. Once the situation is focused around the wheelbarrow, auxiliary objects such as chickens are minor details, like "the wheels of a car." With the poem organized around the wheelbarrow, the reader can see how "everything depends" on it.

Art and Experience

In this poem, Williams tried to capture the experience as it struck him when he noticed it in his neighbor's yard and to convey that experience. To do this, he used simplified, precise language, with just one adjective per noun, basic colors, and no action. All of these techniques are obvious to us only because other poets have used opposite techniques. Some poetry, as a matter of fact, seems to try to be complex, ornate, and active. The more details these poems add, the more they draw attention to their language and away from the experience they are describing. Some poets would say that experience is just one tool in the entire arsenal that a writer has to convey an idea, while others would argue that ideas are not a poet's business—that a poem that makes its reader feel the essence of nature will capture nature's idea without the poet imposing his thoughts. "The Red Wheelbarrow" is an almost pure expression of this latter philosophy.

One of the most striking things about this poem is its form, how each stanza has four lines and every fourth word stands as its own line. Although Williams did not want to enslave his experience to a set poetic pattern, he was open to accepting a rhythm if one arose naturally from a situation. In this case, the structure is not strict, as can be seen by the inconsistency of the number of syllables on the odd-numbered lines: four, three, three and four. In notes that he made public, Williams said that he wrote this poem in about two minutes, after the subject had caught his attention for months. What appears to be a poetic structure, then, is just the way the poem presented itself to him. It does have a structure, but that structure was decided by the experience, not the poet.

Topics for Further Study

- Write a poem describing an object central to a scene or incident. Try to imply the significance of the scene from your description alone.
- Suppose somebody stole the red wheelbarrow from this yard: now what would it all depend on? Why?
- Write about the colors that are mentioned in this poem, and their significance to the poem overall.

Nature and its Meaning

There are three items—wheelbarrow, water, and chickens—mentioned in this poem, but the one that everything depends on is the man-made tool. It is in using this word "depends" that the poem raises its greatest mystery. Usually, objects of nature are mysterious because they have an existence independent of human thought. If, for example, human beings had never walked the earth, there would still be rain and chickens, and so there is part of their existence that will always be independent of humans. In reading "The Red Wheelbarrow," the reader has to wonder just what is meant by the natural objects "depending" on the wheelbarrow. How far does "so much" extend—just within the yard? Is the poet's success or failure implied? Maybe the poem is even reaching into the area of physics that states that all things are interrelated, that a hummingbird's path in Madagascar will affect a flood on the Mississippi River. Williams is purposely unclear about how much "depends" and in what way, but his tone makes it clear that what goes on in this yard is important, even crucial.

Style

"The Red Wheelbarrow" is a poem which rose out of the Imagism movement in the early twentieth century. The poem is composed in free verse and uses unusual stanza breaks and assonance to emphasize the tone of the poem.

Imagism was a movement in early twentieth century poetry that emphasized concise language and fresh imagery over abstract ideas.

Free verse is verse that does not use a formal or regular pattern of meter or rhyme. The lines and stanzas are of variable length and it relies more on images and figurative language to show meaning.

Assonance is a literary device in which identical vowels are repeated in a line or stanza. The usually elongated sound it forms contributes to the tone and rhythm of a poem. Notice the assonance in line 5 in the words "glazed" and "rain?" Tone is the attitude of the voice in the poem. Tone is often displayed by images, figures of speech, and rhythm.

Historical Context

"An 'image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant in time," the poet Ezra Pound wrote in a 1913 essay in *Poetry* magazine. "It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from tome limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art." Pound was one of the founding members of the Imagist school of poetry and had been a classmate of Williams at the University of Pennsylvania, where they formed a lifelong friendship. Imagist poetry was the product of a group of friends who claimed to be Imagists for only a short period of time (1908 to 1917), but the influence of this group has extended to the present day. Although William Carlos Williams mastered different styles of prose and verse in his lifetime, "The Red Wheelbarrow" is considered a perfect ideal of what the Imagists were trying to achieve.

The goal of Imagism was not particularly new. Imagists insisted that poetry should get its power from the feelings that images evoke, not from what the images symbolize or from the poet's clever style. The focus on a fleeting image can be traced back to Japanese haiku of the sixteenth century, although haiku were almost always about things in nature and written in a strict form, whereas Imagism encouraged writers to be open to form and subject matter. In 1798, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge ushered in the Romantic Age with their publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, introducing a new goal for the poet: to capture experience as honestly as possible. The Romantic spirit emphasized the importance of the poet more

Compare & Contrast

- **1923:** Soon after President Harding's sudden death, it was found that his administration was rotten with corruption. Harding's widow undertook an extensive search to collect and destroy all of his letters, leaving his involvement in the scandals unexamined.

  Today: Critics suggest that intense media scrutiny given to all aspects of the lives of presidential candidates may be discouraging the best people from running from office.

- **1923:** Adolf Hitler, a leader of Germany's National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) political party, lead an overthrow of the Munich city government, for which he was arrested and sent to jail. In this same year, the Soviet Union became a country.

  1924: V.I. Lenin, the chairman of the Soviet Union, died, and was replaced by Josef Stalin, who is thought to be responsible for the murders of up to 30 million Russians before his death in 1953.

  1946-1990: After World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in a "Cold War" that did not involve actual fighting between the two countries, but they gave support to opposite sides in many smaller conflicts.

  Today: After the breakup of the Soviet Union, America is the world's only remaining superpower.

- **1923:** The first commercial radio manufacturer, Zenith Radio, was founded.

  1950: 9 percent of U.S. households had television sets.

  1965: 95 percent of U.S. households had television sets.

  Today: The number of households that have Internet access is increasing at a rate too quick to be accurately counted.

than Imagism later did, and therefore Romantic poetry used rhyme schemes and rhythms that the Imagist would say distracts from the full impact of the image. The most immediate predecessors to the Imagists were the French Symbolists, including Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Laforge. Symbols, however, are significant because they refer to another idea or object that they represent, and therefore they have to fit into some sort of system in order to have significance: an image speaks for itself.

In 1908, a small group of poets in London who had formed a Poets' Club found their club dissolving, while at the same time many of the club's members took to gathering informally at a restaurant. One of the former Poets' Club members was Ezra Pound. These meetings naturally led to talk of poetry, and out of these talks came a theory of what poetry should do. Comparison of poetry from different cultures finally focused attention on the image as the poem's central responsibility. T.E. Hulme, who was an unofficial leader, added the idea that no extra words should interfere with the job of presenting an image clearly, which meant, of course, that the poet should not choose his or her words in order to fulfill a rhythm or rhyme scheme. Imagist poems were short and direct. Several of the poets of the group started publishing poems that fit this description. The group's title itself did not come into use until 1913, when Pound published an essay titled "A Few Do's and Don'ts by an Imagiste." The same issue carried an essay by another group member, F.S. Flint, called "Imagisme." The idea caught on in the poetry community, and in the following months poems that were written in the Imagist style began to show up in magazines. In 1914, one of the Imagist poets, H.D., a mutual friend of Pound and Williams, signed a contract with a major publishing hours to produce annual anthologies of Imagist poetry, and the idea spread even further. By 1917, the group of poets who identified themselves as Imagists had broken up. The shape of all twentieth-century poetry has been changed by the Imagists' ideas—for example, metered or rhythmic poetry has never recaptured

the broad acceptance that it had before, because most writers now see that it is possible to strike an emotional chord quickly, using a cleanly observed slice of reality. On the other hand, after 1917 Imagist poetry became more and more infrequent, as poets went beyond one pure image to weaving a series of images together, or using a powerful image to anchor a wider piece in the way an orchestral piece might center on a single haunting melody as its refrain.

Williams was not part of the group who called themselves Imagists. At the time "The Red Wheelbarrow" was published, he was living in the New Jersey suburb he had been born (and eventually died) in and was a practicing physician. He once explained in an introduction to the poem that he had actually seen the wheelbarrow in a neighbor's yard: "The sight impressed me somehow as about the most important, the most integral that it had ever been my pleasure to gaze upon." He did not write this poem trying to be an Imagist, but the logic of Imagism obviously controlled his approach to the subject. To one degree or another, this is how Imagism has affected almost all poets of out century.

Critical Overview

"The Red Wheelbarrow" is a perfect example of an imagist poem. In it, Williams focuses on an object instead of using the poem to explore an idea or express a sentiment. The poem focuses closely on the image of the wheelbarrow, eliminating all else. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in *Understanding Poetry* see this microscopic vision of the wheelbarrow as a new vision of the ordinary.

> Reading this poem is like peering at an ordinary object through a pin prick in a piece of cardboard. The fact that the tiny hole arbitrarily frames the object endows it with an exciting freshness that seems to hover on the verge of revelation.

James E. B. Breslin, in his book *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist,* also explores this new vision of the wheelbarrow:

> The scene is not entirely bare: the wheelbarrow is red and it has just been rained on, giving it a fresh "glazed" appearance. A spare, clinical manner it is clear, asserts by relief the primary color and novelty that are there. We are brought down into a new world.

Criticism

Jhan Hochman

Jhan Hochman is a freelance writer and currently teaches at Portland Community College, Portland, OR. In the following essay, Hochman points out how, in this short verse, Williams has taken a rather ordinary scene and rearranged it so that the reader must pause and reconsider its significance.

Critic Hugh Kenner remarked that if someone said to you, "[You know,] so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens," you would likely wince. But embarrassment is not the usual reaction to William Carlos Williams's "XXII," better known as "The Red Wheelbarrow." And why is the reaction to such a poem not either the sarcastic—or even serious—response, "Heavy, man!" More than anything, it is the way these words are "said" or appear on the page. In "The Red Wheelbarrow" a romantic or heavy sentiment becomes a poem, a poetic object, one to walk around and through as though it were architecture made of words. And just as the Cubist painters, Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, and Juan Gris fractured their objects and creatively reassembled them in painting and sculpture, Williams has taken a rather everyday scene, broken it up, and reassembled it into an art object with space "around" it; it is almost as if we can walk around these words, look at the wheelbarrow and the chickens, get to "know" them for themselves, get to know their "suchness" apart from the usual poetic or sentimental encumbrances. Still, what is most intriguing is that the poem expresses a romantic notion and at the same time is purged of sentimentality. One might go so far as to say that "The Red Wheelbarrow" is an antipoem, or a poem attempting to be, not so much a poem, but a hard object "glazed" with poetry.

"The Red Wheelbarrow" appeared in *Spring and All* (1923), Williams's collection of poems interspersed with manifesto-like prose stating position(s) on what poetry should and should not do, and what his poetry does and does not do. Critic James Breslin thinks the book one of the most important documents of twentieth century literature, not only for its own merits, but for the profound influence it had on other poets (Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley to name a few). Out of this collection, "The Red Wheelbarrow" is Williams's most anthologized and studied poem. First, there is not just what meets the eye, but also

What Do I Read Next?

- This poem is included in volume I of *William Carlos Williams: The Collected Poems,* which covers 1909 through 1939. Volume II covers 1939-1962. Both volumes were published by New Directions in 1991.
- Harold G. Henderson's *An Introduction to Haiku,* published in 1958, explains a poetic form much like the one Williams uses in "The Red Wheelbarrow," with plenty of superb examples.
- The spirit of this piece is experimental. A collection of poets from the same time trying new techniques is gathered in Jerome Rothenberg's *Revolution of the Word,* which studies avant-garde poetry between 1914-1945.
- In *William Carlos Williams' Early Poetry: The Visual Arts Background,* the author, Christopher J. MacGowan, relates Williams's works to what was happening in the art world at the time, particularly the Dada movement. This provides a fascinating new approach to poets and poetry for students who feel that they don't "get it."
- Paul Mariani's huge critical biography *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked,* published in 1981, is quite rich in details about the poet's life and is interesting to read.
- Much of Williams's style can be seen in the work of his friend, Ezra Pound. *The Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound,* published in 1976, covers a time when both poets were developing their styles. To see how Pound developed in a different way than Williams, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound,* most recently published in 1970, is considered his masterwork.
- Williams is respected as a short-story writer as well as a poet. One particular story, "The Use of Force," is frequently included in anthologies of American fiction. This story can be found in *The Collected Stories of William Carlos Williams,* published in 1996, previously published under the title *The Farmers' Daughters.*
- Allen Ginsberg's long poem "Howl" is one of the most influential poems of the second half of the century. It was published in a 1956 book called *Howl,* with an introduction by William Carlos Williams.

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what meets the ear. Though it might go unnoticed, each of the four, three-word lines have either three or four syllables: four in the first and seventh, and three in the third and fifth; every one-word line has two syllables. In all, every stanza has three accents. Even though Williams is known as the inventor of the "variable foot" (a rather controversial bit of prosody where any number of syllables in a line contributes to one beat), the device does not appear in "The Red Wheelbarrow," as some critics have maintained, but appears for the first time in a later poem, "The Descent," (1947).

In a short and ingeniously simple poem like "The Red Wheelbarrow," it is necessary not only to describe what the poem does, but what it does not do, in other words, what makes it an antipoem. Williams eliminates all capital letters and punctuation, rendering the poem into floating main and subordinate clauses that would hover in a realm between prose and poetry were it not for the poem's arrangement and syllabic regularity. There is no rhyme and none of that familiar poetic rearrangement of words indicating that this is poetry, as in Shakespeare's Sonnet 116: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / admit impediments" instead of the prosaic, "Don't let me admit impediments to the marriage of true minds." With no symbolism, no comparison, no metaphor, there is little more than a bare presentation of entities—and mundane ones at that—as if to merely indicate them, as if someone said, "Look there." And though poems usually have titles, "The Red Wheelbarrow," when first published, had none. Finally, there is nothing personal in this poem, no self or I. Moreover, the poet would be effaced if not for the personal assertion, "so much depends." All that is left to let

readers know they are in the presence of a poem, then, is the layout and the lines with a constant pattern of syllables, which, may not seem like much, but is enough to distinguish it markedly from prose. Still, while writing is usually divided into prose and poetry, Williams presents us with an object that seems to be neither.

Even so, Williams conceives of "The Red Wheelbarrow," as a poem and Williams called himself a poet, having worked most of his life writing poetry and theorizing about it. So, then, what is this poem about? Presumably the poet espies a wet, red wheelbarrow that has just been rained upon ("glazed") near some white chickens. Something strikes the poet about the scene. Perhaps it is the ordinary usefulness of a wheelbarrow that a farmer might take for granted but a poet does not. Perhaps it is the contrast between shiny, metallic red and dull feathery white, between a cultural artifact and natural animals, between a thing that must be moved next to beings that move themselves, between something that must be "fed" or loaded, next to creatures who feed themselves. Perhaps it is the complexity of each entity in the scene, leading Williams to fracture the words *wheelbarrow* and *rainwater* at the ends of lines to make us think about them: there are wheels and a barrow, simple, elegant objects whose combination seems a stroke of genius. And "rain/water," rain being water but not the only kind since there is river, ocean, and lake water, fresh and salt. And then the breaking of lines into as small a unit as a single word further slows down and focuses the reader's attention on the scene's components. Intense concentration on objects is perhaps as old as poetry, and though most objects of contemplation are from nature, and Williams writes poems about them as well, there is a poem by one of Williams's first poetic heroes, John Keats, called "Ode to a Grecian Urn" (1819) that describes figures embellishing a kind of circular vase. Though Williams might have objected to the association, "The Red Wheelbarrow" qualifies as a kind of ode, if ode is defined as a lyric expressing exalted emotion about an object (an ode in regular stanzaic form like "The Red Wheelbarrow" is a Horatian Ode). "The Red Wheelbarrow," despite its non-elevated language, does exalt the wheelbarrow ("so much depends") to the point the poem might be renamed "Ode to a Red Wheelbarrow" and be criticized by a non-romantic who asked, "Really, how much *does* depend on this red wheelbarrow?

Williams's other poet-hero was Walt Whitman who had said that "a perfect user of words is a user of things." Williams, perhaps following Whitman, said, "No words but in things," which points to Williams's avoidance of words rich in connotation, words that come laden with years of conceptual baggage. Instead, Williams strips phrases to their essentials and selects words for their directness. Inherited and acquired knowledge, for Williams, are a kind of pollution of perception; he tries to see things as if washed clean by rain, and then recreates them, makes them over in his imagination, something he apparently believes is one's very own, not a product of society. True or not, as a result of bringing objects into the imagination, the poem itself takes shape as an object or poem, a thing "standing beside" the scene as itself an object-poem dependent upon both the scene and the imagination, yet at the same independent of them. Williams construes this not as representation, but creation: "The only realism in art is of the imagination. It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation." Art, says Williams, stands between or mediates reality without imitating it, without creating an illusion of nature or reality. He explains it this way: "Words adhere to certain objects and have the effect on the sense of oysters or barnacles." Words, then, are themselves real things or objects clinging to other real things. In this way, Williams asserts that art "must be real, not 'realism' but reality itself." Of course, few would assert that a painting of, or poem about, grapes does not have a separate existence apart from the grapes that are depicted, those grapes one could eat. To think otherwise would put one in jeopardy. Nevertheless, what Williams is trying to get the reader of "The Red Wheelbarrow" to do is make contact, not with the wheelbarrow or the chickens, but with Williams's experience of the wheelbarrow and chickens, of having used his imagination upon a scene he experienced: "The exaltation men feel before a work of art is the feeling of reality they draw from it. It sets them up, places a value upon experience." And, Williams would add, "There is no end of detail that is without significance," that can be experienced, and be remade by the imagination. As the poem dollys back like a color film camera from a wheel to a wheeled barrow to a wheelbarrow beside chickens, what gets framed is how this human made object is not only important for itself, but how it is especially significant within a context, within the world.

As true as this is for the wheelbarrow, it is also applies to poems. In *Spring and All,* Williams's project is double: to get readers to understand what it means to use the imagination on objects in the

world, which, in the case of Williams includes art objects. Just as it behooves us to think about the world apart from what artists make of it, that is, to exercise our imagination upon our experience in order to make sense of or understand our experience and the world, it is also necessary to do the same with art (which, presumably, itself has already done this). Williams's prose and poetry spurs us to do with his poems what he has already done with the scenes and objects he remakes in his poems: to raise them out of a welter of cultural products and recognize their significance. And if our experience tells us it is silly to attach so much significance to mundane objects or prosaic scenes, whether they be little poems or red wheelbarrows, then our imagination might also tell us how far our time has willfully or unwillfully distanced itself from poetry and from the rawer being of the world.

Source: Jhan Hochman, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Steven Monte

In the following essay, Monte notes that, despite seemingly simple language, Williams's work is complex and thought-provoking, forcing the reader to see familiar settings in a new light.

Most people who grow up in the United States have an allergy to anything that seems labored, artificial, or pretentious. Though this apparently instinctive reaction can at times develop into a mistrust of all intellectual pursuits, it can also produce a healthy skepticism or a no-nonsense approach to experience. William Carlos Williams viewed his poetic project in this light, virtually assigning himself the task of reinvigorating American poetry by bringing it back in touch with everyday life. One of his rallying cries throughout his career was "No ideas but in things," a manifesto for concrete realities against philosophical abstractions. Williams's mission, which he pursued with almost religious fervor, especially involved writing poetry with the language of ordinary people. According to Williams, American poetry should speak in an American idiom. Such a project has political implications insofar as it insists on making poetic language more democratic. This view of poetry connects Williams to a tradition of poets going back to Walt Whitman and William Wordsworth.

But perhaps the best way to approach Williams is to consider him first in the context of modern poetry. Williams wanted to correct a trend in poetry that he associated above all with T.S. Eliot. Eliot, Williams felt, was overly intellectual. He viewed him as having tremendous learning, but little or no vitality. Furthermore a poem such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) was profoundly pessimistic and stemmed more from a European than an American tradition. Eliot was nevertheless the leading poet of the day and exerted tremendous influence on the younger generation of poets. Williams was outraged by this development. Eliot, who had moved to England and eventually became a British citizen, was denying if not betraying his Americanness, according to Williams. Meanwhile Williams settled in northern New Jersey where he earned a living as a doctor (he was general practitioner) and wrote poetry, essays, and fiction in what he called "the American grain."

Though short and seemingly slight, "The Red Wheelbarrow" is well representative of Williams's poetic project. The reader does not need detailed knowledge of a literary tradition, nor even a dictionary, to enjoy this poem. The poem may in fact seem so transparent in meaning as to make the reader wonder why so much fuss has been made over it or what makes it a poem at all. But the apparent simplicity of the poem is in certain respects misleading. Some of the poem's effect relies on the reader's awareness of another sort of poetry, if not that of T.S. Eliot than of someone else who represents the idea that poetry must be difficult or written in a language removed from what we speak everyday. If "The Red Wheelbarrow" feels refreshing, it is in part because it releases us from one set of expectations about poetry and appears to give us something genuine and direct. The poem reinforces this sense of refreshment in that the scene described is apparently a sunny moment following a rain. As simple as the poem may seem, the source of its effects is complicated.

So how does "The Red Wheelbarrow" do whatever it is it does to us? In order to understand the poem, it is worth considering how we would read it if it were altered slightly. If the poem were called "The Blue Wheelbarrow," for example, we would react to it very differently. Though blue wheelbarrows exist, the scene would seem odd, more like something out of Wallace Stevens than William Carlos Williams. The redness of the wheelbarrow is necessary to evoke a pared-down vision of the world: the stark contrast of red and white, of wheelbarrow and chicken, is the sort of thing we might find in a children's book. Or suppose that the poem were written as a one-line sentence: "So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens." In this form the poem would lose almost everything

that makes it feel like a poem. Clearly the line breaks are important to the poem's meaning. They also help pace the reading and make up for any lack of punctuation. If we look closely at the poem, further patterns emerge: each two-line unit consists of one line of three words followed by a line containing only one word. Some words, such as "wheelbarrow" and "rainwater," are broken apart. It is even possible to see the two-line stanzas as visual representations of a wheelbarrow. For a poem that sounds as if it were speaking naturally, "The Red Wheelbarrow" shows signs that someone arranged its words for some effect.

But once again, appearances may be deceiving. Williams himself claimed that he composed "The Red Wheelbarrow" in two minutes. Does this mean that we are guilty of "reading into" the poem if we look too closely at it? Not necessarily. An experienced poet, like a high jumper who trains for months for a few leaps over the bar, may have long hours of practice behind him by the time he goes about his business. More important, explaining why a poem makes us feel the way it does may simply require more time than it takes to read the poem itself, if only because explanation forces us to ask questions we aren't accustomed to asking. Interpreting poetry may, in short, demand its own kind of training. Still, knowing that Williams would not want us to turn his poem into an intellectual exercise should give us some pause. We should talk about how the poem affects us in an immediate way.

With this perspective in mind we can return with more focus to the question of how "The Red Wheelbarrow" achieves its effects. Most immediately, Williams's use of line breaks forces us to read more slowly and invites us to look for more significance in the scene described and the words used to describe it. While the scene is ordinary and perhaps typically American, we are urged to see it in a new light. Williams is saying, in effect, that everyday experience can be as poetic as, if not more poetic than, any traditional subject for a poem. By isolating words like "barrow," "water," and "chickens," Williams gives them greater prominence. The first four lines of the poem tell us that much depends upon the red wheelbarrow; the line breaks in the next four lines hint at what the red wheelbarrow helps us perceive. It is as if we were looking at a painting centered on a red wheelbarrow, but in looking at the wheelbarrow we became aware of other objects that surround and in a sense depend on it: the rainwater and the chickens, whose glaze and whiteness appear more clearly next to the red wheelbarrow. The prominence that the layout of the poem gives to certain words is further reinforced on the level of sound: the three nouns "barrow," "water," and "chickens" are all accented on the first syllable.

And yet it is not enough to say that the rainwater and the chickens in some sense depend on the wheelbarrow. The phrase "so much depends" makes us feel that the poem is telling us more than this. There is, perhaps, a hidden pun on the word "depends," the Latin root of which means "hang from" or "hang down." This pun makes sense given that individual words hang down from the lines consisting of three words, and that the whole poem hangs down from its title, "The Red Wheelbarrow." Because a pun draws attention to words as words (sounds and letters as opposed to meanings), it also allows us to read the poem as a comment on language and poetry. When Williams splits apart one sentence into eight lines and compound words into their parts, he is showing us the building blocks of meaning which are generally invisible to us. Just as it helps us see an ordinary scene more clearly and more vitally, "The Red Wheelbarrow" helps us see and reflect on what we experience each day in the form of language. We are invited to linger over meanings literally between words, such as the "wheel" in "wheel/barrow." The wheelbarrow itself is a tool, a simple machine as a physicist might say, and in this sense can be read as a metaphor for poetry (whose Greek root is the verb "to do" or "to make"). To the extent that poetry helps us see reality more vividly, much depends on it.

In looking closely at "The Red Wheelbarrow," it is easy to lose sight of the poem's overall effect. Here it is worth recalling how Williams's poetic project was in part a reaction against bookishness. "The Red Wheelbarrow" wants to remind us of the things of this world. Its modest size and language cry out to us that less is more and that there is no need to be difficult. Regardless of hidden puns, "The Red Wheelbarrow" ideally does not require lengthy explanations. The poem's general message seems clear and should not be overlooked when we are trying to understand its deeper meanings. But though "The Red Wheelbarrow" stands on its own in many respects, its effects rely on expectations we bring to our reading. The poem is organized in a far from natural way, yet we feel that it is natural and simple because we are familiar with or can imagine other "artificial" or "difficult" poems. What this means is that "so much" of our reading of a poem "depends upon" how the poem compares to other works we have read. We experience po-

The poem is impersonal; its impersonality, however, is not that of indifferent God paring his fingernails, but one that comes from the way the poet has yielded himself intimately to the scene."

ems—or stories or songs for that matter—in part through other poems, stories, and songs. We may think we are reading a poem or listening to a piece of music on its own, but we are always making comparisons.

In the end, a reading of "The Red Wheelbarrow" leaves us with as many questions as it answers. When we realize that the effect of a poem depends in part upon other poems we might ask how many poems like "The Red Wheelbarrow" can be written before the effect wears off. Does Williams's poem and poetic project depend too much on a reaction against what does not seem both natural and American? And from here we might begin to question ourselves. When we react against something that seems artificial, labored, or pretentious, what sort of comparison are we making?

Source: Steven Monte, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

James E.B. Breslin

A discussion of the intense emotion found in the simplistic presentation of the poetry of William Carlos Williams.

Source: James E.B. Breslin, *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist,* University of Chicago Press, 1970 pp. 54–5.

Sources

Axelrod, Steven Gould and Helen Deese, editors, *Critical Essays on William Carlos Williams,* G. K. Hall, 1995.

Breslin, James E. B., *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist,* University of Chicago Press, 1970.

Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976, pp. 73-74.

Frail, David, *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams,* UMI Research Press, 1987.

Miller, J. Hillis, editor, *William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays,* Prentice-Hall, 1966.

Williams, William Carlos, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams* Volume I: New Directions, 1986.

World Literary Criticism Volume 6, p. 4009.

For Further Study

Beaty, Jerome, and William H. Matchett, *Poetry: From Statement to Meaning,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.

The introduction to this book focuses attention onto the overall question of poetry's goals and how they differ from one poet to the next: the treatment of "The Red Wheelbarrow" that comes later in the book is a little obscure, but provides useful information.

Drew, Elizabeth, *Poetry: A Modern Guide to Its Understanding and Enjoyment,* New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1959.

In a chapter entitled "Sound Patterns," Drew is quite rough on "The Red Wheelbarrow," stating coolly: "Whether this kind of thing pleases must be a matter of personal taste, but it should not be called 'verse,' since that word means the rhythm 'turns' and repeats itself." This seems to be exactly the kind of thinking Williams was reacting against.

Pearce, Roy Harvey, "Williams and the 'New Mode,'" *William Carlos Williams,* edited by J. Hills Miller, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996.

Pearce examines in detail how Williams came to use Imagist techniques. This collection also contains essays about Williams by close associates who are major figures in American poetry themselves, including Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Karl Shapiro, and Robert Lowell.

Pratt, William, *The Imagist Poem,* New York: E.P. Dutton Co., 1963.

An indispensable guide to understanding Imagist poetry. Pratt provides one of the most comprehensive histories of Imagism recorded and dozens of examples, including poems that are not directly related to the movement but fit the pattern.

Rapp, Carl, *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism,* Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1984.

The style of this book concentrates more on psychology than criticism, which is appropriate for Williams's method in "The Red Wheelbarrow": the poet shows an image that made an impression on him, and Rapp, in a well-researched examination, shows why it would be striking.

The Sonnet-Ballad

Gwendolyn Brooks

1949

Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Sonnet-Ballad" provides an excellent example of the formal poetry she wrote early in her career. As one would expect from the title, the poem is in traditional sonnet form of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter of which the last two lines form a couplet. Her facility with meter and rhyme (she was known to have written hundreds of sonnets) initially brought Brooks to prominence in 1945 with her first book of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville*. With the publication of her second book, *Annie Allen*, Brooks became the first African–American writer to win the Pulitzer Prize. Though she would move away from formal structure in her poetry toward free verse, which she felt allowed her to better express the personal and political issues of the time, she would always display in her poems the skill with the rhythm and pacing of language that she demonstrates in this poem.

This poem appears traditional in both language and subject, with its story of a woman lamenting to her mother the fatal parting of her lover to war, and its somewhat formal expressions—"walking grandly," "my sweet love." But Brooks's alterations of tradition are evident in such passages as: "impudent and strange / Possessive arms," and "Can make a hard man hesitate." With this combination of familiar form and innovative language, the poem offers a compelling image of the soldier's death as if it were another woman tempting him away from his lover. Thus the speaker in the poem sees the imminent death as a betrayal, and can only ask at the end of such a situation a question often

found in traditional ballads concerned with false love: "where is happiness?"

Author Biography

Combining a commitment to racial identity and equality with a mastery of poetic techniques, Brooks has bridged the gap between the academic poets of her generation in the 1940s and the young militant writers of the 1960s. Born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1917, but raised in Chicago, Brooks started writing poetry as a child. She was inspired by her parents, Keziah Wims Brooks, a schoolteacher, and David Anderson Brooks, a janitor who had failed to achieve his dream of becoming a doctor because of insufficient funds for tuition. By the late 1930s Brooks had published some seventy-five poems and had been encouraged in her efforts by Langston Hughes. Following graduation from Wilson Junior College in 1936, she worked briefly as a maid and then as a secretary to Dr. E. N. French, a "spiritual advisor" who sold potions and charms out of a Chicago tenement building known as the Mecca. In 1938 Brooks joined the NAACP Youth Council, where she met Henry Lowington Blakely II. The two were married the following year and in 1940 saw the birth of their son, Henry Lowington Blakely III.

In 1941 Brooks attended poetry workshops at Chicago's South Side Community Art Center, producing poems which would appear in her first published volume, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945). This work was a poetic description of the everyday lives of the black people who occupied a large section of Chicago called "Bronzeville." Its themes would feature prominently in Brooks's works during the next two decades: family life, war, the quest for contentment and honor, and the hardships caused by racism and poverty. *Annie Allen* (1949), her next book of poems, continued the movement of Brooks's poetry toward social issues. The book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950, the first time that the award had been presented to a black honoree. Brooks's daughter Nora was born the next year and in 1953 the author published *Maud Martha*, a novel.

Over the next several years, Brooks produced a book of poetry for children and worked on a novel which she later abandoned (although the first chapter was published as both a story and a poem). Her next major collection, *The Bean Eaters* (1960), details the attempts of ghetto inhabitants to escape feelings of hopelessness. The importance of the volume derives from Brooks's continued mastery of poetic forms and her movement away from autobiographical tensions and toward social concerns. Brooks's popularity and national visibility increased in the 1960s—in 1962 President John F. Kennedy invited her to read at a Library of Congress poetry festival. New pieces in *Selected Poems* (1963) reveal the author's growing interest in the civil rights movement; among the new poems was a salute to the Freedom Riders of 1961.

Gwendolyn Brooks

Brooks experienced a change in political consciousness and artistic direction after observing the combative spirit of several young black authors at the Second Black Writers' Conference at Fisk University in 1967. This inspiration helped inform the volume *In the Mecca* (1968), in which Brooks abandoned traditional poetic forms in favor of free verse and increased her use of vernacular to make her works more accessible. In *Riot* (1969) and *Family Pictures* (1970) Brooks evoked the revolutionary legacy of such slain black activists as Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and examined the social upheavals of the late 1960s. And in the nonfiction book *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* (1975) Brooks advised beginning poets.

The 1980s continued to bring Brooks honors and awards—in 1980, she read her works at the

White House with Robert Hayden, Stanley Kunitz, and eighteen other distinguished poets. Now holding over forty honorary doctorates and having served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1985 to 1986, Brooks continues to read her works throughout the United States.

Poem Summary

Line 1:

"The Sonnet-Ballad," begins with an address to the speaker's mother. Given that in this particular case the title of the poem gives us very little specific information about the poem's subject, it is difficult with so general an opening line to discern much about who the speaker might be. There is, however, a decent amount of compelling information in the poem that might serve to draw a reader in. For instance, the address to a parent offers the idea that the speaker is might be a child, or, at the very least, is someone's son or daughter. This is immediately complicated though by the addition of a question which—although childlike in its simplicity—one would expect, because of its seriousness, to come from an adult. This seriousness is increased as well by the repetition of the word "mother" which gives the line a sense of pleading, and not simply asking.

This first line is an excellent example of how contrasting ideas or implications can be used to offer complexity in a poem and not necessarily confusion. In this case there is the contrast of the serious, pleading question about happiness with the implied idea of a child. Though this seems contradictory, as one moves through the poem and finds it to be about a woman who has lost her lover to war, the subject of childhood could be seen to strengthen the poem is several ways. First, it heightens the sense of loss in death by subtly offering its opposite: youth or childhood. Second, one might find the idea of childhood bringing in the feeling of vulnerability, which the speaker clearly feels later in the poem.

Line 2:

With this second line the vagueness of the situation is removed as the speaker offers specific information about the situation. Her lover has been taken off to war. Notice how this line establishes a particular tone with its use of carefully chosen language. The lover did not "leave for," or "go to" war, but he was "taken" by an anonymous "They." This adds a sense of tragedy to the poem as it implies that the lovers had no real control in the matter. Also, it is not just the lover that departs, but the "lover's tallness." This change, however slight, could be seen to add human detail to our still general image of the lover. The noun provides a reader with something to begin picturing, but also implies the idea of strength. This again could be seen to add force to the already tragic experience of his being taken by establishing that he was strong, not small and weak, and yet he could not stop them from taking him.

Lines 3-4:

Here, in lines three and four, the poem becomes more involved regarding both form and content. As to form, these lines are the ending of the first of the three, four-line sections of the sonnet. Notice how the end rhymes (ABAB) fit together here and solidify this as a section of the formal structure. Line 3 ends with "guess," which of course rhymes with line 1's "happiness," and line 4, ending with the word "for" completes the rhyme with line 2's "war." This rhyme scheme will now begin again with line 5. Regarding its subject, the poem now shifts focus from the departed lover to the one left behind. She is left "lamenting," but also wondering what good her heart might be if left empty. While this is a powerful question for the speaker to ask, and it expresses a good amount of longing and distress, Brooks goes further to invent a word combination that sharpens the effect even more. With her choice of referring to the heart as a "heart-cup" she not only accentuates the possibility of the heart being "empty" by making it easier for a reader to picture, but also offers the heart as a simple, clear object that one might use every day, and more importantly, might not be able to use from this point forward.

Line 5:

This line is quite simple and direct, but it offers the idea that the parting is somehow permanent, which one might not necessarily think to be the case. In other words, this simple line could be seen to erase any of the expected hope in such a situation. The poem then carries on in an attempt to explain or justify this lack of hope.

Lines 6-8:

Here begins what could be seen as the explanation of why it is the speaker of the poem is so sure her lover will not return from the war. It is still left fairly vague in this section, which completes the second of the three, four-line sections. But it is wor-

thy of notice to see what Brooks has done by choosing several words in particular. First, the choice of "grandly" as an adverb modifying the man's walk in line 7. This establishes the possibility of a certain honor or code that the man might have regarding his action. That he would walk "grandly" off to war, even in a situation where he is being taken there could be seen to imply a certain resignation on his part to do his duty. Second, Brooks's choice at the end of line 8 to liken the man's possible death to a kind of infidelity. With this one word, "untrue," Brooks introduces the compelling and unexpected simile of death being another woman to whom the speaker's lover is drawn.

Media Adaptations

- "Gwendolyn Brooks and Lucille Clifton" audio cassette, The American Academy of Poets Tapes Programs, 1993.

Lines 9-10:

Brooks decides to repeat the phrase that claims the potential death to be both an infidelity and a result of destiny. The phrase itself is powerful and sounds strong, both reason enough for the repetition. But it might also be seen as another form of pleading that Brooks uses in the first and last lines of the poem. The repetition also emphasizes this potentially neglected word "have." Such a simple, ordinary verb, it is possible that stated once it might not be more than a passive reference to a future action in the story. Stated twice though it makes stronger this idea that the lover who has gone to war is not in control of his own destiny. He has to be untrue, or in the terms of the original situation, he has to die.

The addition of the word "Coquettish" in line 10 then extends the simile of death as another woman, and increases the tragedy of such betrayal by claiming that She—death—in the end doesn't even really have an interest in this particular man. Thus his being tempted is nothing but a deception.

Lines 11-12:

In the next several lines this string of adjectives is extended in a continued effort to offer a unique and powerful image of how the speaker's lover's imminent death appears to her. It is also an attempt to explain why her lover might not be able to resist. It is the "strange / possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)" that cause the man to give in. This whole phenomenon is still left a bit vague, but the implication is that there is something about death, its confident, beautiful nature that makes "a hard man hesitate," and long for it. This beauty possibly not the traditional beauty one might think of, as Brooks adds the parenthetical "of a sort" after it, it still has great power. How exactly it might cause a man to be drawn to it is left to the reader. If one recalls the use of certain words earlier in the poem, "grandly" for instance, one might see this seduction as the lover's attraction to pride or honor. Often people confront great odds out of sheer bravery and dedication. But Brooks leaves it more mysterious than this with the use of this word "beauty." The idea that there is something beautiful and possessive about death, that would draw one to it, adds great weight and complexity to the poem as it approaches its end.

Lines 13-14:

In this, the poem's final couplet, there is the climax of the action and then the return to the question that began the poem. The speaker of the poem describes her lover finally giving in to death by stating the "yes." Again the ambiguity or lack of certainty is shown with the use of the word "stammer," as this implies the hesitation. It could also be seen as nervousness or fear at the point of death. Nonetheless, the speaker imagines her "hard man" finally answering the call of the other woman, who in this case is meant to be death. Then there is the final act of closure when the poem repeats as part of its couplet the first line of the poem. This could be seen to affect the poem in several ways. First, regarding the formal elements of the poem, it closes it up neatly and transforms the poem into almost a circle that could start again its song. The last line also though reintroduces the vulnerable pleading—again possibly child-like given the address to the mother—and sadness of the lover being in such a state. Lastly, it leaves the reader with a question that is as essential as it is unanswered. The poem then leaves the reader to think of the speaker of the poem asking such a question, but also possibly lets the question echo in their own mind after the poem is finished.

Topics for Further Study

- Try writing a sonnet about something that you would like to ask a parent or grandparent about. A sonnet is fourteen lines, in iambic pentameter (which means that every line has ten syllables, with every other syllable stressed).
- In this poem, death is personified as a flirtatious woman. Describe three or four different ways you have seen death portrayed as a person. Why do you think authors have pictured death in these different ways?
- Why do you think the speaker addresses her questions to her mother? Is this a situation that is constant throughout the ages?

Themes

Death

In this poem, death is personified as a woman who is trying to seduce the speaker's lover. This, of course, is quite a reversal of the normal expectations, since soldiers going to war are expected to avoid death, not embrace it. Brooks is isolating a psychological fascination that draws men into dangerous situations, an attraction to dying that is not often acknowledged, especially not by "hard" or insensitive people. The very reason this fascination is present is that it is denied. The word "coquettish" refers to the behavior of somebody who flirts by playing hard-to-get; someone who acts shy and all the while is in command of the courtship. Death, then, is shown as being attractive exactly because it is forbidden. It is called "impudent," which means bold or rude, and "strange," and it is these qualities that the speaker's lover is unfamiliar with that make her worry that he might end up attracted to death. She identifies an element of beauty about death, a beauty that has been recognized by artists throughout history, especially those who have painted or sculpted the "Angel of Death," but she takes no steps toward identifying exactly what death's beauty might be. After being seduced, the speaker fears that her lover will say "yes" to death: in this poem, dying in battle is voluntary and does not happen without the victim's consent. This could reflect a concern that the soldier will let his guard down, make a mistake, forget a detail, or in some other way allow himself to die by failing to defend his life in every possible way.

Coming of Age

At the most obvious level, this poem shows the coming of age of the speaker's lover, who walked off to war "grandly" only to be seduced by death. The ability to understand that we all die is often considered to be one way to define consciousness. It is an identifying factor that separates humans from animals: some translations of the Bible say that the apple Adam and Eve ate, causing them to fall into sin, came from the "tree of knowledge," while others translate it as "the tree of life and death." "The Sonnet-Ballad dramatizes the lover's change, having him "hesitate" and "stammer" as if the speaker were there at the moment of his change—with him and watching him.

The speaker of "The Sonnet-Ballad," Annie Allen, also comes of age in this poem. In the context of the entire collection of poems of which this one is a part, she changes when her lover changes: he comes back from the war and rejects her for being too gentle and sweet, which drives her to misery and then, after his death, to prostitution, her innocence having been drained from her when he lost his. Outside of this context, though, using just the information that is provided in "The Sonnet-Ballad," we can see the poem's speaker being drawn out of her childhood naivete and into an open-eyed and somewhat frightened understanding of what the world holds for her. On one level, a childishly romantic level, she is crushed because her lover is gone and her "heart-cup" is empty. In itself, this sadness would be worthy of a poem, but Brooks goes on to indicate a higher level of consciousness by starting and ending the poem with Annie crying out to her mother in confusion. This implies that she is entering a new life, an adult life in which her mother's experience can help her understand why things cannot always be happy. The speaker of this poem foresees what will change in her lover's life, but she is not sure what this will mean for herself.

Victimization

The real culprit in this poem, as it is presented, is the unspecified "them" who "took" the lover away, eventually testing his self-control and break-

ing the speaker's heart. "They," of course, refers to the recruitment division of the armed forces, but to this speaker it also means social forces so far beyond her control or understanding that she cannot even conceive of a name for them. She is a girl who enjoys life, dreams, and love to such an extent that adversity is a mystery. In personifying the lover's recruitment, she is viewing it as something that is done to him and her, as if the young lovers were specifically targeted. Later in the poem, she personifies death as another woman who is competing with her for her lover's affection. She feels she has even less chance against this force than she did against "them," because death makes such a direct effort to take what is hers. In neither case does the speaker seem to believe that she or her lover are capable of defending themselves, nor does she show any theory of why they have been chosen for victimization in the first place. This is Brooks's early characterization of Annie, who develops self-assertiveness later in the sequence of poems, at least enough to take the responsibility for her troubles. Here, though, her innocence cannot avoid being victimized by the world in which she lives.

Style

As its name implies, "The Sonnet-Ballad" possesses a form, invented by Brooks, which combines the form of the sonnet with that of the traditional ballad. As a sonnet, the poem has a traditional meter and rhyme structure throughout its fourteen lines—three groups of four lines, and one final couplet. The traditional meter of sonnets is iambic pentameter. This means that the lines of the poem are arranged with regard to two-syllable sections whose first syllable is unstressed, and whose second syllable is stressed. Each of these sections is an iamb, and when they are linked together in a line they produce a rhythmic or musical effect that is almost song-like. It might help to take a line as an example, and break it up into its iambs, showing stressed and unstressed syllables:

Some**day** / the **war** / will **end**, / but, **oh**, / I **knew**

"Pentameter" refers to the length of the line. It means there are five feet (a foot being a single two-syllable segment) per line. This then means that each line will contain ten syllables.

Finally, there is the rhyme scheme of this traditionally structured sonnet. This has the end-rhymes maintaining a particular pattern. In this poem there are three sets of four lines (before the ending couplet) that follow an *abab* pattern (which is characteristic of the ballad form as well). This means that in each set of four lines the ends of the first and third lines rhyme, and the ends of the second and forth lines do as well.

Historical Context

In the years after World War II, Gwendolyn Brooks was enjoying the first blush of fame in a career that has since been celebrated internationally. Her first collection of poems, *A Street In Bronzeville,* was published in 1945. That same year she won four awards at the Midwest Writers' Conference, was selected one of *Mademoiselle* magazine's "Ten Young Women of the Year," and received the Society of Midland Authors' "Patron Saints" award. In 1946 she won a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, and followed with another one in 1947. "The Sonnet-Ballad" appeared in her 1949 book, *Annie Allen,* as part of an "appendix" to a long poem about the title character. That poem is "The Annied," a play on words of *The Aeneid,* written by the Roman poet Virgil about the founding of Rome. Brooks's piece is a long, poetically textured examination of the life of Annie Allen. In many places the complexity of the prose overshadows the meaning: for example, "Narrow master-master calls; / And the godhead glitters now / cavalierly on his brow." This is the sort of dense verbiage that an author who has been showered with praise is likely to attempt as an exercise or a challenge. Years later, looking back on *The Annied,* Brooks admitted that for all of her hard work writing it, some parts of the poem just are not effective, but she also admitted that writing it was fun. In 1950 *Annie Allen* won a Pulitzer Prize, the first one for poetry ever won by a black woman.

Brooks was raised in Chicago, a city that had a vast, vibrant, but still-segregated, African-American population. She had seen men return from World War II and had observed the effects their service had on them. Since the First World War, the trend in literature had been to expose the horrors and not to praise the glories of war. Writers, including Ernest Hemingway, Rupert Brooke, and Wilfred Owen, set new standards for cynicism about the capacity for mass destruction, and they were followed in World War II by writers who

Compare & Contrast

- **1949:** The United States military had come home from World War II in 1946, having lost 300,000 men who died in battle.

  1950-1953: The United States military was involved in the Korean Conflict in which 33,000 died.

  1964-1973: The United States military was involved in the Vietnam Conflict; 60,000 died.

  1990-1991: The United States military was involved in Operation Desert Storm; 300 died.

- **1949:** The rising fear that Communists were gaining influence in the United States lead to televised Senate hearings, during which hundreds of citizens were accused of being Communists and were pressured to name friends and associates as Communists.

  1971: The White House lost in the Supreme Court in their attempt to block publication of The Pentagon Papers, which outlined deceptive and sometimes illegal activities the government undertook to stop Communists from overthrowing South Vietnam.

  1986: President Reagan presided over the nation's largest peacetime military buildup to defend against Communism, referring to the Soviet Union as a "evil empire."

  1990: Lithuania proclaimed itself free of the control of the Soviet Union and was quickly followed by other states, causing the Communist empire's collapse.

  Today: The only long-standing Communist countries are China and Cuba.

added a strong awareness of the psychological damage suffered by soldiers. There have always been writers who have seen through the celebration of war to its bloody core (Thomas Hardy and Stephen Crane, for example), but until the world wars and the depersonalizing effect induced by advanced fighting machines, their views did not resonate very widely in the general public's imagination. There has always been a feeling, as the speaker of this poem points out, that war holds "beauty (of a sort)" for the fighting man.

Sixteen million Americans served in the armed forces during the years America was involved in World War II, from the bombing of the navel base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in December of 1941, to the Japanese surrender days after atomic bombs were dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Of these soldiers, more than 300,000 died in battle, with 670,000 others physically maimed or wounded. This poem, which combines the strict English or Shakespearean sonnet form, traditionally used for love poetry, with the folksy story-telling of a ballad, may have been inspired by the Second World War, but it is about men seduced by any war at any time.

Critical Overview

Annie Allen, the volume that includes "The Sonnet-Ballad," has received significant amounts of criticism. Some of this came from other African Americans, writers and non-writers, who strong felt Brooks was failing to confront the issues and experience of being black in America in the 1940s and 1950s. Brooks's early work was often written in traditional forms, such as sonnets, and it was felt by certain critics that these were European constructs that failed to speak to the black experience. Don L. Lee, a black writer and activist of the time, has written of the poet's early work in "The Achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks." He argues that by using "their [Europeans'] language ... she suffers by not communicating with the masses of black people." On the other side of the coin, certain white scholars, while admitting to Brooks's skill with language, thought she was at times too quaint in her portraits of mothers and children, or the poor.

Regardless of these criticisms, few could argue against the inherent talent evident in even

Brooks's earliest books. American writer Stanley Kunitz claimed in *Poetry* magazine that "Miss Brooks is particularly at home in the sonnet, where the tightness of the form forces her to consolidate her energies and to make a disciplined organization of her feelings." Even after Brooks largely abandoned the use of formal structures in 1968, with the publication of *In The Mecca,* partly due to a life-changing experience at The Black Writers' Conference at Fisk University, she would always be known for her skill with language. But most of all it was the human element of her writing that won her so much acclaim, as she continually displayed an ability to capture the emotional, social, and political reality of her time. Langston Hughes has echoed this when he once wrote of Brooks's first two books: "There are sharp pictures of neighborhoods, relatives, friends, illnesses and deaths; of big city slums, cafes, and beauty shops.... The people and the poems in Gwendolyn Brooks ... are alive, reaching, and very much of today."

Criticism

B. J. Bolden

B. J. Bolden is an Assistant Professor of English at Chicago State University, Chicago, IL. She is the managing editor of Warpland: A Journal of Black Literature and Ideas *at Chicago State University and the author of* Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945–1960. *In the following essay, Bolden examines how Brooks experiments with form, rhyme, and diction as she presents a portrait of a young black woman impacted by her lover heading off to war.*

Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Sonnet-Ballad" is from her second book of poetry, *Annie Allen* (1949), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950. The mock-epic *Annie Allen* is composed of three parts: "Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood"; "The Anniad"; and "The Womanhood." "The Sonnet-Ballad" is the final poem in "The Anniad." *Annie Allen* is a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age poetic tale of Annie Allen, a young Black urban girl. In a larger sense, the book is Brooks's social commentary on the stymied lives of Black women, given their economic, social, and gender constraints. The poet-speaker of Annie Allen examines emerging womanhood, mother/daughter, and male/female relationships and the ways in which they impact the life of Annie Allen. As a further exploration, Brooks probes the tragedies of war and the emotional place women occupy as men go off to battle, and perhaps death. In the "The Sonnet-Ballad," Brooks illuminates Annie Allen's dramatic romanticism by employing the formal meter, or measured rhythms, of the sonnet and represents Annie's humble origins by infusing the poem with the musical strains of the ballad.

The book is informed by three pressing concerns that confronted Brooks in the mid-1940s. First, the demands of World War II impacted family life throughout the United States and were especially difficult for Black families whose meager economic status was drastically reduced when the male heads of household were drafted or voluntarily enlisted into the armed forces. Second, as a regionalist poet who had focused many of her vignettes on the lives of urban Black women in her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Brooks went a step further in *Annie Allen* by examining the dire ramifications of war on women's domestic and emotional lives. Third, Brooks was challenged by the need to explore the metrical structure and rhyme of traditional poetic forms such as the sonnet and ballad, thus creating her own form and unique place as a poet.

Structurally, the "The Sonnet-Ballad" is one of Brooks's experiments in form, rhyme, and diction. In an interview with Ida Lewis, Brooks commented on her experiment of combining the sonnet and ballad forms: "My one claim to fame is that I invented it" (*Report,* 186). Poet and critic Haki R. Madhubuti was agitated by Brooks's clear immersion in traditional white prosodic forms and asserts his position in the preface of Brooks's first autobiography, *Report from Part One:*

> *Annie Allen* (1949), important? Yes. Read by blacks? No. *Annie Allen* more so than *A Street in Bronzeville* seems to have been written for whites. For instance, "The Anniad" requires unusual concentrated study. She invents the sonnet-ballad in part 3 of the poem "Appendix to the Anniad, leaves from a loose-leaf war diary." This poem is probably earth-shaking to some, but leaves me completely dry.

Madhubuti's explicit concern is clear: "Gwendolyn Brooks's ability to use their language while using their ground rules explicitly shows that she far surpassed the best European-Americans had to offer. There is no doubt here. But in doing so, she suffers by not communicating with masses of black people."

And to some extent, Madhubuti is right. Brooks's mastery of prosody, the theory and prin-

What Do I Read Next?

- *The Selected Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks,* published in 1982 by Harper Collins, brings together most of Brooks's most popular works up to that time.
- Published in 1972, *Understanding the New Black Poetry* is slightly dated, but for that very reason it gives more space to Brooks and her peers of the era between World War II and the Black Power movement of the 1960s than newer anthologies do. Edited by Stephen Henderson.
- Brooks, Keorapete Kgositsile, Haki R. Madhabuuti, and Dudley Randall each offer ideas that would be relevant to the black poetry writer in *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* (Broadside Press, 1977). The project was instigated by Brooks to address issues that would have been outside the focus of classes with a broader subject base.
- Toni Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* also covers the growth of a young African-American girl into womanhood. The author is one of America's few winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature.
- Margaret Abigail Walker was an African-American poet who wrote at approximately the same time as Brooks. Her book *For My People,* published in 1942, is more formally structured and conventional in outlook than Brooks's work, but covers some of the same ideas.

ciples of writing verses, especially regarding rhythm, accent, and stanzas is especially prevalent in *Annie Allen,* but "The Sonnet-Ballad" invites a clear and perceptible explication. For instance, in the opening quatrain of the "The Sonnet-Ballad," Brooks merges the best of the technical craftsmanship of the fourteen-line sonnet form with the folksy, sing-song chants of the four-line quatrain pattern of the ballad in the abab / bcbc / dede / ff rhyme scheme. Annie's lyrical cry for wisdom, pity, understanding, and guidance sets the sorrowful tone of the poem: "Oh, mother, mother, where is happiness?" The repetition of her lament in the final line encloses her in a circle of grief and dismay, leaving her helpless and bewildered as she faces an uncertain future.

The regularity of the iambic pentameter line establishes the somber mood of the poem and accentuates the strict formation of the marching line in military regiments. In the deep mournful expression of her love, Annie cries over her loss: "He won't be coming back here any more." Yet Annie's lament is also infused with the rhetorical repetition and folksy rhythm of the ballad as she comes to understand that her lover has changed: "... I knew / When he went walking grandly out that door / That my sweet love would have to be untrue. / Would have to be untrue. Would have to court / Coquettish death, whose impudent and strange / Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort) / Can make a hard man hesitate—and change." These lines carry a dual message of death: the first suggested by the violence of war and the second informed by earlier references in "The Anniad" to the "man of tan" who goes off to war, carouses with exotic women like a "gorgeous and gold shriek," "a maple banshee," and "a mad bacchanalian lass," and ultimately "Stiffens: yellows" from his "overseas disease." The merger of the sonnet and ballad points to the increased emotional distance of Annie and her lover because of his newfound worldly sophistication cast against Annie's downhome rural flavor and colloquial diction.

In *Annie Allen,* Brooks satisfied her multiple objectives. First, she had sought a poetics that would engage both Black and white critics, earn acceptance from her white reading audience, and secure place in the white mainstream school of arts and letters. Second, Brooks, as a regionalist poet, needed to use her own source of inspiration—ordinary life around her—to tell her own poetic story. She succeeded in both objectives. She did engage

the critics, both Black and white; she captured the attention of a white audience; and she earned an award for technical expertise—the Pulitzer Prize in 1950—for creating the poetic tale of Annie Allen, the poor Black urban girl whose search for happiness is left dangling in the encircling question of the "sonnet-ballad": "oh mother, mother, where is happiness?"

Source: B. J. Bolden, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Don L. Lee

In the following excerpt, Lee offers the highest praise for Brooks, stating that she "is the example for us all, a consistent monument in the real, unaware of the beauty and strength she has radiated."

> *There is indeed a new black today. He is different from any the world has known. He's a tall-walker. Almost firm. By many of his own brothers he is not understood. And he is understood by no white. Not the wise white; not the schooled white; not the kind white. Your least pre-requisite toward an understanding of the new black is an exceptional Doctorate which can be conferred only upon those with the proper properties of bitter birth and intrinsic sorrow. I know this is infuriating, especially to those professional Negro-understanders, some of them very kind, with special portfolio, special savvy. But cannot say anything other, because nothing other is truth.*
> –Gwendolyn Brooks

These words, this precise utterance is Gwendolyn Brooks 1972, is Gwendolyn Brooks post 1967, a quiet force cutting through the real dirt with new and energetic words of uncompromising richness that are to many people unexpected, but welcomed by millions.

When you view Gwendolyn Brooks' work in the pre-1967 period, you see a poet, a black poet in the actual (though still actively searching for her own definitions of blackness), on the roadway to becoming a conscious African poet or better yet a conscious African woman in America who chose poetry as her major craft. However, Gwendolyn Brooks describes her poetry prior to 1967 as "work that was conditioned to the times and the peoples." In other words, poetry that leaped from the pages bringing forth ideas, definitions, images, reflections forms colors etc., that were molded over a distance of many years. Her poetry notebook started at the age of eleven—as a result of and as a reaction to the American reality. And for black people, regardless of the level of their perception of the world, the American reality has always been a battle, the real alley fight.

The early years reaped with self-awareness—there is no denying this—even though at times the force of her poetic song is strained in iambic pentameter, European sonnets and English ballads. *Conditioned!* There is a stronger sense of self awareness than most of her contemporaries with the possible exception of Margaret Walker. She was able to pull through the old leftism of the 1930's and '40's and concentrated on herself, her people and most of all her writing. *Conditioned!* Her definitions of the world as represented in the early poetry are often limited to accommodating her work and her person to definitions that were imposed on her from the outside; and she becomes the reactor rather than the actor. She is being defined not only by her surroundings and by the environment that has been built around her, but the definitions and poetic direction from the Euro-American world is also much a part of her make-up.

As early as 1945 in the book *A Street in Bronzeville*, we see images of womanhood, manhood, justice and race worked into memorable lines: "Abortions will not let you forget. / You remember the children you got that you did not get;" and "Men hep, and cats, or corny to the jive. / Being seen Everywhere (Keeping Alive), Rhumboogie (and the joint is jumpin', Joe), Brass Rail, Keyhole, De Lisa, Cabin Inn. / And all the other garbage cans;" and "had to kick their law into their teeth in order to save them;" and "He was born in Alabama. / He was bred in Illinois. / He was nothing but a / Plain black boy;" and "Mae Belle Jackson's husband / whipped her good last night. / Her landlady told my ma they had / A knock-down-drag-out fight;" and "Mame was singing / at the midnight Club. And the place was red / With blues / She could shake her body /across the floor / For what did she have to lose?;" and "you paid for your dinner, Sammy boy, / And you didn't pay with money. / You paid with your hide and my heart, Sammy Boy, / For your taste of pink and white honey."

As the quoted lines indicate, Gwendolyn Brooks is deeply involved with black life, black pain and black spirits. To seek white honey was natural; to seek anything white in those early years was only keeping within the expected, within the encouraged. However, this thing of doing the expected cannot be fully applied to Gwendolyn Brooks because the medium she worked in was that of the unexpected—

> "Negroes just didn't write and especially poetry."

Her movement into poetry is a profound comment on her self-confidence and speaks to the po-

etic vision she possessed. The fact that she chose to be a poet denotes that her view of the "whirlwind" was serious and challenging—yet conditioned.

Her growth and development partially depended upon the climate of the time. Those critical years of the Thirties and Forties left deep scars of hunger and poverty, but due to a strong and closely knit family, she survived. She has always had unusual encouragement from her mother, who to this day is still quite active in watching over her daughter's output. Other major influences varied from Europe's war number two (known as World War II) to the work of Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, the Southside of Chicago where she lived and still lives today, Cunningham Stark at the Southside Community Art Center (where Gwendolyn Brooks walked off with four poetry prizes between 1943 and 1945 at Midwestern Writers' Conferences at Northwestern University), the appearance of poems in the *Chicago Defender* and *Poetry Magazine*, working with the NAACP's young people's group, appearance in *Mademoiselle Magazine* as one of the "Ten Women of the Year" in 1945, grants from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and Guggenheim Fellowships and other publishing in major magazines that published "American" poetry. Gwendolyn Brooks at this time, the late Forties, was concerned with the "universal fact."

Her work like that of the late Langston Hughes, has always touched at some level on the problems of blacks in America. Even allowing that, she was often singled out as the "exception" and proclaimed as an "artist"—a poet of the first rank—a poet who happens to be black. Not that Gwendolyn Brooks readily accepted these nebulous titles, there was little she could do about it. We must note that she received major encouragement from all quarters to accept, participate and to be grateful for whatever recognition she received. After all, this was what everybody was working for, wasn't it? To go unnoticed is bad enough, but to go unnoticed and not eat is not a stimulus for creativity. By 1945 she had not only married, but had a son. Her family shared most of the time that was normally used for writing and these few literary "breaks" were not only needed, but well received and actively sought after.

If *A Street in Bronzeville* paved the way, *Annie Allen* opened the door. *Annie Allen* (1949) ran away with the Pulitzer Prize—the first black person to be so "honored." After winning the Pulitzer, she now belonged to everybody. In the eyes of white poetry lovers and white book promoters, the publicity was to read "she is a poet who happens to be black;" in other words, we can't completely forget her "negroness," so let's make it secondary. Her winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 is significant for a number of reasons other than her being the first person of African descent to do so. One unstated fact is obvious: *she was the best poet, black or white, writing in the country at the time.* Also in winning the Pulitzer, she became internationally known and achieved a following from her own people where as normally she would not have had access to them. She attracted those "negro" blacks who didn't believe that one is legitimate unless one is sanctioned by whites first. The Pulitzer did this. It also aided her in the pursuit of other avenues of expression and gave her a foot-hold into earning desperately needed money by writing reviews and articles for major white publications.

In her continuing frame of reference, the confusion over social responsibility and "art for art's sake" intensified. Even though she didn't actually see herself in the context of Euro-American poetry, she was being defined in that context. She was always the American poet who happened to be Negro—the definition was always from the *negative* to the *positive*. Again a Euro American definition; again conditioned to accept the contradictory and the dangerous. If you cannot definitely and positively define yourself in accordance with your historical and cultural traditions, how in the world can you be consciously consistent in the direction your person and your work must take in accordance with that which is ultimately best and natural for you? At this time Gwendolyn Brooks didn't think of herself as an African or as an African American. At best she was a "new negro" becoming black. Her view of history and struggle was that of the traditional American history and had not been challenged by anyone of black substance. In her next book the focus was not on history or tradition, but poetic style.

Annie Allen (1949), important? Yes. Read by blacks? No. *Annie Allen*, more so than *A Street in Bronzeville*, seems to have been written for whites. For instance, "The Anniad" requires unusual concentrated study and shows the author's ability to use rhyme royal. She invents the sonnet-ballad in part three of the poem "Appendix to the Anniead leaves from a loose-leaf war diary." This poem is probably earth shaking to some, but leaves me completely dry. The poem is characterized by fourteen lines with a three part alternating rhyme scheme and couplet at the last two lines. Only when she talks of "The Children of the Poor" do we begin to sense

the feel of home again: "What shall give my children? Who are poor / Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land" or "First fight. Then fiddle" or "Not that success, for him, is sure, infallible? But has he been afraid to reach. / His lesions are legion. / Never reaching is his rule." In the poem "Truth" we sense that that is what she is about: "And if sun comes / How shall we greet him? / Shall we not dread him, / Shall we not fear him / After so lengthy a / Session with shade? ... Sweet it is, sweet is it, / To sleep in the coolness / Of snug unawareness / the dark hangs heavily / Over the eyes."

The book has a very heavy moral tone, a pleading tone and "God's actual" in one way or another is prevalent throughout. The poems range from the ridiculous such as "Old Laughter" (written when she was nineteen years old) but included in the book:

The men and women long ago
In Africa, in Africa,
Knew all there was of joy to know.
In sunny Africa
The spaces flew from tree to tree.
The spices trifled in the air
That carelessly
Fondled the twisted hair.
The men and women richly sang
In land of gold and green and red.
The bells of merriment richly rang.
But richness is long dead,
Old laughter chilled, old music done
In bright, bewildered Africa.
The bamboo and the cinnamon
Are sad in Africa.

to the careful profundity of "Intermission" part three:

Stand off, daughter of the dusk,
And do not wince when the bronzy lads
Hurry to cream-yellow shining.
It is plausible. The sun is a lode.
True, there is silver under
The veils of the darkness.
But few care to dig in the night
For the possible treasure of stars.

But for me there is too much "Grant me that am human, that hurt, that can cry." There is an overabundance of the worldrunners, even though paradoxically in part fifteen of "The Children of the Poor," she accurately notes that their special appeal to the "intelligence" has been the argument given to us ever since they raped us from Africa: "What we are to hope is that intelligence / Can sugar up our prejudice with politeness. / Politeness will take care of what needs caring." Yet, Gwendolyn Brooks knows that politeness is not possessed by the enemies of the sun, politeness does not seek to control the world; and their intelligence is as misguided as their need to manipulate every living element that they come in contact with. *Annie Allen* is an important book. Gwendolyn Brooks' ability to use their language while using their ground rules explicitly shows that she far surpasses the best European-Americans had to offer. There is no doubt here. But in doing so, she suffers by not communicating with the masses of black people.

Her work in the late Fifties and early Sixties, like that of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, appealed to a wide cross section. The mood of the land was integration. Come melt with us in the wind at that fume. Some of us are still recovering from the burns. LeRoi Jones (now Imamu Amiri Baraka), William Melvin Kelly, John O. Killens, Conrad Kent Rivers, Mari Evans and Melvin B. Tolson's tone of persuasion was projected toward the conscience of America. They wrote as if America (or the rulers of America) had a conscience or a higher God that it answered to. They felt that America had a moral obligation to its other inhabitants, those who were not fortunate enough to be born white and Protestant. However, a close reading of Indian history in America or their own history in America would have wiped those illusions out completely. But, even then the "I'm a writer, not a black writer" madness was in the air and along with it existed other distortions and temptations that forever kept the writers from dealing from their African or African-American perspective. They all produced important works and all, with the possible exception of Ralph Ellison (Melvin B. Tolson and Conrad Kent Rivers are deceased) had their hands on the stop sign and were getting ready to cross the continent into the Sixties. The Sixties for Gwendolyn Brooks was to be an entrance into new life; however it didn't start with *The Bean Eaters*.

Her major associations during this period of re-definition were the young and the "Black" writing that was part of their makeup. She, at first hand, witnessed a resurgence of what has been termed the *Black Arts Movement*. In every aspect of the creative act, young brothers and sisters began to call their own images, from drama to poetry, from fiction to non-fiction, from plastic arts to films and so on. In every area of creativity black poets cleaned house and carved their own statues into what they wanted themselves to be, regardless of who was watching and with even less regard for what critics, white and black, said. She felt the deep void when Medgar Evers and Malcolm X left us. She conducted writers' workshops with the Blackstone

Rangers and other young people. She took part in neighborhood cultural events like the dedication of the Organization of Black American Culture's Wall of Respect. She lived through the rebellion in Chicago after King's death while listening with disbelief Mayor Daley's "Shoot to Kill" orders. She lives four blocks from the Black People's Topographical Center in Chicago, the first in the nation. The murder of Mark Clark and Fred Hampton and of other blacks continued to raise questions in her mind. And major questions were "What part do play?" "Where do fit in?" "What can do?" Her first and most important contribution was to be the redirecting of her voice to her people—first and foremost. This is what is evident in *In the Mecca, Riot* and *Family Pictures.* She becomes "new music screaming in the sun."

Gwendolyn Brooks post 1967 poetry is fatless. Her new work resembles a man getting off meat, turning to a vegetarian diet. What one immediately notices is that all the excess weight is quickly lost. Her work becomes extremely streamline and to the point. There were still a few excesses with language in *In the Mecca,* but she begins to experiment more with free and blank verse, yet her hand was still controlled and timed. *In the Mecca* is about black life in an old Chicago land-mark. This was to be her epic of black humanity. She wanted to exhibit all its "murders, loves, loneliness, hates, jealousies. Hope occurred, and charity, sainthood, glory, shame, despair, fear, altruism. Theft, material and moral." She included all the tools of her trade, blank verse, prose verse, off-rhyme, random rhyme, long-swinging free verse, the couplet, the sonnet and the ballad. She succeeds with glimpses of greatness.

The books *Riot* (1969) and *Family Pictures* (1970) are important for a number of reasons other than the obvious. With the publication of *Riot,* Gwendolyn Brooks began her association with one of the newest and most significant black publishing companies in the world, Broadside Press, under the quiet and strong editorship of Dudley Randall. As the poems in *Riot* and *Family Pictures* will testify, Gwendolyn Brooks was not only asking critical questions, but seeking substantive answers. She was very conscious of the contradictions in her own personal life, and as best as possible—living in a contradictory situation in America—began to systematically deal with those contradictions. A major problem was that of Harper and Row publishers, a company she had been with for twenty-six years. Naturally, she had a certain affection and dedication to Harper and Row, even though Harper's never, and mean that literally, pushed the work of Gwendolyn Brooks. But the decision that was to be made in regard to Harper's was not either/or, but what is best for black people. And, when people begin to put their lives in a perspective of black people as a body (and not as we've traditionally done—black people as individuals)—the power and influence that we seek will come about because, in the final analysis, the only thing that an individual can do individually is die. Nobody ever built anything individually.

Thus, Gwendolyn Brooks' movement to Broadside Press was in keeping with what she said in *Family Pictures:* "Black / is a going to essences and to unifyings." She became the doer and not just the sayer. She ended her association with Harper and Row with the publication of *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks* and sought out after new boundaries of growth, institution building and black collective association. Before she could enjoy her new comradeship with Broadside Press, other young black writers began leaving Broadside Press and going to large white publishing companies proclaiming—loud and clear—that "the Black Arts Movement was dead" and they had to look after themselves. Here Gwendolyn Brooks was in her fifties, leaving a major white publishing company (and she never accumulated any money or security; she always shared her "wealth") because of her principles and commitment and the new young whom she so admired and patterned herself after were reversing themselves, going to where she just left. This was difficult for her to understand. This would be the black integrity of Gwendolyn Brooks and would lead to her final affirmation of self.

The death of the Black Arts Movement as seen by some writers was, of course, only a rationale for their own sick actions, an excuse for the new young "stars" to move from the collective of "we, us and our" to the individuality of "my, me and I," was the excuse used so as not to be held accountable for the madness to come. Let's examine the situation a little closer. The division that resulted is of an elementary nature and is fundamentally important to the writer if he is to remain true to himself and to his work. The cutting factor was again in the area of definition. How does a black poet (or any black person working creatively) define himself and his work: is he a poet who happens to be black or is he a black man or woman, who happens to write. The black and white "art for art's sake" enthusiasts embraced the former and the black nationalist expanded in the latter adding that he is an African in America who expresses himself and his blackness

with the written word and that the creativity that he possesses is a gift that should be shared with his people and developed to the highest level humanly possible. And that this "art" form in some way should be used in the liberation of his people.

Gwendolyn Brooks had worked with this same question for about ten years now and had, in her own mind, resolved it. Yet, for the young, in whom she had put faith and trust, to reverse themselves made her, too, begin to re-examine her conclusions.

This is the issue. To be able to define one's self from a historically and culturally accurate base and to follow through in your work; keeping the best interest of your history and culture in mind is to—actually—give direction to the coming generations. If one defines one's self as a Russian poet, immediately we know that things that are Russian are important to him and to acknowledge this is not to leave out the rest of the world or to limit the poet's range and possibilities in any way. If a poet defines himself as Chinese we know that that designation carries with it a certain life style which includes Chinese language, dress, cultural mores, feelings, spirituality, music, foods, dance, literature, drama, politics, and so forth. If one is an Indian from India, one is first identified with a land base; is identified with a race of people; is identified with all the cultural, religious, and political advantages or disadvantages that are associated with that people whether the "poet" accepts them or not. This must be understood. To define one's self is to give direction and this goes without saying that that direction could either be *positive* or *negative*. When one speaks of a Yasunari Kawabata or a Yugio Mishima, we first, through name association, link them with Asia (specifically Japan) whether they reside in Asia or not. To speak of Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka or David Diop is to speak of Africa and then the world. When seeking universality, one always starts with the local and brings to the universal world that which is particularly Russian, Asian, European, Indian, Spanish, African or whatever. If, in 1972, this is not clear will concede that the "Black Arts" Movement is dead. But the overwhelming evidence shows that by and large the majority of black "artists" at some level understand their commitment and are educating themselves to the realities of the world more and more: if we don't look after each other, nobody else is supposed to. The black "artist" understands this.

Gwendolyn Brooks is an African poet living and writing in America whose work for the most part has been "conditioned" by her experiences in America. By acknowledging her Africanness, her blackness, she reverses the trend of being defined by the negative to her own definition in the positive. She, in effect, gives direction in her new definition which, if it does nothing else, forces her reader to question that definition. Why does she call herself African? To question our existence in this world critically is the beginning of understanding the world we live in. To constitute the largest congregation of African people outside of Africa is important. To understand that black people in this country, who number thirty million upwards, will have to question why we have no say over domestic policy in reference to ourselves, to question why we have no say over foreign policy in relationship to Africa, to question why we exist as other people's door mats is important. To question is the beginning of empowerment. Why does Gwendolyn Brooks call herself an African? Almost for the same reason that Europeans call themselves Europeans, that Chinese call themselves Chinese, that Russians call themselves Russian, that Americans call themselves American and that Africans should call themselves Africans—people find a sense of being, a sense of worth and substance with being associated with land. Associations with final roots gives us not only a history (which did not start and will not end in this country), but proclaims us heirs to a future and it is best when we, while young, find ourselves talking, acting, living and reflecting in accordance with that future which is best understood in the context of the past. The vision of Gwendolyn Brooks can be seen in lines like:

Say to them,
say to the down-keepers,
the sun-slappers,
the self-soilers,
the harmony-hushers,
"Even if you are not ready for day
it cannot always be night."
You will be right.
For that is the hard home-run.
And remember:
live not for Battles Won.
Live not for The-End-of-the-Song.
Live in the along.

The direction Gwendolyn Brooks gives to "Young Africans" is calm, well thought out and serious:

If there are flowers flowers
must come out to the road, Rowdy!—
knowing where wheels and people are,
knowing where whips and screams are,
knowing where deaths are, where the
kind kills are.

Chester Himes said that "one of the sad things in America is that they try to control the black peo-

ple with creativity." And, to control our own creativity is the prerequisite to any kind of freedom or liberation, because if you tell the truth, you don't worry about offending. You just go ahead and cut the ugly away, while building for tomorrow.

We see in the work of Gwendolyn Brooks of 1972 positive movement from that of the sayer to the doer, where she recognizes that writing is not enough for a people in a life and death struggle. For so few black writers to reflect the aspirations and needs of so many (there are about three hundred black writers who are published with any kind of regularity) is a responsibility that should not be taken lightly. Every word has to be considered and worked with as to use it to its fullest potential. We know that her association with the young had a great effect upon her present work. Also her trip to East Africa in 1971 helped to crystalize and finalize her current African association. To understand that Jews' association with Israel is not only cultural, historical, and financial, but is necessary for their own survival, is to begin to deal with the real world. To understand why the Irish in Chicago sent over $25,000 to Northern Ireland in 1972 is to associate people with land and survival. Gwendolyn Brooks, by her dealings with the young poets, Broadside Press and other institutions is only "in keeping" with what other "European" artists have always done to aid their own. By institutionalizing her thoughts and actions, she is thinking and acting in accordance with a future which will be built by nobody but the people themselves. As in her latest poem, her advice is not confused, clouded, or overly simple, but is the message of tomorrow:

And, boys, in all your Turnings and
your Churnings,
remember Africa!
You have to call your singing and your
bringing,
your pulse, your ultimate booming in
the not-so-narrow temples of your
Power—
you have to call all that, that is your
poem, AFRICA.
Although you know
so little of that long leaplanguid land,
our tiny union
is the dwarfmagnificent.
Is the busysimple thing.
See, say, salvage.
Legislate.
Enact our inward law.

Characteristically she has said that:

My aim, in my next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully "call" (see Imamu Baraka's "SOS") all black people: black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones; Not always to "teach" —shall wish often to entertain, to illumine My newish voice will not be an imitation of the contemporary young black voice, which so admire, but an extending adaption of today's Gwendolyn Brooks' voice.

Gwendolyn Brooks is the example for us all, a consistent monument in the real, unaware of the beauty and strength she has radiated. Above all, she is the continuing storm that walks with the English language like lions walk with Africa. Her pressure is above boiling—cooking new food for our children to grow on.

Source: Don L. Lee, "The Achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks," in *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 3, No. 10, Summer, 1972, pp. 32-41.

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For Further Study

Kent, George, *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1990. Madhubuti, Haki R. preface. *Report from Part One*. Detroit: Broadside. 1972.

This biography, written by a friend of Brooks and containing a forward by D.H. Melham, gives a "behind-the-scenes" look at the poet's life and helps the reader understand her inspirations, which do not show clearly in this poem.

Melham, D.H., *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1987.

Melham looks at the circumstances in Brooks's life that surrounded the publication of *Annie Allen*, examining how the poem sequence developed over the

course of three years. Although not much is said about the poetry itself, she does cover the critical reaction it received and how Brooks was affected.

Shaw, Harry B., *Gwendolyn Brooks,* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980.

Although Shaw does not specifically mention "The Sonnet-Ballad," he does explain "The Annied" (which the poem comes from) and the ways in which it describes "different milestones in the girl's movement from happiness to misery." "The Sonnet-Ballad" is central to this movement.

Tate, Claudia. "Anger So Flat: Gwendolyn Brooks' *Annie Allen. A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction.* Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith, eds. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987. pp. 140-150.

This explanation of the character of Annie Allen makes the poem's context easier to understand. The brief glimpse of Annie's life in "The Sonnet-Ballad" is filled out clearly and without confusion.

Sonnet 130

William Shakespeare

1609

The sonnets devoted to the "dark lady" run from "Sonnet 127" to "Sonnet 154"; this poem, perhaps the most famous of the sequence, is a no-holds-barred description of one of the most intriguing women in English literature. The question as to who she actually is has intrigued Shakespeare's critics since the sonnets were first published in 1609. Most probably, "the dark lady," along with the "fair youth" and the "rival poet," are characters created for the sonnet sequence, inspired partially by fictional characters and real-life acquaintances. "Sonnet 130" provides no further clues as to her identity, but paints a verbal portrait of the "dark lady" that is as unconventional and frank as the speaker's proclamation of his love for her. In refusing to rely on conceits to describe her features, the speaker turns his back on poetic tradition; consequently, he describes a person who is a unique individual—whether or not she only existed on paper. Though his honesty may seem painful at times, the speaker's last two lines reveal the depth of his love for this special woman.

Author Biography

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon on or about April 23, 1564. His father was a merchant who devoted himself to public service, attaining the highest of Stratford's municipal positions—that of bailiff and justice of the peace—by 1568. Biogra-

phers have surmised that the elder Shakespeare's social standing and relative prosperity at this time would have enabled his son to attend the finest local grammar school, the King's New School, where he would have received an outstanding classical education under the direction of highly regarded masters. There is no evidence that Shakespeare attended university. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Ann Hathaway of Stratford, a woman eight years his senior. Their first child, Susanna, was born six months later, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585.

These early years of Shakespeare's adult life are not well documented; some time after the birth of his twins, he joined a professional acting company and made his way to London, where his first plays, the three parts of the Henry VI history cycle, were presented in 1589-91. The first reference to Shakespeare in the London literary world dates from 1592, when dramatist Robert Greene alluded to him as "an upstart crow." Shakespeare further established himself as a professional actor and playwright when he joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company formed in 1594 under the patronage of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon.

The members of this company included the renowned tragedian Richard Burbage and the famous "clown" Will Kempe, who was one of the most popular actors of his time. This group began performing at the playhouse known simply as the Theatre and at the Cross Keys Inn, moving to the Swan Theatre on Bankside in 1596 when municipal authorities banned the public presentation of plays within the limits of the City of London. Three years later Shakespeare and other members of the company financed the building of the Globe Theatre, the most famous of all Elizabethan playhouses. By then the foremost London Company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men also performed at Court on numerous occasions, their success largely due to the fact that Shakespeare wrote for no other company.

In 1603 King James I granted the group a royal patent, and the company's name was altered to reflect the King's direct patronage. Records indicate that the King's Men remained the most favored acting company in the Jacobean era, averaging a dozen performances at Court each year during the period. In addition to public performances at the Globe Theatre, the King's Men played at the private Blackfriars Theatre; many of Shakespeare's late plays were first staged at Blackfriars, where the intimate setting facilitated Shakespeare's use of increasingly sophisticated stage techniques. The playwright profited handsomely from his long career in the theater and invested in real estate, purchasing properties in both Stratford and London. As early as 1596 he had attained sufficient status to be granted a coat of arms and the accompanying right to call himself a gentleman. By 1610, with his fortune made and his reputation as the leading English dramatist unchallenged, Shakespeare appears to have retired to Stratford, though business interests brought him to London on occasion. He died on April 23, 1616, and was buried in the chancel of Trinity Church in Stratford.

William Shakespeare

Poem Text

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the
ground:

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any She belied with false compare.

Poem Summary

Line 1:

The subject of "Sonnet 130," as well as Sonnets 127 through 154 of Shakespeare's sequence, is known as the "dark lady"—not only because of the mystery that surrounds her, but because of her appearance as described in this poem. Certainly, the speaker is mocking the employment of a typical Petrarchan conceit, in which women's eyes were compared to the sun, stars, and other heavenly bodies; such expressions lose their subtlety of meaning with overuse and become clichés. But in refusing to describe his mistress in the expected way, the speaker has also identified her as an individual. Her glance is not light or bright, but deeper and perhaps more profound.

Lines 2-3:

Red coral, used in jewelry, was of a color thought pleasing for lips; even today, "coral" is a common shade of lipstick. Smooth, milky-white skin was also valued for its beauty during Shakespeare's time. As the speaker bluntly proclaims, his mistress's features do not measure up to the typical standards of attractiveness; indeed, his description of her skin as a dull grayish brown sounds like an insult. But is it? Pure whiteness represented virginity. Alternately, this woman's coloring might not just represent her dirtiness, but also her earthiness, and perhaps her natural sexuality (note the play on the word "dun"). There is also the possibility that the mistress is of a darker-skinned race.

Line 4:

The comparison was not quite as unflattering during the Renaissance as during modern times. Threads of beaten gold used in jewelry were the basis of the idea of wires, not the utilitarian metal cords of today. The term "black wires" also does not rule out the possibility that the mistress was of a different ethnicity, such as Asian or African.

Lines 5-6:

Damask is a deep rose color, in addition to a fabric decorated with highly wrought patterns. The "dark lady's" face apparently does not possess the healthy glow of the first, or the luster and richness of the latter.

Media Adaptations

- There are several audio recordings of readings of Shakespeare's sonnets, including *Sonnets of Shakespeare,* by Spoken Arts, Inc.; *Living Literature: The Sonnets of Shakespeare,* by Crown Publishers, Inc.; and *Shakespeare: The Sonnets,* by Argo Records.
- *Shakespeare's Sonnets* is a Films for the Humanities & Sciences video featuring an in-depth look at the poems and recitals of selected sonnets by such actors as Ben Kingsley and Claire Bloom.
- A modern adaptation of "Sonnet 130" can be found in the title song of the singer Sting's 1987 A & M release, *Nothing Like the Sun,* which incorporates lines from Shakespeare's poem into its lyric.

Lines 7-8:

The idea that "reek" and "stink" are synonyms did not develop until at least a century after Shakespeare wrote this sonnet. Renaissance readers would understand that the mistress's exhaled breath was not as pleasant as some perfumes—probably a very realistic observation, but a surprising departure from the traditional flattering line.

Lines 9-10:

"Her voice is music to my ears": this is not an uncommon cliche even today, though the speaker deliberately shunned its sentiment in this sonnet several centuries ago. Though his judgement sounds harsh, he pays her an unusual compliment in commending her conversational arts—especially during the Renaissance, when women were not considered the intellectual equals of men.

Lines 11-12:

A typical Petrarchan conceit might flatter a female subject by comparing her gait to an immortal's stride. This speaker refuses to compare his mistress with that which he has never seen. As in

line 3, her description suggests that she has an earthy quality; to use another cliche, she has "both feet on the ground."

Lines 13-14:

This couplet explains why these lovers will remain a couple, even after 12 lines of frank commentary regarding the woman's shortcomings and imperfections. The "dark lady" and the reader can now be certain that the speaker will not flatter because of habit or tradition; so when he claims that she is precious and exceptional to him, his words ring true. Indeed, he loves her for all her faults, not for what he might have built her up to be. She is unconventional and unpredictable, but so is he in his approach towards romance; her earthiness and his bluntness seem to make a good match.

Topics for Further Study

- In the form of a letter, write a response to this poem from Shakespeare's mistress, expressing whether she is flattered or offended by his statements.
- What characteristics of the sonnet are displayed here? Based on the evidence of this poem, what kinds of sentiments are typically expressed in the sonnet form? Give specific examples.

Themes

Appearances and reality

In "Sonnet 130" Shakespeare explores how we perceive things and (especially) people around us. Specifically, he is interested in the ways love and traditional forms of thinking about or expressing love can color our perceptions. The poem sets up a series of expectations in the reader, based on long-established conventions of love poetry that stretch from the popular blazon form, to the sonnets of Petrarch, and back to medieval love poetry. As Shakespeare uses the images of such things as the sun, coral, snow, and roses, the reader instantly recognizes them as standard materials of love poetry and expects the lover to be compared favorably—or even judged superior—to these things. This is a love poem, the reader understands, and the object of the poet's love will be shown to be better or more beautiful than anything else in the world. However, Shakespeare overturns the conventions and defies the reader's expectations by showing the lover as inferior to the usual standards. As the poem progresses, the reader begins to think that maybe the woman is ugly and starts to wonder what kind of love poem this is. The reader is thrown into uncertainty. The conventional standards of love poetry don't apply. The reader becomes more and more convinced that the poet doesn't love the woman at all. With the closing couplet, however, Shakespeare seems to reverse himself again by insisting that he thinks his love "as rare / As any She belied with false compare." All appearances to the contrary, he does love her after all. Even though the woman doesn't fit the standard model of beauty, even though the poet doesn't sound like a traditional lover, and even though the poem doesn't follow convention, she is in truth beautiful, he does actually love her, and this is in reality a love poem.

Creativity and imagination

"Sonnet 130" can also be read as an examination of the nature of the poetic imagination. Throughout the poem Shakespeare inverts the conventional forms poets have used for centuries to describe the perfect woman. The metaphors and similes comparing the lover's eyes to the sun, her voice to music, and so forth are the tools of the poet's trade, as it were, devices employed to convey what is present in the poet's imagination. But Shakespeare refuses to use these tools; over and over the speaker insists that such comparisons are false. Her lips are not as red as coral, her breasts are not as white as snow, her breath is not finer than perfume. The climax of this series of repudiations comes in lines 11-12, where the lover is contrasted to a goddess. Goddesses are mythological figures; wholly creations of the imagination, they have no connection to the real world. As such, they have been used by poets to express an absolute ideal, a perfection not possible in real life. In this sonnet, however, when Shakespeare declares that his lover is of this world, that she "treads on the ground," he appears to reject the world of the imagination, preferring the actual world instead.

A similar view is expressed in Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Theseus, the wisest and highest-ranking person in the play (and so carries a good deal of authority) argues that poets, lovers, and madmen are all similar in their use of imagination:

> The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact.
> One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
> That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
> Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to
> heaven;
> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing
> A local habitation and a name.
> Such tricks hath strong imagination,
> That if it would but apprehend some joy,
> It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
> Or in the night, imagining some fear,
> How easy a bush is suppos'd a bear! (V.i.7-22)

Theseus scoffs at the way all three create something out of nothing by means of the imagination. He seems to suggest that using the imagination means blowing things out of proportion, a sentiment that is like the one expressed in Sonnet 130. A similar note is sounded in *Hamlet,* when the hero warns a troupe of actors not to overdo it when they perform a play he has given them:

> do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to totters, to very rags, to spleet the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. (III.ii.4-12)

Here the actor's imagination, like that of the poet, exaggerates and distorts. Art, Hamlet goes on to say, should be true to life.

> Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (III.ii.17-24)

Time and time again in his work, Shakespeare criticizes art that is overblown, that is made only of the "aery nothing" of the imagination, and he praises art that is rooted in reality, that holds "the mirror up to nature." "Sonnet 130," with its condemnation of poetic hyperbole as "false compare," is in this respect characteristically Shakespearean.

Style

The sonnet (from the Italian "sonnetto", or "little song") owes much of its long-standing popularity to the Italian poet, Petrarch. By the mid-sixteenth century, this fixed poetic form was adopted by the English, who borrowed the fourteen-line pattern and many of Petrarch's literary conventions. English writers did, however, alter the rhyme scheme to allow for more variety in rhyming words: while an Italian sonnet might rhyme*abba, abba, cdc, dcd,* an English or Shakespearean sonnet rhymes *abab, cdcd, efef, gg.*

In all but three of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets ("Sonnet 99," "Sonnet 126," and "Sonnet 145"), the first three groups of four lines each are known as quatrains, and the last two lines are recognized as a couplet. The three breaks between the quatrains and the couplet serve as convenient places where the writer's train of thought may take a different direction. In "Sonnet 130," the quatrain's work support each other in a common way of thinking about the mistress; the couplet, however, is a great surprise, as it seems to contradict the mood and meaning of the lines preceding it.

"Sonnet 130" is written in iambic pentameter. Iambic meter, the most familiar rhythm in the English language, is simply the succession of alternately stressed syllables: an iamb, a type of poetic foot, is a group of two syllables in which the first is unstressed and the second is stressed. The use of "penta" (meaning "five") before "meter" means that there are five iambs per line. One of Shakespeare's only divergences from the rhythmic flow in "Sonnet 130" is in line 13, when he includes an extra syllable in the poetic foot "by heaven"; this break in the regular meter emphasizes the sincerity behind his oath, and perhaps suggests the height of his emotion for his mistress.

Historical Context

The Renaissance: Shakespeare lived and wrote during the Renaissance, a time of great political, cultural, and social change. The influence of the Catholic Church, which had dominated all aspects of life throughout Europe during the Medieval period, was giving way to more secular, less spiritual forces. In religion the Reformation challenged the absolute authority of the pope in spiritual matters and emphasized the faith and devotional practices of the individual. Along with this dispersion of spir-

Compare & Contrast

- **1558:** Elizabeth I became Queen of England and ruled until her death in 1603. A Protestant country, England was continually threatened by its Catholic neighbors, France and Spain, and Elizabeth herself survived several assassination attempts made by English Catholics. Fears regarding spying, treachery, and outright attack were pervasive throughout Elizabeth's reign.

  Today: Elizabeth II has ruled Britain since 1952. The early years of her reign took place during the height of the Cold War, in which Western democratic countries such as Britain and the United States were in a continual state of hostility with the communist Soviet Union and its allies. As in the reign of Elizabeth I, spying, treason, and invasion were a constant source of worry. Since the collapse of communism in the late 1980s, however, Britain has entered a period of relative peace, a condition never enjoyed by the first Elizabeth.

- **1600:** A French commercial partnership obtained a monopoly on fur trade in the New World, while the English East India Company was established in hopes of challenging Dutch control of the spice trade.

  Today: England, France, and other continental countries are moving to form the European Economic Community, a union designed to help European countries compete more effectively in the truly global marketplace, which is dominated by such economic giants as Japan and the United States.

- **1604:** King James I publishes his *Counterblaste to Tobacco,* describing smoking as "a custome loathsome to the eye, hatefull to the nose, harmfull to the braine, dangerous to the lungs, and in the blacke stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stigian smoke of the pit that is bottomlesse."

  Today: Over fifty million Americans still smoke, despite its being identified as a cause of heart disease, emphysema, and lung cancer. Over 390,000 Americans die each year from the effects of smoking.

- **1605:** The first newspaper began publication in Antwerp, Belgium.

  Today: People get news and information from a host of sources and media, including print newspapers, books, and magazines, television and radio broadcasts, cable and satellite services, CD-ROMs, and internet sites.

- **1609:** The ship *Sea Venture,* part of a convoy sailing to the aid of starving English settlers in the Virginia Colony, was shipwrecked on an island. Previously unexplored, the island had been called the Isle of Devils and was thought to be inhabited by demons.

  Today: The Isle of Devils is now called Bermuda. It remains a colony of Great Britain and is one of the oldest members of the British Commonwealth. Because of its pleasant subtropical climate, it is a popular vacation destination.

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itual authority came a redistribution of political power to individual states, which were throwing off the control of the pope in Rome. Art and culture, too, experienced a reawakening ("renaissance" means "rebirth") as sacred themes in painting, drama, and poetry were replaced by human concerns, such as love, honor, and physical beauty. Writers and painters sought to create new standards, new definitions of what was true, good, or beautiful, based on direct experience rather than on received knowledge or traditions. This impulse can be clearly seen in "Sonnet 130," in which Shakespeare systematically overthrows conventional ideas about love and beauty in favor of more personal, clear-eyed, and down-to-earth definitions. For the speaker of the sonnet, poetic devices and techniques, in use for hundreds of years, no longer seem applicable—indeed, they seem deceitful.

Women who are described using lofty comparisons, the poet states, are "belied with false compare." His lover, in contrast, is no goddess, she is "nothing like the sun"; and his description of her as a real woman who "treads on the ground" therefore comes across as truer, more realistic.

Queen Elizabeth I: Shakespeare's rejection of traditional notions of femininity and feminine beauty in "Sonnet 130" can be viewed as a response to a situation very rare for the time: the presence of a woman on the throne of England. Although Shakespeare's sonnets were first published in 1609 (during the reign of James I), at least some were written a decade or more earlier (during Elizabeth's reign) and circulated in manuscript among the author's friends. For the most part, during Shakespeare's time English society (and that of the rest of Europe as well) was male dominated. Women were seen as inferior to men. Girls received less schooling than boys; since they were not allowed to pursue a profession, a good education was not considered necessary for them. Domestic skills such as cooking, weaving, and spinning were highly valued in women, and training in these formed the bulk of the education they did receive. The only road open to women was marriage, and in that wives were subservient to their husbands.

A notable exception to these rules was the English monarch herself. Queen Elizabeth held a position of power and authority universally held elsewhere by men. Moreover, she was widely considered a strong and effective ruler and a brilliant politician. She led her country through dangerous times, continually repelling threats by Spain, France, and other forces hostile to England. This image of a strong, capable woman stood in marked contrast to the prevailing stereotypes of women, and caused heated debates among many of her subjects, including some of her own court advisors. Queen Elizabeth never married, and throughout her reign she was repeatedly urged to take a husband, who would be made king. This, it was believed, would eliminate the anxiety and uncertainty many felt with a woman monarch. Elizabeth, however, used the prospect of marriage to her as a political tool, holding out the possibility as a means of influencing foreign rulers as well as lords within her own country.

With such a powerful figure on the throne, accepted views regarding women were beginning to be questioned, even if they were never wholly discarded. In "Sonnet 130" we see Shakespeare taking part in this reevaluation, rejecting conventional, idealized descriptions of feminine beauty and beginning to explore alternatives. It is perhaps significant that Shakespeare provides no definite, unified definition of beauty to replace the one he questions. That would be merely to replace one stereotype for another; and in the changing, tumultuous times in which Shakespeare lived, the reassuring certainty that stereotypes can provide would perhaps ring hollow and false.

Critical Overview

Shakespearean critics have never formed a consensus as to whether "Sonnet 130" should be viewed as a serious work of art or an amusing trifle. In *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Self, Love, and Art*, Philip Martin claims that the poem has been wrongfully dismissed as pure satire when it fact it is a passionate defense of all that is "unstereotyped, unpredictable, unique." Alternately, Stephen Booth argues in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* that the poem "appears to have no target and no aim but to be funny."

Also divided is critical opinion of the "dark lady," the subject of this poem and all the sonnets from 127 to 154. Though she has often been denounced as a common prostitute or she-devil, she has also been recognized as an earthy woman with a healthy sexual appetite. In an article in *Studies in Philology*, M.L. Stapleton observes that some of her detractors may have been limited by their own "patriarchal morality" and old-fashioned "sense of propriety."

Criticism

Joanne Woolway

Joanne Woolway is a freelance writer who recently earned her Ph.D. from Oriel College, Oxford, England. In the following essay, Woolway analyzes how, in "Sonnet 130," Shakespeare "succeeds ... in turning traditional poetic conventions around." She also takes a close look at the ways Shakespeare's versification—his skill patterning of stressed and unstressed syllable—supports the poem's meaning

In the sixteenth century, a form of poetry called the blazon was briefly popular. "Blazon" is a technical term usually used to describe heraldry. It always involved a detailed summary of all of the main features and colors of an illustration and also described the position and relation of one picture

What Do I Read Next?

- Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets in all. The first 126 are addressed to a young man or "Friend" as he is called by the poet. (Sonnets 1-17 form a subgroup dealing with the subject of immortality through procreation.) Sonnets 127-152 are addressed to a mysterious "Dark Lady," the poet's mistress, who may have seduced the Friend. The last two do not fit into either of the two main groupings. Some of the most famous of Shakespeare's other sonnets are Sonnet 18 (Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?), Sonnet 29 (When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes), Sonnet 30 (When to the sessions of sweet silent thought), and 116 (Let me not to the marriage of true minds).
- The sonnet has been perhaps the most popular form in English verse. Countless poets have employed it. Among Shakespeare's contemporaries, Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser composed important sonnet sequences (groups of sonnets in which the poems are thematically related). Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* was published in 1591, and Spenser's *Amoretti,* was published in 1595. The fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch was a significant innovator of the sonnet form, and his works influenced Shakespeare and other poets. His sonnets are available in a number of English translations, including *Rime Disperse* (1991), translated by Joseph A. Barber.
- Over the centuries the sonnet form has been employed in two general types of verse: love poetry and religious poetry. Shakespeare, Sidney, and Spenser all wrote love sonnets. John Donne's *Songs and and Sonnets* (1633) features some of the best-known religious sonnets in English literature, including "Holy Sonnet 10" (Death be not proud).

to another. This method of depiction was translated into poetry and was used to portray the features of the human, usually female, body. A typical blazon would start with the hair and work downward, focusing on eyes, ears, lips, neck, breasts and so on. Sometimes, it would start at the feet and work its way up. (One famous example of the blazon is English poet Edmund Spenser's description of Belphoebe in book two of his poem *The Faerie Queene.*) This form was well suited to the style of courtly love poetry that was flourishing at this time, as it allowed writers to project an idea of an idealized and distant woman whose features they could admire from afar.

Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" is interesting because it works by inverting the traditions of the blazon form. The reader knows what to expect from this type of poetry, and so the dramatic force of the poem comes from his or her expectations being turned upside down. The surprise is greatest in the first four lines, in which the contrary imagery is gradually revealed. While the first line does not sound so different from a conventional love poem or poem of praise, by the time the second line has reached its concluding semicolon, the reader is beginning to wonder what the point of the poem is. Here is a poem that, instead of using the superlatives usually associated with this kind of writing, begins to suggest that this woman is not an epitome of beauty and that more beautiful things exist: coral, we are told, is redder than her lips. While hardly flattering, this is not, however, too extreme a criticism, and so we enter the third line still almost expecting the poem to revert to tradition and begin its praise of the woman's features. But this still does not happen, and indeed a note of criticism—not a harsh one, but a criticism nonetheless—is introduced. Her breasts are not white, as they were supposed to be, but "dun," a kind of pale brown color. By this time, the reader's suspicions have been thoroughly awakened, and the effect is continued in the following line, that suggests that the woman's hair looks like black wires. In an age that held up fair hair and skin as ideals of female beauty, this is clearly not only unflattering, but is verging on the insulting.

Shakespeare's insistence through his speaker in Sonnet 130 to have a real, flesh and blood mistress rather than an ideal goddess is typical of his whole cycle."

Having established a tone of criticism in this first section, Shakespeare is content to expand his thesis with further examples. Ironically, he still uses the stock images of love poetry, such as roses, perfume, and music to describe his love. As before, however, they are used in the most unexpected way and with a dramatic timing that fully draws out their element of surprise. Damasked roses are the stuff of love poetry, but the trope of line 5 is quickly undercut by line 6 which completely negates the praise at which the previous line had hinted. Indeed, it almost makes line 5 pointless: why list beautiful things only to point out that no comparison can be made from them? Again the timing is crucial; the surprise that is generated from the non-comparison is far more effective in eliciting a response to and a sense of engagement with the poem than the usual stock phrases of love poetry could themselves provoke. The subverting of these conventional figures of speech even seems to suggest something of their emptiness. As these images pile up, only to be discarded, we begin to suspect that the poet has something profound to say about the language of love poetry itself. Here Shakespeare is perhaps making a point similar to the one he made in *As You Like It,* in which a character mockingly describes a "lover, / Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad / Made to his mistress' eyebrow." Taken to extremes, Shakespeare is saying, poetic fashions can become ridiculous.

You may have noticed that the form of the poem, a sonnet, allows the different sections of Shakespeare's exposition to be carefully arranged so as to deliver his meaning to his readers at a controlled pace. This is particularly apparent in the first four lines, where the reader only gradually becomes aware of what is going on because the lines are paced through the four separate sentences before reaching a conclusive moment of criticism in the fourth line. The rhyme scheme follows the pattern that Shakespeare used in most of his sonnets, namely cdcd, efef, gg. So the next two sets of four follow the pattern of the first four and similarly draw attention to the woman's faults. The last two lines are different, however, both in the thrust of their argument and in their versification. One of the features of the sonnet form is that it usually features a turn or change of argument or perspective toward the end of its fourteen lines. This is called a volta. In a Shakespearean sonnet, the volta occurs between lines 12 and 13, so in "Sonnet 130" it appears just before the concluding lines. The volta is signaled by the change from alternating rhymes to a rhyming couplet: "rare" and "compare" create a concluding rhyme to set this section apart from the rest of the sonnet. This is, of course, highly appropriate, for it is at this moment that Shakespeare introduces, with perfect dramatic timing, the central and unexpected point of his poem: that although his mistress is not conventionally beautiful, he loves her more than any other woman and will not judge her value by mere appearance.

The rhythm of certain lines of the sonnet subtly supports the sense of the words. Line 12 is an example of a particularly clever effect that Shakespeare achieves by making the line different from the others around it. In a sonnet, each line usually consists of ten syllables, which can be divided into five units, or "feet." Each foot consists of an unstressed and a stressed beat. This is called iambic pentameter. Iambic means that the foot has an unstressed and a stressed beat, in that order, and pentameter means that there are five such feet in the line. A typical example of this versification can be found in line 11, "I grant I never saw a goddess go." It has ten syllables and can be divided into five feet, with the stress falling on "grant," "ne-," "saw" "god," and "go." Now compare line 12. It too has ten syllables, but the way in which they are emphasized when read aloud is very different. Whereas the stress would fall on "mis-" in a regular line, here it does not; because a comparison is being made with what has gone before, the emphasis has to be put on "My." Similarly in the words between the commas ("when she walks"), the emphasis has to fall on "she" so as to make the sense of the line clear. Already the rhythm has been severely disrupted; instead of the usual unstressed-stressed sequence, we instead have a line that is stressed, unstressed, unstressed, unstressed, stressed, unstressed. This ordering makes sense if

we look at the subject matter. Line 11 refers to how a goddess would walk, and is completely regular. Line 12, on the other hand, describes the earthly footsteps of a human who, as we know, is not conventionally graceful or beautiful. In the line that describes her movement, therefore, it is entirely appropriate that the verse should be irregular and even clumsy. The last four words of line 12 make the point particularly clearly: it is impossible to read "treads on the ground" without putting a stress on each of the words. The form matches meaning. This, Shakespeare is hinting, is how his mistress walks, one foot in front of the other, like a normal human being. This is not a goddess gliding, but an earthling plodding.

We can see, therefore, that it is through a combination of dramatic timing, careful wording, and skillful versification that Shakespeare succeeds in turning traditional poetic conventions around in this sonnet. The poem could be said to flatter through the most unexpected means and to show not only its author's love for his mistress, but also his delight in placing himself above the usual poetic practices of courtly love.

Source: Joanne Woolway, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Paul R. Thomas

This excerpt details the history of the literary ideas that make up the composition of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130."

We all sense that literary ideas, even commonplace ones, often go through a period of development, followed by a time of artistic flourishing, only to be discarded on the dustheap of time out of overuse. The ancient business of the *effictio*, the well-established head-to-toe description we so often see in Chaucer's portraits in the General Prologue and the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, flourished in the same fourteenth century in Italy in the Laura love lyrics of Petrarch. When the Renaissance poets of England finally caught up with the Petrarchan conceit—that idealized development of the medieval *effictio* that Petrarch employed so lovingly to memorialize his Laura—the ancient topos [literary theme] soon became a familiar face, yielding all its secrets at the hands of the sonneteers, briefly changing its name to blazon, and fading in its beauty through overuse. Over-familiarity had bred contempt.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 shows a deep knowledge of and a begrudging respect for that ancient business of the *effictio*, the blazon, the Petrarchan conceit. But, Shakespeare invokes the topos of the World Upsidedown to breathe new life into the overused Petrarchan conceit by turning it on its head....

The notion that something formerly flourished is transferred by Shakespeare into a very imaginative notion of the sort of beauty that cannot endure into his very "modern" day, as depicted in Sonnet 130. In Nigel de Longchamps' writing in the late twelfth century, we see over and over again the idea of the world upsidedown in the writer's contemporary society. Brunellus the ass travels all over Europe because of his desire to change his short tail and to become wise by studying at the universities of Salerno and Paris. In the end, all the ass has learned is how to hee-haw and how to get his tail cut even shorter—thus the title of this satiric work, the *Speculum Stultorum*, the *Mirror of Fools*....

Could it be said that in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 the poet transforms the time-worn topos of the World Upsidedown into "modern" youth's criticism of age, wherein age is represented by the now traditional cliché of the Petrarchan conceit?

Let us now roam in a rather random way ... to establish a reasonably clear notion of Petrarch's usual practice in delineating his idealized Laura, a woman who differs very little from the portraits of Chaucer's *fin amor* beauties such as Emelye, Criseyde, and Dorigen a little later in the same fourteenth century when Petrarch wrote. All are blondes of incredible slenderness and beauty.

In Petrarch's third sonnet, there is already an implicit comparison between the sun and Laura's eyes, echoed in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 by the lover's denial in line one that his "mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun":

It was the morning of that blessed day
Whereon the Sun in pity veiled his glare
For the Lord's agony, that, unaware,
I fell a captive, Lady, to the sway
Of your swift eyes: that seemed no time to stay
The strokes of Love: ...

In this sonnet, in which the beloved does not fall victim to the arrows of Cupid, her eyes become the bright Sun as the Sun is dimmed in remembrance of Christ's crucifixion.

The fairness of Laura's complexion and the golden color of her hair is described idealistically in Sonnet 13, in which the glowing brightness of gold predominates:

When Love his flaming image on her brow
Enthrones in perfect beauty like a star,
As far as she outshines the rest, so far
I feel the blaze of passion surge and grow.

Yet still I bless the place, the hour when so
Supremely high, at light so singular
I dared to look: "O heart, you blessed are
To gaze upon that pure, that golden glow,"
I murmur. "She inspired the splendid thought
Which points to heaven and teaches honest eyes
All worldly lures and winning to despise:
Through her that gentle grace of love is taught
Which by the straight path leads to paradise,
And even here hope's holy crown is wrought."

Shakespeare's mistress has none of the quality of this goddess who guides the lover to paradise nor does the beloved of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 possess that golden beauty of the ideal mistress. Instead, the upsidedown mistress has black wires on her head and dun-colored breasts. Perhaps an even better version of these ideas and a clearer source for Shakespeare's lines, "I grant I never saw a goddess go: / My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground," occurs in Petrarch's Sonnet 90:

Golden upon the wind her loose hair streaming,
Twisted into a thousand curls was shaken;
And from her eyes, which seldom now awaken
To answer mine, a fiery light was gleaming;
Ah!—was it fancy?—but with wistful seeming,
Her lovely face by pity's tint was taken:
What marvel that my heart, so long Love's beacon,
Should flame out, fueled so by Love's fierce
dreaming?
She was no mortal in her stately moving,
But stepped an angel; and her accents glowing
Beyond all human tones passed human heeding,
A spirit of Heaven!—a sun alive was proving
My power of sight... What matters that sun's
going?
The slackening bow puts no stop to the bleeding.

In a very poignant sense, Laura does come from a former age, the age of the idealized courtly lover. Many of the sonnets that describe her perfect beauty were written after her death, Sonnet 267 being one good example.... In Sonnet 279, the poet recollects the beauty of the love he lost to the plague in 1348:

While Love his slow eternal elegy weaves,
Then, then I see her whom this blind earth presses!
Those eyes like wells of stars, those golden tresses,
That voice like tears, that silver breast which
heaves....

In true blazon fashion, Petrarch remembers Laura's eyes, her hair, her voice, and her breast—all features mentioned in less flattering terms in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130. Petrarch's Sonnet 292 features the following parts of Laura's body: the eyes, the face, the limbs, the golden locks, and the angelic smile. Though Shakespeare may not have known Petrarch's sonnets directly, though there is some evidence that Shakespeare did know some Italian sources for his plays, at least he was influenced by the Petrarchan conceit in his sonnets to the point that he could play with it and turn the conceit upside down in praise of the modern woman—perhaps the sort of woman described in Sonnet 144 as a "woman colour'd ill."... Shakespeare's insistence through his speaker in Sonnet 130 to have a real, flesh and blood mistress rather than an ideal goddess is typical of his whole cycle, and the numerous personifications of Cupid or Love in Petrarch only figure in the last two of Shakespeare's sonnets....

The simple, almost holy tone of Petrarch's Sonnet 245 contrasts with the rational tone of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 and also raises the image of the rosy cheeks that the speaker of Shakespeare's sonnet questions:

Two glowing roses, fresh from Paradise,
That there, on May-Day morning, leaped in light—
Sweet gift sent by a lover wise and white
With age to two young loves in equal wise:
Whereat, so soft the speech, and to the eyes
So excellent his mien (a savage might
Have softened), the same lustre glimmered bright
In both and on their cheeks burned the swift dyes.
"Never had sun looked on a lovelier two,"
Said he, as with a smile and sigh he spoke,
Pressing their ardent palms and turning away.
Of words and roses each shared like and true.
Even now my worn heart breaks, as once it broke,
With bliss, O happy syllables! Holy day!

How the tone of such a sonnet contrasts with the "argument" of the speaker in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130. In the opening two lines, he denies usual poetic comparisons declaratively:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red....

The pattern of the string of impossibilities has begun. The speaker then questions other lovers' notions of the color of the human skin or the fanciful comparison of hair to the fine filigree work of the goldsmiths of Florence. These two lines are framed as quizzical premises that the speaker regards as absurd:

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hair be wires, black wires grow on her head.

Having dismissed four of the usual poetic comparisons in the Petrarchan conceit, the speaker as expert arguer finally makes a concession: he has at least seen red and white roses gathered together.

I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks....

Perhaps the roses suggested to the speaker of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 the sorts of perfume he had in mind to compare with the breath his mis-

tress exhaled (reeks does not have its modern pejorative sense here). The "and" of line seven suggests a connection between the perfumes of the next line and the roses of the preceding line.

> And in some perfumes is there more delight
> Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

Having dismissed the likelihood of a Nature-to-nature comparison, the speaker finds his mistress's speaking voice pleasing, but not quite up to a comparison with fine music—Nature being compared with Art:

> I love to hear her speak; yet well I know
> That music hath a far more pleasing sound....

Continuing in his skeptical, dialectic mood, the lover confesses he has no firsthand experience with goddesses. In the Knight's Tale, Arcite claims right away that he has a superior claim to Emelye because he knew immediately that she was a woman, not a goddess! Shakespeare's verb "go" is used here in the old sense it is in Chaucer—"ryde or go"—ride on a horse or walk.

> I grant I never saw a goddess go:
> My mistress, when she walks, treads on the
> ground.

The minor oath, "by heaven," that follows is logically connected to the discussion of the goddess in the previous two lines. In a sense, the lover may even be thanking the powers of heaven that, in this latter day of truth and real women who are neither as white as snow, as fair as roses and coral, as bright as the sun, nor perfumed goddesses who walk a little above the ground, he has such a mistress:

> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare.

By overthrowing the Petrarchan conceit that was beginning to be worn from overuse, Shakespeare's speaker in Sonnet 130 has also overthrown the usual expectation of the topos we call the World Upsidedown. This sonnet praises the modern woman, warts and all, and does not hark back to the *florebat olim* medieval ideal. In his dialectic game, Shakespeare has clothed the Petrarchan ideal in flesh in his Sonnet 130.

Source: Paul R. Thomas"Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 and the History of Two Ideas: The *Effictio* and the Topos of the World Upsidedown" in *Encyclia,* Vol. 66, 1989 pp. 70–78.

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The Soul Selects Her Own Society

Emily Dickinson

c. 1862

Originally published in Dickinson's posthumous first collection, *Poems by Emily Dickinson*, in 1890, "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" is believed to have been written in 1862, a year during which Dickinson supposedly produced more than 300 poems. Significantly, the poem can be read as a description of the artist's experience: the Soul, perhaps a poet, freely chooses to close herself off from the world in order to pursue the solitary, interior life of creativity and self-discovery.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes the Soul shutting a door, an image of the individual deliberately closing herself away to pursue some greater purpose. While it might seem that the Soul is hiding behind a closed door, there is evidence that the poem's speaker believes her to be exercising the power of personal choice. Chariots pause at her gate; emperors come to visit, but she will not let them in. She is indifferent to these symbols of wealth, romance, and power. The poem's speaker tells us that the Soul has closed her attention to everything except "One." The "One" that she has chosen might be interpreted as her own creative vision.

The poem concludes by comparing the Soul's choice to "Stone," indicating that it is heavy, solid and irreversible. Once the Soul has closed herself off from the world, there is no turning back. Like many of Dickinson's poems, "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" comments on the Soul of the individual and its rejection of the conventions of the larger society.

Emily Dickinson

Author Biography

Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830 and lived there all her life. Her grandfather was the founder of Amherst College, and her father Edward Dickinson was a lawyer who served as the treasurer of the college. He also held various political offices. Her mother Emily Norcross Dickinson was a quiet and frail woman. Dickinson went to primary school for four years and then attended Amherst Academy from 1840 to 1847 before spending a year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Her education was strongly influenced by Puritan religious beliefs, but Dickinson did not accept the teachings of the Unitarian church attended by her family and remained agnostic throughout her life. Following the completion of her education, Dickinson lived in the family home with her parents and younger sister Lavinia, while her elder brother Austin and his wife Susan lived next door. She began writing verse at an early age, practicing her craft by rewriting poems she found in books, magazines, and newspapers. During a trip to Philadelphia in the early 1850s, Dickinson fell in love with a married minister, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth; her disappointment in love may have brought about her subsequent withdrawal from society. Dickinson experienced an emotional crisis of an undetermined nature in the early 1860s. Her traumatized state of mind is believed to have inspired her to write prolifically: in 1862 alone she is thought to have composed over three hundred poems. In that same year, Dickinson initiated a correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the literary editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. Over the years Dickinson sent nearly one hundred of her poems for his criticism, and he became a sympathetic adviser and confidant, but he never published any of her poems. Dickinson's isolation further increased when her father died unexpectedly in 1874 and her mother suffered a stroke that left her an invalid. Dickinson and her sister provided her constant care until her death in 1882. Dickinson was diagnosed in 1886 as having Bright's disease, a kidney dysfunction that resulted in her death in May of that year.

Poem Text

The Soul selects her own Society—
Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—

I've known her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—

Poem Summary

Lines 1-2:

These lines introduce the Soul as the subject of the poem. Clearly, this Soul is feminine, as indicated by the use of the word "her." Here, the Soul might represent the self, the individual, or the mysterious essence of being. This Soul is also subjective; she is an active subject rather than a passive object, and relies upon her personal opinions and feelings. She "selects," meaning that she picks out or chooses, "her own Society." This line can be interpreted in a number of ways. On one level, it might mean that she decides what company she will keep and which social rules she will obey. On a deeper level, it might mean that she chooses the

- An audio cassette titled "Fifty Poems of Emily Dickinson" was released in 1996 by Dove Audio.
- An audio cassette titled "Dickinson and Whitman: Ebb and Flow" is available from Audiobooks.
- "Heaven Below, Heaven Above," an audio cassette, is available through Audiobooks.
- An audio cassette titled "Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson" is available from Audiobooks.

company of her own self over the company of others. Once this selection is complete, she "shuts the Door," or closes herself off. A closed door is a common image in literature which usually represents a block or barrier between the internal and the external world.

Lines 3-4:

Dickinson's use of dashes between words and phrases leads to several possible explanations of these lines. The lines might mean that the Soul is shutting her "divine Majority" inside with her, behind the door. In this sense, "divine Majority" might represent her own holy or sacred self, which is now no longer present to those outside of her closed door. Another way to read the lines is that she is shutting her "divine Majority" out of her inner world. In this sense, "divine Majority" could mean the social or religious system to which she is no longer present. Indeed, the capitalization of "Majority" might even indicate that she is actually shutting out God, an interpretation that might have seemed blasphemous to 19th-century Americans.

Lines 5-8:

In this second quatrain, the speaker gives us examples of the consequences of the Soul's choice to shut the world out. In these lines, we see how thoroughly the Soul has rejected the symbols of the external world. She has turned away from all the proper customs of the world's society. Chariots, perhaps containing potential suitors or wealthy men, stop before her gate. She notices them casually, but she is not interested. She is even indifferent to royalty. The Emperor falls on his knees before her door, but she will not let him enter. This is a reversed image, for it is usually the common individual who must defer to an emperor. These examples illustrate that the Soul's state of being is intensely private, personal, and unreachable.

Lines 9-12:

In these lines, the speaker of the poem, using the pronoun "I," comments upon the power and determination of the Soul. There is a tone of admiration and respect for the Soul's discriminating selection process. It is observed that the Soul could have had her pick of "an ample nation," or a more than adequate body of people, but she has chosen just "One." The "One" here might mean her creativity, or her art, or her private spiritual life. In this interpretation, the Soul has given up the rest of the world for an inward life of reflection and self-realization. She chooses to "close the Valves of her attention," with "valve" perhaps understood according to its archaic definition, "either half of a double or folding door." This definition completes the image created by the "Door" in the first quatrain. Once these "Valves" are firmly closed, she is free to forget external matters and concentrate solely on the "One" thing to which she has devoted her existence. "Like Stone," she is hardened against the world outside, and her decision is solid, permanent, and complete.

Themes

Public vs. Private Life

In America, more than in most countries, we have a strong sense of what privacy is and what rights an individual has to be left alone, possibly because the nation was founded by people who sought the freedom to worship their religion without government interference. On the other hand, balancing this respect for privacy is the suspicion that a person who is too aloof might be up to something and might pose a threat to society. In this poem, Dickinson does not present a defense for the person who chooses to live outside of the bounds of public life, she simply states it as a fact, ignoring society's opinions. If her first two lines were any less direct or absolute—if she had said, for in-

stance, "The soul sometimes selects her own society" or "My soul" or "One's soul"—it would be somewhat of an admission that this might be unusual behavior, a practice that is not common to everyone. Instead, Dickinson presents this move toward privacy as an unavoidable part of the human condition.

The "low Gate" mentioned in line 6 could be an indication that this individual is not shut off completely from public life and is not beyond being contacted. The fact that the poet took the time to mention a gate that would be easy to pass over shifts the cause of the soul's isolation at least partially onto the public at large: the Emperor she uses as a representative of the outside world falls down to his knees, but the poem implies that if he really wanted to breach the division between public and private life he could do it more easily with direct action than with social gesture.

Wealth and Poverty

Although this poem does not dwell upon wealth in terms of worldly things one might collect as possessions, it does refer to the social status that we associate with wealth through the Emperor and the Chariots that pull up outside of the gate. Since this poem is written at a level of high abstraction, it does not have to bother with details about how wealthy the people outside the gate are, or how non-wealthy the poem's speaker is. The reader knows that there is no real Emperor, no carriages nor gate: these are simply indicators of wider-reaching ideas. It hardly matters if the reader interprets the Emperor to symbolize material wealth or political power, since the two are so seldom separate from each other. What does matter is that someone who the public could see as "mighty" is humbled before the soul that stays true to its own values.

This poem's message is similar to the religious stance that values poverty and casts its suspicions toward wealth. The Bible, for instance, tells us that a camel can pass through the eye of a needle more easily than a rich man can pass through the gates of heaven, and other religions require members to take a vow of poverty, so that they will not be more interested in worldly possessions than they are in God. But this poem does say that the Emperor's worldly belongings can distract the speaker. He is irrelevant, uninteresting—she is "unmoved" by the sight of him. Whether it is the Emperor kneeling on her mat or the wealth of options made available by an "ample nation," this Soul is not overwhelmed

Topics for Further Study

- Think of how those excluded from the soul's society feel. Write a poem from the point of view of someone who was not selected.
- Explain what the "Valves" mentioned in the eleventh line represent. Why do you think Dickinson chose this word to express this idea?

by the things of the world that are so easily available to her.

Free Will

The first three words of this poem state Dickinson's case most directly: the word "selects" implies a decision that is gentle and unpressured, not something that one is forced into or that one does to push back against pressure. It is a word that ignores all of the various elements that one might consider when making a decision and leaves the Soul's action entirely up to free will. The rest of the poem, though, is devoted to showing us the outside forces that generally keep one from living alone.

The first stanza offers us the friends that the Soul leaves behind by going into seclusion: the Majority (we can assume that they are friends because they are called "divine," just as we can assume that "divine" does not mean God here because the noun is plural). Having shut friends and acquaintances out of her life, the second stanza has several powerful people in Chariots come to call on her, and one, an Emperor, even kneels on her mat, implying that his wealth and power are offered to her. Some people would be so attracted to an offer such as this that they would find it "too good to pass up," denying that they have free will and the ability to choose, which gives more force to the fact that this Soul calmly "selects" something else.

The tone of the final stanza indicates that the speaker is not entirely happy with the idea of cutting herself off and of behaving like stone instead of flesh and blood. This is the strongest argument that another person might choose to justify re-

maining a part of society: that it is inhuman to shut oneself off like that. The speaker of this poem shows that this point is understood—the cold, thudding final two syllables indicate by their tone just how blunt it is to be "Like Stone"—but the fear of self-dislike is not enough to change the Soul's choice.

Style

"The Soul Selects Her Own Society" consists of three quatrains—stanzas of four lines each—arranged in iambs. The iamb is a metric foot of two syllables in which the first syllable is unstressed and second is stressed. The following line reveals the pattern of stresses in one line of the poem and illustrates Dickinson's use of the iamb:

To **her** / di **vine** / Ma **jor** / ity —

Dickinson wrote most of her poetry in the eight- and six-syllable common meter used in many hymns and nursery rhymes. In this poem, however, her metric mix is eccentric. In the first line of the first quatrain, the poet uses a five-foot line called iambic pentameter ("penta" meaning five), which is the commonest line pattern in English verse. Then in the second line, she shifts to a two-foot pattern, or dimeter ("di" meaning two), that effectively "shuts the door" in its surprising brevity. Next she uses a four-foot line, or tetrameter ("tetra" meaning four). She ends the stanza with another stunningly short two-syllable line.

The second quatrain follows the pattern of the first in the second and fourth lines, but in the first and third lines the poet alters the pattern slightly by using words with a third loose, unaccented "ing" ending in the fourth foot ("pausing," "kneeling").

The first and third lines of the last quatrain are four-foot lines: three iambic feet and a final three-syllable foot with an accented middle syllable, called an amphibrach. And lastly, in the second and last lines of the quatrain, Dickinson uses a single-foot line, or monometer, for a highly effective diminishment in metric rhythm that particularly points up the poet's powerfully terse last line.

Dickinson is noted for her unusual handling of punctuation. In this poem, she uses dashes both at the ends of lines and between words. This peculiar technique has been the subject of much critical study, but it is generally believed that Dickinson, who did not typically follow the standard rules of grammar, used dashes to indicate how words, phrases and clauses should be interpreted. Note, for instance, how the first dash in line two alters the reading rhythm of the formal iambic structure.

The poem is also interesting for its rhyme scheme. Each quatrain is rhymed on alternate lines, but Dickinson's rhymes are not exact ones requiring identity in sound in the last stressed vowel and in following vowels and consonants. She often followed the rule of consonance, or off-rhymes, in which final consonants need be identical, but the accented vowels are different ("Society"—"Majority," "Nation"—"Attention"). In the first two lines of the poem, Dickinson also relies on alliteration, the repetition of initial sounds in words. The "s" sound is repeated in "Soul," "selects," "society," and "shuts," further enhancing the poem's use of sound.

Historical Context

There are a few figures in the history of American literature that are more familiar to the general public for their striking personalities than they are for their writings. For instance, many non-readers would be able to identify Mark Twain as being gruff and cantankerous, with wild, white hair and a huge moustache; or Ernest Hemingway, big and bearded, fisherman and fighter; or Truman Capote, the social gadfly, cheerily festooned in pastels. Emily Dickinson belongs with these: known for the personality that she projected of the recluse who never left her house, writing hundreds of poems but not having them published. Generation after generation, students are fascinated by the legend. Many wonder how a woman who was so removed from everyday life could know so much about it, while others wonder why a woman who had so much wisdom would be so timid. Many hopeful poets use Dickinson's story to defend whatever social awkwardness they themselves suffer from and to dispute theorists who say that good writers must experience fascinating adventures. Poets will always have a touch of introversion built into their personalities, if only enough to make them step aside from socializing long enough to write things down. The legend associated with Emily Dickinson, of the mysterious woman in white looking out at the world from behind the curtains, expands from this kernel of truth, making her life seem more strange and symbolic than it actually was.

Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, the town that she lived in all of her

Compare & Contrast

- **1862:** Congress passed the Homestead Act, giving 160 acres of Western land to any individual for free if she or he could make certain improvements and live on it for five years. In the years to come many could not cultivate the West's arid land.

  Today: Western farmers and cattle ranchers feel that government environmental regulations are hindering their ability to conduct their business

- **1862:** President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that on January 1, 1863, that all persons held as slaves in the United States would be free.

  1865: Freedom of slaves did not actually take effect until the Confederacy was defeated in the Civil War. Almost immediately, laws were enacted that required blacks to be treated differently than whites in almost all social circumstances.

  1964: After increasing gains made in the cause of equality, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 put an end to legal discrimination in public accommodations, unions, and federally funded programs.

  Today: We have laws to punish racial discrimination, although American attitudes still show extreme racial consciousness.

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fifty–six years. Her father was a lawyer, one of Amherst's most important and active citizens, and the treasurer of Amherst College for almost forty years. As a result of this, the family had a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. Emily Dickinson attended the town's public school when she was very young, and then she went to Amherst Academy, a few blocks from her house, where she received an excellent education. She was as active and involved and impressionable as any school girl, forming writing notes and trading secrets with the boys and girls who were her friends. From 1847 to 1848, she lived away from home for the first and only time when she attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, Massachusetts, fifteen miles from Amherst, and shared a room with her cousin. With her keen intelligence and strong preparation from the academy, she was able to pass all of her courses in a year, which was good for all involved (Emily did not take well to the Seminary's religious training, making her the kind of girl who was not welcome by her instructors). She returned to live with her family and never left until her death in 1886. Living at home was not unusual for unmarried women at the time: there were few jobs for women and a strong social stigma against women who lived by themselves. It was so common that her sister, Livonia Dickinson, also lived at home for her entire life. Some literary historians, wondering how Dickinson could have not married and yet write such moving love poetry, speculate about whether she had an affair. The most likely candidates for the suspected affair are a young assistant from her father's office whom her father deemed not a good enough financial prospect or a married clergyman who moved to San Francisco in 1862, at about the time when Dickinson started to withdraw from society.

Throughout the 1850s Dickinson was still socially active about town, attending social events with her family and going for horseback and carriage rides with friends. Historians piecing together Dickinson's diaries and reminiscences of her acquaintances guess that she was slightly shy and impatient with formalities. She was very attached to her big brown dog, Carlo, and was frequently seen taking him for walks. Her famous reclusiveness did not occur one day, but happened gradually, as a slow withdrawal. We know, for instance, that by 1982 she seldom went out in public any more, but she was not paralyzed by phobia in any way that would have prevented her from leaving the house. In both 1864 and 1865, she travelled to Boston for eye treatments, staying the night each time at a boarding house in Cambridgeport. She was still gracious with guests who came to visit the family,

but increasingly she did not leave the property. Neighbors saw her tending the hemlock hedges in the garden or looking out of an upstairs window.

By 1870, she never went anywhere and she took to the habit of dressing all in white. This is the Emily Dickinson of legend, the strange genius who was shut off from the world but who knew so much about it. It must be remembered that, although she never traveled, she was extraordinarily well-read and intelligent and was an active part of her community until she was about forty. She was a sensitive person who could learn more from a half-hour in her own garden than another person might learn from a trip around the world. She was an independent thinker, with strong beliefs about God, living in a society that had beliefs about organized religion that were just as strong: in this light, it is small wonder that she would eventually choose to just keep to herself. We can see from her poems and letters that death fascinated her, and the world she lived in provided death all around to feed her imagination—not only because nineteenth-century medicine was less successful at fighting disease than it became after the advent of antibiotics, but also because many of her classmates and townspeople lost their lives in the Civil War, from 1861 to 1865.

After the death of her strong, socially active father in 1874, Dickinson had little reason to go out and be with other people; the following year, her mother was paralyzed by a stroke, and she had all the more reason to stay at home and tend to her. Through letters, she kept up relations with old friends and people she had never met in her life. Many of the 1775 Dickinson poems that we have today came from her letters, which historians hunted down when they realized the power of her work. Upon her death, her sister Livonia was surprised to find that Emily had been a writer at all, finding 879 poems in bundles around her room.

Critical Overview

"The Soul Selects Her Own Society" is considered an important poem in the context of Dickinson's life and work. In 1862, Dickinson shut herself away in her bedroom to write over 300 poems. Critic Allen Tate, writing in *Limits of Poetry, Selected Essays,* analyzes this period of the poet's life. Tate writes that "when she went upstairs and closed the door, she mastered life by rejecting it." He argues that Dickinson's deliberate, empowering decision to withdraw from the outside world was far from pitiful; in fact, he claims that "her life was one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent."

In *Renunciation in Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry,* David Porter similarly sees the theme of Dickinson's poetry to be the internal "quest," meaning the search to find something within one's self. This "quest" is most often sought through "renunciation," the act of disowning or giving up the world. According to Porter, Dickinson believed that "spiritual immortality requires that one forego this life."

Elizabeth Jennings, in an essay in *American Poetry,* applies this theme of the quest directly to "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" when she writes that "in the ... twelve-line poem, she tells us more about the questing, visionary mind than many poets have succeeded in doing in a complete *oeuvre*" ("oeuvre" meaning a person's body of work). Jennings remarks that Dickinson's ability to handle a subject of such greatness in a relatively tiny space is yet another measure of the poet's genius.

Criticism

Chris Semansky

Chris Semansky is a freelance writer and has written extensively on modern and postmodern literature. In the following essay, Semansky argues that the seemingly simple imagery of "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" is actually very complex and capable of being interpreted in a variety of ways.

Poets, novelists, and even politicians use figurative language to make comparisons between things whose similarity is not initially apparent. For example, when President Clinton says he wants to build a bridge to the twenty-first century, he is not talking about an actual bridge, but a conceptual one linking the ideas of the twentieth century to the ideas of the next. The image of the bridge in this case is what English literary critic I.A. Richards would call the *vehicle,* while the idea of progress—the subject of the comparison—would be the *tenor.* Together these terms comprise a metaphor, or a way of talking about one thing in terms of another. However, when writers attempt to describe a complex emotion, idea, or state of being that cannot be reduced to mere description (either figurative or lit-

eral), they frequently resort to using what American literary critic Cleanth Brooks has termed "functional" metaphors. In Brooks's definition, functional metaphors are comparisons so loaded with meaning—both emotional and referential—that they act more like symbols. Symbols are tropes, or figures of speech, that are both what they say they are and something else as well. For example, flowing water is a powerful and common image used in many metaphors to suggest time, eternity, or change. Emily Dickinson's poems are loaded with functional metaphors, which make them both richer and more difficult to read. "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" contains just such functional metaphors. However, the difficulty in interpreting or making meaning of this poem far outweighs the pleasure her metaphors offer.

For a poet long known for the obscurity and complexity of her references, Dickinson's poems challenge, and sometimes even dare, the reader to make sense of them. She is and has been written about as a poet of the "interior life" because she attempted to find words for the twists and turns the mind makes when engaged with difficult ideas and sensations. Though the images, symbols, and terms she employs are not difficult in and of themselves, the manner in which she uses them is perplexing. "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" speaks to both the hermetic life that Dickinson led and to the (often) hermetic quality of her own writing. The action taken by the "Soul" in the opening stanza speaks of the choices Dickinson made in her own life regarding her contact with the world outside her Amherst, Massachusetts, home—a world she had less and less contact with the older she grew. Seen in this light, shutting the door on "her divine Majority" describes a sensibility that has decided whom and what she would choose to pay attention to and ignores the rest.

The second stanza continues the description of the Soul's "actions," which in this case are a form of non-action. Aloof, even haughty, she observes chariots pausing and an emperor kneeling. Both are supplicants, and neither can distract her nor change her mind about the decision she has made. A few critics have suggested that Dickinson used Queen Elizabeth as the model for her metaphor of the soul as royal personage. The "divine Majority" in the preceding stanza, then, would refer to the Queen's subjects.

The last stanza has occasioned much controversy among Dickinson scholars. Some of her biographers have hinted that the "One" refers to Dickinson's secret lover, variously claimed to be either Samuel Bowles or the Reverend Charles Wadsworth. Both Bowles, the editor of *The Spingfield Republican* newspaper in which a handful of Dickinson's poems were published, and Wadsworth, the pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, were married. In *Emily Dickinson's Poetry*, however, Robert Weisbuch refutes this suggestion, arguing that "if we read the poem without the intention of pimping, we

What Do I Read Next?

- When Dickinson's poems were first discovered after her death, her friend T.W. Higginson prepared them for publication in 1890 by smoothing the rhymes, removing local references and changing obscure metaphors. When Harvard University acquired the rights to the Dickinson estate in 1950, they published the poems as they were originally written. Today, all 1775 poems are available in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, published by Little, Brown and Co.
- Of all of the biographies of Dickinson available, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's 1986 book *Emily Dickinson* is certainly among the best. Wolff gives a meticulous, compassionate explanation of the poet's life.
- At the same time that Dickinson was writing, Walt Whitman's works were being published. His greatest collection, *Leaves of Grass*, was revised ten times throughout his lifetime and has been in print constantly since then. Whitman has common ideas on the theme of individuality with Dickinson, but his approach uses entirely different material.
- Emily Dickinson came from a long New England tradition of poetry. One of the last of the great New England poets was Robert Frost, who lived into the 1960s. To see how the New England sensibilities coped with the modern world, read the 1996 critical biography *Robert Frost Among His Poems* by Jeffrey S. Cramer.

see that the second stanza rules out worldly suitors, emperors, and their chariots. The chosen 'one' is a 'what,' not a 'who,' unnamed because its only name is 'Mystery.'" The "One" is Christ, or a Christ figure. Consonant with this interpretation is Judith Farr's claim in *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* that the mat in the second stanza is actually a prayer mat, and the low gate "is related to the gate of heaven that Jacob recognizes as leading to the house of God in Genesis 18.17." Read in this light, the poem becomes a statement on Dickinson's Christian faith, which her poetry questioned as much as affirmed. Still other scholars see the poem as primarily a description of Dickinson's relation to her writing and to her audience. In this viewpoint, the "Soul" stands for the persona of the poet, whose gradual refusal of all suitors except the "One" suggests that the poet has rejected the lures and demands of the "outside" world and has dedicated her self to her art, writing only for an ideal reader, which may be either an actual or an imagined person. Closing "the Valves of her attention" in this light becomes an emotional act of the heart, then, as much as a reasoned decision of the will.

Finally, of course, critical interpretations of poems are arguments, not opinions, and over the years the possible arguments for this Dickinson poem have not been exhausted but have multiplied. Consider this interpretation by Jerome Loving in *Emily Dickinson: The Poet on the Second Story,* who reads "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" as a poem of "personal crisis":

> The poem is unique for its pattern of regression. We have in the first stanza the "supposed person" in the present selecting her own society. In the second we have the supposed person in the past.... In the third and final stanza the "supposed person" is reduced to an oyster, rejecting from the ocean floor all but one grain of sand, which the bi-valve will siphon in and transform into a pearl.... The movement in the poem from mind (soul) through person (Queen Elizabeth) to matter (the oyster) illustrates Dickinson's response to the human condition. She could only follow her symbol back to the seclusion of the self. There and only there was it possible to live. The love she bore for the self in the past was a love of the self in the future. The only way back was the way forward—a kind of evolution in reverse in which the 'supposed person' devolved into the matter she had contemplated.

This quotation marks a noble attempt to make sense of a very difficult set of images. But there is little in Dickinson's own letters, correspondence, or other poems to suggest that the Soul alludes to Queen Elizabeth or that the poem's final image is one of an oyster.

The preceding passage illustrates that how we read a poem depends not only on what we think the writer's intention might have been, but also on what *our own* intentions are. If we read Dickinson's poems as coded messages about her private romantic or religious life, we are more apt to read figurative language that she uses—such as metaphors and symbols—as allusions to events, people, or statements about that life. Criticism functions as an aid or a map to guide readers through a piece of writing. The lesson in reading a difficult poem such as "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" is that as readers we must also be discriminating by knowing our own intentions and using them to select our own society (of critics).

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Robert M. Luscher

The hidden messages, themes and images that dominate the poetry of Dickinson are discussed.

Most of Emily Dickinson's poetry, David Porter notes, "pulls back from clarity, from specificity, from discernible referential links to an outside reality," leaving readers to speculate about the contexts and puzzle out the themes of her poems. Even some of her best-known poems remain enigmatic and can shift meaning radically when the frame of reference is altered. Of one such poem, "The Soul Selects Her Own Society," Porter remarks, "The most crucial act of all is concealed behind an unidentified, generic one. The poem ends with a decisive sound that belies its utter indefiniteness."... Because the poem has been assigned a date of composition around 1862, near the beginning of Dickinson's gradual withdrawal from society, that "indefiniteness" has often been given a biographical significance, and the poem has been read as a defense of exclusivism. But another context for the poem exists which, while it may not supersede the biographical, opens the text to a broader interpretation, adding substance to its generic drama of selection and specific gravity to its seeming indefiniteness. From such a reading, a picture of Dickinson emerges more in keeping with the figure drawn by her most thorough and balanced biographer, not as the "Queen Recluse" of popular legend, "working in grand isolation," but as a poet engaged with the outside world, "for all her withdrawn ways."

That other context is the familiar one of Emerson's ideas, particularly those concerning society and solitude, friendship and self-reliance. In "The

Soul Selects Her Own Society," Dickinson appears to be consciously adapting Emerson's concept of selection as it is elaborated in "Spiritual Laws," a neglected essay which provides a useful frame of reference for interpreting the poem's language and ideas. With a full Emersonian context in mind, it becomes clear that the poem neither advocates haughty isolation, as Larry Rubin has argued, nor condemns the reclusive soul, as E. Miller Budick believes, for creating an "irreparable dualism" between itself and the cosmos by its arrogant process of selection—an ironic reflection of both the Puritan and Transcendentalist assumption that each person can be one of the "chosen interpreters of the cosmic code." If Dickinson is measuring Emersonian concepts in this poem, she apparently does so with a full awareness of the balance struck in "Spiritual Laws" between the solitude implied in the act of selecting and the unfolding of the self through that act. Rather than rejecting or parodying Emersonian thought, Dickinson's poem may find in it a rationale that redeems the soul's selective solitude. Although she stops short of endorsing Emerson's affirmation that the soul's "choices" manifest the workings of the Oversoul, she does "select" the language of "Spiritual Laws" as the basis for examining the nature of such choices.

The most crucial act of all is concealed behind an unidentified, generic one. The poem ends with a decisive sound that belies its utter indefiniteness ..."

—David Porter

When "The Soul Selects Her Own Society," she is engaged in a process analogous to the one Emerson sketches in similar language in "Spiritual Laws." Although Emerson boldly contends that "The soul's emphasis is always right," he makes it clear that spiritual laws beyond the self are the guarantee of its correctness. Dickinson's poem plainly echoes and adapts the following passage, which immediately follows Emerson's assertion that "eternal laws of the mind ... adjust the relation of all persons to each other":

> He shall have his own society.... Persons approach us famous for their beauty, for their accomplishments, worthy of all wonder for their charms and gifts: they dedicate their whole skill to the hour and the company, with very imperfect result. To be sure, it would be ungrateful in us not to praise them loudly. Then, when all is done, a person of related mind, a brother or sister by nature, comes to us so softly and easily, so nearly and intimately, as if it were the blood in our proper veins, that we feel as if someone was gone, instead of having another come: we are utterly relieved and refreshed: it is a sort of joyful solitude.

Just as the chariots and the Emperor in Dickinson's poem have little to offer the selecting soul, so the gifted and accomplished of society at large portrayed here have little to offer compared to those allied by a similar nature. The poem dispenses with praise of famous men who have nothing to offer the soul and concentrates on illustrating how the soul's selection of like-minded society becomes a reinvigorating influence. In addition to these basic ideological and imagistic similarities, persistent verbal echoes indicate that the poem responds to the same concerns Emerson addresses: the words "society," "selection," "soul," and "his own" (Dickinson's female soul of course requires "her own") resound throughout Emerson's essay, in a variety of forms and contexts, as in the following pronouncement on selection:

> He may have his own. A man's genius, the quality that differences him from every other, the susceptibility to one class of influences, the selection of what is fit for him, the rejection of what is unfit, determines for him the character of the universe. A man is a method, a progressive arrangement; a selecting principle, gathering his like to him wherever he goes. He takes only his own out of the multiplicity that sweeps and circles round him.

While Emerson reflects expansively on selection as the process by which one progressively defines his genius and realizes the calling that determines his particular society and his role in it, Dickinson distills a twelve-line lyric on the same process.

Viewed in this context, Dickinson's queen-like Soul does not appear quite so aloof from her "divine Majority" or the noble visitors who court her attentions.... The Soul's refusal to include the "divine Majority" in her society does not deny its divinity or value but rather indicates her inability to relate to its members *en masse*. By shutting the door and removing herself from their presence, the Soul has not necessarily cut herself off from all animating influences; the closed door need not be read as

either a grave or a closed mind, although both glosses are possible. Instead, the soul may be responding to the dictates of what Emerson deems the "calling" inherent in one's character: "Each man has his own vocation. The talent is the call. There is one direction in which all space is open to him. He has faculties inviting him thither to endless exertion.... By doing his own work he unfolds himself."... By proceeding in that "one direction" and "gathering his like to him wherever he goes," Dickinson's Soul may thus be expanding rather than limiting her vistas; the choice of "One" may, in other words, be grounded in a self-reliance that is ultimately the path to self-discovery.

As Emerson remarks in "Friendship," "The soul environs itself with friends that it may enter into a grander self acquaintance or solitude; and it goes alone for a season that it may exalt its conversation or society." At the heart of this paradox is the same duality present in "Spiritual Laws": to select one's own society is ultimately a form of education rather than a solipsistic narrowing. The selective soul, Emerson contends, actually obeys a higher spiritual law beyond the self—a law that allows for the discovery, cultivation, and fulfillment of an individual talent. While the Dickinson poem exhibits no apparent attachment to the Emersonian higher laws that validate the actions of the individual spirit, it can be consistently read in terms of his affirmation of spiritual education through a "natural magnetism, which is sure to select what belongs to it." Such an intuitive selection process, Emerson reiterates, involves more than just one's choice of friends:

> Those facts, words, persons, which dwell in his memory without his being able to say why, ... are symbols of value to him, as they can interpret parts of his consciousness which he would vainly seek words for in the conventional images of books and other minds. What attracts my attention shall have it, as I will go to the man who knocks at my door, whilst a thousand persons as worthy go by it, to whom I give no regard. It is enough that these particulars speak to me. A few anecdotes, a few traits of character, manners, a face, a few incidents, have an emphasis in your memory out of all proportion to their apparent significance if you measure them by the ordinary standards. They relate to your gift. Let them have their weight and do not reject them.... The soul's emphasis is always right.

Facts, words, anecdotes, traits, manners, faces, and incidents—such small bits of reality can be the stuff of poetry for one with the gift to develop them and for one whose "society," in the more traditional sense of the word, consists of a diminishing circle of people. What the soul selects from everyday experience may be used to cultivate one's talent (in Dickinson's case, poetry); and focusing attention on the manifestations of a single kindred soul, whether in actuality or in memory, may ultimately help "interpret parts of [the] consciousness" active in employing this gift. Read in light of this passage, Dickinson's poem thus addresses not only her personal preference for reclusiveness but also her choice of poetic and philosophic concerns.

Dickinson's selective Soul may thus remain "Unmoved" by the overtures of the chariots which pause at her low gate and the Emperor who kneels upon her mat because these representatives of nobility beckon in the wrong manner and at the wrong portals of the soul, identifying themselves as nonkindred spirits. Emerson asserts that "only that soul can be my friend, which I encounter on the line of my own march, that soul to which I do not decline and does not decline to me, but, native to the same celestial latitude, repeats in its own all my experience." The poem's chariots and emperors err by passively presenting themselves to the Soul rather than actively asserting their affinities; knocking, not pausing or kneeling, might claim them a place in the line of the soul's march as she gathers like unto herself. The rejected suitors, by the "low" level of their appeals, implicitly show themselves to be of a lower latitude than the soul occupies, with little to offer. The truer and more valuable affinities, as Emerson suggests, are determined by "eternal laws of the mind, which adjust the relation of all persons to each other by the mathematical measure of their havings and beings." In an Emersonian context, then, the "One" finally chosen by Dickinson's Soul must measure up by having qualities that attract her attention and awaken her poetic gift, thus justifying the act of sealing the soul off from the rest of society.

Dickinson's reference to a chosen "One" need not imply simply a person selected from society at large. For Emerson, "It is with a good book as it is with good company," and spiritual communion may be achieved by reading: "This is that law whereby a work of art, of whatever kind, sets us in the same state of mind wherein the artist was, when he made it." When we read, we select the writer as our society for the interim and close the valves of our attention to the outside world. Thus, Dickinson's poem may concern choosing from a society of books, of *ideas,* as well as of related persons. Indeed, one of the few potential losses Dickinson feared was that of the society provided by literature. "Some years ago I had a woe," she wrote to

Joseph Lyman, "the only one that made me tremble. It was a shutting out of all the dearest ones of time, the strongest friends of the soul—BOOKS." Given the Emersonian language of "The Soul Selects Her Own Society," the poem may dramatize the soul selecting—from an "ample nation" of texts—the very essay by Emerson which appears to absorb her attention so exclusively. More generally, the poem may simply portray what *any* act of reading can mean to the soul.

In an Emersonian context, the seemingly ominous image of the last stanza, the decisive closing of "the Valves of her Attention / Like Stone," can also be read as an emphatic example of the process outlined in the first two stanzas. Selecting the "joyful solitude" of an Emersonian communion with what is kindred to it, the Soul need by no means become permanently sealed off in a tomb-like world or frozen in a static posture. The closed valves, after all, are only valves of *attention;* their stone-like closure emphasizes the "weight," the certainty, of the act of selection, not merely, as the image is commonly read, the "entombment" of the selective soul. Furthermore, the past perfect tense the speaker uses in the last stanza—"I've known her"—indicates that these valves have closed before; the selection process depicted in the present tense in the first stanza may thus be one in a series of ongoing selections, part of the progressive gathering process Emerson perceives as defining and refining one's genius. The image itself suggests that an alternation takes place; like the valves of the heart, the Soul's valves of attention can both open and close—a way of controlling the flow of related persons, ideas, and events for consideration by memory and the poetic talents. The valves of attention have the potential to be, in Emerson's terms, "the obedient spiracle of your character and aims," singly admitting only those whose kinship intimately aligns them with the Soul in a reciprocal relationship. The intimacy of another related mind, Emerson notes, is like "blood in our proper veins." The process of self-education is couched in a similar metaphor: "There is no teaching until the pupil is brought into the same state or principle in which you are; a transfusion takes place: he is you and you are he; then is a teaching." The Soul's selection, then, instead of creating a heart of stone, a death-like stasis, or a willful solipsism, may actually be preparing it for a "teaching" that paradoxically brings a transfusion from the world outside.

Although the emphasis in "Spiritual Laws" is on the selection process as the key to the discovery and cultivation of one's talent, Emerson goes on to establish that process as complementary to an "active" engagement with the world at large: "I see action to be good, when the need is, and sitting still to be also good.... The fact that I am here, certainly shows me that the soul has need for an organ here. Shall I not assume the post?" Emerson implies that the soul should move into contact with the larger world and ultimately into action. "Besides, why should we be cowed by the name of Action?" he asks. "'Tis a trick of the senses,—no more. We know that the ancestor of every action is a thought." Nonetheless, such an attempt to redeem the seemingly passive refreshment of joyful solitude by spurring the soul into "action" is almost immediately balanced (in typical Emersonian fashion) by the pronouncement "To think is to act." In Dickinson's poem, shutting the valves of attention, a concentration of the Soul's focus, is an active rather than a passive process. If it involves withdrawal from other claimants to the Soul's "attention," it also appears to enable the act of writing, the poet's way of interacting with the world.

In the context of Emerson's essay, then, this poem can be seen as a dramatization of a non-solipsistic, active process by which the soul concentrates on, and grows through, "Society" with another, either directly or through "the company of books." In particular, Dickinson selects Emerson himself as the "One" of her society, temporarily concentrating his ideas about the connection between spiritual laws and self-reliance within the valves of her poetic attention. Although her Soul explores such relations in seclusion, its selectivity, as Emerson asserts in "Spiritual Laws," necessarily links it to other souls with similar affinities and makes possible its own unfolding. Dickinson's poem, in other words, offers more than a defense of reclusiveness, self-reliance, or exclusive friendships. Using Emerson as a framework and as a subject, it defines and defends the act of poetic creation—her calling—as a selective concentration that measures, in relative solitude, particular moments in her Soul's conversation with her own society.

Source: Robert M. Luscher, "An Emersonian Context of Dickinson's 'The Soul Selects Her Own Society'" in *ESQ: A Journal of American Renaissance,* Vol. 30, No. 2, Second Quarter, 1984, pp. 111–116.

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For Further Study

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This is a very clear and thorough biography, filled with details about every aspect of the poet's life.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

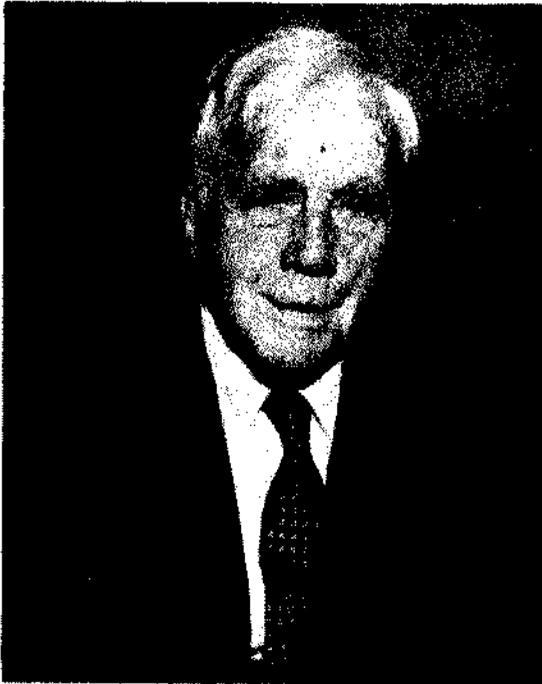
Robert Frost

1923

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," one of Robert Frost's most well-known poems, was published in his collection called *New Hampshire* in 1923. This poem illustrates many of the qualities most characteristic of Frost, including the attention to natural detail, the relationship between humans and nature, and the strong theme suggested by individual lines. In this poem, the speaker appears as a character. It is a dark and quiet winter night, and the speaker stops his horse in order to gaze into the woods. The speaker projects his own thoughts onto the horse, who doesn't understand why they have stopped; there's no practical reason to stop. The woods are ominously tempting and acquire symbolic resonance in the last stanza, which concludes with one of Frost's often-quoted lines, "miles to go before I sleep." One interpretation of this stanza is that the speaker is tempted toward death which he considers "lovely, dark and deep," but that he has many responsibilities to fulfill before he can "sleep."

Author Biography

Born in San Francisco, Frost was eleven years old when his father died, and his family relocated to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where his paternal grandparents lived. In 1892, Frost graduated from Lawrence High School and shared valedictorian



Robert Frost

honors with Elinor White, whom he married three years later. After graduation, Frost briefly attended Dartmouth College, taught at grammar schools, worked at a mill, and served as a newspaper reporter. He published a chapbook of poems at his own expense, and contributed the poem "The Birds Do Thus" to the *Independent,* a New York magazine. In 1897 Frost entered Harvard University as a special student, but left before completing degree requirements because of a bout with tuberculosis and the birth of his second child. Three years later the Frosts' eldest child died, an event which led to marital discord and which, some critics believe, Frost later addressed in his poem "Home Burial."

In 1912, having been unable to interest American publishers in his poems, Frost moved his family to a farm in Buckinghamshire, England, where he wrote prolifically, attempting to perfect his distinct poetic voice. During this time, he met such literary figures as Ezra Pound, an American expatriate poet and champion of innovative literary approaches, and Edward Thomas, a young English poet associated with the Georgian poetry movement then popular in Great Britain. Frost soon published his first book of poetry, *A Boy's Will* (1913), which received appreciative reviews. Following the success of the book, Frost relocated to Gloucestershire, England, and directed publication of a second collection, *North of Boston* (1914). This volume contains several of his most frequently anthologized pieces, including "Mending Wall," "The Death of the Hired Man," and "After Apple-Picking." Shortly after *North of Boston* was published in Great Britain, the Frost family returned to the United States, settling in Franconia, New Hampshire. The American editions of Frost's first two volumes won critical acclaim upon publication in the United States, and in 1917 Frost began his affiliations with several American universities as a professor of literature and poet-in-residence. Frost continued to write prolifically over the years and received numerous literary awards as well as honors from the United States government and American universities. He recited his work at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and represented the United States on several official missions. Though he received great popular acclaim, his critical reputation waned during the latter part of his career. His final three collections received less enthusiastic reviews, yet contain several pieces acknowledged as among his greatest achievements. He died in Boston in 1963.

Poem Summary

Line 1:

In this opening stanza, the setting is clarified as a winter evening in a rural environment. The speaker desires to watch snow fall quietly in some woods. While these woods belong to someone, that person is not present and so will not protest if the speaker trespasses.

Media Adaptations

- An audio record titled "Robert Frost Reads the Poems of Robert Frost" was released in 1957 by Decca.
- A video titled *Robert Frost,* part of the Poetry America Series, is available through AIMS Media.
- *Robert Frost,* a videocassette from volume 3 of the Voices and Visions Series, is available from Mystic Fire Video.
- A 1958 interview with Robert Frost is available on video cassette from Zenger.

Lines 5-8:

The speaker emphasizes that he has no practical reason to stop, that he is stopping for the beauty of the scene only. However, in line 8, an element of darkness appears, which can indicate that all is not well. Because the speaker also emphasizes the cold with "frozen lake," readers begin to understand that the poem may not be a simple lighthearted celebration of nature.

Lines 9-12:

Although this stanza begins with an auditory image, the shaking of the harness bells, the greater emphasis of the stanza is on silence. Although the speaker can hear the "easy wind," such a sound is gentle, nearly as silent as the falling of the snow. The slight alliteration in line 11, "sound's the sweep," mimics the sound of of this wind.

Lines 13-14:

In this stanza, the speaker emphasizes his attraction to the unknown and perhaps the dangerous. He is tempted to go farther into the woods which are "lovely" but are also "dark and deep." He can't, however, lose himself in these woods because he has obligations to fulfill. Here, his life in a social community conflicts somewhat with his desire for communion with nature.

Lines 15-16:

The repetition of this line as the conclusion to the poem indicates that the idea contained in it is highly significant. Although the speaker may literally have "miles to go," the line also functions as a metaphor. He has much life to live before he can "sleep" permanently in a "dark and deep" woods. These lines suggest that although death may at times be more attractive than life to the speaker, he is nevertheless determined to choose life. The tone of the lines, however, may also indicate that the speaker is resigned to life but not necessarily enthusiastic about it.

Themes

Beauty

This poem presents nature as a standard of beauty that is so strong that it captures the speaker's attention and makes him or her halt whatever they are doing. There are not many descriptive words used to convey what it is that the speaker finds so beautiful, only "lovely," "dark" and "deep." Of these, "lovely" simply restates the whole idea of the poem, which most readers would already have gotten a sense of from the speaker's tone and actions. The darkness of the woods is an idea so important that it is mentioned twice in this poem, emphasizing a connection between beauty and mystery. The emphasis on darkness is strange, and more obvious because the poem takes place on a snowy evening, when the dominant impression would have been the whiteness blanketing everything. Some reviewers interpret the fascination with darkness as a death wish, which Frost discounted. By using light and dark imagery and having his speaker favor the dark, Frost leads the reader toward an aesthetic judgement about nature: that it is fascinating precisely for the things that humans do not understand, for the depths that consciousness cannot penetrate. The beauty of this scene is, of course, not registered by the horse, whom the poem shows to be impatient. Once again, the poem shows beauty to exist in the tension between understanding and non-understanding, which the horse does not have the mental capacity to appreciate.

The only other indication of beauty this speaker experiences is the silence of nature—"the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake." Of course, wind can be heard, but an "easy" wind would just barely be perceptible; there is nothing audible about snowflakes unless they are hard and frozen, not "downy" like soft feathers. By bringing attention

Topics for Further Study

- Write a short story about the owner of the woods finding this poem's speaker. Why is he out in the woods, instead of at his house in the village? Would he be angry? Would he befriend the poem's speaker?
- Describe the horse's life: why is he so uneasy about being out in the woods, with no farmhouse around? What does he do day after day, if this is so unsettling?
- Why is this poem's last line repeated? What does this tell you about what has gone on before?

to these nearly unmeasurable sounds, the poem offers us another standard for beauty. The deep dark woods do not present any appreciable pattern and the hushed blowing snow presents no melody: the source of nature's beauty lies in its mystery, not its familiarity.

Return to Nature

With sadness, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" examines just how difficult it has become in the modern world for man to stay in touch with nature. The poem is made up of contrasting images of the natural and the man-made: the woods and the village, the farmhouse and the lake, even the horse and the harness-bells. The speaker is enchanted with the things of nature, but is constantly reminded of human things, and, after a few minutes of giving in to the enchantment, decides with regret that this return to nature cannot last. In this poem humanity is represented not just by objects but by the concept of ownership. The first two words focus attention on an absent character about whom we only find out two things: that he lives in the village, away from nature, and that he owns the woods. It is the irony of this, that the owner does not appreciate what he has, that establishes the poem's mood. Man, it tells us, is wasteful.

One of the most striking things about this piece is that the human and the animal appear to exchange their values. The horse is the one who is in a hurry, who needs a place of business—a farmhouse—in order to make sense of their brief stop. It is the human who is able to temporarily put aside the idea of property ownership and destination and to appreciate the moment. The horse is impatient, the human tranquil. This shows us how completely the horse has been brought into the human world, indicating the completeness of nature's transformation to mankind's uses. Other works of literature, such as Thoreau's *Walden*, show us people casting aside their social lives in order to live with nature, but in the world presented here a brief unplanned visit with nature is all that is possible.

Duty and Responsibility

The speaker of this poem has "promises to keep," and regardless of what these promises are or who they were made to they have to be fulfilled. Obviously, the scene in the wood is important to this person, who is practically hypnotized by the falling snow. Another observer might feel that experiencing this unexpectedly beautiful scene is more important than anything, including promises, or that they are not responsible for doing what they promised because they did not know, at the time the promise was made, that this snowfall in the wood would be so attractive. Promises are broken every day by people who find some reason to forgive themselves. The speaker of this poem loves the snowfall's beauty enough to be distracted by it, but even more than that he or she values keeping a promise. The repetition of the final two lines gives us an indication of how this person feels about the responsibilities that lie ahead: they are not frightening or unpleasant, they are just tedious, involving travel, lack of sleep, and numbing repetition. Unenthusiastic about obligations but enthusiastic about the snowfall, this speaker nevertheless lives up to the promises that were made.

Style

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is written in iambic tetrameter. "Iambic" means that each metrical foot contains two syllables, an unstressed one followed by a stressed one. "Tetrameter" means that each line contains four metrical feet. So a poem written in iambic tetrameter would contain a total of eight syllables in each line. This idea will become clearer if we scan a line, or diagram the meter:

Of easy wind and downy flake.

When the line is scanned, it will look like this:

Of **eas** / y **wind** / and **down** / y **flake** .

Such metrical patterns generally make poetry sound more musical. Occasionally, a line will vary from the established pattern, which often emphasizes the importance of that line.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" also relies on rhyme to achieve some of its music. For the first three stanzas, the rhyme scheme is consistent. Its pattern is *aaba bbcb ccdc*. The fourth stanza, however, rhymes every line with d. This means that in the first stanza, lines one, two, and four rhyme with each other, with line three ("here") seeming odd. However, in stanza two, lines one, two, and four rhyme with "here," while the rhyme on line three, "lake," is picked up in stanza three. Such a pattern links the stanzas together and indicates that the ideas contained in the stanzas are strongly related.

Historical Context

"Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" was first published in 1923, when the pace of social growth was in the process of breaking out into a gallop. In all areas of life, new ways of looking at established ideas suddenly rose up and challenged tradition. In literature, old formal structures were redefined by the writings of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and T.S. Eliot; in art, Dadaism was a short-lived revolution but Cubism arrived to stay; mainstream architects started using the revolutionary ideas of Frank Lloyd Wright; and musicians including Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet invented America's indigenous music, jazz. The ideas of Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein were not just the business of intellectuals anymore, but were discussed openly at dinner tables and in magazines on the grocer's rack. This sudden breakout pace of social change would naturally make people uncomfortable if they were used to slower times. Many readers probably felt like the narrator of "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" who takes a few quiet moments with nature before going on to fulfill obligations.

Often, discussions about the flood of new ideas in the 1920s will focus attention on the end of World War I in 1919. More than any war that came before it, this war made people question the value of human existence, as advances in long-range weaponry and in vehicles to shift troops quickly across long distances, and the first use of airplanes for combat, expanded the scope of human experience while crushing individual lives. As a result, many of the literary figures of the 1920s are said to have felt a sense of alienation, as if the tie between their individual lives and the world in general had been severed. This made it easy for them to break with tradition. American artists in particular became even more alienated when they found they could live much more cheaply in France than they could at home because the American dollar kept rising: in 1919 a dollar bought eight francs, in 1923 it was worth sixteen, and by 1926 it bought twenty-five francs. Separated from the American tradition, these artists could look at their country more objectively, and many chose a new style to express this new view. Robert Frost, who had lived in England from 1912 to 1915 when his literary career was just getting started, may have been able to get a clearer look at American values from that distance, but it did not lead him to a revolution in style. The words he wrote about poet Edward Arlington Robinson in 1935 were equally true about Frost himself—that he "stayed content with the old-fashioned way to be new."

Another type of alienation that became commonly known by mainstream Americans in the 1920s was the Marxist idea of "alienation of labor." Since the last decades of the nineteenth century, the world had become increasingly industrialized, which meant that a generation that had grown up on farms, as Frost had, was now for the most part living in cities. For workers who made their livings in factories, this meant selling their time to their employers during working hours. For intellectuals, it meant that society valued a factory over a stream or a meadow, because the factory provided jobs. Writers pointed out the double disgrace of workers who trampled nature while selling their own lives away for twelve or fourteen hours a day. The Russian revolution of 1917 was seen as a triumph for Communism, and it gave laborers hope that the trend of having power collect in the hands of a few rich men could be reversed, so that people could control their own destinies. In the 1920s, Communist organizations flourished across America, as did all labor unions and workers' organizations. Some of these groups were radical and supported violent means for changing the government, but most, such as the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, worked within the system and are still influential today.

Popular media still refer to that decade as "the Roaring Twenties," offering images of a faster

Compare & Contrast

- **1923:** The Soviet Union came into existence, expanding the Communist empire established by the Russian revolution of 1917.

  1945: With the defeat of the Axis powers in World War II, the Soviet Union became one of the world's two superpowers, along with the United States.

  1990: The Soviet Union disbanded after member nations demanded independence.

  Today: Most former Soviet Union countries belong to the Commonwealth of Independent States: civil wars over property rights of ethnic factions break out frequently.

- **1923:** Approximately 42 percent of the land in the United States was farmland; approximately 30 percent of the population lived on farms, down from 41 percent at the turn of the century.

  1940: 46.8 percent of U.S. acreage was farmland; 23.2 percent of the population lived on farms.

  1960: 49.5 percent of U.S. acreage was farmland; 8.7 percent of the population lived on farms.

  1980: 44.8 percent of U.S. acreage was farmland: 2.7 percent of the population lived on farms.

  Today: Machinery and bioengineering make it possible to grow greater amounts of produce in smaller spaces with fewer employees.

paced city life increasingly controlled by automobiles and violent organized crime. To an extent, this perception is true. There were four automobiles on the road in the U.S. in 1895; in 1920 there were eight and a quarter million; by 1927 that number had doubled. The factories needed to build these machines bought people from farms and other countries to the cities. With liquor outlawed by Prohibition from 1919 to 1933, there were great profits to be made in illegally providing liquor, and the criminals who did this could only protect their profits from each other by violent means. The popular imagination focuses on the flashy, exciting images of the 1920s, but it usually misses the discomfort people felt when they saw the peaceful countryside slipping away. Robert Frost captures this mood in "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Critical Overview

Because it is so well known, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has received significant critical attention, generally positive. Writing in *The Virginia Quarterly Review,* James M. Cox states that this poem contains "haunting rhythms" which are formed partly by the "logic of the rhyme scheme." This rhyme scheme, he says, "is an expression of the growing control and determination" of the speaker. John T. Ogilvie, in his article in the *South Atlantic Quarterly,* suggests that the poem becomes richer with each reading. It has, he says, "a disconcerting way of deepening in dimension as one looks at it, of darkening in tone." A poem which might initially seem simply to describe a natural scene becomes more ominous as the reader becomes more attentive.

John C. Kemp, in his book, *Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist,* also believes the poem is successful in part because of its structure. Here, "we find restraint, economy, and gracefully tuned cadences," he says. In this passage, Kemp is suggesting that Frost is able to use language skillfully, that he is able to draw several levels of meaning from each word and line, and that he is able to do so attractively.

Criticism

Jhan Hochman

Jhan Hochman is a freelance writer and currently teaches at Portland Community College,

Portland, OR. In the following essay, Hochman maintains that the apparent simplicity of this popular, well-known poem invites overanalysis of its meaning.

Perhaps no poem of Robert Frost is more anthologized and studied than "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The poem appeared in Frost's collection, *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes* (1923) for which he won one of four Pulitzer Prizes. Even Frost called the poem his "best bid for remembrance." "Stopping," describes an unremarkable moment: a driver stopping his horse-drawn buggy to look at the woods, his horse shaking the harness bells which the driver thinks is the horse's way of saying, "There must be some mistake," and the driver deciding it is time to move on. It is not known who the person is, nor whether male or female. Neither is it known from where or to where the driver is going, nor why, and the promises the driver must keep also go unexplained. Finally no clue is supplied as to where this scene takes place. Here then, is a poem that functions as a perfect vehicle upon which to heap meaning, since, one is likely to think, the mere situation of stopping and looking at woods surely cannot be all there is to the poem. The reader feels compelled to read into and perhaps even overread the poem. Frost complained that the poem was overinterpreted, especially when critics remarked that "sleep" probably meant death. Still Frost should be expected of some good-natured trickery here: the poem seems deliberately fashioned to lure its readers into either a simplistic underreading or an anxious overreading. The poem itself comes to function like the "lovely" woods it describes: one is either prone to simply drive by and regard the snowy woods as if a beautiful landscape painting or photograph, or, on the other hand, tempted to plunge into the woods, become overwhelmed by the "forces" or the "deeper meanings" of the forest.

Just imagine four possible (over)readings of the poem. First, the driver contemplates the purity of life without sin (snow), but decides one must move on—spurred on by the bestial horse—before living as sinless a life as if one were sleeping or dead. Or the interpretation can be just the opposite: the reader contemplates a fallen nature represented by the woods and wants to indulge in sin, but at the last moment is reined in by the harnessed horse. Third: the driver contemplates the coldness of the snow and is tempted to give up all relationships and become a hermit, but the horse reminds the driver of another presence-in-need and the driver is reminded that a world of relationships is crucial. Fourth, the driver is suicidal since it is the "darkest evening" of the year and wants to walk out into the snowy, dark and deep woods and perish. But the living and dependent horse calls him back with a shake of the harness bells. There are, of course, many more possible interpretations, for instance, the driver resists the siren song of the contempla-

What Do I Read Next?

- Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is an American classic and was one of Frost's favorite books, which he reread often throughout his lifetime. Like this poem, it deals with a time the author left society for the New England forest, except that in Thoreau's case it was not for a few minutes but for a few years. New editions have consistently been published since the first printing in 1854.
- To explore the directions that more experimental poets such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams were taking poetry into in the 1920s, see Stanley K. Coffman's *Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry*. Published in 1951 and reprinted in 1972, this book scarcely mentions Frost, but gives theoretical and biographical information about his peers that makes Frost's individualism come into focus.
- In *Robert Frost Himself,* Stanley Burnshaw draws on personal reflections of conversations, documents, letters, and the author's poems to present his biography. Much of this is thorough and interesting, although sometimes Burnshaw goes a little too far to rescue Frost's image from remarks made by the poets official biographer, Lawrence Thompson. Published in 1986.
- Cleanth Brooks was one of this century's most respected literary critics and theorists. His 1939 book *Modern Poetry and the Tradition,* revised in 1967, explains the complexity of Frost's poetry and places it in the context of the poets who preceded him and his peers.

tive life in nature and chooses a life of responsibility and activity in culture. But whatever the interpretation, the question is, if reading after reading can be spun out, what is the point?

On the other hand it can be decided that if the poem can be read in almost any fashion it becomes meaningless. Adopting one interpretation then seems like the superior way in which to come to terms with "Stopping." The interpretation most likely to result is the one that best fits what the reader might think in a similar situation. Or, with research into Frost, one might adopt the reading that best fits with Frost's outlook and sensibilities even if it grates against one's own.

Problems, however, exist with either strategy. With the multiplication of interpretations, the poem turns into a runny and complicated mush. On the other hand, if only one "best" explanation is settled for, the poem turns into a thin broth fit only for fragile intestinal tracts. Instead of settling for either the overly processed concoction or decoction of Frost's poem, it might be better to distance ourselves a little bit, study *how* it is the poem lures the reader into (and here I switch metaphors) either using the poem like an old, nicked-up knife, employing it for almost any kind of job, even tasks for which it is ill-suited, or, conversely, seldom "using" it, as if the poem were some marble bust on a pedestal in an alcove. Frost wished that poems would be studied more as performances or processes and less used or regarded as finished objects. This means attempting to understand why the poem has the shape it does, and contains the words it contains, all for the purpose of finding out in what ways the poem best functions. This may be the preferable solution to dealing with an object that will serve us and it better by using it as neither a universal tool nor a fragile and expensive museum piece.

Within a horizon of rather traditional formal limitation based on the number four, that is, iambic tetrameter (four beats or pairs of syllables consisting of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable) in four stanzas of four-lines each, Frost chiselled out for "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" an ingenious form of interlocking rhyme: the third unrhymed line of the first three stanzas provokes the subsequent stanza's rhymed sound. Further, Frost repeated the last two lines of the poem partially as a matter of form: "What it [the repetend or repeated lines] does is save me from a third line promising another stanza .... I considered for a moment four of a kind in the last stanza but that would have made five including the third in the stanza before it. I considered for a moment winding up with a three line stanza. The repetend was the only logical way to end such a poem." What results is a satisfying presentation of traditional form with an individual variation demanded by the poem's own structure. Upon a foundation of tradition, Frost erected a canny interlocking rhyme scheme, upon which he attached a consistent and efficient way of solving a formal problem—so elegant is Frost's solution of the repetend for an ending, that its formal perfection is likely to go unnoticed even as it attracts us with its peaceful, sleeplike repetition. The four stanzas, the four lines per stanza with four beats in each line, and the four end-rhymes yield a kind of rational object, one made of straight lines that produces a kind of box-like or grid structure. Such a structure can remind one of conventionality, of a person who does the usual or the normal, as when someone says, "He's square," or "She's straight." Frost himself said that "Stopping" illustrated a "commitment to convention." Form, then, appears to be reinforcing content, the fourfold structure lending itself to the driver's decision to move on, to stop dreaming and get back to a world of responsibilities and practicality.

The first stanza sets a rather mischievous tone for the poem. First, worried that the owner of the woods might see him stopping, the driver seems gratified the owner lives in the village. Such meditations are common to an environment in which private property replaces unboundaried nature. Stopping is increasingly called "loitering," "trespassing," or it simply arouses suspicion so that stoppers are self-conscious about stopping. One must, as the police say, "Keep moving," if one is to remain above suspicion. But just when the driver has established his pleasure at being above suspicion, the second stanza establishes the horse's discomfort. It is not the woods that bothers the horse so much, the driver thinks, as the absence of a farmhouse on the "darkest evening of the year." This evening might be the winter solstice on December 22, the longest night of the year. With the scene being so dark and devoid of human presence, the reader might begin to share the horse's, and maybe the driver's, mild discomfort. The third stanza intensifies the solitude of the scene through attention to sound: the only sounds being the momentary shake of harness bells, and the ongoing "easy wind" and softly falling snow. Here the reader might be simultaneously pulled in by the increasing mystery or quiet of the natural scene and the endearing way in which the driver seems to understand or overinterpret his horse's shake. As

abruptly as driver and horse seem to have stopped, however, the driver resolves to go and leave behind this at least somewhat alluring forest, even if the series of adjectives, "lovely, dark, and deep" convey a complex mix of attraction and fear. The reasons for leaving the woods the driver offers are those very unspecific "promises to keep" and "miles to go." It seems like the driver is reticent to give any more information. Fortunately or unfortunately, the driver's laconic reasons are all that readers have to go on. In the end, what Frost produces is a poem that seems to hover in the zone of perfection, a poem that explains nearly everything and nothing at the very same time. In an end that never ends, the very problem with this poem is its perfection, its quality of demanding more and more discussion about something for which discussion seems pointless. As unsatisfactory as it may seem, these woods can neither be penetrated nor left behind; it is simply time to go.

Source: Jhan Hochman, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Steven Monte

Steven Monte is a free-lance writer. In the following essay, Monte reminds us that a familiar poem is not necessarily a well-understood one, and he urges us to pause and reflect on the intricacies that give depth to Frost's famous poem.

With the exception of "The Road Not Taken," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is probably Frost's best-known poem. As with many well-known poems, we may feel that familiarity equals understanding or that a poem we have read or heard enough times can't surprise us anymore. This is especially the case with "Stopping by Woods," which is not only one of the most popular American poems, but is also one written in a clear and seemingly direct style. We might even say that we like the poem precisely because of its simplicity and effortless feel. But as with a person we've been acquainted with for a long time but don't really know, a familiar poem may change when we encounter it in unfamiliar circumstances. Where once we saw only surface and clearly defined qualities, suddenly we see depths and ambiguity. For this to happen with a poem, we often only need to stop and reflect on our experience, like the speaker in Frost's poem. One of the messages of "Stopping by Woods" seems to be just that—pausing and reflecting on experience help us re-enter life with a new understanding and sense of direction.

The plot of "Stopping by Woods" is straightforward: a man (we assume) narrates his experience of driving some sort of horse-drawn vehicle by privately owned woods on a snowy evening. He stops, and then contemplates how strange his halt must seem to the horse, given that it is cold and dark and there is no farmhouse in sight. The horse shakes his harness bell, an action that the man interprets as the animal asking "if there is some mistake." The man then listens to the wind and the snow and ends his account with some remarks on his experience, his responsibilities to the world, and the distance he needs to travel before he sleeps. The story could easily be true—it certainly aims to be "true to life"—but it is hard not to interpret it symbolically. Many readers over the years have felt that the man's journey toward sleep represents life's "journey" toward death, though Frost himself insisted that the last two lines were not an invocation of death. Another popular way of reading the poem is to understand the man's rejection of the woods as an acceptance of social duty and personal responsibility.

But "Stopping by Woods" is a much stranger poem than may appear at first. From the opening lines, we know that the story is being told from the speaker's point of view ("Whose woods these are I think I know"), but we may never bother to consider whom the man is addressing. The addressee of the poem can only be the man himself, who seems to be narrating the events as they occur to him, or thinking "aloud" to himself. This odd, subjective perspective is worth puzzling over, if only because it allows us to see just how self-conscious the man is. Why is he so concerned about being seen stopping by the woods? Is it simply because he fears he will be accused of trespassing on someone else's property? Perhaps he feels guilty that he has temporarily suspended his business and does not wish to be seen or see himself as someone who shirks responsibility. Or it could be that he feels guilty for indulging in a fantasy, for he is attracted to something he feels he should resist. It is hard to say what the woods represent for the man—rest, death, nature, beauty, solitude, oblivion—but it is clear that he feels he should not allow himself to give in to his desire to stay there. There is moreover a sexual dimension to his fantasy: the feminine woods ("lovely, dark and deep") are set against a world of men where promises must be kept—the world of property and business.

Whatever depths "Stopping by Woods" possesses, it gives us the impression of simplicity. How does the poem manage this? Most obviously, its language remains conversational throughout and it

generally avoids twisting around the word order of spoken speech. "Stopping by Woods" also contains only one word with more than two syllables. When the poem does alter the expected word order, as in "Whose woods these are I think I know," the sound and the sense of the line help us forget that there is anything odd going on. We don't feel the line should read "I think I know whose woods these are" because we get the sense that the speaker is expressing the thought as it occurs to him: he is especially concerned with remembering who owns the woods, and he expresses his uncertainty by following his first thought with the phrase "I think I know." The insistent rhythms of the poem—every line except one is exceptionally regular in beating out "ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum"—and the frequent rhymes add to the illusion of simplicity. Caught in the flow of the poem, we tend not to notice that the lines "Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year" neither follow logically from the lines that come before them nor form a complete sentence on their own. Once again, we might feel that we are listening to the thoughts of the speaker. He is situating himself in place ("Between the woods and frozen lake") and time ("The darkest evening of the year"), where "darkest" may imply the "longest" evening of the year, December 22, the winter solstice. By calling the evening "darkest," the man suggests that he has reached a low point or a moment of crisis.

Another reason why "Stopping by Woods" seems simple is that it is structured around many familiar oppositions. A complete list of these oppositions would be unusually long for such a short poem: man and nature, masculine and feminine, emptiness and fullness, business and pleasure, movement and stopping, society and solitude, life and death, activity and sleep, and so on. Such familiar distinctions may make us feel at home in the poem, but they may also be disturbing. The categories either seem too fixed (should we only associate men with activity and business?) or too fluid (which is empty, life or death?). Oppositions also help determine the poem's organization: "Stopping by Woods" constantly alternates between inner thoughts and descriptions of the world outside. Even within its descriptive mode, the poem shifts from the visual details of the first stanza ("He will not see ... To watch his woods") to the sounds of the third stanza ("harness bells ... The only other sound's the sweep"). Meanwhile the second and the fourth stanzas are more reflective. In the second stanza, the man imagines what the horse is thinking. The details of "the woods and frozen lake" may be in the man's line of vision, but they may also be his way of placing the scene on a mental map, just as "darkest evening" may place the day on a mental calendar. The fourth stanza is even more subjective in its description of the woods as "lovely, dark and deep." All of this inward and outward movement and the poem's oppositions make us feel that the man is being pulled in different directions and needs to make a decision.

But before looking at the decision the man makes in the last stanza, it is worthwhile to stop and examine some of the odd features of his descriptions. Why is his horse "little"? Why is the wind "easy" and the flake "downy"? It is not enough to say "because they *are* little, easy, and downy," or even "because they appear that way to the man," for we would still be left wondering why he chose to describe these things and not others. A somewhat more inventive if unkind explanation is that Frost needed to fill up his lines with these adjectives in order to keep the poem's rhythm insistent. But perhaps we can do better. By calling the horse "little," Frost gives us a sense of the smallness of the figures in the landscape. We furthermore sense that the man is not rich and is probably fond of his animal. "Easy" and "downy" may in their own way hint at what the man is feeling. Part of the attraction of the scene seems to lie in its promise of ease and softness, its contrast to the hard world of men.

The description of the woods in the final stanza leads into the strangest and most memorable section of the poem. Why does this last stanza haunt us? It begins innocently enough and even sounds like a cliche: "The woods are lovely." But the vagueness of the description, the pulse of the line, and the repetition of sounds ("dark and deep") suggest that we are entering a kind of dreamworld. The drowsy repetition of "And miles to go before I sleep" completes this effect, and we sense that the poem is enacting what the man is feeling. The poem's close feels satisfying because it deviates from, and then reinforces, patterns that the poem has established earlier. The first three stanzas have rhymes in the first, second, and fourth lines. The third line then rhymes with the first line of the following stanza, helping us feel that all four stanzas connect like links in a chain. But the established rhythms and rhymes are disrupted in the final stanza. The line "But I have promises to keep" is not as rhythmically insistent as the other lines of the poem. It also contains the poem's only three-syllable word, "promises." Just as the man attempts to shake off his dreamy attraction to the woods, we

are brought up short with this jarring line. The last two lines then feel like a fade out, not simply because of the repetition, but due to the return of the rhythm and the absence of a new linking word: all four lines of this stanza rhyme.

The speaker in "Stopping by Woods" "wakes up" to a knowledge of what he must do. He apparently decides to return to the real world and cease his dreaming. He is leaving nature and returning to society, and in so doing makes us feel that there is some irony in the poem's title: he was only "stopping by" nature, as if on a social call. At the beginning of the poem he was unsure ("I think I know"); at the end he has gained some kind of knowledge. We can think of the experience he has by the woods as either a temporary diversion or a recurring moment in his life that helps him go on. In this straight reading of the poem, the man's experience, though forcing him to confront the fact of death and the difficulties of life, consoles him (and the reader) in the end. But if this moment is, or has the potential to be, a recurrent moment in life, the poem may not be as consoling as we first thought. In this dark reading of the poem, we can't be sure whether the man has come to a decision or merely postponed it. He never actually says he has moved on and, if anything, he seems on his way to sleep. Even supposing he does continue on his journey, it is not clear that the road ahead represents a more appealing alternative to the woods. Real life may seem emptier now, and all those familiar oppositions that help us make sense of our lives are open to question. If we equate stopping by woods with reading a poem, we will confront a similar dilemma. As the man's experience should suggest, however, it is not a question of choosing between alternatives so much as it is becoming aware of new possibilities. In looking closely at a poem, we don't cancel our first experience of reading so much as we enrich it and make it more strange.

Source: Steven Monte, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

N. Arthur Bleau

In the following excerpt, Bleau shares his story of meeting Frost and speaking with him about "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Robert Frost revealed his favorite poem to me. Furthermore, he gave me a glimpse into his personal life that exposed the mettle of the man. I cherish the memory of that conversation, and vividly recall his description of the circumstances leading to the composition of his favorite work.

You know—in answer to your question—there is one poem which comes readily to mind; and I guess I'd have to call it my favorite ... I'd have to say "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is that poem.'"

—Robert Frost

We were in my hometown—Brunswick, Maine. It was the fall of 1947, and Bowdoin College was presenting its annual literary institute for students and the public. Mr. Frost had lectured there the previous season; and being well received, he was invited for a return engagement. I attended the great poet's prior lecture and wasn't about to miss his encore—even though I was quartered 110 miles north at the University of Maine. At the appointed time, I was seated and eagerly awaiting his entrance—armed with a book of his poems and unaware of what was about to occur. He came on strong with a simple eloquence that blended with his stature, bushy white hair, matching eyebrows, and well-seasoned features. His topics ranged from meter to the meticulous selection of a word and its varying interpretations. He then read a few of his poems to accentuate his message.

At the conclusion of the presentation, Mr. Frost asked if anyone had questions. I promptly raised my hand. There were three other questioners, and their inquiries were answered before he acknowledged me. I asked, "Mr. Frost, what is your favorite poem?" He quickly replied, "They're all my favorites. It's difficult to single out one over another!"

"But, Mr. Frost," I persisted, "surely there must be one or two of your poems which have a special meaning to you—that recall some incident perhaps." He then astonished me by declaring the session concluded; whereupon, he turned to me and said, "Young man, you may come up to the podium if you like." I was there in an instant.

We were alone except for one man who was serving as Mr. Frost's host. He remained in the background shadows of the stage. The poet leaned casually against the lectern—beckoning me to come closer. We were side by side leaning on the lectern as he leafed the pages of the book.

"You know—in answer to your question—there is one poem which comes readily to mind; and I guess I'd have to call it my favorite," he droned in a pensive manner. "I'd have to say 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' is that poem. Do you recall in the lecture I pointed out the importance of the line 'The darkest evening of the year'?" I acknowledged that I did, and he continued his thoughtful recollection of a time many years before. "Well—the darkest evening of the year is on December twenty-second—which is the shortest day of the year—just before Christmas."

I wish I could have recorded the words as he reflectively meted out his story, but this is essentially what he said.

The family was living on a farm. It was a bleak time both weatherwise and financially. Times were hard, and Christmas was coming. It wasn't going to be a very good Christmas unless he did something. So—he hitched up the wagon filled with produce from the farm and started the long trek into town.

When he finally arrived, there was no market for his goods. Times were hard for everybody. After exhausting every possibility, he finally accepted the fact that there would be no sale. There would be no exchange for him to get a few simple presents for his children's Christmas.

As he headed home, evening descended. It had started to snow, and his heart grew heavier with each step of the horse in the gradually increasing accumulation. He had dropped the reins and given the horse its head. It knew the way. The horse was going more slowly as they approached home. It was sensing his despair. There is an unspoken communication between a man and his horse, you know.

Around the next bend in the road, near the woods, they would come into view of the house. He knew the family was anxiously awaiting him. How could he face them? What could he possibly say or do to spare them the disappointment he felt? They entered the sweep of the bend. The horse slowed down and then stopped. It knew what he had to do. He had to cry, and he did. I recall the very words he spoke. "I just sat there and bawled like a baby"—until there were no more tears.

The horse shook its harness. The bells jingled. They sounded cheerier. He was ready to face his family. It would be a poor Christmas, but Christmas is a time of love. They had an abundance of love, and it would see them through that Christmas and the rest of those hard times. Not a word was spoken, but the horse knew he was ready and resumed the journey homeward. The poem was composed some time later, he related. How much later I do not know, but he confided that these were the circumstances which eventually inspired what he acknowledged to be his favorite poem.

Source: N. Arthur Bleau,"Robert Frost's Favorite Poem," in *Frost: Centennial Essay III*, edited by Jac Tharpe, University Press of Mississippi, 1978 pp. 174–176.

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Cramer gives a brief but thorough background of almost every poem Frost has written. An indispensable guide.

Johnson, Paul, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Eighties*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1983.

Not as fun or interesting to read as Geoffrey Perrett's book listed below, but full of more factual information.

Perrett, Geoffrey, *Americans in the Twenties*, New York: Touchstone Books, 1983.

This book is filled with fascinating anecdotes that bring the decade alive. All aspects of life are covered.

Suchard, Alan, et. al., *Modern American Poetry, 1865-1950*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989.

The author paints a portrait of Frost as a bitter and brilliant man, quite the opposite of the impression one gets of him from his poetry.

Swing Low Sweet Chariot

Anonymous

c. 1850s

"Swing Low Sweet Chariot" is an African-American spiritual, also referred to as a Negro folk song. As a folk song, it is thought to have been created by a community rather than an individual, in this case the community of African-American slaves prior to the Civil War. However, one song collector, John Wesley Work, in his book *Folk Songs of the American Negro,* reported a legend that it was composed by Hannah Shepherd of Tennessee in the mid-nineteenth century. Work recounted that she created it in a desperate moment to solace a distraught slave who had learned that she would be sold to another plantation and thus separated from her infant daughter.

Regardless of whether it originated from one composer or from a whole community, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" was a popular song, sung throughout the South by slaves while they worked and during their occasional times of rest and prayer. The lyrics use biblical imagery and follow a slow, deep melody. They express the desire for a release from bondage and a return to home—geographically, the land of Africa, or spiritually, the peace of heaven. To this day, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" has remained popular, performed by gospel singers throughout the world, imbuing audiences with religious spirituality.

Poem Text

Swing low sweet chariot
Comin' for to carry me home,

Swing low sweet chariot
Comin' for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, an' what did I see,
Comin' for to carry me home,
A band of angels comin' after me,
Comin' for to carry me home.

If you get-a dere befo' I do,
Comin' for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too
Comin' for to carry me home.

Poem Summary

Lines 1-4:

The first stanza consists of two repeated lines that introduce the main image of the poem, a chariot that descends from the sky to carry the speaker home. For some singers and listeners, the chariot may represent the path to freedom offered by organized abolitionists through the Underground Railroad. For others it could symbolize a chariot of the Lord offering transportation for the soul to heaven. This interpretation has its origin in the Bible, which contains descriptions of chariots used in war as well as to transport honored souls, such as the prophet Elijah's, to heaven. Since the chariot in this song is "sweet" it suggests a conveyance to heaven more than to battle in war. "Psalm 68" in the Bible's book of Psalms, for example, depicts God as having thousands of chariots, a sign of his power. In addition to the imagery here, this stanza uses alliteration —the "s" in "swing" and "sweet." This and all of the stanzas exhibit alliteration of the "k" sound in "comin" and "carry," two words from the repeated chorus. The chorus is meant to be sung by a group, whereas the first and third lines of each stanza are intended to be sung by an individual, the spiritual leader.

Lines 5-6:

In the second stanza, the lead voice sings about a group of angels coming from Jordan, the river that flows from the Sea of Galilee through the biblical Holy Land. According to the Bible, a group of Israelites crossed the Jordan River in their quest for the Promised Land. The Jordan is also significant because the Bible indicates that it is the river in which John the Baptist baptized Jesus Christ. And just as the Egyptian slaves had a river to cross in their journey, African slaves who escaped often did so by crossing the Ohio River to the North, where slavery was illegal.

Lines 7-8:

The word "band" suggests strength, as in the expression "to band together," meaning to join forces. "Band" also implies an unbreakable union in the image of a circular construction, a hoop-like form. Lastly, "band" calls up images of music from the definition of an ensemble of musicians. In the Bible, "angels" deliver messages for God. They assist, protect and deliver those faithful to the Lord. Altogether, this stanza (lines 5-8) evokes the idea deliverance and acceptance by the Lord, a theme taught in the Bible and one that the American slaves personalized in their desire for freedom. In addition to the imagery, this stanza, like the chorus, uses alliteration: the "m" and "n" sounds in "Jordan," "an'," "comin," "me," "home," "band," and "angels." The frequency of these sounds gives a very soothing, melodious quality to the lyrics.

Lines 9-12:

In the final stanza, the singers express an optimistic determination to reach home, the land of literal or spiritual freedom. The lead singer tells the audience that, should they be liberated first, they should tell the singer's friends that he or she will join them too. The suggestion that the singer will join his or her friends works in both the metaphorical and spiritual interpretation of the song. If the listener thinks of the song as an expression of hope for liberation from slavery, then the friends would be those slaves who have already escaped. If the song expresses the slaves' wish to enter heaven, then the friends would be those whose souls have already ascended. Wherever the destination, the song succeeds in conveying an unwavering hope that the singers will successfully join their friends. The frequency of the chorus, sung every third and last line in each stanza, has the effect of affirming this promise that the "chariot" will indeed carry its singers "home."

Themes

Religion

The figure of a god riding across the sky in a chariot goes back to Greek mythology, in which Apollo was said to ride the sun as a chariot over the earth during the daylight hours. It is an image of heaven's magnificence, combining the chariot, which symbolized the wealth and power enjoyed by a king, with the superhuman power of flight. The heavenly chariot can also represent trouble for

mankind, as in ancient images of Zeus, king of the Greek gods, driving his chariot with one hand and hurling thunderbolts at the earth with the other. In this poem, the chariot is welcome; the speaker specifies that it is coming to carry him or her "home." Here we are shown the Christian belief that heaven is one's natural home, and that life on this earth is just a temporary displacement. This belief is always particularly strong among oppressed people, such as slaves. In the South, slaves were told by the law that this was not their home but the home of their owners—that even people born in America had no home of their own on earth. Religious belief is a natural reaction for people who are powerless to fight against their oppressors. In some ways, this is seen as a negative thing, because it keeps people from fighting for their rights, but the benefit is that it makes an intolerable situation tolerable.

Often in Negro spirituals and folklore, blacks are portrayed as God's chosen people and are thus identified with the Israelites of the Old Testament, who also were kept in slavery, watched over by God, and finally led to freedom. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt: in biblical times, the border to that land was the River Jordan, which feeds the Red Sea. According to the Bible, Moses parted the Red Sea in leading the Israelites to freedom. Spirituals were sung about such Old Testament heroes as Joshua, Noah, Solomon, and Daniel; they always related the ancient stories in some way to the suffering that the singers felt. The most obvious interpretation of this poem is that it is about God and a band of angels coming to end the speaker's worldly suffering with death and take him or her off to heaven.

Freedom

It is a matter of record that Negro slaves, who could not sing openly about the desire to escape to freedom, would disguise this theme in their songs. In this poem, the phrase "carry me home," which seems to clearly indicate a trip to the afterlife, can be read as having a double meaning. In the central stanza the band of angels is seen coming across the River Jordan: like the Mississippi River in theUnited States, the Jordan ran up the middle of the Biblical world. From north of the Sea of Galilee down to the Dead Sea, towns within twenty miles of the Jordan's banks include Nazareth, Jericho, Pella and Jerusalem. The legend of Moses has him part the Red Sea, which is just a swelling of the River Jordan, in leading the Chosen People to freedom.

Northern states recognized some rights of Negroes, although they could still be sent back to the plantations they had escaped from if they were caught. It was possible to escape to Canada and live outside U.S. laws; the Underground Railroad was a network of travel modes and hiding places set up by people who sympathized with slaves and wanted to help them escape. It is therefore understandable that, while working in the fields, slaves would sing about someone coming to take them to the land of freedom. It is equally understandable that they would not want to sing openly about their desires and stir up the anger of the slave drivers. The spirit of hope in this song was less threatening to the slave owners if they could interpret it as a hope for life after death and not as a hope for escape.

Identity

This poem is not just about the death or liberation of an individual person, but of an entire people, who are referred to with the personal pronoun "I." The first indication of this is that the line "Comin' for to carry me home" is repeated, just like the repeated lines in the call-and-response structure of work songs, in which the group sings the refrain together. Also, the fact that the written form of the poem has retained the dialect of the nineteenth-century, southern Negro indicates that this piece is meant to capture the feelings of an entire culture. Finally, the last stanza's emphasis on

Topics for Further Study

- Write your own lyrics, describing what you will be doing when the modern equivalent of the Chariot—a Rolls Royce, a Cessna plane, or whatever you choose—comes for to carry you to the afterlife.
- Choose the lyrics to a contemporary song that you think will still be in the poetry books a hundred years from now. Explain what you think about these lyrics is memorable and what they will tell people of the future about our culture.
- Why do you think the phrase "Comin' for to carry me home" comprises half of this piece? Why have those who wrote the song down left the "g" off of "coming"?

the speaker meeting his or her friends when arriving "home" tells us that the freedom being sung of will not just be for an individual, but for everyone.

Style

As pointed out by John Wesley Work in his book *American Negro Songs and Spirituals,* African-American songs often retain forms that originated in African tribal customs. "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" belongs to the largest group, a class of spirituals that use the African "call and response chant form." Work described it as "interesting as well as distinctive. Its feature is a melodic fragment sung repeatedly by the chorus as an answer to the challenging lines of the leader which usually change." The chorus, "Comin' for to carry me home," repeats every second and fourth line of each stanza. It was intended to be sung by a group in answer to an individual voice that sings the first and third lines of each stanza. This repetition not only provides structure for the song, it also enables the lyrics to be easily remembered. Another aid to memory exists in the rhymes that occur at the end of the first and third lines in each stanza: "chariot" with itself, "see" with "me," and "do" with "too."

Historical Context

"Swing Low Sweet Chariot" is a spiritual song in the style developed by American Negro slaves during the nineteenth century. Although there is no one particular author associated with these lyrics, the style is clearly recognizable, and all of the individual elements that we can see in this poem are easy to trace back to slave experiences. First is the repetition of the refrain on every even-numbered line. This pattern goes back to work songs which were sung by slaves since their arrival in America, with written records going back to the 1600s. The purpose for this call-and-response pattern was to allow the group to participate by singing the refrain while a solo singer could add various lines to compliment the basic thought. Slaves were encouraged to sing while working, because singing kept them moving in a regular pattern, and this made their work progress tirelessly without interruption—like clockwork. The connection between motion and music was itself a cultural tradition well-established in the slaves' native Africa. Several scholars, including the well-known poet, novelist, and historian James Weldon Johnson, have traced the spiritual's roots back to the African *ring-shout,* a traditional practice during which the participants would dance in a circle for hours, closing the ring as exhausted members dropped out and clapping and stamping in rhythm.

While spirituals owe their basic structure to the work songs of slaves, they owe at least as much to Christian hymns. Starting in the eighteenth century, a concerted effort was made to convert slaves to Christianity, and Biblical themes began showing up in songs that were about the slaves' social condition. One famous source in particular was a collection of hymns compiled by Dr. Isaac Watts and published in 1707. This hymnal was familiar to Negroes in the North, who worshipped in separate churches from whites and who would, therefore, have had the opportunity to alter the words to fit their own experiences. In the South, blacks became familiar with the hymns that had been handed down from European roots through religious services at outdoor, travelling camp meetings, which were also segregated from white gatherings. Throughout the 1800s, more and more songs combining Christian themes with the work song call-and-response structure appeared. Unlike traditional white hymns, which tended to emphasize moral themes such as good and evil, right and wrong, the Negro spirituals focused on the aspect of Christianity that promised salvation from suffering. The Old Testament of the Bible offered slaves a direct reference to a time when God's chosen people were slaves, while the New Testament focused upon the humanitarian principles of Jesus, expressed in the Sermon on the Mount as "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last." There is, in fact, some dispute among scholars about whether the optimism expressed in "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" is a hope for salvation in the afterlife or anticipation of leaving slavery and escaping to the North. The mention of angels might indicate that the poem intends "home" to mean heaven, but former slaves, included noted author Frederick Douglass, have noted that slaves could not openly mention hopes about freedom, so they hid their hope, even though everybody recognized the hidden meaning when they sang these songs.

The musical structure that developed from African chants to work songs to spirituals went on to evolve into blues, jazz, and rock-and-roll. Spirituals became known to white audiences in the late 1870s, when George L. White took nine singers from Fisk University in Nashville on a singing tour to raise money. Fisk was the nation's first black university. The tour was an unprecedented success,

Compare & Contrast

- **1863:** The Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln declared that the U.S. government did not recognize the institution of slavery.

  1865: The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution made slavery a crime in the United States.

  1870: Black Americans were given the right to vote by the Fifteenth Amendment.

  1896: In the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson,* the Supreme Court approved of segregation by accepting the concept that facilities for blacks and whites could be "separate but equal."

  1954: The Supreme Court overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine and pushed for immediate desegregation.

  Today: Voters in several states have voted down Affirmative Action measures, which are meant to equalize the opportunities available to all.

- **1861:** A Western Union telegraph line between New York and San Francisco brought an end to the Pony Express letter delivery system.

  1876: Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone.

  1962: The first active communications satellite was placed in orbit.

  1975: The first personal computer, the MITS Altair 8800, was released to the market in kit form.

  Today: Although mostly replaced by faxes and e-mail, personal letters are still written.

- **1861:** Elisha G. Otis patented a steam-powered elevator.

  1890s: Chicago architect Louis Sullivan developed the concept of the high-rise office building, based on new, inexpensive steel production methods and the elevator.

  1931: The Empire State Building in New York was the tallest building at 1250 feet tall.

  1973: Chicago's Sears Tower was built at 1454 feet tall (1707 with antennae).

  Today: The Petronas Towers in Malaysia will be 303 feet taller than the Sears Tower when they are completed.

making the name of the Fisk Jubilee Singers an important name in the development of American music. The melody of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" is known throughout the world and has been incorporated into Anton Dvorak's "New World Symphony," played by a flute in the first movement; similarly, the lyrics are treasured as one of the earliest examples of American folk art.

Critical Overview

In his *Black Song,* John Lovell, Jr., discusses all aspects of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." He considers its origins, structure, interpretations, poetic techniques, recordings, performances, and literary and artistic uses. He refers to studies of African sources for the spiritual, citing a Bantu song, "The Story of Tangalimlibo," and an unnamed Rhodesian song that uses the same refrain and response. Lovell also addresses the theory that one person composed "Swing Low Sweet Chariot"; he quotes the famous scholar H. L. Mencken, who has theorized that probably one poet composed "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." Mencken believes the poet "was one of the greatest poets we have ever produced, and he came so near being our greatest musician that I hesitate to look for a match for him."

Many authorities have analyzed the meaning of the "chariot" and the word "home" in this spiritual. On a metaphoric level, "chariot" may stand for the Underground Railroad—a network of transportation and safe houses that assisted slaves in their escape from Southern plantations—while

"home" would be a destination in the North, away from slavery. Lovell commented that Harriet Tubman, one of the leaders of the Underground Railroad, was nicknamed "Old Chariot." Earl Conrad wrote, "When the enslaved black sang, 'I looked over Jordan and what did I see, Coming for to carry me home,' it was over the Mason-Dixon line that he was looking; the band of angels was Harriet or another conductor coming for him, and 'home' was a haven in the free states of Canada."

Another popular reading of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" casts it as an appeal by the slaves to be returned to Africa, possibly Liberia, an African country founded in 1822 as a home for freed African-American slaves. Musicologist Miles Mark Fisher offered one of the most original interpretations for the chariot, explaining that "a chariot was a French sledlike vehicle used to transport tobacco in the Carolinas.... Slaves wanted a chariot to swing out of the skies from Africa low enough for their souls to mount and to be carried many miles from North America."

Lovell prefers the spiritual interpretation of the song, calling it a "spiritual classic." He admitted, "Of course, the slave could be referring to the Underground Railroad which had taken to glory (free land) many of his friends and fellow workers. Assume he is not. This is one of a family of songs in which a great golden vehicle, powered and directed by God, manned by angels, comes down from heaven through the skies to pick up and elevate a particular individual."

Howard Thurman also strongly supports the spiritual interpretation. He discusses the religious experiences of the slaves, pointing out that in the absence of hope for liberation from slavery, they found comfort in the promise of "release in death" and expressed that comfort in songs such as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." Maude Cuney-Hare supports the religious reading of the spiritual in her discussion of its origin. She refers to the legend that an old black woman in Tennessee created the song to comfort a female slave being parted from her child. The old woman said she sang from the "Lord's scroll" taken off His "chariot." Whatever interpretation is chosen, the listener can hardly help but be moved by the quiet hope expressed in this lasting song.

Criticism

B. J. Bolden

B. J. Bolden is an Assistant Professor of English at Chicago State University, Chicago, IL. She is the managing editor of Warpland: A Journal of Black Literature and Ideas *at Chicago State University and the author of* Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945–1960. *In the following essay, Bolden provides an overview of the themes and form of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and explores the spiritual's relation to African music.*

The Negro spiritual is a religious folk song of African-American slave origin. In terms of formal classification, as Dr. Alain Locke noted in his essay "The Negro Spirituals," they belong to a larger class of four song types that were common in the rural south during slavery: ritual prayer songs or spirituals; the free and spirited evangelical "shouts," or camp-meeting songs; the more secular work and labor songs; and the folk ballad. The Negro spiritual may be likened to the folk ballad in its graphic narrative method and the strongly marked rhythm that is often apparent in the singing, clapping, and swaying of the participants. The spiritual is known for its enduring quality and beauty as well as the overwhelming emotional component that is visible in the epic intensity and the profound tragedy of the songs. In his essay "Of the Sorrow Songs," W. E. B. Du Bois commented that in the Negro spiritual, the "soul of the black slave spoke to men" and that "by fateful chance the Negro folksong—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born on this side of the seas." The assessments of Locke and Du Bois concerning the universal appeal of the Negro spirituals were confirmed by the worldwide acclaim and financial success of the Fisk Jubilee Singers whose artistic renditions of the spirituals, from 1871-1875, netted them $150,000 to build Fisk University.

Yet even in the face of the broad acceptance of the Negro spiritual, the question of origin continues to be the subject of critical scrutiny by folklorists, musicologists, and historians. In his well-known poem "O Black and Unknown Bards," James Weldon Johnson asks: "Heart of what slave poured out such melody / As "Steal away to Jesus," "Roll, Jordan, Roll," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot?" In *The Book of American Negro Spirituals,* Johnson answers his own question: "The Spirituals are purely and solely the creation of the American Negro.... The Negro brought with him from Africa his native musical instinct and talent." Contemporary discussions revolve around the issue of the extent to which the spirituals reflect patterns of African retentions versus the extent to which

What Do I Read Next?

- Alex Haley's 1976 novel *Roots* presents the history of a black family from pre-slavery times up to the present. The sections concerning his slave ancestors are very vividly rendered and give the reader a good sense of what life in plantations was like for slaves.
- Poet, ambassador, and publisher James Weldon Johnson's 1927 volume of poems, *God's Trombones,* is written in the voice that a nineteenth–century preacher would use in addressing a congregation, but unlike the poet in "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," Johnson pointedly refuses to use dialect in spelling words, for reasons explained beautifully in the introduction. The history lesson to be gained from the introduction alone makes this book worth reading.
- W.E.B. du Bois was one of our country's leading African-American intellectuals. His 1961 collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folks,* is a landmark, written with grace and understanding.
- *American Negro Slavery: A Modern Reader,* edited by Allen Weinstein and Frank Otto Gatell and published in its second edition in 1973, is a collection of essays by historians that offers the reader one of the most complete and intelligent overviews ever compiled in one book about what it was like to be a slave.
- In *Moses, Man of the Mountain,* Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neale Hurston's 1939 novel (available in a 1991 reissue), the Biblical story of Moses is retold in the voice of a southern Negro, giving the reader a sense of this story's importance to an enslaved people without addressing the relationship between the two cultures directly.

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they reflect a mere refashioning of southern white thematic and stylistic devices. The answer is twofold: the Negro spiritual contains visible elements of the rhythms and chants of its African ancestry coupled with the melody and harmony of the southern American slavemaster's religious music during and after the Civil War.

The Negro spiritual represents the most basic elements of the survival of African slaves transported to America, derived from the profound emotion emanating from a sorrowful, patient, long-suffering, hard-working, persistent, jubilant, creative, clever, and religious people who regularly emitted the plaintive cry of the wounded and entrapped. The songs illuminate the quality of a people who were metaphorical in their Biblical imagery, even under the harness of slavery, stoic in their vision of ultimate victory over imminent oppression, and clever in their ability to inject their songs with concealed messages of escape. In *The Historical and Cultural Atlas of African Americans,* Molefi K. Asante and Mark T. Mattson catalog the myriad creators of the spiritual who emanated from over 250 groups from various parts of the continent of Africa and were transplanted and enslaved in America. They include the Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa, Fulani, Akan, Ewe, Ga, Wolof, Touculeur, Mande, Sherbro, Luba, Kuba, Dan, Douala, Ibidio, and Edo.

Similar to Asante and Mattson's assessment, specific African conventions have been noted in the Negro spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." In *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame,* John Lovell, Jr. remarked on the presence of African musical transfers to Black American music, especially in the formal structure: the use of the pentatonic, hextatonic, and heptatonic scales; of lowered thirds, raised sixths, and lowered sevenths; of rhythm that dominates metrics; of scale that is ruled by song, rather than song ruled by scale; and, most significantly, the call and response pattern of a lead singer who positions the short choral phrase against the longer melodic line or refrain of a chorus.

For instance, the African convention of call and response is apparent in "Swing Low Sweet Chariot": Leader: Swing low sweet chariot, Congregation: Comin' for to carry me home. Leader:

Swing low sweet chariot, Congregation: comin' for to carry me home. Leader: I look over Jordan, what do I see? Congregation: Comin' for to carry me home. Leader: A band of angels comin' after me, Congregation: Comin' for to carry me home.

Lovell and Mark Fisher both observed that "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" uses the same response and refrain structure as "The Story of Tangalimlibo," a Bantu song from Rhodesia in south central Africa.

Like most Negro spirituals, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," though deceptively simple in theme, content, and form, is thematically rich in its Christian references and signals the sense of victory over despair that was crucial to the physical, emotional, and psychological survival of the slave. The eschatological belief system or "other-world" theology that promises heavenly relief for those who faithfully endure the trials and tribulations of this world is apparent in the opening lines: "Swing low sweet chariot / Comin' for to carry me home." The chariot is the vessel that will transport the weary slave from the sordid world of enslavement to the beauty and freedom in the otherworld of heaven. The spiritual embodies the slave's plaintive response to the alien conditions and experiences that he encountered in America—a new land, a new language, and a new religion—and is informed by his exposure to the Judeo-Christian biblical legacy. As the early African slaves merged into the American plantation system, the spirituals became the emotional release valve that permitted them to sing of their grief, sorrow, and pain. But the slaves were not without hope, and their songs reflect a deep religious commitment, the spirit of ultimate victory over despair and hope as a measure of their faith in transcending the bowels of slavery. As a reward to having braved their earthly enslavement, they looked forward to going to their heavenly home to live with God.

However, there are scholars who pose an alternate explication of Negro spirituals such as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." For instance, abolitionist and ex-slave Frederick Douglass was adamant in his view that the Negro spirituals were not limited to such simplistic Biblical interpretations, but, instead, were encoded with a secret language of escape. Based on that view, the second stanza of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" offers a vastly different interpretation:

I looked over Jordan, an' what did I see, Comin' for to carry me home, A band of angels comin after me, Comin' for to carry me home.

In this view "home" would imply escape from slavery, and the "band of angels" would be representatives from Harriet Tubman's Underground Railroad who would lead groups of slaves north to freedom. This message would be disseminated among slaves as a warning to anticipate escape. What in Biblical terms might be explained as the slave expressing a poignant sense of beauty, a deep religious feeling, and a deep longing for peace would, by contrast, be interpreted as a desperate longing for escape from slavery to freedom. Thus Douglass' view of the language of Negro spirituals such as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" dispels the myth of the contented slave whose religious fervor erased the pain of enslavement. As Du Bois wrote, "Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things."

Source: B. J. Bolden, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Maude Cuny-Hare

In the following essay, Cuny-Hare offers a brief description of the development of this spiritual.

These songs known as Spirituals are the expression of a supreme belief in immortality that transcends mere religious creeds and theoretical dogma. Through them the paganism of African "spirit" songs are reborn and modified by Christian doctrines, and they are the musical expression of spiritual emotion created by the race and not for it.

"Swing Low Sweet Chariot," an American "Negro Spiritual" in the pentatonic scale, noted in *Fisk Jubilee Songs*, 1871, offers a key to this development. The variants of this song are "Good Old Chariot," "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," (Hampton) and "The Danville Chariot." In the first movement of Dvorak's "New World Symphony," in which this theme occurs, it is given out by the flute. The song has been arranged with piano accompaniment by many composers, and transcribed for organ by Carl R. Diton. William Arms Fisher, who has given the melody a setting for solo voice and piano, tells an interesting story about the song, which was told to him by Bishop Frederick Fisher of Calcutta, India, who had recently returned from Central Africa. He relates:

> "Bishop Fisher stated that in Rhodesia he had heard the natives sing a melody so closely resembling "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" that he felt that he had found it in its original form; moreover, the subject

was identical. The tribe of natives that inhabit the region near the great Victoria Falls have a custom from which the song arose. When one of their chiefs, in the old days, was about to die, he was placed in a great canoe together with the trappings that marked his rank, and food for his journey. The canoe was set afloat in midstream headed toward the great Falls and the vast column of mist that rises from them. Meanwhile the tribe on the shore would sing its chant of farewell. The legend is that on one occasion the king was seen to rise in his canoe at the very brink of the Falls and enter a chariot that, descending from the mists, bore him aloft. This incident gave rise to the words 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,' and the song, brought to America by African slaves long ago, became anglicized and modified by their Christian faith."

In America, it is told that the song arose from an incident which happened to a woman sold from a Mississippi plantation to Tennessee. Rather than be separated from her child, she was about to drown herself and little one in the Cumberland River, when she was prevented by an old Negro woman, who exclaimed, "Wait, let de Chariot of de Lord swing low and let me take de Lord's scroll and read it to you." The heart-broken mother became consoled and was reconciled to the parting. The song became known with the passing on of the story, which seems more legendary than real.

Source: Maude Cuny-Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music,* Associated Publishers, 1936, pp. 68–69.

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Cone, James, "The Black Church and Black Power," in *The Black Church in America,* edited by Hart M. Nelsen, Raytha L. Yokley and Anne K. Nelsen, New York: Basic Books, 1971, pp. 335-55.

Cone makes the case that what appeared to be longing for the afterlife in spirituals was actually a covert way talking about freedom in this life.

Harper's Bible Dictionary, edited by Paul G. Achtemeier, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985, pp. 604-5.

This source gives the historical and biblical significance of the River Jordan.

Meier, August, and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto,* third edition, New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.

The explanation of slave life here is interesting in that it puts American slavery into a broad context of other slave countries.

Shaw, Arnold, *Black Popular Music in America,* New York: Schirmer's Books, 1986.

Shaw's first chapter begins with black music being popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Players in 1871 and then traces the Spirituals back to work songs and from there to Africa: the rest of the book traces clear steps from one genre to the next, up to rap and hip-hop.

This Life

Rita Dove

1980

This poem was published in Dove's first complete book of poems, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, in 1980. "This Life," like several other poems in the same collection, grapples with the problem of fantasy versus reality. The speaker sees that "the possibilities" in this life may be impossible, "like golden dresses in a nutshell." As a child, the speaker relates, she "fell in love / with a Japanese woodcut / of a girl gazing at the moon." Further, the speaker confesses, "I waited with her for her lover." Her identification with the imaginary girl is so complete that even now, in this life, the speaker associates the imaginary lover with her present lover: "he had / your face, though I didn't know it." Finally, the speaker concludes that her life and her lover's "will be the same," and that she will remain "a stranger in this desert," this life, though she will continue to try to attain the impossible, "nursing the tough skin of figs."

This poem may also be portraying the difficulty of being a woman, with certain emotional and romantic needs, as symbolized by the image of the moon, in a society dominated by men. In the first stanza, the speaker addresses an unidentified second person when she says, "You tell me the same thing / as that one, / asleep, upstairs." Later, the speaker reveals that this "you" is her lover or husband. The rest of the passage may be a reference to her father or to the cultural concept of a male god, who is "asleep, upstairs." Either way, the meaning is the same—the reality of this life can never measure up to her fantasy of a world of pos-

Rita Dove

sibilities more abundant than this desert, which only produces nuts and figs with tough skins.

Author Biography

Born in 1952 in Akron, Ohio, to well-educated parents, Dove is the daughter of Ray A. Dove, the first African-American chemist to break the racial barrier in the tire and rubber industry, and the former Elvira Elizabeth Hord. An excellent student, Dove was invited to the White House in 1970 as a Presidential Scholar, ranking nationally among the best high school students of the graduating class of that year. She earned a bachelor's degree from Miami University of Ohio in 1973—where she had enrolled as a National Achievement Scholar—and graduated summa cum laude. The following year, Dove studied at West Germany's Tubingen University as a Fulbright scholar. This led to further studies at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. There she met her husband, the German-born writer and journalist Fred Viebahn. In addition to her other achievements, which include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Dove holds the distinction of having been the first African American, as well as the youngest individual, to hold the post of United States Poet Laureate, a position she held from 1993 to 1995. Dove lives with her husband and daughter in Charlottesville, Virginia, where she is Professor of English at the University of Virginia Commonwealth.

Poem Text

The green lamp flares on the table.
You tell me the same thing
as that one,
asleep, upstairs.
Now I see: the possibilities
are like golden dresses in a nutshell.

As a child, I fell in love
with a Japanese woodcut
of a girl gazing at the moon.
I waited with her for her lover.
He came in white breeches and sandals.
He had a goatee—he had
your face, though I didn't know it.
Our lives will be the same—
your lips, swollen from whistling
at danger,
and I a stranger
in this desert,
nursing the tough skin of figs.

Poem Summary

Line 1:

At first glance, this opening line seems to be a simple, declarative sentence, but the images suggest several other possibilities. The green lamp could be a camping lantern—something one takes to illuminate the darkness of the natural world. But this is "on the table," so even if it is intended to be used outside, this lamp is inside. The fact that it "flares" by itself may suggest a flare-up of anger, or it may foreshadow self-enlightenment, or it may suggest something ominous in this scene.

Lines 2-6:

In the second line, the speaker introduces a second unidentified person, who tells the speaker "the same thing / as that one, / asleep, upstairs." Here, a third unidentified person is mentioned. The tone is restrained and guarded. This person could be the speaker's father, or it could refer to the cultural concept of a male god, who is distant and unaware of her plight. In lines 5 and 6, the speaker already has reached a conclusion based on evidence that is hid-

Media Adaptations

- A video cassette titled *Bill Moyers Journal: Poet Laureate Rita Dove* was released in 1994 by Films for the Humanities.
- A video cassette titled *Shine Up Your Words: A Morning With Rita Dove* was released in 1994 by Virginia Center for the Book.
- A video cassette titled *Color: A Sampling of Contemporary African-American Writers* was released in 1994 by The Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives.
- *A Conversation With Poet Laureate Rita Dove,* a video cassette from Real Earth Productions, was released in 1993.
- An audio cassette titled "Selected Poems of Rita Dove" is available from Audiobooks.
- "Rita Dove: Selected Poems" was released on audio cassette in 1993 by Random House Audio.

den from us. What she sees is that "the possibilities" in this life are as restricted and impossible as "golden dresses in a nutshell." This image also may suggest that what is important to her has been relegated to a minuscule and inaccessible place, and that life is hard.

Lines 7-13:

In this section of the poem, the speaker relates a childhood experience of falling "in love / with a Japanese woodcut / of a girl gazing at the moon." This image suggests an exotic, feminine ideal of romantic love. The speaker has identified with the imaginary girl, and has "waited with her for her lover." And, in the speaker's memory of the woodcut, "He came in white breeches and sandals," an image of pure romantic love, a savior. But in the next two lines, the speaker fuses her memory of the childhood fantasy with her present reality. The lover in the woodcut "had a goatee—he had / your face, though I didn't know it." The speaker wants to believe that her present relationship has been fated. The image of the "goatee" seems to suggest betrayal or something evil.

Lines 14-19:

In this final section of the poem, the speaker is again brought back to the reality of her situation—their "lives will be the same." He will continue to be ineffective in protecting her in this life—his lips will be "swollen from whistling / at danger"—and the speaker will remain "a stranger / in this desert, / nursing the tough skin of figs." So, even though she realizes that nothing will really happen to make this life more bearable, she continues to try to nurture "the tough skin" of this male-dominated desert of a life.

Themes

Limitations and Opportunities

The moon represents opportunity in this poem, that unknown future which one always assumes will bring better things. To the speaker of this poem, as well as to the girl in the woodcut, this opportunity would be fulfilled by the arrival of a handsome and brave lover. This was the childhood dream of the speaker, but we can see in the first stanza that the faith and enthusiasm that were at the core of the dream have diminished to almost nothing. The speaker of the poem realizes that possibilities exist and that they are valuable and beautiful—they are "golden dresses"—but from the perspective of adulthood, with all of its struggle and responsibility, these possibilities are miniature, small enough to fit inside of a nutshell. In using the word "this," the poem's very title tips the reader off to the speaker's feeling of frustration, making the point that she is bothered about having to live this particular life and not a better one.

It could be argued easily that most of the speaker's disappointment is already evident in the very nature of her dream: that she was destined from childhood to have her possibilities limited. Her young self was not even looking for opportunities in her own life, but in the life of the girl in the woodcut. She was not responding to her own environment, so it is natural that her real life would not match her dreams. The similarities that are stated between the real lover and the one that she imagined coming to the Japanese girl—with sandals, a beard, and a casual attitude toward danger—are not the qualities that ensure a strong adult relationship. As it turned out, the lover that this

speaker did pick is not actually the salvation that she had hoped for: to her, he seems like a child, talking like "that one, / asleep, upstairs." This family has limited the possibilities that the speaker once saw for herself, in the way that hard reality will always limit the open possibilities of dreams.

Wilderness

The end of this poem gives us an image of the speaker out in the desert, which is known as a place where no other humans are around and the harsh weather is dangerous to human existence. It is a curious way to portray the life of someone who feels herself to be trapped in the middle of her family. We would not expect this character to feel alone, especially not to feel such total isolation. In suggesting that this woman's life could be a desert wilderness, the poem appears to be giving a bleak look at human relations, indirectly telling us that humans cannot form relationships but instead are doomed to isolation.

But harsh and barren as the desert is, it also has a history of being a proving ground, a place that one emerges from as a better person for having suffered the difficulties of desert life. Among Bible stories, two of the most prominent are those of Moses leading the Israelites away from slavery and across the desert and of Jesus spending forty days alone in the desert, freeing himself from the distractions of the world. This poem does not give us any indication that its speaker intends to some day emerge triumphantly from her metaphorical desert, but it could well be offering us a glimmer of hope for her future, provided that the "figs" at the end represent the speaker's spouse and child. This would make sense because the figs' "tough skin" is consistent with the man's swollen lips and casual attitude toward danger, and the child thinks like the man, as mentioned in lines 2 through 5. Under this interpretation, the speaker's act of nursing is an investment, an affirmation that life will not always be a harsh desert, for the others if not for herself. It is a difficult job; the skin is so tough that they will not appreciate her nursing, but it at least has her more involved with life than she was as a child, staring at a picture and making up lives.

Art and Experience

It is interesting to note that the speaker of this poem does not look with disappointment upon a dream that she dreamt for herself, but on a dream that she had for the girl in the Japanese woodcut. As described, the only details that the picture provided her with were the moon and the girl who stared at it: it was the poem's speaker who decided that she was waiting for a lover, and then went on to imagine a description for the lover. If a work of art is meant for a viewer to identify with, then this woodcut did its job almost too well. The poem's speaker fell so in love with the scene that it became a part of her real life. The absent lover that her imagination provided for the girl turned out to match her own eventual lover. For her to meet someone years later who looked like someone she had once imagined would seem an amazing coincidence, a supernatural premonition, or an indication that this speaker bends her perception of reality in order to match her fantasy. The imagery in this poem indicates a fertile mind—"golden dresses in a nutshell," "this desert," "the tough skin of figs"—but this creative mind finds no beauty or happiness when examining her own experiences. It is only when refracting this creativity through the suggestions made by someone else's artistic creation that she shows such inventiveness herself.

Topics for Further Study

- Write a poem in which you imagine yourself a participant in a painting that you are familiar with, as Dove does in the second stanza. Describe your interactions with the people in the picture, and with people who live in the picture's world.
- Write a short paper explaining all that you can guess about the person referred to as "that one, / asleep, upstairs."
- Explain the significance of the colors mentioned in this poem.

Style

"This Life" is written in free verse. This means that the poem uses no set pattern of meter, and that there is no rhyme scheme. The poem is divided into two stanzas: one of six lines, and the other of thirteen lines. The poet has chosen where to break the lines,

Compare & Contrast

- **1980:** Polish shipyard workers in Gdansk, led by Lech Walesa, went on strike in defiance of the Communist authorities, which eventually led to the formation of the independent Solidarity union. Moscow, fearing that this act of independence might spread to other countries in the Soviet Union, sent troops to intimidate the labor movement.

  1990: After losing heavily to Solidarity candidates in Congressional elections, the Polish Communist party voted to disband itself. Lithuania was the first of the republics in the Soviet Union to declare itself independent, leading to the downfall of Communism in eastern Europe.

  Today: Many of the countries formerly in the Soviet Union have aligned themselves with the West and become members of NATO.

- **1980:** The United States Supreme Court ruled that a man-made life form could be patented. The case in question involved a genetically engineered bacterium created to break down crude oil after oil spills.

  Today: Genetically engineered vegetables are commonly available in grocery stores; mammals have also been cloned.

creating the poem's own unique accents and rhythms. Where a line ends with a period, it is called end stopped; where a line flows on to the next line, it is called enjambed.

Critical Overview

Critic Nelson Hathcock, writing in *Critical Survey of Poetry*, says: "Poems in *The Yellow House On The Corner* often depict the collision of wish with reality, of heart's desire with the dictates of the world. This collision is made tolerable by the working of the imagination, and the result is, for Dove, 'magic,' or the existence of an unexplainable occurrence. It is imagination and the art it produces that allow the speaker in 'This Life' to see that 'the possibilities / are golden dresses in a nutshell.' 'Possibilities' have the power to transform this life into something distinct and charmed."

Critic Robert McDowell, writing in *Callaloo*, remarks that in "This Life" and other poems Dove "echoes, distorts, and revises ancient myths." Critic Arnold Rampersad, writing in *Callaloo* notes that "Dove insists on a more austere governance of intimacy than many poets, and most people, are willing to concede."

Criticism

B. J. Bolden

B. J. Bolden is an Assistant Professor of English at Chicago State University, Chicago, IL. She is the managing editor of Warpland: A Journal of Black Literature and Ideas *at Chicago State University and the author of* Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945–1960. *In the following essay, Bolden reads "This Life" as a poem about memory, offering "a contrast of the then and the now."*

"This Life" is the opening poem of Rita Dove's first full-length book of poetry, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, which was based upon her master's thesis. Part one of the book is a retrospective account of random characters and incidents that occupied places in "in the old neighborhood," as suggested by a poem from the same section, "Teach us to Number Our Days." Other poems of the volume that support the theme of neighborhood include "The Bird Frau," "Small Town," and "Sightseeing." In the poem "This Life," Dove is concerned about memory: how present reality plays out against past expectations. The anonymous, first-person narrator reflects over the direction her life has taken and considers how different that life is from its adolescent promise.

The narrator's reverie begins as she is lured into a hypnotic trance of remembrance while "the green lamp flares on the table." The green light functions as the symbolic beacon of her youth that beckoned her forth to life's myriad opportunities. The speaker makes an abrupt entrance into the poem; she immediately addresses the person who initiated her thoughts, and speaks to him in a sardonic tone: "You tell me the same thing / as that one, / asleep, upstairs." The speaker has no discernible affinity either to the "You" she is addressing, or to "that one" who, unmindful of her restless thoughts and perhaps insomnia, is mindlessly "asleep, upstairs," while she, alone, wrestles with the reality of her unfulfilled life. As contrasted to someone telling her about the disenchantments one must face as an adult versus childhood fantasies, the narrator has come to grips with the reality of her life on her own terms. Now she sees that although the potential for a rich, happy life might have been available to her as a young woman, those possibilities were as precious and rare as "golden dresses in a nutshell." The air is heavy with her disenchantment and resignation. For now, the narrator suggests, it is too late for her to realize the golden promises of her youth.

Suddenly, the narrator makes a retrospective shift to a pivotal scene from her childhood. There is a sense of reflective calm as her musings focus on the object that stimulated her early fantasies: "As a child, I fell in love / with a Japanese woodcut / of a girl gazing at the moon." Unresolved longing lingers and winds itself around the word "gazing," as though locked in a temporal embrace of desire that is not a mere glance nor a look. As the speaker watches the girl in the picture, she creates an idealistic romantic fantasy of a free-spirited lover who blithely enters in loose, soft, billowy "white breeches"; open, unrestricted "sandals," and a "goatee." In essence, the speaker creates a lover whose attire epitomizes her sense of male beauty, though at that time "[she] didn't know it."

Lines spill over into meaningful enjambment as the speaker realizes that her creation of a dream man became her own real life fantasy: "he had / your face, though I didn't know it." This epiphany shifts the narrator from the deep recesses of memory to the bright light of reality, as she contrasts the "green lamp" of her early opportunities to the "desert" of her present existence. In the newness of her reality, she knows that the man she addresses will continue to court the dangers of an adventurous life that separates the two of them, and she, alone in the spareness of her life, will continue to seek emotional nourishment from a seemingly impossible life source: "the tough skins of figs."

The poem "This Life" is about evolution, a contrast of the then and the now. The speaker has made a journey from the bright innocence of youth to the sober reality of maturity. Unaware that the romantic images of her youth were the golden promises available to the young, she reaches adulthood stymied and unfulfilled by not having explored life's opportunities. Dove enhances her theme of life as an emotional and psychological

What Do I Read Next?

- A good recent collection that includes poems by Dove is *The Woman That I Am: The Literature and Culture of Contemporary Women of Color* (1994), edited by D. Soyini Madison. This collection includes poetry, essays, and fiction by American women of various ethnicities.
- In the fiction of Alice Walker we can see a resemblance to Dove's themes and the tough-minded attitudes of her characters. The short stories in Walker's book *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down,* published in 1981, present a good introduction to her work.
- Virginia King, the protagonist in Dove's 1987 novel *Through the Ivory Gate,* is much like the speaker of this poem in the way she sees the world. This book offers a full range of experiences and emotions that are approached with the same resolve shown in "This Life."
- This poem is concerned with how reality challenges a woman's sense of her self. One of the greatest works ever written about the roles that society assigns to women is French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex,* first published in 1952 and most recently reprinted in 1989 by Vintage. This book takes a cool, analytical look at the social forces that were true in the 1950s, were true when "This Life" was written and are true today.

journey with the subtle injection of the images of memory. History becomes a ruling motif as the speaker arrives at the realization that it is "This" present life, not "that" past life with which she must seek reconciliation. Color imagery plays a pivotal role in the subtle suggestion of vision and freedom of movement in the "green lamp"; caution, limitation, and restriction in the yellow light of "golden dresses in a nutshell"; and the subliminal red light of danger and unfulfilled dreams in the "lips, swollen from whistling / at danger."

The line lengths in the middle of the first and third stanzas define the restrictions that the speaker has permitted to be imposed upon her present life, even in the face of the unlimited possibilities available to her in adolescence. Dove's compressed language augments the feelings of disenchantment and limitation that permeate the poem and the life of the speaker. Tight control of language and imagery demand the active participation of the reader to discern meaning, as in the line "Our lives will be the same." Though the poem is metrically varied, the accents lean toward iambic tetrameter in the full lines, where meaning is most discernible, while the dimeter of the shorter, compressed lines defines the constrains and limitations of the speaker's life.

Dove's success in the poem is the emotional distance she employs to tell the story of personal loss. Her tone is objective, even aloof, even as she conveys the sadness of unfulfilled dreams. Because Dove exercises such tight control over her subject and uses an economy of words, her terse, compressed language challenges meaning, yet still manages to invite speculation on the freshness and brevity of youthful optimism against the pragmatic resignation of adult survival.

Source: B. J. Bolden, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

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Taleb-Khyar, Mohamed B., "An Interview with Maryse Conde and Rita Dove," in *Callaloo*, 1991, pp. 347-66.

For Further Study

Ashworth, Debora, "Madonna or Witch: Women's Muse in Contemporary American Poetry," *Women's Culture: The Women's Renaissance in the Seventies*, edited by Gayle Kimball, Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1981.

The author of this piece doesn't directly address Dove's poem, but she gives a good examination of how the conflicting roles of fighting and comforting became crucial at the time that "This Life" was written.

Cooke, Michael G., *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

Cooke's work gives the reader a feel for literature as a form of expression at approximately the time that this poem was published because he creates an historical context. His chapter "Tragic and Ironic Denials of Intimacy" says much about the novelists of the 1970s and 1980s that can be applied to this poem.

Russell, Sandi, *Render Me My Song: African-American Women Writers from Slavery to the Present*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Russell has an excellent critical eye for what makes Dove's poetry unique among her peers, and she manages, in a few short pages, to give the reader a good sense of Dove's philosophy and historical significance.

Those Winter Sundays

Robert Hayden

1962

Robert Hayden possessed amazing skill with language and the structure of the poem. Though he is perhaps best known for his poems that explore and express the African-American experience, from the days of slavery, to the Civil War, to that of his own time, poems like "Middle Passage," or "The Ballad of Nat Turner," he also wrote shorter, arguably more lyric poems that capture personal or religious moments. "Those Winter Sundays," a poem about a son remembering his father, is an excellent example of one of these shorter poems as it displays Hayden's incredible control of language and intricate understanding of human experience. It is clear that there was distance between them and little communication or even warmth. It is discovered though, in recollection, that love actually was present. It was just communicated subtly in the father's effort, specifically by building fires in the early morning that "dr[ove] out the cold." The poem seems to be a lament of the fact that the son, who at the time could not perceive such subtle expressions of love, never returned them. Though subjects and speakers of poems do not necessarily correlate with the poet who writes them, it is interesting to note that Hayden was not actually raised by his real mother and father, but by their neighbors to whom he was given at the age of eighteen months.

den embarked on an academic career; he considered himself "a poet who teaches in order to earn a living so that he can write a poem or two now and then." Hayden taught English at Fisk University in Tennessee for over twenty years and then ended his career at the University of Michigan. In 1976 Hayden was appointed poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. He was the first black writer to hold this position—a fact that helped confirm his stature in American literature. He died in 1980.

Author Biography

Hayden was born Asa Bundy Sheffey in 1913 in the ghetto neighborhood of "Paradise Valley" in Detroit, Michigan. When his mother Gladys Ruth Finn Sheffey left her husband, Asa Sheffey, to move to New York, she gave her eighteen-month-old baby to her neighbors William and Sue Ellen Hayden, who rechristened the boy Robert Hayden. Hayden attended Detroit City College (now Wayne State University) and the University of Michigan, where he studied with poet W. H. Auden. As a student Hayden read and admired the works of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, especially Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Orrick Johns. He also studied the works of other renowned poets of the period, including Carl Sandburg and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Some of Hayden's most famous poems appear in his first three collections: *Heart-Shape in the Dust* (1940), *The Lion and the Archer* (1948), and *Figure of Time: Poems* (1955). In 1943 he became a member of the Baha'i religion and adopted their belief in the unity of all religions and worldwide brotherhood. Because of his ideology, he rejected racial classification of his work, declaring himself an American poet rather than a black poet at considerable cost to his popularity. After graduating from college in 1944, Hay-

Poem Summary

Lines 1-2:

The poem begins with a very simple line that nonetheless establishes the subject and the tone of what will follow. The title has already suggested the quiet cold of "winter Sundays" and this first line adds to it the notion of the early morning. The speaker's father is also introduced which leads one to believe that he will figure centrally in the poem. The simple action of the man getting up and dressing is sharpened as an image by the use of the interesting and striking adjective "blueblack," which describes a darkness that will soon be contrasted by the image of fire. This beginning might also be seen to suggest something of the father's character as well, as he is up before daybreak, and is the one to confront the cold darkness of the home.

Lines 3-5:

The father's effort and suffering are then focused upon. His hands, a particularly human reference, are dry and pained from weekday work. Yet

this is not enough to keep him from the necessary task of making a fire. The element of self-sacrifice is clear in this description as the man disregards his own pain to warm and light the home for his family. The first stanza comes to a close with a quiet but surprising admission: "no one ever thanked him." This addition seems to further the implied isolation of the father as we learn that his suffering and effort go unacknowledged by the others. This last line also adds the element of lament or regret on the part of the speaker to the poem as it shifts from the father to the son and anonymous others.

This first stanza also serves as an excellent example of Hayden's meticulous skill with language. Notice the sounds that he compiles as he tells the beginning of this simple story. He first establishes the cold dark with "blueblack." Then, consistent with the sound of a hard "c," he adds the element of pain: "cracked hands that ached." When certain consonant sounds repeat in close proximity it is called consonance and its use here is part of what holds the stanza together. The sounds are very subtle, but as each new hard "c" is uttered, it evokes some recollection of those that came before. So as one continues through the first stanza and hears "weekday," "banked," and "thanked," the poem coheres almost without notice. It could also be argued that this hard "c" was chosen to resemble the sound of a fire just starting, the cracking and popping of the dry wood. Finally, Hayden uses alliteration, the repetition of words beginning with the same consonant sound, with "weekday weather" and "banked fires blazed" to add to the smoothness of the lines and their sound.

Line 6:

Here, as the focus shifts to the speaker's role in this Sunday morning experience, the consonance continues. Though it is described as the speaker hearing the "cold splintering, breaking," the sounds continue to carry the connotation and sound of the fire started in the first stanza. The image of the fire affecting the cold also begins the progression from dark and cold to light and warm that seems to flow through the poem.

Lines 7-8:

Here, once warmth is established, the father calls to the son, who then performs the same act as the father in lines one and two by rising and dressing. This could be seen as a parallel between the two, to make a subtle connection that adds weight to the speaker's lament. It is possible, the parallel suggests, that the speaker has come to understand this childhood experience by eventually finding himself in the role of the father.

Line 9:

The second stanza then ends—as the first did—with an unexpected and powerful line. The idea of "chronic angers" is introduced into the calm scene in which the father makes the house warm and comfortable for his family. More specific information is not offered however, and the reader is left to guess who the source of the anger is, and what its causes might be. It is clear though that anger was a constant in the house, as much a part of the mornings as the fire itself. Hayden uses another hard "c" sound to express this, with the word "chronic," which connects this idea of anger to the earlier description of the fathers painful hands, and the fire blazing. One could argue that this introduces complexity—psychological and structural—that makes the poem much more accurate a description of such familial interaction.

Lines 10-12:

The third and final stanza begins with an image of emotional distance. This seems a fairly natural extension of the previous line's mention of the presence of anger in the house. The next two lines, however, imply that as much as the indifference may have been self-protective, it was also ungrateful. There is no judgment made about whether or not the indifference was justified, or could have been helped. There is only the admission that, in addition to possibly being the source of "chronic angers," the father also tended to his child. The images offered are clear and strong as first we are reminded of the building of the fire which drives out the cold, and then are given the more austere and sharper image of the man polishing shoes. Both of these images carry the connotations of the actions of a servant more than a father.

Lines 13-14:

After establishing the complex emotional sense of the remembered ritual, the speaker poses a striking rhetorical question that will end the poem. Line 13 provides, with an almost pleading repetition, the admission of ignorance on the part of the speaker. Then Line 14 reveals what it is that the speaker was ignorant about, what he has discovered looking back on those mornings. It is the nature of love, more specifically the love of the father. The first key adjective to offer insight into this is "austere." This means simple, or unadorned, but

Topics for Further Study

- Write a poem about mornings that you remember from childhood, especially ones that frequently repeated the same pattern. Include something that you now think about that time that you did not think then.
- What does this poem tell you about parents? About children? Do you agree with the ways it characterizes fathers?
- What do you think the author means by "the chronic angers of that house"? Explain the assumptions you can make about this family's life.

also removed from the ideas of pleasure. All of this we see in the description of the father who neglects his own comfort and confronts the cold and pain of his hands, in order to foster the comfort of his family. The second adjective, "lonely," then adds to this the element of isolation, which the father experienced each morning as he built the fire.

All of this seems to point to the fact that when the speaker was young he doubted his father's love; as a child he assumed love was expressed in certain, more obvious ways. It is not until the speaker has grown significantly older that he realizes that love is often expressed silently and indirectly, and he is then able to recognize it in the early morning gestures of his father. Though there is still a sadness at the end of the poem, a lament for the opportunity to thank the father, or treat him better, there is also a feeling of resolution. It is as if homage is being paid finally in the making of the poem.

Themes

Memory

It is evident that the speaker of this poem is telling his story from a distance in time. In trying to describe what it was like at his house on those mornings, he comes up with details that do not necessarily give the reader a vivid picture of the way things were. The details we are given are more impressionistic, giving us a sense of the young observer through the impressions he received. From the details here we can tell that the father worked hard as a laborer, outdoors in the cold; that the house was heated by a furnace that would burn out overnight; that the house was filled with unspecified "chronic angers"; and that the son owned more than one pair of shoes and he wore the good pair on Sunday. From these few facts, the reader has to fill in the life that has either slipped from the speaker's mind, been suppressed, or has purposely been left incomplete to make the reader think.

Despite the good shoes, this is obviously a poor family: the father works six days a week (indicated by "Sundays too"), and the temperature in the house was allowed to drop so low in the night that reheating it made the woodwork splinter and break. For such a poor household to have special shoes for Sunday implies deep religious conviction, and yet there are those chronic angers. Who else lived there? Does "No one ever thanked him" refer to the child's mother, siblings or extended family? These details are left out of this memory.

"What did I know," the speaker repeats in the thirteenth line. Now an intellectual, he uses the words "austere" and "offices" when simpler, more direct words would be sufficient. From this perspective, only the harshest details surface to memory. The speaker of the poem tells us about love, but there is no mention of that love in the details that he remembers, precisely because the slim clues of his father's love are shadows among things he remembers. The poem tells us that we tend to remember the bad things in life so clearly that it gives a distorted impression, but that we can find love when we examine our strongest memories.

Anger

The house in this poem is described as suffering "chronic angers," meaning, first, that there is more than one type of anger there, and second that they are not brief flare-ups but are constant, and will keep repeating until they are cured. The reader is not given the source or sources of these angers. The reader does not even know to whom they belong. The poem's speaker is afraid of this anger, so he is not the root of it, although he does contribute to the atmosphere by speaking indifferently. The father could be responsible for several layers of

anger himself: a man working hard to raise a son alone could blame society for the bills he has to pay, or he could be angry at the boy's mother, whether she has left him or even if she is dead. Anger is irrational. The reference to "no one" in line 5 implies, though, that several people live in the house and benefit from the stoked furnace. Whatever the relationship between the author and the events of the poem, it would be unfair of him to write a poem about anger without indicating the anger's cause. Therefore, we can assume at least part of Hayden's message to be that hard work causes anger; the ironic twist here is that the hard work is itself caused by love.

Love

The household described here is ruled more by anger than by love, but at the end of the poem the speaker points out the love that he can see only now. Clearly, he was aware of his father's actions as a child—he knew that his father woke up on Sundays to light the furnace in the cold, and that he polished the child's shoes. If these gestures are only recognized by the son later in life, then their significance to him must have grown in his mind. It is a bleak childhood presented to the reader. There is something ominous about the improvised compound word "blueblack," the description of the father's cracked and aching hands, and the splintering, breaking sounds of the house warming. It is not until late in the second stanza that any emotions are revealed. At first the boy's reluctance is shown with his rising "slowly," but that can be explained away any number of ways until the very next line reveals what the tone of the poem has hinted at all along: fear. The poem first makes us feel, and then it describes, a hostile atmosphere that the speaker grew up in, so frightening that it made him stifle his words, "speaking indifferently," even though he was to grow up to speak the flowing diction of the poem's last line. This is the classic pattern of an oppressive, overbearing parent and a child who is rueful but obedient. The eternal question for psychologists and poets is whether such a relationship represents actual love, or if the child's obedience is based only on intimidation. Hayden tries to show that love was hidden within anger, and he proves it by showing the father in a positive light, first physically (with descriptions) and then with the final line's justification. The adult speaker of this poem could blame the father for being a bully and passing his pain along, but he does not. In the end, he says that he understands his father's actions to signify love.

Style

Robert Hayden had great understanding and skill when it came to writing in traditional forms and meter. Most often though he straddled the line of these forms and free-verse. "Those Winter Sundays" is an excellent example of how he would do this as it contains certain elements of a traditional sonnet. It is fourteen lines long, though these are broken up into three stanzas of five, four, and five lines respectively. Many of the lines are also written with exactly ten syllables, and while they are not in iambic pentameter, they are of the same length as the lines of traditional sonnets. Hayden would often use these loose interpretations of forms in his poetry.

Sometimes he would just use a certain number of stanzas, possibly composed of the same number of lines. Regardless of what form he used, Hayden's poems always display meticulous consideration and control of the language and appear very strong or solid on the page.

Throughout the poem Hayden uses several poetic techniques that help hold the poem together and increase the power of the language. The first of these is consonance, which is the repetition of certain consonant sounds. The first stanza of the poem establishes a hard "c" sound, as in "cracked," that is found often in the poem. There is also some use of alliteration. This is the close proximity of words beginning with the same consonant sound. An example from the first stanza is "weekday weather." Finally, Hayden establishes very subtly a metaphor, or a figure of speech that allows one object to be representative of another. In this case it is the fire the father builds, that resembles the speaker's discovery of his father's love where he previously thought none existed.

Historical Context

At first, because of the personal nature of the poem's central situation, there seems to be no sense in exploring the historical context of the time when it was published. It takes place within a household, between a father and son; the only real references to the world outside are that the father labored outdoors and that the son wore his good shoes on Sunday: these are circumstances that can be found in uncountable social situations throughout time. Robert Hayden's work appears in anthologies of black writers, and he edited an important anthol-

Compare & Contrast

- **1962:** Riots broke out on the campus of the University of Mississippi to prevent a black student, James Meredith, from enrolling. When the federal government forced the state government to stop blocking him, Meredith was admitted. For the first 10 months of his college career he had to attend classes under the guard of federal marshals.

  1995: A Supreme Court decision required the Citadel, a military school receiving federal funds, to admit its first female student, Shannon Faulkner. Within a month Faulkner dropped out, citing exhaustion from the exercise regimen.

- **1962:** The first American astronaut orbited the Earth.

  1969: The first person, American astronaut Neil Armstrong, stepped onto the moon.

  1986: The space shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds after liftoff, as the entire nation watched.

  Today: International teams of scientists perform experiments in space.

- **1962:** The ABC network began broadcasting in color for three and a half hours per week.

  1967: All three American television networks were broadcasting all of their shows in color.

  1975: The first telecommunications satellite made cable television available across the country.

  Today: Almost 65 percent of American households have cable television; almost 80 percent of American households own videocassette players.

ogy of black writers, yet there is nothing specifically about the black experience in this poem. This distance from social situation is particularly notable when one considers that it was published in 1962, a period of increased activity in the African-American community, when the Civil Rights movement was at its height. Understanding the background that Hayden chose to avoid in writing this poem can help the reader understand the intensity of feeling that the poet is reaching for.

During the last half of the 1950s, the cause of civil rights for African Americans made substantial legal progress. Since the Civil War in the 1860s, southern states had maintained laws that had made it illegal for black citizens to make use of the same facilities as whites. There were, for example, separate railroad cars, restaurants, public drinking fountains, hotels, campgrounds, taxi cabs, etc. Exclusion of African Americans was legal because of a Supreme Court ruling in 1898 in the case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, which stated that it was legal to offer "separate but equal" accommodations for blacks. In practice throughout the first half of the 1900s, the "separate" part of this doctrine was strictly enforced, with blacks punished by law for using property designated for whites, while the "equal" part was openly ignored. Beside the punishment of the legal system, African-American citizens were intimidated by the violence of vigilante "goon squads," such as the Ku Klux Klan, which seldom faced punishment for murdering, beating or destroying the property of non-whites. In the 1950s, though, the blatant inequality in the southern states came to national attention, and the federal government stood against state governments to protect the rights of blacks. In 1954 the Supreme Court overturned the 1898 decision and ruled that schools could never be equal if races were separate, and would therefore have to be desegregated; this judgement was eventual applied to all other forms of segregation. In 1955 Dr. Martin Luther King led a boycott against the transit system of Montgomery Alabama to protest separate seating arrangements on buses: the year-long protest was victorious,

showing the power of black consumers. In 1957, federal troops were sent to Little Rock, Arkansas, to face state National Guard troops whom the governor had ordered to stand in front of a high school to keep black children out. That same year Congress passed the first Civil Rights Act since the 1870s.

These political and legal advances for blacks did not cure social inequality: by 1962, they had created a great deal more unrest than satisfaction, by putting racial injustice into the front of everyone's minds. White segregationists felt threatened by African-American gains and became even more violent, while blacks became impatient as society moved at a crawl to enforce the rights that had been recognized. Many schools admitted blacks, but some, such as the University of Mississippi, were still sites of violent resistance, approved of by state governors. To ensure enforcement of a 1961 ruling that banned segregation on all interstate roads and connected rest stops, buses of black and white youths, called Freedom Riders, rode the South and were often met with violence. With the passage of time, the once-solid civil rights movement was splintered by the different ideas that were brought to it. Some groups wanted to meet violence with violence, while others felt that the non-violent techniques that had been used in the 1950s were most successful. Some leaders, including Dr. King, welcomed whites who were supportive of their cause, while others, like Malcom X, felt that the problems of blacks could only be understood by blacks. If the 1950s had given African Americans the idea that they *could* stand in support of their racial identity, by the 1960s different factions of the Civil Rights movement stressed that they *should*.

Robert Hayden often maintained that he wanted to be thought of as a poet, not a black poet. He was born in 1913, and was in school during the Harlem Renaissance, which was America's greatest grouping of African-American literary figures. Although he had been able to see the Renaissance writers succeed as blacks in literature never had before, he also saw the praise they received as always for being "black" artists, as if they had been held to a lower standard. Hayden, like any African American, knew what it was like to feel conspicuous because of his skin, but some of that effect was muted by his reaching maturity during the 1930s, during the Depression, when people of all colors had employment troubles. In 1943, Hayden converted to the Baha'i religion, which holds as one of its basic principles the recognition of universal brotherhood, regardless of race or gender. He was an intellectual and a man of letters, who received grants from foundations and a solid, prominent position teaching literature at Fisk University, which had been established in 1875 as the nation's first black university. He was interested in poetic form, not politics. In 1966, he came under attack when Fisk hosted its first Black Writers' conference, where Hayden was openly jeered for writing about personal subjects and not the African-American experience. Having been hailed as a leading black artist in the 1950s and 1960s, Hayden found his attempts to transcend race mocked by his own people. Until his death in 1980 he resisted attempts by social groups to influence his subject matter.

Critical Overview

Throughout much of his early career Robert Hayden was relatively ignored by poetry critics. Much of the attention he did receive came as strong criticism against him from those of his own race, African Americans, during the Civil Rights Movement. Some of the more militant black writers claimed that Hayden was denying his heritage by not writing directly about the political experience of being black in America at the time. Hayden asserted that he wanted to be considered an American poet, and not simply a black poet, and at a time when Blacks and America were at odds, certain members of the Black community saw this as a betrayal. The irony is that Hayden was fundamentally concerned with and interested in the history of being black in America. "Middle Passage" explores the frightening experience of a slave ship on its way to America. "The Ballad Of Nat Turner" and his well-known sonnet "Douglass" speak of great black figures in American history. Hayden's concern was on the scale of history and mythology and not simply that of the current events of the time. He did not want his poems to ever be considered merely political propaganda.

Hayden finally began to get widespread critical recognition with the publication of *A Ballad Of Remembrance* in 1962. In *The Georgia Review* John S. Wright referred to him as "full-voiced and with consummate control." A few years later, Hayden went on to win the grand prize for poetry at the World Festival of Negro Arts at Dakar, Senegal in 1966 for *A Ballad of Remembrance*. From this point on through the rest of his life Hayden grew in respect and position in the world of American Letters. In 1976, four years before his death,

What Do I Read Next?

- Richard Howard's anthology *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry Since 1950* was first published in 1965 and does not include Robert Hayden. It does, however, have an impressive selection of other influential poets of the time, Hayden's peer group. This provides the reader with a good source of perspective.
- After Robert Hayden's insistence that he not be considered a "black poet" thrust him into controversy, he showed his awareness of his ethnicity in 1967 by editing *Kaleidoscope: Poems by American Negro Poets.* The selections reflect Hayden's tastes and are generally more conservative than those found in similar anthologies.
- W.E.B. du Bois was a leading intellectual of our century, a black scholar on par with Hayden, who brought racial issues to a new plane of analysis. His best writings were brought together in the 1971 collection *A W.E.B. du Bois Reader.*
- The poet Langston Hughes, along with Milton Melzer and C. Eric Lincoln, wrote the text for *A Pictorial History of Black Americans,* published with new material in 1973. The pictures of the fight against segregation in the 1950s and 1960s tell much about what life was like when Hayden wrote this poem. Hayden was a fan of Hughes since childhood.
- Of all the critical histories of black poetry written in recent years, Eugene B. Redmond's 1976 *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry* tells the story most coherently. Appropriately, he gives a large section to Hayden, who was still writing at the time, recognizing that other anthologies often left him out because of their difficulty categorizing him.

he became the first black writer appointed poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. If there is a criticism to Hayden's work it might well be that there is only so much of it. His life-long schedule of teaching, increased by his successes, ironically left him limited time to actually do his own work. Regardless of this fact, Robert Hayden's poetry remains a valuable part of American literature.

Criticism

Jeannine Johnson

Jeannine Johnson is a freelance writer who has taught at Yale University. In the following essay, Johnson provides a close reading of "Those Winter Sundays," concluding that "Hayden's poem honors the value of love's simple, domestic services in our lives."

From the very first words of Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays", we realize that for everything the poem says, there is something else that remains unspoken. The words on the page explicitly state a certain meaning but they also imply, or indicate without directly stating, much more. For instance, the poem begins with the words "Sundays too my father got up early," suggesting that this line continues a thought expressed before the beginning of the poem. The simple phrase "Sundays too" implies two things. First, it implies that the father's actions took place on Sundays as well as on every other day of the week. It seems to continue an unspoken sentence that might read, "On every day, Monday through Saturday, and even on Sundays too my father got up early." Second, it implies that there might be something uncommon or unexpected about the fact that the poet's father got up early on Sundays. Sunday may be distinguished from other days as a traditional day of rest from the regular work week. In addition, in Christian religions, Sunday is set aside as a day of worship. As we read through the rest of the poem, we should bear in mind these special associations with Sunday morning.

The first line of the poem, which refers to "my father," establishes a first-person speaker. It also shows that the speaker is recalling a time when he was a child. This line is grouped with four other lines and together they make up the poem's first section, or stanza. In the rest of the stanza, the poet describes his father's actions. He tells us that after awakening early, his father would get dressed and build a fire. But the first stanza says much more than this. The poet says his father dressed "in the blueblack cold," indicating exactly how early he arose. His father got up before the house received

the sun's light and warmth, and therefore before dawn. But the unusual word "blueblack" creates a more precise visual image of that nearly pitch-dark time before sunrise than do the ordinary words "before dawn." We know from the fact that someone in the family had to build a fire to warm the house that this was not a rich family with servants, for instance. Also, since this was a house without central heating, we might further conclude that its inhabitants were probably poor.

In the first stanza the poet describes his father's hands with many suggestive terms. He calls his father's hands "cracked" and tells that they "ached / from labor in the weekday weather." We know from the title of the poem and from the need for a fire that these events take place during the winter. Thus, when the poet says that his father labored in "the weekday weather," he not only informs us that his father worked outside but reminds us with the word "weather" that he worked during the cold winter. By referring to his father's hands as "cracked" and aching, the poet calls attention to the fact that he performed manual labor. In so doing the poet also illustrates his own present sympathy for his father's past deeds. Significantly, this sympathetic description is from the point of view of an adult remembering and not from the perspective of a child observing his father. For the speaker tells us that when he was a child, he did not recognize the efforts and sacrifices his father made. The poet states that "No one ever thanked him," revealing that others in his family were as unappreciative of his father as he was.

The point of view of the poet as a child governs all of the second stanza and most of the third. He recalls waking up and listening to "the cold splintering, breaking." Here the poet makes use of figurative language to more richly describe the sound of the fire his father had made. We would expect him to say that it was the firewood, and not the cold, that the child heard "splintering" and "breaking." The poet applies these two verbs ("splintering" and "breaking") which are associated with the sense of hearing to a noun ("the cold") that is associated with a general sense of touch or physical feeling. (The technical term for this poetic method of describing one sensory faculty in the terms of another is called "synaesthesia.") What was important to the child was that the house was getting warmer, and therefore he connected the sound of the crackling fire with his anticipation of not feeling cold when he got out of bed.

The child seems to have dreaded the chilly emotional atmosphere of his home as much as its physical coolness. Though he feared the "chronic angers of that house," we do not witness any verbal or physical battles between family members. In fact, most of the poem points to a kind of deliberate silence among them. The father never heard words of thanks from his family, and the only conversation in the poem is recorded indirectly. The speaker remembers that "When the rooms were warm, he'd call," but he does not explicitly quote his father. In addition, the poet recalls himself "Speaking indifferently" to his father, but again he offers this information without quotation. By these indirect summaries, the poet emphasizes that these were habitual, common interactions: what each person said was not unique and not worth a specific quote. But this lack of quotation in the poem also reflects the impaired communication among family members who were subject to the "chronic" or ongoing angers of the house. The word "indifferently" may point to the child's attempt to hide or protect his feelings in a hostile environment.

The child's indifference also reveals his attitude that these interactions with his father lacked significance for him at the time, perhaps because they were so common and familiar. But for the adult poet, it is precisely the predictability and ordinariness of his father's actions (and of the poet's own) that make them special to him now. At this point we should recall that these ordinary events occurred on an extraordinary day, Sunday. And the poet reminds us of exactly this fact when he writes that his father regularly drove out the cold "and polished my good shoes as well." We may presume that the child wore these polished shoes, along with his best clothes, to church services. Again the poet uses a simple phrase, "good shoes," to imply an unstated comparison with ordinary, weekday shoes. Furthermore, with those two words he makes it clear, without expressly stating, that it is Sunday.

The meaning of the poem remains somewhat open-ended, given that it closes with a question rather than a definitive statement. And the final question itself allows no easy interpretation. Since the poet repeats "What did I know, what did I know," we should take particular notice both of that line and of the line that follows. Repetition is one way a poet calls attention to an idea, and in a poem as short as "Those Winter Sundays," a repeated phrase has great significance. The repetition underscores a tone of uncertainty and disbelief in the poet's question. It is as though the poet, reflecting on his own ingratitude, has difficulty admitting his former ignorance or lack of feeling. On the other hand, the repeated phrase may also sound a note of

defiance. The poet may want to defend or excuse his thoughtlessness as an inevitable part of his immaturity. The ambiguity of the tone of this question may reflect the poet's own ambivalence toward his father and toward his childhood. For, while the poet may regret his indifference toward his father's acts of love, he still feels some of the pain of the "chronic angers" for which his father was also responsible.

Whatever the tone, this final question distinguishes the adult poet from the young child. The adult recognizes what the child could not, namely, the sacrifices that are bound up in a parent's love for his or her child. We should note that there is something strange about the poet calling love's actions "lonely" and "austere." These two words emphasize solitude and strictness or even unkindness, concepts that we would not normally associate with love. But this seeming contradiction is precisely what the poet wishes to portray. His idea of love is that it has many conflicting qualities and that it expresses itself in complex ways. Importantly, the poet chooses "offices" to refer to his father's actions and to stand as the poem's last word. This term can mean "services" or "functions," pointing to the idea that love serves its object. "Offices" also connotes "rites," especially in the sense of religious observances. The last word of the poem then implies that the father's deeds should be viewed as having all the ceremony and solemnity of a religious ritual. The end of the poem contains a moment of celebration, but it is a serious celebration, marked by a small sadness or remorse. Nevertheless, rather than foregrounding the Sunday customs of traditional religion, Hayden's poem honors the value of love's simple, domestic services in our lives.

Source: Jeannine Johnson, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

John S. Wright

In the following discussion, Wright examines the parallels and autobiographical tones in Robert Hayden's work.

In one of the quieter moments in the expanded edition of his last book, *American Journal,* Robert Hayden offers a rare, unmediated comment on the trajectory of his life: "When my fourth decade came, / I learned my name was not my name. / I felt deserted, mocked ... And the name on the book was dead, / like the life my mother fled, / like the life I might have known." Other names, unwanted names—"Four Eyes. And worse"—kept Hayden inside and isolated as a boy, plying his abysmally poor eyesight with books. So "Old Four Eyes fled / to safety in the danger zones / Tom Swift and Kubla Khan traversed." That world of the artist's imagination seems to be a place of refuge but is in fact a danger zone, Hayden later concluded, because art is both cruel and mysterious. The cruelty of art, he alleged, is that it mockingly outlasts those who make it. The mystery of art he voiced in a simple question: "Why does it mean so much that it can determine one's whole life, make a person sacrifice everything for it, even drive one mad?"

The mystery of his own art he was most sanguine about, saw himself, in fact—in that veiled, allusive way he usually treated the details of his own biography—as a "mystery boy" looking for kin. If Robert Earl Hayden had been a confessional poet, he would probably have made more capital out of a life rich with the dramatic tension he wanted his poems to have. He would have worked more pointedly the flamboyant ironies of a World War I era boyhood in the "Paradise Valley" section of Black Detroit. He would have exposed and explored how his work's almost ritual preoccupation with identity, with names, and with ambiguous realities reflected the bruising fact that "Robert Hayden" was his adoptive, not his legal name and that discovering what that "real" name was served as part of his initiation into fuller manhood. If the confessional mode had better fit him, he would have chronicled also the "burdens of consciousness" that his dual commitment to human freedom and artistic integrity made him bear; he would have logged the jagged confrontation with the Black Arts writers which ultimately turned his long tenure at Fisk University into a trial of words and which made him for a moment seem a naysayer to blackness and so become one of a younger generation's many scapegoat kings.

But Hayden was not a confessional poet like so many of his contemporaries because, as he acknowledged, he entered his own experiences so completely that he had no creative energy left afterward. He could admire the way that Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Michael Harper made poems out of devastating personal experiences; but he countered, in his own defense, that "reticence has *its* aesthetic values *too*." And so, with words at least, he wore the mask, and won in wearing it the detached control and objectivity without which poetic marvels like his most widely acclaimed poem, "Middle Passage," would not have been possible. From the apprentice work of his earliest book, *Heart Shape in the Dust* (1940),

to the closing lines of *American Journal,* he pushed toward the mastery of materials, outlook, and technique that would enable him to strike through the masks reality wore. And so he made himself, like the Malcolm X of his honorific poem "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz," one of Ahab's Native Sons, though rejecting Ahab.

The continuities in the progressive unmaskings, which Robert Hayden described as his "slim offerings over four decades," are striking. His absorption with the past, especially the black past, provided one axis of subject and theme for him—an absorption that brooked no lost Edens, no nostalgia, but which transformed archetype and artifact into a poetry of revelation. At the same time, he was drawn more to the dramas of human personality than to things or abstractions or philosophical ideas. In *American Journal,* as in all his books, the places, landscapes, and localities he recreates so minutely live primarily through his heroic and what he called "baroque" people—more often than not outsiders, pariahs, even losers. As he revealed in an interview with John O'Brien, Hayden thought of himself as a "symbolist of a kind," as a "realist who distrusts so-called reality," as a "romantic realist." And he couched his symbolist explorations of human suffering and transcendence in a world-view permeated by an omnipresent, though never obtrusive, "God-consciousness." Poetry, indeed all art, he felt, was "ultimately religious in the broadest sense of the term;" if poets have any calling beyond fulfilling the demands of their craft, he insisted, "it is to affirm the humane, the universal, the potentially divine in the human creature."

Hayden was explicit about his own motives in a little book, *How I Write,* which he published with Judson Philips and Lawson Carter in 1972: "I write poetry," he said, because

> I'm driven, impelled to make patterns of words in the special ways that poetry demands. Maybe whatever it is I'm trying to communicate I can most truthfully express in poems. I think I have other reasons, too. At best, though, I can make only very tentative statements, and they're subject to change without notice. I suppose I could say, with fear of contradicting myself later, that writing poetry is one way I have of coming to grips with both inner and external realities. I also think of my writing as a form of prayer—a prayer for illumination, perfection.

But he wasn't satisfied with any of this, thought it sounded pompous, high-falutin', though he knew it was about as close as he could come to an answer. The fuller answer, if more oblique, is projected, of course, in the body of his work. There

That world of the artist's imagination seems to be a place of refuge but is in fact a danger zone, Hayden later concluded, because art is both cruel and mysterious."

Robert Hayden the time-keeper, Robert Hayden the symbol-maker, Robert Hayden the believer, Robert Hayden the wrestler with language and form, all voice in concert "the deep immortal human wish" that man be "permitted to be man," that injustice, suffering, and violence must yield, along with the inability to love on which they feed, to what Hayden's Bahai prophet, Baha'u'llah, envisioned as the absolute, inescapable necessity for recognizing the fundamental oneness of mankind.

Far from embodying any naïve optimism or sentimental religiosity, Hayden's vision of the human predicament and of human possibility presents love as characteristically an *agon,* presents God and nature as beneficences shrouding caprice or indifference, presents our slow progress toward the godlike in man as a scourging, scarifying journey through maze and madness. That "voyage through death to life upon these shores" (which his "Middle Passage" chronicles, for example) discovers its metaphors for sin, sickness, and salvation in the historic matrix of the Atlantic slave trade and racial slavery. But the death wish, the masks, the phantasms that lure the crew and cargo of the slave ship *Amistad* figure no less potently in the timeless and seemingly antithetical "easeful azure" world of disquieting natural beauty into which the awestruck persona of Hayden's "The Diver" descends.

But lest we overstress the dark side of Hayden's poetic world, I should add that nothing in his work is *less* ambiguous, nothing *more* affirming of human hopes for illumination, perfection, and freedom than his gallery of portraits sketching the possibilities for heroic action in the face of even the most murderous and dispiriting forces. The flight *to* and fight *for* freedom dramatized in "Runagate Runagate," the rectifying resurrecting images in his

"Ballad of Nat Turner," the transcendent fortitude captured in his dedicatory sonnet "Frederick Douglass," the unbowed tradition of communal artistry celebrated in "Homage to the Empress of the Blues"—combine to create a lineage of heroic *presences* painted in rich hues and delivered from oppression and obscurity, presences to which all of us, at the level of will and aspiration, are kin....

The poetic inspiration behind Hayden's images of the heroic came early in his career and stayed late. The apprentice poems of *Heart-Shape in the Dust* were largely imitative of the themes and conventions of the New Negro Renaissance, and reflected a young poet still in search of his voice. These first poems nonetheless made the rich storehouse of legend and lore (acquired by Hayden as a folklore researcher for the Federal Writer's Project in the late thirties) into an enduring framework for later achievements. In this first book, his long mass chant "These Are My People," his portrait of gallows-bound slave rebel Gabriel Prosser, the blues-toned resilience he pictures in the "po' colored boy" of "Bachanale"—all offered shadings of the ordinary extraordinary heroic spirit that Hayden would continue to sing long after the formulaic stridency and vaguely socialistic ideology in which these poems were couched had disappeared from his poetic scheme.

During these formative years, Hayden absorbed and reconciled a variety of poetic influences—Dunbar, Cullen, Langston Hughes, Millay, Sandburg, Hart Crane, Stephen Vincent Benét, Eliot, and Yeats. In his second book, *The Lion and the Archer* (written with Myron O'Higgins and published in 1948), and in *Figures of Time* (1955) Hayden showed the impress of what he later called "a strategic experience" in his life: as a graduate student at the University of Michigan he had studied with W. H. Auden, and Auden had shown him his strengths and weaknesses as a poet in ways no one else had done. *The Lion and the Archer* and *Figures of Time* presented Hayden *as stylist* moving toward the baroque, the surreal, and away from what he rejected as "chauvinistic and doctrinaire." The dated dialect and colloquialism of his earliest work gave way now to dense, sculpted language which glittered and whirled like a prism. And though his folk themes and heroic motifs acquired a new kind of grandeur, his audience—his black readers in particular—were not uniformly pleased with the changes. *Heart-Shape in the Dust* had been praised in *Opportunity* magazine as "a true marriage of form and content, a happy fusion of mastery of technique with the rough and raw material of life." And Robert Hayden had been pictured to be a worthy challenger to Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown as an interpreter of Afro-American experience.

But as the scathingly sarcastic review in *Crisis* magazine of *The Lion and the Archer* showed, Hayden's movement toward a more complex and consciously modernist poetry exacted the high price of what would be a recurrent accusation: that he had abandoned his people and his political commitments for a poetry of arcane, overwrought diction and professorial pretension.

There is little doubt that Hayden's development as a poet has placed increasing demands on his readers; and Hayden himself—unceasingly self-critical—has acknowledged that he was inclined to be "perhaps oversensitive to the weight and color of words." But the poetic language and form he experimented with during that crucial phase of his career was no mere library poet's fixation on the ornamental and esoteric, nor any reclusive linguistic introversion. Hayden was seeking ways, on his own terms, to make the techniques and innovations of the New Poetry movement of the twenties and thirties his own, to bring *all* the resources of the English language—classical and vernacular, popular and academic—to bear on the illumination of Afro-American experience. He had "always wanted to be a Negro poet ... the same way Yeats is an Irish poet." So he had always resisted the private temptation and the public call to restrict himself to the treatment of exclusively black experience. Yet he felt it was no paradox that he consistently found his most intensely universal symbols for human striving and strife in the materials of Afro-American life.

So with the appearance in 1962 of his fourth book, *A Ballad of Remembrance,* it was a Robert Hayden "meditative, ironic, and richly human"—qualities he ascribes to Mark Van Doren in that volume's title poem—who, full-voiced and with consummate control, created from "the rocking loom of history" and the scenes of modern American life the sweeping mosaic of word, color, image, syntax, music, and portraiture that won him the grand prize for poetry at the first World Festival of Negro Arts at Dakar, Senegal, in 1966. With this book the recognition of Hayden's achievements on the terms he sought it—as a poet and not as "a species of race-relations man"—was assured by the brilliant performances of "The Diver," "The Ballad of Sue Ellen Westerfield," "An Inference of Mexico," "Tour 5," "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," "Witch Doctor," "Mourning Poem for the Queen

of Sunday," "Those Winter Sundays," "Middle Passage," "The Ballad of Nat Turner," "Runagate Runagate," and "Frederick Douglass."

Between 1962 and his death in February of 1980 Robert Hayden published five more books of poetry: *Selected Poems* in 1966, *Words in the Mourning Time* in 1970, *The Night-Blooming Cereus* in 1972, *Angle of Ascent* in 1975 (which recapped the work of the previous fifteen years); and finally the first edition of *American Journal* in 1978. In 1967, he published *Kaleidoscope: Poems by American Negro Poets;* and in 1971, *Afro-American Literature: An Introduction.* After twenty-two years' service at Fisk University, he went home to Michigan in 1968. He spent the final decade of his life dividing his time among his family, yet another generation of students, and a poetry that (after his favorite volume, *The Night-Blooming Cereus*), was less embossed, less erudite, more serene even when dealing with the violence and chaos of the times, unguardedly conversational, and measurably freer—freed now, as one perceptive reviewer realized, through an imagination given wings by wisdom, style, and the science of language.

That hard-won freedom permitted Hayden in *American Journal* to return with greater imaginative detachment and detail than before to the scenes of the childhood where, by his own acknowledgment, "cruel and dreadful things happened and I was exposed to all kinds of ... really soul-shattering experiences in the home and all around me." And indeed, the book's emotional center lies in the *Elegies for Paradise Valley* stirred by the poet-persona's memory of a seance his mother arranged with a counterfeit gypsy to contact the spirit of a murdered uncle. Returning with Uncle Crip from now vanished rooms and dead streets to flood the poet's mind are the names and faces that make Paradise Valley a human kaleidoscope. And here in kaleidoscopic whirl, carefully wrought but unobtrusive, are all of Hayden's trademarks as a poet: the sensuous delight with aural texture and rhythm; the fluid syntactic and semantic shifts between the spare and the ornamental, the colloquial and the esoteric; the line lengths expanded and contracted for sinuous and staccato effects; the haiku-like concentration of image. Limned with panoramic sweep and surreal juxtapositions amidst a progression of subtly shifting stanzaic forms, human character here takes on the intense coloration of the exotic, the idiosyncratic, the alien, yet is shaded as almost always in Hayden's work by the common bonds of dying, of loving, and of evil. Hayden's persona, whose first remembrance is of a junkie dying in maggots below his bedroom window, closes the eight-part reverie with a recollection of his own guilty boyhood impulses and his ruefully imagining himself "the devil's own rag babydoll."...

Michael Harper (one of the two "sustainers" to whom *American Journal* is dedicated) described Robert Hayden in a recent tribute as "a man of considered reserve, with an unsuppressible elegance, his bow-ties, watch-chain and old man's comforts giving him the glow of a courtly preacher summoned to give the word, and well he did." That word, at the end, was a question for the Furies that drove this "mystery boy," who had looked so reverently, so transfiguringly, for kin and who made his fluent prayers for illumination and perfection seem so well answered.

Source: John S. Wright, "Homage to a Mystery Boy," in *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Winter, 1982 pp. 904–11.

Source

Wright, John S., "Homage to a Mystery Boy," in *The Georgia Review*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 4, Winter, 1982, pp. 904-11.

For Further Study

Barksdale, Richard, and Kenneth Kinnamon, *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology*, New York: The MacMillian Co., 1972.

Published during Hayden's lifetime, this work shows his strained politeness. The authors recognize Hayden as a major poetic talent but seem confused about how to fit him in as a "black writer," which was the effect Hayden strove for.

Cooke, Michael G., *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

An interesting comparison is made here between Hayden and Alice Walker, whose works show a similar world view.

Williams, Pontheolla T., *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Smith's thorough biography in the beginning of this book gives more helpful background than most critical analyses do. This is one of the most complete analyses of Hayden's life and works.

Glossary of Literary Terms

A

Abstract: Used as a noun, the term refers to a short summary or outline of a longer work. As an adjective applied to writing or literary works, abstract refers to words or phrases that name things not knowable through the five senses.

Absurd, Theater of the: See *Theater of the Absurd*

Absurdism: See *Theater of the Absurd*

Accent: The emphasis or stress placed on a syllable in poetry. Traditional poetry commonly uses patterns of accented and unaccented syllables (known as feet) that create distinct rhythms. Much modern poetry uses less formal arrangements that create a sense of freedom and spontaneity.

Act: A major section of a play. Acts are divided into varying numbers of shorter scenes. From ancient times to the nineteenth century plays were generally constructed of five acts, but modern works typically consist of one, two, or three acts.

***Acto*:** A one-act Chicano theater piece developed out of collective improvisation.

Aestheticism: A literary and artistic movement of the nineteenth century. Followers of the movement believed that art should not be mixed with social, political, or moral teaching. The statement "art for art's sake" is a good summary of aestheticism. The movement had its roots in France, but it gained widespread importance in England in the last half of the nineteenth century, where it helped change the Victorian practice of including moral lessons in literature.

Affective Fallacy: An error in judging the merits or faults of a work of literature. The "error" results from stressing the importance of the work's effect upon the reader—that is, how it makes a reader "feel" emotionally, what it does as a literary work—instead of stressing its inner qualities as a created object, or what it "is."

Age of Johnson: The period in English literature between 1750 and 1798, named after the most prominent literary figure of the age, Samuel Johnson. Works written during this time are noted for their emphasis on "sensibility," or emotional quality. These works formed a transition between the rational works of the Age of Reason, or Neoclassical period, and the emphasis on individual feelings and responses of the Romantic period.

Age of Reason: See *Neoclassicism*

Age of Sensibility: See *Age of Johnson*

Agrarians: A group of Southern American writers of the 1930s and 1940s who fostered an economic and cultural program for the South based on agriculture, in opposition to the industrial society of the North. The term can refer to any group that promotes the value of farm life and agricultural society.

Alexandrine Meter: See *Meter*

Allegory: A narrative technique in which characters representing things or abstract ideas are used

to convey a message or teach a lesson. Allegory is typically used to teach moral, ethical, or religious lessons but is sometimes used for satiric or political purposes.

Alliteration: A poetic device where the first consonant sounds or any vowel sounds in words or syllables are repeated.

Allusion: A reference to a familiar literary or historical person or event, used to make an idea more easily understood.

Amerind Literature: The writing and oral traditions of Native Americans. Native American literature was originally passed on by word of mouth, so it consisted largely of stories and events that were easily memorized. Amerind prose is often rhythmic like poetry because it was recited to the beat of a ceremonial drum.

Analogy: A comparison of two things made to explain something unfamiliar through its similarities to something familiar, or to prove one point based on the acceptedness of another. Similes and metaphors are types of analogies.

Anapest: See *Foot*

Angry Young Men: A group of British writers of the 1950s whose work expressed bitterness and disillusionment with society. Common to their work is an anti-hero who rebels against a corrupt social order and strives for personal integrity.

Antagonist: The major character in a narrative or drama who works against the hero or protagonist.

Anthropomorphism: The presentation of animals or objects in human shape or with human characteristics. The term is derived from the Greek word for "human form."

Anti-hero: A central character in a work of literature who lacks traditional heroic qualities such as courage, physical prowess, and fortitude. Anti-heros typically distrust conventional values and are unable to commit themselves to any ideals. They generally feel helpless in a world over which they have no control. Anti-heroes usually accept, and often celebrate, their positions as social outcasts.

Antimasque: See *Masque*

Anti-novel: A term coined by French critic Jean-Paul Sartre. It refers to any experimental work of fiction that avoids the familiar conventions of the novel. The anti-novel usually fragments and distorts the experience of its characters, forcing the reader to construct the reality of the story from a disordered narrative.

Antithesis: The antithesis of something is its direct opposite. In literature, the use of antithesis as a figure of speech results in two statements that show a contrast through the balancing of two opposite ideas. Technically, it is the second portion of the statement that is defined as the "antithesis"; the first portion is the "thesis."

Apocrypha: Writings tentatively attributed to an author but not proven or universally accepted to be their works. The term was originally applied to certain books of the Bible that were not considered inspired and so were not included in the "sacred canon."

Apollonian and Dionysian: The two impulses believed to guide authors of dramatic tragedy. The Apollonian impulse is named after Apollo, the Greek god of light and beauty and the symbol of intellectual order. The Dionysian impulse is named after Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and the symbol of the unrestrained forces of nature. The Apollonian impulse is to create a rational, harmonious world, while the Dionysian is to express the irrational forces of personality.

Apostrophe: A statement, question, or request addressed to an inanimate object or concept or to a nonexistent or absent person.

Apprenticeship Novel: See *Bildungsroman*

Archetype: The word archetype is commonly used to describe an original pattern or model from which all other things of the same kind are made. This term was introduced to literary criticism from the psychology of Carl Jung. It expresses Jung's theory that behind every person's "unconscious," or repressed memories of the past, lies the "collective unconscious" of the human race: memories of the countless typical experiences of our ancestors. These memories are said to prompt illogical associations that trigger powerful emotions in the reader. Often, the emotional process is primitive, even primordial. Archetypes are the literary images that grow out of the "collective unconscious." They appear in literature as incidents and plots that repeat basic patterns of life. They may also appear as stereotyped characters.

Argument: The argument of a work is the author's subject matter or principal idea.

Aristotelian Criticism: Specifically, the method of evaluating and analyzing tragedy formulated by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in his *Poetics*. More generally, the term indicates any form of criticism that follows Aristotle's views. Aristotelian criticism focuses on the form and logical structure

of a work, apart from its historical or social context, in contrast to "Platonic Criticism," which stresses the usefulness of art.

Art for Art's Sake: See *Aestheticism*

Aside: A comment made by a stage performer that is intended to be heard by the audience but supposedly not by other characters.

Assonance: The repetition of similar vowel sounds in poetry.

Audience: The people for whom a piece of literature is written. Authors usually write with a certain audience in mind, for example, children, members of a religious or ethnic group, or colleagues in a professional field. The term "audience" also applies to the people who gather to see or hear any performance, including plays, poetry readings, speeches, and concerts.

Autobiography: A connected narrative in which an individual tells his or her life story.

Automatic Writing: Writing carried out without a preconceived plan in an effort to capture every random thought. Authors who engage in automatic writing typically do not revise their work, preferring instead to preserve the revealed truth and beauty of spontaneous expression.

***Avant-garde*:** A French term meaning "vanguard." It is used in literary criticism to describe new writing that rejects traditional approaches to literature in favor of innovations in style or content.

B

Ballad: A short poem that tells a simple story and has a repeated refrain. Ballads were originally intended to be sung. Early ballads, known as folk ballads, were passed down through generations, so their authors are often unknown. Later ballads composed by known authors are called literary ballads.

Baroque: A term used in literary criticism to describe literature that is complex or ornate in style or diction. Baroque works typically express tension, anxiety, and violent emotion. The term "Baroque Age" designates a period in Western European literature beginning in the late sixteenth century and ending about one hundred years later. Works of this period often mirror the qualities of works more generally associated with the label "baroque" and sometimes feature elaborate conceits.

Baroque Age: See *Baroque*

Baroque Period: See *Baroque*

Beat Generation: See *Beat Movement*

Beat Movement: A period featuring a group of American poets and novelists of the 1950s and 1960s—including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, William S. Burroughs, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti—who rejected established social and literary values. Using such techniques as stream of consciousness writing and jazz-influenced free verse and focusing on unusual or abnormal states of mind—generated by religious ecstasy or the use of drugs—the Beat writers aimed to create works that were unconventional in both form and subject matter.

Beat Poets: See *Beat Movement*

Beats, The: See *Beat Movement*

***Belles- lettres*:** A French term meaning "fine letters" or "beautiful writing." It is often used as a synonym for literature, typically referring to imaginative and artistic rather than scientific or expository writing. Current usage sometimes restricts the meaning to light or humorous writing and appreciative essays about literature.

***Bildungsroman*:** A German word meaning "novel of development." The *bildungsroman* is a study of the maturation of a youthful character, typically brought about through a series of social or sexual encounters that lead to self-awareness. *Bildungsroman* is used interchangeably with *erziehungsroman*, a novel of initiation and education. When a *bildungsroman* is concerned with the development of an artist (as in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), it is often termed a *kunstlerroman*.

Biography: A connected narrative that tells a person's life story. Biographies typically aim to be objective and closely detailed.

Black Aesthetic Movement: A period of artistic and literary development among African Americans in the 1960s and early 1970s. This was the first major African-American artistic movement since the Harlem Renaissance and was closely paralleled by the civil rights and black power movements. The black aesthetic writers attempted to produce works of art that would be meaningful to the black masses. Key figures in black aesthetics included one of its founders, poet and playwright Amiri Baraka, formerly known as LeRoi Jones; poet and essayist Haki R. Madhubuti, formerly Don L. Lee; poet and playwright Sonia Sanchez; and dramatist Ed Bullins.

Black Arts Movement: See *Black Aesthetic Movement*

Black Comedy: See *Black Humor*

Black Humor: Writing that places grotesque elements side by side with humorous ones in an attempt to shock the reader, forcing him or her to laugh at the horrifying reality of a disordered world.

Black Mountain School: Black Mountain College and three of its instructors—Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Charles Olson—were all influential in projective verse, so poets working in projective verse are now referred as members of the Black Mountain school.

Blank Verse: Loosely, any unrhymed poetry, but more generally, unrhymed iambic pentameter verse (composed of lines of five two-syllable feet with the first syllable accented, the second unaccented). Blank verse has been used by poets since the Renaissance for its flexibility and its graceful, dignified tone.

Bloomsbury Group: A group of English writers, artists, and intellectuals who held informal artistic and philosophical discussions in Bloomsbury, a district of London, from around 1907 to the early 1930s. The Bloomsbury Group held no uniform philosophical beliefs but did commonly express an aversion to moral prudery and a desire for greater social tolerance.

***Bon Mot*:** A French term meaning "good word." A *bon mot* is a witty remark or clever observation.

Breath Verse: See *Projective Verse*

Burlesque: Any literary work that uses exaggeration to make its subject appear ridiculous, either by treating a trivial subject with profound seriousness or by treating a dignified subject frivolously. The word "burlesque" may also be used as an adjective, as in "burlesque show," to mean "striptease act."

C

Cadence: The natural rhythm of language caused by the alternation of accented and unaccented syllables. Much modern poetry—notably free verse—deliberately manipulates cadence to create complex rhythmic effects.

Caesura: A pause in a line of poetry, usually occurring near the middle. It typically corresponds to a break in the natural rhythm or sense of the line but is sometimes shifted to create special meanings or rhythmic effects.

***Canzone*:** A short Italian or Provencal lyric poem, commonly about love and often set to music. The *canzone* has no set form but typically contains five or six stanzas made up of seven to twenty lines of eleven syllables each. A shorter, five- to ten-line "envoy," or concluding stanza, completes the poem.

***Carpe Diem*:** A Latin term meaning "seize the day." This is a traditional theme of poetry, especially lyrics. A *carpe diem* poem advises the reader or the person it addresses to live for today and enjoy the pleasures of the moment.

Catharsis: The release or purging of unwanted emotions—specifically fear and pity—brought about by exposure to art. The term was first used by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in his *Poetics* to refer to the desired effect of tragedy on spectators.

Celtic Renaissance: A period of Irish literary and cultural history at the end of the nineteenth century. Followers of the movement aimed to create a romantic vision of Celtic myth and legend. The most significant works of the Celtic Renaissance typically present a dreamy, unreal world, usually in reaction against the reality of contemporary problems.

Celtic Twilight: See *Celtic Renaissance*

Character: Broadly speaking, a person in a literary work. The actions of characters are what constitute the plot of a story, novel, or poem. There are numerous types of characters, ranging from simple, stereotypical figures to intricate, multifaceted ones. In the techniques of anthropomorphism and personification, animals—and even places or things—can assume aspects of character. "Characterization" is the process by which an author creates vivid, believable characters in a work of art. This may be done in a variety of ways, including (1) direct description of the character by the narrator; (2) the direct presentation of the speech, thoughts, or actions of the character; and (3) the responses of other characters to the character. The term "character" also refers to a form originated by the ancient Greek writer Theophrastus that later became popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is a short essay or sketch of a person who prominently displays a specific attribute or quality, such as miserliness or ambition.

Characterization: See *Character*

Chorus: In ancient Greek drama, a group of actors who commented on and interpreted the unfolding action on the stage. Initially the chorus was a major component of the presentation, but over time it became less significant, with its numbers reduced and its role eventually limited to commentary between acts. By the sixteenth century the chorus—

if employed at all—was typically a single person who provided a prologue and an epilogue and occasionally appeared between acts to introduce or underscore an important event.

Chronicle: A record of events presented in chronological order. Although the scope and level of detail provided varies greatly among the chronicles surviving from ancient times, some, such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* feature vivid descriptions and a lively recounting of events. During the Elizabethan Age, many dramas—appropriately called "chronicle plays"—were based on material from chronicles.

Classical: In its strictest definition in literary criticism, classicism refers to works of ancient Greek or Roman literature. The term may also be used to describe a literary work of recognized importance (a "classic") from any time period or literature that exhibits the traits of classicism.

Classicism: A term used in literary criticism to describe critical doctrines that have their roots in ancient Greek and Roman literature, philosophy, and art. Works associated with classicism typically exhibit restraint on the part of the author, unity of design and purpose, clarity, simplicity, logical organization, and respect for tradition.

Climax: The turning point in a narrative, the moment when the conflict is at its most intense. Typically, the structure of stories, novels, and plays is one of rising action, in which tension builds to the climax, followed by falling action, in which tension lessens as the story moves to its conclusion.

Colloquialism: A word, phrase, or form of pronunciation that is acceptable in casual conversation but not in formal, written communication. It is considered more acceptable than slang.

Comedy: One of two major types of drama, the other being tragedy. Its aim is to amuse, and it typically ends happily. Comedy assumes many forms, such as farce and burlesque, and uses a variety of techniques, from parody to satire. In a restricted sense the term comedy refers only to dramatic presentations, but in general usage it is commonly applied to nondramatic works as well.

Comedy of Manners: A play about the manners and conventions of an aristocratic, highly sophisticated society. The characters are usually types rather than individualized personalities, and plot is less important than atmosphere. Such plays were an important aspect of late seventeenth-century English comedy. The comedy of manners was revived in the eighteenth century by Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, enjoyed a second revival in the late nineteenth century, and has endured into the twentieth century.

Comic Relief: The use of humor to lighten the mood of a serious or tragic story, especially in plays. The technique is very common in Elizabethan works, and can be an integral part of the plot or simply a brief event designed to break the tension of the scene.

Coming of Age Novel: See *Bildungsroman*

***Commedia dell'arte*:** An Italian term meaning "the comedy of guilds" or "the comedy of professional actors." This form of dramatic comedy was popular in Italy during the sixteenth century. Actors were assigned stock roles (such as Pulcinella, the stupid servant, or Pantalone, the old merchant) and given a basic plot to follow, but all dialogue was improvised. The roles were rigidly typed and the plots were formulaic, usually revolving around young lovers who thwarted their elders and attained wealth and happiness. A rigid convention of the *commedia dell'arte* is the periodic intrusion of Harlequin, who interrupts the play with low buffoonery.

Complaint: A lyric poem, popular in the Renaissance, in which the speaker expresses sorrow about his or her condition. Typically, the speaker's sadness is caused by an unresponsive lover, but some complaints cite other sources of unhappiness, such as poverty or fate.

Conceit: A clever and fanciful metaphor, usually expressed through elaborate and extended comparison, that presents a striking parallel between two seemingly dissimilar things—for example, elaborately comparing a beautiful woman to an object like a garden or the sun. The conceit was a popular device throughout the Elizabethan Age and Baroque Age and was the principal technique of the seventeenth-century English metaphysical poets. This usage of the word conceit is unrelated to the best-known definition of conceit as an arrogant attitude or behavior.

Concrete: Concrete is the opposite of abstract, and refers to a thing that actually exists or a description that allows the reader to experience an object or concept with the senses.

Concrete Poetry: Poetry in which visual elements play a large part in the poetic effect. Punctuation marks, letters, or words are arranged on a page to form a visual design: a cross, for example, or a bumblebee.

Confessional Poetry: A form of poetry in which the poet reveals very personal, intimate, sometimes shocking information about himself or herself.

Conflict: The conflict in a work of fiction is the issue to be resolved in the story. It usually occurs between two characters, the protagonist and the antagonist, or between the protagonist and society or the protagonist and himself or herself.

Connotation: The impression that a word gives beyond its defined meaning. Connotations may be universally understood or may be significant only to a certain group.

Consonance: Consonance occurs in poetry when words appearing at the ends of two or more verses have similar final consonant sounds but have final vowel sounds that differ, as with "stuff" and "off."

Convention: Any widely accepted literary device, style, or form.

***Corrido*:** A Mexican ballad.

Couplet: Two lines of poetry with the same rhyme and meter, often expressing a complete and self-contained thought.

Criticism: The systematic study and evaluation of literary works, usually based on a specific method or set of principles. An important part of literary studies since ancient times, the practice of criticism has given rise to numerous theories, methods, and "schools," sometimes producing conflicting, even contradictory, interpretations of literature in general as well as of individual works. Even such basic issues as what constitutes a poem or a novel have been the subject of much criticism over the centuries.

D

Dactyl: See *Foot*

Dadaism: A protest movement in art and literature founded by Tristan Tzara in 1916. Followers of the movement expressed their outrage at the destruction brought about by World War I by revolting against numerous forms of social convention. The Dadaists presented works marked by calculated madness and flamboyant nonsense. They stressed total freedom of expression, commonly through primitive displays of emotion and illogical, often senseless, poetry. The movement ended shortly after the war, when it was replaced by surrealism.

Decadent: See *Decadents*

Decadents: The followers of a nineteenth-century literary movement that had its beginnings in French aestheticism. Decadent literature displays a fascination with perverse and morbid states; a search for novelty and sensation—the "new thrill"; a preoccupation with mysticism; and a belief in the senselessness of human existence. The movement is closely associated with the doctrine Art for Art's Sake. The term "decadence" is sometimes used to denote a decline in the quality of art or literature following a period of greatness.

Deconstruction: A method of literary criticism developed by Jacques Derrida and characterized by multiple conflicting interpretations of a given work. Deconstructionists consider the impact of the language of a work and suggest that the true meaning of the work is not necessarily the meaning that the author intended.

Deduction: The process of reaching a conclusion through reasoning from general premises to a specific premise.

Denotation: The definition of a word, apart from the impressions or feelings it creates in the reader.

***Denouement*:** A French word meaning "the unknotting." In literary criticism, it denotes the resolution of conflict in fiction or drama. The *denouement* follows the climax and provides an outcome to the primary plot situation as well as an explanation of secondary plot complications. The *denouement* often involves a character's recognition of his or her state of mind or moral condition.

Description: Descriptive writing is intended to allow a reader to picture the scene or setting in which the action of a story takes place. The form this description takes often evokes an intended emotional response—a dark, spooky graveyard will evoke fear, and a peaceful, sunny meadow will evoke calmness.

***Deus ex machina* :** A Latin term meaning "god out of a machine." In Greek drama, a god was often lowered onto the stage by a mechanism of some kind to rescue the hero or untangle the plot. By extension, the term refers to any artificial device or coincidence used to bring about a convenient and simple solution to a plot. This is a common device in melodramas and includes such fortunate circumstances as the sudden receipt of a legacy to save the family farm or a last-minute stay of execution. The *deus ex machina* invariably rewards the virtuous and punishes evildoers.

Dialogue: In its widest sense, dialogue is simply conversation between people in a literary work; in its most restricted sense, it refers specifically to the speech of characters in a drama. As a specific lit-

erary genre, a "dialogue" is a composition in which characters debate an issue or idea.

Diary: A personal written record of daily events and thoughts. As private documents, diaries are supposedly not intended for an audience, but some, such as those of Samuel Pepys and Anais Nin, are known for their high literary quality.

Diction: The selection and arrangement of words in a literary work. Either or both may vary depending on the desired effect. There are four general types of diction: "formal," used in scholarly or lofty writing; "informal," used in relaxed but educated conversation; "colloquial," used in everyday speech; and "slang," containing newly coined words and other terms not accepted in formal usage.

Didactic: A term used to describe works of literature that aim to teach some moral, religious, political, or practical lesson. Although didactic elements are often found in artistically pleasing works, the term "didactic" usually refers to literature in which the message is more important than the form. The term may also be used to criticize a work that the critic finds "overly didactic," that is, heavy-handed in its delivery of a lesson.

Dimeter: See *Meter*

Dionysian: See *Apollonian and Dionysian*

***Discordia concours*:** A Latin phrase meaning "discord in harmony." The term was coined by the eighteenth-century English writer Samuel Johnson to describe "a combination of dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike." Johnson created the expression by reversing a phrase by the Latin poet Horace.

Dissonance: A combination of harsh or jarring sounds, especially in poetry. Although such combinations may be accidental, poets sometimes intentionally make them to achieve particular effects. Dissonance is also sometimes used to refer to close but not identical rhymes. When this is the case, the word functions as a synonym for consonance.

Documentary: A work that features a large amount of documentary material such as newspaper stories, trial transcripts, and legal reports. Such works can include fictionalized segments or may contain a fictional story in which the author incorporates real-life information or events; these are referred to as documentary novels.

Documentary Novel: See *Documentary*

***Doppelganger*:** A literary technique by which a character is duplicated (usually in the form of an alter ego, though sometimes as a ghostly counterpart) or divided into two distinct, usually opposite personalities. The use of this character device is widespread in nineteenth- and twentieth- century literature, and indicates a growing awareness among authors that the "self" is really a composite of many "selves."

***Double Entendre*:** A corruption of a French phrase meaning "double meaning." The term is used to indicate a word or phrase that is deliberately ambiguous, especially when one of the meanings is risque or improper.

Double, The: See *Doppelganger*

Draft: Any preliminary version of a written work. An author may write dozens of drafts which are revised to form the final work, or he or she may write only one, with few or no revisions.

Drama: In its widest sense, a drama is any work designed to be presented by actors on a stage. Similarly, "drama" denotes a broad literary genre that includes a variety of forms, from pageant and spectacle to tragedy and comedy, as well as countless types and subtypes. More commonly in modern usage, however, a drama is a work that treats serious subjects and themes but does not aim at the grandeur of tragedy. This use of the term originated with the eighteenth-century French writer Denis Diderot, who used the word *drame* to designate his plays about middle- class life; thus "drama" typically features characters of a less exalted stature than those of tragedy.

Dramatic Irony: Occurs when the audience of a play or the reader of a work of literature knows something that a character in the work itself does not know. The irony is in the contrast between the intended meaning of the statements or actions of a character and the additional information understood by the audience.

Dramatic Monologue: See *Monologue*

Dramatic Poetry: Any lyric work that employs elements of drama such as dialogue, conflict, or characterization, but excluding works that are intended for stage presentation.

***Dramatis Personae*:** The characters in a work of literature, particularly a drama.

Dream Allegory: See *Dream Vision*

Dream Vision: A literary convention, chiefly of the Middle Ages. In a dream vision a story is presented as a literal dream of the narrator. This device was commonly used to teach moral and religious lessons.

Dystopia: An imaginary place in a work of fiction where the characters lead dehumanized, fearful lives.

E

Eclogue: In classical literature, a poem featuring rural themes and structured as a dialogue among shepherds. Eclogues often took specific poetic forms, such as elegies or love poems. Some were written as the soliloquy of a shepherd. In later centuries, "eclogue" came to refer to any poem that was in the pastoral tradition or that had a dialogue or monologue structure.

Edwardian: Describes cultural conventions identified with the period of the reign of Edward VII of England (1901-1910). Writers of the Edwardian Age typically displayed a strong reaction against the propriety and conservatism of the Victorian Age. Their work often exhibits distrust of authority in religion, politics, and art and expresses strong doubts about the soundness of conventional values.

Edwardian Age: See *Edwardian*

Electra Complex: A daughter's amorous obsession with her father.

Elegy: A lyric poem that laments the death of a person or the eventual death of all people. In a conventional elegy, set in a classical world, the poet and subject are spoken of as shepherds. In modern criticism, the word elegy is often used to refer to a poem that is melancholy or mournfully contemplative.

Elizabethan Age: A period of great economic growth, religious controversy, and nationalism closely associated with the reign of Elizabeth I of England (1558-1603). The Elizabethan Age is considered a part of the general renaissance—that is, the flowering of arts and literature—that took place in Europe during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. The era is considered the golden age of English literature. The most important dramas in English and a great deal of lyric poetry were produced during this period, and modern English criticism began around this time.

Elizabethan Drama: English comic and tragic plays produced during the Renaissance, or more narrowly, those plays written during the last years of and few years after Queen Elizabeth's reign. William Shakespeare is considered an Elizabethan dramatist in the broader sense, although most of his work was produced during the reign of James I.

Empathy: A sense of shared experience, including emotional and physical feelings, with someone or something other than oneself. Empathy is often used to describe the response of a reader to a literary character.

English Sonnet: See *Sonnet*

Enjambment: The running over of the sense and structure of a line of verse or a couplet into the following verse or couplet.

Enlightenment, The: An eighteenth-century philosophical movement. It began in France but had a wide impact throughout Europe and America. Thinkers of the Enlightenment valued reason and believed that both the individual and society could achieve a state of perfection. Corresponding to this essentially humanist vision was a resistance to religious authority.

Epic: A long narrative poem about the adventures of a hero of great historic or legendary importance. The setting is vast and the action is often given cosmic significance through the intervention of supernatural forces such as gods, angels, or demons. Epics are typically written in a classical style of grand simplicity with elaborate metaphors and allusions that enhance the symbolic importance of a hero's adventures.

Epic Simile: See *Homeric Simile*

Epic Theater: A theory of theatrical presentation developed by twentieth-century German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Brecht created a type of drama that the audience could view with complete detachment. He used what he termed "alienation effects" to create an emotional distance between the audience and the action on stage. Among these effects are: short, self- contained scenes that keep the play from building to a cathartic climax; songs that comment on the action; and techniques of acting that prevent the actor from developing an emotional identity with his role.

Epigram: A saying that makes the speaker's point quickly and concisely.

Epilogue: A concluding statement or section of a literary work. In dramas, particularly those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the epilogue is a closing speech, often in verse, delivered by an actor at the end of a play and spoken directly to the audience.

Epiphany: A sudden revelation of truth inspired by a seemingly trivial incident.

Episode: An incident that forms part of a story and is significantly related to it. Episodes may be ei-

ther self- contained narratives or events that depend on a larger context for their sense and importance.

Episodic Plot: See *Plot*

Epistolary Novel: A novel in the form of letters. The form was particularly popular in the eighteenth century.

Epitaph: An inscription on a tomb or tombstone, or a verse written on the occasion of a person's death. Epitaphs may be serious or humorous.

Epithalamion: A song or poem written to honor and commemorate a marriage ceremony.

Epithalamium: See *Epithalamion*

Epithet: A word or phrase, often disparaging or abusive, that expresses a character trait of someone or something.

Erziehungsroman : See *Bildungsroman*

Essay: A prose composition with a focused subject of discussion. The term was coined by Michel de Montaigne to describe his 1580 collection of brief, informal reflections on himself and on various topics relating to human nature. An essay can also be a long, systematic discourse.

Exempla: See *Exemplum*

Exemplum: A tale with a moral message. This form of literary sermonizing flourished during the Middle Ages, when *exempla* appeared in collections known as "example-books."

Existentialism: A predominantly twentieth-century philosophy concerned with the nature and perception of human existence. There are two major strains of existentialist thought: atheistic and Christian. Followers of atheistic existentialism believe that the individual is alone in a godless universe and that the basic human condition is one of suffering and loneliness. Nevertheless, because there are no fixed values, individuals can create their own characters—indeed, they can shape themselves—through the exercise of free will. The atheistic strain culminates in and is popularly associated with the works of Jean-Paul Sartre. The Christian existentialists, on the other hand, believe that only in God may people find freedom from life's anguish. The two strains hold certain beliefs in common: that existence cannot be fully understood or described through empirical effort; that anguish is a universal element of life; that individuals must bear responsibility for their actions; and that there is no common standard of behavior or perception for religious and ethical matters.

Expatriates: See *Expatriatism*

Expatriatism: The practice of leaving one's country to live for an extended period in another country.

Exposition: Writing intended to explain the nature of an idea, thing, or theme. Expository writing is often combined with description, narration, or argument. In dramatic writing, the exposition is the introductory material which presents the characters, setting, and tone of the play.

Expressionism: An indistinct literary term, originally used to describe an early twentieth-century school of German painting. The term applies to almost any mode of unconventional, highly subjective writing that distorts reality in some way.

Extended Monologue: See *Monologue*

F

Fable: A prose or verse narrative intended to convey a moral. Animals or inanimate objects with human characteristics often serve as characters in fables.

Fairy Tales: Short narratives featuring mythical beings such as fairies, elves, and sprites. These tales originally belonged to the folklore of a particular nation or region, such as those collected in Germany by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.

Falling Action: See *Denouement*

Fantasy: A literary form related to mythology and folklore. Fantasy literature is typically set in nonexistent realms and features supernatural beings.

Farce: A type of comedy characterized by broad humor, outlandish incidents, and often vulgar subject matter.

Feet: See *Foot*

Feminine Rhyme: See *Rhyme*

Femme fatale: A French phrase with the literal translation "fatal woman." A *femme fatale* is a sensuous, alluring woman who often leads men into danger or trouble.

Festschrift: A collection of essays written in honor of a distinguished scholar and presented to him or her to mark some special occasion.

Fiction: Any story that is the product of imagination rather than a documentation of fact. characters and events in such narratives may be based in real life but their ultimate form and configuration is a creation of the author.

Figurative Language: A technique in writing in which the author temporarily interrupts the order, construction, or meaning of the writing for a par-

ticular effect. This interruption takes the form of one or more figures of speech such as hyperbole, irony, or simile. Figurative language is the opposite of literal language, in which every word is truthful, accurate, and free of exaggeration or embellishment.

Figures of Speech: Writing that differs from customary conventions for construction, meaning, order, or significance for the purpose of a special meaning or effect. There are two major types of figures of speech: rhetorical figures, which do not make changes in the meaning of the words, and tropes, which do.

***Fin de siecle*:** A French term meaning "end of the century." The term is used to denote the last decade of the nineteenth century, a transition period when writers and other artists abandoned old conventions and looked for new techniques and objectives.

First Person: See *Point of View*

Flashback: A device used in literature to present action that occurred before the beginning of the story. Flashbacks are often introduced as the dreams or recollections of one or more characters.

Foil: A character in a work of literature whose physical or psychological qualities contrast strongly with, and therefore highlight, the corresponding qualities of another character.

Folk Ballad: See *Ballad*

Folklore: Traditions and myths preserved in a culture or group of people. Typically, these are passed on by word of mouth in various forms—such as legends, songs, and proverbs—or preserved in customs and ceremonies. This term was first used by W. J. Thoms in 1846.

Folktale: A story originating in oral tradition. Folktales fall into a variety of categories, including legends, ghost stories, fairy tales, fables, and anecdotes based on historical figures and events.

Foot: The smallest unit of rhythm in a line of poetry. In English-language poetry, a foot is typically one accented syllable combined with one or two unaccented syllables.

Foreshadowing: A device used in literature to create expectation or to set up an explanation of later developments.

Form: The pattern or construction of a work which identifies its genre and distinguishes it from other genres.

Formalism: In literary criticism, the belief that literature should follow prescribed rules of construction, such as those that govern the sonnet form.

Fourteener Meter: See *Meter*

Free Verse: Poetry that lacks regular metrical and rhyme patterns but that tries to capture the cadences of everyday speech. The form allows a poet to exploit a variety of rhythmical effects within a single poem.

Futurism: A flamboyant literary and artistic movement that developed in France, Italy, and Russia from 1908 through the 1920s. Futurist theater and poetry abandoned traditional literary forms. In their place, followers of the movement attempted to achieve total freedom of expression through bizarre imagery and deformed or newly invented words. The Futurists were self-consciously modern artists who attempted to incorporate the appearances and sounds of modern life into their work.

G

Genre: A category of literary work. In critical theory, genre may refer to both the content of a given work—tragedy, comedy, pastoral—and to its form, such as poetry, novel, or drama.

Genteel Tradition: A term coined by critic George Santayana to describe the literary practice of certain late nineteenth- century American writers, especially New Englanders. Followers of the Genteel Tradition emphasized conventionality in social, religious, moral, and literary standards.

Georgian Age: See *Georgian Poets*

Georgian Period: See *Georgian Poets*

Georgian Poets: A loose grouping of English poets during the years 1912-1922. The Georgians reacted against certain literary schools and practices, especially Victorian wordiness, turn-of-the-century aestheticism, and contemporary urban realism. In their place, the Georgians embraced the nineteenth-century poetic practices of William Wordsworth and the other Lake Poets.

Georgic: A poem about farming and the farmer's way of life, named from Virgil's *Georgics.*

Gilded Age: A period in American history during the 1870s characterized by political corruption and materialism. A number of important novels of social and political criticism were written during this time.

Gothic: See *Gothicism*

Gothicism: In literary criticism, works characterized by a taste for the medieval or morbidly attractive. A gothic novel prominently features elements of horror, the supernatural, gloom, and violence: clanking chains, terror, charnel houses,

ghosts, medieval castles, and mysteriously slamming doors. The term "gothic novel" is also applied to novels that lack elements of the traditional Gothic setting but that create a similar atmosphere of terror or dread.

Gothic Novel: See *Gothicism*

Graveyard School: A group of eighteenth-century English poets who wrote long, picturesque meditations on death. Their works were designed to cause the reader to ponder immortality.

Great Chain of Being: The belief that all things and creatures in nature are organized in a hierarchy from inanimate objects at the bottom to God at the top. This system of belief was popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Grotesque: In literary criticism, the subject matter of a work or a style of expression characterized by exaggeration, deformity, freakishness, and disorder. The grotesque often includes an element of comic absurdity.

H

***Haiku*:** The shortest form of Japanese poetry, constructed in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables respectively. The message of a *haiku* poem usually centers on some aspect of spirituality and provokes an emotional response in the reader.

Half Rhyme: See *Consonance*

***Hamartia*:** In tragedy, the event or act that leads to the hero's or heroine's downfall. This term is often incorrectly used as a synonym for tragic flaw.

Harlem Renaissance: The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s is generally considered the first significant movement of black writers and artists in the United States. During this period, new and established black writers published more fiction and poetry than ever before, the first influential black literary journals were established, and black authors and artists received their first widespread recognition and serious critical appraisal. Among the major writers associated with this period are Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston.

Harlequin: A stock character of the *commedia dell'arte* who occasionally interrupted the action with silly antics.

Hellenism: Imitation of ancient Greek thought or styles. Also, an approach to life that focuses on the growth and development of the intellect. "Hellenism" is sometimes used to refer to the belief that reason can be applied to examine all human experience.

Heptameter: See *Meter*

Hero/Heroine: The principal sympathetic character (male or female) in a literary work. Heroes and heroines typically exhibit admirable traits: idealism, courage, and integrity, for example.

Heroic Couplet: A rhyming couplet written in iambic pentameter (a verse with five iambic feet).

Heroic Line: The meter and length of a line of verse in epic or heroic poetry. This varies by language and time period.

Heroine: See *Hero/Heroine*

Hexameter: See *Meter*

Historical Criticism: The study of a work based on its impact on the world of the time period in which it was written.

***Hokku*:** See *Haiku*

Holocaust: See *Holocaust Literature*

Holocaust Literature: Literature influenced by or written about the Holocaust of World War II. Such literature includes true stories of survival in concentration camps, escape, and life after the war, as well as fictional works and poetry.

Homeric Simile: An elaborate, detailed comparison written as a simile many lines in length.

Horatian Satire: See *Satire*

Humanism: A philosophy that places faith in the dignity of humankind and rejects the medieval perception of the individual as a weak, fallen creature. "Humanists" typically believe in the perfectibility of human nature and view reason and education as the means to that end.

Humors: Mentions of the humors refer to the ancient Greek theory that a person's health and personality were determined by the balance of four basic fluids in the body: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. A dominance of any fluid would cause extremes in behavior. An excess of blood created a sanguine person who was joyful, aggressive, and passionate; a phlegmatic person was shy, fearful, and sluggish; too much yellow bile led to a choleric temperament characterized by impatience, anger, bitterness, and stubbornness; and excessive black bile created melancholy, a state of laziness, gluttony, and lack of motivation.

Hyperbole: In literary criticism, deliberate exaggeration used to achieve an effect.

I

Iamb: See *Foot*

Idiom: A word construction or verbal expression closely associated with a given language.

Image: A concrete representation of an object or sensory experience. Typically, such a representation helps evoke the feelings associated with the object or experience itself. Images are either "literal" or "figurative." Literal images are especially concrete and involve little or no extension of the obvious meaning of the words used to express them. Figurative images do not follow the literal meaning of the words exactly. Images in literature are usually visual, but the term "image" can also refer to the representation of any sensory experience.

Imagery: The array of images in a literary work. Also, figurative language.

Imagism: An English and American poetry movement that flourished between 1908 and 1917. The Imagists used precise, clearly presented images in their works. They also used common, everyday speech and aimed for conciseness, concrete imagery, and the creation of new rhythms.

***In medias res*:** A Latin term meaning "in the middle of things." It refers to the technique of beginning a story at its midpoint and then using various flashback devices to reveal previous action.

Induction: The process of reaching a conclusion by reasoning from specific premises to form a general premise. Also, an introductory portion of a work of literature, especially a play.

Intentional Fallacy: The belief that judgments of a literary work based solely on an author's stated or implied intentions are false and misleading. Critics who believe in the concept of the intentional fallacy typically argue that the work itself is sufficient matter for interpretation, even though they may concede that an author's statement of purpose can be useful.

Interior Monologue: A narrative technique in which characters' thoughts are revealed in a way that appears to be uncontrolled by the author. The interior monologue typically aims to reveal the inner self of a character. It portrays emotional experiences as they occur at both a conscious and unconscious level. images are often used to represent sensations or emotions.

Internal Rhyme: Rhyme that occurs within a single line of verse.

Irish Literary Renaissance: A late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movement in Irish literature. Members of the movement aimed to reduce the influence of British culture in Ireland and create an Irish national literature.

Irony: In literary criticism, the effect of language in which the intended meaning is the opposite of what is stated.

Italian Sonnet: See *Sonnet*

J

Jacobean Age: The period of the reign of James I of England (1603-1625). The early literature of this period reflected the worldview of the Elizabethan Age, but a darker, more cynical attitude steadily grew in the art and literature of the Jacobean Age. This was an important time for English drama and poetry.

Jargon: Language that is used or understood only by a select group of people. Jargon may refer to terminology used in a certain profession, such as computer jargon, or it may refer to any nonsensical language that is not understood by most people.

Journalism: Writing intended for publication in a newspaper or magazine, or for broadcast on a radio or television program featuring news, sports, entertainment, or other timely material.

K

Knickerbocker Group: A somewhat indistinct group of New York writers of the first half of the nineteenth century. Members of the group were linked only by location and a common theme: New York life.

***Kunstlerroman*:** See *Bildungsroman*

L

***Lais*:** See *Lay*

Lake Poets: See *Lake School*

Lake School: These poets all lived in the Lake District of England at the turn of the nineteenth century. As a group, they followed no single "school" of thought or literary practice, although their works were uniformly disparaged by the *Edinburgh Review*.

Lay: A song or simple narrative poem. The form originated in medieval France. Early French *lais* were often based on the Celtic legends and other

tales sung by Breton minstrels—thus the name of the "Breton lay." In fourteenth-century England, the term "lay" was used to describe short narratives written in imitation of the Breton lays.

***Leitmotiv*:** See *Motif*

Literal Language: An author uses literal language when he or she writes without exaggerating or embellishing the subject matter and without any tools of figurative language.

Literary Ballad: See *Ballad*

Literature: Literature is broadly defined as any written or spoken material, but the term most often refers to creative works.

Lost Generation: A term first used by Gertrude Stein to describe the post-World War I generation of American writers: men and women haunted by a sense of betrayal and emptiness brought about by the destructiveness of the war.

Lyric Poetry: A poem expressing the subjective feelings and personal emotions of the poet. Such poetry is melodic, since it was originally accompanied by a lyre in recitals. Most Western poetry in the twentieth century may be classified as lyrical.

M

Mannerism: Exaggerated, artificial adherence to a literary manner or style. Also, a popular style of the visual arts of late sixteenth-century Europe that was marked by elongation of the human form and by intentional spatial distortion. Literary works that are self-consciously high-toned and artistic are often said to be "mannered."

Masculine Rhyme: See *Rhyme*

Masque: A lavish and elaborate form of entertainment, often performed in royal courts, that emphasizes song, dance, and costumery. The Renaissance form of the masque grew out of the spectacles of masked figures common in medieval England and Europe. The masque reached its peak of popularity and development in seventeenth-century England, during the reigns of James I and, especially, of Charles I. Ben Jonson, the most significant masque writer, also created the "antimasque," which incorporates elements of humor and the grotesque into the traditional masque and achieved greater dramatic quality.

Measure: The foot, verse, or time sequence used in a literary work, especially a poem. Measure is often used somewhat incorrectly as a synonym for meter.

Melodrama: A play in which the typical plot is a conflict between characters who personify extreme good and evil. Melodramas usually end happily and emphasize sensationalism. Other literary forms that use the same techniques are often labeled "melodramatic." The term was formerly used to describe a combination of drama and music; as such, it was synonymous with "opera."

Memoirs: An autobiographical form of writing in which the author gives his or her personal impressions of significant figures or events. This form is different from the autobiography because it does not center around the author's own life and experiences.

Metaphor: A figure of speech that expresses an idea through the image of another object. Metaphors suggest the essence of the first object by identifying it with certain qualities of the second object.

Metaphysical Conceit: See *Conceit*

Metaphysical Poetry: The body of poetry produced by a group of seventeenth-century English writers called the "Metaphysical Poets." The group includes John Donne and Andrew Marvell. The Metaphysical Poets made use of everyday speech, intellectual analysis, and unique imagery. They aimed to portray the ordinary conflicts and contradictions of life. Their poems often took the form of an argument, and many of them emphasize physical and religious love as well as the fleeting nature of life. Elaborate conceits are typical in metaphysical poetry.

Metaphysical Poets: See *Metaphysical Poetry*

Meter: In literary criticism, the repetition of sound patterns that creates a rhythm in poetry. The patterns are based on the number of syllables and the presence and absence of accents. The unit of rhythm in a line is called a foot. Types of meter are classified according to the number of feet in a line. These are the standard English lines: Monometer, one foot; Dimeter, two feet; Trimeter, three feet; Tetrameter, four feet; Pentameter, five feet; Hexameter, six feet (also called the Alexandrine); Heptameter, seven feet (also called the "Fourteener" when the feet are iambic).

***Mise en scene*:** The costumes, scenery, and other properties of a drama.

Modernism: Modern literary practices. Also, the principles of a literary school that lasted from roughly the beginning of the twentieth century until the end of World War II. Modernism is defined by its rejection of the literary conventions of the

nineteenth century and by its opposition to conventional morality, taste, traditions, and economic values.

Monologue: A composition, written or oral, by a single individual. More specifically, a speech given by a single individual in a drama or other public entertainment. It has no set length, although it is usually several or more lines long.

Monometer: See *Meter*

Mood: The prevailing emotions of a work or of the author in his or her creation of the work. The mood of a work is not always what might be expected based on its subject matter.

***Motif*:** A theme, character type, image, metaphor, or other verbal element that recurs throughout a single work of literature or occurs in a number of different works over a period of time.

***Motiv*:** See *Motif*

Muckrakers: An early twentieth-century group of American writers. Typically, their works exposed the wrongdoings of big business and government in the United States.

Muses: Nine Greek mythological goddesses, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (Memory). Each muse patronized a specific area of the liberal arts and sciences. Calliope presided over epic poetry, Clio over history, Erato over love poetry, Euterpe over music or lyric poetry, Melpomene over tragedy, Polyhymnia over hymns to the gods, Terpsichore over dance, Thalia over comedy, and Urania over astronomy. Poets and writers traditionally made appeals to the Muses for inspiration in their work.

Myth: An anonymous tale emerging from the traditional beliefs of a culture or social unit. Myths use supernatural explanations for natural phenomena. They may also explain cosmic issues like creation and death. Collections of myths, known as mythologies, are common to all cultures and nations, but the best-known myths belong to the Norse, Roman, and Greek mythologies.

N

Narration: The telling of a series of events, real or invented. A narration may be either a simple narrative, in which the events are recounted chronologically, or a narrative with a plot, in which the account is given in a style reflecting the author's artistic concept of the story. Narration is sometimes used as a synonym for "storyline."

Narrative: A verse or prose accounting of an event or sequence of events, real or invented. The term is also used as an adjective in the sense "method of narration." For example, in literary criticism, the expression "narrative technique" usually refers to the way the author structures and presents his or her story.

Narrative Poetry: A nondramatic poem in which the author tells a story. Such poems may be of any length or level of complexity.

Narrator: The teller of a story. The narrator may be the author or a character in the story through whom the author speaks.

Naturalism: A literary movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The movement's major theorist, French novelist Emile Zola, envisioned a type of fiction that would examine human life with the objectivity of scientific inquiry. The Naturalists typically viewed human beings as either the products of "biological determinism," ruled by hereditary instincts and engaged in an endless struggle for survival, or as the products of "socioeconomic determinism," ruled by social and economic forces beyond their control. In their works, the Naturalists generally ignored the highest levels of society and focused on degradation: poverty, alcoholism, prostitution, insanity, and disease.

Negritude: A literary movement based on the concept of a shared cultural bond on the part of black Africans, wherever they may be in the world. It traces its origins to the former French colonies of Africa and the Caribbean. Negritude poets, novelists, and essayists generally stress four points in their writings: One, black alienation from traditional African culture can lead to feelings of inferiority. Two, European colonialism and Western education should be resisted. Three, black Africans should seek to affirm and define their own identity. Four, African culture can and should be reclaimed. Many Negritude writers also claim that blacks can make unique contributions to the world, based on a heightened appreciation of nature, rhythm, and human emotions—aspects of life they say are not so highly valued in the materialistic and rationalistic West.

Neoclassical Period: See *Neoclassicism*

Neoclassicism: In literary criticism, this term refers to the revival of the attitudes and styles of expression of classical literature. It is generally used to describe a period in European history beginning in the late seventeenth century and lasting until about 1800. In its purest form, Neoclassicism marked a

return to order, proportion, restraint, logic, accuracy, and decorum. In England, where Neoclassicism perhaps was most popular, it reflected the influence of seventeenth-century French writers, especially dramatists. Neoclassical writers typically reacted against the intensity and enthusiasm of the Renaissance period. They wrote works that appealed to the intellect, using elevated language and classical literary forms such as satire and the ode. Neoclassical works were often governed by the classical goal of instruction.

Neoclassicists: See *Neoclassicism*

New Criticism: A movement in literary criticism, dating from the late 1920s, that stressed close textual analysis in the interpretation of works of literature. The New Critics saw little merit in historical and biographical analysis. Rather, they aimed to examine the text alone, free from the question of how external events—biographical or otherwise—may have helped shape it.

New Journalism: A type of writing in which the journalist presents factual information in a form usually used in fiction. New journalism emphasizes description, narration, and character development to bring readers closer to the human element of the story, and is often used in personality profiles and in-depth feature articles. It is not compatible with "straight" or "hard" newswriting, which is generally composed in a brief, fact-based style.

New Journalists: See *New Journalism*

Noble Savage: The idea that primitive man is noble and good but becomes evil and corrupted as he becomes civilized. The concept of the noble savage originated in the Renaissance period but is more closely identified with such later writers as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Aphra Behn.

Novel: A long fictional narrative written in prose, which developed from the novella and other early forms of narrative. A novel is usually organized under a plot or theme with a focus on character development and action.

Novella: An Italian term meaning "story." This term has been especially used to describe fourteenth-century Italian tales, but it also refers to modern short novels.

Novel of Ideas: A novel in which the examination of intellectual issues and concepts takes precedence over characterization or a traditional storyline.

Novel of Manners: A novel that examines the customs and mores of a cultural group.

O

Objective Correlative: An outward set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events corresponding to an inward experience and evoking this experience in the reader. The term frequently appears in modern criticism in discussions of authors' intended effects on the emotional responses of readers.

Objectivity: A quality in writing characterized by the absence of the author's opinion or feeling about the subject matter. Objectivity is an important factor in criticism.

Occasional Verse: Poetry written on the occasion of a significant historical or personal event. *Vers de societe* is sometimes called occasional verse although it is of a less serious nature.

Octave: A poem or stanza composed of eight lines. The term octave most often represents the first eight lines of a Petrarchan sonnet.

Ode: Name given to an extended lyric poem characterized by exalted emotion and dignified style. An ode usually concerns a single, serious theme. Most odes, but not all, are addressed to an object or individual. Odes are distinguished from other lyric poetic forms by their complex rhythmic and stanzaic patterns.

Oedipus Complex: A son's amorous obsession with his mother. The phrase is derived from the story of the ancient Theban hero Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother.

Omniscience: See *Point of View*

Onomatopoeia: The use of words whose sounds express or suggest their meaning. In its simplest sense, onomatopoeia may be represented by words that mimic the sounds they denote such as "hiss" or "meow." At a more subtle level, the pattern and rhythm of sounds and rhymes of a line or poem may be onomatopoeic.

Opera: A type of stage performance, usually a drama, in which the dialogue is sung.

Operetta: A usually romantic comic opera.

Oral Tradition: See *Oral Transmission*

Oral Transmission: A process by which songs, ballads, folklore, and other material are transmitted by word of mouth. The tradition of oral transmission predates the written record systems of literate society. Oral transmission preserves material sometimes over generations, although often with variations. Memory plays a large part in the recitation and preservation of orally transmitted material.

Oration: Formal speaking intended to motivate the listeners to some action or feeling. Such public speaking was much more common before the development of timely printed communication such as newspapers.

***Ottava Rima*:** An eight-line stanza of poetry composed in iambic pentameter (a five-foot line in which each foot consists of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable), following the abababcc rhyme scheme.

Oxymoron: A phrase combining two contradictory terms. Oxymorons may be intentional or unintentional.

P

Pantheism: The idea that all things are both a manifestation or revelation of God and a part of God at the same time. Pantheism was a common attitude in the early societies of Egypt, India, and Greece—the term derives from the Greek *pan* meaning "all" and *theos* meaning "deity." It later became a significant part of the Christian faith.

Parable: A story intended to teach a moral lesson or answer an ethical question.

Paradox: A statement that appears illogical or contradictory at first, but may actually point to an underlying truth.

Parallelism: A method of comparison of two ideas in which each is developed in the same grammatical structure.

Parnassianism: A mid nineteenth-century movement in French literature. Followers of the movement stressed adherence to well-defined artistic forms as a reaction against the often chaotic expression of the artist's ego that dominated the work of the Romantics. The Parnassians also rejected the moral, ethical, and social themes exhibited in the works of French Romantics such as Victor Hugo. The aesthetic doctrines of the Parnassians strongly influenced the later symbolist and decadent movements.

Parody: In literary criticism, this term refers to an imitation of a serious literary work or the signature style of a particular author in a ridiculous manner. A typical parody adopts the style of the original and applies it to an inappropriate subject for humorous effect. Parody is a form of satire and could be considered the literary equivalent of a caricature or cartoon.

Pastoral: A term derived from the Latin word "pastor," meaning shepherd. A pastoral is a literary composition on a rural theme. The conventions of the pastoral were originated by the third-century Greek poet Theocritus, who wrote about the experiences, love affairs, and pastimes of Sicilian shepherds. In a pastoral, characters and language of a courtly nature are often placed in a simple setting. The term pastoral is also used to classify dramas, elegies, and lyrics that exhibit the use of country settings and shepherd characters.

***Pastorela*:** The Spanish name for the shepherds play, a folk drama reenacted during the Christmas season.

Pathetic Fallacy: A term coined by English critic John Ruskin to identify writing that falsely endows nonhuman things with human intentions and feelings, such as "angry clouds" and "sad trees."

***Pelado*:** Literally the "skinned one" or shirtless one, he was the stock underdog, sharp-witted picaresque character of Mexican vaudeville and tent shows.

Pen Name: See *Pseudonym*

Pentameter: See *Meter*

***Persona*:** A Latin term meaning "mask." *Personae* are the characters in a fictional work of literature. The *persona* generally functions as a mask through which the author tells a story in a voice other than his or her own. A *persona* is usually either a character in a story who acts as a narrator or an "implied author," a voice created by the author to act as the narrator for himself or herself.

***Personae*:** See *Persona*

Personal Point of View: See *Point of View*

Personification: A figure of speech that gives human qualities to abstract ideas, animals, and inanimate objects.

Petrarchan Sonnet: See *Sonnet*

Phenomenology: A method of literary criticism based on the belief that things have no existence outside of human consciousness or awareness. Proponents of this theory believe that art is a process that takes place in the mind of the observer as he or she contemplates an object rather than a quality of the object itself.

Picaresque Novel: Episodic fiction depicting the adventures of a roguish central character ("picaro" is Spanish for "rogue"). The picaresque hero is commonly a low-born but clever individual who wanders into and out of various affairs of love, danger, and farcical intrigue. These involvements may take place at all social levels and typically present a humorous and wide-ranging satire of a given society.

Plagiarism: Claiming another person's written material as one's own. Plagiarism can take the form of direct, word-for-word copying or the theft of the substance or idea of the work.

Platonic Criticism: A form of criticism that stresses an artistic work's usefulness as an agent of social engineering rather than any quality or value of the work itself.

Platonism: The embracing of the doctrines of the philosopher Plato, popular among the poets of the Renaissance and the Romantic period. Platonism is more flexible than Aristotelian Criticism and places more emphasis on the supernatural and unknown aspects of life.

Play: See *Drama*

Plot: In literary criticism, this term refers to the pattern of events in a narrative or drama. In its simplest sense, the plot guides the author in composing the work and helps the reader follow the work. Typically, plots exhibit causality and unity and have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Sometimes, however, a plot may consist of a series of disconnected events, in which case it is known as an "episodic plot."

Poem: In its broadest sense, a composition utilizing rhyme, meter, concrete detail, and expressive language to create a literary experience with emotional and aesthetic appeal.

Poet: An author who writes poetry or verse. The term is also used to refer to an artist or writer who has an exceptional gift for expression, imagination, and energy in the making of art in any form.

Poete maudit: A term derived from Paul Verlaine's *Les poetes maudits* (*The Accursed Poets*), a collection of essays on the French symbolist writers Stephane Mallarme, Arthur Rimbaud, and Tristan Corbiere. In the sense intended by Verlaine, the poet is "accursed" for choosing to explore extremes of human experience outside of middle-class society.

Poetic Fallacy: See *Pathetic Fallacy*

Poetic Justice: An outcome in a literary work, not necessarily a poem, in which the good are rewarded and the evil are punished, especially in ways that particularly fit their virtues or crimes.

Poetic License: Distortions of fact and literary convention made by a writer—not always a poet—for the sake of the effect gained. Poetic license is closely related to the concept of "artistic freedom."

Poetics: This term has two closely related meanings. It denotes (1) an aesthetic theory in literary criticism about the essence of poetry or (2) rules prescribing the proper methods, content, style, or diction of poetry. The term poetics may also refer to theories about literature in general, not just poetry.

Poetry: In its broadest sense, writing that aims to present ideas and evoke an emotional experience in the reader through the use of meter, imagery, connotative and concrete words, and a carefully constructed structure based on rhythmic patterns. Poetry typically relies on words and expressions that have several layers of meaning. It also makes use of the effects of regular rhythm on the ear and may make a strong appeal to the senses through the use of imagery.

Point of View: The narrative perspective from which a literary work is presented to the reader. There are four traditional points of view. The "third person omniscient" gives the reader a "godlike" perspective, unrestricted by time or place, from which to see actions and look into the minds of characters. This allows the author to comment openly on characters and events in the work. The "third person" point of view presents the events of the story from outside of any single character's perception, much like the omniscient point of view, but the reader must understand the action as it takes place and without any special insight into characters' minds or motivations. The "first person" or "personal" point of view relates events as they are perceived by a single character. The main character "tells" the story and may offer opinions about the action and characters which differ from those of the author. Much less common than omniscient, third person, and first person is the "second person" point of view, wherein the author tells the story as if it is happening to the reader.

Polemic: A work in which the author takes a stand on a controversial subject, such as abortion or religion. Such works are often extremely argumentative or provocative.

Pornography: Writing intended to provoke feelings of lust in the reader. Such works are often condemned by critics and teachers, but those which can be shown to have literary value are viewed less harshly.

Post-Aesthetic Movement: An artistic response made by African Americans to the black aesthetic movement of the 1960s and early '70s. Writers since that time have adopted a somewhat different tone in their work, with less emphasis placed on the disparity between black and white in the United

States. In the words of post-aesthetic authors such as Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman, and Kristin Hunter, African Americans are portrayed as looking inward for answers to their own questions, rather than always looking to the outside world.

Postmodernism: Writing from the 1960s forward characterized by experimentation and continuing to apply some of the fundamentals of modernism, which included existentialism and alienation. Postmodernists have gone a step further in the rejection of tradition begun with the modernists by also rejecting traditional forms, preferring the anti-novel over the novel and the anti-hero over the hero.

Pre-Raphaelites: A circle of writers and artists in mid nineteenth-century England. Valuing the pre-Renaissance artistic qualities of religious symbolism, lavish pictorialism, and natural sensuousness, the Pre-Raphaelites cultivated a sense of mystery and melancholy that influenced later writers associated with the Symbolist and Decadent movements.

Primitivism: The belief that primitive peoples were nobler and less flawed than civilized peoples because they had not been subjected to the tainting influence of society.

Projective Verse: A form of free verse in which the poet's breathing pattern determines the lines of the poem. Poets who advocate projective verse are against all formal structures in writing, including meter and form.

Prologue: An introductory section of a literary work. It often contains information establishing the situation of the characters or presents information about the setting, time period, or action. In drama, the prologue is spoken by a chorus or by one of the principal characters.

Prose: A literary medium that attempts to mirror the language of everyday speech. It is distinguished from poetry by its use of unmetered, unrhymed language consisting of logically related sentences. Prose is usually grouped into paragraphs that form a cohesive whole such as an essay or a novel.

Prosopopoeia: See *Personification*

Protagonist: The central character of a story who serves as a focus for its themes and incidents and as the principal rationale for its development. The protagonist is sometimes referred to in discussions of modern literature as the hero or anti-hero.

Protest Fiction: Protest fiction has as its primary purpose the protesting of some social injustice, such as racism or discrimination.

Proverb: A brief, sage saying that expresses a truth about life in a striking manner.

Pseudonym: A name assumed by a writer, most often intended to prevent his or her identification as the author of a work. Two or more authors may work together under one pseudonym, or an author may use a different name for each genre he or she publishes in. Some publishing companies maintain "house pseudonyms," under which any number of authors may write installations in a series. Some authors also choose a pseudonym over their real names the way an actor may use a stage name.

Pun: A play on words that have similar sounds but different meanings.

Pure Poetry: Poetry written without instructional intent or moral purpose that aims only to please a reader by its imagery or musical flow. The term pure poetry is used as the antonym of the term "didacticism."

Q

Quatrain: A four-line stanza of a poem or an entire poem consisting of four lines.

R

Raisonneur: A character in a drama who functions as a spokesperson for the dramatist's views. The *raisonneur* typically observes the play without becoming central to its action.

Realism: A nineteenth-century European literary movement that sought to portray familiar characters, situations, and settings in a realistic manner. This was done primarily by using an objective narrative point of view and through the buildup of accurate detail. The standard for success of any realistic work depends on how faithfully it transfers common experience into fictional forms. The realistic method may be altered or extended, as in stream of consciousness writing, to record highly subjective experience.

Refrain: A phrase repeated at intervals throughout a poem. A refrain may appear at the end of each stanza or at less regular intervals. It may be altered slightly at each appearance.

Renaissance: The period in European history that marked the end of the Middle Ages. It began in Italy in the late fourteenth century. In broad terms, it is usually seen as spanning the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, although it did not reach Great Britain, for example, until the 1480s or so. The Renaissance saw an awakening in almost every sphere of human activity, especially science, philosophy, and the arts. The period is best defined

by the emergence of a general philosophy that emphasized the importance of the intellect, the individual, and world affairs. It contrasts strongly with the medieval worldview, characterized by the dominant concerns of faith, the social collective, and spiritual salvation.

***Repartee*:** Conversation featuring snappy retorts and witticisms.

Resolution: The portion of a story following the climax, in which the conflict is resolved.

Restoration: See *Restoration Age*

Restoration Age: A period in English literature beginning with the crowning of Charles II in 1660 and running to about 1700. The era, which was characterized by a reaction against Puritanism, was the first great age of the comedy of manners. The finest literature of the era is typically witty and urbane, and often lewd.

Revenge Tragedy: A dramatic form popular during the Elizabethan Age, in which the protagonist, directed by the ghost of his murdered father or son, inflicts retaliation upon a powerful villain. Notable features of the revenge tragedy include violence, bizarre criminal acts, intrigue, insanity, a hesitant protagonist, and the use of soliloquy.

***Revista*:** The Spanish term for a vaudeville musical revue.

Rhetoric: In literary criticism, this term denotes the art of ethical persuasion. In its strictest sense, rhetoric adheres to various principles developed since classical times for arranging facts and ideas in a clear, persuasive, appealing manner. The term is also used to refer to effective prose in general and theories of or methods for composing effective prose.

Rhetorical Question: A question intended to provoke thought, but not an expressed answer, in the reader. It is most commonly used in oratory and other persuasive genres.

Rhyme: When used as a noun in literary criticism, this term generally refers to a poem in which words sound identical or very similar and appear in parallel positions in two or more lines. Rhymes are classified into different types according to where they fall in a line or stanza or according to the degree of similarity they exhibit in their spellings and sounds. Some major types of rhyme are "masculine" rhyme, "feminine" rhyme, and "triple" rhyme. In a masculine rhyme, the rhyming sound falls in a single accented syllable, as with "heat" and "eat." Feminine rhyme is a rhyme of two syllables, one stressed and one unstressed, as with "merry" and "tarry." Triple rhyme matches the sound of the accented syllable and the two unaccented syllables that follow: "narrative" and "declarative."

Rhyme Royal: A stanza of seven lines composed in iambic pentameter and rhymed *ababbcc.* The name is said to be a tribute to King James I of Scotland, who made much use of the form in his poetry.

Rhyme Scheme: See *Rhyme*

Rhythm: A regular pattern of sound, time intervals, or events occurring in writing, most often and most discernably in poetry. Regular, reliable rhythm is known to be soothing to humans, while interrupted, unpredictable, or rapidly changing rhythm is disturbing. These effects are known to authors, who use them to produce a desired reaction in the reader.

Rising Action: The part of a drama where the plot becomes increasingly complicated. Rising action leads up to the climax, or turning point, of a drama.

***Rococo*:** A style of European architecture that flourished in the eighteenth century, especially in France. The most notable features of *rococo* are its extensive use of ornamentation and its themes of lightness, gaiety, and intimacy. In literary criticism, the term is often used disparagingly to refer to a decadent or over-ornamental style.

***Roman a clef*:** A French phrase meaning "novel with a key." It refers to a narrative in which real persons are portrayed under fictitious names.

Romance: A broad term, usually denoting a narrative with exotic, exaggerated, often idealized characters, scenes, and themes.

Romantic Age: See *Romanticism*

Romanticism: This term has two widely accepted meanings. In historical criticism, it refers to a European intellectual and artistic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that sought greater freedom of personal expression than that allowed by the strict rules of literary form and logic of the eighteenth-century neoclassicists. The Romantics preferred emotional and imaginative expression to rational analysis. They considered the individual to be at the center of all experience and so placed him or her at the center of their art. The Romantics believed that the creative imagination reveals nobler truths—unique feelings and attitudes—than those that could be discovered by logic or by scientific examination. Both the natural world and the state of childhood were important sources for revelations of "eternal truths." "Romanticism" is also used as a general term to refer to a type of sensibility found in all periods of literary history

and usually considered to be in opposition to the principles of classicism. In this sense, Romanticism signifies any work or philosophy in which the exotic or dreamlike figure strongly, or that is devoted to individualistic expression, self-analysis, or a pursuit of a higher realm of knowledge than can be discovered by human reason.

Romantics: See *Romanticism*

Russian Symbolism: A Russian poetic movement, derived from French symbolism, that flourished between 1894 and 1910. While some Russian Symbolists continued in the French tradition, stressing aestheticism and the importance of suggestion above didactic intent, others saw their craft as a form of mystical worship, and themselves as mediators between the supernatural and the mundane.

S

Satire: A work that uses ridicule, humor, and wit to criticize and provoke change in human nature and institutions. There are two major types of satire: "formal" or "direct" satire speaks directly to the reader or to a character in the work; "indirect" satire relies upon the ridiculous behavior of its characters to make its point. Formal satire is further divided into two manners: the "Horatian," which ridicules gently, and the "Juvenalian," which derides its subjects harshly and bitterly.

Scansion: The analysis or "scanning" of a poem to determine its meter and often its rhyme scheme. The most common system of scansion uses accents (slanted lines drawn above syllables) to show stressed syllables, breves (curved lines drawn above syllables) to show unstressed syllables, and vertical lines to separate each foot.

Scene: A subdivision of an act of a drama, consisting of continuous action taking place at a single time and in a single location. The beginnings and endings of scenes may be indicated by clearing the stage of actors and props or by the entrances and exits of important characters.

Science Fiction: A type of narrative about or based upon real or imagined scientific theories and technology. Science fiction is often peopled with alien creatures and set on other planets or in different dimensions.

Second Person: See *Point of View*

Semiotics: The study of how literary forms and conventions affect the meaning of language.

Sestet: Any six-line poem or stanza.

Setting: The time, place, and culture in which the action of a narrative takes place. The elements of setting may include geographic location, characters' physical and mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place.

Shakespearean Sonnet: See *Sonnet*

Short Story: A fictional prose narrative shorter and more focused than a novella. The short story usually deals with a single episode and often a single character. The "tone," the author's attitude toward his or her subject and audience, is uniform throughout. The short story frequently also lacks *denouement*, ending instead at its climax.

Signifying Monkey: A popular trickster figure in black folklore, with hundreds of tales about this character documented since the 19th century.

Simile: A comparison, usually using "like" or "as", of two essentially dissimilar things, as in "coffee as cold as ice" or "He sounded like a broken record."

Slang: A type of informal verbal communication that is generally unacceptable for formal writing. Slang words and phrases are often colorful exaggerations used to emphasize the speaker's point; they may also be shortened versions of an often-used word or phrase.

Slant Rhyme: See *Consonance*

Slave Narrative: Autobiographical accounts of American slave life as told by escaped slaves. These works first appeared during the abolition movement of the 1830s through the 1850s.

Socialist Realism: The Socialist Realism school of literary theory was proposed by Maxim Gorky and established as a dogma by the first Soviet Congress of Writers. It demanded adherence to a communist worldview in works of literature. Its doctrines required an objective viewpoint comprehensible to the working classes and themes of social struggle featuring strong proletarian heroes.

Soliloquy: A monologue in a drama used to give the audience information and to develop the speaker's character. It is typically a projection of the speaker's innermost thoughts. Usually delivered while the speaker is alone on stage, a soliloquy is intended to present an illusion of unspoken reflection.

Sonnet: A fourteen-line poem, usually composed in iambic pentameter, employing one of several rhyme schemes. There are three major types of sonnets, upon which all other variations of the form are based: the "Petrarchan" or "Italian" sonnet, the

"Shakespearean" or "English" sonnet, and the "Spenserian" sonnet. A Petrarchan sonnet consists of an octave rhymed *abbaabba* and a "sestet" rhymed either *cdecde, cdccdc,* or *cdedce.* The octave poses a question or problem, relates a narrative, or puts forth a proposition; the sestet presents a solution to the problem, comments upon the narrative, or applies the proposition put forth in the octave. The Shakespearean sonnet is divided into three quatrains and a couplet rhymed *abab cdcd efef gg.* The couplet provides an epigrammatic comment on the narrative or problem put forth in the quatrains. The Spenserian sonnet uses three quatrains and a couplet like the Shakespearean, but links their three rhyme schemes in this way: *abab bcbc cdcd ee.* The Spenserian sonnet develops its theme in two parts like the Petrarchan, its final six lines resolving a problem, analyzing a narrative, or applying a proposition put forth in its first eight lines.

Spenserian Sonnet: See *Sonnet*

Spenserian Stanza: A nine-line stanza having eight verses in iambic pentameter, its ninth verse in iambic hexameter, and the rhyme scheme ababbcbcc.

Spondee: In poetry meter, a foot consisting of two long or stressed syllables occurring together. This form is quite rare in English verse, and is usually composed of two monosyllabic words.

Sprung Rhythm: Versification using a specific number of accented syllables per line but disregarding the number of unaccented syllables that fall in each line, producing an irregular rhythm in the poem.

Stanza: A subdivision of a poem consisting of lines grouped together, often in recurring patterns of rhyme, line length, and meter. Stanzas may also serve as units of thought in a poem much like paragraphs in prose.

Stereotype: A stereotype was originally the name for a duplication made during the printing process; this led to its modern definition as a person or thing that is (or is assumed to be) the same as all others of its type.

Stream of Consciousness: A narrative technique for rendering the inward experience of a character. This technique is designed to give the impression of an ever-changing series of thoughts, emotions, images, and memories in the spontaneous and seemingly illogical order that they occur in life.

Structuralism: A twentieth-century movement in literary criticism that examines how literary texts arrive at their meanings, rather than the meanings themselves. There are two major types of structuralist analysis: one examines the way patterns of linguistic structures unify a specific text and emphasize certain elements of that text, and the other interprets the way literary forms and conventions affect the meaning of language itself.

Structure: The form taken by a piece of literature. The structure may be made obvious for ease of understanding, as in nonfiction works, or may be obscured for artistic purposes, as in some poetry or seemingly "unstructured" prose.

***Sturm und Drang*:** A German term meaning "storm and stress." It refers to a German literary movement of the 1770s and 1780s that reacted against the order and rationalism of the enlightenment, focusing instead on the intense experience of extraordinary individuals.

Style: A writer's distinctive manner of arranging words to suit his or her ideas and purpose in writing. The unique imprint of the author's personality upon his or her writing, style is the product of an author's way of arranging ideas and his or her use of diction, different sentence structures, rhythm, figures of speech, rhetorical principles, and other elements of composition.

Subject: The person, event, or theme at the center of a work of literature. A work may have one or more subjects of each type, with shorter works tending to have fewer and longer works tending to have more.

Subjectivity: Writing that expresses the author's personal feelings about his subject, and which may or may not include factual information about the subject.

Subplot: A secondary story in a narrative. A subplot may serve as a motivating or complicating force for the main plot of the work, or it may provide emphasis for, or relief from, the main plot.

Surrealism: A term introduced to criticism by Guillaume Apollinaire and later adopted by Andre Breton. It refers to a French literary and artistic movement founded in the 1920s. The Surrealists sought to express unconscious thoughts and feelings in their works. The best-known technique used for achieving this aim was automatic writing—transcriptions of spontaneous outpourings from the unconscious. The Surrealists proposed to unify the contrary levels of conscious and unconscious, dream and reality, objectivity and subjectivity into a new level of "super-realism."

Suspense: A literary device in which the author maintains the audience's attention through the buildup of events, the outcome of which will soon be revealed.

Syllogism: A method of presenting a logical argument. In its most basic form, the syllogism consists of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion.

Symbol: Something that suggests or stands for something else without losing its original identity. In literature, symbols combine their literal meaning with the suggestion of an abstract concept. Literary symbols are of two types: those that carry complex associations of meaning no matter what their contexts, and those that derive their suggestive meaning from their functions in specific literary works.

Symbolism: This term has two widely accepted meanings. In historical criticism, it denotes an early modernist literary movement initiated in France during the nineteenth century that reacted against the prevailing standards of realism. Writers in this movement aimed to evoke, indirectly and symbolically, an order of being beyond the material world of the five senses. Poetic expression of personal emotion figured strongly in the movement, typically by means of a private set of symbols uniquely identifiable with the individual poet. The principal aim of the Symbolists was to express in words the highly complex feelings that grew out of everyday contact with the world. In a broader sense, the term "symbolism" refers to the use of one object to represent another.

Symbolist: See *Symbolism*

Symbolist Movement: See *Symbolism*

Sympathetic Fallacy: See *Affective Fallacy*

T

Tale: A story told by a narrator with a simple plot and little character development. Tales are usually relatively short and often carry a simple message.

Tall Tale: A humorous tale told in a straightforward, credible tone but relating absolutely impossible events or feats of the characters. Such tales were commonly told of frontier adventures during the settlement of the west in the United States.

***Tanka*:** A form of Japanese poetry similar to *haiku*. A *tánka* is five lines long, with the lines containing five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables respectively.

***Teatro Grottesco*:** See *Theater of the Grotesque*

***Terza Rima*:** A three-line stanza form in poetry in which the rhymes are made on the last word of each line in the following manner: the first and third lines of the first stanza, then the second line of the first stanza and the first and third lines of the second stanza, and so on with the middle line of any stanza rhyming with the first and third lines of the following stanza.

Tetrameter: See *Meter*

Textual Criticism: A branch of literary criticism that seeks to establish the authoritative text of a literary work. Textual critics typically compare all known manuscripts or printings of a single work in order to assess the meanings of differences and revisions. This procedure allows them to arrive at a definitive version that (supposedly) corresponds to the author's original intention.

Theater of Cruelty: Term used to denote a group of theatrical techniques designed to eliminate the psychological and emotional distance between actors and audience. This concept, introduced in the 1930s in France, was intended to inspire a more intense theatrical experience than conventional theater allowed. The "cruelty" of this dramatic theory signified not sadism but heightened actor/audience involvement in the dramatic event.

Theater of the Absurd: A post-World War II dramatic trend characterized by radical theatrical innovations. In works influenced by the Theater of the absurd, nontraditional, sometimes grotesque characterizations, plots, and stage sets reveal a meaningless universe in which human values are irrelevant. Existentialist themes of estrangement, absurdity, and futility link many of the works of this movement.

Theater of the Grotesque: An Italian theatrical movement characterized by plays written around the ironic and macabre aspects of daily life in the World War I era.

Theme: The main point of a work of literature. The term is used interchangeably with thesis.

Thesis: A thesis is both an essay and the point argued in the essay. Thesis novels and thesis plays share the quality of containing a thesis which is supported through the action of the story.

Thesis Novel: See *Thesis*

Thesis Play: See *Thesis*

Third Person: See *Point of View*

Three Unities: See *Unities*

Tone: The author's attitude toward his or her audience may be deduced from the tone of the work. A formal tone may create distance or convey politeness, while an informal tone may encourage a friendly, intimate, or intrusive feeling in the reader. The author's attitude toward his or her subject matter may also be deduced from the tone of the words he or she uses in discussing it.

Tragedy: A drama in prose or poetry about a noble, courageous hero of excellent character who, because of some tragic character flaw or *hamartia*, brings ruin upon him- or herself. Tragedy treats its subjects in a dignified and serious manner, using poetic language to help evoke pity and fear and bring about catharsis, a purging of these emotions. The tragic form was practiced extensively by the ancient Greeks. In the Middle Ages, when classical works were virtually unknown, tragedy came to denote any works about the fall of persons from exalted to low conditions due to any reason: fate, vice, weakness, etc. According to the classical definition of tragedy, such works present the "pathetic"—that which evokes pity—rather than the tragic. The classical form of tragedy was revived in the sixteenth century; it flourished especially on the Elizabethan stage. In modern times, dramatists have attempted to adapt the form to the needs of modern society by drawing their heroes from the ranks of ordinary men and women and defining the nobility of these heroes in terms of spirit rather than exalted social standing.

Tragedy of Blood: See *Revenge Tragedy*

Tragic Flaw: In a tragedy, the quality within the hero or heroine which leads to his or her downfall.

Transcendentalism: An American philosophical and religious movement, based in New England from around 1835 until the Civil War. Transcendentalism was a form of American romanticism that had its roots abroad in the works of Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Coleridge, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The Transcendentalists stressed the importance of intuition and subjective experience in communication with God. They rejected religious dogma and texts in favor of mysticism and scientific naturalism. They pursued truths that lie beyond the "colorless" realms perceived by reason and the senses and were active social reformers in public education, women's rights, and the abolition of slavery.

Trickster: A character or figure common in Native American and African literature who uses his ingenuity to defeat enemies and escape difficult situations. Tricksters are most often animals, such as the spider, hare, or coyote, although they may take the form of humans as well.

Trimeter: See *Meter*

Triple Rhyme: See *Rhyme*

Trochee: See *Foot*

U

Understatement: See *Irony*

Unities: Strict rules of dramatic structure, formulated by Italian and French critics of the Renaissance and based loosely on the principles of drama discussed by Aristotle in his *Poetics.* Foremost among these rules were the three unities of action, time, and place that compelled a dramatist to: (1) construct a single plot with a beginning, middle, and end that details the causal relationships of action and character; (2) restrict the action to the events of a single day; and (3) limit the scene to a single place or city. The unities were observed faithfully by continental European writers until the Romantic Age, but they were never regularly observed in English drama. Modern dramatists are typically more concerned with a unity of impression or emotional effect than with any of the classical unities.

Urban Realism: A branch of realist writing that attempts to accurately reflect the often harsh facts of modern urban existence.

Utopia: A fictional perfect place, such as "paradise" or "heaven."

Utopian: See *Utopia*

Utopianism: See *Utopia*

V

Verisimilitude: Literally, the appearance of truth. In literary criticism, the term refers to aspects of a work of literature that seem true to the reader.

Vers de societe : See *Occasional Verse*

Vers libre: See *Free Verse*

Verse: A line of metered language, a line of a poem, or any work written in verse.

Versification: The writing of verse. Versification may also refer to the meter, rhyme, and other mechanical components of a poem.

Victorian: Refers broadly to the reign of Queen Victoria of England (1837-1901) and to anything

with qualities typical of that era. For example, the qualities of smug narrowmindedness, bourgeois materialism, faith in social progress, and priggish morality are often considered Victorian. This stereotype is contradicted by such dramatic intellectual developments as the theories of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud (which stirred strong debates in England) and the critical attitudes of serious Victorian writers like Charles Dickens and George Eliot. In literature, the Victorian Period was the great age of the English novel, and the latter part of the era saw the rise of movements such as decadence and symbolism.

Victorian Age: See *Victorian*

Victorian Period: See *Victorian*

W

***Weltanschauung*:** A German term referring to a person's worldview or philosophy.

***Weltschmerz*:** A German term meaning "world pain." It describes a sense of anguish about the nature of existence, usually associated with a melancholy, pessimistic attitude.

Z

***Zarzuela*:** A type of Spanish operetta.

***Zeitgeist*:** A German term meaning "spirit of the time." It refers to the moral and intellectual trends of a given era.

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